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## Decentring the Human? Towards a Post-Anthropocentric Standpoint Theory

Drawing on recent developments in virology and the work of Chicana queer-feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, this article explores the possibility of shifting from anthropocentric epistemologies (including feminist standpoint theories) into more expansive, decentralized modes of knowledge production which are neither entirely human-centered nor fully post-human. We explore this shift through several parts: (1) A brief overview of recent critiques of anthropocentrism and the limitations in mainstream feminist standpoint theory's ability to overcome this anthropocentrism; (2) an exploration of recent developments in virology's promising alternatives to anthropocentrism's narrow definition of the human; and (3) an analysis of Anzaldúa's innovative nepantlera subjectivity and onto-epistemology as seen in her theory of *conocimiento*. Because scholars have yet to examine the post-anthropocentric (and posthumanist) dimensions of Anzaldúa's thought, but instead generally categorize her epistemology as an ethnic-specific feminist standpoint theory, her work offers a unique point of entry into these investigations.

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“In its arrogant, alienated, and domineering Western form, human identity reflects a host of problematic assumptions, biases, prejudices, and myths derived from religion, philosophy, science, and culture as a whole. The massive, tangled knot of ideologies involved in the social construction of our species identity need to be critically unraveled, so that we can develop new identities and societies and forge sane, ethical, ecological, and sustainable life ways.”

Steven Best<sup>1</sup>

It is by now almost a commonplace among theorists in new materialism, critical animal studies, and other recent fields to critique anthropocentrism (defined here as the centring of human beings and human beings’ concerns). Generally, the argument goes something like this: Our Westernised self, social identity, and epistemology are deeply entrenched within worldviews that marginalize nonhuman beings and things while centring the human as distinct, detached, and dominant, the magnum opus of divine being or evolution. Anthropocentrism’s cognitive framework situates humankind as intrinsically apart from and quintessentially above the inhuman rabble—as not a system but a sovereignty complete and self-contained, as a be-all and end-all, as the alpha and the omega, separate from and superior to rats, rocks, ferns, fungi, and firestorms, to dirt, dogs, ice glaciers, influenza, and beyond. To paraphrase the words of Steven Best featured in our epigraph, if it’s not human, it doesn’t count, and this anthropocentric way of being, believing, and behaving imbues and influences the human code of inter-human and planetary conduct. Neither sound nor sustainable, our human-social and environmental ideologies and practices are not ethical, not equitable, and cannot endure.<sup>2</sup>

While we do not presume a simplistic causal relationship between anthropocentrism and the myriad crises impacting our planet, we believe that its narrow humanism and restrictive definitions of the human have played significant roles in shaping these crises. We need new definitions of the human, new subjectivities, and new epistemologies. In short, we need new worldviews. Rosi Braidotti makes a similar point: “[W]e need to devise new social, ethical, and discursive schemes of subject

1 S. Best, *Minding the Animals: Ethology and the Obsolescence of Left Humanism*, „The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy”, 5 February 2009.

2 This point is argued by many scholars. See, for instance, E. Hayward, *More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspiciated Selves*, „Women’s Studies Quarterly” 2008, no. 3–4, p. 64–85; I. Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*, Hoboken 2012.

formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing. That means we need to learn to think differently about ourselves[,] ... to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually becoming.”<sup>3</sup> Like Braidotti, we call for the development of “alternative schemes of thought, knowledge, and self-representation”<sup>4</sup>. And so, in this article, we explore the possibilities of shifting from anthropocentrism into less centralized, more expansive and interconnected worldviews in which the human is neither exceptionalized nor excluded. Drawing on recent work in science studies, U.S. women-of-colour theories, and speculative realisms, our article investigates this shift through several parts: (1) A brief overview of recent critiques of anthropocentrism and the limitations in mainstream feminist standpoint theory’s ability to overcome this anthropocentrism; (2) an exploration of recent developments in virology’s promising alternatives to anthropocentrism’s narrow definition of the human; and (3) an analysis of Chicana queer-feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa’s innovative nepantlera subjectivity and onto-epistemology as seen in her theory of *conocimiento*.<sup>5</sup> Because scholars have yet to examine the post-anthropocentric (and posthumanist) dimensions of Anzaldúa’s thought but instead generally categorize her epistemology as an ethnic-specific feminist standpoint theory, her work offers a unique point of entry into these investigations. We conclude with a few speculative questions about what the virus and *conocimiento* might teach us as we attempt to develop post-anthropocentric epistemologies and definitions of the human.

Like other critical posthumanist scholars influenced by feminism, environmentalism, and other recent theoretical movements, we call for and attempt to develop a post-anthropocentric worldview. Rather than entirely reject the human by positing some type of post-human figure, we enact a critical posthumanism that proceeds by redefining the human in more expansive terms that underscore human beings’ radical interconnectedness with all existence yet, simultaneously, decenter

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3 R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, UK 2013, p. 12.

