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**On Changing and Differing Types of Bodies and Their
Relationships to Their Souls or/and Minds in Western Culture**

**O měnících a odlišujících se typech těl a jejich vztahu k duši
a/nebo mysli v západní kultuře**

**Sur les types de corps changeants et différents et leurs relations
avec leurs âmes ou/et leurs esprits dans la culture occidentale**

Doctoral Thesis
in cotutelle

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Prohlášení

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Abstract:

On Changing and Differing Types of Bodies and Their Relationships to Their Souls or/and Minds in Western Culture is a collection of loosely connected chapters that answer the question of how to make Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology more inclusive. The first chapter, devoted to Jean-Luc Nancy, serves as an introduction to the topic of alternative embodiments and the question of the soul in the body. In the following chapters, Merleau-Ponty is confronted with selected authors associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT). First, the comparison with Bruno Latour shows that the integrity of all beings and entities, including the most privileged humans, is not to be taken for granted. The pathologies in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and Annemarie Mol's depiction (*enactment*) of atherosclerosis are then used as an analogy for the inferior status of women in our society, while the fourth chapter shows the empowerment that can grow out of it through an interpretation of Elfriede Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher*. The last two chapters focus on unconventional modes of intersubjectivity and kinships as ways of being in the world. The confrontation with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro destabilizes established ontological categories while attempting to incorporate alternative worldviews of the Indigenous peoples of (present-day) Americas. Drawing on texts by Donna Haraway, Helen Verran, Anna Tsing, and Déborah Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, the very last chapter provides examples of complicated but necessary cooperation between different human cosmologies and between humans and other species.

Key words: phenomenology, actor-network theory, anthropology, science studies, Indigenous studies, flat ontology, ontological turn, embodiment, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, kinship, material semiotics, praxiography, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bruno Latour, Annemarie Mol, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Donna Haraway, Helen Verran, Anna Tsing, Déborah Danowski, Elfriede Jelinek

Abstrakt:

O měnících a odlišujících se typech těl a jejich vztahu k duši a/nebo mysli v západní kultuře je sbírkou volně navazujících kapitol, které odpovídají na otázku, jak učinit Merleau-Pontyho fenomenologii inkluzivnější. První kapitola, věnovaná Jeanu-Lucu Nancymu, slouží jako úvod do tématu alternativních tělesných existencí a otázky duše v těle. V následujících kapitolách je Merleau-Ponty konfrontován s vybranými autory spojenými s Teorií sítí aktérů (ANT). Nejdříve se ve srovnání s Brunem Latourem ukáže, že integrita všech jsoucen a entit (včetně nejprivilegovanějších lidí) není samozřejmostí. Patologie ve *Fenomenologii vnímání* a pojetí aterosklerózy Annemarie Mol jsou pak použity jako analogie pro podřadné postavení žen v naší společnosti, přičemž čtvrtá kapitola ukazuje zmocňování (*empowerment*), které z něj může vyrůst, prostřednictvím interpretace románu *Pianistka* od Elfriede Jelinek. Poslední dvě kapitoly se zaměřují na nekonvenční způsoby intersubjektivita a příbuzenství (*kinship*) jako způsoby bytí ve světě. Konfrontace s Eduardem Viveirosem de Castro destabilizuje zavedené ontologické kategorie a zároveň se pokouší začlenit alternativní pohledy na svět původních obyvatel (dnešních) Amerik. Na základě textů Donny Haraway, Helen Verran, Anny Tsing a Débory Danowski a Viveirose de Castro jsou v poslední kapitole uvedeny příklady komplikované, ale nezbytné spolupráce mezi různými lidskými kosmologiemi a mezi lidmi a jinými druhy.

Klíčová slova: fenomenologie, teorie sítí aktérů, antropologie, sociologie vědy, studium původních obyvatel, plochá ontologie, ontologický obrat, vtělení, subjektivita, intersubjektivita, příbuzenství, materiální sémiotika, praxiografie, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bruno Latour, Annemarie Mol, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Donna Haraway, Helen Verran, Anna Tsing, Déborah Danowski, Elfriede Jelinek

Résumé :

Sur les types de corps changeants et différents et leurs relations avec leurs âmes ou/et leurs esprits dans la culture occidentale est un ensemble de chapitres librement reliés qui répondent à la question de savoir comment rendre la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty plus inclusive. Le premier chapitre, consacré à Jean-Luc Nancy, sert d'introduction au thème des incarnations alternatives et à la question de l'âme dans le corps. Dans les chapitres suivants, Merleau-Ponty est confronté à certains auteurs associés à la théorie de l'acteur-réseau (ANT). Tout d'abord, la comparaison avec Bruno Latour montre que l'intégrité de tous les êtres et entités, y compris les humains les plus privilégiés, ne va pas de soi. Les pathologies de la *Phénoménologie de la perception* et la représentation (*enactment*) de l'athérosclérose par Annemarie Mol sont ensuite utilisées comme analogie du statut inférieur des femmes dans notre société, tandis que le quatrième chapitre montre l'autonomisation qui peut en résulter à travers une interprétation du roman d'Elfriede Jelinek, *La Pianiste*. Les deux derniers chapitres se concentrent sur les modes non conventionnels d'intersubjectivité et de parenté en tant que manières d'être au monde. La confrontation avec Eduardo Viveiros de Castro déstabilise les catégories ontologiques établies tout en tentant d'intégrer les visions du monde alternatives des peuples indigènes des Amériques (actuelles). S'appuyant sur des textes de Donna Haraway, Helen Verran, Anna Tsing et Déborah Danowski et Viveiros de Castro, le tout dernier chapitre fournit des exemples de coopération compliquée mais nécessaire entre différentes cosmologies humaines et entre les humains et les autres espèces.

Mots clés : phénoménologie, la théorie de l'acteur-réseau, anthropologie, études scientifiques, études autochtones, ontologie plate, tournant ontologique, incarnation, subjectivité, intersubjectivité, parenté, sémiotique matérielle, praxiographie, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bruno Latour, Annemarie Mol, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Donna Haraway, Helen Verran, Anna Tsing, Déborah Danowski, Elfriede Jelinek

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Abbreviations and Bibliography Note

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Work:

N	<i>Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France</i> , trans. Robert Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003. <i>La nature. Notes. Cours du Collège de France. Suivi de : Résumés de cours correspondants</i> . Paris: Éditions du Sueil, 1995.
OE	“Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty, <i>The Primacy of Perception</i> , 159–90. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. <i>L'Œil et l'Esprit</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1964.
PhP	<i>Phenomenology of Perception</i> , trans. Donald A. Landes. London – New York: Routledge, 2012. <i>Phénoménologie de la perception</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1945.
S	<i>Signs</i> , trans. Richard C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. <i>Signes</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1960.
SC	<i>The Structure of Behavior</i> , trans. Alden L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967. <i>La structure du comportement</i> . Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967.
VI	<i>The Visible and Invisible</i> , trans. Alfonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. <i>Le visible et l'invisible</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

Other Abbreviations:

KS	Jelinek, Elfriede. 2009. <i>The Piano Teacher</i> , trans. Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Grove Atlantic. Jelinek, Elfriede. 2004. <i>Die Klavierspielerin</i> . Hamburg: Rowohlt.
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Where applicable, all the sources and pagination are listed as follows: *English translation / original*. In the case of French summaries, only the French originals are given.

Introduction:

Hors D'Oeuvre

Let me start with a joke, illustrating rivalry between two cities in the Czech Republic, my home country. One city is Prague which everyone knows, the other one is Brno, of which you might have never heard, unless you are interested in guns. So an actor from Brno talks to an actor from Prague: “Do you know what we say about you in Brno?” “...?” “That you are a very bad actor.” The actor from Prague answers: “And do you know what we say about you in Prague?” “...?” “Absolutely nothing.”

The joke is a nice metaphor of my project: to approximate Actor Network Theory and phenomenology (to put it very broadly). While Actor-Network Theory (ANT) criticizes phenomenology and the whole history of the so-called Western philosophy, phenomenologists in general don't care about ANT at all. It follows that my project of connecting these two streams is in danger of attacks from both sides: while contemporary (Deleuzian) anthropologists and scholars orbiting around ANT are likely to judge my texts as too benevolent towards the European philosophy tradition and not progressive enough, more traditionally oriented philosophers tend to dismiss my work, stating that ANT and related fields are not even worth a serious debate.¹ As if I were “between Scylla and Charybdis: between an inability to articulate, and, on the other hand, a precise formalism, keenly honed by tradition and devoid of content,” as Jan Patočka (1999/1995: 4/11) described the never ending struggle of philosophy in his lecture in 1968. This is very true about the two traditions I am trying to speak from: the ANT branch is more empirically based and it is definitely more broadly relevant to the ongoing world. But some of the authors tend to be banal and imprecise at times, overlooking nuances and diversity within Western philosophy. More classically oriented scholars are sometimes intellectually richer but often fail to address

¹ This has been amusingly performed by the two institutions I have been pursuing my degree in: my supervisor from The University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès has been usually criticizing my conservatism, whereas my supervisor from the Charles University has been warning me against the problems I might face for giving too much importance to non-philosophical, alternative, and progressive materials. The a.r.t.e.s. Lab of the University of Cologne that I twice briefly visited in 2018 and the Philosophy Department of the University of Alberta where I (thanks to the Wirth Institute fellowship) half-officially relocated to in 2019 have been able to offer me support in my pursuit in both directions, for which I am very grateful.

problems that would be of any interest outside of their specific field and they tend to disregard criticisms that have been raised against their discourse. The situation leads to the impression that the ANT case is somehow stronger, because of its adaptability and reactivity. My choice of authors obviously makes some of the philosophers simply unable to answer objections against them because they passed away, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty or recently deceased Jean-Luc Nancy. Therefore, in some cases, I will answer for them, as in chapter three on Annemarie Mol. However, in other cases I will refrain from a strong defense of Western philosophy because I feel that it has lost its entitlement to it in certain contexts. This applies to chapter five on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. The intellectual reconciliation between the two is hence only intimated, not fully performed.

If there are scholars from either camp, who refuse to take the other camp seriously, I can hardly convince them otherwise. There is however another set of possible objections, concerning the combination itself. Or as an anonymous reviewer put it: “Why should we want to combine different theories rather than, say, appreciate each in their differences?” The answer I offer is that they can enrich each other and point out each other’s weaknesses. Since Mol (2021) normalized talking about food in the philosophical context, here is a cooking metaphor: many combinations of ingredients seem odd at first but with appropriate spices and processing, they might start making sense. If I failed to satisfy this particular reviewer, there is probably something else wrong than the very choice of main ideas: some people might focus too much on the ingredients but overlook the final product. I am going to provide you with a few justifications shortly but even before doing so, I invite you to explore the text without judging it first based on its premises.

Justifications

Historical

The points of contact between ANT and phenomenology can be traced back to the predecessors of and inspirations for ANT. One of these are the so-called quasi-objects developed by Michel Serres (1982: 225ff.) and adopted by Bruno Latour (1993b/2006: 51ff./73ff.) in his famous book *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Serres talks about a soccer ball: conventionally it is an object that needs (human) subjects to move it but it becomes defacto subject of the game, with players revolving around it. The subjects and objects establish each other, it is impossible to set them strictly apart. A similar concept appears already in Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1962 when he wrote about drivers and their cars. He likened drivers to “so-called primitives”: while the latter skillfully read footprints in the soil, the former navigate “city jungles” in their vehicles with the lightness that would be incomprehensible to people who are not used to that kind of technology. A car and its driver become one entity:

It is no longer a case of the operation of an agent on an inert object, nor of the return action of an object, promoted to the role of an agent, on a subject dispossessing itself in its favour without demanding anything of it in return; in other words, it is no longer situations involving a certain amount of passiveness on one side or the other which are in question. The beings confront each other face to face as subjects and objects at the same time; and, in the code they employ, a simple variation in the distance separating them has the force of a silent adjuration. (Lévi-Strauss 1966/1962: 222/294)

There is one distinct motive that is clearly both Merleau-Pontian² and ANTian and that will also serve as my stepping stone for a further development of the connection: A driver and their car are a single actor as long as everything works smoothly. This is the Latourian micro-actors moving in the same direction (Latour 1993a/1984: 168ff./187ff.), the Molian “body multiple” lived and perceived in a certain way in a particular situation (Mol 2002), and the cars-with-their-drivers-inside would be the Serresian quasi-objects. (Serres 1982) At the same time, a driver-car can be understood as a habitual body in Merleau-Ponty if a driver-car moves as naturally as a person alone, similarly to a person who has a piece of clothing that sticks out (and would normally get in the way) but is already used to it:

Without any explicit calculation, a woman maintains a safe distance between the feather in her hat and objects that might damage it; she senses where the

² Claude Lévi-Strauss and Maurice Merleau-Ponty also wrote about each other but the exchange is not the topic of this text.

feather is, just as we sense where our hand is. If I possess the habit of driving a car, then I enter into a lane and see that “I can pass” without comparing the width of the lane to that of the fender, just as I go through a door without comparing the width of the door to that of my body. (*PhP* 144/167)

The subjects’ intense exchange with their environment, their attunement to it, and their occasional merging with it are topics that bring ANT and Merleau-Ponty together. The main differences are the diverse perspectives and in the case of Merleau-Ponty, the emphasis on harmony which is absent in ANT. The principal goal of my text is to acknowledge the disharmony and to enrich phenomenology so that the embodiments that were up until recently considered anomalies are fully appreciated.

Thematic

Both Merleau-Ponty and most ANT scholars work with a concept of perception that doesn’t take established structures for granted while at the same time acknowledging various ways to perceive, provided that it *appears so* (phenomenology) or it *works* (ANT); they both refuse to adopt easy dichotomies (body and mind, matter and form etc.).

The idea of combining Merleau-Ponty and ANT arose simply from my impression that the experience of the self, i.e. my experience of myself, takes place precisely at the intersection of the two approaches. My body has always had the specific ‘ownness’ to it that Merleau-Ponty wrote about, but the objecthood he so much opposed also has its truth, especially in the case of a female body. Indeed, the female embodiment does feel like “the result or the intertwining of multiple causalities that determine my body or my ‘psyche,’” (*PhP* lxxi/ii) which Merleau-Ponty says ‘I’ is *not*. ANT as a method suitable for unraveling diverse causalities enabled switching between subjective and objective perspectives which corresponds to lived experience better than a mere subjective position. The phenomenological existence is in the end also entangled in links, as evidenced by the very last sentence of the *Phenomenology*, a quote by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “Man is a knot of relations, and relations alone count for man.” (*PhP* 483/520) These relations are however always treated from the first perspective

and the subject in its center is itself very compact. Not that it doesn't change but with each change, the compactness is re-established anew. Once the subject ceases to be the compact center on all occasions, ANT becomes a better tool for describing embodied experiences of illnesses, discriminations, objectifications, anxieties, and insecurities.

A Few Methodological Notes

Since ANT works with the concept of flat ontology, which means that entities (whether organic or inorganic, material or conceptual) are not qualitatively different a priori, my text is not limited to humans or animals but touches upon all kinds of entities. Bruno Latour (2005: 61n67) even sees this as an unsurmountable difference, complaining about “the excessive stress given by phenomenologists to the human sources of agency.” I don't find this dispute unresolvable for, as will become clear in the course of the text, I situate myself somewhere in the middle: I am not a strict proponent of flat ontology, but neither do I agree with the human exceptionalism of the whole Western tradition of knowledge (by the way deeply Christian), which has proved utterly disastrous. Nevertheless, it must not be ignored since most academics and our whole academic tradition grew out of it: there is no point in pretending we are not part of it. By contrast, flat ontology, albeit coming out of the very same tradition, offers a counterbalance that can help to dilute the arrogance of anthropocentrism, without however (arrogantly) imagining that I or anyone instituted by the Euro-American system can fully abandon it.

My project started about six years ago and then I obviously had a completely different idea about its future outcome. Souls and/or minds ceased to be my main concern but because – as I said – this thesis is embedded within the Euro-American cultural heritage, the question of minds and souls are always present: explicitly in the first and fifth chapters, in the other chapters more implicitly, but as Jean-Luc Nancy (2008b/2000a) explained, where there is a body, there is a soul as well, at least in my culture. And the fact that I personally may not believe in its existence has nothing to do with it.

All the chapters begin with an excursion to the ‘outside world.’ While philosophers of the past used the desk or table as the most common object at hand because their lives mostly revolved around it (Ahmed 2006: 3–4), to the extent that tables have become ‘neutral,’ philosophers of today – and particularly precarious PhD candidates – live in a very different world: We travel across continents in the hunt after fundings, have many other jobs or hobbies, struggle with multiple languages, deal with world problems, and confront our privileges or lack thereof. The beginnings of the chapters serve as a reminder and remainder of why I started philosophy in the first place: as an attempt to first explain and later develop my own existence and that of the world(s) around me. It is, after all, another tribute to both traditions I have been researching in.

My text did not originate in a material vacuum. I had to work with what was at my disposal: both at the time of the pandemic and before and after. I moved to Canada while writing my thesis, and like many other students, I struggled with depression, for which I was unable to seek help due to my precarious status. All this is inscribed in the text in front of you.

In accordance with the requirements of the University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès, all chapters are accompanied by French summaries/resumés. They don’t do full justice to the text as the writing style with all the ornaments is part of it, but hopefully provide a useful outline of the chapters, if reading in French is an option for you.

Content of the Chapters

The chapters are built as separate texts although they follow a certain sequence. The first chapter explores the idea of the soul as a reflection of the body and suggests possibilities of bodies without souls. The following two chapters are dialogues between Merleau-Ponty’s texts and two ANT scholars, Bruno Latour and Annemarie Mol: The second chapter deals mostly with the problem of how to conceptually separate individual entities and how to characterize humans at all, while the third chapter deals with subjectivity on the basis of different representations of illness and disability. This theme is returned to in chapter four, where it is set in the context of gender with the help of Elfriede Jelinek’s novel

The Piano Teacher. The fifth and sixth chapters are the most experimental, touching on the limits of our world. Chapter five shows the multiplicity of worlds through perspectivism which turns our reality on its head, so to speak. Drawing primarily on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the chapter rethinks intersubjectivity in a space-time where the human body and soul loom on completely different axes. The last chapter takes place at the temporal boundaries of our world. There I seek kinships between species and possibilities to live among the ruins.

In addition to embodied subjectivity, the theme of authorship and the position from which authors speak runs through the text. It is inspired by recent anthropology, my history of literary studies, and phenomenology itself: “The philosopher is first and foremost the one who realizes that he is situated in language, that he *is speaking*.” (S 104/131) The situatedness, so crucial for phenomenology, is understood not only in the sense of embodiment, but also as situatedness in a particular culture, which applies to philosophy as well as to other disciplines. Since my text otherwise spares no criticism of many aspects of Western (nature-)culture, I conclude this short introduction with a quote from Merleau-Ponty’s text, where he praises other disciplines while warning against common prejudices, both in philosophy and elsewhere. Where do I speak from?

“You believe you think for all times and all men,” the sociologist says to the philosopher, “and by that very belief you only express the preconceptions or pretensions of your culture.” That is true, but it is no less true of the dogmatic sociologist than it is of the philosopher. *Where does he speak from*, the sociologist who speaks in this way? (S 109/137)

Introduction: hors-d'œuvre

– Résumé

Cette brève introduction vise à justifier le projet principal, qui consiste à relier la phénoménologie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty et la théorie de l'acteur-réseau. L'un des points de contact sont les quasi-objets chez Michel Serres (1982) et repris par Bruno Latour (2006). Les sujets qui ne sont pas si clairement définis apparaissent également chez Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962 : 294) et Merleau-Ponty (*PhP* 167).

L'échange intense des sujets avec leur environnement, leur syntonie avec celui-ci et leur fusion occasionnelle avec lui sont des thèmes qui rapprochent l'ANT et Merleau-Ponty. Les principales différences sont les diverses perspectives et, dans le cas de Merleau-Ponty, l'accent mis sur l'harmonie, ce qui n'est pas le cas dans l'ANT. L'objectif principal de mon texte est de reconnaître la disharmonie et d'enrichir la phénoménologie afin que les incarnations qui étaient jusqu'à récemment considérées comme des anomalies soient pleinement appréciées.

Puisque l'ANT travaille avec le concept d'ontologie plate, qui signifie que les entités (qu'elles soient organiques ou inorganiques, matérielles ou conceptuelles) ne sont pas qualitativement différentes a priori, mon texte ne se limite pas aux humains ou aux animaux, mais touche à toutes sortes d'entités.

Même si la question initiale d'il y a six ans, à savoir la relation entre l'âme et le corps, n'a pas été abandonnée, elle s'est en grande partie déplacée dans l'espace entre les lignes.

Tous les chapitres commencent par une excursion dans le « monde extérieur » afin de rapprocher le monde universitaire du monde non universitaire, ce qui est également en accord avec la phénoménologie et l'ANT. Outre la subjectivité incarnée, le thème de la position à partir de laquelle les auteurs parlent traverse le texte. Il s'inspire de l'anthropologie récente, des études littéraires et de la phénoménologie elle-même.

1. Un-bodies – Mass of bodies, Body as a Mass:

Touching Maurice Merleau-Ponty Through Jean-Luc Nancy³



Focus on visualising it as it disintegrates, in whichever way seems most natural to you. This part decomposes. That part decomposes. This part falls off. That part falls off. Let yourself become engrossed in watching it, using your own ingenuity. This falls off, that falls off, until everything has fallen apart all the bones, from the skull on down. Once the skin that enwraps them has decomposed, the flesh has decomposed, the tendons that hold them together have decomposed, the bones can't help but fall apart, piece by piece, because they are held together only by tendons. Once the tendons decompose, the different parts have to fall off piece by

³ A previous shorter version of this chapter was published in *Research in Phenomenology*. (Jakešová 2020b) The photos in the collage are taken by me and they are obviously an addition. If you are shocked, it fulfilled its purpose.

*piece in a pile on the ground, scattered all over the place. You can even visualise having vultures, crows, and dogs come to eat and scatter the parts everywhere.*⁴

This first chapter explores the limits of corporeality itself: What needs to be done to start taking the body into consideration? How does it make itself perceptible? Conversely, what must happen for the body to cease to be a body? The ideas I develop here stem from Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the body as a mass, outlined in his "On the Soul" lecture, which I expand along three possible lines. Each time I use a different concept from Maurice Merleau-Ponty together with another tradition of thought and/or practice. Hence Nancy allows for several openings to Merleau-Ponty which are developed further in other chapters.

Nancy defines the soul as the (however minimal) reflection of the fact that we have or we are a body, thus the conception of the body as a mass may offer possibilities to think the body outside of or prior to this reflection. The first of the non-reflected bodies is an abstracted body Nancy ascribed to Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine): it is a body which has been criticized by feminist scholars like Judith Butler and which is the first layer of embodied subjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. The second one is a hypothetical pre-body proposed by the object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman which may have existed before the actual body emerges. This body would be incompatible with Merleau-Ponty as it stands strongly against the whole phenomenology as a scientific fallacy: it basically shows the body as a conglomeration of previously independent particles. The last one is the disintegrated rotting post-body in two different contexts: European baroque imagery and *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*, a Thai meditational practice that also inspired my introduction story. The last dismembered body is connectable to the Merleau-Pontian undifferentiated flesh from *The Visible and the Invisible*. All three types of bodies-as-a-mass are legitimate conceptualizations of what Nancy indicates. However, the mass quality is the very nonconceptuality, which is therefore the ultimate outcome that I have to reach.

4 Cited from Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Straight from the Heart*. I learnt about the book from Klima 2002. The photographs were taken by me during an enactment of Ancient Greek sacrifice that I took part in several times during my master's studies.

1.1 Body And Soul

When Jean-Luc Nancy talks about the soul, he uses the term mainly for rhetorical and symmetrical reasons. ‘Rhetorical,’ indeed quite literally, because his essay “On the Soul” is in fact a transcript of a speech at a conference dedicated to the body. The name of his contribution is a deliberate allusion to Aristotle's text (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 125/112)⁵ and by using it, Nancy also wanted to make clear that, like Aristotle, he would not put a sharp distinction between the body and the soul: they are not the insurmountable opposites.⁶ His usage of the word ‘soul’ is also symmetrical, because when talking about something that is the *other* of the body, we are accustomed to calling it by that name. But what is the other of the body in this case? Nancy chooses a very original way to come to terms with the notorious body–mind/soul duality. This other – which we can now call the soul – is “the sensing of the body [...] the inside, which senses it is outside,” so in other words the material and extended ‘bodiness’ itself. (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 131/121–2; see also Morin 2016: 333) Referring to Freud, he says in “Corpus” that “the ‘psyche,’ in other words, is *body*, this is precisely what escapes it, and its escape [...] or its process of escape, constitutes it as ‘psyche,’ in a dimension of not (being able/wanting)-to-know-itself.” (Nancy 2008a: 21) Preliminary said, the soul is thus the presence of the body, the very fact that there is a body. (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 128/117; see also Morin 2016: 337; 2022: 60)

According to Nancy, the self-sensing of the body (that is, the body that senses that it is a body) is always on its outside and is therefore associated with the sense of touch, which demarcates the body-space. It is not by accident that touching is a favorite figure of phenomenologists and those who are

5 Citations of Jean-Luc Nancy refer to English translations and French originals, respectively, except for the bilingual edition of the “Corpus” chapter where I refer only to the English translation since the French original is always on the opposite page, *The Birth to Presence* which “Corpus” version I use as the reference Harman used and whose French original I failed to find, and a brief note concerning the essay “Strange Foreign Bodies” from the English compilation *Corpus II.*, of which I haven’t found the French version either, neither have I found any sign of its existence. The citation from a postscript included in the edition of *L'intrus* from 2010 is translated by me.

6 The idea of body and soul being the insurmountable opposites has been far less widespread among philosophers than is usually thought. It may only correspond to simplified versions of Cartesianism (Bonan 2010: 66), not even Descartes himself. For an example of phenomenological coping with the problematic concept of soul, see e.g. the interpretation of Jan Patočka in Ritter 2017.

methodologically or thematically connected to them: haptic perceptions are considered unique because they delineate conventionally perceived borders of the body and they are famously self-reflexive; we can sense and be sensed by the same organ, that is, by the skin and we can sense our sensing, in the form of a sensual reflection. (See e.g. Husserl 1952: 145; *PhP* 95/109; *VI* 9/24, 133–4/174) Derrida who dedicated one of his books to the history of touch with special attention to Nancy, also wrote that “touching is no longer just one sense among others, since it conditions them all and is coextensive with them” and that “for all animals, touch remains the primary sensory function. Without it, no other sense exists.”⁷ (Derrida 2005/2000: 161/186, 319n3/34n1) Jenny Slatman (2005: 305) says that living beings can survive without other senses “but they cannot stay alive without the sense of touch.” Having a sense of touch is tantamount to having a body, being a body.

The Nancian Body – which is also the soul as we saw – is thus a body sensed by itself from the outside. It is like a glance from the side or a body slightly delayed after itself: “an I that can say ‘I,’ and ob-jects the body. It can then say: ‘I am my body,’ but only because it is effectively not its own body anymore but holds it at a distance.” (Morin 2016: 336) It is a self-reflection but not like the visual one which is made possible only through mediation of an object (a mirror, water surface etc.), not a supposedly immaterial *ego cogito*, but the most intimate interlacing of oneself with oneself, the closest possible relation without penetrating or destroying, the touch: “Perhaps there's only ever an opening by way of a touching or a touch. And to open – to touch – is not to tear, dismember, destroy.” (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 122/107)

Hence there is the Body which is exactly this: perceived body, felt body, body which we pay attention to, the Body with a capital ‘B.’ The cleverness of this move is inspiring. It is the concept of a soul which seems to be arising automatically from the body. And since it is the Body at the beginning and only later is it called ‘the soul,’ as if randomly, it looks almost innocent. I like Nancy’s logical consistency but anything emerged from the Christian tradition that, in spite of being called differently – like ‘mind’ or ‘Body’ –, seems to be the same old soul and arises suspicions. Therefore, my intention here is to explore body without

⁷ All senses have as their basis particles that fall on a surface. Haptic perceptions are the first ones we experience after we are born and even the most primitive animals have them.

its soul, before becoming the Body. My then question is as follows: if the soul or the Body is the Other of a body, what is the other of this Other? Is it possible to touch the body before or rather outside of this – however basic and minimal – reflection?

Nancy suggests possible paths to his readers when he writes about bodies that are not Bodies yet. The bodies are losing their appropriate Bodily existence when they are measured as a *mass* of bodies instead of their count. (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 124/110) As an example, he mentioned the then ongoing atrocities in Bosnia where the tortured, raped, humiliated, and killed bodies were, according to him, “being denied their being as bodies.” (Ibid.: 122/107) He then continued by stating that these “massive bodies” are in fact without any weight just like the Aristotelian substance has neither extension nor weight, strictly speaking.⁸ These bodies – which aren't in fact bodies according to the author – are then quite literally ‘bodies that *don't* matter’: nobody cares about them and they have no weight. This however provokes the question as to what these massive bodies or, to avoid confusions, rather ‘un-bodies’ could be. In the following pages, I will treat the three types of un-bodies, which can be traced with Nancy's philosophy. They are the suppressed body, the not-yet-body, and the disfigured body.

1.2 Cartesian Male Un-body

The first possibility is the denial of the body in the sense of most Christian traditions, like (Nancy's simplified version of) Augustine of Hippo who allegedly didn't like bodies in their extensions except for the negation thereof: “[o]nly the point is ‘good,’ the self that is unto itself, without extension.” (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 124/109)⁹ This would be the neutral, rational body that we all know from countless theoretical writings of European humanities. “An entire philosophical tradition understood human body in such a way that the body as our own, as we live it and as it experiences itself, could never become a topic of

8 This is what Nancy says in 2008b/2000a: 123/109. In fact, I think that he had matter (*ὄλη*) in mind. See also below.

9 It's not my intention here to discuss Augustine of Hippo's understanding of body so I take Nancy's mention as it is. Augustine certainly considered bodily existence and particularly its certain aspects to be ignoble but the inexistence of body is rather a soul than anything else.

philosophical reflection,” says Jan Patočka (1999/1995: 3/11). The body is reduced to a point just before nonexistence. I am tempted, and in this I would follow feminist criticism, to imagine this body as a male body throughout European history: white and either healthy or so filled with spirit that it becomes almost immaterial.

That however doesn't correspond at all to what is known about the Middle Ages and some aspects of life of the 17th and 18th centuries. There were tendencies among Christian intellectual elite to suppress body but even for them, body was always a vessel for the soul and the means to achieve salvation. (Brown 1981) Outside the educated elite, the fleshiness of the body is even more conspicuous: hagiographies¹⁰ and depictions of Jesus' and the Saints' torments as well as worship of relics show a high esteem of body. (Bynum & Gerson 1997) The body would be starved, tortured, then piously preserved and stored or, conversely, cut into pieces or even boiled (Brown 1981) but in any case it always retained a certain significance and sometimes even power when dead; while the afterlife was heavily dependent on preceding bodily behavior when alive.

The body of nonexistence labeled by Nancy as Augustine's seems to have only started getting prestige with Cartesianism.¹¹ (Boureau & Semple 1994) It spread with rational attempts to erase the body that I feel even now; the body of enlightenment was born. In the Middle Ages, the soul was chiseled through the purification of the body or even its destruction whereas the ideal of Cartesianism was the erasure of the body: the less of the body, the more of the soul.

That's when body ceased being a vessel and became a tool instead. This corresponds well to Bruno Latour's (2005: 38ff.) distinction between mediators

10 The Czech Legend of St. Catherine from the 14th century can serve as an example here. The anonymous author expressionistically describes Catherine's torture, using colors. The passage is undoubtedly allegoric which however doesn't diminish its naturalism: “The pain of many bruises / struck her heart / blood swells the skin / that turns blue dark. / Blood floods her body / between the wounds / wherever the hangman whips. [...] She assumed the sixth color / and gave the same sense to it / in which her shining hair / suffered the pain as well / the hair that shone brighter / than all the gold things in the earth. / It was trembling on her neck / devilishly tangled and / where the whips hit / entangled with the hair / tore it from the scalp. / With every new lash / the hair got matted in the flesh / creating a bright flash / in the blood.” (*Legenda* 1941: 95–6; my translation)

11 Here, I don't necessary mean René Descartes himself since he was less of a dualist than what the history of thought has been accusing him of. (See e.g. Descartes 2008: 57; Morin 2016; Nancy 2016/1979: 88ff./129ff.)

and intermediaries: An intermediary is an entity that serves as a means to something else while giving the expected outcome. A mediator can also be a tool or device but the one that is defected and/or gives variable or not completely predictable results. The means itself can also change during the process. The modified and modifiable bodies of the Saints of Middle Ages are mediators, the erased neutral un-bodies inspired by Cartesianism are intermediaries, or at least should be.

The body is supposed to be functional, muscular without any fat (although the people who can attain this ideal rarely need the hyper-functional muscle machine for their subsistence) or starved to the verge of existence if it is a female body. The current obsession with physical fitness might be experienced as a disproportionate focus on the body but it is inspired by the body erasure, the body as an intermediary. (E.g. Boureau & Semple 1994, Grebeníčková 1997) Only one body is allowed. It is the dematerialized un-body of man, that is a male human body. This kind of body doesn't have to deal with its materiality, it is perceived as normal, non-embarrassing, unchanging, comfortable and not-being-in-the-way, no matter whether it is accurate in concrete instances.¹² A supposedly neutral (hu)man is always male.¹³ As Butler also puts it, the immaterial male body is the result of exclusion of other bodies, of this un-body's other:

This is a figure of disembodiment, [...] the figure of a male body which is not a body [...] This figuration of masculine reason as disembodied body is one whose imaginary morphology is crafted through the exclusion of other possible bodies. (Butler 2011: 21)¹⁴

12 For a phenomenological analysis describing why the male body is not in the way see e.g. Young 2005: 27–45; for the assumption of the male able body to be unchanging, see *ibid.*: 57. For gendered bodies, see also chapters 3 and 4.

13 “How can one be an enemy of woman, whatever she may be?” as the Renaissance physician Paracelsus put it; this could never be said of man because, quite simply, ‘one’ is male.” (Laqueur 2003: 22)

14 It is only fair to add that Nancy himself is concerned with those other bodies when he writes about concrete bodies, that is, about Bodies, about the soul: “There is no body other than that of a ‘this one,’ and we should immediately add that ‘this one’ is often feminine.” In French it works even better: “Il n’y a de corps que d’un celui-ci – et il faudra immédiatement ajouter, ou d’une celle-ci.” (2008b/2000a: 128/116)

The un-body, the other of the Body, would be a non-existent abstraction of which the first sense-image is the implicitly and explicitly privileged male body – so highly privileged that it seemed to cease to exist.¹⁵ Up until recently, the body was not ‘prestigious’ enough to occupy philosophical minds, except as the antipole of the soul.

Saying that it was not until Merleau-Ponty that bodies were rehabilitated would not be quite correct. His predecessors include Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and of course Edmund Husserl, but it was Merleau-Ponty who made bodies the focus of his attention, and didn't merely regard it as the other of the soul. Or more precisely, it was embodied existence that was the center of his attention, because the point is that what we are accustomed to call body and soul (later mind or consciousness) cannot be separated: “The union of the soul and the body is not established through an arbitrary decree that unites two mutually exclusive terms, one a subject and the other an object. It is accomplished at each moment in the movement of existence.” (*PhP* 91/105) The living lived body is our only access to subjectivity as well as the whole world. (E.g. *PhP* 205/231–2)

The problem with Merleau-Ponty's embodiment – in line with Nancy's objection against neutral un-body – would be the smoothness with which we are supposed to navigate our embodied lives. Merleau-Ponty uses various types of embodiment as his examples¹⁶ but there is still an elementary harmony and completeness in all of them, even in the cases of pathologies, children or ‘primitives’. (*PhP* 110/125) He does mention struggles of (as we would now say) people with certain disabilities but mainly in order to emphasize the ‘natural’ problem-free conduct of ‘normal’ people. This is one of Nancy's critiques of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl – what is the Body for them, is mass for him:

There are some celebrated analyses by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on this question of “self-touching,” of my own hands’ “self-touching.” But curiously – and this comes up over and over again in the whole tradition – everything always returns in interiority. The phenomenological analyses of “self-touching” always return to a primary interiority. Which is impossible. To

15 This is not to say that a male body is without any problems or that it doesn't require care. It means that the adult healthy male body – deprived of the functions of nutrition, excretion, and often sexuality – serves as a model for this un-body.

16 See chapters 3 and 4 for female embodiment and sickness.

begin with, I have to be in exteriority in order to touch myself. And what I touch remains on the outside. I am exposed to myself touching myself. And therefore— but this is the difficult point—the body is always outside, on the outside. It is from the outside. The body is always outside the intimacy of the body itself. (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 128–9/117–18)

We see that contrary to Merleau-Ponty, perfectly working organs are not parts of the Body for Nancy: “health is life in the silence of the organs, when I don't sense my stomach, my heart, or my viscera. There's an intimacy there, but an intimacy that is merely not there, not sensible, it's of the order of the mass.” (Ibid.: 129/118; see also Morin 2012: 128) A transplant or a malfunctioning organ is felt,¹⁷ therefore it is a part of the Body, whereas the unfelt parts are silent, unspeakable, mass, non-existent.

Merleau-Ponty's non-universality, or rather possible extensions of his thinking to be more inclusive will be one of the most important themes of the following chapters: to give voice to Bodies is one of the goals of my thesis.

1.3 Networking Un-bodies

Another possible variant of the un-body Nancy indicated is one proposed by the object-oriented (quasi-)Heideggerian philosopher Graham Harman. He quotes and applauds the closing passage of one of the versions of “Corpus” where Nancy sees body as a conglomeration of both material and conceptual individual particles:

There is no whole, no totality of the body – but its absolute separation and sharing out [*partage*]. There is no such thing as *the* body. There is no body.

Instead, there are patient and fervent recitations of numerous corpuses. Ribs, skulls, pelvises, irritations, shells, diamonds, drops, foams, mosses, excavations, fingernail moons, minerals, acids, feathers, thoughts, claws,

17 “According to my doctors I cannot feel my liver. There is no innervation for the organ, and the connective capsule surrounding it is left with the old, cirrhotic one. *Eppure* ... I do feel my organ right here, under my ribs, slightly eccentric. It beckons my attention, like a fist that presses my side from the inside, just enough to let me know it is there. Sometimes it stretches and speaks with a tension, which is not quite pain, but makes me move for relief. It is so *tangible*, stuck like an envelope of the hidden organ.” (Varela 2001: 264; see also Nancy 2008c/2000b: 162–3/15–16; Morin 2012: 128ff.)

slates, pollens, sweat, shoulders, domes, suns, anuses, eyelashes, dribbles, liqueurs, slits, blocks, slicing, squeezing, removing, bellowing, smashing, burrowing, spoiling, piling up, sliding, exhaling, leaving, flowing — (Nancy 1993b: 193; quoted also by Harman 2012: 96)

However, what Harman seems to overlook or ignore, is that such interminable enumerating *is making up* the Body. In this lies the universality of Nancy's concept. The Body is striving to hold together but it is never either completely disintegrated or entirely united. Anything new is already a part of the Body the same instant I think of it, feel it, sense it, or talk about it.

The anxiety of the Body's endeavor both to purify itself and to encompass its new parts is described in *The Intruder*, Nancy's famous account of the experience of having a transplanted heart. Who was the intruder? The old heart, when it started being sensible, or the new heart, someone-other's heart? "If my own heart was failing me, to what degree was it 'mine,' my 'own' organ?" (Nancy 2008c/2000b: 162/15) In Annemarie Mol's ontology arising from research in a medical environment, it is a different *doing* of a body: the struggle shows how the Body *enacts* itself anew. (Mol 2002: 41) And exactly through the necessity of this new enactment, the Body arises. The new Body different from the Body of the past. They are not the same, but partially connected and equally genuine. In the end, the question is not who or what is the intruder. The feeling of intrusion, the strangeness is what makes up the Body, it is what "holds it at a distance" and what allows me to say 'I' in the first place. (Morin 2016: 336; 2022: 73) In the postscript from 2010, Nancy writes that the whole idea of his hearts – his own malfunctioning one and the graft – as intruders keeps fading:

in this inextricable intertwining of "nature" and "artificiality" that forms the world of men – that is to say the world itself – everything absolutely penetrates everything without any outside." (Nancy 2010: 52; my translation)

The Body is articulated chaos: chaos is what gives sound to the silent phenomenological body and articulation prevents it from collapsing into the order of mass. According to Harman (2012: 100), Nancy's "mass of bodies turns out to be little more than a traditional conception of matter: nothing determinate in itself,

yet capable of becoming anything.” Of course as usual, Harman in his text primarily pursues his own agenda, that is object-oriented philosophy, and that is why he probably pushes Nancy a little further to contrast him with his own ontology. In Harman's interpretation, the mass of bodies (or of anything else, for that matter) is an infinite potency which only articulates itself by contact with other bodies. (Ibid.: 101) As Nancy writes, “*the body is* always in the plural” (2008a: 63) and “[o]f the body, there's always *a lot*. There's always a *crowd* of bodies.” (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 124/110). Similarly, Luka Nakhutsrishvili also points out: “Nancy prefers to speak about *multiple* bodies rather than about *one* body. The birth of ‘a body’ would only be a reconstruction from an original multiplicity whose material-physiological consistency in a voluminous unity would have no more founding phenomenological strength [...]” (Nakhutsrishvili 2012: 170; my translation) The un-body that I am seeking, the body *before* becoming the Body/Soul, is not possible to count. It is the Nancian ‘whatever’ from another of his texts: “insofar as it is posited, exposed, insofar as it is the thing itself, every thing is whatever.” (Nancy 1993b: 174) Nancy certainly had inanimate objects in mind but it can be extended to any material entity, especially in the context of object-oriented philosophies. Harman naturally does not like the idea of vague indiscernible potency because it deprives material entities of their uniqueness and autonomy (in his philosophy, things either are or are not – there is no such thing as potential). If the Body only emerges after having encountered, or rather *while encountering*¹⁸ other Bodies, there is nothing stable and it is hardly surprising that Harman has similar problems with Nancy like he has with Bruno Latour.

The association of Nancy with the thinking of Latour and Actor-Network Theory in general is quite logical due to the fact that the Body only reveals itself in relations to other Bodies: through its *exposition*, which also means “an extension through networks.” (2008b/2000a: 124/109; 2008a: 21) This is the point of departure of Nancy's philosophy of body and also the starting point for many Actor-Network Theory thinkers. Nevertheless, Harman's interpretation makes Nancy's mass/matter somehow close to Latour's seemingly more fundamental

18 “[P]resence in its entirety is coming: which means, not ‘having come’ (past participle), but a *coming* (the action of coming, arriving). Presence is what is born, and does not cease being born.” (Nancy 1993b: 2; quoted also by Harman 2012: 99)

micro-actants in his early theoretical–philosophical essay “Irreductions.” Actants are supposed to be small units of events captured in relational networks in a concrete moment of space-time. The fact that we can only see the micro-actants in durable compact constellations is the effect of translation,¹⁹ interpretation, or (as Harman calls it) abstraction.²⁰ But these operations are not hermeneutical tools, they are the constitutive principle of the world. We cannot tell, whether the actants express themselves or if it is something else that interprets them and gives them ‘voice.’ (Latour 1993a/1984: 166/186)

The Nancian mass is also a point in space-time (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 124/109), that does not mean anything on its own. Nonetheless, what I find important – and what might be intentionally overlooked by Harman – is the fact, that the Body is interpreted, endowed with sense, translated or abstracted first and foremost *by itself* not (only) by an external network:

It’s always an “object,” a body ob-jected precisely *against the claim of being a body-subject*, or a subject-in-a-body [...] I ob-ject my body against myself, as something foreign, something strange, the exteriority *to* my enunciation (“ego”) *from* this enunciation *it-self*. (Nancy 2008a: 29)

The body is in the plural but it is in the plural even when it is (seemingly) alone. It is multiple, similar to what Mol (2002: 55) calls “more than one – but less than many.” The force giving a form to the mass, so that it can become the Body and/or the soul is something partially united from the beginning (instead of a group of the Latourian allied actants) and integral to the very Body it – with an

19 “To create an asymmetry, an actant need only lean on a force slightly more durable than itself. Even if this difference is tiny, it is enough to create a gradient of resistance that makes them both more real for another actant. [...] For a long time it has been agreed that the relationship between one text and another is always a matter for interpretation. Why not accept that this is also true between so-called texts and so-called objects, and even between so-called objects themselves?” (Latour 1999: 160, 166)

20 “Since every actant is utterly concrete (and according to *Irreductions* happens only once and in one time and one place) to make an actant mobile, stable, and combinable demands some sort of *abstraction* from that one time and one place. Yet Latour's form of abstraction can be performed by any object, not just a transcendent knowing human.” (Harman 2009: 54) See also the next chapter.

infinitesimal gap or rupture²¹ – creates. The un-body in this case would be a mere hypothesis: an unnameable frazil postulated as being *before* the Body.

It is possible to see these two first types of un-bodies in contrast: the first one is too compact, too smooth to be even registered, the second one is a pile of particles without any sense. Merleau-Ponty is very strongly opposed to a conception of the body that would gravitate towards the latter. On the contrary, any existence even if it shows signs of disintegration, is to a certain extent a complete existence as I mentioned earlier. This is linked to the phenomenological method: the embodied existence is always *already here*. Since the subject is “the absolute source” (*PhP* lxxii/iii), there is no access to anything that would hypothetically exist before it. Phenomenology is not interested in looking for causes, it describes phenomena. (*Ibid.*: lxxi/ii) The idea of particles grouped together into wholes is too close to so called natural sciences that – according to Merleau-Ponty at least – obscure lived experience. Embodied subject cannot be an ensemble of atoms or a thermodynamic system: “I am not the result or the intertwining of multiple causalities that determine my body or my ‘psyche.’” (*Ibid.*: lxxi/ii) Nor can it be an ensemble of both material and spiritual facts, as he makes clear in his main text on *flesh*. (*VI* 139/181) However, as the passage cited by Harman shows, the very possibility of Nancy being quoted by him suggests the main difference between the Merleau-Pontian and Nancian bodies. The Nancian Body is deliberately much more chaotic and this is also why it can be developed from this un-body, unlike in Merleau-Ponty's case, for whom it would be one of the gravest methodological mistakes. (See Morin 2022: 63–8)

The closest case of this un-body type would be a clinical account of the body. It is a body not felt like my own, a body I can objectify and translate into tables, numbers, and X-ray pictures. People of my time-space have grown unused to the outdated methods of doctors treating patients' bodies as if the patients themselves weren't even there but it doesn't mean that the body is not objectified with its viscera put on display. The only difference is that doctors nowadays often share their findings with their patients/clients. This is the experience of Francisco

21 “Nancy's body is constituted by a fragmentation that is never mended.” (Morin 2016: 341)
“What it [Nancy's discourse about touch] first recalls is sharing, parting, partitioning, and discontinuity, interruption, caesura – in a word, syncope.” (Derrida 2005/2000: 156/179)

J. Varela (2001: 259) when he describes his own liver transplantation, talking about himself in the third form: “The scene is viewed from the side. The patient is lying on his half-raised hospital bed. Tubes, sutures and drains cover his body from nose to abdomen.” The Body experience, described by Nancy as the experiencing from the outside is somewhere between the perfectly functioning ‘silent’ phenomenological (un-)body and the un-body of science: it is the body with all the difficulties of embodied existence. The difference is well demonstrated by Iris Marion Young in her text on the Pregnant Embodiment: a pregnant woman is far from experiencing her body as a neutral enactor of her intentions, which is the (obviously simplified) Merleau-Pontian concept she challenges.

Pregnancy roots me to the earth, makes me conscious of the physicality of my body not as an object, but as the material weight that I am in movement. The notion of the body as a pure medium of my projects is the illusion of a philosophy that has not quite shed the Western philosophical legacy of humanity as spirit. (Young 2005: 52)

She describes how on the one hand her belly feels like an additional part when she ‘forgets’ her grown and growing dimensions but on the other hand it is still an inherent part of the body because it feels the touch and the inside movements. The experience of the big body is the Nancian experience from the outside while keeping the phenomenological intimate interiority at the same time.²² “Pregnant consciousness is animated by a double intentionality: my subjectivity splits between awareness of myself as body and awareness of my aims and projects.” (Ibid.: 51–2) On the contrary, when a pregnant woman undergoes countless medical examinations and then the delivery itself, her personal experience is often taken out, objectified, put on display for everyone in the room, and included under statistics. (Ibid.: 58) This is the alienated un-body, mass of particles.

22 Pregnancy is undoubtedly a phenomenologically unique experience but abrupt changes in bodily compositions and abilities (sudden weight changes, rapid muscle growth, temporary or permanent acquisitions of disabilities etc.) can also lead to an intensified consciousness of one's own body.

1.4 Folds of Being

The last way I see to perceive the un-body, is the mass as most of us would probably picture it. This means either one body perceived *as a mass*, a body that is being tortured, cut, killed, and left to decay, or *a mass of* bodies – a mass grave full of cadavers, for instance. (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 122–4/107–10) In “Corpus”, there are many other examples of these un-bodies which have usually something to do with what would be called a violation of bodily dignity or integrity. Many of them are, maybe surprisingly, connected to vision because its ‘massity’ is detached from the sense of touch. If there is any kind of tactile sensation present, it is stronger, it doesn’t touch anymore: instead it penetrates and destroys, like in the introductory photos that go against Nancy’s definition of touch. (Ibid.: 122/107) It is the absolute *vision* of Death and in the context of sexuality, it is the desire to *see* a tortured, destroyed body, that is untouchable. (Nancy 2008a: 45) It is a pulsation between “a pure concentration” and dissolving [*lysat*] (ibid.: 59), a formless mass of Death or as I would call it: unrestrained energy. The difference between this mass and the mass in the previous section is that whereas the Harmanian mass consists of discrete parts, this time it is continuous, and whereas the former is the mass *before* it becomes the Body, the latter is rather the mass *after* the Body disintegrates. However it might be capable of amoebic transformation and re-creation. In the remaining pages, I will write in praise of this energy, the formless mass which can be ‘whatever’ but still inclines to becoming certain entities rather than others, in praise of decay and death with small ‘d’s.

As many philosophers have implicitly and sometimes explicitly shown, it is possible to think matter as creative and active, instead of a passive mass that is waiting for a form to give it a concrete shape. After all, if there is nothing *but* matter,²³ without dual oppositions, then matter has to be active in order for any change to be possible. Diana Coole, a New Materialist philosopher, makes use of Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on nature to show different entities as folds in or of space. (Coole 2010: 106–8) The folds can be considered as being on an equal ontological level, hence there does not have to be a qualitative difference between

23 It is a belief like any other, which I here try to hold as a thought experiment rather than a personal conviction.

human and non-human animals, or other living organisms and even so-called inanimate objects.²⁴ All the differences consist in density and/or quantity of matter. And it is generative mass or matter *itself* that makes the folds. Coole (2010: 108) and Gilles Deleuze (1988a/2004: 110/117), whom she cited, therefore praised the folds in Merleau-Ponty: “I am not, to recall Hegel's phrase, a ‘hole in being,’ but rather a hollow, or a fold that was made and that can be unmade.” (*PhP* 223/249) The (embodied) subject is thus not something that eludes or interrupts being but a fluidly changeable and changing layer. “Life is not a sort of quasi-interiority, it is only a fold, the reality of a process [*passage*], [...] unobservable up close, which assuredly is made, and which is a reality,” said also Merleau-Ponty (*N* 157/208) in his lectures on nature, going against Nancy's (2008b/2000a: 128/117) accusation.

