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Navigating (Post-)Anthropocenic Times of Crisis: A Critical Cartography of Hope

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Abstract:

Departing from the (post-)Anthropocenic crisis state of today's world, fuelled by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, various post-truth populist follies, and an apocalyptic WW3-scenario that has been hanging in the air since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this article argues for the possibility – and necessity – of an affirmative posthumanist-materialist mapping of hope. Embedded in the Deleuzoguattarian-Braidottian (see Deleuze and Guattari 2005 [1980]; Braidotti 2011 [1994]) methodology of critical cartography, and infused with critical posthumanist, new materialist, and queer theoretical perspectives, this cartography of hope is sketched out against two permacrisis-infused positionalities: nostalgic humanism and tragic (post)humanism. Forced to navigate between these two extremes, the critical cartography of hope presented here explores hope in numerous historico-philosophical (re)configurations: from the premodern "hope-as-all-too-human", to a more politicised early modern "hope-as-(politically-)human" – representing hope's first paradigm shift (*politicisation*), and from a four decades-long neoliberal redrawing of hope as "no-more-hope" – hope's second shift

(*depoliticisation*) – to a critical (new) materialist plea to de-anthropocentrise and re-politicise hope – hope's third and final post-Anthropocenic shift (*re-politicisation*). By mapping these (re)configurations of hope, a philosophical plea is made for hope as a material(ist) praxis that can help us better understand – and counter – these extractive late capitalist, neoliberal more-than-human crisis times.

Introduction: Navigating (Post-)Anthropocenic Times of Crisis

In these ongoing times of pandemic crisis that are forcing planetary beings to disproportionately live and die on the edge(s) of a terrain-losing Anthropocene – a descriptor of the current catastrophic geological era that is, arguably and quite ironically, characterised by the same arrogant human exceptionalism it meant to highlight and denounce[1] – philosophical refuge can be found in the creation of an affirmation-propelled posthumanist-materialist critical cartography of hope. Or so this article proposes.

Important to know – and in line with the situated politics of location that critical cartographies must be rooted in to not become totalising (see Rich 1986 [1984]; Haraway 1988) – is that the contours of this mapping of hope are sketched out against the hard to navigate backdrop of (post-)Anthropocenic times of crisis, and two positionalities, namely, nostalgic humanism and tragic (post-)humanism. Nostalgic humanism is a rather reactive attitude that boils down to the flat-out denial of the more-than-human pandemic crisis times still unfolding. It consequently rejects the critical posthumanist and new materialist conceptual toolkits needed to analyse and better understand these complex times; toolkits that, contrastingly, underpin the cartography of hope illustrated here. Liberal humanists, such as Martha C. Nussbaum (2010), but also more conservative thinkers like Francis Fukuyama (2018), are responding to these calamitous times – and the dire state humanism and the Humanities are said to be in, brought on by the ever-accelerating forces of extractive late capitalism, neoliberalism, globalisation,

and, of course, anti-humanist poststructuralist thought – by constructing neo-humanist philosophies. These anti-posthumanist philosophies are characterised by a problematic 'dis-embedded universalism', as Deleuzoguattarian philosopher Braidotti describes it so well in *The Posthuman* (2013: 39). This type of philosophical universalism prioritises very particularly embodied human subjects and their, in the end, parochial values. The other positionality that this cartography must find its way around is that of tragic (post-)humanism. Although tragic humanism has a fascinating philosophical genealogy[2] of its own, tragic (post-)humanism, as used in this essay, stands for a positionality that accepts today's (post-)Anthropocenic reality but at the same time has come close to giving up hope on anything more than an apocalyptic doom-filled future for "more-than-humankind". Tragic (post-)humanism hence goes down the same tragedy-plagued route as its tragic humanist predecessor, barely shaking off humanism's built-in species exceptionalism – but then all within an undeniably more-than-human crisis context.

Traversing these two extremes and having to deal with the fact that hope has an all-too-human history, a critical cartography of hope does everything in its power to avoid abstract utopian futurism. It in fact overlaps with ecofeminist science studies scholar Donna J. Haraway's (2016) critique of unsituated hope and its antonym, despair (which is more aligned with tragic (post-)humanism): in Haraway's eyes, these are but two future-obsessed attitudes. What really matters in these more-than-human times of crisis, is the cultivation of a mindset that concentrates on the problems of a, for Haraway, already post-Anthropocenic present, so that a better future could arise. Or as Haraway puts it so poetically in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016: 4):

> Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with

> each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly.

This materialist multispecies "staying with the trouble"-project, boiling down to what fellow ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo (2010: 2) calls post-Anthropocenic 'trans-corporeality', or the realisation that 'the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world', highlights the importance of action in the here and now – and human actors do have a crucial ethico-political role to play in this: they need to urgently come to terms with the posthumanist fact that a respectable living-with other planetary beings is the only way forward. Yet, given the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, other zoonosis-driven pandemics waiting to happen, and the apocalyptic WW3-scenario that has been hanging in the air since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it almost makes sense to be swayed by the tragic (post-)humanist standpoint described earlier. The fact that this extractive late capitalism-propelled neoliberal era was already quite ruin-filled before these seemingly exceptionalist events took place – as also noted in various ecofeminist works, such as Isabelle Stengers's *In Catastrophic Times* (2015 [2009]), Anna L. Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), and Alaimo's *Exposed* (2016) – points at a continuity between tragic (post-)humanist and, arguably, equally tragic, "pre"-(post-)humanist times characterised by various types of more or less fatalistic humanisms, such as Stoic humanism.

Because of this link, it seems imperative to, as Haraway also advises and as will be hammered on in this exploratory cartography, not be seduced by narratives of hopelessness, nihilism, and apocalyptic catastrophism, nowadays characterised by populist fake news-filled follies popping up in the context of widespread antivaxx conspiracy theories and the ongoing Russian attack against Ukraine. The digital nature and speed of the infowars that are being fought online right now – just think of the Russian online propagandist pushing for the "denazification" of the Ukrainian government (see Wesolowski 2022), or the viral message making the rounds on various hoax-hosting platforms about how the bivalent Omicron boosters

have supposedly only been tested on eight mice (see Wolfe 2022)[3] – are of course new, yet, the times in which all of this is happening, are not that unprecedented as tends to be argued: the pandemic neoliberal "new normal" in fact so far has only brought us more of the same capitalist earth-destroying, status quo-preserving "old".