4 Ibid., p. 12.

5 We borrow the term “onto-epistemology” from Karen Barad and use it to underscore Anzaldúa’s innovative inter-twining of epistemology and ontology—an intertwining which precedes Barad’s work by years. See Barad’s „Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers.” *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies*, ed. R. Dolphijn, I. van der Tuin, London 2012. We discuss nepantlera subjectivity and *conocimiento* in detail below. In brief, “nepantlera” is a term Anzaldúa coined to describe a liminal, threshold person or mediator among multiple worlds; and “conocimiento” is her term for her onto-epistemology.

the human. (Through this decentring process, we avoid both a “humanism that excludes nonhuman suffering and labour” and a transhumanism that strives for an “enhanced” human being.)<sup>6</sup>

As a number of contemporary scholars have argued, anthropocentrism’s characteristic centring and superiorising of the human being and agenda not only authorize the domination, destruction, exploitation, control, and rampant consumption of beings and things relegated as not-human, but also construct a solitary human subjectivity, isolate the human in an illusion of sequestration, and create a cognitive dissonance that prevents human beings from recognising our connection to the Earth and acknowledging that the harm humankind does to the Earth must, necessarily, harm humanity as well. Michael Meacher, former environmental minister to the UK, explains that while five times previously the Earth has been subject to massive extinctions, we are experiencing now and for the first time ever a planetary cataclysm initiated by an Earthen species. Meacher cites the human-engineered shortages of fresh water, the human demolition of forest and land, the escalating devastation by human-manufactured climate change, the human overuse and exploitation of the Earth’s natural resources, and the relentless rise in human population as driving the “elasticities of the world’s ecosystems beyond their tolerance limits.” As Meacher states, “[w]hat we now face is a transformation of our world and its ecosystems at an exponential rate, and unprecedentedly brought about not by natural forces, but by the activities of the dominant species across the planet.”<sup>7</sup>

Epistemologically supporting this conceptual severing of humankind from nonhuman entities is a dichotomous mode of discernment through which beings, things, conditions, and concepts are defined by their construed disparity. Difference within this epistemic framework is not a neutral equation but instead a formula conveying not only categorical polarity but also rigid demarcation as superior/inferior. Manifesting anthropocentrically and exemplified in pairings such as human/animal and human/nature wherein the human is detached from and dominant over nonhuman animals, and “nature” is conceptualized as obtaining meaning and value only through the control, commodification, and so-called civilizing influence of human rule, this dichotomous framework leads to hierarchical segregation: the further a being or thing

6 For discussions of these critical posthumanisms, see R. Braidotti *The Posthuman*, especially chapter two and R. Twine, *Genomic Natures Read through Posthumanisms*, „The Sociological Review” 2010, no. 58.S1, p. 175–195. The quotation is on p. 179.

7 M. Meacher, *End of the World Nigh: It’s Official*, lecture delivered at Newcastle University, 14 February 2003 (Global Policy Forum).

falls from the anthropocentrically defined “human,” the more alien and thereby inferior this being or thing becomes. Anthropocentrism’s cognitive censorship positions these constitutive others fundamentally outside human reference, thus suppressing any possibility of human-nonhuman connection. The binary ways of thinking, the relentless, recurring dynamics of dominance/oppression, power/powerlessness, I/other are all rooted within anthropocentrism. Mountains, monera, manatee, mushrooms, tomatoes, tornados, turtles, the tundra, apes, aluminium, and amoebas are the alien, the other, the lesser—their worth determined by their potential for human consumption.

Anthropocentrism’s single-dimensional narrative leaves no space for interdependency, collectivity, communion, or symbiosis. Formally established by Socrates in early fourth century BCE, this anthropocentric standpoint resounds through western philosophy’s tenets and continues to permeate and frame contemporary ideologies. Despite notable exceptions (Homer, Hesiod, Theophrastus, Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Spinoza), western canonical philosophers like Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Heidegger, and Kant have directed considerable effort to conclusively demonstrate the indelible distinction between the human and the nonhuman. As Gary Steiner explains in *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents*, western philosophy’s “dominant view ... is that human beings are fundamentally superior to nonhuman animals, typically on the grounds that only human beings possess reason, language, and self-awareness”.<sup>8</sup> And although the majority of western philosophers ponder the anthropocentrically-defined “moral status” of nonhuman animals—and ultimately deny not only moral status *to* nonhuman animals but also assert that humankind has absolutely no moral obligations *towards* nonhuman animals—they give no such consideration to entities dualistically divided from and hierarchically ranked further below the inferiorised category of the nonhuman animal: the nonanimal things, objects, and systems of the Earth.<sup>9</sup>

An increasing number of contemporary theorists argue that anthropocentrism is both factually false and ideologically flawed, and that

8 G. Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy*, Pittsburgh 2010, p. 38.

9 See for example B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge 1993; R. Braidotti, *The Postmodern*; M.J. Hird, *Feminist Engagements with Matter*, „Feminist Studies” 2009, no. 2, p. 329–346; M.J. Hird, C. Roberts, *Feminism Theorises the Nonhuman*, „Feminist Theory” 2011, no. 2, p. 109–117; N. Giffney, M.J. Hird, *Introduction: Queering the Non/Human, Theorising the Non/Human*, Burlington, VT 2008; C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, New York 1983.

the ramifications of this fallacy are not trivial but instead cataclysmic. As John Burnside asserts, “anthropocentrism underpins our most basic moral and political failures . . . as long as we are even the least bit anthropocentric, we do harm, not only to other creatures and their habitats but to the world we ourselves inhabit.”<sup>10</sup> Right now, in this very moment, acting with anthropocentrically-conferred authority and arrogance, humankind hurts the planet, hurts the beings and things collectively comprising the planet, and has the escalating ability to conclusively destroy the planet.<sup>11</sup>

Yet as feminist standpoint theorists (among others) remind us, all too often this anthropocentrism is even more narrow than our analysis would imply because “humankind” has itself been defined in restrictive terms that include only some human beings: those from elite groups who have, historically, shaped anthropocentric thought in their own image. By exposing this nonobjective, narrow (androcentric) worldview, feminist standpoint theorists have significantly expanded our understanding of anthropocentrism’s deadly limitations.<sup>12</sup> And yet, despite their important critiques of conventional (anthropocentric) philosophies and theories, feminist standpoint theories—like the mainstream Western perspectives they critique—centre the human, enacting versions of what Greta Gaard describes as “human-centred (anthropocentric) feminism.”<sup>13</sup> In short, feminist standpoint theory itself inadvertently adheres to the precepts and paradigm of anthropocentrism, while only somewhat expanding the epistemology to include previously overlooked groups

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10 J. Burnside, *Humans Don't Make the World Go 'Round*, „New Statesman”, 29 November 2012.

