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How Many Earths?
The Geological Turn in Anthropology.

Nietzsche claimed that his time was that of the death of God. Maybe we should characterize our present as the time of the coming of the Earth. More precisely, our time might be that in which the Earth is making its appearance on the stage of history. This, at least, is what a certain number of scholars have recently claimed, including Chakrabarty, in his already classic article on the Anthropocene, Stengers and Latour in their respective appeals to Lovelock's Gaia, and Viveiros de Castro in a recent article with the Brazilian philosopher Déborah Danowski (among others).[1] I will support their claim. However, it is also my contention, as I think it is theirs, that we can only become prepared to interact with this new actor if we accept that it raises considerable ontological challenges. It is not only a new being; it is also a new *kind of being*.

Many have already argued that this present requires us to overcome the distinction between nature and culture, reality and representation, constructivism and realism, being and sign, world and language. I will support this idea too, but from a particular line of argumentation: I will argue that getting ready for the Earth requires us to accept a form of radical ontological pluralism, specifically of the kind introduced by what has been called the "ontological turn" in the discipline of anthropology. This movement, as is well-known, begins with a simple observation: the very notion of "culture" is self-relativizing in the sense that it is itself attached to a particular "culture." Consequently, anthropological relativization must not pluralize and compare "cultures," but rather "ontologies," one such ontology being characterized by the distinction between nature and culture. According to such a pluralism, *to be* is ultimately to be an alternative of what could have been instead, or to be situated at the intersection of various lines of virtual becoming-other. I will thus argue that the redefinition of anthropology as comparative ontology defended by a certain number of anthropologists today (Viveiros de Castro, Descola, Latour, Strathern, Ingold, Holbraad, etc.) is exactly the sort of theory we need to approach the Earth that is coming, on the condition that it is slightly redefined in light of the new concept of the Earth.

My point here will be that this new actor that we can call the Earth is at the same time unique—there is no planet B, as the activists rightly say—but nonetheless not unified. The oneness of the Earth is not separable from the diverging ways this oneness is made on each locality of the Earth (and a locality will have to be defined as such a diverging construction of globality itself). This situation, I will claim, is the new situation in which anthropology, understood (following Viveiros de Castro) as the art of controlled equivocation, is yet again needed, as it was in the past as a counter-poison to colonization. And it is from there that we will understand what sort of ontological turn in anthropology is indeed necessary at the age of the coming of the Earth. If you liked the ontological turn in anthropology, you will love *the geological turn*!

1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", Critical Inquiry 35, no. 2 (2009); Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes, (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016) ; Bruno Latour*, An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) ; Isabelle Stengers*, In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (Open Humanities Press, 2015).

1. Preliminary Clarifications

A certain number of preliminary clarifications are in order so that what I mean by the statement "the Earth is a new actor in history" might not be misunderstood.

1. First, I must stress that I understand this statement as a contribution to what Foucault and Deleuze called a "diagnosis of the present": it tries to characterize an event, to expose what is new and challenging in our present situation. And it does so by trying to diagnose what needs to be reshuffled in our critical toolbox. Indeed, what is "critique" if not the capacity to push the present to its limits? In consequence, nothing better expresses the novelty of an event than the modifications it imposes on our critical tools.

2. I also want to emphasize that this statement does not mean that human beings are transforming their environment on a significant scale for the first time in history. This would obviously be wrong: we know, for instance, what the Amazonian forest itself owes to human action. Very few parts of the Earth have not been impacted by human presence over long spans of time. But what is happening today exceeds that in two ways.

First, the coming Earth is not only a passive recipient of human influences; if the Earth can be called an actor it is because it has some initiative. It fights back. What that means can be understood, for instance, by reference to dynamic systems theory. In such systems, a local transformation is not a linear function of some isolated parameter but rather the consequence of the attempt of the whole to reach a new equilibrium. Such a system is thus not simply modified *by* our intervention; it reacts to our action, it has initiative. It is in this sense that the Earth is understood here as an actor. This could be put in Hannah Arendt's terms, if only for the sake of irony. She distinguished in *The Human Condition* the *world* as the playing-field emergent in human action from the *Earth* as that which constrains it from outside. Arendt's concern was of course that this ethical playing field might one day escape from that planetary constraint.[2] But we can now say that the Earth has come into our world: it is a partner in the making of history; it is just another actor in the plurality that makes the world what it is. This is exactly the argument made by Chakrabarty about the Anthropocene, when he remarks that the pace of geological transformations is now faster than the pace of institutional change; or by Stengers, when she gives the name Gaia to what we call the Earth precisely because Gaia is what intrudes and responds.[3]