Such catastrophic narratives, together with the deaths, long-term illnesses and disabilities, massive increases in global disparity, ecological-economic destruction, and all-around trauma that these pandemic and war-filled times have generated, nonetheless are leaving their marks. So much so that several critical theorists and policy-makers have recently categorised these ongoing crisis times as 'the era of permacrisis' (see Zuleeg et al. 2021: n. p.), that is, an era characterised by complete existential instability in which multiple entangled crises succeed one another. How, then, can hope – in its most grounded sense of "staying with the trouble" – be kept alive in these times of alleged permacrisis while moving away from the nostalgic humanist and tragic (post-)humanist positions that are continuously seducing us?

Cartographical Contours: A Critical (New Materialist) Approach

One methodological route that could be explored is that of critical cartography. Embedded in the philosophies of poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2005 [1980]) and Braidotti (2005; 2011 [1994]), and infused with critical geographical and poststructuralist reflections, such a critical cartographical exercise resolutely chooses the way of the virtual. Critical cartography builds on Foucauldian genealogy and thus partly emphasises the past and present, as it explores the conditions of why something in the here and now has come into existence without, however, fetishising 'the search for [historical] "origins"' (Foucault 1977 [1971]: 139). It nonetheless simultaneously transcends the genealogical approach because of spotlighting what could be actualised through such explorations. Additionally critical of what Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005 [1980]: 8) call acts of essentialising

'tracing', cartographical mapping is rhizomatic and virtuality-focused in nature; it is 'open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification' (12). Critical cartographies – such as the one in the making here – can therefore be best regarded as living and lively assemblages: future-oriented networks with multiple nodes that bring formerly unseen connections and flows into being, all while considering the cartographer's own positionality and situated ways of producing knowledge (see Haraway 1988).

In this sense, critical mapmaking could be seen as a new materialist methodology: like diffractive theorising (see Barad 2007; Geerts and van der Tuin 2021), critical cartography embodies an immanent conceptual take on the world, while at the same time coming into being in full entanglement with the cartographer's geopolitical positionality and lifeworld, giving it an ethico-political dimension.[4] It is the latter aspect, plus cartography's focus on the virtual, that has been emphasised by Braidotti (2011 [1994]: 4), who notes that such situated mapmaking boils down to 'a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present' with the goal of engendering 'creative theoretical alternatives'.

A Cartography of Hope: Affirmative & Critical Posthumanist

Such a critical cartographical approach – here devised as an explicitly affirmative[5] enterprise– would anchor hope in concrete material-conceptual praxes while holding onto the world-creating powers of the virtual[6], so that we could envision a way out of the current "not-so-new normal" and the skipping back and forth between nostalgic humanism and tragic (post-)humanism. Given its Deleuzoguattarian and critical new materialist roots, such a mapping exercise could benefit from the cross-pollinations between critical historical and new materialist figurations of hope sketched out in what follows, as these figurations are, amongst other things, united by their materialist emancipatory framework, grounded critique of extractive capitalism,

and emphasis on grassroots political work and praxis. This posthumanist-materialist cartography of hope, offers us a more materially grounded option beyond the utopia/dystopia-binary or a dialectics-driven counter-revolution, as these historical and new materialist figurations are all about "staying with the trouble" and envisioning the virtual. And, even more importantly: such a cartography presents us with a viable alternative that takes the agential powers of the more-than-human seriously, while not relieving human actors of their immense planetary responsibilities.

It is this particular focus on ongoing human agency, subjectivity, and responsibility that gives this affirmative materialist cartography critical posthumanist touches, and consequently distinguishes it from less critical undertakings, such as transhumanist (see Moravec 1999) viewpoints and object-oriented ontological (see Bryant 2011) philosophies in which the world is conceptualised as consisting of independently existing objects. Although the human subject in this critical posthumanist mapping exercise would be regarded as yet another actor in a vitalism-packed more-than-human world as well, the complex power-laden affairs, encounters, and interactions between worldly beings would not be reduced to a flat ontological framework in which all beings – human, (formerly and currently) dehumanised, more-than-human, non-human … – are naively conceptualised as ontological "equals". In contrast to techno-optimistic transhumanist and object-oriented ontological undertakings that are mostly void of analyses of power, a materialist cartography embedded in critical posthumanism acknowledges the weight of worldly power structures, relations, and imbalances. What distinguishes critical posthumanist philosophies from similar – yet less critical – human-decentring strands of thought, is exactly this accentuation of a strong analysis of the workings of power, human accountability, and the human as an ethico-political actor with "trans-corporeal" planetary duties.[7] Critical posthumanism is also categorised by a particular type of nomadic subjectivity, or, as Braidotti (2013: 49) describes it:

> Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building. […] The focus is shifted accordingly from unitary to nomadic subjectivity, thus running against the grain of high humanism and its contemporary variations.

The above relational, trans-corporeal touch is central to the affirmative cartography drawn up here that wishes to lay out a still-to-be-actualised roadmap for humanity's respectful engagement with its more-than-human surroundings and companions. It does so in the hope of establishing a better future for all planetary beings without forgetting who was – and oftentimes still is not – allowed to partake in Western modernity's conceptualisation of humanity (for this critique of posthumanist thought, see Wynter 2003 and Jackson 2020).

A Cartography of Hope: From All-Too-Human Hope…

It is not that surprising to see that hope has so far been regarded as a human agency-expressing affair. Hope as articulated in the context of multispecies justice[8] – or the taking seriously of trans-corporeal existence and hence letting go of speciesism when designing and implementing laws – therefore seems to be a *contradictio in terminis*. Its critical posthumanist shapes nonetheless contain the blueprint for more transversally and trans-corporeally just multispecies times-to-come.