11 Early in the 1980s, biologist Eugene F. Stoermer coined the term “the Anthropocene” to convey a geological epoch within which the present and potential impact of humankind upon the planet poses a conclusively catastrophic risk. We live in the Anthropocene, and the magnitude of humankind’s harmful influence upon the earth and the likelihood of planetary destruction increase each day.

12 Although she stops too soon, Sandra Harding offers a nuanced critique of this anthropocentric exceptionalism in *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities*, Durham 2008.

See Ralph Acampora’s discussion of Marilyn Frye’s work in *Zoos and Eyes: Contesting Captivity and Seeking Successor Practices*, „Society and Animals” 2005, no. 1, p. 69–88. As Acampora notes, “Frye speaks of arrogant eyes which organize everything seen with reference to themselves and their own interests” (p. 67); she has in mind the controlling gaze of patriarchy and its effects on women, but her analysis in several respects is quite capable of extrapolation to the gaze of anthropocentrism and its effects on nonhuman animals” (p. 85).

13 G. Gaard, *Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism*, „Feminist Formations” 2011, no. 2, p. 26–53.

of humans.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, conventional feminist standpoint theory has made significant contributions to academic social-justice movements,<sup>15</sup> and our point here is not to condemn or reject it. Demonstrating knowledge production as intrinsically informed by embodied social location, feminist standpoint epistemologies have offered vital critiques of Enlightenment-based assumptions about absolute truths and monolithic worldviews. In this article, we build on these critiques while borrowing from feminist standpoint theory's method, its ability to retell a totalistic narrative, shifting human paradigm and perspective to a less centralised, more interconnected viewpoint.

Anthropocentrism does not serve us well. We need new worldviews that de-centre the human. In the following pages, we speculate on several routes we could take to enact this de-centring process. Because anthropocentrism is based upon an onto-epistemology that posits and enacts an unbreachable schism between humankind and the beings and things categorically jumbled as not-human, one possible approach entails dismantling the notion of the human body as a locus of biological integrity. Deconstructing anthropocentrism's flat-earth fallacy with emerging scientific data enables us to reconceptualise the human "I" in collective terms—a "We" comprised of monera, protista, fungi, plantae, animalia, and viruses. As Jane Bennett describes in *Vibrant Matter*, the simple crook of the human elbow is "a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria," and rather than see the human as singularly embodied, it is necessary to know that "[w]e are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them"<sup>16</sup>. These nonhuman assemblages literally constitute the human body, and investigating their direct contributions to human physiology can derail anthropocentrism's story of the human as singular in subject, identity, and agency.

It is biologically accurate to characterise the human not as a separate, organically segregated body and being but rather as a *microbiome*—a neologism Nobel laureate Joshua Lederberg coined in 2000

14 Hence Braidotti's description of feminist standpoint theory as "humanist feminism," in *Feminist Epistemology after Postmodernism: Critiquing Science, Technology and Globalisation*, "Interdisciplinary Science Reviews" 2007, no. 1. For an example of feminist standpoint epistemologies' anthropocentrism, see Harding's *Sciences from Below*.

15 For a representative sampling of conventional feminist standpoint theory, see Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Susan Hekman, and Patricia Hill Collins. For samples of their work, see *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. S. Harding, New York 2003.

16 J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham 2010, p. 112–113.

to reference the sum of microbial species, the genomes of these species, and the mutual interaction occurring on and in the human environment. The commonly conceptualised singular human body and/or being is in fact an inter-special, multi-corporeal conglomerate.<sup>17</sup> We are, as Dorion Sagan notes, “beings made of beings;” derived “messily from a motley;” “crisscrossed and cohabited by strange beings, intimate visitors who affect our behavior.”<sup>18</sup> While previous scientific epistemologies have framed the flora, the fauna, the nonhuman entities present on and in the human body as the *they*—the foreign matter serving or injuring the distinct and apex *us*—contemporary microbiomic research refutes this binary notion, reveals that the *they* are in truth also the *us*.

To be “human” is to be predominantly “not human”—a vigorously dynamic, mostly cooperative but sometimes combative, busy crowd of interbeing. “Being human” is to be 100 trillion—nearly an entire kilogram!—of assorted bacteria; it is to be an abounding multitude of mites and monera, a frenzy of fungi and microflora. The human gut, for example, is a veritable galaxy of microorganisms, and the human belly button brims with unique, industrious beings. These interacting entities’ communal conduct does not just contribute to but instead creates the physiology that we call “human.” When we recognize the human body and being as a collaborative effort, the processes and phenomena of being human is seen in every micro-moment of our lives as influenced both hugely and minutely, both benevolently and malignantly, by the legion of beings and things constituting the human.<sup>19</sup> Endeavouring to decentre the human and deconstruct the concept of the human body and being as exclusive and excluded, alone and unaligned with an otherised and therefore subordinate world, we focus on what Jane Bennett terms the “its”—the “I as it: the outside that’s within.”<sup>20</sup> Donna Haraway, charting the intersection of science and philosophy, notes in *When Species Meet* that exclusively human genomes constitute only ten percent of the human body;

17 See, for elucidation, the National Institute of Health’s Human Microbiome Project.

18 D. Sagan, *Cosmic Apprentice: Dispatches from the Edges of Science*, Minneapolis 2013.

19 In *Vibrant Matter* Bennett writes of the “‘alien’ quality of our own flesh,” the ways through which human “flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners” (J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham 2010, p. 112), and describes the human difficulty in focusing upon “the oxymoronic truism that the human is not exclusively human, that we are made up of its” (p. 113).