The second reason why our present situation is new is that we are no longer talking about the reaction of a local environment to human action. Human beings have been confronted in the past by significant unforeseen reactions of an ecosystem to their own actions within it, and this is precisely what motivated the formulation of the ecosystem concept itself. We have understood for quite some time already that "environments" are not passive outer frames for our actions, but something that responds to them in unexpected ways. Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, is emblematic of such an awakening.[4] In this bestseller from 1962, Carson showed that the unforeseen and undesired consequences of our actions are delimited by the characteristics proper to "ecosystems." We develop pesticides to kill insects at a particular location and those pesticides have consequences on

2 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.4.

3 See Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," and Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*.

4 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

the biology of birds: they hinder the development of their eggs, for instance, which generates large-scale infertility, and this is why, the more we spread pesticides in the fields, the more likely we are to end up with silent springs, springs deprived of bird songs, among other unfortunate consequences. This kind of observation has been repeated over and over again and has encouraged a new sensibility to human action in modernity in general.

However, with Climate Change we are not talking anymore about unforeseen consequences of an alteration to a local region. We are speaking of chain reactions that operate at a global level. And the difference between the local and the global is not quantitative, but qualitative. The Earth is indeed not an ecosystem, not even an ecosystem of ecosystems. An ecosystem is that which makes selected beings the very conditions of each of the others' existences, and it requires time, evolution, discrimination. In contradistinction, it would be wrong to say that we *live with* all of the Earth's beings (in which case there would be no sense in speaking of ecosystems anymore, since ecosystems are selective by definition). The global regulations that constitute the Earth (the carbon cycle, the phosphorus cycle, etc.) enable ecosystems to get at least partially locked into themselves, but do not constitute in themselves any particular ecosystem. We therefore do not dwell on the Earth; the Earth is that which makes it possible to transform some of its parts into habitats.

The Earth qua Earth manifests itself each time *all* beings, even those that have not mutually selected each other as conditions of life, are at least virtually put in relation to one another in ways that completely cut across the logic of ecosystems. This is the case for instance when our carbon emissions indirectly affect the Venezuelan tepuis, since we are not part of their ecosystem in any sense, those impressive geological formations being isolated from their surrounding environment by steep cliffs, and some of them having never been visited by any human being.[5] This sort of event is rather rare in the history of the planet, but it is only through such events that something like the Earth manifests itself. In the past this may have required the eruption of a supervolcano or the impact of an asteroid; today the Earth is awakened by the advent of carbon civilization. Each time an event elicits not only a modification of a state of affairs but also a supplementary chain of reactions that potentially affects *all* the beings of the planet, the Earth itself is manifested as an actor.

If global warming deserves to be called a new philosophical issue, it is precisely because it is global. Indeed, we are not well equipped to understand what globality is. The Earth is not the soil, it is not the ground, it is not the landscape, it is not this or that environment, it is not an ecosystem, it is not even the planet as it might be defined from an astronomical point of view (like Newton's, say). It is a global actor whose becoming has not until now been so relevant for human decisions.

2. First Ontological Challenge of the Earth: The Concept of Hybridity and Why It Does Not Suffice to Characterize This New Actor

Now the question is this: why has this challenge so defined, i.e. the appearance of the Earth as a new actor in the world, attracted the particular attention of some of the most significant proponents of what is known as the "ontological turn" in anthropology? Typical of this encounter is the way Bruno Latour introduces his *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*: "The diplomatic scene that I seek to set forth through this inquiry is one that would reunite the

5 See Mark Lynas, *Six Degrees: Our Future in a Hotter Planet* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007).

aforementioned moderns with the aforementioned "others" as Gaia approaches."[6] What is ontologically so challenging about this new actor? And what does our confrontation with "global warming" have to gain from anthropology?