Conceptualised as an anticipation-laden state, hope in the history of Western philosophy has primarily been linked to the desire and/or intellectual capacity to critically analyse, reimagine, and reshape the human subject's own circumstances and the world at large. The anthropocentric, somatophobic (that is, fearful of and disgusted by the body and everything connected to the bodily) undertones of hope only really started being questioned by the modern

monist philosopher Spinoza; the 'masters of suspicion' (Ricoeur 1970 [1965]: 33) Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud; Michel Foucault and other poststructuralist anti-humanists; and contemporary critical posthumanists and new materialists, such as Braidotti (2006 and 2013), Karen Barad (2007), Jasbir K. Puar (2007), Zakiyyah I. Jackson (2020), Elizabeth Grosz (2017), and the earlier-mentioned ecofeminists – all critical theorists that emphasise the necessary dethronement of the human as the supposed sole planetary actor. A nuanced critique of both anthropocentric subjectivity and agency is especially present in contemporary critical new materialist thought, which, in similar ways to affirmation-based critical posthumanism, differs from other new materialist and posthumanist approaches because of its critical theoretical touches (also see Geerts 2021a), as can be seen in Figure 1.

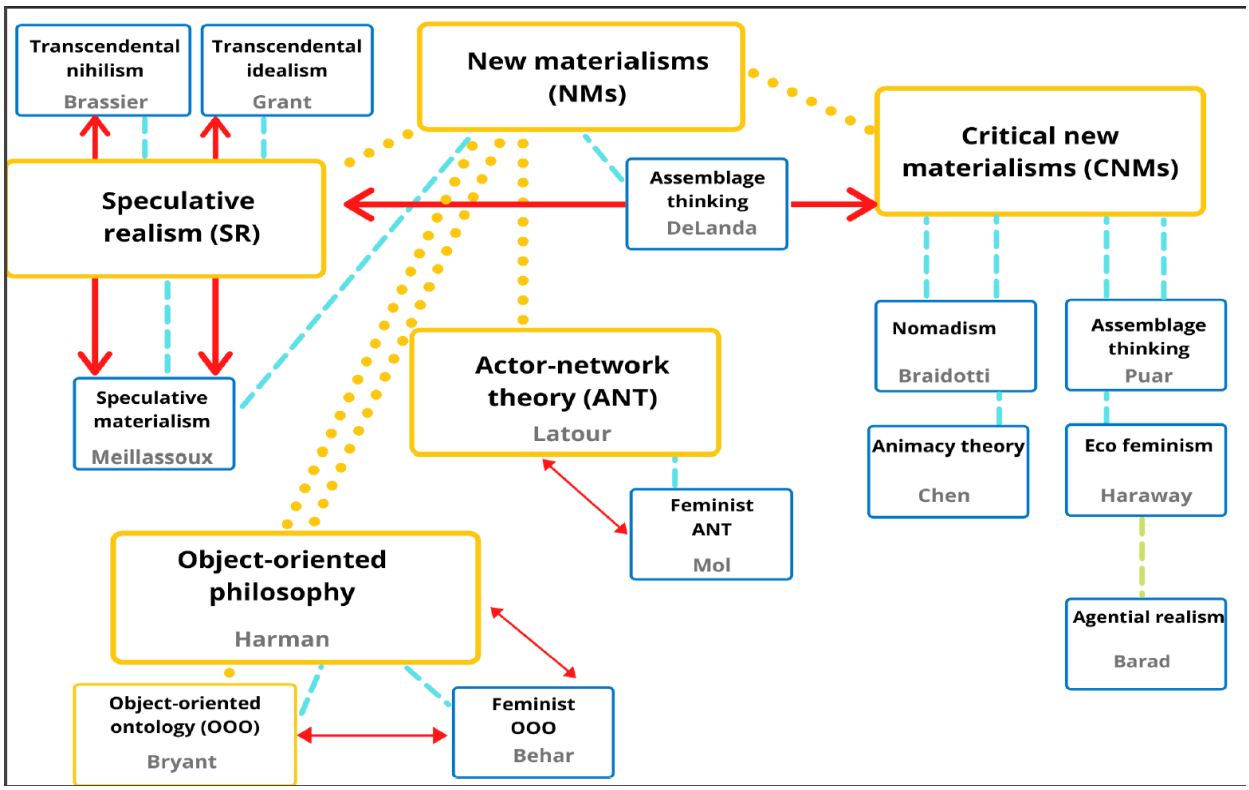

Figure 1. ***(Critical) New Materialisms: A Cartography*****. ©Evelien Geerts 2022. Dutch version first printed in Geerts 2021a. This figure depicts the author's own situated critical cartography of new materialist thought. The strands of thought connected by the dotted lines refer to the five most well-known new materialist strands, namely, speculative realism, object-oriented philosophy, object-oriented ontology (a**

subset of the latter but also a strand of its own), actor-network theory, and critical new materialisms. The striped lines show each of the aforementioned strands' subsets (think: feminist OOO as a subset of OOO), while the arrows are supposed to represent the alleged tensions between certain strands (think: feminist OOO as related to OOO, but then with a much stronger attachment to an analysis of power relations).

Ranging from anti-correlationalist speculative realism[9] – including Quentin Meillassoux's speculative materialism (2008 [2006]), Ray Brassier's (2007) transcendental nihilism, Iain Hamilton Grant's (2006) transcendental materialism, Graham Harman's (2010) object-oriented philosophy, Levi Bryant's (2011) object-oriented ontology, and Katherine Behar's (2016) object-oriented feminism – Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory and Annemarie Mol's (2002) feminist take, to the critical new materialisms of Braidotti (Deleuzoguattarian nomadism), Haraway (ecofeminism), and Barad (agential realism), all these philosophies could be dubbed "new materialist" because of their shared interest in materiality and the non-human. Critical[10] new materialist philosophies, however – heavily influenced by feminist, queer, and critical race studies theories, and thus preoccupied by questions of mattering and non-mattering through the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity – additionally investigate the world through a strong power analytics, resulting in the thinking together of ontological, epistemological, and ethico-political questions. It is this more holistic approach that preserves the human subject as an ethico-political actor, always part of a larger more-than-human assemblage, to be held accountable for its worldly interventions. Together, these elements make critical new materialist philosophies extremely good at analysing these more-than-human crisis times while laying a proper foundation for a responsible engagement with the here and now.

