

## CODA

# toward a politics of nonhuman witnessing

COVID-19 HAS SHATTERED many of the fictions that sustained the global order, racial capitalism, and the supremacy of Man. These pandemic years have been a brutal reminder of the nonhuman agencies that impinge upon and transform us and our ways of living in profound and immeasurable ways. Writing on the growing intimacies with such nonhuman agencies in sites such as post-Fukushima Japan, Kath Weston argues that “ecointimacies are compositional,” born of the “growing conviction that creatures co-constitute other creatures, infiltrating one another’s very substance, materially and otherwise.”<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 is that most intimate of infiltrators, absorbed through air and breath, accelerated and intensified by both the desire to share social and familial space, but even more so by an economic order that demands the production and distribution of goods passed through human hands in tightly packed spaces in which people have no choice but to breathe the same air. Regimes of testing, the continual monitoring for new strains, the (re)instantiation of borders of all kinds, the clear correlation between changing climate and new diseases—the pandemic has forced us to confront our entanglements, both with one another and with the nonhuman in all its technical and ecological variety. More just and equitable futures for human life depend not only on reckoning with COVID-19 but also with the enduring crises from which it is inseparable. Attending to the intimacies and estrangements through

which life is composed is crucial to that task. If the virus teaches us of our constitutive entanglement within one another, it also insists on difference, complexity, and the incommensurate opacities through which life coexists.

Produced by new cominglings of human and animal, the novel coronavirus emerged from the forces of expansion, extraction, and enclosure that actualize the compulsions of capital and its handmaiden the state.<sup>2</sup> But even as the pandemic disrupted the seemingly smooth flow of goods and people across the globe, it also accelerated the datafication and informationalization of life at all scales. From the profusion of Zoom meetings to the normalization of population health surveillance to the redistribution of carbon emissions away from air travel to data centers and compute resources, the pandemic has intensified the constitutive contradiction of contemporary life between the promise of a smooth and knowable World and the collective experience of disjunctive, agonistic worlds. Collapsing the geopolitical into everyday life, the stark inequities in access to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments across the globe—not to mention the very different capacity of wealthy nations to weather the economic storms of lockdowns, deaths, and soaring health care costs—are in turn reflected in the classist and racist application of restrictions within polities, backed by police and militaries. Here in Sydney, for example, armed police and active-duty soldiers were deployed en masse in the diverse working-class suburbs in the southwest of the city, while residents of the affluent east and north went largely untroubled. The biopolitics of health management fused with an incipient necropolitics of militarized policing, facilitated by the ontopolitical capacities of algorithmic analysis of the feral transmission of the virus itself.

Politics as we know it is not equipped to deal with the intimacies of the entangled and incommensurate, just as it is not equipped to reckon with crises at the planetary scale. “Only a politics rebuilt on aesthetic principles, that is, by remaking communications,” writes Cubitt, “offers the possibility of changing the conduct of relations between human beings and nature, and between both of them and the technologies that so profoundly and multifariously mediate between them.”<sup>3</sup> If the neoliberal moment of racial capitalism has produced a fragmented and ad hoc politics based around the marketization and informationalization of life, then an alternative politics must surely begin with communication within and across difference. As I have argued throughout this book, nonhuman witnessing is a distinctive communicative modality, one in which difference is not a problem to be solved but rather the grounds for flourishing. Many of the nonhuman entities and ecologies traced in this book lack speech, or lack an inherent verbal or visual language

equivalent to the human, but they are nevertheless continually communicating. Uranium isotopes continue to communicate with the plants, animals, sand, and peoples at Maralinga, and with the Traditional Owners driven from Country. Communication such as this is aesthetic, in that it is at once sensing and sense-making, but it is also relational and epistemological.

Nonhuman witnessing makes a claim on what can be known, whether in the neural layers of machine learning systems, or in the breath of the artist blowing glass in the trail of nuclear fallout, or in the digital afterlife of the sacred sites blasted to extract iron ore. For philosopher Jacques Rancière, politics is disorder, an insistent challenge to the prevailing order, the demand that the part without a part—the dispossessed and denied—obtain agency over its own fate.<sup>4</sup> The problem at hand is not simply to expand who or what gets to stand for parliament, but to radically reimagine the conditions within which knowledge is made and the communicative modalities needed to reckon with the incommensurabilities and opacities that constitute life within worlds of infinite relation. Even as the politics of the pandemic have for the most part been grim in the extreme, I hold on to thin hope that these conditions of crisis contain within them the potential to witness worlds and what happens within and between them in ways that enable alternative politics in the flourishing of communication, of connection, and of relation across difference.