Now, the folds and flesh in the later Merleau-Ponty are of course not matter in the classical sense, i.e. passive material or a conglomerate of ‘corpuscles,’ it is more of an element like fire or earth (*VI* 139/181–2), and the folds are realized through intensity. In an ontology like this, an entity, a Body arises by means of other entities, itself, and a space-time lag, a *differance* (Morin 2022: 173), a “shift,” “spread,” an *écart*, much like in Nancy. (*VI* 146–8/189–92) The distinction between him and Merleau-Ponty lies in the smoothness with which the lags come into being and the firmness or maybe rather *confidence* with which the folds *stay* in being: “Rather than invoking a vocabulary of ‘incarnate sense,’ of intertwining, chiasmus, and reciprocity, to describe the way in which the world is opened up through bodily intentionality, Nancy invokes a vocabulary of rupture and discontinuity.” (James 2006: 132)²⁵ In Merleau-Ponty, the world is not fully homogenous either because if it were the case, nothing would exist but entities arise through folds, mild pressures, intensified spaces, not in the situation of conflict like in Nancy's *Intruder*.

24 While following the tradition of contemporary thinkers, I only try to use some of Merleau-Ponty's ideas to propose a kind of ‘flat ontology’ which is developed in the following chapters. I am of course very well aware that nothing like this would be shared by Merleau-Ponty himself.

25 It is true that Nancy (2013: 84) himself in his text “Strange Foreign Bodies” praises phenomenological descriptions of the chiasm and flesh. What he likes, is however not really the lived body but rather anything that refers to “chiasm or torsion between inside and outside.” (Morin 2022: 15)

Rawness of flesh is escaping exactly the moment I want to name it. It is the mass of the Body not aware of its part but at the same time always ready to let itself be known. When a body still holds together to constitute the Nancian Body, matter attracts my attention – usually when there is a problem – only to broaden the Body. But the un-bodies Nancy writes about in the beginning of his essay “On the Soul,” the “tortured, violated, wounded, humiliated bodies” or the cadavers (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 122/107, 124/110) are not Bodies any more. They are disintegrated bodies and revealed parts of the Body, ripped out of their bodily context and arousing disgust. Not only disgust but abjection: an existential fear and horror from the repulsive.²⁶ The experience of extreme abjection (far stronger than everyday mild discomfort of regular bodily functions), that is, the violence, serious life-threatening body decomposing illnesses, extreme pain, or decaying bodies are threatening my very self and although it affects me to different degrees, abjection does not fundamentally change its quality if it happens directly to me or if I ‘only’ witness it. (Menninghaus 2003: 1) The decomposition or torturous pain is different than the Body that is aware of its internal organs through pain, the ‘I’ of the utterance (*énonciation*): “I utter myself [*m'énonce*], I am”. (Nancy 2016/1979: 84/121) The former cannot state itself, it is flooded by pain and/or decay.

But the horror caused by gore is not necessary. I would like to dedicate the last part of the chapter to a discussion of positive approaches to repulsive bodies.

1.5 Abject

While there are many accounts of the actual physical suffering causing pleasure to their initiators, witnesses or even victims,²⁷ the experience of sheer intensive

26 On the difference between “disgust” and “abject,” see e.g. Arya (2017: 57): “If we were to find a mouldy peach in a cellar we may feel disgusted and would feel inclined to remove it from our presence or to avoid it in other ways. If we were to find instead a rotting corpse instead of a mouldy peach, our reactions would be very different.”

27 “Nietzsche stated the essentially religious problem of the meaning of pain and gave it the only fitting answer: if pain and suffering have any meaning, it must be that they are enjoyable to someone. From this viewpoint there are only three possibilities: the first, which is the “normal” one, is of a moral and sublime character; it states that pain is pleasing to the gods who contemplate and watch over man; the other two are perverse and state that pain is enjoyable either to the one who inflicts it or to the one who suffers it. It should be clear that

revulsion alone (that is, aside from obvious moral problems like hurting or inflicting pain to someone and aside from any BDSM context) seems more interesting here. To avoid objections, I am taking into consideration a dead corpse of a person that died peacefully, a decaying cadaver out of any morally horrifying context, by which I mean first of all violent death, death caused by an accident, death from an unexpected illness, an epidemic, etc.

Julia Kristeva described the abjection caused by a disintegrating body in her famous *Powers of Horror*. She sees the experience of abjection in general as a universal phenomenon of people in all human societies (Kristeva 1980: 83) and even though the individual manifestations are different, the dead body is allegedly one of the strongest possible horror sensations. (Ibid.: 33) She was rightfully criticized by anthropologists for following “an insulting evolutionary track” from the so-called primitive people (both ancient and living) to contemporary Europeans and for claiming the current European dominant understanding of subject to be universal. (Klima 2001: 558; see also Tsing 1993: 18) It is nevertheless true, that what it means to live in a body, or be a living body, has been highly dependent on space-time. (E.g. Mol 2002: 25–6) The German historian Barbara Duden shows on an example of the medical notes of a physician from an early-eighteenth-century German town how the body could be perceived and lived through as a closed enigmatic system with a fragile equilibrium of bodily fluids, whose imbalance can manifest itself by these fluids seeping or leaking to the surface, usually through unusual orifices (e.g. breast milk from the rectum or vagina etc.). (Duden 1991: 106–9)

Medieval and baroque works of art are other such examples of different bodily experiences, especially with regard to gore. The Czech literary theorist Růžena Grebeníčková also denies the usual belief that the Middle Ages neglected the body. In fact, the body as such really wasn't favored very much but exactly because of this, it served as a subject to many reflections and artistic production. In Nancian dichotomy, the body was perceived as the Body with its weight, depth, and inner structure that can be touched.

the normal answer is the most fantastic, the most psychotic of the three.” (Deleuze 1991/1967: 118/119)

[W]hat is *behind* the body, is not [only] soul as the life bringing principle, but, shortly, only the body again: it has its exterior, which we see but which is sensed first of all as the ‘envelope, skin’, and its interior, that is, that, *which is not directly seen but can be physically perceived and sensed, because it induces tactile ideas*. (Grebeníčková 1997: 28–9; my translation, emphasis in original)

The text Grebeníčková comments on is an excerpt from a medieval collection of moral essays by Odo of Cluny from the 10th century. By appealing to everybody's personal experience, he describes a body as “the dirt bag.” And if we are not capable of touching “slime and filth” with the tips of our fingers, why do we want to touch another person’s (i.e., woman’s) body?²⁸ (Ibid.: 24) As Grebeníčková wrote, the body is dissected but not as an object as it would be cut by a doctor on an autopsy table, it is being examined by itself via touching and is analogically projected on another body. (Ibid.: 26–8) It is Nancian mass (because it is the inside of a healthy body) but touched from the outside precisely *in order to be felt* as decaying matter and to provoke disgust: It starts from the neutral intimacy of the un-body of the first type and then it proceeds through touch to mass as putrefaction, which is the desired picture in this situation.

1.5.1 Asubha Kammatthāna

This brings my chapter to an even more extreme (and certainly more thorough) example: the Thai *theravāda* praxis called *asubha kammatthāna*. It is a technique of gradual contemplating corpses (in their actual presence or on photographs) in different stages of their disintegration in order to be able to see them later at anytime even when it is not ‘present’ in our usual sense of the word. After being able to visualize the corpses, the next step is to experience one's own body as a carcass.²⁹ That which is supposed to be *abject*, rejected, is internalized and understood as myself. At this stage, it is similar to medieval or baroque³⁰ goals:

28 Citing German version of Johan Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, citing Odo of Cluny, *Collationum libri III*, Migne t. CXXXIII, 556. (Citation checked with Huizinga 1996: 160.)

29 This is of course very simplified, for a more detailed description, see e.g. Klima 2001: 561–70.

30 See e.g. a Czech baroque poem from the 17th century:

“More hideous am I, / than bloated blisters, than dung too, / all swollen, pale, / more repulsive

the revelation of the morbid truth behind a beautiful appearance, getting rid of carnal desires, and proving the nothingness and evanescence of human existence. (Klima 2001: 568) Nevertheless, for Buddhist meditators this way of thinking is but one stage on the path towards the comprehension of omnipresent impermanence and illusoriness: “the purpose is to see the constructedness of both the attractive and the repulsive themselves, proving to the heart (*chai*) that there is no essential truth that inheres in objective form, whether that of abjection ‘in the body’ or that of beauty.” (Klima 2002: 221) In the end, a decaying body and its ugliness is precisely as illusory and irrelevant as a beautiful body of a young person, they are only states of mind: “We live in our thought-formations, our picture-painting – engrossed and upset by nothing but our own thought-formations, our own picture-painting.” (Mahā Boowa 2012: 83) It is calmness, purity, and meaning of meaninglessness that one is supposed to arrive at through the practice of switching the mind between extremes.

1.6 Floating Sense

The dichotomies mass–weight or un–body–Body (as I call it) can be used here in all its fluidity: something that is supposed to be mass par excellence overturns to be the bodiest Body, only to become mass again, but a mass full of the most significance it can bear. There is nothing that can escape the process of Boding: “The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified as prior*.” (Butler 2011: 6) Of course, with Nancy, it is more complicated and while Butler says that language and materiality are two different things that are at the same time inextricable, it is still too symmetrically poststructuralist:

Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependency, but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already

than poison and plague. / I am myself a mere blister, / a rotten cadaver, / stench, dung, pus, bitter poison / for the mange of a filthy body. // I am a puddle of sins, / mere decay, / worm, mere pond of stench, / vice, dearth, penury, poverty. / A monstrous lobster gorges me, / I am mere infection, / in which the pus and dung pile up, / the presage of certain death.” (Bridel 2013: 11; my translation)

implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different. (Ibid.: 38)

Nancy explicitly defends himself against potential objections coming from the Butlerian side, the objection that everything is “*already interpretations*” and thus “caught up in a network of signification, and that no ‘free body’ floats beyond sense.” (Nancy 2008a: 23) Rather than free-floating matter waiting for an interpretation, it is the sense that needs an anchorage. His answer is:

sense itself will float, in order to stop or start at its limit: and that this limit is the body, and not as a pure and simple exteriority of sense, or as some unknown, intact, untouchable matter, thrust into some improbable transcendence closed in the densest immediacy [...] not then, finally, as “the body,” but instead as THE BODY OF SENSE. (Ibid.)

The sense floats in order to stop at surfaces, skins, it touches and gently embraces forms, parts of bodies, and whole bodies that themselves “make up the inorganic body of sense.” (Nancy 2008d/1993a: 63/103) Due to the chaotic organization and necessary alienation, the Body, or rather the corpus which is the composition, has to be uttered (*énoncé*). In the utterance (*énonciation*), the body and mind are combined in the mouth and form the Body. (Nancy 2008a: 25; 2016/1979: 105/155) The strength and attractiveness of Nancy's theory of the Body consist precisely in this formal usage: whenever I speak, I am already forming *it*. Not only speaking *about* the Body but speaking *it, the Body* (both nominative and accusative). However, its Other is hardly tangible at all when it aims at a substantial definition which I tried to show in my text. One cannot speak the unspeakable. The un-body of white man becomes the Body thanks to scholars who started to put into question its undoubtedness, thus it was paradoxically the non-privileged-bodied people who have brought the white-male (un-)body back to life. The hypothesis of a body as a cluster of small actants is escaping my understanding at the very moment I think I grasp it: Harman's interpretation of Nancy serves more as a point of departure of Harman's own philosophy, because before the birth of the Body, there is nothing to speak of. My third attempt to seize

the un-body only reveals Nancy's unsuitability for endowing his mass with gravity – it is not possible, it escapes, disappears.

1.7 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to open up possibilities of bodies before their articulation, before their formation, and after their disintegration. They are serving as sketches of the pathways that interpretations and extensions of Merleau-Ponty can take. Nancy with his scattered partial integrations was used as a guide to these openings. The idea of a certain falsity or at least non-universality of the first un-body runs throughout the whole text, the body and reality as a compilation of particles will be further explored in the next chapter, disease in the clinical sense will appear in chapter three, and the illness arousing disgust is elaborated in chapter four. In the light of *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*, all possible universality of any Western notion of body, bodily experience, embodiment, and subjectivity vanishes. If I could train myself to see a person in front of me as a carcass, isn't it in the end more 'true' than seeing them as a youthful body? Or rather does it even matter, since the ultimate 'truth' is that there is no truth in or even behind appearances. The elusiveness of reality which becomes fully apparent as soon as we step into the unknown territories is outlined in chapter five.

To conclude this section, I am not going to recapitulate differences between Nancy and Merleau-Ponty, as this was done very comprehensively by Morin (2022) in her recent book, on which this chapter obviously relies heavily. At the end of the first part which is dedicated to the notion of body, she writes that the Nancian body stands in contrast to the phenomenological body precisely in that it is not the body-subject but the body-object, body ob-jected. (Ibid.: 82) The demand for philosophical exploration of the body thus turned around. If Patočka during a lecture in 1968 said that "the body as our own, as we live it and as it experiences itself, could never become a topic of philosophical reflection" and that "*living body* is the presupposition of our even being aware of an anatomical and a physiological body" (1999/1995: 3/11), Nancy in 1992 writes the opposite: that "there is no 'proper body,' just a reconstruction." (2008a: 29) After all these years of trying to work on Merleau-Ponty, I am now myself becoming skeptical of

the 'lived body' myself which no longer seems to be much more than an abstract idealization. Of course, Nancy could write his text precisely because the proper body had already been described by phenomenologists, but he is in line with feminist and decolonial objections raised against phenomenology: female, non-white, and other minority embodiments have certainly not been experiencing their bodies in terms of "I can."³¹

31 E.g. *PhP* 139/160.

Non-corps : Masse des corps, le corps comme masse:

Toucher Maurice Merleau-Ponty à travers Jean-Luc Nancy

– *Résumé*

Ce premier chapitre explore les limites de la corporéité elle-même. Les idées que je développe ici découlent de Jean-Luc Nancy, de sa notion du corps comme masse telle qu'elle est exposée dans son intervention « De l'âme », que je déploie selon trois axes possibles. A chaque fois, j'utilise un concept différent de Maurice Merleau-Ponty en combinaison avec une autre tradition de pensée et/ou de pratique. Ainsi, Nancy permet plusieurs ouvertures sur Merleau-Ponty qui sont développées dans d'autres chapitres.

Pour Nancy, « l'âme est le nom du sentir du corps [...] le dedans qui se sent dehors » (Nancy 2000a : 121–2) L'âme est donc la présence du corps, le fait même qu'il y a un corps. (Ibid. : 117 ; voir aussi Morin 2016 : 337 ; 2022 : 60) Le corps est toujours perçu de l'extérieur, il est l'extérieur de l'intérieur, et en tant que tel, il est associé au toucher. Il est toujours *déjà* perçu, il n'y a pas de corps avant ou après. Sauf pour la masse que j'explore ici. Selon Nancy, les corps perdent leur existence corporelle propre lorsqu'ils sont mesurés comme une *masse* de corps au lieu de leur nombre, comme par exemple dans les guerres ou les massacres. (2000a : 110) Un tel corps n'a pas de poids, c'est comme le corps du siècle des Lumières : le corps qui est censé céder entièrement la place à l'âme. Ce dernier est donc mon premier exemple : le non-corps neutre d'un homme blanc. Le deuxième exemple est théorique : le corps comme cumul de particules. Le troisième non-corps est la masse informe par excellence.

Le non-corps masculin cartésien

Comme l'a dit par exemple Jan Patočka (1999/1995 : 3/11), le corps en tant que corps vécu n'était pas un sujet pertinent pendant la majeure partie de l'histoire de la philosophie européenne. Depuis Descartes au plus tard, le corps doit être fonctionnel, musclé sans aucune graisse ou – s'il s'agit d'une femme – affamé à la limite de l'existence. Le corps ne devient qu'un outil.

Merleau-Ponty a été le premier à faire du corps le centre de son attention, ou plutôt du sujet incarné parce que ce que nous avons l'habitude d'appeler le

corps et l'âme (plus tard l'esprit ou conscience) ne peut être séparé. (*PhP* 105) Ce que Nancy reproche à Merleau-Ponty et à la phénoménologie en général, c'est que la vie incarnée est trop harmonieuse, il n'y a pas de brèche ni d'extérieur qui serait exposé :

tout retourne toujours en intériorité. Les analyses phénoménologiques du « se toucher » retournent toujours en une intériorité première. Ce qui n'est pas possible. Il faut d'abord que je sois en extériorité pour me toucher. Et ce que je touche reste du dehors. Je suis exposé à me toucher moi-même. Et donc, mais c'est là le point difficile, le corps est toujours en dehors, au-dehors, il est du dehors. Le corps est toujours hors de l'intimité du corps lui-même. (Nancy 2000a : 117–18)

La seule intimité corporelle chez Nancy est celle du silence. Mais dans ce cas, ce n'est plus le Corps ; c'est la masse. Ce sont les organes qui fonctionnent parfaitement sans qu'on s'en aperçoive, le corps qui répond toujours à nos besoins, le corps comme outil. Même le puissant « je peux » merleau-pontien serait de l'ordre de la masse.

Le réseautage des non-corps

Une autre variante possible du non-corps indiqué par Nancy est celle proposée par Graham Harman, le philosophe de « l'ontologie de l'objet ». Il aime l'idée que le corps est un conglomérat de particules à la fois matérielles et conceptuelles. (Nancy 1993b : 193 ; cf. Harman 2012 : 96) Mais Harman pousse Nancy trop près de la théorie de l'acteur-réseau afin de se différencier lui-même. Dans son interprétation, la masse des corps est une puissance infinie qui ne s'articule que par le contact avec d'autres corps. (Harman 2012 : 101) Néanmoins, ce qui est important, c'est le fait que le corps est interprété, doté de sens, traduit ou abstrait avant tout par lui-même et non (seulement) par un réseau externe. (Nancy 2008a : 28) Le corps avant ses interprétations, traductions et significations, le corps en tant que masse, ne serait qu'une hypothèse, parce qu'il ne peut échapper à son (auto)interprétation.

Le cas le plus proche de ce type de non-corps serait un compte rendu clinique du corps. C'est un corps qui n'est pas ressenti comme le mien, un corps

que je peux objectiver et traduire en tableaux, en chiffres et en images radiographiques. (Cf. Varela 2001 : 259) Rien ne peut être plus éloigné de la phénoménologie que cela : l'idée de particules regroupées en ensembles est trop proche des sciences dites naturelles qui – selon Merleau-Ponty au moins – obscurcissent l'expérience vécue. Le sujet incarné ne peut pas être un ensemble d'atomes ou un système thermodynamique. Cette partie suggère la principale différence entre les corps merleau-pontien et nancien. Le corps nancien est délibérément beaucoup plus chaotique et c'est aussi pour cela qu'il peut être développé à partir de cet un-corps, contrairement au cas de Merleau-Ponty, pour qui ce serait une des plus graves erreurs méthodologiques. (Voir Morin 2022 : 63–8)

Les plis de l'être

La dernière façon de percevoir le non-corps, c'est la masse au sens habituel : « pourriture où s'abolit l'espace, pure concentration, broyat, lysat de corps dans le suave ineffable grouillant de *cette chose qui n'a de nom dans aucune langue* ». (Nancy 2008a : 58) C'est l'ancien corps en voie de putréfaction mais dans son potentiel créatif, c'est en même temps la chair qui compose le monde par le pliage. Dans ses textes tardifs, Merleau-Ponty était probablement plus proche de Nancy que celui-ci ne l'admettait lui-même. La réalité est composée de différentes intensités de la chair qui se replie sur elle-même en créant déhiscence ou fission. (N 208 ; VI 189–92 ; voir aussi Morin 2022 : 173)

La crudité de la chair s'échappe exactement au moment où je veux la nommer. C'est la masse du corps qui n'a pas conscience de sa partie mais qui, en même temps, est toujours prête à se laisser connaître. Les non-corps de Nancy sont « torturés, violés, blessés, humiliés » (Nancy 2000a : 107) ou des cadavres en décomposition qui provoquent le dégoût. Mais l'horreur provoquée par le gore n'est pas nécessaire. La dernière partie du chapitre y est consacrée.

L'abject

Dans son célèbre ouvrage *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Julia Kristeva (1980 : 33) désigne le cadavre comme la sensation d'horreur la plus forte, prétendument universelle dans toutes les cultures. (Ibid. : 83) L'art chrétien européen médiéval et

baroque est un exemple d'utilisation créative du gore pour atteindre des objectifs plus élevés, à savoir le détachement de la dépendance aux plaisirs terrestres et la purification de l'âme.

Un exemple plus extrême est une technique de méditation thaïlandaise *theravāda* appelée *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* : des moines ou des nonnes contemplant des cadavres à des stades progressifs de désintégration afin de pouvoir les imaginer à tout moment par la suite. Plus tard, ils sont censés percevoir leur propre corps de cette manière : ce qui est considéré comme abject, c'est-à-dire rejeté, est intériorisé et compris comme étant moi-même. (Klima 2001 : 568) Le but ultime est cependant de « voir le caractère construit de l'attractif et du répulsif eux-mêmes, prouvant au cœur (*chai*) qu'il n'y a pas de vérité essentielle inhérente à une forme objective. » (Klima 2002 : 221 ; ma traduction) En fin de compte, un corps en décomposition et sa laideur sont précisément aussi illusoire et sans importance que le beau corps d'une jeune personne, ce ne sont que des états d'esprit : « Nous vivons dans nos formations de pensée, notre peinture d'image – absorbés et bouleversés par rien d'autre que nos propres formations de la pensée, notre propre peinture d'image. » (Mahā Boowa 2012 : 83 ; ma traduction) C'est au calme, à la pureté et au sens de l'insignifiance que l'on est censé parvenir par la pratique de la commutation de l'esprit entre les extrêmes.

Le sens flottant

Les dichotomies masse–poids ou non-corps–Corps peuvent être utilisées ici dans toute leur fluidité : quelque chose qui est censé être la masse par excellence se renverse pour devenir le Corps le plus corporel, pour redevenir une masse, mais une masse pleine de la plus grande signification qu'elle puisse porter. Plutôt que la masse en attente de son interprétation, c'est le sens qui flotte et a besoin d'un ancrage :

c'est le sens lui-même qui va flotter, pour finir ou pour commencer, sur sa limite : et cette limite est le corps, non pas comme une pure et simple extériorité au sens, non pas comme on ne sait quelle « matière » intacte, intouchable, enfoncée dans une invraisemblable transcendance close dans l'immédiateté la plus épaisse [...], non pas donc, pour finir comme « le corps », mais bien comme LE CORPS DU SENS. (Nancy 2008a : 22)

On ne peut pas parler de l'indicible. Le non-corps de l'homme blanc devient le Corps grâce aux chercheurs qui ont commencé à remettre en cause son indiscutabilité : ce sont paradoxalement les personnes non privilégiées qui lui ont redonné vie. L'interprétation de Nancy par Harman sert plutôt de point de départ à sa propre philosophie, car avant la naissance du corps, il n'y a rien à dire. Ma troisième tentative de saisir le non-corps ne fait que révéler l'inaptitude de Nancy à doter sa masse de gravité – ce n'est pas possible, ça échappe, ça disparaît.

2. Holding Onto the Body in Networked Reality: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Bruno Latour

*Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking.*³²

First, there is nausea and disorientation. I am even upset: it is ridiculous that people drug their minds and then they feel smart. What am I doing here, by the lake, I should be home writing and I want my sharp mind back. Everyone is acting weirdly but at some point even I stop pretending that I am cutting vegetables. “Go enjoy life, it’s ok,” said Ziba, dancing around the cutting board. I walk aimlessly in the forest, mountains start moving. I decide to lie down in the tent to escape mosquitos and sleep it off. As I begin to close my eyes, the construction of the tent starts creating fantastic ornaments and when I close my eyes completely, I suddenly fly in something that looks like a screensaver from the 1990s. After some time, the geometrical visions disappear and I start exploring my body. Everywhere I touch, I can sense all the structures, wrinkles, and pores with the tips of my fingers, monstrously magnified. I don’t feel repugnance, I feel compassion. When I touch my belly, I can enter inside my body. Seeing and sensing pulsating blood everywhere, I feel love for the ephemerality that I am and sympathy for everything alive. I keep crying for everyone I have ever loved, for all living beings, for all the beauty and fragility around me, for my self that I treat so badly sometimes.

सब्बे सत्ता भवंतु सुखितत्ता³³

After hours, I am slowly getting back to mundanity but my senses are still too sharp. My fingers are still too ‘meaty’ to do anything, the forest is too green to

32 Margulis & Sagan 1997: 29.

33 Transcribed as “sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta,” translates approximately as “may all beings be happy.” It is a verse from the *Mettā Sutta* from The Pāli Canon, traditionally from 6th or 5th century BC. The sutta should relieve fear. I was not reciting it for myself in sanskrit but I was feeling a strong affiliation to certain sentiments that are usually connected to what we call Buddhism. I had had connections to ‘Buddhism’ many years before and during that evening, they re-emerged.

look at, the world is still too intense. Finally, the phrase “a certain blue of the sea is so blue that only blood would be more red” makes sense to me.³⁴

2.1 No Isolation

The body has emerged now, out of formless mass or as an assemblage of particles, it is caught in its fragility of existence. But how to assert and maintain its shape? The skin is certainly an option, which is why touch is so important for phenomenology. It is an organ that perceives and is perceived, can also perceive itself and cannot not perceive (even if I am not touching anything solid, I still feel the air temperature for example). The skin is hence a good start but it doesn't hold under all circumstances. First, not everything that is part of my body is organic in the biological sense: I have many so-called artificial parts inside of my body (tooth fillings, screws). Second, bodies expand and shrink, either by sudden life changes (pregnancy, illness, or even amputations – to use Merleau-Ponty's favorite example) when subjects struggle to ‘catch up,’ or simply by attaching objects onto them: things that help me navigate the world (glasses, a white cane), survive (clothes),³⁵ move faster (cars, bicycles, canoes) or move at all (crutches, a wheelchair). Third, no living being can survive for long without an intensive exchange of various substances with their environment.³⁶ (See also the next chapter) These things are rather obvious but not so often accounted for and they are going to be discussed in further chapters. Here, the focus is on the relatively unproblematic existence of subjects and objects. And on the destabilization of this dichotomy.

The embodied subject moves quite naturally and in most situations (or maybe rather in model situations) doesn't ponder on the problem of boundaries. It is thought of as a Latourian black box and any time a body needs to adapt (to align the physical and habitual body), new blackboxing occurs, as it is the desired

34 Merleau-Ponty is paraphrasing Paul Claudel here. (*VI* 132/172)

35 I am occasionally outside when it is -40C so this is not an exaggeration even for me, a city person of 21st century.

36 Even tardigrades need nutrition *eventually*.

state.³⁷ Again, the body becomes interesting precisely at its boundaries and fissures – temporal, spatial, or conceptual – when the subject cracks, loses connection to itself or when its different versions mismatch. But this chapter focuses on descriptions of smooth existences and only in the end indicates their limits. How is it possible that subjectivity holds its shape and what are the forces that make it possible? Or rather, what makes us so obsessed with the concept of compact subject and what makes it hold?

According to Merleau-Ponty, the spontaneity of the subject is exactly *the* mystery that needs to be described: it seems natural to live but difficult to explain. (E.g. VI 3/17) In the following pages, I will show how it is possible to maintain a subject thinking both with phenomenology (focusing on *The Structure of Behavior* this time) and ANT, through Bruno Latour’s famous book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993b/2006) and the article by John Law and Annemarie Mol (2001) “Situating technoscience: an inquiry into spatialities.” First, I will however need to go back to my second un-body from the previous chapter. There the body came into being through networking of micro-forces that try to extend their lifespan by resistance. Resistance is not a privileged word, we can also use other expression like curdling or folding (*plier*). (Latour 1993a/1984: 159/177) The considerable amount of space will be devoted to the scientific take on nature and criticism thereof, because that’s where entities emerge and because both authors challenge the commonly understood objectivity.

2.1.1 Latour: Fusion of Forces

As I wrote before, the micro-forces form alliances in order to become stronger. The difference is only in quantity, not in quality: the more allies a micro-actant attracts to its side, the stronger it gets. Hence the reason why anything collaborates with anything else is the effort to survive, or rather *subsist*, to avoid biological terminology. Here the first problem arises: actors are supposed to be brought to life by networks, but Latour betrays this claim by starting with the former. His

³⁷ Bruno Latour (1999: 304) talks about technological tools but it can be applied to the problematic – and often problematized – phenomenological embodied unity: “When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity.” I owe this idea to a discussion with the thesis of Milan Kroulík.

penultimate book *Where Am I?*³⁸ is again full of individuals (both human and non-human, both organic and inorganic) that the author laboriously links together, asserting that *in reality*, they are all connected and the borders of an individual are not strictly defined: “what is a ‘human’ body when the amount of microbes needed to sustain it exceeds the number of its cells by several orders of magnitude?” (Latour 2021: 63) And yet starting from the compact body rather undermines the argument. What makes Latour able to presuppose a singular compact body? If the body itself is composed of many other organic and chemical actors, and is at the same time interwoven with its environment by perception, material exchange, and deliberate acts, what is it about the skin – which is but one semi-permeable boundary out of many – that makes it so distinctive that most people, including Latour, still regard the body enclosed by it as a singular entity? The same applies to the question of time: “how do we actually manage to connect all these different versions of objects in everyday practice?” asks Annemarie Mol in an interview.³⁹ (Kuijper 2006: 52; my translation) There seems to be something special and prominently solid about the body but it is hard to describe, let alone explain – no wonder people have been trying to secure its unity by a ‘master’ monad or any other version of indivisible entity that seeps through all the parts of the body and keeps it within its borders.

Latour is in fact no different: My personality is but a small actor that for some reason got the upper hand. We have to settle for explanations by collaborations between forces and different levels of density and intensity which is only caused by the *quantity*, not quality of the micro-actants working together. When writing about the body in particular, Latour focuses on functionality instead of definitions: “one is not obliged to define an essence, a substance (what the body is by nature), but rather, I will argue, *an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements.*” (Latour 2004a: 205–6) The body can be approached using centripetal movements but it

38 The English translation is called *After Lockdown* but I currently only have the French version (*Où suis-je ?* 2021) at my disposal therefore all translations are mine. (I also don’t like the English translation of the original title and in my own translation into Czech, I decided to stay true to the original.)

39 Similarly, the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993: xv) wonders that if according to postmodernism, everything is constructed, how it is possible that we still go on “pretending [...] that we live facts, not fictions.”

can never be fully attained. It is only logical because ANT falls short when it comes to general metaphysical claims. Arguably, this is to a large extent intentional: ANT scholars usually don't want to draw any abstract conclusions unless these rely heavily on examples of concrete practice that however always remain primary. It is easier to claim that metaphysical ideas of other philosophies (like phenomenology in my case) are better developed, when ANT very often doesn't even aim at metaphysical claims. As Casper Bruun Jensen (2017: 529n3) aptly comments:

There is a significant tendency among anthropologists (and philosophers) to focus on Latour's philosophical writings rather than on his empirical work. This emphasis lends misleading plausibility to the idea that actor-network theory defines a general metaphysics rather than offering a method for tracing practical ontologies.

The body is no exception, it is also defined by practice rather than complicated definitions, as was well illustrated by an activity of Latour's workshop *Where to land?* taking place in February 2020: each participant in turn stood in the centre of a circle drawn on the floor and thought about various influences in their life. Other participants then represented those influences and they place themselves into one of the quadrants based on the instructions of the person in the center: an influence was either located in the past or heading to the future and either rather positive or negative. The more influences or actors are attached to the person in the middle, the more defined she or he becomes. A single individual doesn't mean anything: every human being needs their environment to survive and once Bruno Latour put himself into the circle as well, he realized that he was in fact a vector of trajectory going from the past to the future. (Latour 2021: 104–6) In the end, a human is again a force or a collection of tiny forces that either survives or not.

2.1.2 Where Do Networks Stop?

The general idea of networks growing ad infinitum is contested (or commented upon and further developed) in an article by Marilyn Strathern from 1996: If I follow the networks, how will I decide where and when to stop? Also, if I use a

different scale – zoom in or out – there is another world of networks and the level of complexity is always the same. (See Strathern 2005) Networks thus proliferate both externally and internally. (Strathern 1996: 523) If I think of my body for example, it is an actor within networks but the body itself is a network at the same time. Traceability of networks across the world is a subject in many artistic creation, especially cinema,⁴⁰ but the recent pandemic has definitively proven that global interconnectedness is no mere fiction. The way it was referred to has however also demonstrated that the more extensive the network, the less dense and less elaborated it is. Switching focus between extensity and intensity (or global and local if you want) has strong political connotations and implications. As in other aspects of ANT, here it is also true that using its implementation works better than reasonings behind it. Law (2019: 5) suggests that it is the matter of goals and concerns: the magnitude of a network is determined with regard to “*what we are trying to achieve.*” So say when Latour wanted to point out, that Louis Pasteur was not the sole actor behind and ‘father’ of fermentation, vaccination, and pasteurization, he traced human and non-human actors around him and his work. (Latour 1993a/1984) If I want to show how history erases all the agency except of that of white men, I will focus on contributions to (or fights against) the course of histories by people of color and marginalized genders. Let’s try it: Have you heard of Marie Pasteur? No? Latour apparently neither because he doesn’t mention her in his book. She was Louis Pasteur’s wife and also his secretary, amanuensis, scientific assistant, and mother of five children, three of whom died in childhood. Another infamous example of erasure is the labor of Chinese workers on the Transatlantic Railroad: first their role was overlooked or marginalized, later they were on the contrary *reduced* to it. (Gow 2019) And list goes on. The issue is that there is no objective way to ‘follow the networks’: there are always points of view, interests, and more and less honorable goals.

Strathern (1996) proposes a slightly different strategy of situational cuts. These occur when a ‘condensed’ network⁴¹ is suddenly treated as a single unit and

40 E.g. *Babel* (Iñárritu 2006), *Contagion* (Soderbergh 2011) or – in a satirical way – *Riders of Justice* (Jensen 2020).

41 She actually uses Latour’s concept of hybrid – a combination of what we call culture and nature – and argues that hybrids are dense networks and networks are loose hybrids. (Strathern 1996: 523) I very much agree but hybrids are not crucial for this chapter; they will be mentioned in the last chapter.

the networking process is interrupted by the conclusion. She mostly refers to the moment a business transaction is concluded and a new ownership established or fixed. Let's say that when I buy an old house, it still contains in some way the networks of the past, but by purchasing it (or more paying it off in the case of a mortgage), there is a significant cut: the previous owners no longer have any claim on it and its history begins to fade into obscurity, at least for humans. The advantage of Strathern's approach is that it gives the system a more fixed structure (in a way not dissimilar to Merleau-Pontian Gestalts). Its downside is that some of the fragility that is typical of networks is lost. "You cannot build a network, lock it in place, and throw away the key. It has to be done again and again and again if it is to hold. *Everything is a process*," Law (2019: 4) says in the aforementioned text.

A partial conclusion now is that any apparently durable entity is solidified by active forces,⁴² and even if I start my inquiry from the actors rather than networks (which is what Latour often slips into), I will always end up in networks, vectors, and force fields, probably with more or less final cuts. Despite all this, Latour seems too static and at times sterile: his system is in the end just a bunch of individuals (be it humans or atoms) who compete with each other and only seek alliances for strategic reasons. To enable diversification of the networks, I will later turn to the article "Situating technoscience: An Inquiry into Spatialities" from 2001 by Law and Mol but not before networking the phenomenological embodiment.

2.2 Structures of the World

For understanding Merleau-Ponty's notion of being that is not limited to the being of humans, it is probably best to turn to his *Nature Lectures* or *The Visible and the Invisible*, particularly the chapter "Intertwining – Chiasm." The magic of the essay is that it begins *in medias re*: the being experiencing itself which is arguably more true to ANT than some Latour's texts. However, I will focus more on the

42 And body in particular: As my favorite quote says, "the assumption that we *have* a coherent body or *are* a whole hides a lot of work. This is work someone has to *do*. You do not have, you are not, a body-that-hangs-together, naturally, all by itself." (Mol & Law 2004: 57) This will reappear in later chapters.

“Intertwining” later, here I am mainly working with parts of Merleau-Ponty’s first book, *The Structure of Behavior* (1967b/1967a; *The Structure* or *SC* later on) from 1942 precisely because of its proximity to Latour’s essay “Irreductions.” The part concerning science is developed using *The Structure* and *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012/1945; *Phenomenology* or *PhP* later on) and the discussion of non-human animals is based on *The Structure* again and partially the *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (2003/1995; *Nature Lectures* or *N* later on).

2.2.1 Gestalts Against the Background

Unlike in the “Intertwining,” Merleau-Ponty starts the third part of *The Structure* from the objects and builds up the rather expected hierarchy in this order: matter, life, and mind. What is important, is that he doesn’t begin his analysis from any atom-like (or micro-actant-like) particles that would construct matter. Neither does he start from anything like networks: his point of departure is complex but relatively compact structures, forms or Gestalts. Their indivisibility is likened to a melody: just as it makes no sense to speak of a melody as the sum of its notes, structures cannot be reduced to its particles. (*SC* 137/148) There is a book, lamp, bridge, “relatively stable wholes (*ensembles*),” (*SC* 139/149) whose “equilibrium [is] obtained with respect to certain given external conditions.” (*SC* 145/157) These ‘things’ can be carefully subsumed under bigger structures (a shelf, house, city, planet) so they are “partial totalities” (*SC* 139/149) because equilibrium is never completely isolated (unless of course we are talking about controlled laboratories – which is an important point Latour also made repeatedly). When I perceive and research these partial wholes, I always have to take the interconnectedness into consideration: “what one verifies is never a law but a system of complementary laws.” (*SC* 139/150)

On its lowest levels, that is on the level of matter, Gestalts are networked meaningful chunks of reality emerging from the background. Meaningful for what or whom? Here is where Merleau-Ponty teeters for the first time on the edge of realism and idealism. Gestalts are not plainly ‘out there’ as ready-made meaningful objects that would wait for our passive consumption: “form is not a physical reality but an object of perception; without it physical science would

have no meaning, moreover, since it is constructed with respect to it and in order to coordinate it.” (SC 143/155) Melody is actually an apt metaphor because while not being purely in my imagination, it doesn't make much sense if no one is listening to it. In fact, the very idea of music without its perception is quite nonsensical. Gestalts are however not a mere creation of our intellect either: “one is no longer dealing with a material reality nor, moreover, with a mental reality, but with a significative whole [*ensemble*] or a structure which properly belongs neither to the external world nor to internal life.” (SC 182/197) It is because perceptual consciousness (of all living organisms) and intellectual consciousness (of humans) are Gestalts themselves. Despite being of different orders, they are still part of the world: they don't perceive the world from the outside⁴³ since there is properly speaking no outside.

Intermezzo: Plasma

Latour doesn't have Gestalts: he has actors that are often probably more 'gestalty' than he would have liked to admit. What he however does share with Merleau-Ponty is the idea of foreground and background. The introduction of this background called 'plasma' is admittedly a bit disappointing and definitely underdeveloped and if it weren't for the analogy, it wouldn't even be worth mentioning. It only appears in two of his works and one very short article: a multimedia project *Paris : Ville invisible* (2009b) that is now inaccessible ('invisible' in the true sense) to an average user of the Internet,⁴⁴ a short chapter in the *Reassembling* (2005), and an article “Paris, invisible city: The plasma” from 2012, which isn't much more than a rant about Google Maps. Plasma is a logical outgrowth of 'networkiness' because after all, one of the main features of any network is that there is a lot of empty space between its links and nodes and Latour probably got scared of how seamless his networks might appear. This problem is well dealt with either by Strathern (1996) as summarized above or by

43 See also Toadvine 2009: 21–2: “gestalts in Merleau-Ponty's sense are irreducible to systems in the realist's sense of this term, no matter how holistic or relational, because the gestalts of which reality is composed are essentially perceptual” but “despite being essentially intentional, gestalts cannot be the products of acts of consciousness or judgments.”

44 The Adobe Flash Player needed for browsing through the project was disconnected and I haven't found any other way to access the content:
<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/virtual/index.html>.

diversification of types of networks by Law and Mol (2001), which will be discussed in detail below. In contrast, plasma as a ‘solution’ seems to come out of nowhere. Kyle McGee quite accurately observes (2015: 11) that “[f]or Latour, plasma is simply the ‘dumping ground’ where he deposits the things that do not awaken his interest” and calls it a “surprisingly Cartesian tendency.” I think it’s another uncredited Deleuzian moment, and not very well executed one at that. Even though Latour (2005: 245) reminds the readers that “[h]ermeneutics is not a privilege of humans but, so to speak, a property of the world itself,” it is hard to tell why he, of all other humans, living beings, and ‘stuff’ should be the one to decide what is networked and what is not. “Why do fierce armies disappear in a week? Why do whole empires like the Soviet one vanish in a few months? Why do companies who cover the world go bankrupt after their next quarterly report?” asks Latour (ibid.) betraying his flat ontology, for if he or even all the people on Earth don’t understand something, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the events were random from other points of view. Sure, as far as I can see (or ‘follow’) the networks, there are many blind spots but I tend to lean towards a certain agnosticism about *what* they are. They could be some kind of antimatter, virtuality, or “an immense repertoire of missing *masses*.” (Ibid.) But they might just as well be finer networks that form a continuous space over infinitesimal distances. Even though the concept of plasma offers a lot of potential for theories (and maybe new careers) of ‘what Latour might have thought,’ it was apparently not central for his thought and I will leave it here as the first example of Latour’s unintentional human exceptionalism that will be discussed later.

2.3 Networking The Structures, Structuring The Networks

Latour’s conception of micro-actants grouping together and thus forming stable entities is as unassailable as it is pointless. It leaves his readers with a ‘whatever’ impression. “If there is no longer any structural differences between the mental, the physiological and the physical, there is no longer any difference at all,” says Merleau-Ponty (*SC* 136/146) and I agree, if not factually, certainly methodologically for the sake of this chapter. After all, I grew up within this hierarchy and even if it were an incorrect description of the world ‘out there,’ it

has certainly become cemented in our ways of being. Nevertheless, when Merleau-Ponty for his part tries to comprehend life, ‘the physiological,’ he naturally fails like everyone else. But while Latour ignores the problem altogether, Merleau-Ponty at least offers suitable and creative metaphors and examples: melody as a metaphor for an organism (ibid.: 87/96, 107/117) and physical structures (ibid.: 137/148) or sea anemone as an example of an organism that is just about more than (mere) physical structure. (Ibid.: 150/162) By depending on perception and at the same time trying to define non-living nature, he nonetheless goes around in circles, at least in his first book. I will show shortly that it is very much the case of Latour as well.

2.3.1 Objective Knowledge?

Latour – with his erasure of the difference between the material and conceptual – can be subsumed in a tradition called *material semiotics* which as summed up by John Law (2019: 1) is “a set of tools and sensibilities for exploring how practices in the social world are woven out of threads to form weaves that are simultaneously semiotic (because they are relational, and/or they carry meanings) and material (because they are about the physical stuff caught up and shaped in those relations).” It traces networks and actors, supposedly without any foreunderstanding of a “single machinery at work behind the complexities of the social.” (Ibid.: 15) Importantly, it is “not a school or theory” but rather a movement. (Ibid.) The expression “movement” well illustrates an intermingling of (what we call) theory and practice, and I dare say that this is to some extent similar to Merleau-Ponty. Even though he sets off from common confused notions of sensation (*PhP* 3/9), perception (*VI* 3/17) or by presenting well-known paradoxical ‘solutions’ to ontological problems (*SC* 3/1) with the aim of theoretical clarification, in the end he also invokes knowledge not as abstract objective rationalization – which is his very enemy number one when it comes to comprehending phenomena – but as embodied grasp. It is subjective: not in the sense of ‘personal,’ but in the sense of intrinsic to the subject. The world is discernable from the subject but the latter is still embedded in and intertwined with the former.⁴⁵ It is virtually inexplicable, henceforth phenomenology focuses

45 This is not meant in a simple spatial way. In Merleau-Ponty’s late work, the body is One

on descriptions, not explications: once I try to find (mainly scientific) causes of phenomena, I explain them *away*, they disappear. (*SC* 152/164–5; *PhP* 18/25; see also Carman 2014: 46) Latour's project is similar: if everything is both material and conceptual at the same time, the most interesting quest is to weave and unweave the associations and in fact to *perform* the ontology, instead of musing over its foundations. This is why Latour's "Irreductions" where he shifts from descriptions to causal explanations, come across as rather unconvincing.

Unlike in the next chapter, where I will show that two similar methods can lead to quite different, almost opposite outcomes, here I am going to argue that different starting premises can lead to similar results. To this end, I will now compare the conceptualization of nature in both authors.

2.3.2 Latour: Science Is Constructed

Where Latour assumes symmetry, Merleau-Ponty postulates radical asymmetry between the self and the rest. Nevertheless both lead to a conception of nature that is 'impure' and unstable. The world according to Latour as described for example in *We Have Never Been Modern* is (unlike in the "Irreductions") not composed of subatomic particles or events but it is a system of situations. He uses the historical example of Boyle's vacuum pump, a 17th century device for creating a small vacuum space, to show that science does not discover something 'out there' in nature, rather it is a complex system of facts that is created through the efforts of many people and other actors. The so-called discovery of the laws of nature (this whole phrase should be in quotes here) often requires very unnatural and cumbersome conditions in the laboratory. ANT generally does not recognize virtual or potential realities: something either happens or it doesn't (except for the concept of plasma). Therefore, if I 'prove' something using a particle accelerator in Geneva, it is not valid in, say, Bujumbura, until I repeat the experiment in the new location. This is of course very simplistic, because information, ideology, politics, ways of thinking and Western science itself are all part of networks, so if

through the doublesidedness of perceptibility. "We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box [...] There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. Or rather [...] there are two circles, or two vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live naïvely, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other." (*VI* 138/180)

the scientific community in Burundi believes that something generally true was found at CERN, it applies to a large extent there too. However, in 17th century Europe, when today's concept of science was being born, the idea of 'discovering' something universal in the confined space of a laboratory was quite new. If I today feel that the laws of physics and chemistry are valid always and everywhere and apply this belief to the 17th century, it is an anachronism.

Scientists accused Latour of deconstructing science⁴⁶ because he reputedly denounced it as untrue. That's however a complete incomprehension. Being constructed doesn't mean untrue, on the contrary: *the more something is constructed, the more it is 'true'* (or valid or relevant).⁴⁷ Hence if anything, Latour was rather *constructing* science, especially towards the end of his life when he was trying to do his bit to help avert climatic catastrophe. Facts don't stand alone⁴⁸ and if we finally understand this, we will stop wondering how come people don't trust science when it's telling the 'truth,' like for example in the case of climate change denial or anti-vaccine movement. To be very honest, most people who follow the scientific consensus (myself included) usually also believe the facts based on where they come from rather than their own independent judgements, simply because we don't have the education, knowledge or tools to gather (i.e. invent) the facts ourselves. So-called anti-system people are just our mirror image.

2.3.3 Merleau-Ponty: Science Is Secondary

Merleau-Ponty's relationship to science is complicated and diversified: it depends what kind of science is in question. He certainly didn't aim to do science himself: "This first rule – to be a 'descriptive psychology' or to return 'to the things themselves' [...] – is first and foremost the disavowal of science," he writes on the very second page of the *Phenomenology*. (*PhP* lxxi/ii) His work however

46 See the famous 'Sokal affair.' A nice overview of the incident (and a critique thereof) is given for example by Stephen Hilgartner (1997). I for my part mentioned it in two Czech non-academic articles (Jakešová 2020a, 2023a) arguing that Alan Sokal missed the point, at least in relation to Latour.

47 Here comes my favorite pair of quotes for the first time: "In our emphasis on biology we dismiss culture too lightly. The assumption is that a man-made thing can be unmade." (Strathern 2016: 276) "To be 'made' is not to be 'made up.'" (Haraway 1997: 99)

48 "The only way a scientific fact is accepted as a fact is when it fits [...] to the capitalist system," says Lynn Margulis in the interview with Conner Habib (Andre Khalil). (Habib & Margulis 2019)

demonstrates an extensive knowledge of many disciplines and much like Latour, neither he would claim that what science says is untrue: “How could any philosopher aware of the philosophical tradition seriously propose to forbid philosophy to have anything to do with science?” (*S* 101/127) What he would claim (again just like Latour) though, is that scientific discourse is disingenuous about its foundations and that a specific type of objective thought even conceals them. For example, when I try to understand the nature of motion and take science (physics and mathematics) to help me, it actually takes me further away from my intended goal:

we ask ourselves what is actually given to us in movement, we prepare ourselves for rejecting appearances in order to attain the truth of movement, and we fail to notice that it is precisely this attitude that reduces the phenomenon and that will block us from attaining it itself, because this attitude introduces – along with the notion of truth in itself – presuppositions capable of concealing from me the birth of movement. (*PhP* 280/310)

This is present in his late writing as well:

Science manipulates things and gives up inhabiting them. It makes its own models of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect transformations that are permitted by their definition, it only confronts itself with the actual world every now and then. (*OE* 159/9; translation modified)

Merleau-Ponty hence regards the so-called objective nature, i.e. the nature known to science, as secondary – I find it much easier to navigate in space using the right and left than objective earth coordinates:⁴⁹ “such a nature is clearly posterior to the experience of cultural objects, or rather, it itself is a cultural object [...] For the majority of us, nature is but a vague and far-off being, driven back by the towns, roads, houses, and above all by the presence of other men.” (*PhP* 26/33, 25/31) So

⁴⁹ Even if not taking non-human organisms into account, it’s true that different humans use very different ways of orientation: I have seen some with impressive abilities to determine objective space almost under any circumstances (like in a cave system after dozens of minutes of walking in dark corridors). And again, I don’t take into account any non-Western ways of orientation about which I have, this time absolutely, zero knowledge. But I dare to say that there is almost no-one, who would say that plates are on the northern shelf or that the remote is to the south-east of you.

here we are: the so-called ‘nature’ is cultural. The nature, world does exist as phenomenal field but its essence is not knowable as something detached or separate from me. Precisely at the moment when I tend to think that I am getting to know the pure objective nature, my cognition is indirect, mediated. It is the quantifiable nature of mathematics and physics, like the notion of movement: if understood as an immutable object changing positions in space, it is “in fact a negation of movement,” because if the object doesn’t change at all, it doesn’t move. (*PhP* 281/310) Causality is a similar case: I cannot separate putative cause and effect from other surrounding influences. The following passage is worth quoting at length to show Merleau-Ponty’s proximity to Latour:

Properly speaking, therefore, what one verifies is never a law but a system of complementary laws. There could be no question of supposing a point-for-point correspondence between the experiment and the physical laws; the truth of physics is not found in the laws taken one by one, but in their combinations. Since the law cannot be detached from concrete events where it intersects with other laws and receives a truth value along with them, one cannot speak of a linear causal action which would distinguish an effect from its cause; for in nature it is impossible to circumscribe the author, the one responsible as it were, of a given effect. (*SC* 139/150)

If I ‘prove’ something by means of creating a limited and isolated vacuum environment, it is a very artificial (and therefore cultural) situation. I argue that Latour and Merleau-Ponty would agree with each other, even though each of them primarily attacks a different ‘universal’ principle: the former takes aim at the assumed universality of science across time and space and division between the cultural and natural sphere; the latter emphasizes above all the constructedness of mathematical space and the tricky notion of direct causality. Such a thing is nowhere to be found in real nature, because there are always too many (f)actors to take into account.