There are two ways these questions can be addressed. One might be to claim that the need to face the Earth provides a good reason for repeating the sort of intellectual moves for which the proponents of the ontological turn have already argued. In other words, facing the Earth would require that we redefine anthropology as ontology (in a sense that will be clarified shortly).

But it can also go the other way. It might be that to think through what is at stake in the ontological turn, we have to realize that anthropology, in the end, is not only about Being qua Being, it is also about the Earth. "Ontologies" would then be regions of the Earth. The object of anthropology would neither be cultural variation nor ontological variation but, to borrow a term from Elizabeth Povinelli, *geontological variations*, variations of the Earth itself within itself.[7] This means that there would be here a turn within a turn. It is in that sense that I warned the reader: "You liked the ontological turn? Then you will love the geological turn!"

But before examining those two strategies, I need first to explain quickly what version of the "ontological turn" I have in mind. I will make some clearly disputable claims that I cannot justify here for the sole reason that I do not wish to discuss the contentious notion of an "ontological turn" per se, but rather to explore some of its consequences—in other words I would like to *move forward*. I have argued elsewhere and in more detail for the following interpretation of "the ontological turn," so I will proceed here in a more dogmatic style, with a series of propositions.[8]

> *Proposition 1.* Anthropology is a form of knowledge that makes of the virtual variation of the subject of that knowledge the only source of knowledge. As an anthropologist, I must not hold true anything other than whatever emerges from the particular experiences I have of how my own existence might have been another one.
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> *Proposition 2.* The ontological turn is a consequence of that epistemology: construing those becoming-others as cultural differences simply does not do justice to the fact that many of those becomings precisely exclude relating to themselves and to us as cultural differences. As a consequence, the true comparative ground cannot be culture; Being will be a more effective comparative field, because it enlarges the scope of the differences. Anthropology then gets redefined as comparative ontology.

6 Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, p. 13; Many proponents of what is known as the "ontological turn" (like Latour, Viveiros de Castro, Descola, Ingold, etc.) have emphasized the relevance of their work in the context of Climate Change. The first version of this paper was not by chance presented at a conference in Rio de Janeiro held in September 2014 and entitled "The Thousand Names of Gaia: from the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth", which gathered Viveiros de Castro, Latour, Harraway, Stengers, Povinelli, Chakrabarty, etc.

7 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

8 Patrice Maniglier, "Anthropological Meditations: The Discourse on Comparative Method", in Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon, Peter Skafish eds., *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology after Anthropology* (Landham (Md.): Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

> Conversely the ontological turn commits itself to a very radical form of ontological pluralism: to be is to be taken in a series of virtual becomings or alternatives of oneself, which might have the form, say, of transformation groups *à la* Lévi-Strauss. To be is to be a variant.
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> *Proposition 3.* The notion of variant should not mislead us into thinking that there is a vantage point external to the virtual variation itself and from which the variety could be objectively considered; the variant is always at the same time a relativization of the type, and the culture concept only makes sense within a particular "ontology," for example. Such "ontologies" are not representations of the way things are, but different ways of existing or variants of Being.

This definition of the ontological turn helps us at the very least understand why we cannot be content with the explanation of the relation between the challenge of the Earth and the pluralist version of the ontological turn that Bruno Latour puts forward in the introduction to *Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*. He argues there that the appearance of the Earth (which he calls *Gaia*, a term that has many merits, including being more precise as a concept than "the Earth," but which triggers so many misunderstandings that I prefer to stick with "the Earth" here) requires that we overcome the distinction between culture and nature. Indeed, if the new age of the Earth is so marked by human activity that it should be named the Anthropocene, how can anyone still work with that distinction?[9] This situation would be the most eminent illustration of what Latour had already identified in *We Have Never Been Moderns* as the trick that is characteristic of the moderns: the more the moderns swear that nature and culture are two distinct things, the more they multiply the hybrids.[10] The Earth then would be the maximal, the apocalyptic hybrid, the one that makes the modern trick simply unsustainable: *le Roi est nu*, and modernity would have reached with global warming the point where it has to confess that there were hybrids all along.

