

What, if anything, comes after the insurrection of theology?

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Abstract

Over the course of Judeo-Christian history, the boundaries endemic to its theological thought have been dualistic in nature. The clashes between the orthodox and the heretical, nomianism and anti-nomianism, apophatic thought and cataphatic thought, and theology from above versus theology from below have been all too evident. Recent trends in the field of Political Theology have developed a sub-genre of Radical Theology—best exemplified by the work of Ward Blanton, Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey W. Robbins, and Noëlle Vahanian—which is attempting to subvert such dualisms in hopes of rejecting traditional Western models of Onto-theology in favor of a theology that sparks genuine creation within the political realm. The article that follows is an assessment of the vitality of such an Insurrectionist project in terms of its ability to follow through on the promise of construction. All too often, projects of deconstruction are left stranded amidst the wreckage which they have wrought without any hope of something arising from the ashes. To what extent is the Insurrectionist project similar, and how does it differ? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Key words

Radical theology; political theology; deconstructionism; messianism; insurrection; non-dualism; hyper-nomianism; plasticity; onto-theology

The provocative new combined work by the exciting and engaging authors Ward Blanton, Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey W. Robbins, and Noëlle Vahanian, *An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Four New Gospels for a Radical Politics*, opens with the proclamation of its being a political manifesto, rather than a theological, systematic treatise of some sort, in order to inaugurate the giving of its ‘radical politics’ through these ‘four new gospels’. The declaration that most clearly sets the stage for what follows in the book is the first line of the jointly-authored introduction: ‘We believe in the Insurrection, not the Resurrection—whether it be of Jesus Christ or of anyone else’ (Blanton et al 2016, 1). Rather than be tied to the instantiation of new (‘resurrected’) forms, the political event of insurrection is a moment of ‘genuine creation’ brought about in the political sphere, a moment of pure affirmation. In the words of one of the four, ‘Insurrection is the creative force proper to us mere mortals’ (Robbins 2016, 133). Opposed to the claims made by Carl Schmitt regarding the link between sovereignty and political theology, a radical theology of insurrection, such as these authors cultivate, seeks to sever the connection between them, ending the long reign of onto-theology within western thought. The fact that this project of

‘overcoming onto-theology’ (as Merold Westphal had once put it¹) has its own history—and which too will make clear why the figure of Heidegger looms directly or indirectly over each chapter—does not, however, play a central role in these, less historical and more programmatic essays.

The authors do not take up a ‘postsecular’ point of view, but rather search for a way to understand the secular alongside the religious, a conjunction wholly in-line with their attempt to deconstruct the dualistic frameworks that guide so many historical theological-conceptual speculations. In many ways, their striving for a radical politics based within a Christian theological point of view is one that places a certain strain on its being identifiably Christian at all, while also retaining the Christian narrative in some respects at the same time, placing the project in interesting, if somewhat complicated, waters. In another one of the author’s words, ‘[...] a theology of insurrection is neither a repudiation of Christianity and an indictment of its universalism, nor is it a Christian apologetic clamoring the triumph of post-Christian, yet Christian, secular universalism’ (Vahanian 2016, 149). What such nuance should make clear to the reader is that insurrection, in their specific parlance, is an internal dynamic that issues from within a given structure, norm or religious institution, and so is, in somewhat Derridean fashion, a spectral, messianic force never without its historical counterpart. Insurrection, we are repeatedly told, is a process that takes place from within, ‘within phallogocentric language, within the history of colonial oppression and white supremacy, within capitalism, within the sin of Christianity—without exoticisms’ (Vahanian 2016, 144). Each author draws deeply in some respects from the writings of Paul Tillich, John Caputo, Richard Kearney and other postmodern theologians, while also recognizing that such theological threads have somewhat run their course. They also openly establish themselves in opposition to radical orthodoxy and the apparent conservatism of Jean-Luc Marion, as well as Heidegger, among others, though this should come as little surprise to anyone who has followed the cumulative works of the authors thus far in their careers.

The question this volume places before us most squarely, I believe, is to what degree this deconstructive theological affair that yet calls for a radical politics to be taken up will be capable of doing more than simply deconstructing what is already there before it? Or will this deconstructive approach, along with a call for an insurrection, prove to be enough? Is there another way to break through this apparent impasse that any radical politics seems to come up against time and again?