2.3.4 Vital Order

The balance, equilibrium that Merleau-Ponty refers to as the desired state of all types of forms, is seemingly unrelated to Latour's actants, yet a closer look reveals

them to be symmetrical: actants gain solidity and stability through alliances, but what is in Merleau-Ponty inactivity, a peaceful balanced state, is in Latour a fight for life (persistence) that only *appears* as immobility. The peaceful balanced dwelling in Merleau-Ponty concerns material forms in particular. When advancing further to a higher level of forms, it turns out that even though Merleau-Ponty is obviously very far from the radical flatness of (most) ANT, he is thanks to the central role of perception in fact much ‘flatter’ than the majority of other philosophers. Living organisms who are part of the ‘vital order,’ contrary to mere matter, don’t only passively react to their immediate surroundings but they are active in co-creation and changing their environment, often through the ability to move. Movement is not only an actual relocation, but rather an unfolding of space with and within perception. (N 308n1/284:a) Organisms can hence be understood through *norms*, unlike physical structures that follow the *laws*. (SC 148/161) The difference is not sharp, it’s rather a scale: no organisms can be completely subsumed under physical laws but the most primitive ones of them are the closest to mere physical processes. (SC 149/161; see also N 209/270) In the case of living organisms, balance is achieved “not with respect to real and present conditions, but with respect to conditions which are only virtual and which the system [i.e. a living organism] itself brings into existence.” (SC 145/157) The path of least resistance is not sought as a rule of its own – as is the case of non-living matter if I grant it agency – but “*with respect to the task in which the organism finds itself engaged.*” (SC 147/159) Even if it were possible to reconstruct all the physical and chemical conditions of all matter, the physical laws would not reach to the vital order, “the irreducibility of the life-world.” (Barbaras 2005: 208) They would only explain it away: the phenomenon of life would disappear. On the other hand, concepts that work with a kind of essence of life, such as *élan vital*, introduce a magical unintelligible breach. (SC 158/171) The signification of phenomenal bodies in perception is a middle ground of its sort. When I live my life and perceive the world around me, this experience is based neither in physics nor in pure intellectual operations, but in perception. The objective world of physics can exist on its own and mind can theoretically also wander in its own space⁵⁰ but

50 Both of these two are paradoxical as Merleau-Ponty was trying to show throughout all his academic career.

perception is always already ‘networky,’ it is famously always *of* something, a type of two-way communication. An object appears to me and I gravitate towards it: there is a relationship between me and the object and even (in Merleau-Ponty's case, a rather metaphorical relationship) between the objects themselves:

Each object [...] is the mirror of all the others. When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities that are visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls, and the table can “see.” The back of my lamp is merely the face that it “shows” to the fireplace. Thus, I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence. Each act of seeing that I perform is instantly reiterated among all the objects of the world that are grasped as coexistent because each object just is all that the others “see” of it. (*PhP* 71/82–83)

As in the case of trees returning gaze to their painter (Merleau-Ponty 1964a/1964c: 167/31; see also chapter five), objects actually do not *see*. It's the matter of transcendence of objects that we know from our experience. I am aware, I ‘see’ that if I took the position of the fireplace, I would be *facing* the lamp. Objects don't have vision but they do have visibility. My experience shows me that I enter into a relationship with durable objects, and by analogy the objects are in a relationship with each other which is again a part of my experience. The objects around me *guide* me in my perception. Color surfaces *make* me look at the spots where the color is the most distinct. (Kelly 2005: 84) The relationship between myself and the world creates norms of perception, “my body is geared to the world” (“*en prise sur le monde*”) by moving both as a response to the world and in anticipation of its reactions. (*PhP* 261/289; see also Carman 2005: 57, 70)

This implies that non-human living beings are granted intentionality (to various degrees) because they perceive as well. This is not to say that I as a human don't use my mind as well during various activities but that intellectual reasoning is secondary (albeit ‘higher’ and what makes me ‘properly human’). Merleau-Ponty uses notions of ‘male’ and ‘female’ as an example (*SC* 157/170–1): When asked, most people are able to enumerate so-called male and female

characteristics but it doesn't mean that they would use them as a checklist when they want to find out whether a person in front of them is a woman or man. In fact, they don't really speculate who is what gender: the gender is *already* there.⁵¹

Merleau-Ponty quite often uses examples of humans when he talks about living organisms in general. My main point in this chapter till now has been to show the order of matter and vital order but the question of science and 'objective' knowledge of both living and non-living nature is circularly coming back to the question of humans. What qualifies us to talk about it? Developing Merleau-Ponty's idea quoted above: creation of the 'nature' bereft of humans, is the most human and artificial (i.e. cultural) movement. Both authors explicitly reject such science and such 'nature' but the very act of writing and positing themselves as uttering subjects to be read puts them and by extension all their readers in the center of the world. This is what creates human exceptionalism, some manifestations of which are (in my opinion) inevitable and/or even

51 Gender is indeed the most memorable trait of any person we meet: "If you have met people and you try to remember them, you may have forgotten their names and their addresses, their contributions to a funny event, and even their interesting theoretical arguments, however much you wanted to keep that in your head. But, in each instance, you will remember whether you met a man or a woman. Sex is the very last thing people forget about each other. To have one's sex forgotten is tantamount to disappearing from someone's memory." (Hirschauer & Mol 1995: 371) This has obviously become quite a hot and controversial topic recently. Here I am limiting myself to Merleau-Ponty's text that was written in a certain place and at a certain time and the (still contemporary) experience of most Westerners and Westernized people. The increasing visibility of trans-gender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary people is however shifting the situation in an interesting direction, especially in North American progressive academic circles. For example, I actually sometimes *do* use a checklist because I pay more attention to people's intentional presentation or I simply ask. The statement that "the totality is not an *appearance*; it is a *phenomenon*" (SC 159/172) just doesn't apply anymore in the case of gender, or at least not in certain settings. It should also be added that there is no reason to believe that the prevailing Western notion of gender is universal, as is amply demonstrated in Strathern's *Before and After Gender* (2016) or basically in any non-Western testimony about genders, as for example the Stól lō scholar Lee Maracle (2017: 144–5) explains: "I do understand that some people were born as male and feel female. They have that extraordinary gift of feeling gendered. That is so powerful to me, I respect that. [...] I become confused when I am asked to identify my gender. Although my sexual proclivities, attractions, enjoyments, etc., are clear to me, the feeling of being a gendered individual is not." Furthermore, it is often the uncertainties, overlaps, and frictions that compel us to define categories, as she continues: "It is only recently that we have been referred to in the press as Indigenous women and not female native, like a female dog or some other such animal. I also feel like I am beginning to discover other genders. When did women realize we have a gender called 'woman' among us? I would think it would be the moment we discovered transgendered women and transgendered men. It is the transgendered who help us to see ourselves." (Ibid.: 146)

beneficial, but others are unnecessary, problematic, and often unacknowledged and unaddressed.

2.4 Human Exceptionalism

Coincidentally the day before Latour passed away, I was giving a lecture on his ecological views and was asked whether I was a Latourian myself. I answered that I don't think that humans can be seen as merely quantitatively different from, say, other animals. The reasons are objective and positional: First, the common sense of human exceptionalism is so prevalent in my cultural environment that I cannot simply cross it out (I mean, dogs don't usually organize public lectures, right?).⁵² Second – and more importantly – because I myself am a human being. I don't need to consider myself exceptional objectively but I have a specific position in relation to myself. Biologically, it is only possible to draw a difference between individual species but not between humans and *all* animals but let's say that viceroy butterflies would also try to distinguish themselves from all other living organisms.⁵³ Human exceptionalism is of course configured differently in different parts of the world and in some space-time, there might not be any human exceptionalism at all. In any case the Euro-American one seems particularly obsessive. In the fifth chapter, I will nevertheless show, that even in a very different cosmology, while the 'objective' reason for human exceptionalism falls through, the positional one still holds (it is actually crucial) and it is also granted to some other species, to use our terminology.

I am yet to meet a human person or textual (in a broad sense) creation that could fully overcome the positional human exceptionalism.⁵⁴ Nor do I think that it would be a particularly useful enterprise either but what I find important and will show shortly, is that ANT is no exception here. On the other hand, what I think is one of the strongest points of phenomenology, is that it fully embraces it. For

52 This is only obvious within certain cultures (or natures – for a more radical destabilization of the nature–culture dichotomy, see chapter 5).

53 The 'positional' reason as I just called it is of course grounded in the 'objective' one since drawing the lines is quite random: I usually feel a certain affiliation with members of my gender and many people feel very loyal towards the people of the same origin but there aren't many who would pledge allegiance based solely on eye color.

54 My colleague Milan Kroulík seems to be getting quite close.

sure, this is not without risks and Annemarie Mol is not entirely wrong when she mocks phenomenology for “the ‘I’ of phenomenology that elevates a single person’s self-ethnography to grandiose proportions.” (Mol 2010a: 254) After all, the main goal of my Phd project has been to break the supposedly universal ‘I.’ But the problem of many ANT texts is that their authors think they have some kind of privileged access to knowing how things really work, while staying inside human exceptionalism just like everyone else.⁵⁵

2.4.1 The Intrinsic One

Phenomenology recognizes the insurmountability of the first perspective and the impossibility of objective – in the sense of a-subjective – knowledge. Therefore, there is no pure nature: the more I try to ‘objectify’ it, the more cultural it becomes. The human order, subject side, is not ‘pure’ either. “The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them. This is why we have spoken of a human order rather than of a mental or rational order.” (SC 180/195) It is the order that integrates – without annulling – the two previous ones: the physical and the vital. No doubt, I am subject to physical and biological laws, but I can work with them intentionally and consciously. If my body is healthy enough, I can lie down on the floor or get up as I please; even if I am hungry, I can put off eating for a long, albeit limited, period of time (again, unless I have some medical condition, such as diabetes). Eating is never a pure manifestation of biological function, nor is it obviously a pure cognitive act. The human order makes all reality properly human but it doesn’t erase its material and biological nature. (See also *PhP* 162/186, 195/221)⁵⁶

55 To be fair, they are far from the only ones. The problem is that they often claim that they don’t do it.

56 Étienne Bimbenet (2004: 107–8; my translation) distinguishes between the approach of *The Structure* and *Phenomenology*: In the *Phenomenology*, there is indeed the full acknowledgment of the biological nature in humans, whereas in *The Structure*, the biological and the rational are in opposition. “It is not only that, in order to ‘live (*erleben*) such and such a world,’ it is better to be alive (*leben*), and rather well than sick or dead. It is above all that in order to live in this or that world one must have been initiated into it by the biological opening of the body to its behavioral environments. Thus the *Phenomenology of Perception* accomplishes what was announced [...] *The Structure of Behavior* on the contrary still maintained an oppositional relation between a consciousness freed from nature and a nature taking back its rights through genesis or pathology.”

This is all well and good but there is a caveat. Where Latour pretends that there is no asymmetry between the world and the entity who writes about it (i.e. himself or any other perceiving or speaking subject), Merleau-Ponty recognizes the asymmetry alright but then ‘forgets’ to apply it to himself. He thinks that he has an insight into all ‘normal’ human perception and that he is able to judge other – ‘abnormal’ – perceptions⁵⁷ or non-perceptions in case of non-living entities. He acknowledges the culture-nature indivisibility but culture is not much more to him than an empty signifier that means either a presumably objective nature of science that he dismisses as a part of culture (*PhP* 25–6/31–3), an abstract ‘other culture’ (*PhP* 190/215), or a vague reference to humanity as a whole (e.g. *PhP* 25/31, 205/231). By seeing through the cultural conditioning of the ‘objective’ nature (which I – and most ANT scholars – fully agree with), he believes he is not bound by it.

2.4.2 The Sneaky One

The powerful passage from *We Have Never Been Modern* where Latour reconstructs the hypothetical evasive argumentation of European colonialists applies to his own writing as well.⁵⁸ ANT scholars criticize other traditions and methods for aiming at universal statements but their own (let’s say) ‘movement’ is supposed to be one single tool applicable for everything: everything is flat, everything is connected. When you point it out, they would argue that ANT is not a method and that they just ‘follow the networks’ of concrete situations. When you say that they place themselves above all those situations by claiming that they follow the networks and can analyze them from neutral position, they would answer that they never explicitly excluded themselves from the network.

Latour states in *Reassembling the Social* (2005: 75) that one doesn’t need to strive to bridge the chasm between subject⁵⁹ and object because we don’t need

57 There are parts where Merleau-Ponty admits that he cannot understand the gestures of ‘primitives’ or dogs (sic!), only to fabricate some ‘truths’ about ‘primitive’ superstitions later. (*PhP* 190/215, 298ff./330ff.)

58 If Native Americans thought that their lives depended on their ancestors and a predestined fate, the whites would tell them that these things were just their constructions. If Native Americans then concluded that they could create their own society, they would be answered that there were societal and economical laws that transcend them. (Latour 1993b/2006: 38/58)

59 He does talk about the subject when he identifies it with the society in Latour 1993b/2006. However that’s not the existential subject this thesis focuses on, but rather something like the

to postulate those two in the first place but he betrays his method by in fact starting from individual entities and only thereafter connecting them through networks, from his own elevated position. Seemingly, it is not the subject–object dichotomy: it is a field of objects of which ‘I’ is a part of. The subject is obviously present in his text and he doesn't try to hide it: he talks about his travels, his health, personal experiences, etc. but he never thematizes the position of the ‘I.’ The ‘I’ is for Latour but another entity yet he seems to forget that it’s him who says so. By ignoring what I believe is the radical asymmetry of one’s own situatedness (both inside and outside of the world), he made it somewhat easy for himself.

It is impossible to report on networks and be a neutral part of them at the same time, which is well illustrated also by his (somewhat clumsy) introduction of plasma. Marilyn Strathern (1996: 532n8, n10), an ANT relative, so to say, summarizes some of the movement’s problems as follows: “The tools of their discipline include methods of classification and comparison that are, arguably, an effect of the same Euro-American scientific imagination with which they battle in every ethnographic description.” These methods “are not innocent [...] The observer's or writer's counter-rhetorical practice in deconstructing narratives of unity carries its own politics.” Putting everything on the same level and privileging the particular over the universal will not make the world neutral. Especially if these techniques are supposed to be, you know, universal.

I don’t think that it is even possible to get out of the first perspective (meaning as always: for a Westerner in everyday life) and Latour doesn’t even escape human exceptionalism. On the one hand, he suggests that non-human (both living and non-living) entities can be in reciprocal relations: they act upon each other and they translate and interpret each other, which is all in effect the same thing.

For a long time it has been agreed that the relationship between one text and another is always a matter for interpretation. Why not accept that this is also true between so-called texts and so-called objects, and even between so-called objects themselves? (Latour 1993a/1984: 166/186)

subject *pole*.

On the other hand, he contradicts his own previous claim when he later writes about Louis Pasteur and historicity by saying that ferments “did not exist before he [Pasteur] came along.” (Latour 1999: 145) This is an important objection Graham Harman (2009: 84) raised in his book devoted to Bruno Latour which I mostly agree with: “Microbes may have existed in the year 1800, interlocked in propositions with wine and broth, and even with human bodies, though not with the human medical knowledge of the time.” Latour is stuck between two extremes, both of which would be unacceptable for ANT: discoverable entities, here ferments, have either been existing in the world since prehistorical times and they had passively waited for Pasteur to *discover* them, or they were brought into existence by Pasteur, the *inventor*. By claiming that ferments didn’t exist before Pasteur, Latour of course doesn’t mean that only humans can grant existence to objects. What he tries to say is that objects (and animals and humans for that matter) only exist if they have a network around them. In the same chapter, he backs this up with a seemingly elaborated conception of history, using a few of his so favorite graphs but what he wants to claim, is basically this: There is a linear historical time and then a time that is, so to speak, always present. The present time overwrites the past. We cannot access the past directly, it is always filtered by the presence or better still, the presence constructs the past. Thus me writing the text now will be forgotten and lost by all the future versions of this day. Our science is usually understood exactly as either pure discovery (in chemistry for example) or pure invention (e.g. in the case of new machines), whereas the living reality is always in the combination of the two, or since dichotomies are abandoned: in all the discourses (material and non-material) around the particular event. The so-called discoveries that supposedly reveal something that has been true all along, consist in overwriting the past. If this newly ‘discovered truth’ is to continue to hold, again many actors are needed.

The prevalent feeling about the world tends to be that there is ‘the world,’ existing since ever (or since the Creation or Big Bang), and then ‘humans’ appeared who started acting upon the passive matter: either discovering or creating. We also like to think in terms of single individual actors changing the world by singular acts: Napoleon marched into Russia, Gutenberg invented the

printing press etc.⁶⁰ These events are supposed to change the world with a wave of the magic wand but in reality, if we want to pronounce someone (timelessly) ‘right’ and someone else ‘wrong,’ we can do so “only on the condition that we render very clearly and precisely the institutional mechanisms that are *still at work* to maintain the asymmetry between the two positions.” (Latour 1999: 167–8) The answer to the question about the existence of Pasteurian ferments is therefore a bit more complicated: they were *both* there “all along” *and* made up in 1864. “After 1864 airborne germs were there all along,” says Latour (*ibid.*: 173), but it is not without cost and definitely not done by a single act: “To be everywhere in space or always in time, work has to be done, connections made, retrofitting accepted.” (*Ibid.*)

The problem that Harman sees in this particular chapter of Latour’s is that he only considers networks from the human perspective. Let’s have a look at what that means. I agree with Harman that Latour is somehow inconsistent and if he had wanted to be true to his claims about interpretation between objects (Latour 1993a/1984: 166/186), he would have had to adopt a kind of agnosticism: ferments probably did exist before Pasteur in different network configurations, i.e. outside explicit theoretical human knowledge, just as Harman pointed out. This is quite a simple correction that would set Latour’s propositional claims right and dilute the anthropocentrism that Latour himself was so against. (E.g. Johnson/Latour 1988)⁶¹ It would not however – in my genuine opinion – annul the shift between acts and referring about them, just as it wouldn’t cancel the fact that Latour was (as far as I know) a human with the first-person perspective, not

60 A few notes here: 1) I wrote ‘feeling’ because I refer to the unconscious organization of the world, not the actual empirical knowledge. Everyone knows that Napoleon Bonaparte was not alone when he marched to Russia and everyone knows that Johannes Gutenberg was not the single person behind the printing press (well ...). 2) The Creation and Bing Bang are for me structurally the same. It’s about the worldview, not about the scientific and theological particularities. 3) Belief in the world that precedes us is not universal. See e.g. Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017. 4) The idea of discoveries and inventions as singular events in history contributes to the related concept of social and cultural development: progressive concepts (such as gender and racial equality) are considered eternal truth that are being revealed and learnt over time. Common knowledge does recognize civilizations’ falls (the fall of Rome for example) and subsequent decline but creeping regress is mostly incomprehensible. Hence the wonderings like ‘how can this be happening in 2023?’ but also for instance the prevalent belief that witch hunts were a thing of the Middle Ages (because how could these things happen in the age of ‘Enlightenment’).

61 Bruno Latour is playing with the authorship in this text.

dissimilar to me or you (I assume). Now this ‘mistake’ about ferments is actually very illustrative: if ferments indeed had *not* existed, it would have been just as well possible to say that the obscure half of the “Constitution,” i.e. the constant unobserved exchange between nature and culture on which their divide depends (Latour 1993b/2006: 31ff./48ff.), did not exist until Latour *discovered* it. He tries to bridge the gap between ontology and epistemology by claiming that there is no fundamental difference between being and its description but as if in reverse effect, he widens it by giving priority to human intellectual activity. Since of course, fermentation and ferments have been in human practical knowledge for thousands of years (not to mention all the fermentation happening outside of human activity) and Pasteur’s discoveries have certainly refined the processes but it doesn’t mean that they introduced them into existence. Hence Latour seems more Cartesian than phenomenology here, because not only does he deprive the ferments of being in itself, but he only acknowledges their existence through intellectual apperception.

It is probably quite clear by now where I am heading: In order to be true to ‘flat ontology,’ it is indeed necessary to grant (well, this is not the best word but it nicely demonstrates the mental acrobatics) agency to non-human entities but as an embodied being, always situated in a particular time-space, I cannot overcome my self-centrism and – by extension – anthropocentrism. As any basic lesson on Austin tells us and as ANT scholars argue as well (e.g. Gad & Jensen 2010: 57; Law 2019: 15), every description is simultaneously an act but Latour sometimes seemed as if he forgot that.

2.4.3 The ANT Space Is Phenomenological

Bruno Latour wrote that “in spite of many efforts [...] to reconcile ANT and phenomenology, the gaps between the two lines of interest remain too wide because of the excessive stress given by phenomenologists to the human sources of agency. [...] This does not mean that we should deprive ourselves of the rich descriptive vocabulary of phenomenology, simply that we have to extend it to ‘non-intentional’ entities.” (Latour 2005: 61n67) This is ultimately correct, though certainly not for all ANT-associated thinkers. Latour himself probably got closest to phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty in particular, in his later books on ways to

live on/with Gaia. The texts *Où atterrir ?* (2017; in English *Down to Earth*, 2018) and *Où suis-je ?* (2021) differentiate between the terrestrial Earth and the Earth seen from above, the quasi objective perspective. Our space is not the Euclidean space of regular meters (or feet). The space unfolds in front of subjects or actors and distances are not measured by geometrical meters – quite obviously: distances elongate or shrink depending on the means of transport I am using, on the terrain, my level of tiredness, and the reason I started moving in the first place. This is the case of all the earthlings, terrestrials, critters, Terrans, or earthbounds:⁶² “I begin to posit myself as a terrestrial among other terrestrials and once the surprise wears off, I realize that they never move ‘freely’ in some undifferentiated space but they construct their space instead, step by step.” (Latour 2021: 39) Here, Latour talks from the inside of the network, him being part of it, but his ‘surprise’ is not so surprising for anyone who is at least a little familiar with phenomenology: “perceptual space is not a Euclidean space,” Merleau-Ponty says already in *The Structure* (144/156), paraphrasing Wolfgang Köhler. The passage in the *Phenomenology* dedicated to space shows it even more clearly: the experienced space is dependent on what I can actually do in it, it is “a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain *hold (prise)* my body has on the world.” (Ibid.: 261/289) Such space is not detached from time. If an object is at a certain spatial distance from me, it means that it is distant in time as well, because ultimately what matters is my relationship and access to it and its handleability. (*PhP* 277/306–7) If Latour and Merleau-Ponty seem similar here, it is because they are: Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017: 35–6) point out that many of the contemporary ‘cancelations’ of the rift between Nature and Culture bring it back into play by a new dichotomy, this time between the dichotomized and the non-dichotomized. One important point remains, however, in both Latour and Merleau-Ponty: the geometric, scientifically observable world that we are accustomed to thinking of as the most ‘natural,’ is the artificial, and hence the

62 In French, Latour was first using the term *Terriens*, later *terrestres*. The former has been translated as *Earthlings* or *Earthbound* (people/beings), the latter as *terrestrials*. Danowski & Viveiros de Castro (2017) use the English term *Terrans* (*Terranos* in Portuguese). Frankly, I don’t find it very useful to dwell on these details, but my personal favorite is the word *critters*, used in a similar sense by Haraway (2016). However, whereas Latour and Danowski & Viveiros de Castro use their term(s) mostly for humans (the ‘good’ non-modern humans) and then *additionally* for other living beings, Haraway writes a lot about other critters, such as pigeons and spiders. (See Haraway 2016b and chapter 6)

most ‘cultural’ one. In contrast, our cities and the way we move through them are (along with the whole culture) part of the natural world and not dissimilar to the life of ants in anthills. (Latour 2021: 37) Merleau-Ponty would hardly go that far when it comes to the ants, but it is still true that his perceptual world is not limited to humans as explicitly formulated in *The Structure* (145ff./157ff.), *The Nature* (e.g. 183/239–40) and other texts. (E.g. Merleau-Ponty 2004: 70;⁶³ see also Toadvine 2004) For making Merleau-Ponty’s hierarchy thinkable within networks, I will now show how different types of spatialities from Law and Mol’s article (2001) can be associated with different levels of integration in Merleau-Ponty.

2.5 Integration

2.5.1 Of Space

The article (Law & Mol 2001) discusses four different types of situatedness of scientific and technological objects in space, building on Latour's work and that of other ANT scholars who have been trying to demonstrate the non-universality of science. This was one of Latour’s main points throughout his life and it is proving true quite painfully in the contemporary world: Science may well be right but firstly, it is not true always and everywhere and secondly, it needs a whole apparatus of networks that supports it, which is exactly why for example the ‘truth’ about climate change doesn’t provoke much action. People don’t (want to) believe it so the ‘objective’ science is powerless. If a fact is supposed to be universally (accepted as) true, it needs a whole network making sure that this fact will be treated as such on the opposite side of the globe, as Latour somewhat humorously illustrates by a ‘cheese example’: “We say that the laws of Newton may be found in Gabon. This is quite remarkable since that is a long way from England. But I have seen Lepetit camemberts in the supermarkets of California. This is miraculous, since Lisieux is a long way from Los Angeles. Either there are

63 The lecture on “Animal Life” from *The World of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 70) contains again one of those ingenuous formulations: “In fact, this world is not just open to other human beings but also to animals, children, primitive peoples and madmen who dwell in it after their own fashion; they too coexist in this world.” I am just thinking of adding ‘women and black people’ to make it flawless.

two miracles that have to be admired *together*, or there are none.” (Latour 1993a/1984: 227/255; translation modified) *Both* the fact of Newton’s laws *and* the concrete camembert need to stay the same during their travels and that takes effort. As long as objects and ideas don’t move, it is the first spatiality from Law and Mol’s text: *immutable immobile*, where things and facts are situated in a concrete time-space. Once they start to move while keeping their shape like Newton’s laws and cheese, they become the second type: *immutable mobile*. (Law & Mol 2001: 611)

In the third type of spatial organization, Law and Mol (2001: 613ff.) depart from Latour and make the system more dynamic. It is the fluid space of *mutable mobile*: an entity that spreads through space with modifications. The authors give an example of an invention that becomes adopted by various communities and adapted to local differences and needs. Importantly, in the case of the immutable mobile, it was the immutability that made the network hold: for example Portuguese ships of the 15th and 16th century need to keep their shape in order to help sustain overseas imperium. (Law 1986: 237) In contrast to that, inventions of the third category are often durable precisely thanks to their mutability, i.e. adaptability.

The last category of situatedness is inspired by fire: many (f)actors being there and not being there at the same time, appearing and disappearing like a flashing fire. In any situation, there are absent Others: the situation depends on them but at the same time it depends on the fact that these Others *stay* absent. Here, Law and Mol use an example of aviation training, latently containing international politics as a *mutable immobile*.

2.5.2 Of Bodies in Space

It is clear that these four kinds of spatiality, especially the two added on top of Latour’s basic networks, make the space more diversified. Sure, even fluid and fire situatedness can be subsumed under the original networks but the radical flatness that would result from such subsumption is exactly what is unacceptable in ANT for so many people. If you can reduce everything to one thing – and reduction is what Latour did, despite naming his text “Irreductions” – it is always suspicious, and maybe even more importantly: it gets boring.

My body, if I understand it through Law's and Mol's lens, gains plasticity. In the first step when I identify the *immutable immobile*, the transcendental mind loses its universality, it is locked in my body, in one place only at any moment. I exist here and now in the center of my world, with everyday concerns and temporariness. When I now try to apply these spatialities to Merleau-Ponty from his earlier writings, it is obvious that this is the most important type of spatiality for phenomenology: it means that I am a part of the world and I can only see other beings from one side. It is what I share with anything else in the world that exists, like a lamp 'facing' the fireplace etc. (*PhP* 71/82) Non-living entities obviously move and change over time and are caught in all kinds of networks of signification but they never move on its own.⁶⁴ They don't have dimension of time and change in itself: they need a witness that would perceive the change over time. (*PhP* 433/470)

The *immutable mobile* is somewhat mechanical: it shows an established network similar to machines. It is a spatiality of commutes, including the human commute. I move daily, as evidenced by my GPS tracker, seen 'objectively.' Nevertheless, as Law and Mol (2001: 611–13) remind their readers, it is possible to understand the second spatiality, that of networks of *immutable mobile*, either as a fraction of the Euclidean space where I move regularly (going to university everyday for example) or as a different type of space altogether.⁶⁵ There the space is not organized along coordinates but the network itself is its basis. They use ocean-going merchant ships as their example but it applies to everything more or less established and regular: if I look at my daily commute from a bird's eye view (an unfitting expression) and take into account a long term perspective, the situation is quite static. The commute itself is made possible (or impossible in case of North America) by stable communications and system of public transport. Also my body keeps invariable in a short enough timeframe and under normal favorable circumstances, and even I don't consider those commutes dynamic: they are static in my memory and it's hard to tell the days apart. For phenomenology, this type of movement can be seen as non-intentional movement. Strictly

64 Just to make sure: I am not trying to explain Newton's Laws of Motion here, I am providing an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty in the light of ANT.

65 This is obviously a differently non-Euclidean space than the phenomenological space discussed above.

speaking, there is no such thing for intentional beings (approximately corresponding to ‘higher’ animals⁶⁶) but it very much feels that way in certain situations. It is a movement understood as a mere shift of matter, or a relocation which is mechanical to such an extent that it even loses its ‘movement character.’ This type of *immutable* movement is in Merleau-Ponty characteristic for ‘lower’ animals, such as the famous urchin in a passage by Jakob von Uexküll (2010: 76), quoted by Merleau-Ponty (*N* 169/222): “When a dog runs, the animal moves its legs. When a sea urchin runs, its legs move the animal.” An urchin moves but not intentionally, it only moves because it has legs, therefore there is no actual change from the animal’s perspective (since it actually *doesn’t really have* any perspective). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that it is not a machine after all because of “the construction of forms and regeneration,” (*N* 169/223) the self organized unity and ability to heal or ‘repair’ itself⁶⁷ but compared to the ‘higher’ animals, they form a closed bond with their environment (*Umwelt*). This is why they would be *immutable* in my interpretation, just like human automatic daily movements, which in themselves do not produce any change.

The fluidity (*mutable mobile*) of my embodied personality shows over time or through changes in my life: I am still to a large extent considered the same human being I was when I was a child even though no-one would recognize me if they’d only seen me when I was five and now thirty years later. Through cell regeneration I rebuild large parts of my body during my lifetime but since it happens gradually cell by cell, I am still considered the same person. The change with and *through* movement is finally the real movement for Merleau-Ponty. It is neither a simple physical relocation, nor a movement that happens on its own or as a pure reaction to the environment (the case of urchins and similar animals). When a dog receives a stimulus, it⁶⁸ reacts but can ‘decide’ what the reaction will be, it’s not automatic. The relation between the animal and its environment is not

66 A vague term with a very questionable meaning both in biology and social/human studies. Christiane Bailey (2011) discusses ways of studying animality in relation to humanity in Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty and suggests using the terms ‘familiar’ and ‘unfamiliar’ animals instead of ‘higher’ and ‘lower.’

67 With the ever-evolving AI of recent years, it would be interesting to revisit these conditions. I touched the issue briefly in Jakešová 2018.

68 It is very unnatural for me to address a dog as ‘it.’ In French or Czech, the word is already gendered but in English, I would have to assign a gender to the dog. And calling it ‘they’ would be confusing, so he/she/they is ‘it’ for now.

one of closure but of opening. (N 171/225) The animal processes it, filters it, not unlike the human world is filtered by what we call culture. Similar to the bush pump in the example above, the animal subject gradually changes itself as it gets old and in response to its environment but it reciprocally changes the environment as well.

The fire-inspired *mutable immobile* spatiality is behind all the mostly contingent factors that I have almost no agency over: having a lean white female relatively young and relatively healthy body makes me very privileged. I cannot take credit for automatically having an easier starting position than, say, black people or fat people, the very second I enter the room. In the world of ANT, this type of relations is present everywhere but in phenomenology, it can be the only properly human sphere. A dog is of course entangled in all the cultural meanings and human histories but it cannot directly relate to all this: factors that are present in absence are concealed from it. Humans relate to all the cultural world and by that recreate (or destroy) the nature – whatever they do, there are many meanings attached to every action: clothes, house or food are not mere means of survival, but are always related to culture, social class, fashion and individual preferences.⁶⁹ (SC 174/188) The spatialities of absent presence can mean the relationship to the world as an integrated system, to the extent that it is given to me. Merleau-Ponty, quoting Hegel, talks about a “hole into being,” as an interaction that has the power to radically change the world, compared to “a mere hollow” in the case of non-human animals. (SC 126/136–7; my translation)⁷⁰ Sometimes I wonder whether it’s not time to create more hollows and less holes.

69 This seems to correspond to a famous experiment: When chimpanzee and human children aged 2–4 were shown how to get into a box with with a reward by a series of movements, human children tended repeat all the movements, including those that were obviously necessary, whereas chimpanzees were much more likely to eliminate them. One of the possible conclusions is that non-human animals are hence more inclined to focus on a given task, whereas humans imitate social behavior, including movements and activities that don’t necessarily make immediate sense. (Horner & Whiten 2005; on anthropological account of mimetic faculty, see also Taussig 1993)

70 The translation is completely misleading here. The ‘hole’ and ‘hollow’ are my translations of ‘trou’ and ‘creux.’

2.6 Prospects

As Law and Mol admit, there might be many more types of space and all those make ANT more interesting, less cult-like, and more worthy talking about even outside of its core supporters' club. I can think of something I would call 'ghost situatedness': a multiple digital identity that is immutable in some instances, such as the case of the "system identity" defined by Aneesh where the subject's mobility depends on its immutability.⁷¹ In other cases it is mutable in faithful or less faithful copies of ourselves in virtual space, moving in Paprika⁷²-like ghostly staccato jumps all over the world while its physical copy often stays between four walls, as described so well by Latour (2021) in his Covid-19 book.⁷³ The more phantom identities take shape, the fainter their physical copies become. Examples include the hikikomori who indulge in online communication and gaming but also for example people living in the diaspora in the cases of strong affiliation and engagement with their home communities.⁷⁴ My suggestion of ghost situatedness is obviously connected to Law and Mol's fire metaphor but with the difference that here it is directly about the multiplication of the subject, not about factors that are more or less external to it. The world of digital simulacra doesn't offer much analogy with Merleau-Ponty, precisely because of his emphasis on compactness

71 He means official government identities that make it virtually impossible to travel incognito: "Passports, birth certificates, and other forms of identification are attempts at constructing fixed, ascriptive personhood. Their motive is to ensure that the person is essentially the same through various changes in personality, body, behavior, and being. They make sure that the person flying to New Delhi is the one who was issued the passport a decade ago. The motive is to fix the person in their essence despite their multiple mercurial appearances, to privilege being over becoming." (Aneesh 2015: 94–5)

72 In the opening sequence of the famous anime *Paprika*, we see the dreamy alter-ego of doctor Chiba jumping between various non-Euclidean spaces: the slow-downed city, mirrors, dreams, movies, movie posters, and even a print on a t-shirt. (Kon 2006)

73 He however intended to give the impression that the virtual global space is somewhat fake, not real, and not bound-to-Earth enough. (E.g. Latour 2021: 42) I call this tendency 'baumanism,' after Zygmunt Bauman, the philosopher and sociologist who complained in most of his book about deterioration of authenticity in our (well, *his*, to be precise) times. I of course don't agree with Latour (or Bauman) on this at all: The fact that most people were quite unhappy under the lockdown doesn't mean that virtual space is not real or bad. After all, many people would have been just as miserable had it been the virtual space that disappeared. The lockdown would have been much more desperate without virtual possibilities and no-one has ever seriously claimed that virtual space can replace 'real' space (or at least not any time soon, that is).

74 From personal communication with many members of the Canadian-Iranian community, it has become clear to me that in light of the news from Iran, they find their daily lives meaningless and they are even ashamed of them.

and physical embodiedness. The subject is embodied always in one place at any given moment, over time it moves, changes, is exposed to various near and distant influences, but it also multiplies across virtual space. Broad extensions of this sort were certainly not relevant (or not much at least) in Merleau-Ponty's time but they were better anticipated by some of his contemporaries.⁷⁵

I can see now that what ANT is famous for – prioritizing networks over actors and flat ontologies – can be used in an integrative way. Not that this is anything new in ANT: entities are simply more compact and better defined the denser the networks around them, a point Latour emphasized in all his texts. Here however, I associated reticulation with phenomenological integration, taking advantage of Latour's 'humanistic slip' to show that most of us do indeed think hierarchically, and that the level of integration or density can be a tool to describe and understand one of the (many) problems of our contemporary thinking. The last point of this chapter will be, as usual, the praise of disintegration.

2.6.1 Disintegration as a Source of Compassion

One of the shifts between Merleau-Ponty's first and second books is the change in point of view. While a big part of *The Structure* shows three different levels of structuring from "the point of view of the 'outside spectator,'" (SC 162/175) the *Phenomenology* concerns almost exclusively humans and alongside the examples of 'abnormal' perception (see chapter three), there are many instances of invoking the *Myself* (or grammatically often 'ourselves' in French). This *myself* is situated in a healthy body though: the 'abnormal' or pathological embodiments are always pushed to the third perspective as a case study, almost like deterrence of its sort. They are only present in the "clinical margins." (Garner 1993: 453, 454n34) Barbaras (2008: 68) claims that switching between the first (reflexive) and third (explicative) points of view performs the two-sidedness of the body but if the reflexive one is always from the healthy body, whereas all the problems appear on the side of the clinical approach, it is rather asymmetrical.⁷⁶ After all, a healthy

75 Deleuze and Guattari, obviously. But even thinkers like Walter Benjamin.

76 No matter how his texts may seem ableist from today's perspective, giving so much space and attention to people with all kinds of disabilities was unheard of in his time and it opened up possibilities for a fruitful exchange between disability studies and phenomenology, such as Bredlau & Welsh (2022).

ideal body is almost transparent, an un-body in a way, which is also Barbaras' (2008: 68; my translation) objection: "As Franck Tinland says very well, with Merleau-Ponty, 'this incarnation of the *cogito*, however interesting it may be, goes hand in hand with a kind of disembodiment of the body'; if the cogito is incarnated, it is for the benefit of a body which is a pre-objective *view* of the world, which knows the world in its own way, and whose movement is rather a knowledge instead of knowledge being a movement." But the body is not only either healthy and non-existent, or broken, dysfunctional, and painful. The fragile bodiliness can be embraced positively as a chronicle of one's own fruitful life. Exploring or simply noticing the so-called imperfections of other people's bodies fills me with compassion and gratitude. Looking at an X-ray photograph of my own body, I remain in awe of its ability to live. The pain from old injuries reminds me of my body's healing powers.

The hallucinogenic experience from the beginning of this chapter is another example: The enhanced sensibility created a possibility of experiencing my body from the outside (and even its inside from the outside, so to speak). Through my fingers, I could sense every single hair on my body and all the pores on my skin. But instead of feeling disgust (like in the initial stages of *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* from the previous chapter), I felt compassion and love that one can only feel towards another embodied being. The detached consciousness from the body connected me more closely to myself: I experienced the expanded *écart* and an indescribable desire to merge myself with myself, similar to the feeling when you hold someone tightly and long for even closer proximity. I am not suggesting that everyone should try a mushroom trip to get to know themselves (although ...) but that experiences of disintegration are crucial for appreciating one's own life and for the compassion towards oneself and other living beings. The understanding of integrated subject through disintegration is obviously exactly what Merleau-Ponty was seeking in the *Phenomenology* but his examples are not only free from any compassion but he also limited himself to negative examples of 'abnormal' others. ANT, on the other hand, is able to trace all possible actors at play and find sources of disintegration but fails to provide any descriptions of subjectivity itself.

Maintenir le corps dans la réalité réseautée

– Résumé

Ce chapitre se concentre sur une existence relativement sans problème des sujets et des objets et sur la déstabilisation de cette dichotomie à la fin. Les deux auteurs en question sont Bruno Latour et (comme toujours) Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Selon Merleau-Ponty, la spontanéité du sujet est précisément *le* mystère qu'il faut décrire : elle semble naturelle à vivre mais difficile à expliquer. (P. ex. *VI* 3/17) Dans les pages suivantes, dans le prolongement du chapitre précédent, je montrerai comment il est possible d'entretenir une pensée du sujet à la fois avec la phénoménologie – en se concentrant cette fois sur *La structure du comportement* – et la théorie de l'acteur-réseau (ANT), à travers le livre le plus célèbre de Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (2006) et l'article de John Law et Annemarie Mol (2001) « Situating technoscience : an inquiry into spatialities. »

Pas d'isolation

Les entités isolées n'existent pas. Les corps ou les sujets incarnés ne font pas exception. Ils ne sont que des acteurs parmi d'autres, nés de réseaux. Cependant, Latour trahit souvent cette affirmation en commençant par les acteurs eux-mêmes. Qu'est-ce qui lui permet de présupposer un corps singulier et compact ? Le corps semble avoir quelque chose de spécial et d'éminemment solide, mais il est difficile de le décrire, et encore plus de l'expliquer. Il peut s'agir d'une monade « maître, » d'une âme, ou – dans le cas de Latour – d'un petit acteur qui a accidentellement pris le dessus. Qu'est-ce que le corps ou le sujet incarné ? Comme pour de nombreux auteurs de l'ANT, et même pour Latour, le corps est décrit par la pratique. Plus il y a d'influences ou d'acteurs attachés à quelqu'un, plus cette personne est définie.

Une autre question se pose : Où couper les réseaux et comment en faire un système ? On ne peut pas tracer des lignes à l'infini. Pour John Law (2019 : 5), il s'agit de savoir ce que nous voulons atteindre. Par exemple, si j'ai une préoccupation féministe, je pourrais montrer comment les femmes ont toujours été actives dans la création du monde, mais en même temps constamment effacées de la mémoire historique. Il n'y a pas de manière objective de « suivre les réseaux » :

il y a toujours des points de vue, des intérêts, des objectifs plus ou moins honorables. Marilyn Strathern (1996) propose une stratégie légèrement différente, celle des coupures situationnelles. Celles-ci se produisent lorsqu'un réseau « condensé » est soudainement traité comme une seule unité et que le processus de mise en réseau est interrompu par la conclusion. L'avantage de son approche est qu'elle confère au système une structure plus fixe (qui n'est pas sans rappeler les Gestalts merleau-pontiennes). L'inconvénient est que l'on perd une partie de la fragilité typique des réseaux.

Une conclusion partielle est que même si je commence mon enquête à partir des acteurs plutôt que des réseaux, je finirai toujours dans des réseaux, des vecteurs et des champs de force, probablement avec plus ou moins de coupes finales.

Les structures du monde

Dans *La structure du comportement*, Merleau-Ponty construit le monde selon cette hiérarchie : la matière, la vie, l'esprit. Ceux-ci sont organisés en structures – plus ou moins compactes –, formes ou Gestalts, les morceaux de réalité significatifs en réseau qui émergent de l'arrière-plan. Significatifs pour quoi ou pour qui ? C'est ici que Merleau-Ponty oscille pour la première fois entre réalisme et idéalisme. Les Gestalts ne sont pas simplement « là, » comme des objets signifiants prêts à l'emploi qui attendraient notre consommation passive : « la forme est [...] non pas une réalité physique, mais un objet de perception, sans lequel d'ailleurs la science physique n'aurait pas de sens, puisqu'elle est construite à propos de lui et pour le coordonner. » (SC 155) Mais ils ne sont pas non plus une simple création de notre intellect : « ce n'est plus à une réalité matérielle qu'on a affaire et pas davantage d'ailleurs à une réalité psychique, mais à un ensemble significatif ou à une structure qui n'appartient en propre ni au monde extérieur, ni à la vie intérieure. » (SC 197)

Réseauter les structures, structurer les réseaux

Pour comprendre les proximités entre Merleau-Ponty et Latour, il est instructif d'examiner leur conceptualisation de la science et de l'objectivité. Alors que Latour suppose une symétrie, Merleau-Ponty postule une asymétrie radicale entre

le soi et le reste. Néanmoins, tous deux aboutissent à une conception de la nature « impure » et instable.

Les scientifiques ont accusé Latour de déconstruire la science parce qu'il l'aurait dénoncée comme fausse. Mais c'est une incompréhension totale. Être construit ne signifie pas être faux, au contraire : *plus une chose est construite, plus elle est « vraie »* (ou valide ou pertinente). Par conséquent, Latour a plutôt *construit* la science. Les faits ne sont pas isolés et si nous comprenons enfin cela, nous cesserons de nous demander comment il se fait que les gens ne fassent pas confiance à la science lorsqu'elle dit la « vérité. »

La relation de Merleau-Ponty à la science est compliquée et diversifiée. Son œuvre témoigne d'une connaissance approfondie de nombreuses disciplines et, comme Latour, il ne prétend pas non plus que ce que dit la science est faux. Ce qu'il affirme (encore une fois, comme Latour), c'est que le discours scientifique n'est pas sincère quant à ses fondements et qu'un type spécifique de pensée objective les dissimule même. Il considère la nature dite objective comme secondaire : « elle est bien postérieure à l'expérience des objets culturels, ou plutôt elle est l'un d'eux. » (*PhP* 33)

Tout comme dans l'exemple de la pompe de Boyle de Latour (2006), tout ce qui est « prouvé » dans un environnement isolé est artificiel et ne peut être extrapolé sur la réalité « extérieure. » (*SC* 150)

Toutes les formes visent l'équilibre. Alors que les objets non vivants s'équilibrent passivement en réaction à l'environnement, les organismes vivants co-crée et modifient leur environnement. Leur équilibre est atteint « non pas à l'égard de conditions présentes et réelles, mais à l'égard de conditions seulement virtuelles que le système amène lui-même à l'existence [...] [et à l'égard] *à la tâche dans laquelle l'organisme se trouve engagé.* » (*SC* 157, 159) En raison de cette co-création réciproque des organismes et de leur environnement, il est impossible d'expliquer la vie uniquement par des lois physiques (voir aussi Barbaras 2005).

L'exceptionnalisme humain

L'anthropocentrisme occidental s'appuie sur deux arguments principaux : le premier est la conviction que les humains ne sont pas seulement une espèce parmi d'autres, mais qu'ils sont en quelque sorte spéciaux, de sorte qu'il est possible de

les mettre d'un côté et toute la nature de l'autre. Le second argument est d'ordre positionnel : je suis moi-même humaine et je parle donc en tant que représentante de l'espèce. Alors que la phénoménologie s'appuie explicitement sur le second type et tente de justifier le premier, je soutiendrai que même l'ANT (et Latour en particulier) se situe dans le cadre de l'anthropocentrisme, bien qu'elle le nie.

C'est surtout dans *La structure* que l'exceptionnalité humaine merleau-pontienne est très explicite : le troisième ordre, humain, intègre – sans les annuler – les deux précédents, le physique et le vital. Je suis soumis à des lois physiques et biologiques, mais je peux travailler avec elles de manière intentionnelle et consciente. Si mon corps est en bonne santé, je peux m'allonger sur le sol ou me lever à ma convenance ; même si j'ai faim, je peux repousser mon repas pendant une longue période, même si elle est limitée. L'ordre humain rend toute réalité proprement humaine mais n'efface pas sa nature matérielle et biologique. (Voir aussi *PhP* 186, 221 ; Bimbenet 2004 : 107–8) Le problème est que même si Merleau-Ponty reconnaît l'asymétrie entre le soi et le reste, il oublie de se l'appliquer à lui-même : en voyant à travers le conditionnement culturel de la nature « objective » (que je – et la plupart des chercheurs en ANT – approuvent pleinement), il croit qu'il n'est pas limité par ce conditionnement.

Latour a quelque chose que je nommerais « anthropocentrisme sournois » qui se manifeste dans son concept de plasma (2005, 2009b, 2012) et dans son privilège de la « découverte » par les humains de certains faits ou systèmes. C'est notamment le cas de l'existence des ferments, découverts par Louis Pasteur : Latour prétend qu'ils n'existaient pas avant la découverte de Pasteur. Graham Harman (2009 : 84) critique à juste titre Latour en affirmant que les microbes existaient peut-être avant Pasteur, même dans les pratiques humaines : ils n'étaient tout simplement pas articulés scientifiquement. Pour être fidèle à l'« ontologie plate, » il est en effet nécessaire d'accorder un pouvoir aux entités non humaines, mais en tant qu'être incarné, je ne peux pas surmonter mon autocentrisme et, par extension, mon anthropocentrisme.

L'intégration

Pour que la hiérarchie de Merleau-Ponty puisse être envisagée dans le cadre des réseaux, ce chapitre montre en outre comment différents types de spatialités de

l'article de Law et Mol (2001) peuvent être associés à différents niveaux d'intégration de Merleau-Ponty. L'article montre (1) la situation (*immuable immobile*), (2) l'importance du mouvement des entités stables (*immuable mobile*), (3) la stabilité par la flexibilité (*mobile mutable*), et enfin (4) tous les (f)acteurs présents en l'absence (*mutable immobile*).

Chez Merleau-Ponty, la spatialité première (*immuable immobile*) serait la situation de base de toutes les entités matérielles mais elle est d'abord typique de la nature non vivante. Les entités non vivantes se déplacent et changent évidemment avec le temps et sont prises dans toutes sortes de réseaux de signification, mais elles ne se déplacent jamais d'elles-mêmes. (*PhP* 470)

Le *mobile immuable* est en quelque sorte mécanique : il montre un réseau établi semblable à celui des machines. Il s'agit d'une spatialité de déplacements, y compris de déplacements humains. Pour la phénoménologie, ce type de mouvement peut être considéré comme un mouvement non intentionnel. À proprement parler, cela n'existe pas pour les êtres intentionnels (correspondant approximativement aux animaux « supérieurs »), mais c'est bien ce que l'on ressent dans certaines situations. Il s'agit d'un mouvement compris comme un simple déplacement de matière, ou d'une délocalisation qui est mécanique au point qu'elle perd même son « caractère de mouvement. » Ce type de mouvement immuable est chez Merleau-Ponty caractéristique des animaux « inférieurs », comme le fameux oursin dans un passage de Jakob von Uexküll (2010 : 76), cité par Merleau-Ponty (*N* 222) : « Quand un chien court, c'est l'animal qui meut ses pattes; quand un oursin se meut, ce sont ses pattes qui meuvent l'animal. »

La fluidité (*mobile mutable*) de ma personnalité incarnée se manifeste au fil du temps ou des changements dans ma vie : je suis toujours, dans une large mesure, considéré comme la même personne que lorsque j'étais enfant, même si personne ne me reconnaîtrait s'il ne m'avait vu qu'à l'âge de quatre ans et aujourd'hui trente ans plus tard. Le changement avec et par le mouvement est finalement le vrai mouvement pour Merleau-Ponty. Il ne s'agit ni d'un simple déplacement physique, ni d'un mouvement qui se fait tout seul ou en pure réaction à l'environnement. Lorsqu'un chien reçoit un stimulus, il réagit mais peut « décider » de sa réaction, ce n'est pas automatique. La relation entre l'animal et son environnement n'est pas une relation de fermeture mais d'ouverture. (*N* 225)

La spatialité *immobile muable* est responsable de tous les facteurs essentiellement contingents sur lesquels je n'ai pratiquement aucune influence. Dans le monde de l'ANT, ce type de relations est présent partout mais en phénoménologie, il peut être la seule sphère proprement humaine. Les humains sont en relation avec l'ensemble du monde culturel et, ce faisant, recréent (ou détruisent) la nature.