#### AFTER THE WORLD, MANY

Many peoples and worlds know deeply the destructive force of the World: damming rivers and flooding homelands in the name of progress; clearing bush for farmland; blasting mountain, hill, and stone to extract fossil fuels; dispossessing peoples and breaking apart families; and severing ties to land, country, and kin. Even if the World that, like Man, overrepresents itself as the totality of existence has come to an end as a plausible or coherent notion, its death throes continue to wrack the planet and life on it in catastrophic ways. No reckoning has yet been made, despite the urgency. Indebted to the Zapatista slogan “a world where many worlds fit,” de la Cadena and Blaser describe “the practice of a world of many worlds, or what we call a pluriverse: heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity.”<sup>5</sup> A pluriversal reconception of coexistence—from World to worlds—is the task at hand for that great swathe of humanity that has benefited from and main-

tained the fiction of Man. Pluriversality requires a new “political ontology,” a “politics of reality” grounded in the presumption of “divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions.”<sup>6</sup>

Pluriversality confronts a dominant politics set sharply against the very notion of many worlds. This politics “emerged (with science) to make a liveable universe,” writes de la Cadena, “to control conflict among a single if culturally diversified humanity living in a single scientifically knowable nature.”<sup>7</sup> This political field depends on divisions between friend and enemy, as well as between nature and culture. As de la Cadena argues, “These two antitheses—between humanity and nature, and between allegedly superior and inferior humans—declared the gradual extinction of other-than-human beings and the worlds in which they existed.”<sup>8</sup> To engage in politics, one had to be recognized within the hierarchical domain of Humanity—of Man—and not assigned to Nature, a form of racialization many First Nations people have been, and continue to be, subjected to. Pluralizing politics, then, is not simply a question of inclusion within Man, but is to be found in the very dissolution of such a notion to begin with. As I argued in the introduction, witnessing has long operated as a coconspirator with Man, a guarantor to science, law, religion, and culture of the coherence and cogency of the World. As I have articulated the concept, nonhuman witnessing aims to break that binding of the Witness to Man and, with it, Man to World.

This refiguring of witness and witnessing does not facilitate the smooth aggregation of politics as usual with pluriversality but enables an adversarial pluralism, in which noncontiguous and mutually exclusive worlds can coexist—even if coexistence requires the end of the World of Man. Coexistence depends upon contact and relationality, not mutual exclusion. Incommensurate worlds can only coexist when contact with irreducible difference is the condition for a relational politics. Attending to the nonhuman in witnessing is one way to “slow down reasoning and provoke the kind of thinking that would enable us to undo, or more accurately, unlearn, the single ontology of politics,” as de la Cadena puts it.<sup>9</sup> Nonhuman witnessing offers the means to trace how knowledge moves between or is animated across many worlds in a situation in which media, like all resources, are finite. Media and mediation hold the potential to generate the connective, communicative tissue between worlds. For Cubitt, communication constitutes the ground of a renewed politics, a politics that reckons with the exclusion of the nonhuman from the forms foisted on the world through the Enlightenment, colonialization, and marketization. To build alternative futures, the

nonhuman must be understood as “an active agent of historical change.”<sup>10</sup> For this to hold, humanity must reckon with the fact “that our environments are not only capable of communication, but are constantly communicating.”<sup>11</sup> Communication—and mediation more generally—have long been too radically delimited by modernity’s insistence on the radical distinction between human and environment, between nature and culture. Communication must embrace entities far beyond the human, not as sources of evidence or information but as agential and vital in and of themselves. In the aftermath of the end of the World, this communicative politics must reckon with the jostling and at times agonistic existence of countless worlds on this one planet. Setting agendas between worlds and resolving conflicts between species and things where outcomes might be lethal presents an immense challenge to such a proposition, and one that this book can only gesture toward. Pluriversal justice resides in the capacity for coexistence, and the active refusal of worlds predicated on martial, algorithmic, and ecological violence. Such a future requires a kind of faith in the incommensurate, a willingness to build a pluriversal politics of human and nonhuman that begins with the collective witnessing of what must remain opaque, unknowable, and incommunicable even as it seeks and nourishes connection and communication. A nonhuman witnessing of the opacity of existence constituted by human and nonhuman relationality.