The five characteristics of an insurrectionist theology which they enumerate, and which here I believe bear repeating insofar as they situate the scope of the project well, include (1) a line of descent from the ‘death of God’ theologies of the mid-Twentieth Century, in league with liberation and process theologies (esp. Robbins 2016, 120), though in such a way as to consider moving beyond the ‘death of the death of God’ too, (2) an ‘ontology of the Real’ spun from the works of Lacan, Deleuze and Žižek, among others, that points toward the ‘not-All’ within the Real before us that ‘prevents the symbolic from achieving totality, completion, or groundedness’ (Blanton et al 2016, 9), (3) a theological commitment to a non-reductive ‘plastic materialism’ à la Catherine Malabou that would embrace an ‘auto-

¹ Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

annihilating' sense of material form that resists any dualistic constructions (Blanton et al 2016, 13), (4) an ethical-ecological, political and posthumanist leftist perspective that confronts the failures of neo-liberalism and (5) the recognition that theology is always 'in process', never finished. This last characteristic arises from the internally divided nature of theological inquiry, illuminating along the way how 'Theology must be willing to lose itself to find itself' (Blanton et al 2016, 16).

To describe this theological investment as 'radical' is perhaps somewhat of a misnomer, and (as Catherine Keller's 'Afterword' will suggest too) one that the authors acknowledge in their introduction by laying claim to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome rather than invest themselves further in a radical politics. In many ways, this will be a central theoretical undercurrent in their work, one that they hope overcomes the onto-theology they are battling. Theirs is then a 'radical' theology by another name perhaps, in truth a rhizomatic theology that maintains, following Deleuze and Guattari, 'a complex knot of connections and affiliations, taken from the description of tuber plants, which they opposed to the conception of radicals and roots' (Blanton et al 2016, 6; also Keller 2016, 177). The notion of the rhizome allows them some room to maneuver, to declare a radical politics while also reserving the space to not posit too much in terms of an actual, material political project (other than to observe their commitment to a 'leftist' politics that goes mainly underdeveloped). They describe rhizomatic thought as 'a disciplined refusal to allow our thinking to function as a mere repetition of the same' (Blanton et al 2016, 10-11), the very ideal, I would suggest, that prohibits a concrete politics from taking shape in a more determinate manner. Comprehending this structural configuration (incompletion) of things will go a long way in explaining why Blanton, in particular among the four, will frequently refer to the metaphor of the archive to explain where his gaze is diverted.

In the following remarks, which are presented not so much as a general review of the authors' positions as a synthetic account of what is truly at stake methodologically in this volume, I will address all four co-authors at the same time, citing their names in parenthesis, but treating them as a totality, much the way we might, in order to establish doctrine based on biblical interpretation, read all four canonical Gospels together. This should help us to better describe the general nature of an insurrectionist theology, as there are numerous suggestions, not always brought together into some coherent form, as to its shape and contour throughout the book.

An insurrectionist theology, to begin, shuns the dualism of the spiritual and the material in order to posit a theological materialism grounded in 'energy transformation' (Crockett, 28) and hence is capable of taking the immanent earth very seriously as a focal starting point. Theology is not just anthropology, however, as Feuerbach had claimed. Its subject matter is both God and humanity, but also animality and technology, we are reminded (Crockett, 30). This emphatic displacement of dichotomous thinking calls forth a rejection of the nature/culture dualism, something which puts a new twist on our understanding and implementation of anything like an ecotheology (Crockett, 35), on the one hand, and challenges our conceptualizations of nature entirely, on the other. In their rejection of the secular/religious divide, as much as the atheist/believer one (Crockett, 56), there is therefore also the clear rejection of the nature/artificial divide (Robbins, 136). Rather, to be more precise, there is no denying in our age that nature

is also culture, with a highly permeable membrane separating them, indicating an opening through which the supernatural might permeate the natural as well (Robbins, 122). God, humanity and nature, in the end, are really, each and all, empty containers calling for us to look beyond the ways we have defined them thus far in order to glimpse the potential they are capable of maintaining beyond what meaning we have ascribed to them (Crockett, 36).