Perspectives

L'un des changements entre la structure et la phénoménologie est celui du point de vue : alors que la première contient beaucoup d'observations « objectives, » la seconde est racontée principalement du premier point de vue tant que l'auteur traite du corps sain. Les sujets « anormaux » ou pathologiques sont toujours repoussés vers la troisième perspective en tant qu'étude de cas. Barbaras (2008 : 68) affirme que la commutation entre le premier (réflexif) et le troisième (explicatif) point de vue réalise le caractère biface du corps, mais si le point de vue réflexif est toujours celui du corps sain, alors que tous les problèmes apparaissent du côté de l'approche clinique, c'est plutôt asymétrique. Après tout, un corps idéal sain est presque transparent, un non-corps en quelque sorte, ce qui est également l'objection de Barbaras (2008 : 68). Mais le corps n'est pas seulement sain et inexistant, ou cassé, dysfonctionnel et douloureux. La fragilité du corps peut être accueillie positivement comme une chronique de sa propre vie féconde. Explorer ou simplement remarquer les soi-disant imperfections du corps des autres me remplit de compassion et de gratitude. En regardant une radiographie de mon propre corps, je reste émerveillé par sa capacité à vivre. Les expériences de désintégration sont cruciales pour apprécier sa propre vie et pour la compassion envers les autres êtres vivants. La compréhension du sujet intégré par la désintégration est évidemment exactement ce que Merleau-Ponty recherchait dans la Phénoménologie, mais non seulement ses exemples sont exempts de toute compassion, mais il s'est également limité à des exemples négatifs d'autres personnes « anormales. » L'ANT, quant à elle, est capable de retracer tous les acteurs possibles en jeu et de trouver des sources de désintégration, mais ne parvient pas à fournir de descriptions de la subjectivité elle-même.

3. Embodied Network:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Annemarie Mol

*Thursdays were the best. In the mornings I had a philosophy class about the body and in the afternoons an anatomy class where we dissected corpses. Barthes gave way to a large, white room that stank of formalin. Merleau-Ponty was followed by corpses wrapped in orange towels and green plastic.*⁷⁷

When she was a child, Aneta, a random average female subject, used to spend time in the scout organization, in a girl-only group. With other girls, she would build summer camps, raise flagpoles, chop firewood, hike, and experience all other kinds of ‘adventures.’ She also liked reading adventure books about boys and men, thinking they were written about her and for her. Unbeknownst to her, she fell in the trap of ‘universal subject’: a he is also a she, it’s just a custom to call them ‘he,’ the ‘he’ is generic. However when Aneta later left the girl scout group and started spending time in an environment of more genders (but mostly the two cis-genders), she realized that all those books were not about her at all and that the adventures in which everyone was equal were but a game. There are two aspects (or ‘versions’ as will become clear later) of being female, and now I don’t have in mind the hackneyed duality of sex and gender,⁷⁸ I mean the awareness of being female and being socialized as such, and the realization of being the Other. Aneta knew that she was female but first she didn’t consider herself as the Female of the Male. It is similar to the experience described by Frantz Fanon: Antilleans were taught the history of France at school from the viewpoint of the white man and when they heard about ‘savages,’ they thought about the Senegalese. Antilleans of course know that their skin is black but they don’t realize that they are the Blacks of the Whites.

Because the Antillean does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as an Antillean. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white man. But he is a

77 This is a quote from the preface to *The Body Multiple* (Mol 2002: x), where she describes her double studies in philosophy and medicine.

78 Don’t get me wrong, it had its important place in history but there is no point in it anymore. (E.g. Butler 2011: xii, Mol 2002: 20.)

Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe; and when he hears Negroes mentioned he will recognize that the word includes himself as well as the Senegalese. (Fanon 2008/1971: 114/120–1)

All the tools the young woman had been used to handling started to be taken out of her hands; she was celebrated and admired but not as such, her gender suddenly began to play a major role: Aneta was strong ‘for a woman’ because despite being a woman, she was not ‘like other women,’ that is she was not too feminine and weak but importantly, not too emancipated either; much like Fanon's black men who are appreciated only if they are considered different from other black men: white inside. (Fanon 2008/1971: 49/54) Aneta adopted a vaguely progressive position with the privilege of getting positive attention thanks to ‘not being like the others.’ Thus she succeeded in promoting feminist views among rather conservative people while not exposing herself too much and enjoying some of the male and some of the female privileges. Is female subjectivity any different from ‘neutral’ embodied subjectivity? How does subjectivity change if I understand it as an actor emerging from networks? I will use this ordinary, not very interesting story to illustrate that a banal, yet complex life situation can be well explained and apprehended by the combination of the Merleau-Pontian embodiment and Mol's understanding of (multiple) body.

3.0.1 Annemarie Mol

Annemarie Mol is one of the authors associated with Actor-Network Theory (further referred to as ANT) which is a movement or a set of theories that has been only rarely put together with phenomenology.⁷⁹ Up until her latest book, Mol herself mostly refrained from referring to phenomenology except for brief and sometimes outright negative mentions.⁸⁰ Her last book is focused on philosophical questions from the point of view of eating and digestion and even though the topic itself explores the body in the way that is far from my own interests for the time

79 The schools that at least partially draw on both phenomenology and ANT, albeit with different focus are e.g. object-oriented ontology, new materialism, and postphenomenology.

80 In one article she reflects on the conventions of using or not using the first person ‘I’ in text and remarks: “Is it possible to use ‘I,’ the first person singular, in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*? [...] will it remind you of the ‘I’ of phenomenology that elevates a single person’s self-ethnography to grandiose proportions?” (Mol 2010a: 254)

being, her intense engagement with some main figures of continental philosophy situates her in a clearer position within – and simultaneously outside of – its context. Earlier drafts of this chapter were written before the book was published and while some of my assumptions have turned out to be not entirely accurate, the fact that she herself addresses Merleau-Ponty, provides me with a very welcome justification of my own project.

I outlined arguments for the connection of Merleau-Ponty and ANT in general in the introduction and I believe that Mol specifically offers even more opportunities for the combination than other ANT associated authors because of her focus on the body, and in the last book also on the subjectivity in general. I agree with many objections the two authors would (or did) raise against each other, some of which will be discussed here. Despite all the differences and unavoidable incommensurabilities, the thematic, methodological, and conceptual proximities which I am going to elaborate on, will substantiate their connection. Then the differences between the two authors will enact new configurations that can grow from them.

This chapter aims first to compare and then combine the two different ways to approach, describe, and (per)form subjects into existence as emerging from bodily existence: Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012/1945; further as *PhP*) and Mol's work, especially her book *The Body Multiple* (2002) and some other texts she wrote or coauthored that take the body and embodied subjectivity as their topics. First I will compare the ways the two authors use concrete examples which is partially related to their writing methods. These differences result in divergent conceptions of subjectivity. At the end I am arguing for the combination of the two theories by using the opening story to support it. Throughout the chapter, I will also try to defend Merleau-Ponty from Mol's criticism in her latest book *Eating in Theory* (2021) and explain why the connection of the two authors can still be fruitful, even though Mol would probably distance herself from it. Still she considers her work more of a continuation or an extension of Merleau-Ponty's project, rather than a revision: "The concern from where my comments start is not that this [Merleau-Ponty's embodiment] is wrong, but that it leaves a lot unanalyzed." (Mol 2021: 32)

Although Mol has stated several times (Mol 2010a; Kuijper 2006) that she favors discussion in the academy, her replies to her own critics and authors using her methods tend to be quite uncompromising, even angry. (Mol 2010b; 2013) My intention here is not to criticize the author, but to use her research to extend the well-established discipline of phenomenology, with both approaches taken as more or less equal.

3.1 The Empirical As The Beginning?

The first proximity between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Body Multiple* that suggests itself is the use of illnesses, or in the case of Merleau-Ponty more specifically pathologies, in Mol's case mainly atherosclerosis.

Mol studied philosophy and medicine and while she didn't practice medicine herself, her research is strongly affected by this link. She calls her method empirical philosophy (Mol 2002: 1; 2021: 1ff.), which is here meant in the strong sense: in the case of *The Body Multiple* (2002), her first monograph, the practical-theoretical ontology is formulated on the basis of very concrete empirical data collected mostly in one hospital; *The Logic of Care* (2008) is less theoretical and challenges fetishization of autonomous choice; and her last book *Eating in Theory* (2021) takes inspiration from stories about food, eating, and digestion that are then used as unexpected models for answering classical ontological, epistemological, and ethical questions. One model out of many, since Mol doesn't aim at universalism, as she often emphasizes. (E.g. 2021: 49)

The form and vocabulary Mol has made use of in her books and articles would by their concreteness traditionally remind rather of anthropology or the type of sociology employed by Science Studies scholars, including one of the ANT 'fathers,' Bruno Latour. Her early research that resulted in *The Body Multiple* was related to multiple manifestations (or rather 'versions' as she calls them) of atherosclerosis in an anonymous Dutch hospital: She was watching patients being treated and various medical professionals doing their work, she talked to doctors, nurses, and laboratory researchers, and she was studying medical documents. This is also what we read: anonymized anthropological empirical data about concrete people that are summarized and commented on

afterwards. Atherosclerosis is a disease of blood vessels which, to put it simply, leads to a bad blood circulation. It is a progressive disease very often not manifested till older age and even though the causes are not known, there are several risk factors, such as family history, lifestyle, and other health conditions like diabetes. One of the main symptoms, and also the most common reason why patients seek help are problems with walking. Mol follows conversations between patients and health professionals, focusing on different emphases each side puts stress on: patients talk about their pains and fears whereas doctors try to capture the severity of symptoms and find the best treatment or at least pain relief and higher comfort in everyday life of their clients.

Merleau-Ponty was particularly interested in dysfunctions concerning perception and movement, but unlike Mol who researched on the reduced motility based on problems in the limbs themselves, Merleau-Ponty mostly focused on psychological or psychiatric issues and brain damages. Mol (2021: 32) in her latest book in line with ANT sets Merleau-Ponty's interests in a broader historical and scientific context: the World War I showed psychiatrists and psychologists clearly and painfully that thinking is located in and dependent on the correct brain functioning. Merleau-Ponty himself then noticed the interdependency of bodily movement and self-perception with the overall perception of the world.

He didn't do his empirical research on pathologies himself – he relied on texts written by psychologists and medical experts. The most famous example discussed in *Phenomenology of Perception* is the “case of Schn.,” a psychological study of Johann Schneider, a World War I veteran who suffered severe cerebral damage in combat and was later researched on by the psychologist Adhémar Gelb and neurologist Kurt Goldstein. (E.g. Goldstein & Gelb 1918) As a result of his wounds he allegedly suffered from visual agnosia and could not perform the so-called “abstract” movements,⁸¹ whereas he was almost perfectly able to do “concrete” movements (*PhP* 105–6/119–20). This means that whenever he needs to move in order to get something vital for himself or whenever he was moving instinctively and without the necessity of say ‘thinking about it too much,’ he did

81 For the discussion about the reliability of Gelb and Goldstein's account, see e.g. Goldenberg 2003 and Marotta & Behrmann 2004; for the discussion about the concrete form of visual agnosia in this case, see e.g. Farah 2004: 21–2 and Jensen 2009.

it without any extra effort. He even learned a manual profession later in his life. However, when he was told to move an arm or a leg without any concrete goal or with the movement as the very goal itself, he couldn't do it (especially with closed eyes), even if it could be in fact a part of the “concrete” movement performed before. So he either needed to place his whole body into a situation of which the movement would make a part or it took him much effort and it looked as if he had to posit his body to the required posture the same way he would have done it with an object, to which he needed sight, like most of us when we move objects. (*PhP* 106–7/120–1)

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Far-Reaching Conclusions from Concrete Data

Both Merleau-Ponty and Mol start with concrete empirical data to proceed later to general claims and theories and both make use of examples of impaired bodies to do so. However, there are profound differences in the way they work with their empirical material. First, Mol conducted her research herself even though she included medical details she got from other medical professionals as well as personal testimonies from the patients themselves. For what she wants to show, it's quite irrelevant whether the information she obtains from doctors is true in a supposedly objective sense or not. As she says later in regards to certain questionable ‘facts,’ she is “not after facts, but after models.” (2021: 167n40) It actually doesn't even matter what she writes about which is apparent from the shift of her interest from illnesses towards eating in recent years. Her ontology⁸² that I will describe shortly, is independent of its concrete content and could be probably demonstrated on almost anything. But I can claim this only after having read her book because the concrete data always precede. In her own words in an interview, she likes the method of “making descriptions local, and then still drawing far-reaching conclusions from them.” (Kuijper 2006: 55; my translation)

82 It would be *ontologies* instead of one single *ontology* (Mol 2002: 6), because the reality of things is not singular. But there is an overarching concept which I would call *ontology* here, keeping in mind that it is a simplification. Later, Mol refrained from using the term ‘ontologies’ anyway, saying that it is too technical and it creates confusions. (Mol 2021: 154n35). About multiple ontologies, see chapter 5 on Viveiros de Castro.

Hence the “far-reaching conclusions” might have possibly been drawn from other data but theoretical conclusions shouldn’t hold priority over the exciting stories of atherosclerosis in a Dutch hospital.⁸³ The book *Eating in Theory* is even more concrete, this time also in its conclusions: she demonstrates only one possible enactment of subjectivity so it is in a way a case study of the ontology developed earlier. Her texts are full of interesting facts, contexts, and links but it is an act of performance and permutation rather than a (quasi)neutral descriptions and illustrations of a theory.

Mol’s books are not exactly ‘traditional’ in form either. There are actually two texts in *The Body Multiple*: the main text is about the hospital, atherosclerosis, and the ‘body multiple’ (which is famously “more than one and less than many”)⁸⁴ and the bottom part of all pages is filled with another text that discusses how to build on previous academic literature. Mol is very good at her own discipline ‘praxiography’: she writes about her theoretical concepts while at the same time doing them, performing them or in her own words *enacting* them. While I read, the ontology demonstrates itself. The ‘bottom’ section of the pages is more theoretical so one would be tempted to see it as the main part, with the ‘upper’ section being its concrete illustration, but I like to think about it the other way round: the ‘bottom’ as an application of what is written above. In the ‘upper’ part, the ontology is being concretely and empirically born and performed, at the bottom it's being used on a very different object: not the body, not humans, not a disease, but texts.

83 L titia Mouze, a professor at the University of Toulouse – Jean Jaur s, said at a seminar *Philosophie antique et m di vale* in 2016 that certain philosophical metaphors are supposed to be remembered in their visuality, instead of merely illustrating a theoretical concept. Who would remember the *meaning* of Plato’s Cave if there weren’t the *image* of the cave? The same goes for the Kantian “starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” The concrete has been important all along. On laughter accompanying research, see also Verran 2001: 5 and chapter 5.

84 This is a famous phrase from Marilyn Strathern’s *Partial Connections* that is repeated everywhere all over again. It means that what we are used to perceiving as individual entities, is not fragmentary (hence “less than many”) but it still exists in various versions (“more than one”). The book was first published in 1991 where Mol took her quote from (p. 35) and I have to admit that I haven’t found the quote in my copy of the book, the “updated edition” from 2005.

Intermezzo: What Is Praxiography?

The term praxiography was first coined by Mol (2002: 32) herself. It plays with the term ethnography yet this time it is not writing about cultures or ethnics, but about practices. It is a method of describing reality: the things are how they *do* and are *done*, i.e. how they enact and are enacted. I will give you a simple example: let's try it with a gold necklace I inherited from a relative of mine. The necklace was made of gold plus it is a family inheritance so it was treated as such: It was carefully stored in my drawers and I didn't wear it very often. One day I needed some extra money so I decided to sell it but in the jewelry store, I was told that the necklace was actually not made of gold at all. The whole time, it hadn't been gold!

Or had it still? When I was inspecting it in front of the jeweler, the necklace was completely different than before: I saw the mild black discoloration, the necklace was also somehow lightweight all of a sudden. It had performed its goldness before, when its material had never been questioned. It had *enacted* being gold, hence it had been gold and hadn't I needed the money, it could have been gold for many more years or even decades. However, the jeweler came with another interpretation and she was an expert so the enactment of goldness fell apart. It was not gold *anymore*. There were multiple versions of the necklace and it actually became more interesting: Who made it look like gold? Was it intentionally deceiving? Who was the first one in the family to consider it gold? The necklace was enacting differently for different people and still differently for non-human entities: similarly to the ferments in the previous chapter, the atoms probably didn't 'think' that they were gold.

This would be too easy though. Mol's method doesn't only consist in descriptions of enactments but also in the enactments themselves. Texts are entities of this world as well and writing is itself an act (much like consciousness is a part of the world in *The Structure of Behavior*: there is nothing outside). "What is atherosclerosis?" Mol asks again in the beginning of the third chapter of *The Body Multiple*. "But after the shift from an epistemological to a praxiographic appreciation of reality, telling about what atherosclerosis is isn't quite what it used to be. Somewhere along the way the meaning of the word 'is' has changed." (Mol 2002: 53–4) The necklace has been enacted in my text: Here it is both gold and

fake gold, it is a part of my story and my academic career. In fact, there never was any necklace, I made it up for this text. Or did I?

3.2.2 Revealing the Normal Through the Abnormal

Merleau-Ponty's method is much more concealed despite him having included a preface that is supposed to describe what phenomenology is about. It's not a coincidence that in her book *The Primacy of Movement*, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone named the chapter dedicated to Merleau-Ponty "Merleau-Ponty: A man in search of a method" and most of it is filled with sentences that end with question marks. She suggests that Merleau-Ponty used pathological ways of perception similarly to how Edmund Husserl used phenomenological reduction. Just as the intellectual operation of *epoché*⁸⁵ aims to show the usual being in the world as something non self-evident, Merleau-Ponty's examples of pathologies present damaged perception in order to analyze the 'normal' perception of the self and its environment and 'normal' and 'healthy' movement in space. (Sheets-Johnstone 2011: 239) To be able to see the peculiarity of embodiment and embodied subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty needed to place them into contrast with the cases where they are damaged. (*PhP* 110–13/125–30) Abnormal syndromes are "vital to the effort of description not just because they supply us with new weird data, but because our initial intuitive response to them casts light on the prior background understanding we bring with us from prereflective experience." (Carman 2008: 101) Here Merleau-Ponty is close to Mol in that he aims to show something universal (or universally human in his case) through particular cases of ill individuals. In contrast to her however, his examples are more essential for what he wants to demonstrate. He needed people whose ability of perception or motility are impaired, and even more conveniently people who have both capacities reduced co-dependently.

Merleau-Ponty cannot make his writing as performative as Mol does due to the nature of his theories. Of course because he doesn't write about the being *itself*

85 This is by no means the only way we can see *epoché* in Merleau-Ponty's texts. See e.g. Smith 2005, who wrote that *epoché*, as the 'bracketing' of intellectual assumptions is fully compatible and actually in accord with Merleau-Ponty's '*être au monde*' with its emphasis on perception which, by definition, cannot be bracketed. Merleau-Ponty himself famously wrote that "the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction" precisely because we are parts of this world and not "absolute spirit." (*PhP* lxxvii–lxxviii/viii)

or alternatively about the medium of text or language,⁸⁶ at least not in the parts I am focused on here. Therefore he couldn't demonstrate it by the text *itself* even if he wanted to.⁸⁷ However he also uses examples and first-person evocations that help readers remember or picture what he writes about, which is even stronger in his later texts. What I would call performative in his writing is his way to describe theories that he is going to dismiss later. He dedicates long passages of his book to “empiricism” and “intellectualism,” two rival ways of thinking about perception and movement, but he does it very persuasively so readers don't feel like being confronted with straw men. Merleau-Ponty arguably still stays in the vocabulary of dichotomies that he is trying to overcome (Barbaras 2004: 6; 2008: 71): he starts with them, balances between them, and then situates himself somewhere between. This is later abandoned, especially in the essay “The Intertwining – The Chiasm” (*VI* 130–55/170–202) where he starts from the middle position right away without identifying the two extremes beforehand. However already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, his arguments filled with concrete examples make readers vividly rethink what they – according to him – experience, as in the passage about driving (*PhP* 144/167; cited in the Introduction) or when he writes about common things that we can encounter every day, evoking what he wants to show, like observing movement in thrown stones (*PhP* 280/310) or experiencing one own's room. (E.g. *PhP* 45/54)

Both authors try to make their claims apparent, and almost common sensical: Mol by the enactment of her method, Merleau-Ponty by appealing to our everyday experience that contradicts the empiricist and intellectualist approach (see also Barbaras 2004: 6), by appealing to everyday experiences, and by putting the common or normal into a new context when contrasted with the pathological

86 I wrote about this topic in Jakešová 2019 where I compared three traditions of writing and their performative strength: The German *Medienwissenschaft*, ANT, and philosophy of language of Walter Benjamin.

87 Neither can Mol (2021), in fact, when she writes about eating. As Merleau-Ponty says (*PhP* 196/222), “one can speak about speech, whereas one cannot paint about painting,” just as one cannot, obviously, eat about eating, and that even less so. Mol's book does retain the fluid and semi-permeable composition though, that is inherent in the ambivalent boundaries of metabolic processes. It again holds a non-conventional structure: the side of the main text consists of examples of eating habits and discourses from various regions of the world. In this case the ‘extra passages’ remind of spices.

so that readers are supposed to experience the novelty of the ‘normal.’ They are also both interested in the problem of subjectivity but Merleau-Ponty takes embodied subject as his main topic, whereas Mol treats a human body as but one example that praxiography is manifested on. Hence she was able to make her point when writing about sheep, tomatoes, planes, bush pumps, and last but not least eating. (Law & Mol 2001; 2008; Heuts & Mol 2013; Laet & Mol 2008; Mol 2021)

3.3 Subjects

3.3.1 Embodied Unity

Merleau-Ponty's subjects are embodied subjects: they hold together by the very (embodied) being in the world. In a normal situation, my ‘feeling’ about my body pretty much aligns with the body that I also am objectively. It means that my habitual body (the body that is keeping all my history) is in accordance with my actual physical body. (*PhP* 84/97) The result of this negotiation is *corps propre*, or the “one’s own body,” as translated by Landes (2012: xlviii). The harmonic functioning of *corps propre* is broken in pathological subjects but Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that a basic embodied unity applies to them too: There was still a natural behavior present in Schneider's movements – he also experienced his phenomenal body, he just needed his surrounding and the whole situation to be more concrete. This corresponds to the interesting fact, that the patient's pathological state is experienced as “a complete form of existence,” so he was not fully aware of his dysfunctions. (*PhP* 110/125; Livet 2005: 96–7; see also Goldenberg 2003: 283) However, when ‘advancing’ to the abstract movements, we are dealing with something very different. As Merleau-Ponty says, “the normal cannot be deduced from the pathological” and “nothing could be more mistaken than to assume that the same operations [as Schneider did when trying to perform the abstract movements] are at work for the normal person and merely abridged by habit.” (*PhP* 110/125) The abstract movements that healthy subjects perform when they are for instance asked to move their arms are of a different kind. A normal subject “does not have his body available merely as implicated in a concrete milieu, he is not merely situated in relation to the tasks set by his trade,

nor is he merely open to real situations,” which was the case for Schneider and presumably other patients with similar dysfunctions. “Rather, in addition he [a healthy subject] possesses his body as the correlate of pure stimuli stripped of all practical signification; he is open to verbal and fictional situations that he can choose for himself or that a researcher might suggest.” (*PhP* 111/126)

Hence there are two levels of embodiedness: the first one is a very concrete anchorage in a situation or everyday life. It is the basis: “As always in Merleau-Ponty, pathology or primitiveness reveals the originary experience on which the ‘normal’ is based.” (Barbaras 2004: 9) On top of it, there is a so-called normal subject who can move and act freely even when they are disconnected from an immediate situation. For a normal subject, movements are always natural to perform, “every movement is indissolubly movement and consciousness of movement,” and every movement has its own background that together with the movement itself forms a single unity. For the patient on the other hand, the unity was shattered, it was a hit-and-miss situation: sometimes he had to think the movement through in advance, sometimes he got stuck in blind attempts. (*PhP* 113/128) Concrete movements are responses to stimuli, they are part of the environment, whereas abstract movements aim at the unknown, “the first adheres to a given background, the second itself sets up its own background,” (*PhP* 114/129) which is the ability that the patient lost, the ability to see a broader context, or let's say an abstract context: “the disorder primarily affects his power of recognizing simultaneous wholes, and for motricity it primarily affects his power of surveying movement from above [*survoler*] and of projecting it into the exterior world.” (*PhP* 128/147; see also Marotta & Behrmann 2004: 635) I can always enrich the repertoire of my movements by acquiring new habits, like driving or dancing and even Schneider reportedly could, to a certain extent, because he learnt how to fabricate wallets. (Goldstein & Gelb 1918: 10; *PhP* 105/120) New movements might start as a collection of discrete elements but in order to truly master a new bodily technique, it is necessary that the body on its own “‘catches’ (*kapiert*) and ‘understands’ the movement.” (*PhP* 144/167) It incorporates new skills into its own repertoire of natural behavior.

3.3.2 “More Than One” Body

The main difference of Mol’s subjects in contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s ones is that for Mol, the body is “more than one,” always in more versions. There is no prior embodied unity that Merleau-Ponty sees unfolding in everyday experience of normal subjects: “I do not simply contemplate the relations between the segments of my body and the correlations between my visual body and my tactile body; rather, I am myself the one who holds these arms and these legs together, the one who simultaneously sees them and touches them.” (*PhP* 151/175; see also *SC* 190/205) This is not to say that the body cannot expand beyond its skin: The body in a sense becomes a vehicle-body when I am driving (*PhP* 144/167), and even the perceptual body can be extended like in the case of the white cane. (*PhP* 153/177) But even in these examples – and precisely in these examples – the body is always a lived unity to be described and defended against mechanistic views. Mol appeals to everyday experience as well, but as will become clear, unlike Merleau-Ponty, she tries to show the exact opposite, namely that the body is not ‘one.’ Furthermore, Mol is not interested in any privileged dichotomies that would need to be abridged. The question of usual dualities like body and mind or knowledge and world is not even posed. By focusing on practices and engagements, the opposition between passive matter and active mind/soul/consciousness is abolished:

unlike many other books on medicine and its processes, this one does not speak of different perspectives on the body and its diseases. Instead it tells how they are done. This means that the book comes to talk about a series of different practices. These are practices in which some entity is being sliced, colored, probed, talked about, measured, counted, cut out, countered by walking, or prevented. Which entity? A slightly different one each time. Attending to enactment rather than knowledge has an important effect: what we think of as a single object may appear to be more than one.” (Mol 2002: vii)⁸⁸

88 Mol talks about avoiding the “epistemological tradition in philosophy that tried to articulate the relation between knowing subject and their objects of knowledge.” (Mol 2002: 32) There is a minor tradition of what could be anachronistically called ‘praxiography,’ namely Nietzsche and Deleuze and their relatives. In *On The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche explicitly states that actions cannot be separated from actors: “just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and takes the latter to be a deed, something performed by a

The subject/object (and by extension epistemology/ontology) dichotomy is usually dismissed among the ANT scholars altogether⁸⁹ and Mol is no exception as she explains in the theoretical (i.e. the ‘bottom-page’) section of *The Body Multiple*: “I investigate knowledge incorporated in daily events and activities rather than knowledge articulated in words and images and printed on paper.” (32)⁹⁰ The knowledge is not *about* acts but knowledge is *part of* them and inextricably integrated *in* them.⁹¹ Interestingly enough, Merleau-Ponty would probably concur with Mol when it comes to general assumptions about the lived experience: “The subject does not live in a world of states of consciousness or representations from which he would believe himself able to act on and know external things by a sort of miracle. He lives in a universe of experience, in a milieu which is neutral with regard to the substantial distinctions between the organism, thought and extension; he lives in a direct commerce with beings, things and his own body.” (SC 189/204) The problem of body and mind is not a problem, as long as we stay outside of philosophy: “Naive consciousness does not see in the soul the *cause* of the movements of the body nor does it put the soul in the body as the pilot in his ship. This way of thinking belongs to philosophy; it is not implied in immediate experience.” (SC 188/203) Merleau-Ponty hence agrees with Mol that in everyday conduct, we don’t deal with body and soul as two separate entities, neither do we consciously categorize three main spheres of the world (things, organisms, mind). The difference is that most of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking actually only fully begins once he abandons the natural naïve attitude and

subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the freedom to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; ‘the doer’ is invented as an after-thought, – the doing is everything.” (Nietzsche 2007/1921: 26/327)

89 In the quasi-textbook of ANT, Bruno Latour writes: “To get the right feel for ANT, it’s important to notice that this has nothing to do with a ‘reconciliation’ of the famous object/subject dichotomy. To distinguish a priori ‘material’ and ‘social’ ties before linking them together again makes about as much sense as to account for the dynamic of a battle by imagining a group of soldiers and officers stark naked with a huge heap of paraphernalia—tanks, rifles, paperwork, uniforms—and then claim that ‘of course there exist some (dialectical) relation between the two.’” (Latour 2005: 75)

90 Of course, the text we read is still ‘words on paper.’ I addressed this issue in Jakešová 2019.

91 This is why Renaud Barbaras points out that by constantly explicitly rejecting the ‘empiricist’ and ‘intellectualist’ approach, Merleau-Ponty remains in *Phenomenology of Perception* at least partially stuck between their presuppositions by in fact acknowledging them and performing them. (Barbaras 2004: 5–6)

starts to subject the initial undifferentiated experience to scrutiny, whereas Mol keeps performing instability of any main ontological categories.

I believe that by not dwelling on the question of the usual dichotomies, Mol (like other ANT-related scholars) actually does a good job at removing them out of sight which makes a reader ‘unused’ to them. In a simple but instructive example, she describes how she made a spinach frittata: It’s neither a purely natural event (she is hungry so she eats), nor an act of pure will (she craves spinach) but many other factors are at play, such as what she has at home, how much time and energy she has etc. (Mol 2021: 87)⁹² These illustrative examples reveal the complexity of common events, but only make sense once coherent wholes have been established. The more pressing issue is how to differentiate individual entities so that I don't end up with everything being a mere fluid mass of influences. “The amazement of the classical theory of science about how it is possible for everyone to look at things differently is thus replaced by another amazement: how do we actually manage to connect all these different versions of objects in everyday practice?” asks Mol (in Kuijper 2006: 52; my translation). The initial answer would probably be ‘because it appears so.’ It would definitely be true for Latour, for whom everything is a question of interpretation. But not necessarily a human interpretation only. (Latour 1993a/1984: 166/186; see two previous chapters) If an entity that we called a subject is perceived as a coherent whole, then it is one (until it isn't). Nonetheless, just like with the dismissed dichotomies discussed earlier, the question has to be posed slightly differently. It's not about individual entities that are glued together, but about the actor-network(s) that holds. And in that actor-network, we can zoom in or zoom out (cf. Strathern 2004: xvff.) and see individual actors or groups of actors according to the scale through which we perceive or enact things.

‘Traditional’ ANT scholars usually proceed as follows: there is a situation – either in the present or in the past – and if I am to make use of chosen ANT ‘rules’ or ideas, I zoom in and try to describe the network that holds together by discovering, identifying, and disentangling various actors at play. So in fact, ANT

92 Incidentally, this would roughly be Merleau-Ponty’s case as well: eating is a combination of mental (what I want to eat), biological (I need to eat something), and even physical order (I cannot simply teleport myself to my favorite restaurant). See the previous chapter.

is in general perfect for showing how come that a given situation is stable and finding unexpected factors and connections that are necessary for it to hold⁹³ but is consequently very spatial and static. Even Mol, who overall tends to more fluid analyses than say Latour, admits that her book “does not go into history.” (Mol 2002: 25)

Hence the first (proper) answer to the question ‘how does the body hold together?’ is ‘it holds together as long as the actor-networks around it do’ and if it didn't, we would have nothing to research on in the first place. The second answer is that after having made a body “more than one but less than many,” there is usually only one version at a time that is dominant or one mixed version that fuses several of them. This is why entities that seem coherent are multiple, but not fragmentary: they are “less than many.” Mol describes this when she writes about different and sometimes contradictory diagnoses: “doesn't a single name come with a coherent body? In order to achieve such coherence, a hierarchy between diverging measurements may be established. This is often done. In cases where two facts contradict each other, one may be accorded more weight than the other.” (Mol 2002: 63) Specific results are usually included, but sometimes excluded, and sometimes explained and then with adjustments included again. All this requires effort, as Mol writes in an article with John Law: “the assumption that we *have* a coherent body or *are* a whole hides a lot of work. [...] Keeping yourself whole is one of the tasks of life. It is not given but must be achieved, both beneath the skin and beyond, in practice.” (Mol & Law 2004: 57) This is supposed to be a claim that goes for everyone but in everyday life we do not always notice it: ‘holding together’ is not a state of non-activity, even if it only meant breathing, nutrition, and sleeping. Then the people whose everyday existence requires *more* work because they are old, ill, pregnant, transgender etc. know about it even more acutely. And indeed their bodies are often *literally* fragmented: pricked, opened, cut into pieces.

The conceptualization of subjects in *Eating in Theory* (2021) doesn't differ significantly from that in Mol's earlier texts. Only the inspiration from and

93 Cf. Müller and Schurr (2015: 220–1) comparison of actor-networks and the Deleuzian assemblages: “ANT not only provides a rich selection of case studies, but it also has a repertoire of concepts through which to understand the work of stabilising relations [...] while ANT still starts from description, it arrives at explanation through description.”

dialogue with other authors is more evident when she formulates her own theories. Throughout the book, she constantly reminds readers that she doesn't want to substitute other concepts with her own, instead she approaches it as an experiment: What happens if we take eating as a model for talking about subjectivity? How does dependency on nutrition manifest itself in humans? What alternatives does this model offer for discourses about the boundaries of human bodies? (e.g. 39) That's what's missing from most Western philosophical writing of the past, and even in the cases when food was written about, it was usually demoted to the 'low' level of human nature, as in Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, and Emmanuel Levinas.⁹⁴ She also discusses Merleau-Ponty in some detail, her main point being that the Merleau-Pontian subject is too compact and isolated: "Merleau-Ponty's subject is able to walk around his apartment as long as his neuromuscular body works as an integrated whole. Its integration allows it to remain distinct from its surroundings, to avoid bumping into tables and chairs." (Mol 2021: 36;⁹⁵ cf. *PhP* 209/235) This is an interesting paradox because in order to be "a whole," to maintain one's own integrity and boundaries, one needs to cross them: by eating, breathing, and excretion at the very least. Her book is filled with everyday examples of what happens when this semi-permeability is damaged which I don't need to go into details of as everyone is very well aware of this from their own life.

Again, she doesn't claim that Merleau-Ponty is necessarily wrong (neither are the other discussed authors), but that he doesn't go far enough, or better still that he offers a model that works for certain times, situations, or for certain people only. This is also a common feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty (e.g. Young 2005; see the next chapter) and 'compactness' is also Jean-Luc Nancy's critique of phenomenology in general. (Nancy 2008b/2000a: 128/117; see the first chapter) According to Mol (2021: 32), Merleau-Ponty unlike some of his predecessors recognized and paid attention to the neuromuscular layer of the body but took its metabolical layer for granted. 'Layer' is the word Merleau-Ponty sometimes uses, for example in the context of actual and habitual body: "It is as though our body

94 My point here is not to discuss Mol's engagement with these authors. However, the books she relies on are *The Human Condition* (Arendt), *Philosophy of Biology* (Jonas), and *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas).

95 She uses a different translation than me: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2005 (1958). *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge.

comprises two distinct layers, that of the habitual body and that of the actual body.” (*PhP* 84/97) Mol (2012) importantly prefers the term ‘version’ which is a convenient detail to explain the difference: While a layered entity is stable with layers entering from the background to the foreground, an entity followed across its various versions changes over time and its identity needs to be constantly performed and re-established rather than pre-established in the beginning or assumed in advance.

3.3.3 Answer to Mol

Mol’s critique of or rather discussion with Merleau-Ponty only takes *The Phenomenology* into account. Like quite a few other authors she limits herself to his most homogenous text, thus making the polemic a little easier for herself. If I think about movement, my body surely is compact, it is moving against its background as Mol (2021: 36) summarizes in the quote above. However, a certain level of permeability is crucial already in *The Phenomenology*. The subject–object relations are intentional and codependent, both in the movement and in perception. This is apparent from another passage about the apartment: “For me, my apartment is not a series of strongly connected images. It only remains around me as my familiar domain if I still hold ‘in my hands’ or ‘in my legs’ its principal distances and directions, and only if a multitude of *intentional threads run out toward it from my body*.” (*PhP* 131–2/151; my emphasis) It is not only an active body moving unaffected on the passive background.

The enmeshment of the (so-called) cultural and natural, so essential for ANT, Mol included, is important for Merleau-Ponty as well.⁹⁶ It’s true that he doesn’t delve deeply into the question of eating but he does recognize in a brief comment that food goes beyond mere natural subsistence, because it already is in a human situation: “Already the mere presence of a living being transforms the physical world, makes ‘food’ [*nourriture*] appear over here and a ‘hiding place’ over there, and gives to ‘stimuli’ a sense that they did not have.” (*PhP* 195/221) When Merleau-Ponty writes about food, it is almost exclusively in association with non-human animals (the expression ‘non-human’ being anachronistic here)

⁹⁶ E.g. *PhP* 195/220–1: “It is impossible to superimpose upon man both a primary layer of behaviors that could be called ‘natural’ and a constructed cultural or spiritual world. For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural, [...]”

as in *The Structure of Behavior*, and he only mentions in passing that, of course, humans also need to eat. (*PhP* 162/186) It is nevertheless not the case that humans would have a strictly separate metabolic, locomotor, and then an intellectual/spiritual layer.⁹⁷ “The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them.” (*SC* 180/195; see also the previous chapter) All the aspects of human embodied life are mixed together and already (naturally) human. (See also *PhP* 162/186; Bimbenet 2004: 107–8; Toadvine 2007; on the difference between humans and other animals, see the previous chapter and chapter five)

Taking into consideration Merleau-Ponty’s later texts, such as the essay “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” the melange of the subject and object becomes even more prominent and instead of thinking about how to connect the subject with the rest of the world (the problem of solipsism), it is more about how to separate them. But already in the *Phenomenology* the attainment of unity is by no means effortless or static, even though the development admittedly proceeds in the opposite sequence: at least some kind of unity is indeed necessary as a precondition for there being a subject at all.⁹⁸ That’s why not only do Merleau-Ponty’s ‘pathological cases’ keep their basic intentional unity when performing concrete movements, they allegedly do not perceive their handicap even when trying to do the abstract tasks. Merleau-Ponty thus shows that a basic intentional unity is present *even* for people suffering from some sort of perceptual dysfunctions, whereas Mol argues that unity is not to be taken for granted, *not even* in the case of healthy people at that. Nevertheless, people with diseases, such as diabetes or atherosclerosis are more intimately affected by everyday concerns. Needless to repeat, the desired unity is achieved with the help of other entities, which is evident from her work on food and even more explicitly in the texts that have emerged from research in hospitals and care facilities.

97 In fairness, this is not what Mol says specifically about Merleau-Ponty: she says it about Hans Jonas but I see it implied in her text. It is also a logical interpretation, given the layouts of *The Structure of Behavior* and Merleau-Ponty’s courses on nature.

98 Actually for being *anything* at all because structure and organization is not limited to humans, not even to living organisms. (E.g. *SC* 138/149) On this topic see the previous chapter.

I suggest that the Merleau-Pontian subject is being created by *accumulation, sedimentation, and habituation* (see Morin 2022: 39): Since I was born, I have been subjected to the sedimented effects of the existence of other humans (*PhP* 363/400) and I myself have been learning techniques by mutually established and maintained contacts with other entities in the world and acquiring skills throughout my life in the “double moment of sedimentation and spontaneity.” (*PhP* 132/152) The most foundational skill (“original intentionality”) is that of movement, that enables me to reach out to the world (*PhP* 139/160), and embrace and establish myself in it. The progress is obviously not only positive but when my motility (and other skills) decrease with age, I can at least partially adapt to the development, or if I happen to for example lose a part of my body, I can get and learn to use moving or handling aids. It is the accumulation (or decumulation) of layers that become included in the whole and in fact lose their layeredness once they are incorporated, at least in healthy subjects. The spatial compactness is thus in a way mirrored in the temporal one:

the body necessarily exists “now”; it can never become “past.” [...] At each moment in a movement, the preceding instant is not forgotten, but rather is somehow fit into the present, and, in short, the present perception consists in taking up the series of previous positions that envelop each other by relying upon the current position. [...] The synthesis of time, like that of space, is always to be started over again. (*PhP* 141/163–4)

The layers only reveal themselves when there is a problem, like in the case of phantom limbs when the layers of the actual and habitual body disconnect (*PhP* 84/97) or during illness in general. (*SC* 189/204) It is when I realize limits of my ‘bodiness.’ Hence while the embodiment is crucial and constitutive, it is essentially defective and it only reveals itself precisely through those – inevitable – defects or failures:

Since the physical, the vital and the mental individual are distinguished only as different degrees of integration, to the extent that man is completely identified with the third dialectic, that is, to the extent that he no longer allows systems of isolated conduct to function in him, his soul and his body

are no longer distinguished. [...] integration is never absolute and it always fails. (SC 203/218–19, 210/226)

The Molian entities, including but not limited to embodied humans are enacted by *negotiation*. She speaks about hierarchy, winning, bracketing, and unbracketing but there can be fusions, or sometimes the double (or triple or multiple) entities are left how they are:

When different tests give different outcomes, it is not obligatory to abandon one. It is also possible to understand the objects of two different techniques as indeed being different objects. In such a scheme both pain when walking and pressure drop are troubles that may plague a patient. Troubles that have a relation, but not necessarily one that is linear. Troubles in their own right. (Mol 2002: 66)

The negotiations don't necessarily always happen in the fierce competitive way though. This would rather be the case of the early Bruno Latour (e.g. 1993a/1984) for whom it was always about fighting or allying actants.⁹⁹ When objects are being negotiated, the outcome doesn't need to be either a conflict or harmony. In the interview cited above, she talks about "tense peace" (*gespannen vrede*) between multiple realities, multiple versions. When applied to treatment, the question is: "What are the advantages and disadvantages, not only of both treatments, but of both ways of shaping the reality attached to them?" (Kuijper 2006: 53; my translation) Nothing is ever an isolated event: everything co-creates its wider or narrower environment. Another way of negotiations is cooperation: In the book *The Logic of Care* (2008) she refuses the dichotomy of a patient's choice versus the objectification by health care professionals and instead proposes a third way, the logic of care. It means that the subject is no longer perceived as a separate stand-alone unit that decides out of free will of their destiny or, on the contrary, as an entity that has been stripped of their autonomy and is being decided about by others: the subject is instead henceforth interpreted, understood, and treated in the context of joint activities of many actors. This applies to eating situations too but it needs to be kept in mind that interactions are always ambivalent: usually when I

⁹⁹ Note the war metaphors: the first part of Latour 1993a/1984 is named "War and Peace of Microbes," see also the previous and the last chapter.

take care of someone or something, there is a countervalue attached – I take care of the carrots in my garden, but obviously, it is because I want to eat them. (Mol 2021: 111)

The subject's relations to other subjects and objects (which are not really distinguished in ANT) are ambiguous and as in phenomenology, they are *already there in advance*, except that phenomenology, despite its proclamations, usually takes tens or hundreds of pages before getting to intersubjectivity at all. (*PhP* 361/398, Husserl 1952: 162, Heidegger 2002: 120)

3.4 Fragmentations

Mol and other ANT-related scholars are very good at analyzing existing situations. These situations developed in time, which is fully acknowledged (for instance by emphasizing 'versions' over 'layers') but the time is quite standard, linear, and ... 'unengaged': versions imply a certain democracy between different stages, rather than progression. ANT can describe why actor-networks hold at this particular point or what factors may have contributed to their breakdown. If I perceive one version to be better than the other (as I, say, prefer myself being healthy to being sick), it is contextual and perspectival (because for example viruses prefer my illness, pharmaceutical companies might profit from it etc.). There is no state that is preferred in and of itself because the 'wholeness' or 'unity' can have different meanings for different entities. Precisely because of the default qualitative democracy of all the actors involved, it doesn't work that well in analyses of the subject. Despite all the praxiographic claims, what ANT scholars do when they write, is, well, working with texts (which is also the only source most of us have an access to) and that's true even in the situations when they tend to be very self-reflective. (See Jakešová 2019) The radical phenomenological asymmetry of analyzing the self and then extrapolating some of the conclusions to make them more broadly relevant would, in general, be quite unacceptable for most ANT scholars. In spite of this, I believe that ANT methods (or rather axes of focus since ANT is not supposed to be a method)¹⁰⁰ can

¹⁰⁰ See e.g. Latour 2005: 94, 142ff. and Mol 2010a: 261. I don't take this claim particularly seriously because many schools of thought would claim that they are special by not – in fact – being a method.

contribute to making phenomenology more inclusive, especially when there happen to be problems regarding embodied unity.

3.4.1 Female and Non-White Bodies or Why the Revision is Needed

In order to proceed to a fusion, I will now look briefly at the situations when subjects start falling apart. Both for Merleau-Ponty and Mol, unity is something desirable, where in Mol, the nature of the ‘unity’ depends on the point of view. If the unity is broken in Merleau-Ponty, it basically means that the habitual and the actual body disconnect. The prominent example given in *Phenomenology of Perception* concerns phantom limbs, which is the situation when a person still ‘feels’ the limb that they have lost. (*PhP* 78ff./90ff.) For Mol, it's a disagreement in a hospital or a person that fails at holding themselves together, be it because of the so-called material circumstances or due to mental capacities that at some point become insufficient.¹⁰¹ There is no need to analyze complicated pathologies right away when I want to describe difficult bodily existences. The everyday experience of people who are discriminated based on their bodies is fully sufficient: other than cis male gendered bodies, bodies of people of color, bodies of people with all kinds of disabilities or other than heterosexual identities.¹⁰² This has been a target of complains: various scholars have been criticizing traditional phenomenology precisely on the ground of its failure to relate to other than privileged bodily experience.

One of the most well-known critiques is the feminist essay “Throwing Like a Girl” by Iris Marion Young (2005).¹⁰³ Her point of departure is the fact that women in general tend to move much less spontaneously, especially when performing task-oriented movements. This results in them typically being less efficient than men even when corrected for muscle mass. Young chose the throwing of a ball as her main example: when a girl or woman wants to throw a

101 Those aspects are not qualitatively different, that's why I call Mol's subjects embodied subjects too. Her topic is a body but it is an entity that is negotiated by both material and non-material actors.

102 I am not claiming that lives of white able-bodied men are easy but that their bodies are typically not the source of difficulties.

103 Other examples include: from the feminist perspective de Beauvoir 1949, Butler 1988, 1989, Fisher and Embree eds. 2000; within disability studies e.g. Paterson & Hughes 1999, Campbell 2009, Mladenov 2015, from the post/decolonial perspective e.g. Lee 2008, 2016, Chowdhury 2014, Al-Saji 2018, Worthy 2019. See also the next chapter.

ball, instead of naturally moving her whole body, she typically only uses her arm, which prevents her from using a big part of her bodily potential. The explanation Young offers is historical and cultural, not innate or so-called natural. Due to cultural stereotypes, relation between body and mind (because we are used to this dichotomy) differs in the two genders. Whereas men have been used to perceive themselves as the Subjects, women have been quite often treated and raised as objects, both by others and themselves.¹⁰⁴ Hence a woman is a subject, like any human, but her feminine body throws her into the realm of objects. This split is the reason why women are much more likely to perform tasks exactly the way Merleau-Ponty said they are normally *not* performed: I think of a task, try to imagine myself executing it, consider all the risks, and then set my body in motion, often with fears, doubts, and insecurities. Women move their bodies, instead of moving *through* their bodies and Merleau-Pontian ‘I can,’ which is supposed to be the main approach to the world, is very often rather ‘I cannot,’ if you happen to have a body that is considered female.

Something similar albeit with different accents can be seen in the case of non-white bodies: Frantz Fanon (2008/1971: 84ff./90ff.) in the famous passage of *Black Skin White Masks* describes the anxiety he feels when he realizes how his body appears to others and that he can be a source of fear based solely on the color of his skin. In both cases, there is a discordance but between what exactly? Not really between the habitual and actual body (I am used to being female and I also objectively *am* female, in the common meaning of the word) but rather between my own sense of my body and the way it is perceived by others. Some of those gaps can be overarched by habits – a woman can get used to being watched as an object all the time and it might be even pleasant, a black man can get used to the necessity of behaving differently than a white man in the presence of the police etc. Very often it is however everything but desirable and all this becomes inscribed in our identities.

It has been argued to me that these critiques might not require the abandonment of phenomenology but that updating and adapting it might suffice. My answer is yes and no. ‘Yes’ in the sense that it is in a way what I am doing here in my own way. Moreover, I believe that it was Merleau-Ponty who made

104 For a discussion of this almost common knowledge, see Strathern 2016: 118, 233.

these discussions possible: Despite his ‘body’ being arguably too compact and harmonious, he established it as a relevant object of inquiry.¹⁰⁵ My ‘No’ grows out of frustration from how often objections against phenomenology are taken lightly as ‘exceptions’ or straight away dismissed. I don’t think it is a useful strategy to postulate harmony and then demarcate exceptions. Merleau-Ponty can ‘accommodate’ many peculiarities and specificities, as a Merleau-Pontian scholar and dear colleague of mine once formulated it but there is no point in ‘saving’ intact Merleau-Pontian scholarship in its entirety when it doesn’t seem to offer meaningful models anymore.

The wholeness and unity shouldn’t be assumed as the basis, both for methodological and moral reasons. Methodologically, such an approach would always put its Other on the back burner and never address it seriously; morally, it is simply false for most subjects as it doesn’t reflect the majority experience, even if I limit myself to humans only. In fact, it doesn’t even correspond to those vilified white heterosexual men. That’s why I find ANT, with its at times chaotic methodology, distractions, confusions, and paradoxes, to be a better tool for describing and dealing with the contemporary world.

Minorities or underprivileged people in general are profoundly (and sometimes critically) shaped by their surroundings and while (modified) phenomenology is extremely useful for analyzing partially shared embodied experience, ANT offers tools to identify and disentangle various both human and non-human actors that make us what and how we are. To demonstrate it, I will go back to the female subject whose experience, I believe, can be understood through this lens: the combination of the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and ANT.

3.5 In Lieu of a Conclusion

Remember Aneta from the beginning? It seems like she grew up almost as a neutral subject in something close a genderless society due to the fact that she was mostly around one gender only.¹⁰⁶ With Merleau-Ponty, I could probably argue

¹⁰⁵ Just like René Descartes actually opened the field for criticism of Cartesianism.

¹⁰⁶ There happened to be two transboys in the scout group: one of them was uncomfortable there, but the other was perfectly happy and was participating in the group’s activities for many years. Whenever an outsider visited the summer camp and asked “what is that boy doing

that she is a 'normal' subject who got limited later in life – her moves became less efficient, she got used to moving in a more 'feminine' way, much like what Young describes in her article. If the embodied unity is being achieved by accumulation, then here it is a negative process: a reduction, decumulation. In contrast, ANT can endow any situation with an equal validity and thus contribute to an empowerment that doesn't need to be based in catching up with unequal norms. With ANT, the female subject discussed here (much like anything and anyone else) is a crossroads of networks, she is both an actor and a combination of actors, depending on the scale I look at her: she is a result of negotiations. Mol repeatedly stresses (e.g. 2002: 54, 171, 181; 2008: 8–9, 91; 2021: 24–5, 49) that she doesn't reconstruct *the* subject or *the* experience of eating, but only one specific case out of many. This makes her texts somewhat unassailable, but it also deprives them of certain depth and urgency. When everything is flat and everything is one case out of many, one wonders what else her theories have to offer further, other than more or less interesting case studies. When she criticizes “the ‘I’ of phenomenology that elevates a single person’s self-ethnography to grandiose proportions” (Mol 2010a: 254), doesn't she 'elevate' herself to a privileged position, when she assumes that she can capture her own particularity? Although I obviously subscribe to the critique of the so-called universal 'I' of Western philosophy, that has been male, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, usually Christian etc., I believe that there *is* a privileged position of the 'I' in that it is my 'I'¹⁰⁷ and no one else's, and this cannot be overcome by any flatness. Thus the neutrality of the ANT perspective would prevent me to see the pain of disintegration of Aneta's first version of self and the primacy of the male subject, the primacy which is, I believe, mostly cultural¹⁰⁸ and which allows women in

here?”, someone would casually reply: “Oh, that's our Rachel/Austin”, depending on how far along he was in his transition at the time.