Another important aspect worth mentioning when mapping hope's initial all-too-humanness, is that, until the arrival of historical and feminist materialism (see, respectively, Adorno & Horkheimer 1997 [1944] and Delphy 1977 [1970]) – two strands of thought that have laid the groundwork for critical new materialisms' revaluing of the material and corporeal– hope had primarily been thought of in negative terms. In premodern Western

philosophy, cultivating hope was thought of as quintessentially human but also deemed futile, as human life was predetermined by religious and other mores. Plato's oeuvre, for instance, underlined this doubleness quite well: in the *Timaeus* (1929 [c. 360 BC]), hope is described as a seductive, inescapable human passion, leading people away from the here and now, whereas the *Philebus* (1925 [c. 360–347 BC]) provides us with Socrates's appreciation of hope as something that motivates people to act. In the eyes of the Stoics, such as Seneca, who took tragic humanism to a whole new level, hope carried a similar meaning (see his *Letters from a Stoic* (1969) [c. AD 65]): hope was regarded as a desire-packed – and thus all-too-bodily and distracting – state one had to transcend to be able to live a tranquil life. Or as Seneca (195) put it himself: 'Now think of the things which goad man into destroying man: you'll find that they are hope, envy, hatred, fear and contempt'. Hope was thus primarily regarded as an emotional disposition that must be overcome at all costs, but at the same time was completely entwined with being human.

…To Hope-As-(Politically)-Human

In early modern Western philosophy, and more specifically, seventeenth-century philosophy, hope appeared to have been defined less ambiguously, as it became part of the now emancipated human subject's psychology – slowly but surely unchaining itself from religious traditions, norms, and beliefs, and transcending more tragic humanist interpretations of life and humanity. As a human action-engendering disposition, hope therefore received a slightly more positive connotation. But it was still perceived as a fickle, that is, part emotional, part intellectual, and therefore all-too-human, passion.

Numerous early modern philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, nonetheless provoked a paradigm shift by describing hope as a political passion crucial for the creation of society's social contract in their *Leviathan* (1998 [1651]) and *Theological-Political*

Treatise (2007 [1670]). Spinoza's account of hope – always entangled with that other passion, fear – is especially of interest here.[11] At first, Spinoza (5) still held onto a negative interpretation of hope as a distracting passion preventing self-reflexivity:

> [S]ince people are often reduced to such desperate straits that they cannot arrive at any solid judgment and as the good things of fortune for which they have a boundless desire are quite uncertain, they fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear. […] When the mind is in a state of doubt, the slightest impulse can easily steer it in any direction, and all the more readily when it is hovering between hope and fear, though it may be confident, pompous and proud enough at other times.

The more human subjects depend on ratio, the less they are (mis)guided by hope and fear. Later in the *Treatise*, Spinoza (2007 [1670]: 197) addresses his social contract theory. When he claims that human subjects always prefer 'to live according to laws and the certain dictates of reason', hope receives a more positive, politicised meaning: together with fear, hope – and, in this case, 'hope of a greater good' (198) – is what for Spinoza ends up co-creating socio-political order. Hope is even described as the superior human passion of the two, as citizens cherishing hope for a better future tend to stick to the social contract more.

Hope-as-(politically)-human remained political throughout late modernity and postmodernity, and that thanks to subsequent Marxist and (post-)existentialist explorations. Political theorist Hannah Arendt (1998 [1958]: 178), for instance, saw the 'startling unexpectedness' of the new in cherishing hope, further connecting hope to political action and the bringing about of a different world. Arendt (247) even labels hope the essence of 'human existence', underlining a politicised version of hope-as-quintessentially-human. The same can be said about anticolonial thinker and activist Frantz Fanon, who ascribed a major anticolonial – and thus emancipatory – role to both violence and hope in his magnum opus *The Wretched of the Earth* (1693 [1961]).

Hope's emancipatory political role has also been underlined by philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose deconstructive work not only set the tone for queer theory and critical animal studies (see Derrida 2002) but also pointed at the intimate interlinkages between spectral hauntings from the past, hope, and justice. Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994 ([1993]) and 'Marx and Sons' (2008 [1999]) espouses a 'messianism without religion' (1994 [1993]: 74), or a materialist-deconstructivist philosophy with 'an emancipatory promise' (74) that is not apocalyptic or theological in nature – and thus bypasses the limitations of a tragic humanist philosophy in which the human subject waits for its impossible salvation. Derrida's non-religious messianism instead focuses on how a more just 'future-to-come' (xix) could arise through a learning to live 'with ghosts' (xvii–xviii)[12]; a type of living-with that must be instigated by the human subject. For Derrida, the spectres of the past – representing all those multispecies lives that were made to not matter – constantly interrupt the here and the now through their spacetime-queering hauntings[13]. In Derrida's regard, a more just future for all could be achieved through hoping for an ethico-political acknowledgement of these various spectres. It is important to note, however, that Derridean justice does not equate to 'justice as law (*droit*)' (1992 [1990]: 5), and therefore falls outside of the human-made politico-legal system. Derrida distinctively conceptualised justice as a 'gift without exchange' (25); a regulative – and, in a way, transcendent and messianic – ideal that humanity can hope to see realised someday through owning up to its collective historical wrongdoings.