To put this refusal of the nature/culture dualism into insurrectionist terms, we might note how '[...] resistance against the natural order is not unnatural' (Robbins, 125). Rather, nature is in a constant process of change that signals how our resistance to nature, at times, may be something actually natural to us, in league even with our 'divine' artificiality. As the borders that we had thought divided nature from culture begin thereby to crumble, this process of change that underlies their inseparability becomes visible as a force that precedes difference itself, hence prioritizing transformation or conversion over the once prized difference/sameness dichotomy (a point that Malabou's work drives home for this movement in particular) (Vahanian, 145).

To grasp the significance of this shift in thinking, one that would take us away from any dualistic frameworks so that we might embody the transformations, conversions and changes that constitute a fuller sense of being (again, pointing toward the rhizomatic assemblages they favor), we are led to perceive this failure of the dualism as a failure of identity itself. Identity, grounded as it has been upon a dualism of sameness and difference, only reinforces the problem we need rather to overcome, to defeat or at least displace the 'strength' of onto-theology in favor of the 'weakness' of insurrection. To deny the failure of identity that is part and parcel of the Christian Gospel—its 'messianic hope' as a moment of 'messianic failure'—is to miss the message of Christianity entirely (Vahanian, 154). In particular terms, 'God's violent interjections into human history are an expression of divine failure, not triumph' (Robbins, 126) and this fundamental ambiguity of God's power (and so also God's relationship to violence), results in the exposure of our own inherent ambiguity as well as that of creation on the whole (Robbins, 123). The God that is to be found somewhere amongst the (onto-theological) wreckage of the Judeo-Christian traditions witnesses to the unjust violence and suffering in our world (Robbins, 130). Pain can yet be transformed, from such a perspective, from something wholly meaningless into something constitutive of humanity, despite its completely unjustifiable nature (as with the biblical character of Job's suffering). Job's insurrection against God, as they call it—his 'ontological resistance'—'admits the failure and inadequacy of old standards of justice' (Robbins, 132, 131; see also Vahanian, 171), offering us the failure of God's violence and perceived strength at the same time as it promises new solidarities among those who suffer for no apparent reason. This reconfiguration of the oldest theological themes is Job's testament to humanity and what ultimately lays the foundations for Jesus's later reconfiguration of the law.

These acts of 'ontological resistance' are not so much a reason to jettison the project of theology altogether, as they are rather witness to new possibilities for theological inquiry. To arrive at this destination, however, we must take what appears to be a backwards step: 'What we need is not another reformation of theology or religion; what we need is a deformation of theology', the ability to stand outside of theology in order to see its ideological constructs while also realizing that

we are really not able to abandon the project, symbolism or economy of theology altogether (Crockett, 29, 57). This ‘deformation’ or de-creation of theology is what guarantees that new transformations will be possible in the end. It is a decidedly Freudian notion as well, I might add, one that we could advance as archaeologists of theology (a point that Blanton’s chapter will take on directly). This register is not ignored; but rather championed: ‘Insurrectionist theology is a form of psychoanalysis [...] because it is necessarily split between the critique of theology in itself as ideology and the affirmation of theology for itself as energy’ (Crockett, 59).

The resonance that I sense here moving beneath the surface shares much in common with a certain Freudian attraction to archaeology, though decidedly not sharing with the Derridean reading of this Freudian drive as a form of ‘archive fever’. This is a descent into the archives more in league with Agamben’s reading of Freudian regression, an archaeological movement backwards (we might think of Benjamin’s arcades project as one such example) that yet holds out no idealistic, utopian hope in an absolute foundation or point of origin. It is a descent into the archives, not in order to find the missing item that sutures everything together once and for all, but a careful sifting from among all items within the archive for those useful things that might help subvert the normative order. ‘Archivists of insurrection, we suggest that the many divine names be broken down into a strange new science that maps these names as so many singular passages of resonance into repetition, repetitions consistent enough to become regularized affective zones until they come to constitute organs bearing designations and functions, subjects and objects, insides and outsides, worlds present and worlds to come’ (Blanton, 62). That the many names of God have withered and fallen away throughout history poses no problem for the insurrectionist theologian that would meander through the archives of various (onto)theological traditions, a Foucaultian monk of sorts, imagining new solidarities being formed from amongst the apparently lifeless names (registered as the many ‘deaths of God’ or deaths of the Gods). It is in this sense, because nothing is to be discarded, that we can envision how ‘A theology of insurrection understands the bind and the burden of inheritance’ (Vahanian, 169).