107 This is the Western position. I don't reject possibilities of other experiences, be it through drugs, meditations, so-called illnesses, religious practices or access to other dimensions. I touch upon what in Western discourses would be called 'alternative experience' in the last two chapters. Nevertheless, Mol doesn't talk from any of these places.

108 The fact that something is rather 'cultural' than 'natural' doesn't mean it is less real. See e.g. Strathern 2016: 276: “In our emphasis on biology we dismiss culture too lightly. The assumption is that a man-made thing can be unmade. But it can only be unmade if 'it' is properly identified. To say that gender differences between men and women are basically cultural and not biological in origin does not lead to the automatic conclusion that they are therefore malleable and weak. They may be very strong.”

contemporary Western societies to be ‘neutral,’ that is male, even if only to a certain degree. The usage of the two sources enables me to see both the strong normativity, and the potential of its disruption or overturn.

To conclude with the tribute to Mol (2021: 25): The offered combination doesn't aim to discover something that has been till now hidden. My goal has been to offer one of many interpretational tools or as she says “models” that through a specific understanding helps to strengthen empowerment, joy, and emancipation.

Réseau incarné : Maurice Merleau-Ponty et Annemarie Mol

– *Résumé*

Ce chapitre vise d'abord à comparer puis à combiner les deux différentes manières d'aborder, de décrire et de (per)former les sujets à l'existence comme émergeant de l'existence corporelle : La *Phénoménologie de la perception* de Merleau-Ponty (2012/1945) et le travail de Mol, notamment son livre *The Body Multiple* (2002 ; « le corps multiple ») et certains de ses autres textes. Il compare tout d'abord la manière dont les deux auteurs utilisent des exemples concrets, ce qui est partiellement lié à leurs méthodes d'écriture. Il en résulte des conceptions divergentes de la subjectivité. A la fin, le chapitre suggère la combinaison des deux théories en utilisant une histoire concrète. Tout au long du chapitre, j'essaie également de défendre Merleau-Ponty contre les critiques de Mol dans son dernier livre *Eating in Theory* (2021 ; « l'alimentation en théorie ») et d'expliquer pourquoi la connexion des deux auteurs peut encore être fructueuse.

L'empirique comme point de départ ?

La première proximité entre les deux ouvrages est l'utilisation de maladies, à savoir les pathologies (Merleau-Ponty) et l'athérosclérose (Mol). Les deux auteurs abordent également la question du mouvement : pour Merleau-Ponty, la capacité de se mouvoir est l'un des fondements de sa théorie du sujet, étroitement liée à la perception et au bon fonctionnement du cerveau. Pour Mol, le lien avec le mouvement est plus contingent car le premier symptôme de l'athérosclérose est très souvent la difficulté à marcher. Mais ses théories pourraient être prouvées par presque n'importe quoi, comme en témoigne le déplacement de son intérêt des maladies vers l'alimentation ces dernières années. Mol a mené ses recherches elle-même, même si elle s'est largement appuyée sur les témoignages de médecins et d'autres professionnels de la santé. Son livre se compose d'entretiens, d'observations et de ses commentaires.

Merleau-Ponty a puisé ses données empiriques dans d'autres publications. L'un de ses exemples les plus marquants est « le cas Schn. », un vétéran de la Première Guerre mondiale qui a subi de graves dommages cérébraux au combat et qui a fait l'objet de recherches ultérieures de la part du psychologue Adhémar

Gelb et du neurologue Kurt Goldstein. À la suite de ses blessures, il était encore capable d'effectuer des mouvements concrets, donc des mouvements naturels pour vivre et même travailler manuellement. Mais il ne pouvait plus faire les mouvements abstraits, c'est-à-dire les mouvements sur commande qui ne mènent à aucun but concret.

Les sujets

Je soutiens que les deux philosophes utilisent les maladies pour montrer quelque chose sur le corps sain : Merleau-Ponty voulait (1) démontrer l'intentionnalité et la cohérence élémentaire même chez le malade et (2) – ce qui est proche de la réduction phénoménologique – il voulait présenter la perception et le mouvement dans l'espace chez l'homme sain comme quelque chose de spécial, comme un mystère qui doit être expliqué. Je prétends qu'Annemarie Mol utilise les exemples des malades d'une manière très similaire : elle veut présenter des personnes dont le corps est apparemment endommagé ou sa fonction réduite pour montrer que cela s'applique naturellement à tous les corps. Et pour se percevoir et percevoir les autres humains comme des unités, cela demande beaucoup de travail.

Les sujets de Merleau-Ponty sont des sujets incarnés, ce qui signifie qu'ils tiennent ensemble par le fait même d'être (incarné) dans le monde. Dans une situation normale, le « sentiment » que j'éprouve à l'égard de mon corps correspond à peu près au corps que je suis aussi objectivement. Cela signifie que mon corps habituel (le corps auquel je suis habitué) est en accord avec mon corps physique actuel. (*PhP* 84/97) Cette harmonie est endommagée chez les sujets pathologiques, mais Merleau-Ponty souligne qu'une unité corporelle de base s'applique également à eux : Il y avait encore un comportement naturel présent dans les mouvements de Schneider – il faisait aussi l'expérience de son corps phénoménal, il avait juste besoin que son entourage et la situation globale soient plus concrets. Cependant, lorsqu'on « avance » vers les mouvements abstraits, on a affaire à quelque chose de très différent. « Le corps chez le sujet normal n'est pas seulement mobilisable par les situations réelles qui l'attirent à elles, il peut se détourner du monde, appliquer son activité aux stimuli qui s'inscrivent sur ses surfaces sensorielles, se prêter à des expériences, et plus généralement se situer dans le virtuel. » (*PhP* 111/126)

La principale différence des sujets de Mol par rapport à ceux de Merleau-Ponty est que pour Mol, le corps est « plus qu'un », il n'y a pas d'unité préalable. Cela signifie que chaque entité existe en plusieurs versions : les choses ne sont pas individuelles mais en même temps elles conservent une certaine forme de cohérence (jusqu'à ce qu'elles ne le fassent plus). C'est pourquoi elles ne sont pas nombreuses mais multiples : « plus d'une, moins de beaucoup ». Les choses existent comme elles *font* et *sont faites*, et cela se passe dans de multiples versions.

Cependant, les sujets merleau-pontiens ne sont pas non plus entièrement statiques. Je suggère qu'ils sont créés par *accumulation* et *sédimentation* : J'acquiers ou je perds des compétences au cours de ma vie et elles deviennent partie intégrante de moi. Par contre, les entités moliennes, y compris, mais sans s'y limiter, les humains incarnés, sont actées par la *négociation*. Elle parle de hiérarchie, de victoire, de mise entre parenthèses et de suppression, mais il peut y avoir des fusions, ou parfois les entités doubles (ou triples ou multiples) sont laissées comme elles sont. (Mol 2002 : 66).

Fragmentations

En raison de la multiplicité des acteurs et des versions, l'ANT (« Actor Network Theory » – la théorie acteur-réseau) peut être utile pour décrire les unités brisées et les regroupements et ensembles alternatifs. Cependant, précisément à cause de la « démocratie » des acteurs, elle n'est pas aussi pertinente pour décrire les sujets. Il semble que nous ayons besoin à la fois de la hiérarchie (pour honorer la particularité de la première perspective) et de la non-hiérarchie (pour les descriptions d'expériences alternatives, qui sont entre autres les expériences des minorités). Ne suffirait-il pas d'adapter la phénoménologie aux expériences non majoritaires ? En dehors du fait que c'est en quelque sorte ce que je fais ici, non. Les objections contre la phénoménologie ont trop souvent été prises à la légère, comme des « exceptions », ou rejetées d'emblée. L'unité ne devrait pas être prise comme base, tant pour des raisons méthodologiques que morales. Sur le plan méthodologique, une telle approche mettrait toujours son Autre en veilleuse et ne le prendrait jamais au sérieux ; sur le plan moral, elle est tout simplement fautive pour la plupart des sujets car elle ne reflète pas l'expérience de la majorité, même

si je me limite aux seuls humains. C'est pourquoi je trouve que l'ANT, avec sa méthodologie parfois chaotique, ses distractions, ses confusions et ses paradoxes, est un meilleur outil pour décrire et traiter le monde contemporain.

Au lieu d'une conclusion

L'histoire que j'ai utilisée dans ce chapitre est celle d'une fille qui a grandi principalement entourée d'autres filles et qui n'était donc pas consciente de la position inférieure qui est souvent attribuée aux femmes. Avec Merleau-Ponty, elle peut être perçue comme un sujet normal qui s'est limité avec le temps – elle s'est habituée à bouger d'une manière plus « féminine », etc. Si l'unité incarnée est obtenue par accumulation, il s'agit ici d'un processus négatif : une réduction, une décumulation. En comparaison, l'ANT peut conférer à toute situation une validité égale et contribuer ainsi à une autonomisation qui n'a pas besoin d'être fondée sur le rattrapage de normes inégales. Avec l'ANT, le sujet féminin (comme toute chose et toute personne) est un carrefour de réseaux, il est à la fois un acteur et une combinaison d'acteurs, selon l'échelle à laquelle je le regarde : il est le résultat de négociations. En même temps, je crois à la position privilégiée du « je » et l'ANT tend à la nier. La neutralité de la perspective ANT m'empêcherait de voir la douleur de la désintégration du soi et la primauté du sujet masculin, primauté qui est, je crois, essentiellement culturelle et qui permet aux femmes dans les sociétés occidentales contemporaines d'être « neutres », c'est-à-dire masculines, même si ce n'est que dans une certaine mesure. L'utilisation des deux sources me permet de voir à la fois la forte normativité, et le potentiel de sa perturbation ou de son renversement.

4. Abnormality as a Creative Drive:

Elfriede Jelinek's *Piano Teacher* as a Challenge to the Normal

The piano teacher Erika Kohut bursts like a whirlwind into the apartment she shares with her mother. Mother likes calling Erika her little whirlwind, for the child can sometimes move extremely fast. She is trying to escape her mother. Erika is approaching the end of her thirties. By her age, her mother could be easily her grandmother. It was only after many hard years of marriage that Erika came into the world. Her father promptly left, passing the torch to his daughter. Erika entered, her father exited. Through necessity, Erika learned how to move swiftly. Now she bursts into the apartment like a swarm of autumn leaves, hoping to get to her room without being seen. But her mother looms before her, confronts her. She puts Erika against the wall, under interrogation—inquisitor and executioner in one, unanimously recognized as Mother by the State and by the Family. The mother inquires: why does Erika only now, so late, find her way home? Erika dismissed her last student three hours ago, after heaping him with scorn. I suppose you think I won't find out where you've been, Erika. A child answers her mother without being asked, but it is not believed because the child likes to lie. The mother still waits, but only until she has counted one two three. (Jelinek 2009/2004a: 3–4/7; translation modified)¹⁰⁹

The chapter is an interpretation of *The Piano Teacher*, a novel by the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek from 1983, with a focus on various levels of abnormality and disintegrated subjectivity that are often experienced by women and other non-privileged human beings. This part of my project is not inscribed within the discipline of disability studies, nor does it aim to be a precise literary study. It aims to evoke unexpected connections and creative emancipation. It also inevitably mirrors my own experience and position in society.¹¹⁰ I am going to

109 In the text as “KS EN/DE.” I use the English translation unless stated otherwise. In the case of this long quotation I modified considerably to better reflect the deliberately peculiar way of sentence composition used by the author in the original German text.

110 Being a white European woman in her mid-thirties, I feel close to the protagonist of the novel. While I don't believe that scholars should be entitled to write solely on behalf of the minorities of which they themselves are members (after all, I write about various minority subjects in other chapters of this text), I do feel more confident when addressing situations I can personally relate to.

make use of several authors who engage with pathologies and challenge categories of normal and abnormal and from the perspective that emerged as an intertwining of my interactions with different philosophical traditions, I will retell the story as a meeting point of various tensions between normality and abnormality. As will become clear, the normal is a very shaky category, in the novel probably even more so. The abnormal or pathological is much easier to identify which is one of the reasons why the pathological will be my point of departure. In fact, the normal is often defined at its boundaries, the abnormal, because the neutral is transparent.

The method is rather eclectic as it has grown from the project performed throughout this whole text: merging Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and (post) Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This unexpected connection is the result of my intellectual proximity to where the two ways of thinking overlap: challenging the established structures and acknowledging various ways to perceive. At the same time, I agree with many objections the two theories (or sets of theories) would raise against each other: on the one hand I appreciate the rejection of anthropocentrism of ANT, but on the other hand I believe that ANT scholars tend to forget their own position and the inevitability of their perspective, which is something phenomenology can work with very well. (See chapter two) This chapter is an application of what has been pursued in the whole thesis up until now. In every chapter, I have presented a concrete example, a problem that can be perceived through the lens of my world-understanding and world-making (always enmeshed), or more precisely: my world-understanding-and-making of a few years ago since once I become ready to write about something, it is not what I am thinking anymore. The grasping itself changes what was meant to be grasped: my writing is obsolete at the very moment it is produced because it is an attempt to freeze something that is necessarily a flow. The freezing however only applies to me who wrote the text. When the text leaves its author, it can become alive again. This is why for this chapter, I am choosing a piece of literature as my 'case study.' It's the novel I spent the most time with of any fiction book I've ever read in my life. It has been living with me, it is new every time I open the book again. The two texts meet together – the always-alive text of the novel and the frozen text of mine – in the hope that the process will swap: that I will freeze the novel

and bring life to my own writing. Initially, this was supposed to be the last chapter but in the end, it is the chapter that merely closes the well-known territories. In the last two chapters, I will carefully step outside.

*The Piano Teacher*¹¹¹ tells a story about Erika Kohut, a piano teacher in her late thirties who is living in an apartment with her abusive mother and unsuccessfully tries to develop a romantic or at least erotic relationship with her young student Walter Klemmer. In order to offer an interpretation, I will use a concept of abnormality or pathology that can be identified across various layers of the book. I am putting aside the illness of Elfriede Jelinek, the actual author herself, even though as she admits, her illness might have been one of the essential motivations for her writing. (Jelinek 2004b) Moreover, I cannot simply forget what I know about her and as such, it is necessarily reflected in my text and I will occasionally appeal to some of her comments on her own work and worldview. Still, I am avoiding specifically autobiographical references as much as possible. It is after all in line with her own wishes, as she stated for example in an interview for *Austrian Films.com* in 2001: “Interviewer: ‘To what extent is your novel autobiographical?’ Elfriede Jelinek: ‘I’d prefer not to answer that, and I’d also prefer my novel not to be seen as autobiographical, although naturally it contains many autobiographical elements.’” (Jelinek 2001)

What interests me in the book are three forces that go against our usual understanding of health or normality: (1) the neuroticism of the main character Erika; (2) the sickness of the Austrian society, i.e. its depiction in the novel. These two layers of abnormality fight against and are mirrored in each other. The last layer is (3) the text itself which deploys pathology as a narrative tool.

Proceeding from the ‘abnormal’ to the ‘normal’ is obviously inspired by Merleau-Ponty. He dedicated long passages of the *Phenomenology of Perception* to studies on pathologies, particularly “the case Schn.,” a study of Johann Schneider who couldn’t perform “abstract” movements but was capable of “concrete” movements. (For more see the previous chapter) With Iris Marion Young (2005, orig. 1980), I will argue that women’s movements can be

111 In German it is “Die Klavierspielerin” which means “the piano *player*.” It will become important later.

understood as abnormal or pathological from the Merleau-Pontian perspective and interestingly enough, it is actually reversed: Women are supposed to perform worse precisely during concrete movements, when there is a clear goal, that is in the situations where Schneider would be least impaired. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's method, I start from the pathological and present the normal in contrast with it, not the other way around. Thus the so-called abnormal or pathological would be the starting point and in fact basis on which the structure of the normal is built.

4.1 Erika Like A Whirlwind

“The piano teacher, Erika Kohut, bursts like a whirlwind into the apartment she shares with her mother. The mother likes calling Erika her little whirlwind, for the child can sometimes move extremely fast.” (*KS* 3/7; translation modified) From the opening scene of the novel, readers can notice that there seems to be something odd about the setting: There is a female character, Erika Kohut, with a teaching job which would indicate that she is an adult, but she is also living with her mother who considers her “the child” and calls her “her little whirlwind.” A few sentences later it's also stated that she is in her late thirties. The abusive relationship between mother and daughter immediately starts revealing itself: Erika's mother interrogates her daughter about her free time, her relationships, the purchases she makes with the money she earns herself, and she even controls her in the night because the two women sleep in the same bed together.

In the main narrative layer, Erika is an adult but the text alternates between the main storyline and episodes from an unspecified period of Erika's childhood and teenage years when she was being brought up in a very strict regime with the hope of becoming a musical prodigy. During this earlier period in Erika's life, she was not allowed anything that would distract her from musical training, especially not any romantic or sexual affairs in particular. Nonetheless, her solo career as a pianist ended in failure at an important concert – an early fiasco that leads to her later decision as an adult to become a piano teacher. Erika's mother, who had dreamt of being the mother of a world famous pianist, was disappointed but it

didn't prevent her from making use of Erika as a provider and companion in her older age.

In the narrative present in which the story is set, Erika loves her mother in the manner of Stockholm Syndrome. She complies more or less with her mother's requirements and rules but she uses her own time in unusual ways, such as attending peep shows and watching copulating couples in parks. She has also been harming herself: cutting herself with a razor, or pricking her body with pins. Erika is depicted as almost emotionless and apparently doesn't experience any sexual arousal. On one occasion when she watches a peep show, she picks up the tissues soaked in sperm that men left in the room and breathes in the smell: she observes carefully with all available faculties but doesn't touch herself, as if being afraid of awakening something inside. "Erika doesn't want to perform any act, she only wants to look. She simply wants to sit there and look. To watch. Erika, watching but not touching. Erika has no feeling." (*KS 52/56*; translation modified) The insensitivity or numbness is also present when she cuts herself:

SHE presses the blade deep into the back of her hand several times, but not so deep as to injure tendons. It doesn't hurt at all. The metal cut's inside like into butter. For an instant, a slit gapes in the previously intact tissue; then the arduously tamed blood rushes out from behind the barrier. She makes a total of four cuts. That's enough, otherwise she'll bleed to death. The razor blade is always wiped clean and then wrapped up again. Bright red blood trickles and trails from the wounds, sullyng everything as it flows. It oozes, warm, silent, and the sensation is not unpleasant. (*KS 43-4/47*; translation modified)

Not even there did she touch herself in the strict sense because she was touching her body indirectly, through a tool, and the cuts themselves didn't hurt her: it was like a surgical inspection of her own flesh and blood. She found satisfaction in merely watching her wound and the blood-flow. Although she cuts herself regularly (*KS 86/90*), there is one specific occasion when she cuts her outer genitalia using the very same razor she used to shave her disabled father. In this case, a male tool is used to mutilate her female parts. Then in the storyline of Erika's adulthood, there are other occurrences of self-mutilation, this time done by 'female' tools: clothespins, pins, and needles. (*KS 249-50/253*) She's been formed

and de-formed from all sides: by her mentally ill father, her mother, abusive society, and the expectations resulting from her being a woman. The usual outcome for her would have been to find a man and replicate all the social models. However, the time when she was the best 'marketable' has passed and she is now a mere inferior product, which is metaphorically expressed in the description of the pre-lost power games she plays with her student:

A present wrapped in slightly dusty tissue paper, on a white tablecloth. As long as the guest is present, his present is lovingly turned and twisted; but as soon as the giver leaves, the present is shoved aside, heedlessly and confusedly, and everyone hurries to supper. The present cannot go away by itself, but for a while it is comforted by the fact that it is not alone. Plates and cups clatter, silverware scrapes on porcelain. But then the package notices that these noises are produced by a cassette player on the table. Applause and the clinking of glasses – everything on tape! Someone comes and takes the package. Erika can relax in this new security: She is being taken care of. She waits for instructions or orders. (*KS 176/180*)

In the passage quoted above, Erika is likened to a gift. Being a woman, she is supposed to be like a nicely wrapped package: beautiful, polished, full of secrets, ready to be opened by a man. But she is not so young anymore and in the book she is described as rather ordinary looking: hence a dusty package – not first class but in this situation behaving appropriately, that is, passively waiting for a man to decide whether he wants to take her and do something with her or to her. "She waits for instructions or orders." But does she really? Readers follow Erika's painful attempt to engage in a romantic and sexual relationship with her young student. She is interested in sexual masochism and wants the young man to dominate her so in this sense, she is literally waiting for instructions and orders, but she pushes it too far and doesn't go far enough at the same time. Women are supposed to be submissive indeed but not in such a disturbing way. Erika's sexual fantasies are too extreme and shocking for her lover, at least initially:

Klemmer laughs out loud. He takes it as a joke: that he should smash his fists in her stomach and sit down so hard on her that she'll lie there like a plank, unable to stir in his cruel, sweet bonds. Klemmer guffaws because she can't

be serious, it is nicely made up. ... He has the impression that she's not even ashamed of herself. (KS 215–16/219; translation modified)

Erika seems to be extremely sexually submissive, which is the first way she escapes expected normality: craving and enjoying pain is always suspicious. On the other hand, she is not submissive *enough*, as Jelinek herself says in an interview: “The reason why E. Kohut fails doesn't consist in her description of how she wants to be suppressed. She fails because she wants to be subject and object at the same time.” (Jelinek & Maresch 1992: 17; my translation) This is the type of masochism depicted in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novels and famously analyzed by Gilles Deleuze. There is an idea that sadists and masochists should pair. After all, this type of sexual fetish used to be labeled under one common name sadomasochism and even the recently more frequent term BDSM combines¹¹² both the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom’ parts of the (ideally) consensually violent sexual situation. In sexual partnerships, it also very often happens that a masochist would pair with a sadist. But neither marquis de Sade and Sacher-Masoch, nor Deleuze are interested in controlled sexual plays in bedrooms or artificial dungeons of consenting adults. Sade and Sacher-Masoch write about and in fact *enact* (by their lives but more interestingly by their writing) deep disturbing perversions, not a way to accommodate harmless fetishes. Deleuze in turn writes about the two authors and about their respective ontologies that are already complete on their own: both perversions are very egocentric and don't care much about their objects. Most people can probably imagine that a ‘real’ sadist would prefer their victim to suffer and not actually enjoy their torture but the incompatibility also applies to masochism: masochists don't need sadists as their counterparts, in fact, they need someone who is willing to be educated to be capable of fulfilling their fantasies.

A genuine sadist will never tolerate a masochistic victim. ... Neither would the masochist tolerate a truly sadistic torturer. ... The woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is *inside* of the masochistic situation, she is an integral part of it, a realization of the masochistic fantasy: she belongs in the masochism. Not in the sense that she

112 BDSM = “bondage & discipline; dominance & submission; sadism & masochism.”

has the same tastes as her victim, but because her 'sadism' is of a kind never found in the sadist; it is as it were the double or the reflection of masochism. The same is true of sadism. The victim cannot be masochistic, not merely because the libertine would be irked if she were to experience pleasure, but because the victim of the sadist belongs entirely in the world of sadism and is an integral part of the sadistic situation. (Deleuze 1991/1967: 40–2/39–40; translation modified)

This is what the young man in the novel understands very well: “He has to be convinced: This woman has put herself entirely in my hands, which makes *him* Erika's property. That's how she imagines it.” (KS 207/211; modified) “Did he get it right that by becoming her master, he can never become her master? So long as she dictates what he should do to her, some final remnant of her will always remain unfathomable. ... And where is my reward in all this? Klemmer jokes.” (KS 216–18/220–1; translation modified)

All this would probably be much less problematic if the center of this kind of fantasy were a man. Austrian society as presented in the book doesn't tolerate women who create their own sexual worlds and who want to dominate in romantic and/or sexual relationships. And it is clear that Erika doesn't fit the role that society prepared for women: when she was younger, she wasn't (allowed to be) beautiful and wasn't allowed to compete for male attention; now in her late thirties, she doesn't behave according to her younger lover's expectations and wants to set her own rules instead.

4.2 Cutting Through The Air With A Razor

Towards the end of the book, there is the motive of the razor again in a violent scene when Erika's love interest Klemmer rapes her but this time it is him who claims to have been only disinterestedly observing and not having felt anything: “All the time, he was just pretending to her something in this regard, it was a scientific experiment, Klemmer denies his honorable needs. And where are your renowned ropes now, he cuts through the air as if with a razor.” (KS 268/272; translation modified) Cutting with a razor means distancing oneself, observing and destroying the object without one's own personal engagement.

The form mirrors the content and Erika has been created by her narrator to accord with the writing style. Or maybe the other way round: the narrator copies Erika's style. She cuts through, explores, and describes Austrian society and culture with surgical precision, coldly, without arousing emotions. But the style is ornamental and ironic, combining clichés and sayings from everyday speech that highlight their semantic emptiness, and quasi-Homeric similes that are nevertheless applied to the most banal situations as in the scene quoted above where the main character is likened to a wrapped package.

The storytelling proceeds as a vivisection that is performed on Austria, Vienna, men, women, and Erika's own body, or more precisely a self-vivisection (analogical to Erika's self-harm) because it seems as if the society vivisected itself and let itself be seen opened with all its viscera exposed in front of the readers. In order to analyze the narrating style of the book, I am going to apply a method from the *Phenomenology of Perception*: using pathology or abnormality as the starting point. However, whereas Merleau-Ponty did this in order to show the normal in a new light, probably for us to appreciate it more, I aim to argue that instead of normality there is a void in the place where normality would be located.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, it is possible to understand Merleau-Ponty's usage pathological ways of perceiving similar to the way in which Edmund Husserl used phenomenological reduction. (See Sheets-Johnstone 2011: 239) Just as the intellectual operation of reduction aims to show the simple being in the world as something non self-evident, Merleau-Ponty's examples of pathologies present damaged perception in order to analyze the 'normal' perception of the self and its environment and 'normal' and 'healthy' movement in space. This is what I see performed in the novel, with the difference that there is in fact nothing normal to aim at. Thus it is closer to (post) ANT scholars, particularly Annemarie Mol and John Law, who use a similar method but not in order to present various levels of harmony of human subjects. Rather, they demonstrate that even healthy (and privileged) people perceived as coherent subjects are fundamentally affected and shaped by many forces, from both the inside and outside. This is in a contrast to Merleau-Ponty. Yes, he does acknowledge the intertwinement between subjects and objects and he dedicates

long passages to human capacity to adapt to various difficult situations (to a physical disability for example) but the subject's unity always remains the very basis of human existence that cannot be 'explained away' by any external causes: "I am not the result or the intertwining of multiple causalities that determine my body or my 'psyche.'" (*PhP* lxxi//ii)

The pathologies depicted in the novel on the level of narration are quite expectedly connected to language or speech and as a narrative tool, they can serve as a reflection of society. The speech disorders that seem to best correspond to the narrator's style would be tangential and circumstantial speech disorders,¹¹³ as well as the contiguity disorder as defined by the linguist Roman Jakobson in 1956. He defined two speech disorders going against each other that simultaneously mirror the two poles of language. Language, that is, usage of language or speech, consists of *selection* from a given corpus and then *combination*, where the combination is heavily dependent on the context and situation in which the speech is being delivered. If a patient suffers from similarity disorder, their speech is mainly reactive to an interlocutor and given situation and they have difficulties in grasping any meaning of words and expressions outside of their context.

On the opposite pole, the contiguity disorder consists in the inability to adapt to a concrete situation. The patient would be able to select words but the selection would feel odd in relation to the given context. "The patient confined to the substitution set (once contexture is deficient) deals with similarities, and his approximate identifications are of a metaphoric nature. [...] *Spyglass* for *microscope*, or *fire* for *gaslight* are typical examples of such quasi-metaphoric expressions." (Jakobson 1956: 72) The language of the novel's narrator suggests a disorder of this sort. Her use of metaphors often feels inappropriate, she jumps from one context to another, and constantly, compulsively distracts herself, sometimes providing unnecessary and unimportant details and comments, as if experiencing tangential and circumstantial speech disorders. For example, when Erika wears her outdoor outfit in hope of going for a trip with Klemmer, the narrator suddenly starts explaining why she is not carrying a rope,¹¹⁴ or another

113 Tangentiality is a "disturbance in the thought process, voluntary or involuntary, which causes one to relate an excessive amount of detail that is elaborate, marginally related, or irrelevant to the subject at hand" (Loftis 2016) and circumstantiality is "circuitous thinking and speech that digresses from the essential point." (Frank 2018)

114 "She doesn't have a rope, because she isn't into extremes. And even if she were into

time she includes unrelated tangential comments following an episode with a piano tuner from Erika's childhood.¹¹⁵

Just as the narrator jumps from one register to another and seems to be unable to stick to linear speech, characters also speak past each other. They hardly ever engage in true dialogues, most interactions between them are monologues or internal monologues, or they are lost in translation, sometimes literally: “Now the woman talks to the man, he should wait for a moment. Erika can’t tell whether the man agrees with her on it. He emits a relatively calm sentence in his language. The woman berates him, that no-one understands it. You wait, understand? Wait! No wait.” (KS 142/146; translation modified) Or the collage is formed by combining various media, like in the passage quoted earlier when Klemmer reads and comments on Erika's letter, a version of masochistic contract,¹¹⁶ in her presence. “He should bore his knees into her abdomen, if you'll be so kind. Klemmer has a good, hard laugh. What a joke.” (KS 215/219) The text as a bricolage of various media, quasi-dialogues, inner monologues, and bits of folk pseudo-wisdoms, makes up a society that most people accept as ‘normal’ but with all its components are laid side by side, it exposes its own fragmentarization and abnormality.

extremes, it would be without a net and a rope; completely without a life anchor would she expose herself to the wilderness of physical burrowing, where one depends entirely on oneself and one’s partner.” (KS 239/243; translation modified)

115 Plays on words are very common and they are obviously often untranslatable: “Die Mutter achtet auf gute *Stimmung* des Instruments, und auch an den Wirbeln der Tochter dreht sie unaufhörlich herum, nicht besorgt um die *Stimmung* des Kindes, sondern allein um ihren mütterlichen Einfluß auf dieses störrische, leicht verbildbare, lebendige Instrument.” “Mother makes sure the piano is kept properly *tuned*; and she also keeps twisting her daughter’s vertebrae, unconcerned about the child’s *mood*, worrying solely about her own influence on this stubborn, easily deformable, living instrument.” (KS 35–6/40; my emphases: the expression *Stimmung* means both ‘tuning’ and ‘mood.’)

116 “In Masoch's life as well as in his fiction, love affairs are always set in motion by anonymous letters, by the use of pseudonyms or by advertisements in newspapers. They must be regulated by *contracts* that formalize and verbalize the behavior of the partners. Everything must be stated, promised, announced and carefully described before being accomplished.” (Deleuze 1991/1967: 18/16)

4.3 One More Corpse In The Wardrobe

The main targets of the narrator's merciless mockery and irony are patriarchy and capitalism, where the former is in fact included in the latter because patriarchy is mainly depicted as commodification of female bodies. The actual author certainly aims to criticize the patriarchal and hypocritical society of late 20th century in Austria, just as she has been doing it in her other works of prose and especially plays and, for that matter, almost any time she speaks to the public. (Jelinek 2004b) *The Piano Teacher* might also look like a realistic story (and Michael Haneke's good yet strongly interpretative film adaptation from 2001 supports the impression), and it most likely contains some autobiographical elements. Nonetheless it is important to read the text as fictional and with sensitivity to hyperboles in order to avoid banal criticism of its exaggerations and simplifications that would emerge if it were understood as a strictly realistic description (which is not what the author was after anyway). Austrian society in the book is obviously patriarchal, and this is predominantly backed up by seemingly random episodes told by the indifferent voice of the omniscient narrator who sees through all her minor characters' very clichéd motivations. The brutal rape at the end of the story is a natural escalation of everyday patriarchy but it is not the core: "I am not a feminist because I fight men who beat up and rape women. It is well obvious that everyone is against it. I am a feminist because this oppressive phallic, phallocratic value system that women are subject to is spread over everything." (Jelinek 2004b, my translation) Throughout the book, readers should realize that the current status quo is what is problematic, not only horrendous rapes. This situation is reinforced by both men and women, with women being targets of the narrator's criticism perhaps even more often than men.

Probably the harshest criticism is aimed at Erika's mother, and at mothers in general. Much has been written about the central mother-daughter relationship both in the novel and in its film adaptation,¹¹⁷ often within a psychoanalytic interpretational framework. Nevertheless, the book doesn't limit itself to the specifically problematic relationship between the main protagonist and her mother, but rather shows a general pattern according to which daughters are

117 See e.g. Kecht 1989, Klages 1992, Kosta 1994, Critchfield 1997, Christian 2009, Bethman 2011; for the emphasis on Haneke's film adaptation see Johnson 2009.

perceived by their mothers as failures, somewhat by default: “In the Aïda Café, mothers discuss their daughters’ sexual activities, finding them dangerously premature. They praise their sons’ commitment to school and sports.” (KS 278/282) It continues later – young women’s value consists in their beauty and mental inferiority to their male counterpart: “female value decreases sharply with increasing years and increasing intelligence” (KS 168/172; translation modified) and a woman must ‘sell’ herself before her value gets too low due to her age. Hence young girls compete against each other for male attention, as in the scene with the main character's male cousin who is attractive because of his promising future and handsome body, and who has a higher value than the girls around him thanks to his gender alone: “He likes to lead the girl’s hand when she holds the racket, while she is embarrassed in her teeny-weeny bikini. She’s a salesgirl, and she’s saved up to buy her swimsuit. The girl wants to marry a doctor, and she shows off her figure so the future doctor knows what he’s getting. He doesn’t have to buy a pig in a poke.” (KS 39/43; translation modified)

Women are commodities like any others. So is fashion, for example, but commodification doesn’t avoid the less conspicuous areas of life either, such as sport and music. (Solibakke 2014) The problem is not in the things themselves but in the way they are (ab)used in late capitalist society. For example, rather than in classical music per se, the problem lies in the fetishism attached to it that makes classical music or rather listening to classical music “the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore,” as Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 81–2) explains when she interprets Walter Benjamin.¹¹⁸ Concerning the classical music, our novel as usual provides an example of an anonymous person, this time a random concertgoer, consuming and appropriating the experience of music: “He’s just read about it and stuff like that. Beethoven's pain, Mozart's pain, Schumann's pain, Bruckner's pain, Wagner's pain. These pains are now his sole property, and he himself is also the owner of the Pöschl Shoe Factory or Kotzler Construction Material Wholesalers.” (KS 19–20/23)

118 This is present throughout Benjamin’s work, the most prominently in the *Passagen-Werke*: e.g. Benjamin 2002/1991b: 7–12/50–8.

The society that readers have before their eyes is based on the system of supply and demand, with a lot of visual presentation or even very straightforward advertisement involved, including of people. Women have to *appear* beautiful so that they can sell themselves to men: a young woman “shows off her figure so the future physician knows what he’s getting.” (KS 39/43) In order to become a desirable commodity, women are supposed to buy other commodities, such as seductive clothing. This is also the case for Erika, but she initially buys her clothes more for the mere sake of ownership than for self-presentation: “The dress, pierced by a hook, was so seductive at the shop, so soft and colorful. [...] Erika has already forgotten the brief, fleeting spell it cast on her in the shop. Now she has one more corpse in her wardrobe, but it is her property.” (KS 4/7, 10/14) Only later does she wear her (over)stylish clothes to present herself to Klemmer: “Lately, Erika has been bridling herself like a circus horse. [...] She not only produces clothes from her rich treasure trove, she also buys kilos of matching accessories in the form of belts, bags, shoes, gloves, costume jewelry. She wants to beguile the man the best she can and thus awakens his most evil desires.” (KS 203/207; translation modified)¹¹⁹

Everyone in the book is encapsulated in their own separate bubble or singular world, unable to react to others, as if contiguity aphasia were the prevalent disease of the society. It is true for Erika's masochistic tendencies: masochists create their own world and exclude the possibility of other full subjects with their own independent desires. (Deleuze 1991/1967: 41–2/40) And it is true for everyone pursuing their own agenda in general. The young man desires his teacher but merely for gaining experience, then he wants to climb up the social ladder. Erika's mother Mrs. Kohut wants to control her daughter, to buy a condominium with her, and not to be left alone. Likewise, all the anonymous characters are competing against each other in accordance with their gender because “the opposite sex always wants the exact opposite.” (KS 143/147) Erika wants a change and no change at all at the same time; she wants to feel but

¹¹⁹ Note the irony: The text here plays with the idea of seduction and sexual relations as something ‘sinful.’ This however doesn’t work on Klemmer, he mocks her. Once the motivation of ‘beguiling the man’ is seen through, she has already lost. On the other hand, she indeed is about to ‘awaken his most evil desires,’ which is the brutal rape at the end of the novel.

simultaneously to purify herself from all feelings. She is trying to make the leap, to act out of character, but in the end she is unable to do so. “Maybe he’s the last man who’ll ever desire me, Erika thinks furiously, and soon I’ll be dead, only another thirty-five years, Erika thinks angrily. Jump on the train, because once I’m dead, I won’t hear, smell, or taste anything ever again!” (KS 117/121)¹²⁰

The society in the book is firmly set and stiff, and there is almost nothing a single person can do about it. Different groups of people fit into it to different degrees: Healthy middle-class young men are in general at peace with their environment as it is made by and for them, while the older women who are intelligent are on the opposite side of the spectrum, especially if they don't want to accept their inferior place. Hence, Erika herself is portrayed as deviant from the ‘normal’: As a child, she had to practice long hours instead of enjoying herself with other young people. “You had to practice so long again?” (KS 41/45) She was always carrying her heavy musical instruments, futilely trying to impress her love interests by her musical virtuosity, instead of trying to attract them by wearing beautiful clothes and make-up (KS 84/89), hopelessly competing with other more beautiful and less intelligent girls. “What are you dragging around, what’s it called? I meant this case here, and not your head up there. It’s called a viola, SHE replies politely. A viooola? What a weird word, I’ve never heard it, lipstick-coated lips say in amusement.” (KS 17/21) She cuts herself with a razor and indulges in voyeurism instead of pursuing sexual and romantic desires that are considered ‘normal’ in a ‘normal’ society.

Erika's presumed abnormality and conflicted situation are in contrast with the norms of her environment: she is getting old and in that she contrasts with her younger lover; she is an adult but is still controlled by her mother; she is a teacher but wants to be dominated; she is sexually submissive but wants to set her own

120 In a typical European (or Euro-American) text, it would be the younger one from the couple who would profit more from the encounter, as an experience of initiation (see e.g. Campbell 2008) which is also present here but it’s less accentuated: Here we follow the story from the position of the older teacher who is hoping for a redemption (KS 213/217) from the young man. Whereas for him the teacher is supposed to be a mere step in the conquering journey and in the end she turned out to be a blind alley instead because she is too perverse for his taste. “The young man starts out on a small scale and climbs rapidly. ... Soon he will be able to leave the beginner’s level behind him, just like a new driver, who first buys a small secondhand car, then once he masters it, advances to a new and bigger model. Fräulein Erika consists purely of music, and she’s not all that old, the student evaluates his experimental model.” (KS 64/68; translation modified)

rules. Her gloomy existence in a mutually abusive relationship with her mother literally comes to full light in the very end when, after having been raped and beaten by her young lover in a small shady apartment, she walks out into the clear sun of a beautiful day filled with perfect young people enjoying themselves and having fun together. It is a situation she has no place in:

The girl laughs loud, briefly burying her blond head in Klemmer's neck which likewise has to carry a blond head. The girl laughs so hard she can barely stand up, as her body language communicates. The girl has to lean on Klemmer. The others agree with her. Walter Klemmer also laughs and shakes his hair. Sun embraces him. Light encircles him. [...] Erika Kohut stands there and looks. She watches. It is broad daylight, and Erika watches. (KS 279–80/284–5; translation modified)

Like every other time, watching is the only thing left for her. She cuts herself, once again, for the last time in the story. Her final act was supposed to be either a murder of her former lover or her suicide. “The knife should dig into her heart and twist around!” But instead, she stabs herself almost harmlessly, only “dirt and pus must not get in,” as the narrator pragmatically and indifferently remarks. The world, “unwounded,” doesn't care for her. “No one follows her. [...] Erika knows the direction she has to take. She heads home, slowly quickening her step.” It is the end of the book, the world stays the same, bright, “windows flash in the light.” (KS 280/285; translation modified)¹²¹

The contrast of Erika and society is where I find Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to be a useful interpretational tool. Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, used the strategy of contrasting the ‘normal’

121 Erin Gizewski (2019: 35–9) offers an interpretation of rhythm getting embodied by readers. After three occurrences of “sie geht und geht” (“she walks and walks”; KS 55/59, 140–1/144–5), the readers follow Erika as she “walks and “walks” for the last time but then the rhythm changes by the usage of long ‘slow’ words, describing her speeding up (“slowly quickening her step” – “beschleunigt langsam ihren Schritt,” KS 280/285). The reading is slowing down but Erika is leaving the text, hurrying up home. Gizewski's master's thesis (and its partial presentation at an online conference in 2020) seems to be the only existing phenomenological interpretation of Jelinek's novel. She uses the concept of the “body without organs” from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, which she applies primarily to the linguistic and structural details of the novel.

behavior with the behavior of people with dysfunctions. He “made the familiar strange not through a suspension of the natural attitude [like e.g. Edmund Husserl had done] but through a study of strange humans.” (Sheets-Johnstone 2011: 239) Merleau-Ponty explicitly stated that “the normal cannot be deduced from the pathological” (*PhP* 110/125) and I am not claiming that the conceptual use of pathological examples is the only or most important part of his argumentation. (C.f. Matherne 2014) However, the passages where Merleau-Ponty discusses various impairments of perception and movement belong to the most concrete ones (and are therefore more tangible than many other passages) and some scholars think that at least in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, deducing the ‘normal’ from the ‘pathological’ is exactly what he did in the sense that even in the pathological, there is a form of unity that constitutes the core on which the ‘normal’ is based. (Sheets-Johnstone 2011: 239, Barbaras 2004: 9, Livet 2005: 96–7)

Similarly, in *The Piano Teacher*, the common, that is, what I have been calling the ‘normal’ society, is shown in a new light as something no longer self-evident. There is the ‘normal’ world seen differently through being put in contrast with the presumably insane and certainly malfunctioning world of Erika. Just like phenomenology claims to be mainly descriptive,¹²² Jelinek also describes, shows, moves and puts various parts next to each other, but never interprets, let alone offers a solution. “Redemption is the specialty of other authors, male and female. My writing, my method, is based on criticism, not utopianism.” (Jelinek 2001)

In Merleau-Ponty, both pathological and normal subjects perceive the world in its wholeness. The patients’ pathological state is experienced as “a complete form of existence,” so they are not fully aware of their dysfunctions. (*PhP* 110/125, Livet 2005: 96–7; see the previous chapter) It cannot even be different in phenomenology because it is through my body (no matter how imperfect it is) that the whole world shows itself as complete: “We must not wonder if we truly perceive a world; rather, we must say: the world is what we perceive.” (*PhP* lxxx/xi; see also Marratto 2012: 14) The quasi-solipsistic nature

122 “Phenomenology involves describing, and not explaining or analyzing. [...] The real is to be described, and neither constructed nor constituted.” (*PhP* lxxi–lxxiii/ii–iv)

of the world(s) is unsurprisingly much more conspicuous in the novel as it is almost a diagnosis of the present world. It is precisely the competitive liberal individualism that is one of the main targets of sarcastic criticism for the narrating style. Everyone is pursuing their own goals, including Erika, who wishes to subject the young student to her fantasies. The world of the masochist is a world on its own: no place for another subject with their independent desires. (Deleuze 1991/1967: 40–2/39–40)

4.4 “She Is Certainly Not Insane, Not At All. Neurotic, But Not Insane”¹²³

The patient Schneider from *The Phenomenology of Perception* was allegedly able to move quite easily when he needed it for his everyday life and his manual job. But any movement disconnected from its common everyday context became difficult, such as movements on command. He was able to perform them (albeit with a certain effort) but it looked more like moving other objects than moving *through* his own body. “If, for example, he is simply asked to move his arm, he is at first dumbfounded. Then he moves his whole body and the movements are subsequently restricted to the arm that, in the end, the subject ‘finds.’ If it is a question of ‘raising his arm,’ the patient must also ‘find’ his head (which is for him the symbol of ‘up’).” For a ‘normal’ subject, their movements are always natural to perform, “every movement is indissolubly movement and consciousness of movement.” (*PhP* 112–13/127–8) Concrete movements are responses to stimuli, they are part of the environment, whereas abstract movements aim at the unknown, “the first adheres to a given background, the second itself sets up its own background.” (*PhP* 114/129) For us, so-called normal subjects, all the movements are equally simple and natural. If I am told to move my arm, I can do it without thinking about it and I definitely don’t need to ‘find’ my arm first. We live in harmony with our goals, there is no mediation needed between our body and our goals.

Or so Merleau-Ponty says. In the previous chapter, I discussed Iris Marion Young’s well known critique of the supposed harmony of universal subject’s

123 Jelinek 2001.

being in the world and I explained why I do not think phenomenology can make do with small corrections. The chapter also showed that ruptures and discrepancies can serve as a basis of subjectivity. Here it is the artistic expression that grows from disharmony. Erika in *The Piano Teacher* is clearly not in tune with her environment and the awkwardness of her existence is expressed throughout the book among other things by countless metaphors that liken her to various objects. The meaning of the metaphors is usually quite predictable (although they are visually creative): a woman is a tool, an object for a man to make use of or take advantage of. But there is one set of metaphor which expresses Erika's own feeling rather than general perception of women by society: the heaviness of her own body, her body as a burden. "SHE is pulled into streetcars by the weight of musical instruments, which dangle from her body, in front and behind, along with the stuffed briefcases. An encumbered butterfly." (KS 14/18) "The daughter must strive to rise in music." (KS 38/42; translation modified) It is the heaviness and physical endeavor that are heavily weighing her down but through which she was supposed to rise to the (imagined) immaterial world of classical music. "The final note dies out, fades away. HER tendons relax." (KS 41/45) Classical music is physical work, like dance or figure skating which is here again a metaphor.

The impact jolts her through and through, charging her with at least double her own body weight, and she forces that weight into the unyielding ice. The skater's musculoskeletal system cuts into the diamond-hard mirror, and into the delicate network of her ligaments, to the limit of the bone's load-bearing capacity. (KS 103/107; translation modified)

Erika's movement is neither strictly concrete nor abstract in the Merleau-Pontian sense. In her everyday activities, she moves in a very conscious and precise way and if she is ever disturbed, it's by much more prosaic problems than what Merleau-Ponty described in the case Schneider: "strong pressure on her bladder, an irksome disturbance that overcomes her whenever she gets excited." (KS 144/148) In her young age, when she was preparing herself for the concert musical career, she was indeed acquiring "new motor habits" like a Merleau-Pontian dancer (*PhP* 148/171) but just like with dance, learning to play a new

musical piece or music in general is anything but an easy process that could be comparable to a woman who “without any explicit calculation, [...] maintains a safe distance between the feather in her hat and objects that might damage it.” (*PhP* 144/167) It seems however, that in her job Erika attained a high level of automatism during her adulthood. She's been routinely giving unimportant concerts and she teaches piano as a form of revenge, by replicating the strict regime she was subjected to herself when she was young. During her work she is thus in her habitual version, in a concrete type of motricity that doesn't need to “set up its own background” (*PhP* 114/129) since it has been set for her: by her mother, society, and her own failures.

Russel Keat in his unpublished manuscript offers an alternative way to challenge Merleau-Ponty's male-oriented approach. “What if, in fact, this supposedly general, ‘human’ bodily existence was itself distinctively masculine? That is, what if the supposedly universal ‘we’ of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body were actually a *gendered, masculine* ‘we’?” (Keat: 13) Thus we would not need to complain with Young about women not being (considered) human enough but we would need, as Keat suggests, to develop a different phenomenology instead. Then it might be receptivity that would be the typical female movement as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's idea of movement which is (not always but typically) conceived as reaching out, active, task-oriented.¹²⁴ And indeed, why is it necessary to comply with the idea of movements that allegedly most women find more difficult to perform than most men?

Erika's life is difficult precisely because she tries to live up to male standards while at the same time she is not allowed to do so properly because of her gender.¹²⁵ This is also how Jelinek talks about herself in some interviews. (E.g. Jelinek 2004b) But between the author and the main character of the book (who might partially match), there is the narrator, making use of broken speech. I am not interested here in a supposedly more feminine way to move and behave in the world: the receptivity, vulnerability, and ‘passivity’ (without any negative

124 Keat as well as I here take mostly *Phenomenology of Perception* into account. Merleau-Ponty became more inclusive in his later texts.

125 “Feminism teaches women (and men) to see male supremacy and the dominant forms of gender expectations and social relations as the bizarre beliefs and practices of a social order that is ‘other’ to us. *It is ‘crazy’; we are not.*” (Harding 1991: 125)

connotations) Keat wrote about, because the way I see it, this view presupposes a rather essentialist understanding of genders. My approach is the fragmentation closer to Young: A woman is a subject but she is used to treating her body as an object; when she wants to perform a task, it is not as spontaneous as in the case of a man – she needs to *set her body in motion* instead. It corresponds to Erika's use of the razor in the beginning of the story when she cut herself as if detachedly, whereas Klemmer, having the body and mind united, treats everything else as objects. So if a common perception is that there is a division between the self ('I,' subject) and the rest of the world (object), in case of women, the split is in certain situations drawn along a different axis: the self is the consciousness, and 'the world' is everything else, including one's own body. The body is then an ambivalent element, switching between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity. Obviously the examples provided in the book are not particularly cheerful but in general, why would an ambivalent, sometimes fragmented way of interacting with the world necessarily be worse?

I suggest that the whole should not have primacy over the fragmentary and while I don't claim that we should necessarily promote the opposite – the fragmentary over the whole –, I argue that the idea of fragmentariness corresponds better to experience of most people, that is to people who don't belong to the most privileged class, gender, age, body type, and so called ethnicity. Hence I propose to proceed from the fragmentary while using a similar method that Merleau-Ponty used: a subject who finds it more difficult to navigate themselves in a given space can be used as a model – but not in order to label the deficient and proceed to show 'normal' subjects as being higher on the scale of bodily coherence; rather it would become clear that fragmentariness is essential to every human being (or every being in general) and it might even be recognized as beneficial at times.