I certainly agree that in order to understand the new situation we are entering into, we must stop distributing natural entities (like carbon, rivers, clouds, etc.) on the one hand, and cultural or representational actions (like social relationships, philosophical categories, etc.) on the other. We must have a *flat* approach to all this (in the sense of a flat ontology), which means, as Bonneuil and Fressoz write in *L'Evénement Anthropocène*, that we must put on one and the same plane, for instance, the habits of European consumers and Indonesian apes, markets and humid zones, social inequalities and endocrine disruptors.[11]

But isn't that exactly the kind of theoretical situation for which the ontological concept of the *network* (and the whole of Actor Network Theory) was invented and developed? The problem is that this interpretation does not commit us to any particular

9 Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*.

10 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1993).

11 Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'Événement-Anthropocène* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 54. During the age of the Anthropocene the Earth, they argue, is not an encompassing circle in which one could find other circles (environments, cultures, etc.), but rather "an intricate network where one finds mutually reproduced, through thousands of channels, 'social' and "natural' arrangements, European consumption attitudes and Indonesian apes, markets and humid zones, social inequalities and endocrine disruptors, powers and the chemical composition of the atmosphere, representations of the world and energetic fluxes" (my translation).

form of pluralism. Quite the opposite in fact: it rather points toward a form of ontological monism in which everything is network. To put it in the terms Latour himself uses: if we only need to understand that there are hybrids everywhere, then the pluralization of modes of existence that he attempts in his in his *Inquiry* would seem quite unnecessary. To make a "flat" ethnography of carbon worlds, we would not need what he calls prepositions (PRE), which multiply the understanding of the *way* things are but only one mode of existence, NET: networks. The Earth would be a NET-being. But that would mean that it is not a plural one and therefore not one for which the version of the ontological turn I have argued for can be of any use. Let's remind ourselves that Latour introduced the model of the modes of existence precisely because he thought that the hegemony of the notion of network was problematic.[12]

So we are left with the question: why would facing the Earth require that we develop a pluralist approach such as the ones developed in what is called "the ontological turn" (and such as the one developed by Latour himself in his *Inquiry*)?

3. Globality, or the New Foundations of Ontological Pluralism

The answer to this question lies again in the realization of what "global" means. It is the global and not the flat character of the Earth that explains why it requires a pluralist approach. That global warming is global means that what happens in New Orleans is not necessarily "exactly the same thing" as what happens in Alaska, in Southern France or in the Venezuelan tepuis. But it is nonetheless *part of something that must in some sense be construed as one*, even though its manifestations and mechanisms are remarkably diverse. The Earth exists as long as we can use the universal quantifier: one action (say, carbon emissions) sets in motion one complex course of reactions that impacts *all* beings. How then are we to understand this oneness?

There is a widespread resistance amongst well-educated people to represent this oneness as that of an organism, as Lovelock is supposed to have suggested with his infamous *Gaia Hypothesis.*[13] Latour and Stengers have argued in a rather convincing way that this is a misreading of Lovelock. I will not discuss this point here. Let it suffice to accept that the Earth is not an organism.[14]

More tempting is what seems to me to be the most accepted answer of the "Earth sciences": the Earth would not be a system integrating all beings in a general homeostasis but rather an interlocking series of dynamic systems, like the carbon cycle, the phosphorus cycle, etc. In other words, the Earth would be exactly that object constituted by all the global correlations that climate sciences make apparent in their models. If the models show that this or that variation in this or that parameter entails this or that alteration of some of the regulatory mechanisms, this variation is what the Earth is made of.

But this answer raises an issue: it entails that the oneness of the Earth transcends the variation of its expressions. There would be a vantage point from which the oneness of the Earth would be objectively accessed, the vantage point of the Earth sciences. In other words,

12 See Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, first chapter.

13 James Ephraim Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

14 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime,* trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge: Polity, 2017). Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*.

the Earth would be that which unfolds in the reports of the IPCC and thus first and foremost a scientific object.[15]

The problem with this interpretation is that it risks reiterating in fact what might be called quite bluntly a colonial structure. The ultimate form of dispossession consists in taking away from those we force to encounter us the capacity to define and negotiate the very ground of that encounter. To claim that there is one vantage point from which the Earth as such is identifiable as one thing is imposing a particular definition of that which we share or have in common.