While Derrida may have presented us with a collectivity-focused – and thus politicised – type of hope that is strongly entangled with the project of justice-to-come, or to put in Deleuzoguattarian terms, the virtual, there is, unfortunately, not a lot of room for such an ethico-political project in our late capitalist neoliberal society obsessed with the citizen-subject's hyperindividualisation and hyperresponsibilisation: in contrast to intersectional analyses that take the impact of, for example, structural racism into account, neoliberalism – here defined as

'a normative order of reason developed […] into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality' (Brown 2015: 9) that 'transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic' (10) – deems the individual as solely responsible for its failures and successes. It furthermore also regards the citizen-subject as an atomistic über-resilient actor (also see Bracke 2016), forced to constantly bounce back, and that without any community care or assistance.

From No-More-Hope to the "Year of Hope" & Back Again…

Anno 2022, hope's once so powerful politicalness appears to have been hollowed out by about four long decades of the just-mentioned community-crushing neoliberal rule. Way back, the punk music scene's "No Future"-anthem already captured the impact of Thatcherian neoliberal and Reaganomics-propelled no-more-hope quite well. This anthem was later on philosophically captured in queer theory's antirelational turn, led by queer theorists Leo Bersani (*Homos* (1996)) and Lee Edelman, who put American queer theory on the map with his *No Future* (2004) monograph.

This antirelational turn consisted of a thorough critique of heteronormativity and its queer mirror image, homonormativity, and how both were – and quite frankly, still are – co-opted by a neoliberal, neoconservative politics built upon what Edelman (2004: 2) calls 'reproductive futurism': the privileging of the biological, preferably White, middle-class, and able-bodied 'Child [as] the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics' (3). The "Child" here stands for socio-political futurity *tout court*; a system in which 'the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form' (4). For Edelman, the queer subject – heavily impacted by the AIDS epidemic, while also embodying an anti-reproductive *jouissance* – is the prime example of the "No Future"-anthem of the 1980s and 1990s and queer non-futurity: the ethos of no-more-hope

transformed into a literal "Fuck(ing) the Future", which, in a way, anticipates tragic (post-)humanist catastrophism.

Although these punk and queer counter-movements were politically subversive in nature, they did not necessarily transcend neoliberalism's futurelessness or its presumed political hopelessness. In addition to this angsty depoliticisation process – representing hope's second major paradigm shift and cartographical constellation after its politicisation – the centuries-old definition of hope-as-human (or being regarded as a quintessential all-too-human passion), is now far removed from the more-than-human crisis times that the assemblages of humans, the more-than-human, non-humans, and the dehumanised are finding themselves in. Another depressing dose of no-more-hope, but then in tragic (post-)human "We Have Fucked the Future"-form… or so it seems …

More than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, and more than likely on the verge of another pandemic era-to-come, it is clear that the more-than-human must be reckoned with. The minuscule SARS-CoV-2 virus, activated by the imbroglio of humanimal hosts and their collapsing ecosystems (also see Braidotti 2013 and Nayar 2014), interconnected infrastructural hubs, and extractive late capitalism's perpetual push for racially driven spectacular accumulation (for this argument, see Tsing 2005; Chakravartty and da Silva 2012), is causing unseen (post-)Anthropocentric planetary damage. A type of damage that is furthermore amplifying pre-existing human inequalities and spurring a host of populist, and in some cases even fascist, follies.

Part of a more-than-human permacrisis assemblage, this particular pandemic's biggest toll nonetheless has been existential, making it harder amid the ongoing pandemic whirlwind of feelings – or as Braidotti (2020: 466) puts it in a recent piece on the affective effects of the COVID-19 pandemic: 'intense sense of suffering alternating with hope, fear unfolding alongside resilience, boredom merging into vulnerability' – to even cultivate the tiniest bit of

hope.

Once heralded as the vaccine-driven eschatological "Year of Hope", it became clear that 2021 turned out to be vastly different than expected: by the start of 2022, millions of humans had died globally from COVID-19 and kept on perishing because of governmental incompetency, bio-/necropolitical flirtations with scientifically illogical herd immunity theories, flat-out racist, able-bodiedness-driven eugenics, anti-Semitic conspiracy schemes, vaccine nationalism, and overall increased multispecies vulnerability and precarity. Seen from planetary critical posthumanist and new materialist perspectives, populations of imprisoned minks around the world were massacred to curtail the virus's spread; countless laboratory animals were sacrificed in the search for treatments; and various marine organisms as well as sea birds have been smothered in billions of discarded PPE face masks that are now almost as widespread as toxic microplastics…altogether painting a dramatically tragic (post-)humanist picture of today's lifeworld.

If the Anthropocene's final countdown is supposed to herald what Haraway (2016: 2) calls the Chthulucene, or a more hope-filled trans-corporeal post-Anthropocenic era 'of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth', then we urgently need to find a way out of the vicious cycle of fighting extractive late capitalist destruction with over-production. Next to being impacted by this more-than-human crisis that points at the shared but not at all equally-experienced vulnerability of all that is (see Braidotti 2020 and Butler 2020), hope-as-human must thus be de-anthropocentrised while re-politicised for the sake of all planetary beings. And this double move can be regarded as hope's third critical cartography-embedded paradigm shift.

Critical (New) Materialist Cartographical Perspectives: Re-politicising Hope[14]

For such a de-anthropocentrisation and re-politicisation of hope, together with transversal (that is, economically redistributive and ecologically restorative) multispecies justice to come about,

hope must not only be taken out of its current tragic (post-)human context but should also be decoupled from contemporary sloganesque "Yes, We Can"-articulations. What does this mean exactly? Although neoliberalism provoked counter-movement responses of futurelessness and hopelessness, neoliberalism as 'a normative order of reason' (Brown 2015: 9) or a socio-political and cultural system invading all spheres of life, has cultivated an attitude that queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2011: 3) calls neoliberal 'toxic positivity'. In tandem with the earlier-touched upon processes of hyperindividualisation and hyperresponsibilisation, neoliberalism has co-opted the American Dream-driven – yet capitalist-in-disguise – "Yes, We Can"-motto: everything and anything is possible, if you just work hard enough! The individual subject's capacities and willpower are again highlighted here, and not the intersecting structures of discrimination, privilege, and oppression that disable many from fulfilling that exact "Dream". As Halberstam (3) explains it in more detail:

> Positive thinking is offered up in the U.S. as a cure for cancer, a path to untold riches, and a surefire way to engineer your own success. Indeed believing that success depends upon one's attitude is far preferable to Americans than recognizing that their success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender.