20 J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 113–114.

the other ninety percent of so-called human cells contain the genomes of “bacteria, fungi, protists, and such.” An individual is never alone but rather becomes “an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates.”<sup>21</sup> Or, as Bennett asserts, “we are also nonhuman,” explaining that “human being and thinghood overlap ... the us and the it slip-slide into each other.”<sup>22</sup> In presenting the human body and being as not precisely human but more accurately a conglomeration, it is both productive and provocative to feature the virus—an entity on the cusp of conceptualised life, transgressing scientific classifications of “living” and “dead,” confounding the being/thing binary, and companionship the human as an often maligned member of the microbiome since the proverbial dawn of time.

What new epistemologies can arise through considering the organic state of interconnection characterising the viral-human relationship? What conceptual shifts, what new perceptions, become possible when we recognize the collaboration, the alliance, the relationship of reciprocal transformation quintessential to the host-virus relationship? What massive evolution in self-schema accompanies the realization that we humans are not individual, independent, self-propelled and self-empowered but rather a legion, a numberless multitude, a vibrant throng of interdependencies, our every moment, every move, every mood not the act of “I,” “I,” “I,” but rather the act of a “We” too alien to fully comprehend or comfortably contemplate?

Within contemporary fields of science and medicine, the virus is no longer seen single-dimensionally as disease, but rather increasingly assayed—albeit through an anthropocentric lens—as both human biological appurtenance and facilitative adjunct to human evolution. Viruses are old. It’s only barely hyperbolic to say that they have been around forever. A non-cellular entity, not quite scientifically acknowledged as “alive,” scientists posit that viruses emerged at or close to the origin of life, 3.5 billion years ago.<sup>23</sup> Viruses are endemic to the planet, endemic to all forms of conceptual life; as Dennis H. Bamford explains, cellular-based beings (i.e., humans) are vastly outnumbered by viral entities: “cellular life can be conceptualized as ‘bathing in a virtual sea of viruses.’”<sup>24</sup>

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21 D. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis 2007, p. 3.

22 J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 4.

23 H.W. Ackermann, *Bacteriophage Observations and Evolution*, „Research in Microbiology” 2003, no. 4, p. 245–251.

24 D.H. Bamford, *Do Viruses Form Lineages across Different Domains of Life?*, „Research in Microbiology” 2003, no. 4, p. 231–236.

Disproven conclusively by biology, the anthropocentric narrative of humankind's discrete preeminence is false; the viral sea in which we bathe is not a foreign realm but a familiar habitat, a familial home. Microbial biology has made recent, extremely relevant, and fascinating discoveries regarding the interspecies relationship between viruses and other life forms, hypothesising that viruses have not only coevolved with other species but also directly contributed to—indeed created!—these species' bodies. Virologist George Rice explains that viruses “make up the largest component of biomass on this planet,” adding that when “considering that not only is viral presence on this planet all encompassing, but every sequenced organism to date has a major component of its genome that is viral in origin, it becomes apparent that viruses are integral players in the evolution of what we presently consider life.”<sup>25</sup> Humans and viruses share common ancestry; as Bamford explains, “[t]aken together with the observation that cellular life is intimately linked with the world of viruses, and possibly always has been, it seems that viruses may form lineages that extend from the root to all branches in the tree of life” (p. 234). Carl Zimmer applies this model directly to the human species, stating that “[v]iruses have insinuated themselves into the genome of our ancestors for hundreds of millions of years... inserting their own DNA into ours.”<sup>26</sup> Anthropocentrism shrinks the world, denying the biological reality of our human past as well as present and pruning the branches in the tree of life to a human-centred perspective, but simple biological fact refutes this notion, conclusively dispels the conceit of the canonically centred and segregated human body and being.

Confounding the anthropocentric conceptualisation of the human and the virus existing in diametric distinction as well as combative opposition, biologist Frank Ryan writes in his article “I, Virus: Why You're Only Half Human” that nearly half of human DNA is comprised of viral components. With anthropocentrically typical human hubris, scientists relegated these nonhuman viral components as “junk DNA” and only very recently acknowledged their crucial role in human biology. Indeed, as Ryan notes, overwhelming evidence demonstrates that “viruses have significantly changed human evolution,” making the human genome a human-nonhuman assemblage, the evolutionary “union of vertebrate and virus.”<sup>27</sup>