An example will make clear what I have in mind. The French anthropologist Nastassja Martin recounts an anecdote about her stay with Gwinch'in in Alasaka. A Gwinch'in hunter has killed a caribou. But the bowels of the caribou are rotten. "You see," the man remarks, "the Chinese pollute and our caribous die." Indeed, he has been told that the bowels are rotten because the caribous eat the lichens that are contaminated by acid rain.[16] My contention is that the Earth only exists because of and in such connections. It is not anything above those connections, like some unified totality that only satellites could grasp. The Earth is not only in the computers of the IPPC; it is also in the modification of the behavior of the Gwinch'in hunter as well as in the bowels of the caribous. Those too are "modelizations."

However, that there is a connection does not tell us much about how it is made and how it unfolds. That the Gwinch'ins acknowledge the new relation that they have with the Chinese does not mean that they *make* this relation (both in the sense of construing it "in their mind" and of negotiating it "in reality") in the terms of the climate sciences. Each relation is to be made by the *relata* and might not be made in the same way. The relation might be precisely about the incompatible ways in which the relation is made by the *relata*.

A good example of such a diverging perception of what is at stake with Climate Warming is Amazonian shaman Davi Kopenawa's prophecy. In his book with Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky*, he clearly refers to the same thing as the IPCC does. However, he explains it as continuous with the "*xawara* epidemic smoke" that decimated his people (which we identify as epidemics of smallpox) and whose etiology he finds in the obsession with metal and more generally with mining of "Whites."[17] Can we make something out of such claims or are we condemned to treat this at best as a metaphor of scientific truth? Can we make room for both the IPCC and Kopenawa?

It is very tempting to claim that those who are able to see the truth of the relation between acid rain and Chinese pollution are also those who know what the Earth is. As a consequence, it is also very tempting to claim that Gwinch'in hunters should relate now to their caribou in a way that can only be rational if it is mediated via the standpoint of those connections they don't see but can be informed of. To be part of the Earth would become the new way by which the good old colonial predicament would endure. And the growing tensions between indigenous communities and conservationists, lovers of Nature and short-

15 A very subtle version of this idea has been defended by Isabelle Stengers: "It is the name of what a new scientific field addresses, a being the past of which is reconstructed in order to learn about its present and future behavior. What threatens us has no face but a complex interrelated set of models and data." See Isabelle Stengers, "Gaia, The Urgency to Think (and Feel)." Paper presented at the conference, "The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth," 2.

16 Nastassja Martin, *Les Âmes Sauvages*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2016).

17 Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

sighted ecologists show that this is not only a *vue de l'esprit*. If the truth of the Earth is only given from the standpoint of satellites and computer-run models, then only the Earth sciences can tell us what we are dealing with and what we should do. But in that case, it would be tempting to argue that only geoengineering can solve the problem (cutting our carbon emissions itself would be a sort of geoengineering), international decision-making bodies informed by experts would alone be qualified to determine what is right or wrong for the Earth, etc. In sum, a global reality would imply a global power, and here global means above and beyond the diversity of actors.

The transcendence of the Earth as a scientific object that lies beyond the actual encounters between the agents that make the Earth would then infuse all the aspects of our mutual relations. This is how I understand Povinelli's introduction of the notion of *geoontopolitics.*[18] The politics of the Earth is, indeed, the politics of our time. If biopolitics was defined by the fact that the power of the State over its targets both grounded itself and redefined its techniques using the concept of *population*, it is today on the grounds of our belonging to the Earth that new and frightening powers will not only justify but also conduct and operationalize their agendas. We are entering the time of *geopower*. We will have to comply with many things just because we occupy a part of this intricate and sensitive being, the Earth.

I must add that what I have just argued here from anecdotes involving human beings can also involve nonhuman beings. The question is not only how the Gwinch'in hunter represents the situation but also how he relates to the caribou, the Chinese, and the scientist—what relations he actually draws and how he becomes other than himself in the course of the encounter. Similar questions could be addressed to bees, apes or glaciers.