The insurrectionist theology is most surely one that plays with ‘an archive of dead and dying Gods’ (Blanton, 68), and this is why we must attend to the (onto)theological archives with deliberate care, not abandoning them in favor of an excessive transgression of the theological into either a transcendent escapism or an entirely enclosed immanence. There is a place for the transcendent, to be sure—‘The otherworldly cannot simply be denied or forgotten; it must be folded in’ (Vahanian, 143)—but it is one that shines brightest from within the immanent, material reality that we inhabit. There is a transcendence as ‘excess’ within the immanent, that which details how the immanent plane contains ‘too much’ of itself to exist as a permanently stable entity. Our world, our bodies, our immanent, material reality is ‘[...] haunted by a kind of excess, an “overcoding” within coding itself, a strange drive to repetition of a sameness that both exceeds and retroactively grounds the identities imagined as same over time at all’ (Blanton, 83). Instead of opposing immanence to transcendence, an insurrectionist appeal would look toward their bleeding together, that is, their interwoven nature as it undoes the identity of their separate ‘nature’. To see things thus is to witness the Deleuzian rhizomatic structures at work, rather than attempt a counter-attack against normativity itself. And this suggestion highlights the precarious distinction that needs to be stressed

much more than perhaps our authors have: there is a subversion of the norm taking place here, but not a permanent (antinomian) one. The rhizomatic subversion is really another way of seeing intricate relationships and networks form, not a reversion to the subversive/normative dichotomy, as if one had to choose forever between one side or the other.

To grasp this logic as it unfolds is to grasp simultaneously the way in which Jesus can suggest how he came not to subvert the law, but to reconfigure it another way—to ‘fulfil’ it, in his words. It is from these new assemblages of life and law that Jesus ‘undoes’ our previous relationship to the law without entirely doing away with it either. This is what Paul will discern as well at work in Jesus’ new collective: the Pauline reading of the law (nomos) which sees in the existence of the law ‘both prohibition and transgression of the same’ (Blanton, 88). What Paul develops quite clearly (and cleverly) is a way to render law inoperative while not doing away with it either, a tactic that evidences a form of weakness that Paul yet considered to be the strength of Christ (Blanton, 90, 94). Elliot Wolfson has more recently tried to capture such an understanding of what goes beyond being normative law while also recovering the normative measure in a new configuration by utilizing the phrase ‘hypernomian’, an excess from within that defies being antinomian while also utilizing the normative structure in new ways.²

These attempts to describe what goes on—the happening of the event, as Caputo might say—within the heart of the Christian proclamation are certainly not what most people would understand Christianity to be. Indeed, for most of its history, as the archives of the onto-theological will prove for us still, institutional Christianity has avoided facing this most central of its truth claims. What an insurrectionist theology is trying to achieve, then, is something like a recovery of this founding impulse. Through such insurrectionist formulations, we can glimpse how Christianity has been effective at times at being a defensive posturing ‘against homogenization and assimilation’ (Vahanian, 166). There is something fundamentally insurrectionist within Christianity if we could but see its vital force moving subtly within it, and which has often been mistaken as the very part of Christianity that its more ‘orthodox’ interpreters would like to suppress or discard entirely. Rather than espouse a form of radical theology that becomes something like a repetition of antinomian thought, however, an insurrectionist theology is an attempt to recognize the messiness of existence (the lack of any ‘pure ground’ for our being) and of the overlap between the normative and its undoing, as between essence and its limits. To see this is not to suggest an insurrectionist theology as an antiessentialism that ‘serves its iconoclastic (anti-metaphysical) verve’ and so seeks to concoct a ‘pure being’ out of thin air (Vahanian, 148, 146). We are dealing rather with a situation wherein ‘insurrection from within understands that the discursive limits of bodies are also material limits of discursivity’ (Vahanian, 147). This movement is consequently embodied all the way down, and this will constitute its resistance to any disembodied forms of transcendence (hence, its opposition to resurrection).