The idea of fragmentariness is obviously nothing new. On the contrary, it was phenomenology that was new in the sense that it took complex relations as its starting point instead of having postulated discrete entities and then complicatedly trying to glue them together. But there is a school of thought or rather a vector to which many thinkers now tend to, that emerged from a different tradition. That is once again Actor-Network Theory drawing on (sometimes unacknowledgedly) the

Nietzschean tradition. There is nothing easy and unquestionably whole about the subject and their intentionality and Nietzsche shows it through the problem of will, combining its immaterial as well as material aspects:

in every act of willing there is, to begin with, a plurality of feelings, namely: the feeling of the state *away from which*, the feeling of the state *towards which*, and the feeling of this “away from” and “towards” themselves. But this is accompanied by a feeling of the muscles that comes into play through a sort of habit as soon as we “will,” even without our putting “arms and legs” into motion. (Nietzsche 2002/1921: 18/28–9)

The tensions at play in Nietzsche’s notion of will correspond very well to Young’s description of ‘female’ movement I was discussing earlier: “In those motions which when properly performed require the coordination and directedness of the whole body upon some definite end, women frequently move in a contradictory way. Their bodies project an aim to be enacted, but at the same time stiffen against the performance of the task.” (Young 2005: 146–7) We are aiming *towards* a task while at the same time trying to keep *away from* it. In Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s notion of body the struggle is even more noticeable:

What is the body? We do not define it by saying that it is a field of forces, a nutrient medium fought over by a plurality of forces. For in fact there is no ‘medium,’ no field of forces or battle. There is no quantity of reality, all reality is already quantity of force. There are nothing but quantities of force in mutual ‘relations of tension’ ... Every force is related to others and it either obeys or commands. What defines a body is this relation between dominant and dominated forces. (Deleuze 1983/1962: 39–40/45)

This is very close to the ontology of Bruno Latour (see e.g. Latour 1993a/1984: 160ff./178ff.) and it was further developed more concretely by Mol and Law in an article exploring everyday life of people with diabetes. Living with diabetes or any other disease that requires everyday monitoring and care means that there are many forces within as well as outside the body that go against each other. In the case of diabetes it is first of all a never-ending balancing act between hypo- and hyperglycemia, alongside other tensions like the struggle between the disease

itself and desire to lead a physically active life. People with motor impairment experience clashes with non- or badly accessible spaces (Moser & Law 1999), and transgender people often need to maintain their identity with the help of constant medication. Nevertheless, everyday work needed for keeping everything together is by no means exclusive for people with disabilities, diseases, or underprivileged identities, as Mol and Law (2004: 57) remark in the already quoted passage: “the assumption that we *have* a coherent body or *are* a whole hides a lot of work. [...] Keeping yourself *whole* is one of the tasks of life. It is not given but must be achieved, both beneath the skin and beyond, in practice.” The fragmentary is still rather negative here, albeit unavoidable and practically universal. Not wishing to romanticize increased struggles some people have to face, I however argue that there might be benefits in not being a member of the most privileged group. People whose identities are not on the top of our power structure might be typically more aware of alternative ways to navigate their lives. Women in general then “have less to lose by distancing themselves from the social order” (Harding 1991: 126; see also Kourany 2010: 63) so arguably they can offer fresher perspectives, both in theory and in practice.

4.5 Climbing – Writing

Dianne Chisholm in her article “Climbing like a Girl” from 2008 goes back to “Throwing Like a Girl” by Young and offers its counterexample. She interprets the famous climber Lynn Hill’s life story and autobiographical book so that it aligns with Merleau-Ponty as well as with de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*. By contrast, she quite harshly criticizes Young’s article:

Young constitutes gender as the *source* of bodily incapability for girls and women, ... emphasizes the typical incapability of ‘feminine bodily comportment’ over Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the body’s general capability, ... the examples from which Young extracts her criteria for analyzing feminine motility center on the inexperienced and unpracticed body, whereas it is the experienced, well-practiced, habit-body that for Merleau-Ponty constitutes the norm. (Chisholm 2008: 34)

Chisholm's text praises Hill's performance and her specific way of perception of her own body and its surroundings during climbing. I do agree that Young's text is a bit outdated and too, say pessimistic, but I don't share Chisholm's denouncing opinion on it and her optimism about women's existence. Chisholm thinks that we should constitute the norm on the basis of experienced and well-practiced bodies but I think that first it's discriminatory and limiting, second she goes far beyond that: She tries to formulate the norm using the example of one of the best climbers that history knows of. If I have been criticizing Merleau-Ponty for privileging unproblematic bodies and the resulting lack of inclusiveness, it should be noted, that Chisholm does very little to improve the discourse. Despite the fact that Hill indeed faced gender discrimination and, like many female climbers before and after her, the denigration of climbing achievements,¹²⁶ placing her triumphs alongside the clumsy everyday movements of a physically average woman seems disproportionate, to say the least. Outstanding female prodigies cannot change the frustration of 'normal' women who keep realizing every day again and again that the world is literally 'man-made,' that is it is shaped and conceptualized to fit male bodies. And women are taught so since they are born. What nonetheless the example of Hill and also Chisholm's text show is a possible way out, or rather as will be shown, a way *in*: "Hill makes an example of her climbing experience to illustrate the bodily modalities of free movement and existence that any woman can discover and cultivate for herself, even when she finds herself situated in hypermasculine space." (Chisholm 2008: 14) In her book, Hill describes her experience in climbing as trying to *attune* to the environment: She depicts different tactile and visual experiences depending on the type of rock, various colors, her ways to get to know the wall and find her own way because as a shorter person, she could not really make use of her male companion's technique. Chisholm quotes, in a rather amusing contrast, a text by a male climber that shows the thinking of a conqueror: "Then there are 'discreet' walls with 'small hidden holds 10ft. apart with smirches, flickets and wrinkles in between, but where to go? ... So I hand on a half a wire nut and smash hell out of my number 1 Clog, and

126 See for example the infamous utterance of the French alpinist Etienne Bruhl after Miriam O'Brien Underhill's and Alice Damesme's 'manless' ascent of the Grépon in 1929: "The Grépon has disappeared. Now that it has been done by two women alone, no self-respecting man can undertake it. A pity, too, because it used to be a very good climb." (Loomis 2005: 99, quoting Miriam Underhill. 1956. *Give me the Hills*: 153)

make it ... not so unreasonable.” (Chisholm 2008: 31, quoting Peter Livesey. 1980. “I feel rock”: 77) The world is made for men and if it is not, then it remains for ‘no-one’¹²⁷ or it has to be re-shaped. Contrary to that, women are used to the world not being made for them so they are *better equipped to improvise with what is already there to work with*. This is Hill’s approach: instead of smashing bolts into the rock, “if I can’t adapt my form to the rock, then I shouldn’t be doing it.” (Chisholm 2008: 32–3)

Chisholm’s text doesn’t in fact ‘cancel’ what Young wrote, it is a step further towards emancipation. It shows the way to *make it*, if you happen to be a woman. It works in a similar way in other activities. Writing and telling stories is an (epistemological) practice, and although Jelinek is usually very bitter, even she admits in the interview for *profil* that in specific cases, being a woman can be an advantage because of better developed strategies for coping with failures.¹²⁸ The narrator of her book emerged on the edge of various concepts of insanity: she grew from the patriarchal world, as the Harawayan cyborg, “the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism.” (Haraway 2016a: 9) She parasites on the male language thanks to the “ability to live on the boundaries, to write without the founding myth of original wholeness.” (Ibid.: 57) It is precisely from the boundary, the little space between the dominant discourse and the unrecognized underprivileged one that the narrator speaks. The space that emerged between Jelinek’s literary version of dominant society and its allegedly insane or neurotic main character. In a gesture of both recognition and mockery, the book is called “Die Klavierspielerin” in the original, which means “the pianist” or “the piano player” (both the French and Czech translations retain this meaning), not “the piano teacher,” making the title a mere description. Erika obviously is a piano player but it’s not her profession. It is something that the people around her wanted for her and that she failed at. Again, this is a reappropriation of what was first imposed and then denied.

127 And it is certainly not for women: “Before setting foot on Masse Critique, for example, she [Lynn Hill] learned how famed French climber Jibé Tribout proclaimed after making the first ascent that ‘no woman will ever be able to climb this route.’” (Chisholm 2008: 27)

128 “profil: ‘As a man unfit for life, you would possibly have an even harder time, because you couldn’t identify with the oppressed women as a feminist.’ Jelinek: ‘That’s true. As a man, I would have probably killed myself long ago.’” (Jelinek 2004b, my translation)

The Piano Teacher challenges categories such as the ‘normal,’ ‘pathological,’ ‘insane,’ and ‘ill’ whose meanings we often tend to take for granted. Erika with her clumsy and ponderous way of moving would be a typical representative of a woman described in Young, a mirror image of the “patient Schn.” from *The Phenomenology of Perception*, in the sense that women typically perform worse in “task oriented” (i.e. “concrete” in Merleau-Ponty) movement. However, when Erika is put in contrast to ‘normal’ society, not only is it possible to see the normal in a new light, as is the case with Merleau-Ponty's normal subject, but the ‘normal’ no longer seems as normal as before. This is best perceived if I start from underprivileged subjects and then extrapolate to others so that it becomes clear that and how all subjects must strive to appear normal and in harmony with their surroundings. (Mol & Law 2004) “I have had the strange fate of having two crazy parents, but seeing as the whole world is crazy, maybe this is normal!” says Jelinek in an interview. (Naparstek 2006) The normality there is still something to long for even though it ceases to be the neutral zero point. Finally there is however the book itself, celebrating non-conventionality by its own existence. The narrator and the book are creativity springing from the gap between Erika's insanity and the insane society, from the experience of inferiority: “Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.” (Haraway 2016a: 55) The parasitic speech shouting against the oppressors, is a method of finding the way in the hostile world.

L'anormalité comme moteur de la créativité : *La Pianiste* d'Elfriede Jelinek, un défi à la normalité

– *Résumé*

Ce chapitre se concentre sur les différents niveaux d'anormalité et de subjectivité désintégrée dont font souvent l'expérience les femmes et d'autres êtres humains non privilégiés, en utilisant *La Pianiste*, un roman de 1983 de l'écrivain autrichienne Elfriede Jelinek, à la fois comme exemple et comme inspiration. Le roman raconte l'histoire d'Erika Kohut, une professeure de piano d'une trentaine d'années qui vit dans un appartement avec sa mère abusive et qui tente sans succès de développer une relation romantique ou du moins érotique avec son jeune élève Walter Klemmer. Afin de proposer une interprétation, j'utilise un concept d'anomalie ou de pathologie qui peut être identifié à travers les différentes couches du livre : (1) la névrose du personnage principal Erika ; (2) la maladie de la société autrichienne, c'est-à-dire sa représentation dans le roman. Ces deux couches d'anormalité se combattent et se reflètent l'une dans l'autre. La dernière couche est (3) le texte lui-même qui déploie la pathologie comme un outil narratif.

Erika comme un tourbillon

Dans la couche narrative principale, Erika est une adulte, mais le texte alterne entre l'intrigue principale et des épisodes d'une période non spécifiée de l'enfance et de l'adolescence d'Erika, lorsqu'elle était élevée selon un régime très strict dans l'espoir de devenir un prodige de la musique. Pendant cette période de la vie d'Erika, elle n'avait pas le droit de faire quoi que ce soit qui puisse la distraire de sa formation musicale, et surtout pas d'avoir des relations amoureuses ou sexuelles en particulier. Néanmoins, sa carrière de pianiste solo s'est soldée par un échec lors d'un important concert. La mère d'Erika, qui avait rêvé d'être la mère d'une pianiste de renommée mondiale, fut déçue, mais cela ne l'empêcha pas d'utiliser Erika comme pourvoyeuse et compagne dans sa vieillesse.

Dans le présent narratif dans lequel se déroule l'histoire, Erika se conforme plus ou moins aux exigences et aux règles de sa mère, mais elle utilise son temps libre de manière inhabituelle, par exemple en regardant des peep-shows, en observant des couples en train de copuler dans les parcs et en s'automutilant. Elle

semble presque dénuée d'émotions et n'éprouve apparemment aucune excitation sexuelle. Plus tard, elle veut s'adonner au BDSM avec son jeune amant, ce qui se termine de manière très tragique.

Couper l'air avec un rasoir

Les principales cibles de la moquerie et de l'ironie impitoyables du narrateur sont le patriarcat et le capitalisme dans l'Autriche de la fin du XXe siècle. Même s'il y a un viol horrible à la fin de l'histoire, les principaux problèmes sont des exemples de patriarcat quotidien, qui se manifestent dans les familles, les écoles et les lieux de travail. Ainsi le narrateur montre la folie du personnage principal qui est bien évidente mais d'un autre côté il y a la folie cachée de la société elle-même. En les mettant en opposition, il est clair qu'il n'existe en fait aucune norme à laquelle on pourrait comparer l'anormalité. C'est là que réside la différence avec la méthode de Merleau-Ponty, qui, tout en visant à montrer la norme sous un jour nouveau en la confrontant à des phénomènes anormaux, la conserve comme base.

Le chapitre montre ensuite comment l'existence féminine peut être comprise comme un déficit au regard de la théorie de Merleau-Ponty. Ceci a été montré dans le texte classique d'Iris Marion Young (2005, orig. 1980). L'article de Young a été revisité à de nombreuses reprises et je poursuis la critique de Dianne Chisholm (2008) qui, dans son article « Grimper comme une fille » affirme que la phénoménologie des mouvements de femmes devrait être basée sur les athlètes professionnelles plutôt que sur les femmes dont les capacités de mouvement ont été réduites en raison de leur éducation dans une société patriarcale. Je pense que les prodiges féminins exceptionnels ne peuvent pas changer la frustration des femmes « normales » qui se rendent compte chaque jour, encore et encore, que le monde est littéralement « fait par l'homme », c'est-à-dire qu'il est façonné et conceptualisé pour s'adapter aux corps masculins. Je continue de croire que l'exemple de la grimpeuse de génie fourni par Chisholm montre une manière possible de naviguer dans le monde patriarcal. Il s'agit de la méthode de la subversion : les femmes doivent trouver des moyens d'utiliser le patriarcat à leur avantage. C'est exactement ce que fait la narratrice du roman. Elle a émergé à la lisière de divers concepts de folie : elle est issue du monde patriarcal, comme le

cyborg harawayen, « progéniture illégitime du militarisme et du capitalisme patriarcal. » Elle parasite sur le langage masculin grâce à sa « capacité à vivre sur les frontières, à écrire sans le mythe fondateur de la complétude originelle. » (Haraway 2016a : 9, 57)

« Elle n'est certainement pas folle, pas du tout. Névrosée, mais pas folle »

La Pianiste remet en question les catégories telles que « normal », « pathologique », « fou » et « malade », dont nous avons souvent tendance à considérer les significations comme acquises. Erika, avec sa façon maladroitement et pesamment de se déplacer, serait une représentante typique de la femme décrite dans Young, une image miroir de la « patiente Schn. » de *La phénoménologie de la perception*, dans le sens où les femmes sont généralement moins performantes dans les mouvements « orientés vers la tâche ». Cependant, lorsqu'Erika est mise en contraste avec la société « normale », non seulement il est possible de voir le normal sous un jour nouveau, comme c'est le cas avec le sujet normal de Merleau-Ponty, mais le « normal » ne semble plus aussi normal qu'avant. Ceci est mieux perçu si je commence par les sujets défavorisés et que j'extrapole ensuite aux autres, de sorte qu'il devient clair que et comment tous les sujets doivent s'efforcer de paraître normaux et en harmonie avec leur environnement. (Mol & Law 2004) « J'ai eu l'étrange destin d'avoir deux parents fous, mais vu que le monde entier est fou, peut-être que c'est normal ! » dit Jelinek dans une interview. (Naparstek 2006) La normalité est encore quelque chose à laquelle on aspire, même si elle cesse d'être le point zéro neutre. Enfin, il y a le livre lui-même, qui célèbre la non-conventionnalité par sa propre existence. La narratrice et le livre sont une créativité qui naît de l'écart entre la folie d'Erika et la société folle, de l'expérience de l'infériorité : « L'écriture cyborg concerne le pouvoir de survivre, non pas sur la base de l'innocence originelle, mais sur la base de la saisie des outils pour marquer le monde qui les a marqués comme autres. » (Haraway 2016a : 55) La parole parasite criant contre les oppresseurs, c'est une méthode pour trouver la voie dans le monde hostile.

5. Bodies in Multiple Worlds:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro¹²⁹

The great challenge to an historical anthropology is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?

Qui suis-je ? Si par exception je m'en rapportais à un adage : en effet pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je « hante » ?

If we allow our thought to hook into Amerindian alternative logic, the whole notion of Kantian ideals, so pervasive in social science, has to go.¹³⁰

Once upon a time, about five hundred years ago, local people of the island named Boriquen, called Indians by Europeans at the time, decided to rise against the white colonizers. But they saw how strong the Europeans were, and so they were afraid and suspected them of being gods or spirits in disguise. Urayoan, the chief of the Yaguaca tribe, therefore came up with an idea to get to the bottom of this mystery: He invited a young Spaniard named Salçedo to his village to spend some time with the tribe and then offered to have his people accompany him on his return among the Europeans. His guides, however, drowned him on the way. They deliberately did so in a large group so that no individual person would be accused, and they begged forgiveness in case Salçedo was in fact a god. Then they were watching his dead body till it began to rot, still afraid that the boy might come back to life. After a few days when the body already smelled bad, even Urayoan, the chief concluded that Europeans were mortals like them and decided to give the order to attack them. (Oviedo y Valdés 1851: 478–9)

129 Excerpts from this chapter were published in Czech as “Jaguáří pivo” [Jaguar Beer] in *Tvar* 4: 16–17. (Jakešová 2022)

130 The first quote is from Marshall Sahlins’ (1981: 8) book *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*. The second one is the beginning of André Breton’s novel *Nadja*, originally written in 1928. Richard Howard’s translation from 1960 goes like this: “Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt.’” (Breton 1960/1998: 11/11) The third quote is from Latour’s (2009a: 2) short text “Perspectivism: ‘type’ or ‘bomb’?”

This rather insignificant episode has been preserved thanks to Gonzalo Foernández de Oviedo y Valdés, one of the Spanish colonizers who is now most famous for his texts on nature and culture in the ‘Indies.’ From the tone of the rendering, it seems that the main intention was to show how much ‘Indians’ were afraid of Europeans: According to Oviedo, they had heard of the enormous odds the Europeans were overcoming in battles on surrounding islands. Four hundred years later, Claude Lévi-Strauss used this story in two of his texts (1952, 1955), and another fifty years after that, the anthropologist and one of the proponents of the ‘ontological turn’ (further as OT) Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014),¹³¹ writes about it again when he discusses Lévi-Strauss.

Encounters at the seashore have acquired an archetypal power that has been feeding the imagination of history, historical fiction, and other genres such as science fiction (where the ‘shore’ may be the surface of an alien planet). But in the original stories, that is, in the versions in which they have survived, there is almost always some violence present sooner or later. We know very well that the natives of most regions were in the end defeated and sometimes decimated and massacred, but they were not merely passive victims, as the story from Boriquen (now Puerto Rico) above illustrates, or as we are told in the story of the killing of James Cook in Hawaii, who may or may not have been considered a divine being by the locals.¹³²

I am going to use the story from Boriquen, like Lévi-Strauss and Viveiros de Castro did, and another seashore story preserved by colonizers’ voices, asking what it takes to be considered human (enough) by people from a different continent, a different tribe, or a person next door. I am comparing what I would call a prevalent Western¹³³ conception of humanity with a system inspired by

131 While I use the English translation from 2014, the Portuguese original was published in 2009. Viveiros de Castro apparently used the story already in the 1990s but the precise history of this motive in his writing is quite irrelevant for whatever I am trying to do.

132 See the famous controversy between Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins, recapitulated e.g. by Borofsky 1997.

133 I believe David Graeber (2015: 21) has a point when he in his polemical article against Viveiros de Castro writes that the term “Western” is problematic: The notion Western science “if taken seriously, would amount to one of the greatest acts of intellectual theft in human history, since after all, much of what underlies what we now call ‘Western science’ was actually developed in places like Persia, Bengal, and China [...]. Most scientific research is no longer being conducted by Euro-Americans at all.” I am going to use this term to designate the ways of thinking that are typical of international scholars and scientists, as well as most

Amazonian societies as described and developed by Viveiros de Castro (as – needless to say – understood by me). My interlocutor, as a voice of the European tradition, will be as always Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose focus on the body and embodiment, as well as his own shift from a somewhat solipsistic subjectivity (Barbaras 2004) towards an inclusive intersubjectivity, will well serve my purposes.

I am of course not the first person to think of using phenomenological methods in anthropology. It is tricky because according to Aparecida Vilaça (2005: 447), one of the main assumptions of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, that “our bodies are – or at least should be, as they were in the past – identical to those of native peoples: that is, ‘naturally’ mindful and relational,”¹³⁴ simply does not correspond to various anthropological data. This quasi-Merleau-Pontian assertion seems to conflict with the “general uncertainty over forms [that] is a key factor in understanding the concept of the body found in the Amazonian region.” (Ibid.: 447) Mortel Axel Pedersen (2020) offers a recapitulation and critique of phenomenological influence in anthropology and self-confidently suggests that the OT is *the* way to integrate these two. I can see how refraining from any a priori knowledge of the world(s) and society under study can be understood as a case of *epoché* (Charbonnier, Salmon & Skafish 2016: 3; Pedersen 2020) but this is not my main concern here, one of the reasons being that I am not practicing any anthropology myself (not in a traditional way at least). What follows is hence rather a theoretical reflection on possible mutual enrichment of Merleau-Ponty and Viveiros de Castro, or yet more precisely: I am trying to make the latter more approachable through the former in that with Merleau-Ponty, I aim to show Viveiros de Castro's multiple worlds as at the very least imaginable. Furthermore, just like in other chapters with other authors, also in associations between Viveiros de Castro's jaguars and Merleau-Ponty's flesh (*la chair*), I hope to find tools for looking for allies in unexpected places. However, this time unlike in other chapters, I am not aiming at a fusion of two concepts and their authors because I am not situated in the neutral agora, in the middle of the academic

other people who have gone through the educational systems heavily influenced (or imposed) by Euro-American hegemony.

134 Merleau-Ponty certainly wasn't after any romantic ‘noble savage’ ideal. I consider Vilaça's comments to be a critique of attempts to integrate phenomenology into anthropology, rather than an apt analysis of phenomenology itself.

version of the marketplace of ideas where I can freely describe, move, split, and combine whatever I find. The voice coming from and through Viveiros de Castro is the voice of the peoples who have been chased, tortured, infected, massacred, annihilated, and at best (with reservations and conditions) assimilated. Hence my intention is not to ‘save’ European colonialist philosophy by spicing it up with a few Indigenous thoughts. “The last thing Viveiros wants is for the Amerindian struggle against Western philosophy to become just another curio in the vast cabinet of curiosities.” (Latour 2009a: 2) Instead, I will rather place these ideas next to each other in order to illustrate Viveiros de Castro *through* Merleau-Ponty. The ultimate goal would be to help decolonize academia (“decolonization of thought” is Viveiros de Castro motivation, e.g. Skafish 2016: 410), a task I am not up to quite yet. But I would like to remind my readers that, though it may seem so at times, this chapter is not meant to be a cheerful tale of jaguars; it is another voice trying to bear witness to all the injustices that the Western imperialist machinery has done and continues doing to the rest of the world.

5.1 Are There Other Humans?

One of the favorite problems of Western philosophy traditions is solipsism – how can I tell that I am not alone here and other people are not mere machines or my or even someone else's projections? The first answer Merleau-Ponty would give is that other people exist simply because it seems to be the case, it looks like it – literally: “If my consciousness has a body, why would other bodies not ‘have’ consciousnesses?” (*PhP* 367/403) This is not to say that it is in any sense an objective body, a (to put it simply) Cartesian-like mechanistic matter that is being controlled from the inside by a soul, mind or ‘brain.’¹³⁵ After all, at this point, Merleau-Ponty has spent about four hundred pages of his *Phenomenology of Perception* setting his theory apart from the model of objective body animated by a consciousness.¹³⁶ The cited sentence thus works only under the assumption “that

135 In this text, I am assuming like Viveiros de Castro did (e.g. 2014: 52n14) that the soul, mind, and consciousness have been occupying the same or very similar position throughout the Western history.

136 The Cartesian intellectual analogy would particularly make no sense in the case of children: “child psychology makes clear the originary character of the experience of the human world, an originality that seems hardly compatible with the elements that reasoning from analogy

the notion of the body and the notion of consciousness have been deeply transformed.” (*PhP* 367/403) If I stay in the Cartesian cogito, it is always to an extent solipsistic because equating subjects with inner consciousness or soul (only or predominantly), leaves me in complete obscurity in terms of other subjects as I cannot perceive other people's consciousnesses unless I would somehow merge with them: I could only perceive their bodies that however remain pure matter.¹³⁷ M. C. Dillon summarizes the problems of Cartesianism in a similar way: A human being is either defined by their consciousness or they are considered purely mechanical matter. Neither of those can avoid solipsism: “If I am only a cogito, I am absolutely alone; if I am only mechanical meat, I cannot be alone because the concept has lost all meaning.” (Dillon 1988: 128) Cartesianism is caught in its own paradox: “It will never be made clear how signification and intentionality could inhabit molecular structures or cellular masses, and here Cartesianism is correct.” (*PhP* 367/403)

The question whether a mere piece of matter can have a consciousness has been a popular topic of science fiction but, in everyday experience, this is hardly ever the case: It's not that I meet a figurine in a human form and only after do I start wondering whether there is a human soul inside of it or not. As always, no matter how difficult its language is, phenomenology is trying to describe ‘natural experience,’ not fabricated philosophical problems, and I think this is true for Merleau-Ponty even more so than for Edmund Husserl (or Martin Heidegger, for that matter). The point is to describe and explain what appears and how, with the first appearing being always the source of any further investigations, as Renaud Barbaras (2004: 160) says in defense of Merleau-Ponty's keeping the natural attitude: “If the natural attitude truly is *only* an illusion of positivity, a forgetting

requires. In fact, the body of the child and that of the other with which it finds itself related exhibit only a slight objective resemblance; moreover, they cannot be compared insofar as the child does not possess an objective image of its own body; and finally, the child cannot perform such reasoning from analogy since a child does not yet possess discursive thought.” (Barbaras 2004: 21–2)

137 Renaud Barbaras is not convinced by the reasonings in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty is allegedly still trapped in duality between consciousness and body. Thanks to the consciousness being incarnated and thus opaque, the Other is a possibility, but not a necessity. (Barbaras 2004: 33–40; see also Barbaras 2008: 71ff.) After all, it was Merleau-Ponty himself who was not entirely happy with some aspects of his second book, judging from his working note from July 1959: “The problems posed in Ph.P. are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction.” (*VI* 200/250)

of the transcendental attitude, and if the being-in-itself of the world is *only* ignorance of its being-constituted, then how is the natural attitude possible?" Complete rejection of the natural attitude in favor of the transcendental is neither possible nor desirable.¹³⁸ This is what lies behind the Husserlian quote (e.g. Husserl 1973: 117), taken up and developed by Merleau-Ponty: "we must not wonder if we truly perceive a world; rather, we must say: the world is what we perceive." (*PhP* lxxx/xi) We have nothing other than perception and the world is experienced through it. Hence under normal circumstances, I don't theorize whether a person in front of me is a human being like me, instead, I pre-consciously assume so. Sure, I can speculate about anything I want, but as Merleau-Ponty points out, any refusal of society and/or nature is based on the existence of this very nature and society, other people included. (*PhP* 377/413–14) The perception of others thus usually happens at the same time as I see them as humans: "Another consciousness can only be deduced if the other person's emotional expressions and my own are compared and identified, and only if precise correlations are recognized between my gesticulations and my 'psychic facts.' But the perception of others precedes and makes possible such observations, so they cannot be constitutive of it." (*PhP* 368/404)

In fact, drawing from developmental psychology, the problem is originally rather the opposite, as Merleau-Ponty explains in his lecture "The Child's Relations with Others." (Merleau-Ponty 1964e) A child perceives their world in the corporeal symbiosis with it before they start to differentiate themselves from it. They imitate the actions of others but not in the usual sense that they would consciously try to mimic a person in front of them but rather in the sense that they cannot clearly conceive of the difference between that person and themselves. (Ibid.: 117) This original state is not intersubjectivity strictly speaking because there is no distinct subject yet. But it is where the future and habitually undisputed intersubjectivity stems from:

138 There is a debate on the extent to which Merleau-Ponty (and Martin Heidegger) uses *epoché* and transcendental reduction: whether he performs it, rejects it, or already assumes it and works with it. A useful summary is in Dan Zahavi (2017: 51–76). I am not much interested in the problem, since I am not trying to do transcendental phenomenology but rather applied phenomenology. (See Zahavi 2021)

the perception of others is made comprehensible if one supposes that psychogenesis begins in a state where the child is unaware of himself and the other as different beings. We cannot say that in such a state the child has a genuine communication with others. In order that there be communication, there must be a sharp distinction between the one who communicates and the one with whom he communicates. But there is initially a state of pre-communication (Max Scheler), wherein the other's intentions somehow play *across* my body while my intentions play across his. (Ibid.: 118)

Thus the initial 'Cartesian' analogy (my consciousness has a body so another person's body should have a consciousness) is not as simple as it seemed. Or maybe it is simpler because I usually don't need to ponder the problem at all, that is unless I am writing an academic text. Just as I am in fact not a cluster of individual senses reacting to stimuli but rather a manifold system with a certain "style" (Ibid.: 117–18), I don't assess a body in front of me as a pure material object in order to decide whether they have a soul or not, even though the perception is usually mostly visual at first:

I can perceive, across the visual image of the other, that the other is an organism, that that organism is inhabited by a 'psyche,' because the visual image of the other is interpreted by the notion I myself have of my own body and thus appears as the visible envelopment of another 'corporeal schema.' [...] if we are dealing with a schema, or a system, such a system would be relatively transferrable from one sensory domain to the other in the case of my own body, just as it could be transferred to the domain of the other. (Ibid.: 118)

Whereas I do agree with Dillon (1988: 128ff.) that Merleau-Ponty's account is solving the problem in most cases (namely, that there is in fact no problem in usual human conduct), the recognition of others as fellow humans doesn't *always* happen. For now, I am putting aside all those half-conscious efforts to dehumanize others in wars, prisons, concentration and extermination camps; I am interested in the situations in which the humanity of certain humans was denied, questioned or significantly diminished from the beginning. Merleau-Ponty allows for corrections of perceptual illusions and inadequate concepts but if these

corrections are needed any time when one group of people meets another one, the problem seems to be more complex. In my comfortable Euro-American zone, the other person in front of me glows with their style and I approach them as a human being more or less equal to me very ‘naturally.’ Until I meet a radical other which is the topic of the following pages.

It should be mentioned here that as a Western-based woman, when I wrote ‘human,’ I meant the *homo sapiens* species¹³⁹ as it is understood now by popularized Western sciences or more precisely: as Western(ized) people perceive it in general with a vague reference to the current Western sciences. It is going to be challenged as the universal classification so in order to destabilize ‘common knowledge’ terms and their understanding, from now on, I am going to use the term *anthropos* for this type of human, that is, the human understood in terms of the biological species, and *anthropinos* instead of the adjective ‘human’ in the same sense.¹⁴⁰ The ‘human’ on the contrary will become more of a flexible concept.

5.2 *Anthropoi* Meeting Fuegians

As Viveiros de Castro (2016b) summarizes in an interview, Western culture has two ways of defining *anthropous*. Sometimes they are considered nothing more than animals, where both they and non-*anthropina* animals are reduced to so-called natural laws (a collection of atoms subject to the laws of thermodynamics etc.). This attitude is rather marginal and contextual, either in specific scientific disciplines or when it serves, for example, as an apology for rape (men ‘can’t help it’ due to their instincts) or meat consumption (we are ‘naturally’ at the top of the

139 Since the term *homo sapiens* was first used at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and this text also deals with events that happened in the beginning of the 16th century, it is inevitably anachronistic. However it is the easiest possible Western-centered referent in this case.

140 There is no particular reason for using the Ancient Greek word, only that it is mostly understood by English speakers and feels more gender inclusive than the Latin word *homo* (and English ‘human,’ for that matter), since the latter means ‘man’ in Latin, whereas in Greek it is less prominent. Also, ‘anthropology’ traditionally meant the study of humans understood the Western way. Let my attempt to inflect those words throughout the text be a friendly reminder to readers that some languages work differently than the ubiquitous English that has been imposed on all of us speakers of other languages.

food chain). The second – and more prevalent – view then says that *anthropos* is an animal with something extra: soul, consciousness, culture, language. *Anthropoi* differentiate themselves from nature and the level of their humanness is judged by the distance from *presumed* animalness. This differentiating trait may in some cases be a deficit (for example the need to use weapons for hunting, the need for protective clothing, the need to cook meat etc.), but it is always something extra: An *anthropos* is a ‘special animal.’¹⁴¹

This special trait is diminished or questioned while meeting with radical others, which is amusingly described by the anthropologist Michael Taussig in another meeting at the shore. When the British were ‘exploring’ Americas in the 19th century, they met the Fuegian people on the most southern part of South America. Taussig quotes two texts on the encounter and ironically comments on them. Young Charles Darwin who famously took part in the second voyage of HMS Beagle wrote in his diary: “I do not believe it is possible to describe or paint the difference between savage and civilized man.” (Darwin 2008: 460; also cited by Taussig 1993: 73) The language of the Fuegian people, despite being one of the distinct Western features of being human, is half-way between human and animal: “The language of these people, according to our notions, scarcely deserves to be called articulate. Captain Cook has compared it to a man clearing his throat, but certainly no European ever cleared his throat with so many hoarse, guttural, and clicking sounds.” (Darwin 2008: 188)

Darwin and Captain Robert Fitz Roy, as well as sailors were fascinated by Fuegian ability to mimic that they consider much more developed than their own.

141 Étienne Bimbenet (2004: 28) says a similar thing but also writes that Merleau-Ponty broke the tradition (see also further in this chapter). Viveiros de Castro tends to subsume the Western thinking under Cartesianism which is not unjustifiable but it fails to take into account various thinkers since Descartes who have been often contrasting themselves against him (not to mention that Descartes himself was not as dualistic as it is usually attributed to him, see e.g. Nancy 2016/1979: 88ff./129ff.). One of these traditions is obviously phenomenology. Since phenomenology is trying to capture phenomena as they appear in their quasi pre-rational state (no matter how intellectually loaded phenomenologists' texts actually are), it almost seems as if Viveiros de Castro were himself caught in the Cartesian trap. The difference between *anthropoon* and other concepts of humans will prove to be more subtle than Viveiros de Castro's dichotomy. I would say that his definition is mostly true in the cases when I or a person like me is explicitly *asked* what a human is. In that case the simplest answer I would give is probably that human is an animal with something extra (abstract reason or language for instance). This doesn't however entirely overlap with how most people's everyday life is *lived*. We simply *see* humans around us.

The fascination consists of both admiration and mockery, not unlike someone condescendingly admiring a dog for a nice trick. “How can this [mimetic] faculty be explained? is it a consequence of the more practised habits of perception and keener senses, common to all men in a savage state, as compared with those long civilized?” (Ibid.: 189) Anything that is perceived as different, serves a priori as proof of a higher developmental stage of the Europeans. However the intriguing part starts when the two groups switch their roles. This is how Darwin writes about Fuegians:

They are excellent mimics: as often as we coughed or yawned, or made any odd motion, they immediately imitated us. Some of our party began to squint and look awry; but one of the young Fuegians (whose whole face was painted black, excepting a white band across his eyes) succeeded in making far more hideous grimaces. (Darwin 2008: 188, also cited by Taussig 1993: 74–5)

Fitz Roy describes the encounter in a similar way, only now the sailors are the ones who do most of the mimicking:

They expressed satisfaction or good will by rubbing or patting their own, and then our bodies; and were highly pleased by the antics of a man belonging to the boat's crew, who danced well and was a good mimic. (Taussig 1993: 76, citing Fitz Roy)

Differences between the groups are blurring and it is no longer possible to say who is mimicking whom. The situation is similar to adults using baby talk when speaking with babies and children. (Ibid.: 77) Even if the child doesn't talk yet, adults would often mimic how they think that the child would copy them if the child could talk. Information from the Fuegian encounter comes from one side only but thanks to Taussig's comments, it's apparent that what the British sailors found so amusing, was also exactly what they performed immediately after. The mimetic faculty, something that both sides had in common and something that creates similarities and proximities by definition, was what made the Europeans feel superior and more 'human' in their own eyes.

Non-Western cultures are often perceived as less developed because they imitate ‘us.’ “All savages appear to possess, to an uncommon degree, this power of mimicry,” says Darwin (2008: 189). Not that ‘they’ don’t – they also often don’t have any other choice – but ‘we’ do it too, only it has a different meaning, that is a different meaning *for us*: In Fitz Roy’s description, it is supposed to be a game, joke, something that was done for ‘them,’ nowadays it is a costume (sometimes quite rightfully criticized as a cultural appropriation), whereas in the case of other cultures, mimicry is seen “as bound to the savage body as its rightful property.” (Taussig 1993: 78)¹⁴² The peoples whose ties to the Western hegemony are looser, are considered more bound to ‘Nature,’ without the original creativity that is ascribed to the Westerners. They supposedly lack advanced minds and all of the moral connotations that the ‘non-savage’ mind was thought to entail. That’s why they were considered better at mimetic faculty.

5.3 Multiple Natures

Imagine that there are natures for which it is the nature and not culture that is universally shared! I am trying to feign surprise that is supposed to help me understand perspectivism. From my perspective.

For understanding what is at stake during these encounters, I am going to get back to the opening story on Boriquen when Antilleans were testing European bodies and also to a rather anecdotal commentary of Lévi-Strauss. His conclusion is that whereas Europeans wanted to find out whether the American indigenous had souls (see e.g. Huxley 1980), the latter were preoccupied by the problem whether the former had bodies. (Lévi-Strauss 1952: 12, also cited by Viveiros de Castro 2014: 50) Lévi-Strauss considered the Antillean practice more noble because first, they were balancing on the axis of human–spiritual being as opposed to the Europeans who were trying to establish whether the Indigenous were *anthropoi* or ‘mere’ animals. Second, because the Amerindians were proceeding more in line with what we call science: They examined the material realness of their visitors (and conquerors) so they were performing a scientific

142 One doesn’t need to go to the 19th century. Compare the widespread mockery aimed at Japanese tourists for imitating the ‘Westerners.’

experiment. (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 81; 1961: 80; Viveiros de Castro 2014: 51; Latour 2009a: 1)

The way this story is interpreted by Lévi-Strauss aligns with Viveiros de Castro's definition of the Western *anthropos*: I undoubtedly see an animal entity (in the biological sense) and then I contemplate whether this animal body contains a soul/consciousness/mind so that it can be called *anthropinon*. Not all *anthropina* bodies are considered equal and the inner immaterial core is assigned accordingly. In history it has basically meant that the darker a particular person is, the worse the soul they were assigned.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, no matter how much it is true that it is now the Westernized people who do most of the assigning, it has not always been the case. Thanks to written testimonies of the colonizers of the past (however biased), all kinds of testimonies of anthropologists of the past and present (again, however biased), and nowadays first hand testimonies from not-so-much-Westernized people, it is possible to have a glimpse of different worlds as well as different concepts of what it is to be a human being.

The events on Boriquen can be interpreted in a rather classical way, as a case of animism: Everything has or can have a soul so there was no doubt there but the conquerors might have been spirits which would have meant that their bodies would be of a radically different quality or not really *there* for that matter. (Latour 2004c: 451) From how I imagine the encounter, it was still the bodies what was meeting but Europeans were questioning the *spiritual* essence of the native body while Amerindians were doubting the *material* essence of the European colonizers. This is very symmetrical and not so difficult to imagine. After all, the witch 'swimming tests' conducted by Europeans around the same time were an uncanny analogy (that betrays another kind of difference 'within' European culture).¹⁴⁴ But if I follow Viveiros de Castro one step further into the

143 The idea that some souls are better than the others was inspired by Aristotle who wrote that some people were 'naturally' slaves. People classified as non-white were either considered soul-less or endowed with a 'worse' soul that could be sometimes improved by adopting Christian religion and culture (the latter requirement has partially prevailed with an added bonus of 'democracy'). There has been a hierarchy between non-white people: For example legitimacy of the enslavement of Amerindians were being disputed from the very beginning, whereas it took much longer for the enslavement of Africans to be condemned. (See e.g. Huxley 1980) The hierarchy unfortunately still applies all around the world which is apparent for example from double standards during armed conflicts: Some cultures and people are more worth saving or even being talked and written about than others.

144 The reasoning behind it was slightly different because the problem with 'witches' was their

territory that he called perspectivism,¹⁴⁵ there are quite literally different worlds to explore.

In Western metaphysics, soul is to body what culture is to nature. (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 52n14) Body and nature are physical material givens whereas soul and culture are a superstructure and something that makes *anthropous* human – it is more noble, prestigious but at the same time an extra addition that has to be earned. Having a soul is tantamount to having a culture and Europeans (and now privileged North Americans) have infamously and arrogantly been trying to ‘cultivate’ the souls and cultures of peoples of other worlds (without ever granting them full humanity which was not always the case in other regionally dominant cultures). If I proceed with the analogy, in Amerindian societies, not only does everything have (or can have) a soul but everything we call (non-*thropina*) animals can have a culture, and the same one at that. “They are not human *for us*; but we know they are human *for themselves*.” (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 71)¹⁴⁶ Now, this is not anything that can be found in the 16th century colonialist texts. It is based on contemporary research conducted by Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, Marilyn Strathern, and other anthropologists who are associated with or explicitly claim allegiance to the OT.¹⁴⁷

The idea of the OT is that I as a hypothetical anthropologist should abstain from grounding my research in my own knowledge about the world. I should not only respect that there are different views of the same nature and different

soul, not the body. Nevertheless, it was supposed to manifest on their bodies as especially Roman Catholic Christianity recognized the union of body and soul more strongly than the popular versions of Cartesianism: “The idea was based on the following reasoning: since witches rejected the water of baptism, so the element of water would reject them in turn, and they would float in an unnatural manner.” (Tóth 2008: 139)

145 Perspectivism of a different kind has a long tradition in philosophy and Viveiros de Castro admits to having been inspired not only by Deleuze and Guattari, but also by Leibniz, Whitehead, and Nietzsche, who is perhaps most closely associated with the concept. (E.g. Viveiros de Castro 2014: 55)

146 Déborah Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017: 72) shortly after admit the circularity of the argument: “It could be objected that, rigorously speaking, animals are humans-for-themselves *for us*, since it is ‘we’ (the Amerindians) who *know* this and act accordingly. No doubt. But we do not know all that the animals know, let alone all that they are.” I hold that this text is more conservative in its onto- and epistemological split than it is common for other Viveiros de Castro’s texts. Otherwise, this clarification would not have been necessary.

147 While I am going to introduce basic concepts of the ontologies of Viveiros de Castro's texts later, I am not going into details here as it is not the purpose of this text and it has been done before, see e.g. Paleček & Risjord 2012; Somatosphere 2014–15; Heywood 2017; Jensen 2017; Holbraad & Pedersen 2017.

explanation of what is going on around me (this is classical cultural relativism) but I should accept as far as possible that the natures themselves are different. It probably takes a long time for one's nature to change so it remains an epistemological experiment, at least at first. It is the most radical abstention from judgment: “fieldwork, as a method of experimentally connecting with modes of engaging the world that are foreign to technoscientific modernity, can be claimed to be the most demanding phenomenological *époque*.” (Charbonnier 2016: 3)

This or something similar would be the method of the ontological turners but it is at the same time close to the ontologies¹⁴⁸ of societies they do research on. In fact, it is circular: If I want to be true to my method (accepting or allowing as an option that there are multiple natures), I need to adopt their method of engaging the world (the multiplicity of natures). Put it this way, it is all very theoretical. Viveiros de Castro coined the term perspectivism to give people like me an idea of other worlds but that doesn't make Amerindians perspectivist: “The idea was not that we should become perspectivists; that would be ridiculous, because actually no one is a perspectivist, not even in Amazonia. [...] I've never met a perspectivist in real life. That's because perspectivism is a concept, my concept.” (Viveiros de Castro in Skafish 2016: 410) As I stated before, the goal is to decolonize Western academia, not to present an intellectually attractive image of yet another tribe, an activity that has historically been a concomitant of colonialism rather than a tool to combat it. Jean-Christophe Goddard (2022) also writes that “the point is not to find out whether Indians are perspectivists or not (if there are perspectivist Indians walking around in the forest) but to translate and introduce into the Western academic field the powerful indigenous critique of the European colonization of the Amazon.”¹⁴⁹

148 One of many objections against Viveiros de Castro made by David Graeber (2015) in his polemical article was that whereas traditionally, ontology means “a discourse (*logos*) about the nature of being,” with ontological turners, it has turned into “way of being,” and this change is not always articulated. (Ibid.: 15) While I do agree partially, I don't think that it is a major problem: saying that someone has a different ontology, simply means that they approach being(s) differently than I do. If I am exposed to a different ontology for a significant amount of time, I might even adopt it. The question of ontology is dealt with later in this chapter.

149 “[L]a question n'est pas de savoir si les indiens sont perspectivistes ou non – s'il y a des indiens perspectivistes qui se baladent dans la forêt –, mais de traduire et d'introduire dans le champ académique occidental la puissante critique indigène de la colonisation européenne de

Hence I am not trying to become a perspectivist, I am trying to stop usurping intellectual space-time with pervasive Western dogmas by accepting other ways as possible, by “taking different worlds seriously rather than conjuring them away.” (Pickering 2017: 135) In order to be able to follow Viveiros de Castro's project, I am trying to imagine that there are cultures, or rather societies in the Amazon and Caribbean for example,¹⁵⁰ for which culture is what is universally shared, while nature, even in the sense of material reality, changes according to the situation, or rather according to who is watching and experiencing it. However, we need to avoid the idea that there is an objective world around us that only *appears* differently depending on the angle from which it is viewed. That would be a fairly common view, after all. It is that all possible living beings share a culture – for example, they all eat meat and drink beer – but what is beer for a jaguar is blood for me, therefore natures differ. (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470) There is no ontological common basis for this blood/beer:

Multinaturalism does not suppose a Thing-in-Itself partially apprehended through categories of understanding proper to each species. We should not think that Indians imagine that there exists a something=X, something that humans, for example, would see as blood and jaguars as beer. What exists in multination are not such self-identical entities differently perceived but immediately relational multiplicities of the type blood/beer. (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 73)

The formulation itself feels paradoxical and illogical for someone like me. We can see how even the English language defies it: If it is the culture that is to be shared, then it is impossible to speak of a different culture. Analogically, it is very difficult for me to imagine a different nature,¹⁵¹ the mono-nature always tries to

l'Amazonie [...]” My translation.

150 “As various ethnographers have noted (unfortunately too often only in passing), virtually all peoples of the New World share a conception of the world as composed of a multiplicity of points of view.” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 55)

151 In my environment, nature is perceived and considered as something universal, stable, that changes only slowly, if at all (hence the denial of climate change: it is not easy for us to accept that humans could have a major impact on nature). The concept as such is problematic: It is thought of as something that is universal (which is a formal criterium) but it is also at the same time defined with respect to its content. On the one hand, nature is regarded as a kind of constant and unchanging arbiter; on the other hand, it seems very fragile because anything that supposedly goes against it can threaten it. For example women are perceived as

sneak in: “Our macroconcept of nature fails to acknowledge veritable plurality, which spontaneously forces us to register the ontological solecism contained in the idea of ‘several natures’ and thus the corrective displacement it imposes.” Viveiros de Castro thus suggests to think about it not as “a variety of natures” but rather as “the naturalness of variation – variation *as* nature.” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 74) There is no original or copy, only accumulations of multiplications.

Intermezzo: Epistemology Or Ontology. And Metaphysics(S)

It still may seem that in the understanding of European philosophy, what Viveiros de Castro is doing is rather epistemology than ontology. From the interview with Peter Skafish (2016), it is however apparent why he has taken up ontology as his point of departure: It is because epistemology has been in focus of anthropologists much too long and because it doesn't do justice to the people that are being researched on. In European philosophy, ontology is a way of philosophical questioning about what is and how it is which means that if I *do* ontology, I develop a theory about nature of existence of things (any kind of ‘things,’ so it might include concepts, language, thoughts etc., and even the ‘I’) that is universal by definition. Epistemology then would be the (or ‘an’) access to those things and while I can claim that my conception of epistemology is the only one – that the nature of getting and having knowledge about things is the same for everyone – it is still better conceivable that people from some other, say, cultures gain

predestined to by mothers by nature (even though all mothers know that they actually had to learn parental skills with their first born) but then they are criticized if they don't become mothers or their motherhood doesn't correspond to current ideals. “The line between what is natural and what is cultural is drawn in different places depending on the viewpoint of the observer.” (Strathern 2016: 23) And this applies not only to different societies, but also to individuals from the same “culture” – hence the endless discussions about the extent to which sex and gender are natural. So even if I want to keep this dichotomy, it doesn't work: Most people in fact try to apply their cultural stiffness to nature itself. This topic was discussed earlier but this time, I am going to give you longer quotes: “In our emphasis on biology we dismiss culture too lightly. The assumption is that a man-made thing can be unmade. But it can only be unmade if ‘it’ is properly identified. To say that gender differences between men and women are basically cultural and not biological in origin does not lead to the automatic conclusion that they are therefore malleable and weak.” (Strathern 2016: 276) “To be ‘made’ is not to be ‘made up,’” says Donna Haraway (1997: 99) and indeed, as Annemarie Mol points out while commenting on Strathern’s book, “crucial biological sex differences, notably the facts of parenthood, indeed proved to be a lot more malleable than their cultural counterparts.” (Mol 2016: 404)

knowledge in a different way. This is not to say that there is only one ontology, not at all, not even if I limit myself to the Western context. But it means that one person can only stick to one ontology at a time (and politely tolerate the others at best) because anything else would be contradictory.

There is no wonder that Viveiros de Castro doesn't like this: "The problem is that we format other people's cultures in terms of our concepts of nature and culture, so we've got two and they've got one. There would be only one nature, ours, and then two cultures, ours and theirs." (Viveiros de Castro citing Roy Wagner in Skafish 2016: 395) We tend to "believe that [for example] plants, animals, colors, kinship, skin diseases are in some way 'real' and self-evident *things*, rather than ways of talking about things." (Wagner 1981: 103)¹⁵² It puts 'us,' the Westerners, in a superior position, making 'us' a kind of arbiter talking from a universal nature (ontology) judging and comparing two cultures (epistemologies). The majority of traditional anthropologists either describe others with the unconscious background of (our understanding of) reality and they keep their distance from *beliefs* of their subjects,¹⁵³ or if they want to equalize the imbalance, they emphasize our own 'primitive' beliefs and prejudices and deconstruct them,¹⁵⁴ or they say that the people in question don't believe those things either.¹⁵⁵

152 I think this type of thinking is, at least in everyday life, common to almost all Westerners (and certainly inherent in everyone I've ever personally met, including myself). In this citation, Wagner describes linguistic determinism which makes the argument even stronger.

153 For example, the classic anthropological book by Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* from 1937 always says that Azande *believe* this and that, not that it *is* this and that. The very first chapter starts like this: "Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality," instead of writing for example "Among Azande, some people are witches," and the second chapter starts with the famous sentence "Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist." (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 1, 18) The best 'primitives' can get is relativization of their 'beliefs' so that they end up *not as irrational as it seems*: "We shall give a false account of Zande philosophy if we say that they believe witchcraft to be the sole cause of phenomena." (Ibid.: 22) It is however understood that the anthropologist would *explain away* their 'beliefs' in a rational way so that it will expose their contradictions: "I hope I am not expected to point out that the Zande cannot analyse his doctrines as I have done for him. [...] A Zande would not say: 'I believe in natural causation but I do not think that that fully explains coincidences, and it seems to me that the theory of witchcraft offers a satisfactory explanation of them', but he expresses his thought in terms of actual and particular situations." (Ibid.: 23)

154 This was a favorite method of Edmund Leach who likened Australian Aboriginal beliefs and ways of speech about intercourse and birth to Christian myths of Virgin Birth (Leach 1966: 41), and Mary Douglas analyzing the concept of purity. (Douglas 2001)

155 When Viveiros de Castro's accuses Graeber that he is judging Malagasy beliefs on the basis

Viveiros de Castro obviously does nothing of the above: While he does expose Western prejudices it is not in the sense that we *also* have irrational, inconsistent or ‘wild’ beliefs and traditions, but rather he aims to show that our fundamental system is not at all self-evident, no matter how internally consistent it might be (which it is not anyway). Positing two parallel ontologies side by side is an epistemological scandal, that is why I still tend to seek after a more fundamental ontology underneath (exactly what Viveiros de Castro warns his readers against – see above; Viveiros de Castro 2014: 74). The anthropologist Tânia Stolze Lima (1999) explains it well using the clashes between what we would call different species. The situation is *anthropoi* going to a hunt but other humans, peccaries, perceive it as a battle. But thus formulated, it already doesn't correspond to the unfolding realities in Amazonia, as Lima explicates:

The peccary hunt does not display the same reality seen by two subjects, following our relativist model. On the contrary, the hunt displays one event for the humans and one event for the peccaries. In other words, it unfolds in two parallel (or parallelistic) events,

humans hunt peccaries
humans are attacked by enemies

events which are also correlative, and which refer to no objective or external reality comparable to what we understand as nature. One is the referent of the other. We could say, then, that the hunt presents two dimensions, given as two simultaneous events which reflect upon each other.