Although the ongoing belief in American exceptionalism in the US should probably not be put on the same level as the more global experiencing of toxic positivity, it is fair to say that the latter attitude forms one of the building blocks or normativities of today's neoliberal era – which creates quite the schizophrenic situation, as the pressure to remain positive at all times clashes with the existential living-with(in) a post-Anthropocenic world-in-ruins. Getting lost in nostalgic humanism of a past long gone, wallowing in tragic (post-)humanist despair, focusing on queer failure like Halberstam, or fully bowing out, as fellow queer theorist Mari Ruti suggests in *The Ethics of Opting Out* (2017), are all positionalities that do not work through and

move past these mind-numbing scraps of an untenable optimism, however: we need actual materially embedded hope to chew on; a type of hope that furthermore transcends more fleeting acts. And critical (new) materialist points of view can assist us with that.

A Materialist Mapping of Hope

Two anti-fascist historical materialist thinkers – Frankfurt School-affiliates Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin – could play a significant role in the anti-neoliberal re-politicisation of multispecies hope that is mapped out here. By invoking these two thinkers, the potential of creating linkages between critical historical and new materialist thought is underlined, while demonstrating the emancipatory, materialist philosophical roots of critical new materialist thought.

Bloch and Benjamin spotlighted hope as an affirmative materialist mapping with emancipatory touches. In his introduction to *The Principle of Hope* (1986 [1954–1959]: 3), Bloch presents his historical materialist philosophy by claiming that hope as an emotion pushes people out of their inward-looking frame of mind. As an affective-mental phenomenon, hope is conceptualised as bridging the mind/body split – a split that is also critiqued in many new materialisms. Providing the reader with an overview of various historical forms of hope and utopian constructions, Bloch adds existentialist and political philosophical layers to the notion of hope: it is hope, and a politicised version thereof, that will guide humanity towards an ultimately classless – read: free – society. Bloch's philosophy of hope is furthermore propelled by an 'ontology of the Not-Yet' (146), or a process ontology that underscores how the material world is pure virtuality waiting to be actualised, depending on the material conditions and interventions made. It is through this focus on the virtual that Bloch's philosophy receives a strong messianic, almost speculative materialist touch: the not-yet of the 'concrete' (146) utopian is to be realised through the coupling of hope's affectivity and action, meaning that

even the most 'ordinary micropractices of everyday life', as Braidotti (2012: 36) also puts it, could lead to planetary change – although this of course raises the question of whether such individual micropolitical acts could really challenge the more macropolitical powers of institutional politics...[15]

Bloch's conception of hope, despite its focus on the human, presents an affirmative grounded mapping of hope with emancipatory contours that is shared by historical and new materialists alike. By introducing a more tangible political utopia through materially anchored hope, Bloch's philosophy goes further than most orthodox Marxist philosophies. This aspect of zooming in on tangible instead of abstract utopian figurations is aptly captured by Benjamin's (and painter Paul Klee's) *Angelus Novus* that plays a key role in Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' ([1955] 2007).[16] Benjamin's figuration of the 'angel of history' (257) could be interpreted as the embodied figuration of Haraway's and other critical new materialist thinkers' call to attend to the trouble in the here and now for the sake of a more just, anti-fascist multispecies future-to-come. Benjamin's angel, with its face turned firmly toward the past, is taking in the Anthropocenic damage already done. Wishing to construct something new amidst these 'blasted landscapes', to put it in Tsing's (2005: 3) critical new materialist lingo, the angel pauses for a moment but is immediately pushed forward by the storm of 'progress' (Benjamin 2007 [1955]: 257) – which, translated to our permacrisis times, exemplifies neoliberal extractive late capitalism's quasi-unstoppable accumulation processes. It is this disruptive moment during which the angel pauses, eyes firmly focused on the connections between past and present, that matters: the angel sees through both capitalism's false promises, and, anticipatorily, through neoliberalism's toxic positivity, and realises that hope and justice can only arrive as ruptured moments in time; as historical experiences of oppression and injustice within the ruins of the past that should be analysed to prevent new macro- and microfascisms – and permacrises – from forming. Or philosophically traversing spacetime for a moment, as

Derrida would put it: the angel here is perfectly attuned to the lingering spectres of the past.

Although critical posthumanist and new materialist thinkers such as Haraway and Braidotti would be suspicious of Bloch's and Benjamin's attachment to messianic humanism, their political emancipatory focus would surely be appreciated. Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit* or 'the presence of the now' (2007 [1955]: 261) could moreover inform critical new materialist critiques of neoliberal extractive late capitalism: criticising the constant linear, monotonous temporal flow of the same at the heart of politically oppressive and capitalist societies, *Jetztzeit* spotlights the tragedy that is our current (post-)Anthropocenic world, plus the importance of the present in relation to past injustices and still virtual rectifications and redemptions. By following in the *Angelus Novus*'s footsteps – here to be regarded as the spacetime-crossing embodiment of *Jetztzeit* – past wrongdoings, bodies gone missing, and voices forcibly silenced, could eventually be acknowledged. Although not presenting us with a coherent theory of hope as Bloch did, Benjamin does mention hope, and that in the sixth thesis of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. It is there that the historical materialist thinker refers to 'the spark of hope in the past' (2007 [1955]: 255); a spacetime-queering spark that contains the blueprint of a better future but also emphasises, to again foresee Derridean philosophy, how crucial it is to face the spectres of the past:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. […] The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* (emphasis in original) will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (255)

Although mainly a commentary on how the critical (new) materialist thinker should push back against traditional history writing, typically determined by the oppressor's viewpoints and victories, this thesis also underwrites how hope, transformation, and justice come to us as situated moments, always interrupting spacetime.