Transcendence, for far too long, has drawn us away from the land we inhabit, we are told, with its onto-theological seductions (Blanton, 78), refusing to remain in

² Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

the ‘open space of transformation’ that we are otherwise left with in order to connect to our creativity (Blanton, 93). Always willing to work with whatever material is already there, the archivist of insurrection, we are told, ‘elaborates genealogies of the gestures that onto-theology as metaphysics tended to consider irrelevant’ (Blanton, 81). Such a theology is therefore more than willing to sift through the religious material that is littered throughout history so that it might find new, useful assemblages that might assist in the reconfiguring of theology as we know it: ‘[...] insurrectionist genealogies hit upon migrant meanderings of a gesture that, at different moments, takes on modes always at least minimally mysterious, haunted, possessed, deified’ (Blanton, 81). God is perhaps too to be found within the sharing of these ‘migrant meanderings’, in the new solidarities that we are able to assemble from among the wreckage and debris. What we consider such solidarities to be, in the end, theologically, is far less important than that we are capable of making these configurations work for us.

Conjurers of a new archival discipline (rather than mere proclaimers of the event of the New), the insurrectionist archivist slowly, patiently rewires the history of theology into a genealogy of pincers and their stimuli, attempting to catalog the *vibrancy of the specific gestures of linking* whereby divinities irrupt as shareable, social solidarities—the opening and enforcement of countable multiplicities. Call it a new materialism, call it an object-oriented ontology, call it the capitalization of God or an interdisciplinary disciplining of the postsecular, the only thing we care about is the crystallization of new analyses of those alchemical vibrancies whereby divinities as social solidarities come (as Heidegger liked to say) to a stand. (Blanton, 82-83)

What unfolds is a process of insurrection that combines ‘understanding, reworking, and rewiring the recursivities and feedbacks of desire’ (Blanton, 95), hence its deeply psychological, genealogical edge. It is subsequently more realistic as well, less prone to reactionary or revolutionary political engagements, demonstrating a willingness to work with the material that is given to it and which descends from (theological) tradition. In accordance with this belief, it does not foster the illusion that it can break free of such frameworks. Indeed, ‘Insurrection, we believe, is a more austere practice than those oriented around these two idealist and imaginary categories [of "return" and of the "great leap forward"] that love to masquerade as emancipation’ (Blanton, 95). This is not a discourse of radical ‘breakthrough’, but of a subtler forging of solidarities through rhizomatic linkage. In these rhizomatic formations, however, there is still a strong undercurrent of resistance to the normative structure of things; it is just the case that ‘Resistance is not reactionary, but generative, not restorative of an equilibrium, but constitutive of form. As such, it is integral, not opposed, to nature’—in other words, a ‘creative destruction’ or ‘nature’s ownmost possibility’ (Robbins, 136, 138).

In this schema of relations, the ‘archivist of insurrectionist solidarities’ is pitted against the ‘Divinity Manager’, a characterization set in the mold of Foucault and Agamben whose fusion of global, economic forces and bureaucratic fascination merges with the onto-theological divinities that have governed colonial oppression for centuries. The archivist of insurrection is yet capable of sifting through the failed (onto-theological) identities within history in order to reconstruct new ‘gestures of solidarity’, ‘collectives’ that appear ‘announcing themselves in their very failure to appear, their falling out of repetitive vibrancy, their active suppression or their sheer

impossibility, all these failures to show up on the historical or conceptual radar' (Blanton, 96). Again, it is in the failure of identity only that we might locate the change or transformation necessary to construct an assemblage that might subvert the governing norm. God's solidarity and the solidarities constructed in league with such a God as one who rejects the death-dealing processes of scapegoating and lynching that are foisted upon those who reject the natural/artificial boundary but whose exclusion *from* society yet sustains much *of* society, are the necessary corrective to reinstate the goodness of creation itself (Robbins, 119). Faith becomes, in this sense, as it has always been, an enterprise of rendering the law, or *nomos*, inoperative, suspending old solidarities in order to see new ones enacted in their place (Blanton, 63).