In this situation, it seems to me that anthropology is needed; or, rather, a particular kind of anthropology is needed—the one that conceives itself as a counter-poison to colonialism.

Indeed, if anthropology is, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argued, the art (and not the science) of controlled equivocation, nowhere is it more useful than when it comes to understanding what this something that we now have to face *together*, viz. the Earth, is.[19] Viveiros de Castro might be understood as arguing that anthropology uses the failures to extend a category (be it the category of religion, body, humanity, or the Earth), i.e. the failure of "ethnocentric" projections, in order to redefine each term by the very way this category is altered in the course of its own translations—the function of those translations not being to establish any equivalence but rather to let the immanent differences emerge.

While, in the past, the question of what we had in "common" gravitated around the problem of the *anthropos*—anthropology being the art of complicating the relation between the universal and the particular—nowadays the contested element seems to be the Earth, the *geos*, and no longer the *anthropos.* It is the Earth, not the Human, that today arouses our suspicion that the identification of what we have in common is just the hegemonic subsuming of all the parts under the law of just one of them. Our question is no longer: "What does it mean that we are *all* human?" It is rather: "What does it mean that we all have the *same* problem, the Earth?" Our problem is no longer a problem of universality but a problem of globality. It is not the question of an identity (for instance the identity of a human essence), but the question of a totality (how to share one planet). The most critical

18 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, 2016.

19 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014), 84-91.

philosophical issue today is not how to make claims that are universally valid but how to put together forms of togetherness that are incompatible.

The Earth is our real equivocation, it is this "common" ground that only exists through the diverging ways by which the very unification is made. The Earth is not a transcendent identity; it is the dynamic of the diverging versions of itself. The Earth therefore only exists because it makes sense to say that the entity uncovered by IPCC reports and the "great earth-forest" presented by Amazonian shaman Davi Kopenawa are indeed continuous with one another, which means that we have to understand how one *becomes* the other, without reducing either to a metaphor or just a representation of the other one. It is therefore not in the laudable achievements of the IPCC alone that we should find the Earth; it is in all the "contested ecologies,"[20] that is, in all the controversies about that which we are forced to accept that we have in common; in sum in the equivocations by which the Earth, the true Earth, transits.

The Earth calls for an anthropological approach, entirely continuous with and integrated in the earth sciences—although, perhaps, a slightly modified anthropology. Indeed, what the appearance of the Earth means is that we are now part of one (although maybe not the same) something. Not of the same species, not of the same genus (*le genre humain*). The question is not anymore whether we acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge a common essence, destiny or potentiality. It is of what we do under the all-encompassing sway of a power that brings us all into one process and puts us all in relation as never before. As Spivak and Povinelli have remarked, differences are no longer at the other end of the transformational process, as that which we might ultimately become (as in *Heart of Darkness*, alteration is at the end of the journey), but rather within the same totalizing operator, as another way of being integrated.[21] This is what I understand by Povinelli's concept of "the otherwise" or Spivak's notion of planetary subjectivity: differences as different ways of *being in*. The Earth is that which we now share, since it affects all of us; differently and unequally, of course, but all of us nonetheless. The whole question then becomes what is this "all of us": this is why all the rejoinders to Chakrabarty's argument about the "human species" that refer us back to the true fact that it is not the human species in general that is responsible for global warming but rather a very specific alliance of human and non-human actors in perfectly identifiable companies and even individuals, still miss the point. [22] The point is not, "Who is the actor that caused this situation?" It is, "Who is capable of facing a *common* problem?" The problem is not the explanation of the past but responsibility for the future. The Earth is the forced terrain of the encounter. The questions are "What is the 'we' that is addressed by the Earth?," "Who is the 'subject' of the Earth?," "Who is capable of facing the Earth?," "What are the alliances that can be built?" That there is no reason that this "we" has to be defined as exclusively human seems to me obvious. Nevertheless it requires anthropology as the art of making room for a non-hegemonic *we*.

20 In the volume edited by Lesley Green, "contested ecologies" refer to "contests over environments where different versions of nature are in play" and gather a series of essays on "unorthodox environmentalities which do not find a ready ear in fora where ecological management is limited to only one version of 'nature'", not only for the sake of "cognitive justice", but also in order "to manage the difference" so that is functions "as a generative experience for both Aboriginal teachers and scientist learners." See Lesley Green, *Contested Ecologies* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013), 1, 7.