Conclusion: Grounded Hope & Multispecies Justice

Nearing the end of this critical cartographical mapping of hope, it has become clear that past spectres need to be reckoned with for hope to lead somewhere: the past needs to be allowed to speak to the present so a better future could arise. This is something that connects Benjamin to Bloch and Derrida, and of course, to critical new materialist thinkers, such as Braidotti and Haraway.

Zooming in on the construction of 'social horizons of hope' (Braidotti 2013: 122) by means of a '*[z]oe*-centred egalitarianism (original emphasis)' (60) that advocates for the just and equal treatment of differently embodied material beings, hope for Braidotti is philosophically connected to the Deleuzoguattarian virtual – and that in more-than-human and micropolitical terms. Braidotti (2012: 36–37) clarifies this in the interview passage below:

> The yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present […] The future is the virtual unfolding of the affirmative aspect of the present, which honours our obligations to the generations to come. The pursuit of practices of hope, rooted in the ordinary micropractices of everyday life, is a simple strategy to hold, sustain and map out sustainable transformations. […] Hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures, an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them.

Grounded hope always propels us toward the future, and the same can be said about the utopian, which Braidotti and Haraway see as a potential visionary force – given that it does not lose the past and present out of sight. This brings Bloch's philosophy to mind again, and, more

specifically, the following passage from *The Principle of Hope* (1986 [1954–1959]: 145) where Bloch distinguishes abstract utopias from more well-grounded ones:

> Pure wishful thinking has discredited utopias for centuries, both in pragmatic political terms and in all other expressions of what is desirable; just as if every utopia were an abstract one. And undoubtedly the utopian function is only immaturely present in abstract utopianizing, i.e., still predominantly without solid subject behind it and without relation to the Real-Possible [namely, that which Bloch perceives as able to truly actualise itself in the future]. Consequently, it is easily led astray, without contact with the real forward tendency into what is better.

Abstract utopias for Bloch are too disconnected from the material and existential lifeworld. Instead of 'abstract utopian dreaminess' (146), 'concrete utopia[s]' (146) – or what in this article in critical new materialist terms has been referred to as grounded, situated hope – is what needs to be cultivated in dire, tragic (post-)human times. It is precisely this craving for a type of hope that is worldly and concrete, together with a utopian – yet not too farfetched – image of the future that is both focused on transformation and 'transcendent without transcendence' (146) that is shared by Bloch, Benjamin, Derrida, queer materialist thinkers critical of the antirelational turn in queer theory[17], and many, if not all, critical new materialists.

Similar to Braidotti, and likeminded ecofeminist critical new materialists Stengers, Tsing, Alaimo, and Rose, Haraway is invested in a critical new materialist mapping of grounded hope that would bring about multispecies justice. Having continuously spotlighted the inescapable entanglements between the human, non-human, and the environmental at large (while not forgetting about those beings that have been made not to matter), Haraway pleas for '*sympoiesis*' (2016: 27, original emphasis) or a thinking-with and living-with these almost post-Anthropocenic times that are:

> times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time […]. (35)

Such a thinking-with and living-with implies a mapping but also concrete ethico-political – and even critical pedagogical – praxes[18] of grounded hope; praxes that, in contrast to wallowing in despair about the tragic (post-)human now or getting lost in abstract utopian reflecting upon what could be, do not defer response-ability[19] – or the human capacity and willingness to ethico-politically interact with the world and all of its beings – to the distant future. It all boils down to '"play[ing] string figures with companion species"' (Haraway 2016: 4), so that a more just post-Anthropocenic, Chthulucenic world could come about. We must get our hands dirty, and fast.

This shared critical materialist focus on grounded hope does not mean that the task ahead will be easy: like Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, Braidotti, Haraway, and other critical new materialists, are telling response-ability-bearing human actors to face present atrocities and lingering ghosts from times long gone head-on by exploring today's crumbled ruins and collecting found debris. That alone is quite challenging: when existential disorientation, driven by multiple permacrises, is what is essentially orientating us, not succumbing to the totalising dangers of hopelessness, nihilism, or catastrophism is tough. Yet, nothing is more human – and simultaneously lifts human subjects more out of tragic (post-)humanism and their comfort zone into planetary, more-than-human assemblages – than an affirmative critical materialist mapping and praxes of grounded hope; connections-creating yearnings for multispecies just times…

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Notes

1. The term Anthropocene was coined by chemist Paul J. Crutzen (2006) to denote the massive impact human subjects have had on the environment through industrial pollution, as well as agricultural and other landscape-altering interventions. The notion has since then been criticised for its abstractness and anthropocentrism-reinforcing tenets. See Moore (2013), who replaces said notion with that of the Capitalocene to accentuate the systemic destructive role of extractive capitalism, but also Isabelle Stengers ([2009] 2015), Donna J. Haraway (2015; 2016), and Kathryn Yusoff (2018) have contributed to this debate. Haraway's perspective is of interest here, as she points at two potential replacement notions: the Plantationocene – a now heavily criticised concept (see Davis et al. 2019) that emphasises the impact of the intertwinings between slave labour, plantations, and imperialist-colonial capitalism – and the Chthulucene – an era-to-come in which humans would harmoniously live together with other species. Yusoff in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018: 2) is as critical of the notion of the Anthropocene as Haraway, but adds much-needed critical race studies and critical geographical perspectives to the discussion: Noting how 'the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life – *Anthropos* – through a universalist geologic commons', Yusoff shows how racialised this notion really is, and tries to destabilise it by working towards a poetics of a billion Black Anthropocenes (instead of merely renaming the Anthropocene). Yusoff's important critique teaches us that the "post-Anthropocene" could easily fall into the same racialised – but also gendered-sexualised – trap.
2. See Lerner 1947 and Eagleton 2009, who, respectively, use "tragic humanism" in the context of the realisation of the existential limits of "Man" and in relation to a self-reflective, imperfect humanism connected to a fallible human subject seduced by power and other vices. For Herbrechter (2023), tragic humanism can be brought back to the Camusian existentialist position, which is all about accepting the absurdity of life. It is this version of tragic humanism that tragic (post-)humanism is related to.
3. Interestingly, a lot of these antivaccination conspiracy theories recentre the human subject – instead of commenting upon the exploitation these and other laboratory animals must endure (also see Haraway's (1997) discussion of the genetically engineered OncoMouse™).
4. This is best expressed by the Barad's (2007: 185) 'knowing in being' that underlines the idea that responsibility for one's knowledge claims should be at the core of one's research praxis, as researchers reflect upon the world from within the world. Critical cartographies are thus always limited qua perspective, and, hence, open to reinterpretations.
5. See Braidotti 2006 and 2008 for a feminist Deleuzoguattarian take on affirmation, as a way out of philosophical models in which negation, the negative, and lack are focused upon. In Braidotti's critical posthumanist new materialist philosophy, affirmation is synonymous with practicing a trans-corporeal ethics of affirmation, that is, not avoiding the tragedies that life engenders, but a "staying with the trouble" as to create something new.