The term that resurfaces again and again within this insurrectionist theology, and that perhaps best captures this unending process of decreation and creation as well, is *plasticity*, a term evolved from Hegel's philosophy to the writings of Catherine Malabou, who bequeaths it indirectly to these four new gospels. Plasticity, as a conceptual tool, takes the malleability and fragility of life in hand in order to testify to the reshaping of life through a primordial allowance for change that precedes the difference/sameness dichotomy, thus allowing evolution (or *change*) to happen at all (Crockett, 52). In its shortest definition, plasticity is that which both gives form and is also able to resist or annihilate it (Crockett, 55; Robbins, 135), hence the ambiguous foundations of our own planet, or of Nature itself then too, which can destroy us as often as it can give us life. Working with our concrete, material conditions—our planet, our Earth—consequently becomes paramount in forming assemblages that might work for us, while also recognizing that there will be some that do not. Rather than impose a dominant (onto-theological) form upon nature, however, we should rather become increasingly attentive to the complexity of relations and interactions that are already constructed around us (the biospheres and habitat-relations so often callously ignored).

What is not as clear is why the authors shy away from claiming, as we might envision they must claim at some point, that these new 'plastic' assemblages of solidarity, these new collectives, must reify or congeal, or at least entertain the temptation to reify or congeal, into new normative structures. Such an inevitable state of things is what prompts the question I believe will be asked most frequently of their efforts: what, if anything, comes after the insurrection? Is a permanent insurrection even possible? What institutional form will, as it must, take shape once we have listened to the insurrectionist cry to subvert the norms? I think that these questions are what lie behind Catherine Keller's afterword, which contains a profound critique of the theology of insurrection's rejection of the resurrection—its opening salvo to the world of the theological: 'why not put some insurrection into the resurrection?', she wonders aloud (Keller 2016, 175). Instead of positing some absolute separation from the resurrection account, she encourages 'the agonism of conflicting interpretations, multiple ethnonarratives, and potential solidarities' (Keller 2016, 175) between insurrection and resurrection. Indeed, and I think this suggests much the same thing, Jürgen Moltmann had urged some time ago in his *Theology of Hope* (1993) that we are in need of a genuine resurrection theology—one that is as materially embodied as any insurrection theology—to provide some proportionality to the 'death of God' theologies circulating at the time.

What I would place most under scrutiny at the conclusion of this radical cry within a theological wilderness—one that is much needed today for a variety of reasons—is the politically suggestive title of the movement, and whether or not it lives up to its claims, but also a consideration of whether or not it *could* live up to its claims to be an insurrectionist or radical theology. The truth in the end, I think, is that one can never provide a convincing answer to this question; it is perhaps better to be avoided. In many ways, to repeat the insurrectionist move that Jesus seems himself to have made, we are left stranded without an institutional form, much as the situation in which the early Church found itself. If we are to take seriously these particular Jewish-Christian archives, we must face the reality that, in order to bring about the change we wish to see in our world, we must at times deploy a radical rhetoric that does not take into consideration what form these material, concrete structures and institutions will take after the insurrection has taken place (the much too much anticipated ‘resurrection’). There is, from this side of things, only the perpetual advancement to an empty space wherein the failure of what came before offers us new, untold possibilities about what might take its place. That specific story, however, is left to another time and another place.

It seems that theologically we circle back to this same place, time and again, with orthodox theologies routinely pitted against their seemingly heretical ones, christologies ‘from above’ inverted by those ‘from below’, the *Communio* people against the *Concilium* ones, upholding the normative versus its antinomian subversion. What I sense active within this present work on the whole, and one very much needing to see the light of day more directly, is a grasp of the complexity that is really at stake in theological discourse, among other fields—something that Bruno Latour’s work points to in its own way as well.³ Adopting something like a rhizomatic structure that holds forth the potential to reconsider the dualistic logics that have governed our theoretical considerations thus far historically is more than just a beneficial thing to do in order to enlighten and deepen the context of what might otherwise appear to us as political stalemates. It is the chance for genuine change to take place in our world, something no less political than theological, no less cultural and economic as it is a central philosophical point. The difference between the impetus for reform and the Reformation itself lies within such a distinction, and I hope it is one that we will be increasingly attuned to as history rolls forward.

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³ See, among others, Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

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