21 Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*.

22 See Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses."

This is how I understand the need for an "anthropology beyond the human" (to borrow a phrase from Eduardo Kohn).[23]

4. The Ontological Challenge: The Earth Is Structured like a Language

But all this implies one very radical philosophical consequence: equivocation is no longer on the side of language alone; it is also on the side of "realities." If the Earth itself only exists as equivocal, i.e. only in the encounter between different variants of itself, it means that equivocation is not simply something that happens in representations, in which case there would exist one sign that has more than one meaning; equivocation is a kind of reality, it is the mode of existence of a particular sort of beings, of those beings that can be called *global*. This is, according to me, the deepest and utterly unrecognized reason why we must overcome the distinction between language and reality, sign and being; in short, the most interesting challenge of the ontological turn.

My point is that the Earth is as much a matter of translation as our languages are, as much as capital also is (as Chakrabarty showed in *Provincializing Europe*). It is not correct to think that there are on the one hand univocal things, like the Earth, the planets, the climate, etc., and on the other equivocal things, like languages, kinship systems, philosophical ideas. It is not correct to put the equivocation only on the side of representation, while reality would always (at least in principle) be deemed univocal. The Earth only exists in translation, that is, because it is being translated, as a multiplicity; it only exists at the very moment the IPCC Earth-system becomes Davi Kopenawa's Earth-forest and conversely, which enables both of them to redefine themselves as tendencies in this mutually diverging dynamic.

But it must also be noted that translation does not consist in analyzing how two representational systems relate to one referential ground (or, say, divide its semantic space); it consists in redefining each of those systems by the very transformations they operate on one another, without the mediation of a third term, in exactly the same way as Lévi-Strauss's myths translate one another without the mediation of a third compass. The difficult point here is that an identity, for instance the identity of a linguistic term, that we can represent *à la* Saussure as being defined by its differential relations to other terms, is equated with another identity that by definition it is not. Indeed, in this view of translation we don't say that *mouton* can translate *mutton* because they both can be referred to a third term, their meaning, i.e. the eatable flesh of the animal that enters into culinary habits. We say that "*mouton is* mutton" and we have to negotiate the translation without the mediation of a third term that would mitigate the identity.[24] This can only be made sense of if we start with equivocation. Equivocation is the ontological feature of what we might call *split identities*, identities that only exist in their diverging realizations.

We tend to think of equivocation within language as the supposed fact that there are many signifieds for just one signifier. This is not, I contend, a correct view. Equivocation is the expression, on the plane of the signified, of the intrinsic variability of linguistic signs in

23 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2013).

24 The reference to Saussure here should not mislead the reader. I have shown elsewhere that, contrarily to the received view, Saussure's work is entirely aimed at understanding the necessity of historical and dialectal change. I have also showed that this was why Lévi-Strauss drew from Saussure. See Patrice Maniglier, "Signs and Customs: Lévi-Strauss, Practical Philosopher", *Common Knowledge* 22, no. 3 (2016). The reader must, then, suspend all Pavlovian temptations to declare "structuralism" dead, buried, and irrelevant to contemporary thought.