#### WITNESSING OPACITY

Tracing nonhuman witnessing across entangled crises of war, data, and ecologies has meant repeated encounters with tensions and paradoxes. Not bound to the human subject or sensorium, nonhuman witnessing necessarily evokes agencies, entities, and aesthetics that cannot be readily resolved in the human communicative terrain of language, gesture, and image. Against the demand that the modern witness—the witness of science and the courts and the media—have their testimony be verifiable, nonhuman witnessing requires that the incommensurate and unknowable be taken as generative opportunities for crafting new relations and knowledges. Here we might recall the machine vision analysis of military drone images, but also the resistant potential of such systems when harnessed by the investigative aesthetics of Forensic Architecture and applied to state violence. Each of the analytic concepts developed in this book reckon in different ways with tension, incommensurability, and unknowability. Violent mediation seeks to describe

how complexity, uncertainty, and the unknowable are erased and elided through instrumental processes of mediation. Machinic affect names those relational intensities that animate technoscientific apparatuses, ambivalent to the human and otherwise relegated to the mere operation of technical systems. Ecological trauma describes the rippling effects of the rupturing of relations within more-than-human ecologies, many of which elude human understanding and can only ever be partially made sensible to the ecological system itself. Radical absence brings these questions of the incommensurate into the quotidian experience of the digital and its nonhuman infrastructures, accounting for encounters with what has been rendered absent yet remains forcefully present. These analytics thus engage with the necessary opacity of existence, with the fundamental incapacity for entities to disclose themselves to one another even when bound in relation.

Here, then, I arrive at a final doubled meaning: witnessing opacity, or the nonhuman witnessing of opacity, and the opacity of nonhuman witnessing. Nonhuman witnessing seeks to bring opacity into the space of witnessing, not as a problem to be resolved but as a site of potential communicative relation. At the same time, nonhuman witnessing is constituted by its own opacity, its presence in zones of sensing and sense-making that cannot be decoded or even identified at all. The dissolution of the human as privileged witness depends on this potential for withdrawal from anthropocentric epistemology. Modernity—with its Enlightenment and colonial underpinnings—demands transparency, as Glissant argues: “This same transparency, in Western History, predicts that a common truth of Mankind exists and maintains that what approaches it most closely is action that projects, whereby the world is realized at the same time that it is caught in the act of its foundation.”<sup>12</sup> Opacity works against this “reductive transparency.”<sup>13</sup> It is not obscurity but rather “that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”<sup>14</sup> Opacity emerges with and is the condition of new and old worlds alike. Opacity does not produce irreconcilable difference between cultures, languages, or ways of living but rather makes possible the coexistence of multiplicities within a totality. “Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics,” Glissant writes. “To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.”<sup>15</sup> This weave is Relation, or “what the world makes and expresses of itself.”<sup>16</sup> Glissant’s opening to Relation invokes “a poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible,” but in his account is very much tied to human subjectivities and the traumas they experience, particularly those of slavery’s Middle Passage. Glissant’s right to

opacity is itself a response to dehumanizing violence and is, in a sense, already a politics of witnessing traumas that leave no trace, lost to the oceans. For Glissant, this unrecoverable trauma is both an end and beginning; a nonpassage for the drowned and an abyssal beginning for those who survive.

Opacity thus arises from this unknowable trauma and from the contact between worlds that it sets in motion. Racialization, in other words, is not a by-product of the World of Man, but rather its constitutive force that renders certain peoples nonhuman, producing both World and Man through that dehumanization. Responding to the historical enactment of violent trauma, Glissant's opacity offers a way of understanding the Other that does not require the relinquishing of Otherness. As such, it provides a generative way of thinking relations with more-than-human ecologies and technics that do not require their submission to human forms of knowing or being, but depend instead on their openness to communication, justice, and the flourishing of other worlds. In doing so, it will be necessary to reckon with the incommensurabilities of weaponized drones and military AI, for example, and ask whether in the coexistence of worlds such technics should continue. Witnessing opacity is itself a political project, with political struggles inherent to its articulation beyond these pages.<sup>17</sup>