(Lima 1999: 121)

This can be imagined on the basis of an analogy with language: “One is either in one language or another – there is no more a background-language than a background-world.” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 73, citing Jullien 2008: 135) I can translate between languages or learn them but there is no master language above

of his own beliefs about reality (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 12–13), the latter answers, that Malagasy people actually don't really believe their beliefs either: “Would a Malagasy informant object to the statement ‘Ravololona cannot really prevent hail from falling on anyone’s crops’? As someone who spent over a year living in a community once protected by a charm called Ravololona, and with neighbors that still were, I can assure the reader: people said things like that all the time.” (Graeber 2015: 10)

all of them.¹⁵⁶ And just like it is difficult to fully absorb a new language, it is difficult to accept another world. Well, the latter is admittedly much harder ... This is obviously but an approximation because according to most people's common sense, it is precisely culture, not nature that is constituted by language, but while I think Merleau-Ponty is empirically wrong here, his comment relating to this topic is amusing in my new context: “We can speak several languages, but one of them always remains the one in which we live. In order to wholly assimilate a language, it would be necessary to take up the world it expresses, and we never belong to two worlds at the same time.” (*PhP* 193/218) The whole idea of multiple worlds is truly vertiginous: If I ‘make space’ for another ontology, but this other ontology is itself multiple, it means that 1) I am in a way practicing that *other* ontology, 2) variations can proliferate indefinitely.

Viveiros de Castro's project is first of all political – he aims to redefine ‘us’ (Westerners, or even *anthropoi* as such) as one of many instead of universal. He doesn't stop at descriptions of other worlds: The important thing is to show that there are other systems of world-making, that is other metaphysics. “Studying metaphysics is actually a way of politicizing the kind of intellectual work that anthropology is.” (Skafish 2016: 397) Hence the research is not only about ways of being or ways of thinking about that being, but the whole systems of principles that constitute any possibilities of being and thinking (and communicating). “In other words, it is not simply that they have an implicit ontology discoverable by the human sciences but that they themselves think about metaphysical issues as such,” summarizes Peter Skafish in the interview and Viveiros de Castro answers: “My intention there [in the article “The Crystal Forest: Notes on the Ontology of Amazonian Spirits”] was not merely to describe the relevant ontology but to show that it is a part of Yanomami metaphysics, which is a system, in a sense, of explanation.” (Skafish 2016: 400) We Westerners became used to calling our metaphysical enterprises ‘philosophy’ but when a non-Westerner does something analogical, we call it ‘mythology.’¹⁵⁷ But in fact, these are just variants of each other, where one of the particular traits of the Western mythology is that it claims

156 However it is probably highly significant that we have a concept of *Ursprache*, not only as an old biblical concept but also as a linguistic category. See also a spiritual desire for a pure perfect language. (E.g. Benjamin 1991a: 9–21)

157 A very similar point is made by Roy Wagner (1981: 30ff.) about complementarity between the words *culture* and *cargo*.

about itself “this is not a myth.” (Viveiros de Castro 2016a: 261)¹⁵⁸ The goal is to challenge this presumed self-evidence of the sciences but also humanities and ethics of the West, or as the Native American philosopher Brian Burkhart (2019) calls it, the claim to ‘delocal’ truth, that is a truth that is assumed to be valid always and everywhere.

Another example of political challenge to metaphysics is offered by the Australian scholar Helen Verran who is like Viveiros de Castro not only interested in the ontological status of entities but she discusses and challenges the whole structures of thinking and acting in and about the world. The fact that in her book *Science and an African Logic* (2001), she is engaged in mathematics makes her project especially intriguing because for many people it is precisely mathematics that is considered objective and universal: Scholars have become accustomed to the fact that dichotomies such as subject and object may not work the same everywhere, but other dichotomies such as abstract and concrete or singularity and plurality still maintain their privileged status of omnipresence.

Verran took part in the project of training Yoruba elementary school teachers how to teach mathematics to their elementary school pupils and when she thereafter wanted to write about her experience, she demonstrated on her own example that when anthropologists aim to *talk about* different cultures, they can easily fall into a trap of explaining it away: “When I got to the end of the manuscript and tried, in conclusion, to elaborate what followed from my analysis, I began to see that the difference I wanted to focus on and keep was explained away.” (Verran 2001: 19) All the adventurous fun disappeared:

My contention, so passionately held that it motivates my long struggle to write this book, is that this laughter, which can easily turn to a visceral groan,

158 A certain entitlement to universality might be fairly common across the time-space but a story from another encounter of the Indigenous and Westerners well illustrates the difference in approaches: In the early 19th century, Reverend Cram came to the Seneca people living south of Lake Ontario with the intention to tell them the ‘truth’ of the Christian version of world creation. The Seneca patiently heard him out but then they wanted to tell their story which the reverend didn't like. “The Seneca found this perplexing and wondered why he had been so rude when they had sat quietly and listened to his story. There was surely truth in what Reverend Cram had said, but the Indians wondered why that meant their story had to be false.” (Burkhart 2019: 253–4)

this disconcertment, source of both clear delight and confused misery, must be privileged and nurtured, valued and expanded upon. These fleeting experiences, ephemeral and embodied, are a sure guide in struggling through colonizing pasts, and in generating possibilities for new futures. As a storyteller (a theorist) I treasure these moments, I do not want to explain them away. They are the first clue in my struggle to do useful critique. It is easy to ignore and pass by these moments – part of the problem is their fleeting subtlety – yet it is possible to become acutely sensitized to them. Interruptions, small and large are what we, as theorists, must learn to value and use. (Ibid.: 5)

She found out that she could not pass on what she had experienced as long as she stayed in a relatively comfortable position of cultural relativism. The mostly abandoned and obsolete universalism in fact shares the same basic assumption as the supposedly more progressive relativism:

I argue that an unacknowledged, even denied, uniformitarianism is embedded in relativist analysis, and that the foundationist framing that universalism and relativism share is its origin. Foundationism of any sort is committed to ideals that are necessarily uniform. The denial of difference as real with its concomitant redefining and limiting, the rendering of "Yoruba logic" as a degraded form of that logic originating in Europe, and the reinscribing of the author as authority are all expressions of the unacknowledged idealism that infects relativism as much as universalism. Being unacknowledged, the impulse to legislate uniformity in relativist argument is more difficult to deal with. Foundationism is a metaphysics that denies it is a metaphysics. (Ibid.: 32)

If I talk about a different ‘culture’ and compare it with my own Western one from a seemingly neutral position, not only does it not – obviously – erase my affiliation with my culture, but I am talking from a place that claims to be universal, which it is obviously *not*. Verran further explains that what universalism and relativism have in common is the division of being into 1) the world, 2) a person who has some knowledge, and 3) the knowledge itself. It is again the ‘common’ Cartesianism that is challenged by Viveiros de Castro and most ANT scholars described in other chapters of this text, but also by Merleau-

Ponty himself. It is this position from which many Western scholars speak and from which they claim that so-called ‘primitives’ blend these categories. (Verran 2001: 33ff.) The main difference between universalism and relativism is, that for a universalist, the knowledge starts with the reality of entities, whereas a relativist starts off with social constructedness: “Worlds are physical, knowable orders of matter set against empty space-time. (Universalists and relativists disagree on the origins of that order, the first locating it in the physical, the second in past human work.)” (Ibid.: 34)

It is not possible anymore to stay in a safe space of relativism as Donna Haraway wrote¹⁵⁹ in 2003. Both the universalist hierarchy and the relativist tolerance (that is based on the same foundations) crumble. Trying to find a clear cut distinction between humans on different continents, or between humans and non-humans, original and copy, culture and nature, but even between concepts and things is hopeless as Milan Kroulík notes in his text on Taussig:

[S]entient beings are caught within the maelstrom of imitation, with the ground for unambiguous identity disassembled, yet continuously reassembling. [...] Any grounds for a radical separation between art and reality, between nature and culture, between history and being(s) collapse.
(Kroulík 2019: 147–8)

5.4 Making Kin

The simple reversal of nature and culture seems a little too symmetrical as Viveiros de Castro (1998: 470) also admits himself. But even in his rendition, it's a lot more complicated than my summary above. First, Viveiros de Castro is inspired by Gilles Deleuze who is very complex indeed and which I am not going to elaborate on here. Second, the described Amerindian system grows from fundamental, existential interdependencies between predators and preys, that

159 “Dozens of feminist writers have refused both relativism and universalism. Subjects, objects, kinds, races, species, genres, and genders are the products of their relating. None of this work is about finding sweet and nice—‘feminine’—worlds and knowledges free of the ravages and productivities of power. Rather, feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently.” (Haraway 2016a: 99)

originated in the mythical past. According to some histories, “in the beginning of generations, there was nothing but at the same time, people already existed.”¹⁶⁰ All things were humans and only later did they begin to differentiate: “For Amazonian peoples, *the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity.*” This means that whereas Westerners would be typically afraid of animality in *anthropous*, Amerindians should be wary of humanity in animals. (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 465) The differentiation or speciation occurred through bodies, more precisely through nutrition and excretion which naturally involves impurity, something that certain spirits are devoid of:

Do not think that the animal spirits’ food is the same as ours! They eat images of what we call *nē rope*, the **richness** of the forest. This is real food, both tasty and free of any filth. They only drink flavored water from the high mountains. This is why even their excrement is fragrant. Ours stinks because the game we eat decomposes inside us. But the *xapiri*’s body does not contain any tainted flesh and so even their farts give off a pleasant smell! (Kopenawa & Albert 2013: 71; the French version cited also by Goddard 2022)

The fact that we feed on specific prey is behind our individuation and behind the very possibility of taking a perspective but being a predator simultaneously carries with it the danger of becoming prey – everything has its jaguar. (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 30) Eating is always a transgression of its kind because if everything has at least a trace of humanity in itself, with every food, we consume souls: “Cannibalism is, for the native peoples of America, an inevitable component of every act of manducation because everything is human, in the sense of capable of being human.” (Ibid.: 32)

The idea that all kinds of animals, plants, spirits or even stones are or can be human doesn't make the situation particularly friendly (as one might think and as I expected in the beginning). On the contrary, every *anthropos* is constantly in danger of being devoured by others and of slipping into a category of animals, that is other kinds of humans because the boundaries are much more permeable. These

160 “No começo da geração não existia nada mas ao mesmo tempo já existiam as pessoas.” (Carid Naveira 1999: 166, cited also by Viveiros de Castro 2012: 31)

are “the tales in which a protagonist lost in the forest happens upon a strange village whose inhabitants invite him to drink a refreshing gourd of ‘manioc beer,’ which he accepts enthusiastically ... until he realizes, with horrified surprise, that it is full of human blood. Which leads him to conclude, naturally, that he is not really among humans.” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 88) Encounters of Amerindians with Europeans and their ‘trial by water’ then might have been an attempt to find out where in the cannibalistic system Europeans actually are. Goddard (2022) calls Europeans hyper-predators, one of whose characteristics is that they can see – and fight – without being seen, and consequently they can devour without the fear of being eaten. Like this, they wouldn't have a point of view which was precisely what Amerindians tried to fathom:

It was necessary to verify that the enemy was edible (i.e. a body-person), to ensure that he is completely digestible and his decomposed flesh is dischargeable by the anus – without posing the risk of intoxication by his food remains: probably, an armor or a chain mail, a heaume, a plume, an arquebus ... (Goddard 2022)¹⁶¹

Just as the Western philosophical tradition and their cultural derivatives are afraid of solipsism – that there is no soul in the body in front of me – Amerindians are afraid of (we would say ‘cross-species’) mutability of their bodies (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 37) and of being eaten and eliminated by another type of human. (Goddard 2022) Here the danger is not the solipsism (me being the only human), but rather the opposite: that everything is human. Other human beings, both *anthropoi* and non-*anthropoi*, are humans precisely because they are in a relation to me, they are either my kin, or my enemies. The question then is whether Europeans can enter these relations at all. Goddard (2022) writes that Europeans were “otherly other” (*autrement autres*) than anything else they had met before. Just like it is difficult for us to fit into their categories because of our monstrous pervasive expansiveness, perhaps we shouldn't try to subsume Amerindians under our categories (which is an expansion of its kind). As the overused Wagner

161 “Il fallait vérifier que l'ennemi soit comestible (soit un corps-personne) et être sûr de pouvoir comme tel le digérer complètement et évacuer par l'anus ses chairs décomposées – sans risquer d'être intoxiqué par ses restes alimentaires : vraisemblablement, une armure ou une cotte de maille, un heaume, un panache, une arquebuse ...”

(19881: 24) quote states, “[t]heir misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them and thus the difference between our respective interpretations could not be dismissed on the basis of linguistic dissimilarity or communicational difficulty.”

Differences between ‘translations’ is well illustrated by a story recounted by Viveiros de Castro (2004): He was asked by a friend to write a note that would explain the meaning of a word *txai*, used by the indigenous people Cashinahua when they were in a friendly manner addressing their non-indigenous guests. The friend assumed that the word meant something like a ‘brother’ which is the expression that would be probably used in the Western context. It was however not the case, as Viveiros de Castro explains in his text:

I replied that it was impossible to write the note in these terms, since *txai* may mean just about everything except, precisely, “brother.” I explained that *txai* is a term used by a man to address certain kinsfolk, for example, his cross-cousins, his mother’s father, his daughter’s children, and, in general, following the Cashinahua system of “prescriptive alliance,” any man whose sister ego treats as an equivalent to his wife, and vice versa (Kensinger 1995: 157–74). In sum, *txai* means something akin to “brother-in-law.” It refers to a man’s real or possible brothers-in-law, and, when used as a friendly vocative to speak to non-Cashinahua outsiders, the implication is that the latter are kinds of affines. (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 17)

From this anecdote, as well as from the intersubjectivity as understood by Merleau-Ponty above, the difference between the two worlds is becoming to be rather obvious. Merleau-Ponty rightly points out that no-one really operates on the premise that *anthropina* bodies one encounters could be without a soul inside¹⁶² and suggests that we actually experience intersubjectivity ‘naturally’ and without any prior speculations. He also argues via development psychology: A baby doesn’t really differentiate themselves from their environment yet, and only gradually do they acquire individual subjecthood. Understood this way, if we look

162 And here as I already mentioned I don’t think Viveiros de Castro is quite right, or rather precise enough. It surely is an important philosophical problem and it is probably mirrored in the Western ways of treating non-*anthropina* animals in the sense that many people condition the better treatment of animals precisely by them having ‘souls’ or ‘minds.’ However, I argue that the phenomenological insight is a better description of everyday life.

for affinity, we go back, we look for a common origin, and that's why we would call a close friend a sister or brother. We tell them that they are *as if* they were our siblings, which is the closest non-hierarchical relationship anyone can have.

A brother-in-law, on the other hand, is a relationship that one must actively create. "While we tend to conceive the action of relating as a discarding of differences in favor of similarities, indigenous thought sees the process from another angle: the opposite of difference is not identity but *indifference*." (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 19) A relationship is distilled from the pool of random phenomena. It is similar in the case of the Wari', another Amazonian people: Aparecida Vilaça (2002: 359) writes that the positive type of socialization (bringing up offsprings, forming relationships) is just another way of 'making kin,' next to cannibalism and predation. Either way, it is always a process of body transformation via upbringing, bodily ornamentation, clothing, alimentation, and digestion (of each other at times).

In Viveiros de Castro's and Vilaça's accounts, relations and individual identities emerge from mass of undifferentiated potency. It is in a way similar to Merleau-Pontian pre-subjectivity but whereas a Merleau-Pontian Westerner would later while actively establishing connections, go back in time and draw inspiration from primordial communality, an ideal Viveiros de Castrian Amerindian wouldn't see anything positive in the initial undefined state and they would try to maneuver between various human bodily identities: the preceding undifferentiatedness doesn't offer anything to draw from. While Amerindians grow from dangerous indifference, trying to establish hierarchies and differences, Westerners suffer from individualism, even solipsism, and they try to bridge gaps between themselves, occasionally by invoking some common origin. "Our traditional problem in the West is how to connect and universalize: individual substances are given, while relations have to be made." (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 476) No matter how much certain philosophical trends, including phenomenology, emphasize intersubjectivity, subjects still come first and then on their basis is intersubjectivity constructed, and only in a very abstract way at that. The Amerindian problem would rather be the opposite: "how to separate and particularize: relations are given, while substances must be defined." (Ibid.) Therefore it's not intersubjectivity in the strict sense as there are no easily defined

and definable subjects that should be connected later. It is well illustrated by initiation process of Wari': Many entities are able to possess an agency, a point of view, and when a new *anthropino* baby is born, the goal is to secure their membership in the particular human group. The baby is differentiated by speciation of their body but there is always a danger that they could become a different species (that is, a human with a different body and thus a different point of view):

To change identity is to change body, a capacity that humans share with those animals possessing subjectivity. What enables this permutability of the body is precisely the equivalence of spirits: all are equally human, equally subjects. By modifying the body through alimentation, change in habits, and the establishment of social relations with other subjects, another point of view is acquired: the world is now seen in the same way as the new companions, that is, the members of other species.

(Vilaça 2002: 351)

Intermezzo: Ontological Folds

Contrary to how it may seem, Merleau-Ponty can be linked to the above. But let me start with where he rather *cannot*: It is obviously the idea of a single shared world which is prevalent in most highly Westernized cultures. Merleau-Ponty does allow for the existence of multiple worlds but only in a figurative sense: “the ‘worlds’ stand out against the background of a unique natural world” (*PhP* 307/304) and just as the unique natural world serves as a guarantee for multiple ‘worlds,’ that is ‘cultures’ (Toadvine 2009: 72), it might be just the opposite in the case of (truly) multiple worlds. A single universal world and reality for everyone has been common sense for most Western and Westernized people and for a long time interpretation quest for philosophy at least since the Age of Enlightenment. The endeavor to keep the material and immaterial separate while preserving the solidity of the world *out there* leads to paradoxes and challenges: How can the material influence the immaterial (that is, my mind)? How are my body and my mind connected? How am I supposed to be sure that there are other subjects with other minds if I only perceive their material nature (i.e. the body)? On the one

hand, I need others to attest to reality so that I keep believing in the objectivity of the world, but on the other hand, the very same objectivity is challenged precisely by other subjects' different perspectives. (VI 5/19)

Merleau-Ponty would dismiss any kind of a 'general illusion' (that what we perceive is not *really* the world in the sense of Descartes' demon's illusion) as irrelevant precisely because our world is a phenomenal world: "the world is what we perceive." (*PhP* lxxx/xi)¹⁶³ This doesn't mean that there are no illusions, dreams, hallucinations etc. They happen but their deceptiveness is determined by comparison with the 'real' things. I can doubt anything, even all things but the doubt itself is embedded in the world: I cannot doubt the world itself as a whole. This is the first assumption or rather not even an assumption, it is the natural attitude according to which I and most people like me live our everyday lives. But it gets complicated when anyone actually wants to explain it:

We see the things themselves, the world is what we see: formulae of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher—the moment he opens his eyes; they refer to a deep-seated set of mute "opinions" implicated in our lives. But what is strange about this faith is that if we seek to articulate it into theses or statements, if we ask ourselves what is this we, what seeing is, and what thing or world is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions. (VI 3/17)

If it is my own perception, what is the status of others and what is the relationship of their perceptions to my own? While the early Merleau-Ponty starts from the self and 'glues' the world and consciousness by means of perception, the late Merleau-Ponty's answer is that everything is of the same element, that is *flesh* (*chair*), so that sensorial communication between entities can be understood as an extension of what happens when I perceive myself or reflect on myself. He still starts from the self, but that's because it is convenient, it is the Being I embody. If my right hand reaches out to touch objects and I touch it with my left hand, I can either reduce the right hand to an object which means that it loses its grip onto the world, or I can retain the right hand's touching activity but yet I can never touch

163 See also Dillon (1988: 156): "For Merleau-Ponty, the real world is the perceived world is the phenomenal world."

the touching itself – my left hand only perceives the right hand's surface. (VI 147–8/191) It is this very overlap between the perceiver and perceived in a subject, the overlap which never becomes one, that makes the flesh, the embodied unity subject-body. The self-sensing is always shifted, with the gap, divergence or dehiscence (*écart*): “If this gap or spacing from self to self were ever to be bridged or closed, then there would be no self and no sense or sensing,” writes Marie-Eve Morin (2022: 174), drawing Merleau-Ponty closer to Jean-Luc Nancy.

Just as I can sense myself (with a divergence), I sense the world and I can do it precisely because I am a part of the world and the world is a part of me – because we are both made of the flesh. There is a reciprocity in every perception, as Merleau-Ponty illustrates by citing painters in *Eye and Mind*:

Inevitably the roles between him [the painter] and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them. As André Marchand says, after Klee: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me. ... I was there, listening. ... I think that the painter must be penetrated (*transpercé*) by the universe and not want to penetrate (*transpercer*) it. ... I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out (*surgir*).” [...] it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted. (OE 167/31–2)

No matter how much I would like Merleau-Ponty to talk about actual trees actually seeing me, the reversibility is a matter of *visibility* (and perceptibility in general), not vision per se: “not that the tree I see sees me, but that I am visible from the standpoint of the tree as it is from mine because we are both made of the same stuff: the flesh of the world. Thus conceived, perception is a worldly event and not a private occurrence that takes place within an invisible sphere of immanence.” (Dillon 1988: 170) This is also why Morin (2022: 171) writes that in order to understand Being, “the important thing to notice here is that the visible/tangible is first in the order of explanation. Rather than explaining

visibility starting from vision, we need to explain vision starting from visibility.” The capacity of the flesh has a priority over a singular occurrence of seeing.¹⁶⁴

In an even more fundamental way than in the case of objects, I am of the same element as other subjects. The Other can be understood as a mirror of myself, someone who is giving me a different perspective. (Dillon 1988: 166) But the Other is not identical with me: that fold that is my body is always already “infected with the germ of mineness from the very start.” (Ibid.: 168)

5.5 Boriquen Once Again

I argue, that Merleau-Ponty can ‘accommodate’ some parts of Viveiros de Castro's or his informants' world(s). Surely not the ontology(ies) itself, at least not in its raw versions,¹⁶⁵ but concepts of intersubjectivity and even humanity are quite compatible if I bend both sets of ideas a bit. The first thing is that both in Merleau-Ponty and Viveiros de Castro, being human or a specific type of human in the case of the latter depends on the body. It should be clear from the previous parts that for Merleau-Ponty, any humanity and any human mutuality is based in the body. Contrary to Western thought as presented by Viveiros de Castro, the Merleau-Pontian humanity is not animality with ‘something extra’: there is already “another manner of being a body in human being [...] human being is not animality (in the sense of mechanism) + reason. – And this is why we are concerned with the body: before being reason, humanity is another corporeity.” (N 214/277, 208/269; see also Barbaras 2001: esp. 27) Theoretically, other species could have their own humanity but the fold in the flesh that I am, is of such a kind that I cannot relate to them the same way I relate to another *anthropo*. He even says that “we can speak in a valid way of an animal culture” (N 198/258) but this is not an attempt to revert human exceptionalism, rather a way of acknowledging the presence of being and its perception on ‘lower’ levels. (Toadvine 2007: 28) Animals could never access the higher abstraction, the “structure of structures,” multiplicity of perspectives etc. (SC 122/133)

164 This is also why this is an ontology, not a phenomenology: Merleau-Ponty doesn't start from the position of the subject anymore.

165 It could still work, I believe, if it gave up on the objective reality all together and preserved the appearing only.

This approach would probably also be the case of the Boriquen story from the beginning. After all, Merleau-Ponty (2004/2002: 70/34) puts animals, children, the handicapped and ‘primitives’ in the same category and he comments an Inuit mask as revealing “the original double nature” of human and animal. (N 307n11/277n:“a”) The questioning of other people's humanity because of their different hair, skin or eye color, so common in the past (and much too often still) would not then be that much of a questioning of their ‘inner’ souls, but rather the questioning of the flesh, the whole bodily *style*. (Merleau-Ponty 1964e: 117–18) Conversely, when I perceive other subjects as my fellow *anthropoi* or humans, this is when intersubjectivity and sharing of the world happen:

It is said that the colors, the tactile reliefs given to the other, are for me an absolute mystery, forever inaccessible. This is not completely true; for me to have not an idea, an image, nor a representation, but as it were the imminent experience of them, it suffices that I look at a landscape, that I speak of it with someone. Then, through the concordant operation of his body and my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own, I recognize in my green his green, as the customs officer recognizes suddenly in a traveler the man whose description he had been given. (VI 142/185)

In other words, experiencing other subjects is about taking their perspective, attuning to them, similar like with Viveiros de Castro, where a perspective is a point of view, residing in the body. (E.g. Viveiros de Castro 2014: 72) This point of view is being co-created and reinforced by the very act of taking a perspective, as Viveiros de Castro explains by a citation from Deleuze: “Such is the basis of perspectivism, which does not mean a dependence in respect to a pre-given or defined subject: to the contrary, a subject will be what comes to the point of view, or rather what remains in the point of view.” (Deleuze 1993/1988b: 19/27, also cited by Viveiros de Castro 2014: 72) This is also in to some degree quite Merleau-Pontian, in the sense of perception (or later perceptibility itself) constituting subjects and objects.

When Europeans were (are) trying to deprive other societies of their humanity, it was because of their (so-called) cultures but equally importantly

because of their bodies: on the basis of the plain racism first of all, but also depending on what they wore, ate, what was their corporeal behavior. This is the case of Amerindians as well – a point of view is manifested not only in physiology, but rather “the affects, or strengths and weakness, that render each species of the body singular: what it eats, its way of moving or communicating, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary, timid or fierce, and so on. [...] What we are calling ‘body,’ then, is not the specific physiology or characteristic anatomy of something but an ensemble of ways or modes of being that constitutes a *habitus*, ethos, or ethogram.” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 72; see also Vilaça 2005: 449ff.)

I believe I can now see the story from Boriquen from a slightly different angle: Both Europeans and Amerindians saw beings that somewhat looked like humans to them. But Europeans were not sure whether the Indigenous bodies were similar *enough* (as we know, African bodies in particular have been often failing the test) and thus their souls were put into question. Amerindians probably also saw bodies¹⁶⁶ but they were afraid of illusions and volatility of what they were seeing since they knew that there is no such thing as a universal stable reality. “It is always best to distrust one's own eyes.” (Vilaça 2005: 451) Indeed, physical appearance “can be quite deceiving; the human figure, for instance, can conceal a jaguar-affection” (ibid.), which is sadly exactly how it turned out to be. This seems to problematize the “perceptual faith” that Merleau-Ponty takes as one of the presumptions that humans should share. In Amazonia, it is questioned from both sides that he mentions and ultimately refutes as irrelevant concerns (VI 5/19), which are the danger of illusions and the fact that my view may be challenged by another person's view: 1) Illusions seem to be much more common in the Amerindian worlds, without a sturdy basis consisting in the belief in the shared world and 2) the problem of multiple views is actually not really a problem, as much as simply the way the worlds work. Still, with added volatility to reality(ies), Merleau-Ponty doesn't need to be in contradiction with Amerindian perspectivism, thanks to his focus on reversible perceptibility in his later texts. He could represent, well, one perspective out of many.

166 Even though as was pointed out to me, Europeans might have looked quite weird, if they had armory or heavy European clothes. (See also Goddard 2022)

To conclude, I want to adumbrate possibilities that open up with the perspectivist point(s) of view. First, far from thinking that a typical Westerner like me could easily or any time soon start inhabiting unstable multiple worlds (not that I would want it, anyway), it doesn't seem that pervasive human exceptionalism has done us much good either: Instead of seeing 'Nature' as something firm and independent to be either conquered or protected, the Viveiros de Castrián interdependency of humans and natures and their changing relations might provide better tools for dealing with the catastrophe we are heading. *Anthropoi* should as soon as possible realize that *we* are in a real danger: It's not about protecting *it*, it's about finding new strategies of cooperations. As Burkhart (2019: 268) says, "in order to open the possibility of right relationships with the nonhuman world, we need not rework our moral theories; we must rework the notion of a theory as a delocal moral abstraction." Which means that the belief in one objective world with several more or less accurate descriptions that supposedly aim at the universally valid (delocal) truth simply hasn't been working. While 'Nature' might not die with us, we will certainly die when it is gone.¹⁶⁷

Second, understanding alliances (kin) as actively created (as in Villaça 2002 for instance), rather than a given that is anchored in the past, would make us less fixated on supposedly innate characteristics (such as ethnicity) and more prone to creating and taking care of coalitions between various human and non-human actors. Some of those alliances will be explored in the last chapter.

167 See many texts by Bruno Latour, e.g. 2018/2017, 2021, Latour & Schultz 2022; also the next chapter.

Les corps dans les mondes multiples

– Résumé

Ce chapitre parle des similarités, des différences et des combinaisons possibles entre Maurice Merleau-Ponty et Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Je commence par une histoire de Boriquen (aujourd'hui Porto Rico), où, au XVI^e siècle, les Amérindiens ont essayé de déterminer si les Européens avaient un corps. Ce récit a été résumé par Claude Lévi-Strauss qui a comparé cette pratique avec celle des Européens qui, eux, voulaient apprendre si les Amérindiens avaient une âme. Ensuite il a été repris de nouveau par Viveiros de Castro qui en a fait un de ses arguments en faveur de son perspectivisme. L'objectif de ce texte est de montrer que des concepts très différents de la corporéité, de l'humanité et de ce que nous avons l'habitude d'appeler l'intersubjectivité des Amérindiens peuvent être rendus plus compréhensibles et même inspirants à l'aide de Merleau-Ponty. Je crois que c'est lui qui propose un système assez compatible avec celui de Viveiros de Castro.

Contrairement à d'autres chapitres, je ne vise pas cette fois une fusion de deux concepts et de leurs auteurs, car la situation n'est pas symétrique. La voix qui vient de et à travers Viveiros de Castro est la voix des peuples qui ont été pourchassés, torturés, infectés, massacrés, annihilés, et au mieux (avec des réserves et des conditions) assimilés. Mon intention n'est donc pas de « sauver » la philosophie coloniale européenne. Au contraire, je vais plutôt placer ces idées les unes à côté des autres afin d'illustrer Viveiros de Castro à travers Merleau-Ponty. J'aimerais rappeler à mes lecteurs et lectrices que, même si cela peut parfois sembler le cas, ce chapitre ne se veut pas une joyeuse histoire de jaguars ; c'est une autre voix qui tente de témoigner de toutes les injustices que la machinerie impérialiste occidentale a fait et continue de faire subir au reste du monde.

L'intersubjectivité dans la *Phénoménologie de la perception*

La question qui a été souvent posée dans la phénoménologie et la philosophie occidentale en général est la suivante : Comment penser l'intersubjectivité ? Et comment puis-je être sûre qu'il y a d'autres sujets ? La première réponse de *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, c'est parce qu'il semble que ce soit le cas : « Si

ma conscience a un corps, pourquoi les autres corps n' « auraient-ils » pas des consciences? » (*PhP* 367/403) Cela ne signifie pas qu'il s'agisse en quelque sorte d'un corps objectif, d'une matière mécanique de type cartésien qui est contrôlée de l'intérieur par une âme, un esprit ou un « cerveau ». La phrase citée ne fonctionne donc que dans l'hypothèse « que la notion de corps et la notion de conscience ont été profondément transformées. » (*PhP* 367/403) Ce n'est pas que je rencontre une figurine à forme humaine et ce n'est qu'après que je commence à me demander s'il y a une âme humaine en elle ou non, comme dans des circonstances normales, je ne me demande pas si ce que je vois est vraiment le monde : « Il ne faut donc pas se demander si nous percevons vraiment un monde, il faut dire au contraire : le monde est cela que nous percevons. » (*PhP* lxxx/xi) Par conséquent, déjà dans la *Phénoménologie de la perception*, l'intersubjectivité se produit naturellement, comme à l'avance. Je reconnais les autres comme des humains immédiatement, de manière irréfléchie. Même si je construis un monde solipsiste, il est déjà construit à partir et sur le monde réel, y compris les autres personnes. (*PhP* 377/413–14)

Il n'y a donc aucun problème avec autrui, tant que sa corporéité est suffisamment similaire. Cependant, l'histoire nous a souvent montré que ce n'était pas toujours le cas, comme lors de la rencontre sur Boriquen.

Multinaturalisme comme un projet politique

Les événements de Boriquen peuvent être interprétés de manière assez classique, comme un cas d'animisme : Tout a ou peut avoir une âme, il n'y avait donc aucun doute là-dessus, mais les conquérants pouvaient être des esprits, ce qui aurait signifié que leurs corps seraient d'une qualité radicalement différente ou qu'ils n'existeraient pas vraiment. Mais je devrais essayer d'imaginer qu'il existe des sociétés, en Amazonie et dans les Caraïbes par exemple, pour lesquelles la culture est ce qui est universellement partagé, tandis que la nature, même au sens de la réalité matérielle, change selon la situation, ou plutôt selon celui qui l'observe et la vit. La possibilité d'adopter un point de vue est la source de la subjectivité et de l'humanité en son genre, très différente de celle de l'Occident.

Il faut cependant éviter l'idée qu'il existe un monde objectif autour de nous qui n'apparaît différemment que selon l'angle sous lequel on le regarde. Il s'agirait d'une opinion assez commun, après tout. C'est que tous les êtres vivants possibles

partagent une culture – par exemple, ils mangent tous de la viande et boivent tous de la bière – mais ce qui est bière pour un jaguar est sang pour moi, donc les natures sont différentes :

Le multinaturalisme ne suppose pas une Chose-en-Soi partiellement appréhendée par les catégories de l'entendement propres à chaque espèce ; n'allez pas croire que les Indiens imaginent qu'il existe un « quelque chose = x », quelque chose que les humains, par exemple, verraient comme du sang et les jaguars comme la bière. Ce qui existe dans la multinature ce ne sont pas des entités auto-identiques différemment perçues, mais des multiplicités immédiatement relationnelles du type sang|bière. (Viveiros de Castro 2009 : 40)

Le système entière semble paradoxal et pour quelqu'un comme moi, cela reste une expérience de pensée pour le moment. Le projet de Viveiros de Castro est avant tout politique : nous sommes habitués à un monde où nous déterminons la réalité sur laquelle une culture est érigée, excluant les autres cultures de la création de la réalité. Il veut redéfinir la société occidentale, ou même les humains en général selon la définition des sciences occidentales, comme un cas parmi d'autres, au lieu du garant de l'universalité.

La création de relations

Dans l'un de ses articles (2004), Viveiros de Castro explique la compréhension différente qu'ont les Amérindiens des relations en utilisant un exemple de fraternité : lorsqu'un occidental veut exprimer sa proximité avec quelqu'un, il l'appellera « frère », alors qu'un amérindien utiliserait quelque chose comme un « beau-frère ». C'est parce qu'un frère est quelqu'un avec qui je partage le passé, l'origine commune, tandis que la relation avec un beau-frère est quelque chose que je dois créer activement. On le voit aussi dans la socialisation des enfants qui peuvent devenir des humains mais aussi d'autres humains, comme des jaguars, si leurs parents ne sont pas assez prudents. (Vilaça 2002) Les relations sont créées à partir de l'indifférence primordiale, mais contrairement à Merleau-Ponty, qui s'appuie en fait sur la psychologie du développement (un bébé n'est pas vraiment différencié de son environnement au départ, Merleau-Ponty 1964e), cette

indifférence-ci ne crée aucune source vers laquelle on peut se tourner lorsqu'on cherche la communalité. Au contraire, c'est l'un des principaux dangers dont ils doivent se méfier. Les relations doivent se faire de manière active, et non par l'appel à une quelconque communalité primordiale.

L'intersubjectivité de Merleau-Ponty du *Visible et l'invisible* est fondée sur l'ontologie charnelle : tout est fait de la chair dont les plis créent des entités différentes. D'une part, la chair est finalement la même pour toutes les entités, mais d'autre part, elle est aussi ce qui crée une différence entre les types d'entités : « l'homme n'est pas animalité (au sens de mécanisme) + raison ... avant d'être raison l'humanité est une autre corporéité ». (N 208/269) Ainsi, les relations sont basées sur le fait que tout est du même élément, mais en même temps, elles sont maintenues par la différence de soi à soi et les interactions (ce qui veut dire ici percevoir et être perçu). Je crois que ce dernier point peut être renforcé et que Merleau-Ponty peut être enrichi par le perspectivisme de Viveiros de Castro afin qu'on puisse se concentrer davantage sur des alliances inattendues plutôt que sur des caractéristiques supposées innées (comme l'ethnicité) ancrées dans le passé.

6. Epilog – How to Embody the Worlds Ending – Defeat¹⁶⁸

*In a global state of precarity, we don't have choices other than looking for life in this ruin.*¹⁶⁹

“You know, when I see all that is happening in the world and even in my neighborhood, I feel so desperate and powerless at the same time. Nothing matters. And yet, I am still so bothered by all the everyday nuisances, like when I was struggling to assemble an IKEA shelf,” my sister confided to me in one of our endless Skype calls across time and space. I am living in Western Canada, in a city of six-month long winters, she is in north Germany, in a city of permanent cloudy fall. It's evening for her, morning or early afternoon for me. Her first and so far only baby is not even a year old, so naturally, she is troubled by all the news about and – lately even in Europe – visible signs of the world's end. She feels sorry for “animals, babies, and old people” who for her fall into the same category. This she means in a favorable way for the included humans who are associated with animals for their lack of agency and (far from innocent) helplessness.

6.1 No Way Out?

Most of the other humans who are neither babies nor old, at least those in my horizon, balance between ecological responsibility and carelessness. I do care about the environment, but only when I have nothing else to do: when I don't have troubles in my corporate job, when I am not buying tickets to fly across the Atlantic for my mother's birthday, or ... when I am not assembling an IKEA shelf. The first problem can therefore be phrased very simply as follows: Middle class people of the Global North usually know that their way of life is unsustainable but they are spared most of the externalities so they are (so far) privileged enough to close their eyes any time they want to. However, at the same

168 A similar version of the first part of the chapter was published in *34.sk* magazine. (Jakešová 2023b) The chapter would be called ‘Manifesto’ but there seem to be too many manifestos in the world these days.

169 Tsing 2015: 6.

time they have been told that ‘every little step helps’ and they should behave and consume responsibly. Buying organic food is a sign of middle or upper class but so is traveling, therefore this is how we (millennials of second tier Western countries) live: some of us are vegetarians, all of us sort waste, but most of us look for affordable flights. I make a few small changes in my life to, let's admit it, feast on the feeling of moral superiority (the last one: stop buying Nestlé products) and when I want to fly and find a low-cost ticket, I excuse myself that it's not my fault that flying is cheap and that individual actions don't matter anyway. It is hard to admit that many Trump or Orbán supporters may have a much smaller footprint than me because they simply cannot afford to travel to another continent twice a year. Also, by the way, a smaller footprint than many environmental academics who in their publications mention in passing all the places where they have conducted research, held a seminar or given an invited lecture (Strathern 1988, Tsing 2015, Haraway 2016b, Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017, Mol 2021 – to name just a few).

Now, I do find jokes about ‘avocado consuming and to Nepal flying to find themselves’ vegetarians funny despite to a certain extent being one of them. Yet I truly think that we are not to blame for the world coming to an end. Everything that is alive has an ecological footprint but that shouldn't make us confuse a regular consumer at McDonald's with its owners. (Danowski – Viveiros de Castro 2017: 84) The opposite is also true: While I do admire those progressive friends of mine who are getting broke by buying organic food and traveling ‘ecologically’ by train for twice the money and three (or more) times slower, they have absolutely zero impact, except perhaps their own slightly clearer conscience (truly no offense).

My circles were recently outraged by the information that the best thing one can personally do for the environment is to choose not to procreate. Although technically probably true, it is just another scandalous way to shift responsibility onto individuals, this time in connection with one of life's most serious and far-reaching decisions. A decision that to a large extent concerns women's, trans, and non-binary people's bodily autonomy (what a coincidence!). We are living in a society in which we are constantly pushed to increase our productivity but we live

in an illusion of infinite possibilities in our lives at home that nonetheless make no difference. The kangaroo in a satirical German novel sees it clearly:

»Ein *Wahlschein*?«, frage ich.

»Das ist, als ob du in den Supermarkt gehst und da wählen kannst zwischen der Tütensuppe von Maggi und der Tütensuppe von Knorr, aber in Wirklichkeit ist alles Nestlé. Der *Wahlschein* suggeriert Freiheit, aber in Wirklichkeit sage ich dir: Alles Kapitalismus, alles Nestlé, alles Hähnchen.

[...]« (Kling 2009)¹⁷⁰

Just like with religions in the so-called free Western countries, people are generally tolerant if someone practices their ecology *in private* while leaving others enjoying their luxurious lives in peace. At the same time, the personal ‘right’ choices give those who can afford them a sense of superiority, which is, once again, quite superficial. Then the people who organize or participate in public protests are generally frowned upon and scrutinized for their habits (like a scandalous plastic bottle of Greta Thunberg). The question of what to do is becoming ever more urgent but its intractability can easily lead to resignation. Everyday personal choices are almost pointless, even if they are supposed to serve as an example: encouragements towards lifestyle changes from celebrities and other public figures are often – and sometimes quite justifiably – undermined by their own extravagant lives. Demonstrations, protests, and strikes are usually ineffective and extremely draining on the personal level. Moreover, in the case of the middle class, any environmental measure tends to cause a deterioration in living standards, which is not something people typically demonstrate *for* – much like few men are willing to lower standards to make life better for women and minorities of all kinds. What to do then?

This chapter deals with the end of the world and the possibilities of life in its ruins. It does so in a fragmentary way, because there is no longer any

170 “‘A wannabe choice?’ I asked. ‘It’s like going to the supermarket where you can choose between Maggi instant soup and Knorr instant soup but it is in fact all Nestlé. The choice implies freedom but I am telling you: in reality, all is capitalism, all is Nestlé, all is chicken.’” The kangaroo uses an untranslatable play on words: ein *Wahlschein* is a voting ballot, but *Schein* also means illusion.

coherence in which to find refuge. It is an ‘ecological’ chapter of sorts, at least in the sections devoted to Merleau-Ponty, but it ends with fragmentary possibilities for working with and around fire. It is a step outside of academia: a mixture of (still partially) academic writing and non-academic despair. Lévi-Straussian bricolage, Harawayian cyborg as a means of existence.

6.2 Ways To End The World(s)

Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the authors of the inspiring book *The Ends of the World* from 2017 admit at the end of their introduction that they “have no idea what to do about it” (22), by “it” they mean, of course, the end of the world. The book collects various eschatological scenarios, ranging from novels and films, through the unrealistic optimism of some accelerationists, to the myths of South American Indigenous people.

They come to classify three types of the world’s ends. The whole world can terminate in a flash, usually imagined as a planetary collision (Trier 2011: *Melancholia*), disruption of the solar system balance (Ferrara 2011: 4:44 *Last Day on Earth*) or collapse of the sky. The last mentioned is a case of Yanomami prognoses of the world ending that – compared to Western science fiction about Martian attacks – seem eerily accurate. Davi Kopenawa, a shaman and spokesperson of the Yanomami people, warns us about the broken balance between the Earth and sky: “by digging so far underground, the white people will even tear out the sky's roots.” (Kopenawa & Albert 2013: 287) Here comes the poisonous water and rising ocean levels: “The soil will soak up water and start to rot. Then the waters will gradually cover the entire earth.” (Ibid.: 406) And finally the spirits’ prophecies: “If you destroy the forest, the sky will break and it will fall on the earth again!” (Ibid.) Shamanic warnings are correct, and not only metaphorically: The indigenous people trying to protect their habitat truly are keeping the world collapse at bay.

The second option of the end of the world (‘as we know it’) is flourishing nature after human extinction. This version is not particularly appealing to artists, as if there were no sense in continuation of Nature after humans are gone. It is sometimes the subject of speculative documentaries but it is not very often

depicted in fiction.¹⁷¹ Finally, the far most common scheme is surviving humans without (livable) land. Anthropocentrism is at work even when the world is ending: who would be interested in a world with other life forms? Desperate human individuals wandering (Tarr & Hranitzky 2011: *The Turin Horse*, Hillcoat 2009: *The Road*) or continually fighting (Miller 2015: *Mad Max*) in the wasteland are still somewhat more bearable than a world without us. In those fictional future unlivable lands, all life is scarce, including human life¹⁷² so it kind of misses the point as one of the crucial problems of contemporary human civilization is obviously overpopulation, and more specifically the racist and xenophobic fetish white societies have about multiplying *their own* population while opposing immigration. In many of these post-apocalyptic stories, humans are past the catastrophe caused by the exhaustion of all resources.

6.3 “Make Kin, Not Babies!”

As I mentioned earlier, I don’t think that anyone should tell people not to have children as a sacrifice for the world. Nevertheless, some philosophers have been doing precisely that, of course very carefully, one of the most important of them being Donna Haraway (2016b: 102) with her slogan “make kin, not babies!” but I also heard it at a seminar in Toulouse. (Miquel 2016) Even Haraway (2016b: 209n18) however says in one of her never-ending endnotes that the question of having or not having children of her own is in the end a personal decision of every woman.

171 There are some movies that show a possibility of Nature thriving or recovering after human extinction but only as an open question in the end, so to say, like *The Road* (Hillcoat 2009). The film that shows an alternatively developing nature can be *Annihilation* (Garland 2018) but in general, visual imagination of Westernized audience and creators need humans for their plots. (Stanton 2008: *WALL-E*, Reeves 2017: *War for the Planet of the Apes*, Joon-ho 2013: *Snowpiercer*) Semi-fictional worlds in films require internal human witnesses so that all the humans in the movie theater can drive home while wiping their tears of emotions because humanity ‘has made it again.’ (Oh, did I do it again? Assuming a cinema where I should be assuming Netflix? How old-school of me ...)

172 The captivating and deeply touching *Children of Men* (Cuarón 2006) is another example: in this case, the disaster is caused by the loss of the ability to reproduce. No matter how much I love the movie, I cannot refrain from making a cynical remark: There are probably not many things that would help the contemporary (nonhuman) world more than if humanity lost its fertility for eighteen years. I mean this in a very abstract sense: the chaos and spiked up inequality depicted in the film seems to me quite realistic.

The fact that bringing new people into the world makes the world worse for everyone is certainly an important issue, but what I personally find to be a stronger argument against procreation is the unimaginable horror that grips me at the thought of condemning someone I love most to life in the world to come. Gabriel Marcel, a French Christian existentialist philosopher, wrote that “To love a being [...] is to say you, you in particular, will never die.” (Marcel 1951: 147) Death of a loved person is something absurd that you cannot accept, so that the obviously absurd proclamation “you will never die” can make more sense than accepting the finitude of human life. Maybe one of the reasons why people start families is the hope that someone they love so much will thrive many years after they themselves die, that they will not see their loved ones die. Having children now seems like a desperate attempt to pretend that everything will be alright in the end (at least for one more generation) and that the expectation of not seeing one’s own children dying and/or extremely suffering is still reasonable.¹⁷³ Hence I believe that instead of hoping that adults in childbearing age would finally open their eyes and see through the disaster we are hurtling into at full speed, it would be more helpful to create alternative ways of living that would be at least as attractive and fulfilling as nuclear families. As Haraway (2016b: 209n18) says, we also need joy and play “to engage with unexpected others.” Because the way I see it now, the only childless alternative to moving into a house in the suburbs, having two children, a car or two, and maybe a dog, is to do exactly the same thing, only without the children. No wonder, that people try to hold on to the nuclear family dream a little longer.

Haraway encourages innovation in cooperation and compared to Bruno Latour for example, she is much less warlike in her argumentation. Latour calls to arms without, as he himself admits, really knowing against whom or what. (See Latour & Schultz 2022) I also find it very interesting that since her *Cyborg Manifesto* from 1985, Haraway (2016a) has moved to developing strategies and examples of companionships between various (what we call) species and reduced the previous technical metaphoricity of cyborgs. It might be because the imagery has been misused by the (not by accident prevalently white and male) movement

173 I am not suggesting any truths about human nature. I am of course well aware of the fact that not seeing one’s own children die is for humans an anomaly of my time and space.

called accelerationism. (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 50) Their proponents believe in a miracle in the form of human (or some kind of super-human) resurrection by means of technology. Nonetheless, even if there were a method to reverse the ongoing disaster using *more* technology, it would not be of much use. As (again) Haraway (2014) pointed out during her lecture, despite the recent massive investments in research on and development of (so-called) renewable and sustainable technologies, there is still much more money and energy being used to suck the last remnants of fossil fuels out of the ground, as quickly as possible, and to make sure that no-one learns about it and no-one talks about it (much).

6.4 Deceleration

What we need is the opposite: deceleration. That's the direction Danowski and Viveiros de Castro's book is heading. They don't dwell much on population control¹⁷⁴ but they call for a significant slowdown: "the *only* thing we need to accelerate, in light of the 'coming barbarism,' is precisely the process of slowing down the sciences and the civilization that instrumentalizes them." (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 89) This is inspired by Isabelle Stengers (e.g. 2018). Her argument isn't that we should stop doing scientific research but that we should abandon the ideal of quick abstract results connected to the capitalist economy and often detached from everyday reality. This is well illustrated by all the information about scientific progress in healthcare: 'we' as humans know the way to prevent death from diabetes but we ignore the fact that many people have no access to the treatment. Science should be more localized and situated; it is in a way a call to go 'down to earth.' In the end, the implementation of this kind of science often happens to be much more efficient, as is for example the case of the Zimbabwe bush pump, whose inventor didn't want to patent it and left it to local communities to modify according to their needs. (Laet & Mol 2000) Another example is urban development consulted with the local public like 15 minute cities etc. (E.g. Allam et al. 2022)

174 It is a simplified expression – not exactly what Donna Haraway would use.

We truly are running out of time and whatever we have been doing till now, doesn't seem to be working. “Virtually everything that can be said about the climate crisis becomes, *ipso facto*, anachronistic, out of step; and everything that can be done about it is necessarily too little, too late.” (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 8) The time and space are not (any more) a background that the history is happening on, instead we are facing the literal collapse of time and space. (Ibid.:18) Things are changing at an increasingly rapid pace, the window to be able to ‘do something about it’ is diminishing, and the space is smaller in a triple sense: we are capable of moving ‘stuff’ (humans, other living entities, objects, and information) faster and faster; the livable land is shrinking; and human population is still growing. Human history is becoming a geological epoch¹⁷⁵ and vice versa: the geological age is imprinting itself on human history on an unprecedented scale.