general. Just as a sign can be pronounced in many different ways, in the same way it can mean different things. Furthermore, equivocation is a direct consequence of a strange and fascinating property of language, a property that drew the attention of no less a figure than Saussure. This property is that of intrinsic variability. Perhaps the most important sentence of Saussure's entire corpus is the following one: "French does not come from Latin, French *is* Latin." I have shown elsewhere[25] that it is in order to understand that strange fact that Saussure introduced the wonderful paraphernalia of structuralist ontology (entities that are only made of differences, that are dual and purely positional, etc.). If linguistic variation is possible, it is precisely because no language is identical to itself. It does not have to *become* another language because it was never the same from the start. Each language is intrinsically variable in the sense sociolinguistics at the time of Weinreich and Labov described it. When Labov showed that a young African-American man could switch seventeen times from one code, say Black Vernacular English, to another, say Standard English, he showed that it does not make sense in such conditions to constitute dialects into languages and then try to explain how we navigate from one to the other.[26] We should rather try to understand that any language truly spoken is intrinsically multiple, not in the sense that it is composed of many languages, but in the sense that it is itself in variation and also in perpetual transformation. To make sense of this claim, simply imagine that a language is not a unified homogenous entity that defines a community by the identity of what they share (the infamous *trésor* that Saussure said ***la*** *langue* was), but rather that which enables a speaker to translate between two speakers who don't understand each another. Indeed language is not transitive: from the fact that A and B understand each other in language L, and that B and C understand each other in language L too, you cannot infer that A and C understand each other as speaking the same language L. For instance, a university professor might be able to read Rabelais and speak with some of her Canadian students who can't follow it, but they readily understand argotic *québécois* for which she needs subtitles. I suggest that we say that (her) French is that which makes the translation between Rabelais's French and some contemporary argotic French possible.

This detour through linguistics has one purpose: to argue that equivocation has nothing to do with meaning but rather with a particular kind of identity, a particular mode of existence, the mode of existence of what Deleuze called multiplicities, which the conception of language I have just sketched perfectly illustrates. It is enough for one thing to share the ontological features of "split identities" to be called equivocal. It is my contention that the Earth is equivocal in precisely that sense. The Earth is our real, unavoidable, and massive equivocation. And this is why the Earth calls for a renewed anthropological attitude.

This provides an unforeseen ground for claiming that there is something indeed ontologically common between the Earth and language (in other words to argue, with Eduardo Kohn, that we have to understand that signs are not human inventions but start before the human).[27] I am tempted to say: the Earth is structured like a language, in the

25 Patrice Maniglier, *La Vie énigmatique des signes, Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2006).

26 William Labov, *Sociolinguistics Patterns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968).

27 Kohn argued that one needed Peircian semiotics against Saussurian semiology to build an 'anthropology beyond the human,' since the latter relied on the distinction of convention and nature. Not only do I think this last reading is inaccurate but I also think Saussurian semiology offers another way into the equation of Being and sign, a way grounded on the notions of equivocation,

sense Lacan said that the unconscious is structured like a language. Not because it conveys meaning but because it varies in the same way as languages do. The unity of the Earth should be compared to the unity of a language, say, Latin, in the sense that Latin is not only identical to French but at the same time makes of French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian etc. "one" language. The existence of a language, as I have just argued, is exactly coextensive with the varieties of the diverging expressions of itself. It is nothing beyond. Similarly, the Earth is that which enables us to say that the Earth-system of the IPCC is the same as the Forest that Kopenawa argues is a better way to capture what he says we call "the entire world."[28] Similarly, how the Gwinch'in integrate the Chinese is neither identical nor symmetrical to the way Chinese workers integrate the Gwinch'in. This is characteristic of global realities: they are made of diverging, incompatible versions of themselves (a point that global history made clear). By "versions" I don't mean "representations of," of course, but the very real ways of drawing the lines between things, or of making them one. This opens to a large array of empirical works to describe the Earth in all the ways it has of distributing itself in diverging variants of itself.

5. Conclusion.

Anthropology has always been at its best when it thinks of itself as an attempt at to define a non-hegemonic "We." Today, the question of *we* is bound to the appearance of the Earth on the stage of history, as that which addresses and challenges "us all." This provides anthropology with a new ground, as long as it is ready not to let itself be trapped in distinctions that used to be operational but no longer are, like nature and culture, language and reality, human and non-human, etc. In consequence, I would argue that the ontological turn must become a geological turn: *what the Earth is* is really what anthropology is about. Anthropology does not only speak of "the human"; it is also best positioned to speak of "the Earth," because it can do justice to the globality of this new actor without projecting it into any transcendent realm where it would exist over and beyond the variety of its own diverging versions. In other words, the activists who remind us that there is no planet B are right; but we must remember that this does not make of the oneness of the Earth something univocal. The Earth is one—but not the same.[29]

multiplicity, variant, etc., which must not be neglected. Indeed it has the advantage of avoiding the very naturalist undertones of Kohn's "semiotics beyond the human."

28 Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky*, 60.

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