25 G. Rice, *Are Viruses Alive? Microbial Life – Educational Resources*, Montana State University, n.d.

26 C. Zimmer, *Mammals Made By Viruses*, „Discover Magazine” 14 February 2012.

27 F. Ryan, *I, Virus: Why You're Only Half Human*, „Science and Technology” 29 January 2010.

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The results of this union between the human and the virus have literally changed the course of evolution for us both. And yet how did the human genome become infused not only with so many and myriad viral components, but also with genes that are literally viral and human prodigy? Symbiogenesis is the forming of a single new entity through the merging of two unique entities, and throughout our primordial past and into our present, viral DNA has combined with human DNA to create hybridically new organisms. Communion between virus and human is contagion, and ancient contagion became connubial co-evolution. Take, for example, the serendipitous prehistoric instance in which our human ancestor was infected by a very avid, ambitious virus. Viral and human DNA merged to develop a specific gene encoded with the ability to form the protein syncytin. Syncytin enabled the virus to fuse together the cells of the human host in order to facilitate viral mobility, and the human host made use of syncytin in building a placenta fusing foetus to mother, ensuring the passage of nutrients in utero from mother to foetus, and protecting the foetus from attack by the immune system of the mother. Had this primaevael infection—this viral/human relationship of mutual change, mutual evolution—never occurred, the human would not give live birth to young but would instead lay eggs as do birds, and many fish, reptiles and amphibians.<sup>28</sup>

Our human genome is crowded with the record of every instance in which we were touched indelibly by virus. Like an organic hard drive, we are inscribed with the chemical code of conjugal contact between human and virus, and this record stretches back a hundred million years. Only a fraction of our “human” genes code for actual human life; the rest of our genome is comprised of what we would anthropocentrically construe as alien, as other, as not an “Us” but rather an “It”—or even worse from an anthropocentric perspective, as a horrific hybrid of the sacrosanct, purportedly inviolate human, and the alien, the other, the It.

This notion of the human as not a purely human being but instead a genetic mongrel has no place within anthropocentrism’s binary framework. Viewed from this oppositional perspective, the virus’s contact with the human is “infection;” the virus is a parasite attacking, infiltrating, sabotaging, and destroying the human host. Virus and human are disparate and combative, each maintaining—even and especially through

28 See C. Esnault, G. Cornelis, O. Heidmann, T. Heidmann, *Differential Evolutionary Fate of an Ancestral Primate Endogenous Retrovirus Envelope Gene, the EnvV Syncytin, Captured for a Function in Placentation*, „Plos Genetics”, C. Zimmer, *A Planet of Viruses*, Chicago 2011, G. Magiorkinis, R.J. Gifford, A. Katzourakis, J. De Ranter, R. Belshaw, *Env-Less Endogenous Retroviruses Are Genomic Superspreaders*.

contact—distinct and rigidly delineated identities. But this dichotomous doctrine is a fallacy. Infection is not invasion but infusion of viral and human selves. Contagion is biological communion, not combat. This human-virus liaison changes both human and virus, and throughout the ages our species have companioned each other as consorts in an interrelationship of mutual transformation.

Without the virus, humanity as we know it would not exist, and without the human, the virus would not exist in its present forms. Focusing upon this nondichotomous virus-human relationship decentres the human and deconstructs anthropocentric descriptions of the human body as an élite, exclusive, and lonely independency. An onto-epistemological change begun microscopically has macrocosmic potential; revising anthropocentrism's mythos at the microbiomic level can catalyze a shift in humankind's ways of knowing, being, and acting which not only releases humankind from the seclusion of construed supremacy, but also invites humanity to recognise (and hopefully address) rampant planetary consumption this mythos has encouraged us to enact.

What implications arise, when we acknowledge that the human body and being is not singular and solitary but instead comprised of a plurality of entities? What could it mean to realise that we are not human but rather a virus-human hybrid? To understand that the virus, too, is not an entity existing in exclusivity and alienated independence but rather in a biological fusion, an organic give-and-take with humankind? Through the alchemy of association, both virus and human host are transformed—transformed in the instant of contact, and potentially, evolutionarily transformed for eons to come.

Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking work offers further insight into this decentring process. Although Anzaldúa has often been used to illustrate feminist standpoint epistemologies,<sup>29</sup> we believe that these illustrations focus too closely on one aspect of Anzaldúa's work and thus overlook her expansive concept of personhood, as well as the possibilities that can arise through her radically redefined standpoints. As we explain in the following pages, Anzaldúa develops a post-anthropocentric subjectivity and onto-epistemology which neither erase nor elevate the human but instead radically blur the boundaries between conventional (Cartesian) definitions of human and nonhuman life. Thus, for

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29 See for instance T.A. Martine, *Making Oppositional Culture, Making Standpoint: A Journey into Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands*, „Sociological Spectrum” 2005, no. 5, p. 539–570; and Harding's footnoted references to Anzaldúa, as well as her chapter titled “Borderland Epistemologies,” in *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*, Bloomington, IN 1998.

example, in a 1977 poem titled “The coming of el mundo surdo,” she defines herself in broad terms that include but go beyond typical representations of the human: “Within my skin all races / sexes all trees grasses / cows and snails.”<sup>30</sup> Analogous to the viral-human relationship described above, Anzaldúa defines the human in language that acknowledges social identity categories (referring to “all races / sexes”) yet exceeds the human (body) to embrace non-animal plant life, as well as nonhuman animals.