6. The virtual – used in its Deleuzian sense here – is always more than the potentially possible, that what could be imagined, or dreamed of. In Deleuzoguattarian philosophy, both the virtual (not to be confused with the Lacanian Symbolic) and the actual are characterisations of the real. As Deleuze (2001 [1968]: 211) puts it: 'The only danger in all this is that the virtual could be confused with the possible. The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a "realisation". By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself'. The full actualisation of the virtual is – and happens through – creation.
7. The critical element also refers to the emancipatory aspects of critical posthumanist thought. This connects critical posthumanist philosophies to critical new materialisms, as will shortly be explained. Also see Herbrechter 2013 [2009]; Braidotti 2013; and Ferrando 2019 for various articulations of posthumanist thought, and Åsberg et al. 2015 for a critique of object-oriented and other speculative philosophies. Callus and Herbrechter 2012 also offer an interesting perspective that focuses on the relevance of poststructuralism to posthumanist thought – an argument also present in Braidotti 2006 and 2013.
8. For more about this notion, see Haraway 2008; Rose 2011; and Celermajer et al. 2021.
9. The story goes that "speculative realism" was coined during a conference at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2007 to denote the anti-correlationalist philosophies of Harman, Meillassoux, and others. These new materialist philosophies are united by their philosophical realist position and the idea that there is a world "out there" that is fully independent from human subjects-as-knowers, often leading to the earlier-discussed flat ontology problem.
10. With the adjective "critical", the emancipatory focus present in many critical new materialisms is referred to; an element that connects these philosophies to the Frankfurt School founders' ideas of critical theory as emancipatory (Horkheimer 2002 [1937]).
11. Also see Gatens et al. 2021 for a detailed account of Spinoza's conceptualisation of hope and its contemporary political relevance.
12. This emancipatory materialist-deconstructivist philosophy has utopian connotations, although Derrida himself is not too keen on the term. For this, see Derrida 2008 [1999]: 248 and following. For more on Derrida's ethico-political deconstructivism, spectres, and hauntology, see Geerts 2021b.
13. Barad (2007 and 2010) explores this aspect of traversing spacetime via the notion of spacetimemattering. Influenced by quantum physics, queer theory, and Derridean hauntology that zooms in on what has been rendered absent impacts the present, 'spacetimemattering of the universe' (Barad 2010: 261) refers to how, according to agential realist principles, past, present, and future 'are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through the world's ongoing intra-activity' (261). Both time and temporality are hereby placed in an intra-active relationship with space and the material world, creating theoretical space to not only reflect upon forgotten histories but also, for instance, theorise the present effects of trauma inflicted in the past.
14. The following section has been informed by a chapter from my doctoral dissertation. See Geerts 2019.
15. This idea of micropractices builds on Deleuzoguattarian micropolitics. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005 [1980]), Deleuze and Guattari distinguish the 'rigid segmentarity' (214) that gives form to totalitarian states from the 'microfacisms' (214), or the more ungraspable flows of desire, ideological assumptions, perceptions, power, etc. that are operating behind such states' macropolitical façades. For Braidotti (2006: 205), 'nomadic politics is not about a master strategy, but rather about multiple micro-political

modes of daily activism or interventions on the world', meaning micropractices of hope, critique, and resistance are as important as, for instance, mass protest actions.

16. The spectral figure of the *Angelus Novus* was based on a painting by Paul Klee that Benjamin had to leave behind when fleeing Germany.
17. Like Halberstam, queer thinker José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* (2009) writes against queer theory's antirelational turn and its adage of no-more-hope. Bloch's distinction between abstract and concrete utopias is crucial to Muñoz's project of a hope-charged queer collectivity, as can be seen here: 'Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential. In our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism... Concrete utopias can also be daydream-like, but they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solidarity oddball who is the one who dreams for many. Concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope' (3).
18. The notion of praxis used here not only refers to the Aristotelian take on ethical and political philosophy as praxis- or doing-based, but it also spotlights the attention given to actual daily "micropractices" within critical materialist theory and the critical pedagogical lessons that could be derived from critical theory. Or explained in the context of this essay: critical theory-driven reflections in relation to the (post-)Anthropocene. Looked at through critical posthumanist and new materialist perspectives, any attempt to map out hope could be regarded as the starting point for a grounded praxis that could open up possibilities to work towards a more multispecies just world. A critical cartography, in both the Deleuzoguattarian and Braidottian sense, after all bridges the gap between the virtual and the actual, meaning that a conceptual-theoretical mapping of hope as the one presented in this article presents various potential actualisations through situated praxes the reader can choose to embark on.
19. This idea of response-ability – an ethico-political act of responding-to the issue at hand – has found its way into Harawayan (2008 and 2016) and Baradian (2007) thought via Derrida's (2002) critical animal studies-based rereading of Levinasian alterity philosophy. Also see Geerts 2021b.

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