Against the notion that transparency is the necessary antidote to difference between beings and worlds, witnessing opacity helps enable a pluriversal politics. Nonhuman witnessing—as an ethicopolitical, aesthetic, and epistemic mode of relation—provides the potential for a transversal communicative politics, one that works within and between a pluriverse of worlds. Nonhuman witnessing offers an aesthetics of rupture and repair, of connection and disconnection. The politics at hand here are not concerned with policy *per se*, or with the democratic organization of human societies. I am not proposing that nonhuman witnessing enable a parliament of things. Rather, my proposition is that nonhuman witnessing be mobilized in the name of a politics of the dispossessed, of the human and nonhuman, of those denied humanity and denied agency. Such a politics must contend with the incommensurate at every level, precisely because those denied political standing within the World of Man are also deemed to lack transparency or its potential when in fact what they possess is an unassailable opacity. Justice isn't made by enforced transparencies and disclosures, but through contact between opacities that are nonetheless generative of shared knowledges. Nonhuman witnessing's political potential resides in how a field of relations—human and non; technical, cultural, and ecological—composes itself in the face of the injunction that witnessing makes, an injunction to become communica-

tive, to become both response-able and address-able even while holding the refusal that resides in the right to opacity.

### THE POLITICS OF NONHUMAN WITNESSING

Nonhuman witnessing seeks to bring into being the conditions for an otherwise by producing communicative relations across and within difference that refuse to override the opaque and the incommensurate. Nonhuman witnessing is an ecological mode of communication that arises from the fields of relations that come together in the encounter between human and nonhuman, and most intensely so in contexts of violence, domination, and control. By refusing the supremacy of Man the Witness as the figure through which events obtain meaning or knowledge is produced, nonhuman witnessing gives standing to diverse actors and entities, whether people denied humanity or machinic intelligences or wounded ecologies in the aftermath of war. What the nonhuman bears witness to might well be ruin, death, and trauma—and the witness itself might be a perpetrator—but the fundamental implication of nonhuman witnessing is to remake the human and the witnessing that we do. Nonhuman witnessing can be mobilized to heal and empower, to bring to light change in its emergence, and to insist on attending to voices, bodies, patterns, and materialities denied standing in the present order. Nonhuman witnessing is not a panacea, but rather a practice of forging relations with the incommensurate. Its lure is becoming more human through the witnessing of our constitutive nonhumanity.

The politics of nonhuman witnessing, then, is not one of rights, human or otherwise. Expanding the domain of rights—granting rights to rivers and other earth beings, for example—is a worthy enough endeavor but not one that changes the conditions under which politics takes place. If a machine were to bear witness as a rights-bearing subject, what rights would obtain to it and what would their articulation mean for the rights that already accrue to the “human”? Rights, for all the protections they provide, are part and parcel of the existing order of racial capitalism and neoliberal governance, guarantors of human privilege and individual autonomy within the epistemic domain of the Enlightenment. Rather than extending rights that humans have to the nonhuman, the task at hand is to invite nonhumans subjectivities and agencies into the space of politics and, in doing so, seek to recompose what politics is for the human. Cubitt again: “It is we ourselves who must become other in order to produce an other world. The correlative is that we

must cease to be human, and most of all cease to exist as exclusively human polity, which is the medium of communication par excellence. The road to that goal, however, must lead through the polis, the humanity of humans, and most of all through our communications in order to imagine a way out of stasis.”<sup>18</sup> Such a politics nurtures a radical solidarity between human and nonhuman, nourished by a shared capacity to witness violence and wonder, trauma and healing, and to do so in and across incommensurate time, space, scales, subjectivities, and materialities. There is no blueprint for such a politics, no white paper or policy guidance. It is a politics that can only become thinkable in its particularities through the poesis of its emergence. That emergence will produce its own challenges, not least those of setting agendas, establishing the grounds for lethality, and resolving conflicts. But to impose its forms in advance would be to foreclose futures that cannot be imagined from within the epistemic dominance of the *Anthropos*. At this critical conjuncture of history, the transformative potential of the politics of nonhuman witnessing remains unrealized.