While scholars and other readers generally describe Anzaldúa according to specific social identities (“Chicana,” “lesbian,” “queer,” “feminist,” “campesino,” “disabled,” and/or “working-class”), Anzaldúa herself practiced a more fluid self-naming process. Throughout her career, she generally defined herself in much larger terms—terms which begin with specific human identity categories but go beyond them without erasing or ignoring the categories themselves. In short, she transforms—without rejecting or denying—the human-based social identities which feminist standpoint theories emerge from and valorise. Thus, for example, in her early autohistoria, “La Prieta,” she positions herself with/in an array of oppositional movements:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria, the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. “Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,” say the members of my race. “Your allegiance is to the Third World,” say my Black and Asian friends. “Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.<sup>31</sup>

While each group demands that she self-identify and align her activism entirely within their parameters, Anzaldúa resists these expectations without rejecting the people or dis-respecting their political aspirations for a more equitable world. After noting the potential divisiveness in their demands, she embraces the contradiction:

30 G. Anzaldúa, *The Coming of el Mundo Surdo*, in: *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. A. Keating, Durham 2009, spacing in the original. We highlight the early date of this poem, as well as several other Anzaldúan texts, in order to underscore the extent of Anzaldúa’s posthumanism.

31 *La Prieta*, in: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 1981, ed. Ch. Moraga, G. Anzaldúa, New York 1983, p. 198–209.

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and -legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

Anzaldúa maintained this inclusionary stance despite the fact that, during the time of this essay (1979-1981), separatism, nationalism, and identity-based alliances were almost the norm among many U.S. feminists, ethnic nationalists, and other progressive social actors. Although she experienced intense pressure to conform, she refused to do so. By shifting her focus from these demands to the stories and desires which triggered and shaped them, she exposes the social labels' limitations and the flaws in the various forms of identity policing (and "group think") on which such labels rely. This outward-directed shift enables Anzaldúa to redefine belonging in more inclusionary terms. She creates alternative communities that respect—but are not based on—social identity categories.

Anzaldúa's mobile self-positioning and inclusionary alliances illustrate what we describe as her nepantlera subjectivity—an approach to human identity which facilitates the shift from anthropocentrism into a more generous, less human-centred worldview. As we define the term, nepantlera subjectivity represents a nonanthropocentric understanding of personhood that decentres, but does not deny, the human. As such, it offers a useful alternative to feminist standpoint epistemologies while avoiding both anthropocentrism's binary-oppositional frameworks and the premature eradication of the human found in some versions of posthumanist thought. We borrow the word "nepantlera" from Anzaldúa, who coined it to describe her own experiences and those of other liminal, threshold people who refuse to belong only to one community but instead negotiate within and among them (analogous to Anzaldúa's movements, discussed above, in "La Prieta"). Nepantleras are mediators who move among multiple worlds, employ relational epistemologies, develop inclusionary communities, and facilitate additional types of transformation. As Anzaldúa explains in "Speaking across the Divides":

Nepantleras are the supreme border crossers. They act as intermediaries between cultures and their various versions of reality. Las nepantleras, like the ancient chamanas, move between the worlds. They can work from multiple locations, can circumvent polarizing binaries. They try not to get locked into one

perspective or perception of things. They can see through our cultural conditioning and through our respective cultures' toxic ways of life. They try to overturn the destructive perceptions of the world that we've been taught by our various cultures. They change the stories about who we are and about our behavior. . . . *Nepantleras think in terms of the planet, not just their own racial group, the U.S., or Norte América.*<sup>32</sup>

Nepantlera subjectivity is multiplicitous, post-anthropocentric, and nonbinary. Nepantleras do not base their self-definitions, perceptions, or politics on the experiences of a specific (sometimes monolithic) group—or even the experiences of all human beings; they strive to adopt relational, planetary perspectives that embrace internal and external collectivity. With this shifting multiplicity, nepantlera subjectivity facilitates paradigmatic border crossings and transitions between cognitive frameworks. Through nepantlera subjectivity, the limitations of ideologies grounded in anthropocentrism may be perceived, and this perception may help us to move in theory and praxis beyond the constrained cartography of a conceptual human centre.

Internally, nepantlera subjectivity requires a complex, nonunitary definition of the human. Look, for instance, at Anzaldúa's description of "the human personality" in a 1991 interview with AnaLouise Keating:

It's supposed to be one. You know, you're one entity--one person with one identity. But that's not so. There are many personalities and subpersonalities in *you* and your identity shifts every time you shift positions.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike anthropocentrism's fixed "I," which posits and relies on a rigid boundary between human and nonhuman, Anzaldúa's nepantlera subjectivity contains an internal multiplicity, a divergent selfhood that welcomes and expects alterations. This multiplicity is fully enfolded, making the body itself multiple—a thriving, teeming community composed of millions and millions of nonhuman entities. Anzaldúa celebrates this internal multiplicity in an unpublished short story, called "La entrada de ajenos a la casa/The Entry of the alien into the house." As she explains in the same interview, the story is

about the body and all the organisms that live in the body: the *i coli* bacteria in the stomach, the plaque in your teeth, the millions of organisms in the eyebrow area—the roots of the eyelashes have particular organisms different from the ones

32 G. Anzaldúa, *Speaking across the Divide*, in: *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 293.

33 G. Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. A. Keating, New York 2000.

in the forehead. You are not just AnaLouise, you're all the different organisms and parasites that live on your body and also the ones that live in symbiotic relationship to you. The *mouth!!!* The mouth has tons of bacteria and foreign stuff. Animals live in symbiotic relationships—the cows with little birds picking the ticks off. So who are you? You're not a single entity. You're a multiple entity.<sup>34</sup>

Although the story's title seems to describe these organisms as nonhuman aliens, Anzaldúa suggests that these "alien" inhabitants transform the human host, enhancing the human's hybridity, expanding the meaning and manifestation of human life. In nepantlera subjectivity, identity, being, and body are no longer fixed, inert, and single-dimensionally marked by rigidly-ascribed organic and ideological boundaries; they are, rather, a synergistic collectivity, a communion of unique but interconnected entities. Just as the virus and the human create a shifting biological whole that transcends the sum of its parts, Anzaldúa blurs the boundaries between the I and the Alien, the I and the Other, the I and the We.