If there is no land to live on, humans will perish: humans without land will become land without humans. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro’s book ends with an interesting and important observation: it already happened at least once in human history, in Americas, only in the opposite sequence. We are used to thinking about ourselves as *the* humankind (or even more often ‘mankind’) but it is only now, when white people are in universal danger, that we (well, some of us) actually recognize the urgency. It doesn’t however mean that other problems simply disappeared, as Ted Toadvine points out:

We are called to marshal all available resources as quickly as possible to address the single greatest challenge the world has ever faced, in the hopes that we can preserve it in its present form, sustain it, into the future as far as possible. [...] I am uneasy about the “we” who here claim to speak for humanity, for “our civilizations.” How much of humanity does this “we” include? Would the ten percent of the world’s population living in extreme poverty today, or the nearly half of the world’s population that struggles to meet basic needs, agree that climate collapse is the most important issue “we” face? (World Bank 2018). Would those whose lives, livelihoods, and communities have been violated by extractive industries, by settler colonialism, by forced migration, by environmental injustices, by police

175 Haraway (2016b: 100) actually doesn’t consider anthropocene an epoch, she refers to it rather as a catastrophic event that we should get over as soon as possible.

violence, by anti-Black racism, by the intersections of violence and oppression that have made and continue to make “our” civilization possible—would they agree that climate change is “the defining issue of our time” or that every available resource should be mobilized to maintain the world in its present form? This is far from obvious to me. (Toadvine 2021a: 127–8)

Just like white civilizations are most to blame for and the most to profit from the present day destruction of everything alive, they already did it once with the populations of the Americas. The idea of “a world without humans” that served as an excuse to invade the space effectively meant that the humans that had actually been there, became “humans without world.” (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 105) When it comes to disasters, there has been almost nothing as devastating in human history as the so-called ‘discovery’ of the so-called ‘new world’ and its consequences. (Ibid.) Americas’ indigenous peoples then had to learn to live in the ruins and the world that was made to not be theirs. The authors ask us “to learn from these minor peoples who resist in an impoverished world which is not even their own any more.” (Ibid.: 120) This time, we are both the culprits and victims concurrently and we will *all* have to find out how to live in the world that is not ours anymore because if we don’t change our ways of living now, we will be forced to do it anyway: “reducing the scale of our feats and ambitions will in all likelihood not just be a matter of choice.” (Ibid.) This is not exclusively a human problem: all living beings are in danger. We can draw inspiration from diverse indigenous cosmologies¹⁷⁶ but also from the ‘white’ histories of interspecies cooperation, such as favorite Haraway’s examples of kinships between humans and pigeons or dogs. (Haraway 2016b: 9–29; Haraway 2016a: 91ff.)

This seems to be where we will end up: technology will not be of much use when all the airplanes start falling down. (Kopenawa & Albert 2013: 405) What I am more skeptical about, is deceleration as the ultimate deliberate strategy. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro argue against the common claim that ‘we

176 This can be the perspectivist ontology. The concept gained considerable popularity but it is often misunderstood: the idea that everything is or can be human certainly doesn't mean that all living beings live in some kind of Paradise-like symbiosis. See Viveiros de Castro 2014 and the previous chapter. Czech readers can see my summary in *Tvar*, available online. (Jakešová 2022)

cannot go back': "we should wonder what is so seemingly obvious about this oft-repeated sentence. What makes it so appealing or, rather, what makes doubting its pertinence so shocking?" (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro: 120) They use the example of cooperation between ZAD¹⁷⁷ activists and local farmers as an argument against a statement of Mark Fisher (one of the accelerationists), that no-one wishes to return to the "organic mud" of their ancestors. (Ibid.: 53) ZAD explicitly declared that they were "the people of the mud" ("*nous sommes le peuple de boue*," a play on the words "*de boue*" and its homophone "*debout*" which means awake, upright or holding on tightly). These examples are however quite rare. After all, the book was written before the Covid pandemic and we have seen how hard, painful, and hated were all the measures that as a side effect managed to shift the 'Earth Overshoot Day'¹⁷⁸ by meager three weeks. (Latour 2021: 156) Only to start flying across the globe even more vigorously once the restrictions loosened up.

6.5 Collaborations, Cooperations

Just like the authors of the book, I have little idea what to do about it. Make kin and tax the rich? Eat the rich if taxing fails? In the meantime, I would suggest collaboration and cooperation. Instead of using metaphors in order to describe scientific research, I am now going to do the opposite: use selected scientific theories as a metaphor for what seems to be the way, or *a* way to proceed. I have the Gaia hypothesis in mind, the mostly by James E. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis (e.g. 1973) developed idea of the Earth as a complex, self-regulatory system. If I bracket all the detailed disputes, it very roughly says that living organisms while interacting both with each other and non-living elements of the planet co-develop in (something like) symbioses in order to maintain favorable living conditions. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with altruism: it is the inevitable way for organisms to behave in order to subsist and possibly evolve. (Margulis & Habib

177 ZAD (zone à défendre – zone to defend): ZAD do organically organized protests, mainly in rural areas where activists physically block controversial construction activity by their presence. The best known – and successful – example was the protest against the Aéroport du Grand Ouest near Nantes.

178 The day of the year when we start living on ecological debt.

2019) This refers to entities we are used to calling individual organisms, which are in fact often more or less integrated groups of trillions of organisms: “[w]e must begin to think of organisms as communities, as collectives.” (Margulis & Sagan 2008: 45) And it is as well the case of physically separate organisms that need to cooperate (the cases of natural processes like pollination but also asymmetrical relationships such as parasitism or commensalism).

Now, I argue that cooperation, collaborations, and networking, as well as those less ‘friendly’ types of relationships, like parasitism, are a better metaphor for whatever we as (Western-ized) humans do or want to do. Even the celebrated individualism needs collaborations: after all, all exploitation is exploitation of *something* or *someone*. The idea of a free competition of individual agents is therefore simply false, both factually (in a representational sense) and morally (words ‘do things’).¹⁷⁹ Alliances are not only something that activists of various affiliations call for, but also a recognition of how things in fact work: “bounded individualism in its many flavors in science, politics, and philosophy has finally become unavailable to think with, truly no longer thinkable, technically or any other way.” (Haraway 2016b: 5; see also Gilbert, Sapp & Taubert 2012) This recognition can perhaps then contribute to a more equitable distribution – of alliances and ‘things.’ The popularity of (neo)Darwinism about the survival of the fittest (individual, phenotype or gene) has recently given way to more collaborative views of evolution, which may be a reflection of changing times as well as its inspiration. (See e.g. Haraway et al. 2015: 14)¹⁸⁰ The way we think and the metaphors we use is important, as Donna Haraway reminds us, quoting

179 For a simplified but very instructive version of what I mean, see Senator Elizabeth Warren’s famous speech from 2011: “There is nobody in this country who got rich on their own. Nobody. You built a factory out there – good for you. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory ... Now look. You built a factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea – God bless! Keep a hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.”

180 I have no intention of trying to decide which of the evolution theories is more ‘true,’ but it is obvious which one of the two resonates with me better: another ‘proof’ of a change of atmosphere since I do not consider myself immune to paradigm shifts (but neither to short-term contemporary trends). Interestingly, already Merleau-Ponty claimed that Darwinism cannot satisfactorily explain/describe the abundance of life and reciprocal relations between an organism and its *Umwelt*, i.e. its immediate environment. (N 151/201, 171/224, 186/243)

Marilyn Strathern: “it matters what ideas one uses to think other ideas (with).” (Strathern 1992: 10; quoted also in Haraway 2016b: 12) Challenging our own ideological frameworks and trying to change discourses is by the way also one of the few tools we have as average academics to shape the world.

6.5.1 How to Think

Haraway provides many examples of evolving relationships between various animal species: she traces pigeons cooperating with humans as pets, messengers, used as food and often considered pest (2016b: 9–29); symbiotic communities of many species in coral reefs (ibid.: 54ff.), and famously a dog lover herself, she described cohabitation between humans and dogs in her essay from 2003. (Haraway 2016a: 91ff.) Haraway’s texts are undoubtedly intellectually dense but she falls in the same Western trap as anyone else who has tried to develop alternative ways to live (or at least *think* alternative ways to live): whenever someone attempts to mobilize or call for cooperation, it either comes out quite vague or else it’s very concrete and empirical and as such fails to meet the rigid expectations of philosophy. This however is precisely the problem: the Western fetish for abstractions and generalizations makes “taking different worlds seriously” (Pickering 2017: 135) difficult. This has three negative consequences: when staying in abstractions, 1) I tend to replicate the same thoughts over and over again disregarding their spatiotemporal context, 2) what in my project seems ‘universal,’ is very often actually just one particular case that doesn’t resist the already existing universalization since it aligns with dominant narratives that are themselves based on the very same particular case (the healthy male un-body from the first chapter), 3) the criteria based on which we judge philosophies of others, are themselves part of our philosophy hence whatever can be called philosophy somewhere else, naturally cannot be as ‘good’ if we apply our own requirements on it. It is like hierarchizing animals based on their ability to use (human) language but what if geese evaluated our bodies based on the ability to fly?

So now, let’s try judging dominant strands of Western philosophy by its capability to think multiplicity and more than one thing at a time. It is a type of inclusion but in a different way than subsuming everything under one principle. Here are a few examples: many – or actually most – Christians today are quite

tolerant in the sense that they accept people of other beliefs. Nevertheless, there is a caveat: some of them hold that there is the universal Go(o)d that manifests through different religions;¹⁸¹ some – more traditional or conservative ones – believe that other religions are less perfect variants of Christianity but ‘God moves in a mysterious way’ so we shouldn’t violently interfere.¹⁸² Most of them further believe that your ‘religion’ should be something private. Hence the word ‘belief’: something between you and the God himself. But many – what we call – ‘religions’ are not even built around ‘beliefs.’ If I restrict (any kind of) Buddhism to a belief, there is not much of it left. Even Islam or Judaism become strongly limited if their followers are not allowed to manifest their faith. Furthermore, it is not even true that Christianity is a private matter: it is encoded in national constitutions, international law, education, art, organization of space, dualisms (culture – nature, body – mind etc.), the ways we exploit ‘natural resources,’ since the man is considered the master of all creation. Christian imprints have only become invisible for us but they haven’t disappeared, especially when we deal with ‘others.’ The ‘universality’ of Christian secularism (including so-called ‘atheism’) is thus in reality imposing but one version of how to be in this world (or one version of the world – see the previous chapter) whereas all others are nothing more than more or less tolerated approximations. If I take seriously other models of thinking and other ways of ‘doing religions,’ the world(s) become populated with multiple practices that are sometimes overlapping, at times contending, networking, and connecting; at times similar, at times different. This is not to say that highly Westernized cultures are completely unified but that versions often go unnoticed. It is like Latour’s (1993b: 1ff.) hybrids: we created strict borders between entities or concepts but they mix behind our backs so to say. Latour’s main example is nature and culture: we strictly separate them even though in fact we are surrounded of objects that are hybrids of the two. We are also hybrids ourselves, and not because we consist of the body and mind (which is yet another separation) but because all our beings and actings are always

181 To be sure, I consider the Western atheism to be a version of Christianity, as will become clear shortly.

182 I disregard the truly intolerant Christians here as they are less interesting for my argument. They are but a cherry on top and I believe it is the ‘tolerant’ majority that makes their existence possible.

composed of the two spheres that should not have been put in stark contrast in the first place.

6.6 The Invisible

This is why Merleau-Ponty is interesting and I am revisiting him for the last time since I have been drifting away from his philosophy for years. His rejection of sharp distinctions between nature and culture and body and mind, or at least the problematization thereof, made his thought inspiring and suitable for this project as well as many following research in other disciplines, including ecology. (E.g. Abram 1988; Cataldy & Hamrick 2007; Toadvine 2003; 2021b) His thorough discussions of embodiment of humans with disabilities and relatively large space devoted to animals also led to academic research that developed and/or criticized his approach. (E.g. Paterson & Hughes 1999; Toadvine 2007) Paradoxically, his absence of reflection of gendered and/or racialized bodies has been inspiring as well, as many scholars, including me, have been trying to fill in that gap. (See e.g. Butler 1989,; Young 2005) My last tribute to Merleau-Ponty now aims to show his potential for environmental thinking which will be followed by arguing why I feel that in the end, I need to abandon him for the sake of more generative research, better fitting our times.

Among the people who were attracted by the Gaia hypothesis is also the somewhat punk philosopher David Abram who happens to be an (rather eclectic) Merleau-Pontt scholar. He shows the dangers of extrapolating the ideas of one's favorite philosophers and inscribing one's own thoughts into them. In Abram's reading (1988, 1997), Merleau-Ponty was kind of a hippie for whom all the organisms live in the primordial unity of the sensorial world and while he does recognize the importance of reflection in Merleau-Ponty, he considers it a 'mistake.' As Ted Toadvine (2005: 162) aptly comments in his critical article on Abram's work, even if it is true that all our action has its origin in embodiment, it doesn't follow that we can "reduce the intellect to perception or rationality to sensibility." Abram has a lot to say about eurocentrism¹⁸³ and anthropocentrism

¹⁸³ "The world that a people experiences and comes to count on is deeply influenced by the ways they live and engage that world. The members of any given culture necessarily inhabit an experienced world very different from that of another culture with a very different language

but every so often, his reversal of the cultural hierarchy seems fetishistic and exoticizing¹⁸⁴ and the kitschy animism of his is almost cringeworthy.¹⁸⁵ Importantly, he really bends Merleau-Ponty to his liking – no matter how much I myself would prefer the phenomenologist to be less Eurocentric and anthropocentric, it is an anachronism and Abram’s type of thinking, it might be better to abandon Merleau-Ponty altogether. Nevertheless, it is not necessary to give up on ecological phenomenology – there are possibilities but they should be followed more carefully. This is why Toadvine (2003, 2005) suggests a different path for ecological rethinking of Merleau-Ponty. He argues that while the concept of nature where humans are merely its part might as well be a better alternative to the nature-as-an-object (i.e. a passive entity our knowledge and technology can take full possession of) but it is but a variation of the same paradigm. (Toadvine 2003: 142) In addition to Abram – and many others, like the authors of *Ecofeminism* (Adams & Gruen 2022) –, some ANT scholars can be said to be guilty of this as well. Interestingly, it is rather the case of the ‘sociological’ branch of ANT, like Bruno Latour and Annemarie Mol. Latour’s (2021: 19) comparison of the city to an anthill, his quote of ZAD that they are “not defending nature,” but they “are nature defending itself” (Latour 2018: 64) or his attempt to give voice to nonhumans (Latour 2004b) are the most evident examples. (See also Kirksey, Schuetze & Helmreich 2014: 3) But Mol’s (2021: 117) view of agriculture as a mutual relationship of humans and cereals can be included as well. On the other hand, anthropologists¹⁸⁶ linked to ANT like Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (see the

and way of life. Even the scientifically disclosed ‘objective universe’ of contemporary Western civilization cannot genuinely be separated from the particular institutions, technologies, and ways of life endemic to this society since the seventeenth century.” (Abram 1997: 34)

184 “The practice of language among indigenous peoples would seem to carry a very different significance than it does in the modern West. Enacted primarily in song, prayer, and story, among oral peoples language functions not simply to dialogue with other humans but also to converse with the more-than-human cosmos, to renew reciprocity with the surrounding powers of earth and sky, to invoke kinship even with those entities which, to the civilized mind, are utterly insentient and inert.” (Abram 1997: 50–1)

185 I am almost done with him, I promise. “Even boulders and rocks seem to speak their own uncanny languages of gesture and shadow, inviting the body and its bones into silent communication. In contact with the native forms of the earth, one’s senses are slowly energized and awakened, combining and recombining in ever-shifting patterns.” (Abram 1997: 47)

186 For simplicity, I am using the common (admittedly Eurocentric) differentiation: sociology as the discipline studying the westernized societies; anthropology studying all the others. My

previous chapter), Helen Verran or Anna Tsing are far from suggesting any easy communion with so-called ‘nature’ and their forms of kinship are everything but harmonic.

I will get back to them towards the end of this chapter but here it is worth noting that the Merleau-Pontian scholar, albeit from a different field, seems to be right that naive versions of ‘kinship’ are Eurocentric. Toadvine (2003, 2004, 2021b)¹⁸⁷ offers a third way, better corresponding to the Merleau-Pontian scholarship. Nature in later Merleau-Ponty is something that is non-instituted, which means it “has a meaning, without this meaning being-posit-ed by thought: it is the autoproduction of a meaning.” (N 3/19; see Barbaras 2001) With Toadvine (2021b: 8), we can call it the “unbuilt,” something that “we neither construct, nor control, nor necessarily understand, but on which our building constantly relies, such as pollination, fermentation, metabolism, sedimentation, erosion, sunshine, rain, gravity, air pressure, friction, and so on.” The ‘non-instituted,’ ‘unbuilt’ is something *beyond* our comprehension that cannot be subsumed under the transparent objective nature passively waiting to be controlled and explained away (‘penetrated’ if you wish) by Western science. Nor can it be, however, identified in an anthropomorphic¹⁸⁸ way as a single harmonious organism which humans are a part of as everything else. (Toadvine 2003: 142) The intertwining between the perceiver and the perceived is in Merleau-Ponty’s texts from the beginning¹⁸⁹ but in his later writings, Toadvine (Ibid.: 147) identifies an almost erotic desire:

observation is far from conclusive: Haraway whose interests stay mostly within the Western paradigm, for one definitely doesn’t resort to easily conducted kinships.

187 And probably other texts that I was not able to get an access to.

188 Needless to say, it is obviously a very different anthropomorphism than the one identified by Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1998, 2014, etc.

189 See a passage from the *Phenomenology* where Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of sensing the blue color: “I must find the attitude that *will* provide it with the means to become determinate and to become blue; I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet, I only do this in response to its solicitation. My attitude is never sufficient to make me truly see blue or truly touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I had lent to it, but I received it from the sensible in the first place. [...] I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it ‘thinks itself in me.’ I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself, my consciousness is saturated by this unlimited blue.” (*PhP* 222/248; Toadvine 2003: 146 quotes a similar passage from the older translation) While the later writing truly can be seen as more ‘sexual,’ this passage reminds of a couple dance.

We must no longer ask why we have *affections* in addition to “representative sensations,” since the representative sensation also (taken “vertically” to its insertion in our life) is affection, being a presence to the world through the body and to the body through the world, being *flesh*, and language is also. Reason too is *in* this horizon—promiscuity with Being and the world. (VI 239/288)

There is a ‘kinship’¹⁹⁰ but it is secured by differences just as much as by similarities. Everything is composed of *flesh* that is instituted by *écart(s)*, separations, spreads (or folds, arguably – see VI 118/156), to create hierarchies and to ensure that there are any relations at all, that there is *anything* to relate to (and talk about): without the deflection (*écart*), “the experience of the thing or of the past would fall to zero.” (VI 124/163) But this *écart* is not only a cut, it is also “an openness upon the thing itself.” (Ibid.) My inclination to nature is caused by the inner force between the two poles of the flesh (their ‘intertwining’): my flesh and flesh of the world. There is the ‘visible’ sensible matter but the power that brings them together, the ‘call’ that radiates from nature is the ‘invisible’: “realization of an invisible that is exactly the reverse of the visible, the power of the visible.” (Ibid.: 145n5/188n) The invisible is “the invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being (*l’Être de cet étant*).” (Ibid.: 151/196) It is not a negation, it is the “margin of the visible.” (Merleau-Ponty n.d.: Inédit 37)¹⁹¹ In Barbaras’ words:

The invisible is not the other of a visible conceived as positive in itself, but rather it is what makes itself visible in order to preserve its distance, its signifying power; the visible, in turn, is not then the negation of the invisible, but the element of its manifestation and, in being so, a primitive mode of ideality. (Barbaras 2004: 235)

190 Toadvine himself uses the term a lot in other texts (e.g. 2007 in relation to non-human animals) but it is not the ‘easy’ type of kinship where all the hierarchies would get (magically) flattened out.

191 It is admittedly more complicated: most of the mentions of the ‘invisible’ in *The Visible and the Invisible* seems to be on the pole of the subject, or human ‘culture’ in general. See e.g. VI 212/262: the “informing of perception by culture, this descent of the invisible into the visible.” However, since the visible is inseparably grown through by the invisible, it is arguably in the non-instituted nature as well.

The affection and longing for fusion with the world (not dissimilar to sexual desire towards another human body) is conditioned by the fact that the fusion is never complete and importantly, not fully ‘reflectable’: “Perhaps the root of ethical exigency [to ‘protect nature’] lies in the resistance of the unreflective to reflection, in that aspect of the crisscrossing of our glances that prevents anyone from assimilation to the others.” (Toadvine 2005: 170) “[W]e need a healthy respect for what exceeds our management.” (Toadvine 2021b: 10) The mystery of the world, that what makes us perceive the world but at the same time prevents our multiple glances to fully merge, is the invisible. Which might also be the force that urges us, you know, not to destroy the planet. If this seems vague, it is because it’s supposed to be. “[T]he ‘sensible’ world outside the ‘sense’ given to it by a sentient subject: the very thing that philosophy has never been able to think, still less to touch, even though it has doubtless always been obsessed with or haunted by it,” as Jean-Luc Nancy (2003: 85) describes the “indestructible” left behind any destruction. (See also Toadvine 2021b: 14) The ethics grounded in philosophy according to Toadvine (2003: 150) should be “displaced by a phenomenology of the impossible—that is, by an attentiveness to the resistance of what cannot be thought or perceived, to the opacity of a wild being that circumscribes our concepts and percepts.”

It is the admittance that ‘we’ (meaning Westernized, supposedly scientifically oriented rational humans) don’t know everything, yet (or precisely because of it) what we don’t know is still worth our care.

Intermezzo: Before the Institution

In nature, we see a glimpse of the non-instituted. What else is non-instituted? The un-body from the first chapter – be it the ‘universal’ male subject,¹⁹² a pile of particles, or the flesh. Latourian plasma is another example: “It is not hidden, simply *unknown*. It resembles a vast hinterland providing the resources for every single course of action to be fulfilled, much like the countryside for an urban dweller, much like the missing masses for a cosmologist trying to balance out the weight of the universe.” (Latour 2005: 244) For all other visible things (events, networks, and actors) “to be activated they have to rely on an unaccounted

192 This is of course the institution par excellence. But it is so naturalized that it deletes itself.

number of ingredients coming from the plasma around them.” (Ibid.: 245) The flesh itself in Merleau-Ponty is however *not* completely non-instituted. From what position is Merleau-Ponty trying to speak? In the *Phenomenology*, it is avowedly the subjective position (not in the sense of ‘personal’ but in the sense of ‘on the side of the subject’) that the philosopher is talking from. That’s its strength because any time someone feels tempted to blame phenomenology for its anthropocentrism, the phenomenology can retort ‘hey, that’s the point – if you don’t like it, just go find another method.’ It’s an evasive maneuver. In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty switched to ontology, but, as if by a miraculous turn of events, he came to the same thing: in Barbaras’ (2001: 22) words again, “the perceived is no longer the originary in its difference from the derived but *the natural in its difference from the instituted.*” If, however, “[n]ature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being-posit-ed by thought,” (N 3/19) who decides that there is any meaning at all? Merleau-Ponty himself, of course, from his instituted position. As he admits, “there is no objectivity without a point of view, in itself; i.e., an observer is necessary, with his ‘levels,’ his ‘soil,’ his ‘homeland,’ his perceptual ‘norms,’ in short, his ‘earth.’” (Merleau-Ponty 2010: 129 / 2005: 173) This is why ‘some flesh is more equal than the other,’ so to say: “The flesh of the world is not self-sensing (*se sentir*) as is my flesh – It is sensible and not sentient – I call it flesh, nonetheless.” (VI 250/298) The (hu)man flesh simply cannot be on the same level, not even as a thought experiment. The more Merleau-Ponty thinks he can speak from the outside of the institution(s), the more he gives himself away, just like Western atheists who think that they are outside of religions but they are – in fact – Christian.¹⁹³ The same goes for Merleau-Ponty’s ‘neutral body.’ Now, I don’t blame him for having had a privileged body¹⁹⁴ but for not accounting for any other bodies. How would it feel if I took my female embodiment and posited it as universal?

Again, as with Bruno Latour in the second chapter, the problem is not so much of being anthropocentric but being anthropocentric without being aware of it or – even worse – getting to anthropocentrism through some quasi-objective

193 This of course applies to me as well and I would even argue that it is the case for many ex-Muslims.

194 After all, Hannah Arendt was for example perfectly able to hold patriarchal positions from the point of view of her female body.

methods. It is obvious that not only does Merleau-Ponty write about institutions, he also performs them: “This *separation (écart)* which, in first approximation, forms meaning, is not a no I affect *myself* with, a lack which I constitute as a lack by the upsurge of an *end* which I give myself—it is a *natural* negativity, a first institution, always already there—” (*VI* 216/266; see also *S* 109/137) No escape from the institution is possible.

Before I leave Merleau-Ponty for good, it should be noted that despite people having built careers on his ontology, it is based on unfinished texts, at times hardly legible notes, and – in the case of the lecture books – “very mediocre copies” (Vallier 2003: xiii) of notes of (unknown) students. Since I am interested in vibrant thought provoking suggestions on how to live and think of life in our chaotic times, rather than abstract speculations about one type of (hu)man life that has gained prominence in my world over the last few hundred years, I will leave pondering on prefixes in handwritten notes to someone else and turn to notions on kinships, between humans or across species, that don’t fall into the ‘naive sameness’ traps Toadvine warned ecological thinkers from but that are at the same time more open, inclusive, and concrete than what traditional Western philosophy has to offer.

6.7 Burning Kinships

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, the winding streams with tangled growth, as “wild.” Only to the white man was nature a “wilderness” and only to him was it “infested” with “wild” animals and “savage” people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. (Standing Bear 1998: 201)

One of the most characteristic challenges many organisms will have to face at an increased frequency than up until recently are fires. This is meant both figuratively and literally, in terms of dry land and the actual fire: dried up earth is more prone to catch on fire and forest burning (together with other methods of deforestation) is a major threat to indigenous peoples in the Amazon and elsewhere. (Silva Junior et al. 2020, Rorato et al. 2021) As a conclusion, I am

going to offer two examples of living in the burnt lands described by two anthropologists: Helen Verran and Anna L. Tsing.

As I am writing this, I am living, writing, and breathing in Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, during the summer that has come too soon. The air is poisoned by wildfires – apparently the common smell during summer,¹⁹⁵ only this year it is way too early. (Van Dam 2023) Many of the wildfires are caused by humans and in this part of the world, they are almost exclusively non-intentional. But it hasn't always been like this. Let me tell you a story.¹⁹⁶

6.7.1 Worrk

Once upon a time, there were civilizations that were able to manage their habitat in a way that prevented big wildfires: By regularly setting small controlled fires, the risk of a huge uncontrolled wildfire fed by accumulated material was greatly reduced. The damage prevention was just one of the objectives. Depending on the area and climate, indigenous peoples of continents that are now called North America and Australia carefully manipulated ecosystems by controlled burns so that they would provoke or support the growth of specific species of plants and fungi, extend the growing season, and attract certain animals for hunting. The cleared up area also made it easier to hunt and travel. When white people arrived, they thought it was a harmful practice. Or they thought that it was 'just a ritual.' Or they knew that indigenous peoples depended on it so they banned it as yet another method of their genocide. Then the continents started burning – as a result of white people chaotic land management, their carelessness, and later of course the climate change, also mostly caused by them. My continent is on fire right now and there is nothing that can help it.

Or is it still? Towards the end of the 20th century, some powerful white people realized at last, that the fire suppressing strategy was not working. (Hoffman et al. 2021) There are voices now saying that we should consult and collaborate with indigenous peoples so that the fires become more manageable, especially as it is expected that they will be more and more common. As expected, these encounters are not always seamless. Helen Verran (2002) describes one of

195 This is spring 2023, the previous summers I spent here were 2020 and 2022, both of which years were very rainy. 2021 was extremely hot but I was not on the continent.

196 The following information is widely available. I draw on Stewart 2002 and Lewis 2019.

those situations when white Australians were trying to learn from Aborigines. Scientists wanted to learn about what they call ‘prescribed burning’ but they arrived at the event called ‘*worrk*,’ Yolngu Aboriginal land management firing. What follows, is a classical example of “incommensurable metaphysics,” (Ibid.: 731) not unlike different ontologies I wrote about earlier, or if you wish, different *institutions*. The scientists’ goal was “collecting Aboriginal knowledge,” (Ibid.: 732) basically taking advantage of the last commodity the Aborigines still had left. But Yolngu also had their agenda: they wanted to show their skills and practices as something that is beneficial and also relevant for Australian sciences. (Ibid.: 734)

All the participants gathered to camp around the area where the fire was going to take place and the next day, a Yolngu senior gave instructions on the burn. The ‘Balanda,’ non-Aboriginal Australians, were confused, as they expect technical information or information about the environment, ecosystem, and weather, while what they heard is more akin to mythology: People must “respect the land and celebrate it [...] through dancing, singing and holding proper ceremonies. And when this land burns, the smoke rises up across the day. And helps make that cloud – *Wukun*. By the end of today we will see the cloud forming and setting off on its journey. So here we are working together in ways we have always done, and remaking the connections between Wathawuy and other Dhuwa places.” (Ibid.: 738)

Then it turned out that the proper place for burning was actually much further from the camp than previously expected because “when you actually get to the place and walk around a bit and think and talk about this place and its connections to other places, you remember the names better. You need to be here to really remember the songs and dances and stories that tell about the place names, and in which they feature.” (Ibid.: 739) At the spot where the fires were supposed to be started, many other things were going on, like instructing children and collection of yams. The whole burning happened as if by accident: some fires were set without the Balanda even noticing and the whole event turned out to be rather anticlimactic. The scientists hoped to get some ancient Aboriginal wisdom about nature but it “seemed that a *worrk* episode was to some extent ‘just a ritual’ of lighting fires as accompaniment to a ‘foraging expedition.’” (Ibid.: 743) The

Yolngu people genuinely wanted to show their skills to the Balanda, yet it almost felt like a prank.

Verran goes on to show how each of the groups can be justified in metaphysical frames, and very dissimilar ones at that. Each metaphysics allows for different ways of generalizing and different authorities that perform and authorize these generalizations. In the case of prescribed burns, the generalizations concern properties of the environment that are measured against ‘objective’ scientific texts, without actors being directly embedded in the action. Actors are – in the Western metaphysics – almost exclusively humans and they act *upon* the environment, not from *within*. In Aboriginal *worrk*, the generalizing force is the past, tradition, repetition, and the authority of clan leaders, and the general wholes are “people-places,” (Ibid.: 749) i.e. entities emerging rather from metonymical than metaphorical relations. (See Jakobson 1956 and chapter four)

In the common understanding, there is a prevalent view that metaphysics is something ... well, obscure, almost supernatural. But in decolonial philosophy, it is a framework that is so common and obvious that it is not visible: the most fundamental structures of world(s) creating and inhabiting. They are slipping away from my speech because they are what makes the speech possible in the first place. Verran being able to make comparisons and me reading and writing about them is part of a certain metaphysics as well. (Comp. Strathern 1996: 532n10) One of Verran’s abilities is that she (unlike some others) constantly questions and corrects her position. For example when she wrote about Yoruba mathematics in Nigeria, she started from a supposedly progressive position of cultural relativism only to realize later that the relativism itself was in fact a hegemonic position. In the midst of a situation – a Yoruba classroom in that case – there needs to be a certain amount of incomprehensibility left: a wonder, laughter, respect to that remainder, (Verran 2001) “the resistance of the unreflective to reflection,” (Toadvine 2005: 170) “a healthy respect for what exceeds our management.” (Toadvine 2021b: 10) In the article about the *worrk* workshop, she is first committed to finding reconciliation. Her own generalizing project consists in “finding the right story of sameness in the firings,” (Verran 2002: 731) bracketing the referential values of what the respective parties were doing and instead in a

quasi-phenomenological way describing their actions as variants of “doing collective memory understood as a form of ritual.” (Ibid.: 757) In this sense, Verran is in the tradition of structural anthropologists like Edmund Leach (e.g. 1966) and Mary Douglas (2001: 33ff.). Even though she aims to abridge the sterility as well as condescension of relativism and show “possibilities for trust in a common sense of embodied certainty in practice,” (Verran 2002: 757) there is hardly much more to say than that the two groups can enrich each other and that “recognizing that the other has an efficacious working technology of collective memory can lead to mutual respect.” (Ibid.: 758) In very local situations, that is: not as a reconciliation of the centuries of exploitation and fusion of ‘indigenous wisdom’ with ‘enlightening science’ but as a concrete encounter of shared practices and mutually respected goals, boundaries, taboos, and ‘sacred’ spaces. Yet all this is somewhat shallow and disappointing: there is a common denominator, which is politics and rituals, and well, ‘we are all humans and we can agree if we really try.’

Helen Verran (2013) of more than ten years later however sees the situation differently. In the *worrk* workshop, there was a disagreement between a scientist and an Aborigine senior concerning the ‘sameness’ of two particular plants: the scientist considered the plants to be different because indeed, they belonged to different taxonomic categories in the logic of Western science; the Yolngu instructor on the contrary argued that they were the same because they were both parts of the same structure, namely the structure of clans, land, and the burning situation (twigs of the both plants could be used as fire starters). Each party considered the other one an imperfect version of itself: the Western science lacks the deep embodied centuries old knowledge and merely deals with unimportant differences in appearance, whereas the Aboriginal knowledge is in the light of science nothing but an incorrect way of representation, informed by dreams and ‘magic.’ If I say that non-Westerners are “just like us” (Ibid.: 150) and they have a science ‘of their own,’ it simply means that their science is an earlier stage ‘of our own’ science. But Yolngu knowledge is not representational in the way that I could say that they are unscientifically mixing ‘religion’ or ‘belief’ with

reality, similarly to a naive Westerner Christian who believes that God can manipulate physical laws.¹⁹⁷ Their knowledge is embodied and enacted:

The Aboriginal knowing subject and the known world are one; knowledge is performance or enactment, and not representation, and certainty too is constituted in performance. [...] [U]nlike Aboriginal knowers who *are* expression of a transcendental cosmos through having an inherited essence of places they know, science has human knowers and the material world they know as *a priori* separate from each other. (Ibid.: 151)

The two authorities of respective parties reconciled their disagreement by a (quite lame, if you ask me) analogy or, in Verran's words, 'allegory': the plants were like woman and man – both the same and different. The allegorical thinking allows for “doing difference together before coming to concepts” (Ibid.: 156) and it can “make us think and not recognise,” (Stengers 2005: 185, quoted also by Verran 2013: 159) which requires a certain restraint towards immediate translation based on one's own concepts and supposedly common denominators.

Two more years later, Verran (2015) became even more radical, straightly proposing enactment of differences during burning events. This is where the Serresian ball from the beginning comes up again. The fire is the center of the events, just like the ball is the center of a game of soccer, but here, each of the teams plays a different game. As Serres (1982: 226) explains though, “[t]he ball isn't there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun. Skill with the ball is recognized in the player who follows the ball and serves it instead of making it follow him and using it.” This is also Verran's (2015: 59) so far last say about the incommensurability of controlled fires: the task is “to learn to negotiate such singular events together; to learn enough of ‘the other game’ to allow each game to be played well enough, all the while taking care to do difference along with that strategic connection.” This would be Verran's lesson of taking inspiration from the “minor peoples who resist in an impoverished world which is not even their

¹⁹⁷ My aim is not to discredit the Christian faith but to emphasize that religion, as most people in the West perceive it, is relegated to the private sphere and is only allowed occasional miracles at most. Again, this is not to deny that Western culture, science, and politics are unacknowledgedly permeated by Christian metaphysics.

own any more,” (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 120) that she has been exploring for decades. After all, no matter how skeptically we look at Aboriginal cosmologies and – what is usually dismissed as – ‘mythologies,’ it is still true that their controlled burnings are successful at promoting biological diversity and preventing huge disastrous wildfires. Since Merleau-Ponty didn’t know much about “primitives,” (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 70; *PhP* 190/215, 298ff./330ff.) they can be thought of as an example of a different institution that asks for respect without our full comprehension. The impression that we need to fully understand something – which usually means subsume it under our own cosmology – in order to accept or respect it is but a prejudice of our type of science. Besides, even mere ‘mythologies’ still affect my world, and that is meant now in a very Westernly empirical way.

Let me now turn to my last instance of kinship: there is something else that grow on burnt land – mushrooms.

6.7.2 Fungal Contaminations

There are many types of mushrooms, one can pick and eat or sell. They belong to fungi, the disturbing third kingdom of multicellular organisms next to plants and animals.¹⁹⁸ Without explicit mentions, they are more important to my thesis than, for example, the plants that we are more used to considering as part of our worlds. Fungi form an integral part of my biological body, play an essential role in medicine, and are also present in fermentation that showed up in the second chapter impersonated by Latourian Pasteur. Magic mushrooms often temporarily alter spatio-temporal relations and can change emotional tuning in the long term. Common mushrooms appear in everyday diet of many people, while other types of fungi are a common nuisance in the kitchens and bathrooms of many households and in entire cities of humid climates. Furthermore, mushrooms provide a livelihood for many diverse and dislocated communities, often on the verge of legality.

198 Depending on the classification, there is a fourth kingdom of multicellular eukaryotes: protists, a category comprising all remaining eukaryotic living organisms that don’t quite make it to any of the three main kingdoms. The best known example usually included is algae (seaweed).

Anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015) has been famously researching the world of matsutake, a Japanese mushroom, that almost disappeared from the country that gave it its name, but later reappeared in other locations, most prominently in Oregon. Matsutake started growing in the industrially exploited forest along the Deschutes river around 1989. They are a product of a poorly managed ecosystem: replacing majestic ponderosa pines with thin lodgepole pines, and preventing natural wildfires.¹⁹⁹ The mushroom trade then developed on intersections of many national identities or lack thereof. Mushroom pickers are mostly “disabled white veterans, Asian refugees, Native Americans, and undocumented Latinos.” (Tsing 2015: 18) The precarity so apparent in these cases, was once seen as something exceptional but it is becoming reality for more and more people. This doesn’t necessarily (but often does) mean that people have difficulties in ‘making ends meet,’ it is instability and lack of future in general. (Ibid.: 20) With their unpredictability, mushrooms defy comfortable capitalization, plantation, and “scalability” (ibid.: 38ff.) which means expandability without significant changes; they are precarious themselves: creatively thriving on damaged lands in cooperation with outcast trees and humans.

The collaborations between humans, trees, and mushrooms are not of a pure kind. All collaborations involve contamination but it is again more visible here. The humans living on the edges of capitalism and national states are like Harawaian cyborgs, ‘impure’ – metaphorically by absorbing and learning from their environment, symbolically (Douglas 2001: 34ff.) and literally. I have talked to people who have traveled to Alaska and northern Canada to collect morels, the spring mushrooms that grow on burn land and kick off the foraging season. These were mostly young European adventurers eager for extra money (not uprooted immigrants or robbed natives) who on the way back barely concealed their mud and ash blackened skin. The ability to get contaminated shows vulnerability and also adaptability but of a different kind than what corporations value so highly in their employees. The latter is the fake one: capitalism requires precarity but

199 Tsing’s book somewhat contradicts scientific information that I found elsewhere, namely she states that lodgepole pines grow in the forests without wildfires, whereas according to other sources (e.g. Anderson 2003), lodgepole pines do need fires for reproduction just like ponderosas.

demands purity at the same time which is impossible. “Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival.” (Tsing 2015: 27)

Tsing’s book ends in praise of foraging, even metaphorically, in academia. Both hunting and foraging involve contamination but stories of hunting assume singular heroic acts whereas foraging is truer to everyday labor that we tend to overlook. The “foraging expeditions” (Verran 2002: 743) that white Australian scientists failed to appreciate are actually one of the main goals of Aborigine forest burnings, on the equal level of importance as ‘heroic’ controlled burns. Foraging is the way I live, read, and write. Unlike the contemporary fashion, my thesis is not a ‘story’ not even a collection of stories. To use a different metaphor, it would be a collection of restless movie shots from a handheld video camera, like my body: a compost of everything that has come around. Contaminated. Merleau-Ponty’s embodied subject absorbs things from his (sic!) environment but evens out everything to a new smooth glossy black box. The Merleau-Pontian ideal of “I can” is almost as untenable as the Cartesian “I think.” Most of the time, my body *cannot*. This is a chronicle of all those brief moments when it *could*, with the enormous help of multiple other living beings, things, and thoughts.

Epilogue – Comment incarner la fin du monde – la défaite

– Résumé

Ce chapitre traite des limites de notre monde et des collaborations inattendues. Il semble que notre monde se dirige vers un effondrement, ce qui conduit à deux problèmes : comment peut-on essayer d'empêcher la fin et comment vivre dans ce monde ou dans le monde à venir ? Le problème de l'individualisme réside dans le fait qu'on nous a dit que tout relevait de notre responsabilité personnelle, mais les petites décisions écologiques de la vie quotidienne ne servent pas vraiment à grand-chose et certaines d'entre elles sont même assez difficiles à prendre, comme renoncer à avoir des enfants. Certains penseur.se.s (e.g. Haraway 2016b) plaident en ce sens, mais je considère que le principal obstacle est qu'il n'existe pas d'alternative intéressante et vivable aux familles nucléaires.

Les moyens de mettre fin au(x) monde(s)

Danowski et Viveiros de Castro (2017) préconisent la décélération comme stratégie plutôt que de faire appel à la responsabilité personnelle ou aux innovations technologiques. Ils s'inspirent d'Isabelle Stengers (e.g. 2018) dont l'argument n'est pas qu'il faut arrêter la recherche scientifique mais qu'il faut abandonner l'idéal de résultats rapides et abstraits liés à l'économie capitaliste et souvent détachés de la réalité quotidienne. Il semble également que, tout à coup, les Blancs considèrent le changement climatique comme la menace la plus horrible de notre époque, mais ils ne s'y intéresseraient probablement pas autant si ce n'était pas la première fois qu'ils en étaient eux-mêmes victimes. Ted Toadvine (2021a) rappelle que dans les régions non occidentales, les problèmes n'ont pas disparu et Danowski et Viveiros de Castro (2017) mentionnent que les Européens ont été responsables de l'événement probablement le plus dévastateur de l'histoire de l'humanité : le génocide des indigènes des Amériques. Les auteurs nous demandent « d'apprendre de ces peuples mineurs qui résistent dans un monde appauvri qui n'est même plus le leur ». (Ibid. : 120) Cette fois, nous sommes à la fois coupables et victimes et nous devons tous trouver comment vivre dans un monde qui n'est plus le nôtre, car si nous ne changeons pas nos modes de vie maintenant, nous serons forcés de le faire de toute façon. (Ibid.) C'est le cas des

humains comme des autres êtres vivants : il faut que nous, habitants du Nord, travaillions ensemble avec les peuples mineurs et les autres membres de la nature vivante.

Collaborer, coopérer

Les collaborations peuvent s'inspirer de l'hypothèse Gaia (e.g. Lovelock & Margulis 1973), qui considère la Terre comme un système d'autorégulation et un réseau de symbioses. Les théories de l'évolution coopérative développées par Lynn Margulis (e.g. Margulis & Sagan 2008) dans le cadre de l'hypothèse Gaia ne sont pas fondées sur le darwinisme compétitif qui a été populaire non seulement pour sa valeur scientifique mais aussi pour son alignement idéologique sur l'individualisme compétitif. Le darwinisme dans sa mutation sociale n'est pas seulement faux, il est aussi nuisible. L'utilisation de meilleures métaphores peut contribuer à améliorer le monde.

Les collaborations devraient toujours avoir lieu dans des situations concrètes, ce qui remet en question la tendance occidentale à favoriser les abstractions et les généralisations au détriment des perspectives spécifiques au contexte (ce qui signifie que ce résumé français est déjà très inexact). La philosophie occidentale ne parvient pas à penser en termes de multiplicité et d'inclusion et ce qui doit être jugé est toujours lui-même une mesure : toutes les autres traditions ne sont qu'une version moins parfaite de l'Occident.

La prolifération des dualismes est un exemple d'abstractions très importantes et c'est également la raison pour laquelle Merleau-Ponty a été mon point de départ : non pas qu'il surmonte les dualismes, mais il les problématise dans la mesure où il provoque une pensée alternative.

L'invisible

Bien que Merleau-Ponty puisse être utilisé dans d'autres directions en écologie, la meilleure voie semble être celle de Ted Toadvine, qui propose que le besoin de prendre soin de la nature soit le côté invisible de la chair du monde. Il met en garde contre les concepts naïfs de parenté, ne faisant pas la différence entre (le côté culturel des) humains et la nature, (cf. Abram 1988, 1997) disant que c'est précisément *l'écart* entre les deux qui assure leur connexion. « Peut-être que la

racine de l'exigence éthique [de protéger la nature] réside dans la résistance de l'irréfléchi à la réflexion, dans cet aspect de l'entrecroisement de nos regards qui empêche quiconque de s'assimiler aux autres. » (Toadvine 2005 : 170) « [N]ous avons besoin d'un respect sain pour ce qui dépasse notre gestion. » (Toadvine 2021b : 10)

Les liens de parenté brûlants

La dernière section explore deux exemples de liens de parenté inattendus, tous deux liés au feu, le défi métaphorique et littéral de notre époque : brûlages contrôlés et croissance des champignons.

Les peuples indigènes d'Amérique du Nord et d'Australie avaient l'habitude d'utiliser des brûlages contrôlés pour manipuler les écosystèmes, favoriser la croissance des plantes et faciliter la chasse. L'arrivée des Européens a interrompu la tradition, ce qui, combiné au changement climatique, a entraîné une augmentation de la fréquence des grands incendies de forêt au cours du XXe siècle. Ce n'est qu'à la fin du siècle dernier que les Blancs ont compris que la suppression des incendies ne fonctionnait pas et ont commencé à se tourner vers les connaissances indigènes en matière de gestion des incendies. Helen Verran (2002) décrit l'une de ces situations où les Australiens blancs tentent d'apprendre des Aborigènes, mais l'événement est truffé de malentendus nés de cosmologies et de métaphysiques différentes. Alors qu'elle s'est d'abord concentrée sur les occurrences de compréhension mutuelle, plus de dix ans plus tard, en récapitulant l'événement, elle insiste sur le fait que ce sont précisément les incommensurabilités qui sont importantes pour des relations fructueuses entre les différentes communautés. (Verran 2013, 2015)

Le chapitre se termine par l'exemple de divers champignons, en particulier les matsutakes et morilles, qui ont été une source de subsistance pour de nombreuses communautés précaires. Les champignons poussent sur des terres mal gérées ou brûlées, principalement en Alaska et dans l'ouest du Canada. Anna Tsing, qui a écrit sur le monde du matsutake, souligne que la contamination est une partie nécessaire de la vie qui se manifeste particulièrement dans les emplois précaires tels que la cueillette des champignons et dans l'existence des champignons eux-mêmes. À la fin de l'ouvrage, Tsing conclut en utilisant le

foufrageage comme métaphore de la vie et de la création dans le monde académique : tout est une collaboration contaminée, personne n'agit jamais en tant qu'individu isolé.

Conclusion

If every thesis is supposed to answer a question, my research question was: ‘How to make Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology more inclusive?’ Captivated many years ago by “The Intertwining” essay, I still had to ask myself: How could having a body be such a revolutionary topic? Even as a girl, I mastered the skill of appearing: “*Men act and women appear.*” (Berger 1972: 47) Women *are* bodies: that is what sets us apart. We are not only visible (*en droit*), we are always *seen* (*en fait*). (VI 137/179) Given that the intellectual tradition has until recently been dominated by privileged men whose bodies don’t pose a problem, there is no wonder body wasn’t a preferred object of philosophical inquiries. Nevertheless, even when the soul or mind was a more frequent theme in philosophy, humans were still classified and hierarchized on the basis of their bodies, because of the obvious fact, that souls are invisible.

Merleau-Ponty then accomplished an admirable task: he brought the body back into play but the body in question is so neutral and meat-less that it almost resembles the good old soul again. (E.g. Barbaras 2008: 68) This is best exposed in the chapter “The Body as a Sexed Being” in the *Phenomenology* (156ff./180ff.) where readers would probably expect to find mentions of women, but female body is only referred to as an object of desire. As Judith Butler (1989) observes, the ‘pathological’ sexual behavior of Johann Schneider appears quite normal by today’s standards, whereas ‘normal’ – presumably Merleau-Ponty’s – conduct may now even seem problematic: “If foreplay is interrupted, the sexual cycle does not seek to be continued. During intercourse, *intromissio* is never spontaneous. If his [Schneider’s] partner reaches orgasm first and moves away, the nascent desire fades away.” (*PhP* 157/181) It’s not my intention to blame Merleau-Ponty for anything from his personal life but I want to emphasize that his ‘universal subject’ never ceased to be culturally conditioned:

The ideological character of *The Phenomenology of Perception* is produced by the impossible project of maintaining an abstract subject even while describing concrete, lived experience. The subject appears immune from the historical experience that Merleau-Ponty describes, but then reveals itself in the course of the description as a concrete cultural subject, a masculine

subject. Although Merleau-Ponty intends to describe the universal structures of bodily existence, the concrete examples he provides reveal the impossibility of that project. (Butler 1989: 95)

Being a healthy white woman, my endeavor to make Merleau-Ponty more inclusive was in the beginning driven primarily by a feminist perspective. However, the project gradually expanded as it became apparent that I too have been striving for generalizations, even though less comprehensive ones. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's 'margins' (Garner 1993), I have been exploring embodiments that might have been deemed 'imperfect' through his lens: bodies of women, people of color, people with disabilities, and non-human bodies. Unlike some of the classical writers who have inspired me (Beauvoir 1949, Young 2005, partially Fanon 2008/1971), my aim was to look for empowerment in those 'margins.'

Each chapter answers the question 'How to make Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology more inclusive?' in a different way. The 'Un-body' chapter acknowledges the meditative virtuosity of Thai nuns and monks and appreciates the generative power of decay. The chapter devoted to Bruno Latour shows that the integrity and compactness of beings, including the most privileged humans, is not to be taken for granted. Chapters three and four take a closer look at female embodiment and connect Merleau-Ponty's 'pathologies' to the inferior status of women in our society, while the fourth chapter shows the empowerment that can grow out of it. The last two chapters deal with intersubjectivity as a way of being in the world. While the part about Eduardo Viveiros de Castro destabilizes established ontological categories, it was also my attempt to incorporate alternative worldviews of the Indigenous peoples of (present-day) Americas, by suppressing my own. The very last chapter provides examples of complicated but necessary kinships between different human cosmologies and between humans and other species. Ultimately, the way to make phenomenology more inclusive is to abandon it, which is why my last chapter is written in less academic language: so that the humans I wrote about can at least have a chance to read it for themselves.

Conclusion

– Résumé

Ma question de recherche était la suivante : « Comment rendre la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty plus inclusive ? » Chaque chapitre répond à la question d'une manière différente. Le premier chapitre apprécie le pouvoir générateur de la décomposition. Le deuxième chapitre montre que la compacité des entités, y compris des humains les plus privilégiés, ne doit pas être considérée comme allant de soi. Les chapitres trois et quatre s'intéressent à l'incarnation féminine et relient les « pathologies » de Merleau-Ponty au statut inférieur des femmes dans notre société. Les deux derniers chapitres traitent de l'intersubjectivité. Le cinquième chapitre est ma tentative d'inclure les visions du monde alternatives des peuples indigènes des Amériques (d'aujourd'hui), en supprimant la mienne. Le tout dernier chapitre donne des exemples de liens de parenté entre différentes cosmologies humaines et entre les humains et d'autres espèces. En fin de compte, le moyen de rendre la phénoménologie plus inclusive est de l'abandonner, ce qui explique que mon dernier chapitre soit rédigé dans un langage moins académique.

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