There are already and have always been many worlds, both prior to and existing alongside or in the shadow of the World of the *Anthropos*, the World of the *Anthropocene*. First Nations worlds, but also worlds on the periphery of empire, or in the underbelly of cities, or in speculative futures, or in fugitive subjects escaping constraints of all kinds. Worlds of nonhuman beings, of animals and bacteria and plants and rocks. Worlds of earth beings, as de la Cadena describes the animacies of mountains, lakes, and forests.<sup>19</sup> And now worlds of technical agencies, and even—against the odds and despite the hidden human labor that often powers them—machinic intelligences and perceptual machines. Not all of these worlds would be readily recognized as such, and it might well be that the existence of some constitutes a risk to the existence of others. Yet such worlds jostle, cohabiting terrains and atmospheres, competing for energy, voice, space, and even time.

To begin with a political ontology that allows for such pluriversality is itself a radical move, since it means the End of the World, and of life and politics as we know it. “The idea of a pluriverse is utopian indeed,” writes de la Cadena, “not because other socionatural formations and their earth-practices do not take place, but because we have learned to ignore their occurrence, considering it a thing of the past or, what is the same, a matter of ignorance and superstition.”<sup>20</sup> Like all utopian projects, a world of many worlds can’t wind the clock back, undo the damage, or raise the dead. But a world of many worlds does require a communicative modality that reaches toward the incommensurability of crowding worlds, even as it respects the necessity

of ineradicable difference. Rather than rights or democratic participation, the politics of nonhuman witnessing concerns the emergent composition of fields of relations out of which incommensurate collectivities and paradoxical knowledges might form. The politics of nonhuman witnessing is, in this sense, an ecological poesis, an attunement to and calibration of the human and the nonhuman that dwells in and with opacity. It is a politics of and for the future, even as it provides the means to reimagine the past.

The politics of nonhuman witnessing is a politics of the commons, but not the commons in a universal, global, or homogenous sense—rather it is a profusion of commons, bound by their common commitment to neither begin with nor seek to resolve homogeneity.<sup>21</sup> Such a commons can only ever be emergent and unfixed, since it must compose itself a new in the ongoing antagonisms, negotiations, sympathies, and alliances between worlds. Commons are necessarily communicative. Nonhuman witnessing offers the potential for a distinct communicative mode, one that insists not simply upon communication but on the demand for response and address. Such terms carry with them a certain anthropocentrism, but in adopting them I am not returning to narrow notions of speech or recognition. Address and response form instead a communicative relation and generative aesthetic. Fuller and Weizman describe the emergence of an investigative commons in the new collectivities of forensic architecture, open-source investigation, and distributed human rights research, which in turn draws on the existence of an aesthetic commons, in which processes of sensing and sensing-making fold into further such processes.<sup>22</sup> If nonhuman witnessing animates or emerges within particular commons, it also does so at the level of aesthetics and in league with such instrumental investigative modes. But it also exceeds those deliberate, human interventions, describing too the poesis that can arise in the strange agonisms and fleeting alliances of machines, ecologies, animals, and people.

To return to the Pacific Forum that opened chapter 3 of this book, nonhuman witnessing might galvanize a commons of islands and oceans, people and winds, garbage and atmospheric sensing. Nonhuman witnessing would not paper over the incapacities of speech or the ephemerality of certain agencies but would be alive to what emerges in the intensive connections that can arise when worlds are anchored, nurtured, and fought for. It is for this reason that I have attended in this book not only to material events and actually existing technologies, but also to speculative imaginaries and creative works. Such phenomena, objects, practices, and processes are often not at all contiguous or willing to reveal their workings. Nor should they be. What

they reveal is the contingent and always incomplete nature of nonhuman witnessing, how its politics depend on the work of refiguring the human in the face of catastrophic crises.

This book is, too, a necessarily incomplete gesture. A pursuit of something happening all around us yet refusing to be fixed in place. War, in its all its turbulent and violent becoming, now escapes the human more than ever before, yet it cannot and will not leave us behind. Algorithmic and data technologies enclose life and seek to make it operative. Ecological catastrophe pushes the planet itself to the brink of becoming unlivable. In the shadow of what refuses to be grasped, that won't submit to contained and discrete ways of knowing, can't sit still long enough to become knowable to the human alone, nonhuman witnessing widens the ambit through which meaning comes to matter, responsibility is forged, and more-than-human epistemic communities become possible. Yet while its politics are never far from the surface, their form and force remain to be realized in the work that lies before us, humans and otherwise.