We want to underscore the innovative dimensions of Anzaldúa's nepantlera subjectivity. Anzaldúa is not posthuman; she neither denies nor discounts human beings and human life. Rather, she occupies the category ("human being") and transforms it from within. Given the dehumanisation Anzaldúa and other people of colours have experienced in U.S. culture—where full human status has been defined as 'white,' male, able-bodied, economically sufficient, and Christian—this willful occupation of the human is itself a significant political act.<sup>35</sup> But even more significant, for us, is the fact that Anzaldúa does not only insist—in the face of racism, sexism, and other forms of relentless dehumanisation—on her humanity. She is not content simply to self-define as "human." (Inevitably, to do so, would replicate anthropocentrism's binary framework.) Instead, she redefines what it means to be human—drawing on her beliefs, her experiences, and her desire for radically inclusionary communities. By insisting on her humanity while redefining the very meaning of the term "human," Anzaldúa enacts an innovative

By insisting on her humanity while redefining the very meaning of the term "human," Anzaldúa enacts an innovative post-anthropocentric subjectivity that decentres both conventional meanings of the human and progressive standpoint epistemologies

34 Ibid., p. 158.

35 As María Lugones notes, "Beginning with the colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean, a hierarchical, dichotomous distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonized in the service of Western man. . . . Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species—as animals . . . . The European, bourgeois, colonial, modern man became a subject/agent, fit for rule, for public life and ruling, a being of civilization, heterosexual, Christian, a being of mind and reason." – *Toward a Decolonial Feminism*, „Hypatia” 2010, no. 4, p. 743.

post-anthropocentric subjectivity that decentres both conventional meanings of the human and progressive standpoint epistemologies.

Epistemologically, nepantlera subjectivity leads to a relational form of holistic thought-and-action which Anzaldúa names *conocimiento*. The Spanish word for “knowledge” or “consciousness,” *conocimiento* represents a context-specific mix of empirical, rational, analytical, imaginal, and intuitive thinking and acting.<sup>36</sup> Like feminist standpoint epistemologies, *conocimiento* originates in personal-collective, embodied experiences. But Anzaldúa’s theory and practice of *conocimiento* defines “experience” more broadly. Whereas the former associates standpoint exclusively with human social identity categories, *conocimiento*’s standpoint(s) includes human social identity categories but expands beyond them to also to include a more-than-human perspective that begins with respect for the nonhuman and openness to all existence. Anzaldúa offers her most developed delaboration of *conocimiento* in “now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts,” where she presents a recursive seven-stage process that relies on a ceaseless transmutation, a simultaneously inward and outward movement, that makes permeable and then dissolves conventional western oppositions (self/non-self, human/nonhuman, spirit/flesh, etc.). As we see in the following passage, her perspective—her standpoint, if you will—becomes the literal ground on which she metaphorically stands—a ground now defined as sacred, “*tierra sagrada*.”

You stand on *tierra sagrada*—nature is alive and conscious; the world is ensouled. You lift your head to the sky, to the wingspread of pelicans, the stark green of trees, the wind sighing through their branches. You discern faces in the rocks and allow them to see you. You become reacquainted with a reality called spirit, a presence, force, power, and energy within and without. Spirit infuses all that exists—organic and inorganic—transcending the categories and concepts that govern your perception of material reality. Spirit speaks through your mouth, listens through your ears, sees through your eyes, touches with your hands.<sup>37</sup>

What does it mean, to view nature as “alive and conscious,” or to “discern

36 For discussions of Anzaldúa’s theory of *conocimiento*, see S. Ohmer *Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s Decolonising Ritual de Conocimiento*, „Confluencia” 2010, no. 1, p. 141–153; K. Zaytoun, *Theorizing at the Borders: Considering Social Location in Rethinking Self and Psychological Development*, „NWSA Journal” 2006, no.2, p. 52–72.

37 G. Anzaldúa, *now let us shift . . . the path of conocimiento . . . inner work, public acts*, in: *This bridge we call home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. G.E. Anzaldúa, A. Keating, New York 2002, p. 540–578.

faces in the rocks and allow them to see you”? While it could be tempting to dismiss these statements (and, perhaps, the entire passage) as hopelessly naive and overly-romanticised, we suggest a different interpretation. Drawing on *nagualismo*, indigenous thought, and esoteric philosophies,<sup>38</sup> Anzaldúa posits an animist-inflected ontology, an entirely animated world in which everything is alive. To borrow Bennett’s vocabulary, we could say that Anzaldúa posits the “vibrant materiality” of all existence. The point here is not Anzaldúa’s terms—indeed, in her onto-epistemology words like “spirit, a presence, force, power, and energy” are interchangeable and almost entirely synonymous. In this passage, and elsewhere in her writings, “spirit” becomes another word for “flesh” and, like “flesh,” is deeply embodied and partially nonhuman.<sup>39</sup> Anzaldúa posits a “supernatural presence in things” which resembles or calls out to the psychic components of our lives.<sup>40</sup> To again borrow Bennett’s terms, Anzaldúa risks anthropomorphising the nonhuman world (attributing so-called human characteristics to aspects of non-human life) and thus supports Bennett’s speculation near the end of *Vibrant Matter*:

Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman “environment.” Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency. To qualify and attenuate this desire is to make it possible to discern a kind of life irreducible to the activities of humans or gods. This material vitality is me, it predates me, it exceeds me, it postdates me. (120)

These words could be Anzaldúa’s. She, too, invites us to step into a larger framework, to take up her connectionist vision, to shift our

38 For discussions of Anzaldúa’s interest in esoteric philosophies, see R. Conner, “Santa Nepantla: A Borderlands Sutra Plenary Speech, in: *El Mundo Zurdo: Selected Works from the Meetings of the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa 2007 & 2009*, ed. N.E. Cantú et. al, San Francisco 2010, p. 177–202; A. Levine, *Champion of the Spirit: Anzaldúa’s Critique of Rationalist Epistemology*, in: *EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, ed. A. Keating, New York 2005, p. 171–184.

39 See Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute 2008, p. 93. For a discussion of this aspect of Anzaldúa’s work, see A. Keating, *Speculative Realism, Visionary Pragmatism, and Poet-Shamanic Aesthetics in Gloria Anzaldúa—and Beyond*, „Women’s Studies Quarterly” 2012, no. 3, p. 51–69.

40 G. Anzaldúa, *Llorona*, in: *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 297.

understanding of human life and our definition of the human:

With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings... Love swells in your chest and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything . . . You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label.<sup>41</sup>

We've quoted this passage at length to illustrate *conocimiento's* expansive dimensions—the broad, sweeping vision which starts with the embodied human being—a *nepantlera* with a multiplicitous, permeable self-identity, feet planted firmly on *tierra sagrada*—and flows outward, encompassing all that exists. (This *nepantlera* already exceeds the human social identity “boxes.”) *Conocimiento* entails (and enacts) a shift from human social identity categories into a more-than-human standpoint that begins with respect for the nonhuman and moves outward. Anzaldúa replaces conventional social identity categories, which focus entirely on the human, with an open-ended shared identity that includes but goes beyond human life.

The differences between conventional feminist standpoint epistemology and Anzaldúa's post-anthropocentric epistemology are striking. Whereas feminist standpoint epistemologies emerge from and valorise the specific embodied experiences of marginalised peoples, *conocimiento* begins with these embodied experiences but defines them in more expansive terms—terms which acknowledge but go beyond the physically-defined, socially-inscribed human being to include internal and external multiplicity. As we suggested above, for Anzaldúa, the human body itself exceeds the human (as typically defined). The opening-up to the cosmos that she enacts in “now let us shift” points to another form that this multiplicity can take—a logical extension, as it were, given Anzaldúa's understanding of each human body as a supra-human multiplicitous entity.

While it's tempting to conclude this article with an oppositional stance and step-by-step recommendations for change, we take a more speculative approach and invite our readers to consider these questions: What can we learn from our microbiomic companions, from our abiding biological affiliation with the virus, from Anzaldúa's *nepantlera* subjectivity and onto-epistemology? How might standpoint epistemologies and other progressive theories be transformed if we adopt

41 G. Anzaldúa, *now let us shift*, *ibid.*, p. 558.

Anzaldúa’s bold standpoint (on “tierra sangrada”) and her willingness to risk the anthropomorphic? In this era of the anthropocene, what might happen when feminist standpoint theorists and other progressive scholars endorse the shift envisioned by Anzaldúa; alchemise virology’s advances into a theory of radical, interspecial reciprocity and inclusion; and facilitate humanity’s *conocimiento*: an awareness that on a macro as well as microscopic level there is no such thing as separation, as isolation, as action and existence occurring in independence? Might this onto-epistemology facilitate a transformational, potentially healing process—for the planet, and for a humanity reunited with a lively, thriving, vibrant interconnectivity of entities?<sup>42</sup>

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**Tytuł:** *Decentralizacja człowieka? Ku postantropocentrycznej teorii punktu widzenia*

**Abstrakt:** Bazując na ostatnich postępkach w wirusologii oraz pracy queerowej feministki chicano Glorii Anzaldúa'y, w niniejszym artykule badamy możliwość przesunięcia z pozycji epistemologii antropocentrycznych (w tym feministycznych teorii punktu widzenia) w stronę szerszych, zdecentralizowanych sposobów produkcji wiedzy - takich, które ani nie byłyby skoncentrowane wyłącznie na człowieku, ani nie były w pełni postludzkie. Badamy to przejście w kilku etapach składających się na poszczególne części niniejszego artykułu: (1) krótki przegląd współczesnych krytyk antropocentryzmu oraz ograniczeń feministycznej teorii punktu widzenia głównego nurtu w kontekście przekroczenia antropocentryzmu; (2) analiza współczesnych opracowań z obszaru wirusologii, które prezentują obiecujące alternatywy wobec wąskiej antropocentrycznej definicji tego, co ludzkie; oraz (3) analiza podmiotowości *nepantlera* i onto-epistemologii Anzaldúa'y na gruncie jej teorii *conocimiento*. Dzieło Glorii Anzaldúa'y dostarcza nam unikalnej perspektywy dla powyższych rozważań, gdyż postantropocentryczny (i posthumanistyczny) wymiar myśli Anzaldúa'y nie został jeszcze w pełni zbadany, a jej epistemologię powszechnie kategoryzuje się jako etnicznie określoną feministyczną teorię punktu widzenia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** antropocentryzm, feministyczna teoria punktu widzenia, Gloria Anzaldúa, postantropocentryzm, wirusologia

research  
practices

