The nonhuman turn: Critical reflections on alienation, entanglement and nature under capitalism

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Abstract

This article critically reflects on contemporary discussions of human−nonhuman relations and their consequences for ecological politics. Recent critiques push back against popular 'nonhuman turn' appeals to 'decentre' humans and downplay distinctions between humans and nonhumans. The article seeks to both extend and nuance these critiques by emphasising how uneven developments from colonial to digital platform capitalism have intensified historical processes of alienation between humans and the rest of nature. This focus contextualises the nonhuman turn as a response to increasingly alienated forms of entanglement, which may hamper rather than enable challenging contemporary forms of domination. To address this, two conceptual shifts are proposed. First, a shift away from 'decentring the human' to a dialectics between more-than-human and 'less-than-human'. This move emphasises how forms of capitalist domination continue to diminish (certain) humans *and* nonhumans and how challenging this requires pivoting between de- *and* recentring humans where needed. Second, a shift from 'more-than-human' to 'more-than-life', to emphasise how through extremely uneven histories of capitalist development the intensification of alienation has led to growing tensions between ontological relationality and epistemological and practical distinctions.

Introduction

A key objective within human geography over the last decades has been to challenge nature-society and human-nonhuman dichotomies. Many lively debates aim to imagine different relations between humans and nonhumans and are particularly concerned with challenging anthropocentrism. These include debates on posthumanism (Anderson, 2014; Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2009);

more-than-human relations (Ginn, 2014; Haraway, 2016; Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, 2016); new materialist and vitalist ecologies (Bennet, 2010;

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Braun, 2015); (critical) animal and multispecies geographies (Gillespie and Collard, 2017; Van Dooren et al., 2016), and many others. In fact, these objectives have deeply influenced the humanities and social sciences more generally (Anderson, 2014). A recent collection, entitled *The Nonhuman Turn*, for example, argues that a wide variety of approaches – including 'actor-network theory, affect theory, animal studies, assemblage theory, cognitive sciences, new materialism, new media theory, speculative realism, and systems theory' – are all 'engaged in decentering the human in favor of a concern for the nonhuman' (Grusin, 2015: 1).

Clearly, these debates and approaches are highly diverse, and their reasons for 'decentering the human' vary markedly. Yet, across this diversity, several key propositions have become highly influential in many academic discussions. Three of the most consequential are (1) a strong focus on ontological entanglements and relationality, (2) a concern to (re)distribute agency away from humans, and (3) questioning distinctions and distinction-making mechanisms. All are meant to (also and ultimately) challenge more foundational dichotomies between nature-society, subject-object, and human-nonhuman. In this article, I critically reflect on these propositions, particularly how they play out in debates concerning ecological politics under late capitalism. This is important not only because they have become so influential, but also because they have recently received severe critiques. Coming especially from post-Marxian positions, scholars like Foster (2016), Hornborg (2017a, 2017b), and Malm (2018), building on earlier work by Soper (1995), Carolan (2005), and others, have pushed back against these central contentions and are particularly concerned that these lead to ineffective ecological politics in a context of capitalist dominance.[1]

My primary aim in this article is to extend *and* nuance these critiques with two overall aims and arguments. First, to historically situate the nonhuman turn, which, following Grusin (2015), I will use as a shorthand to refer to the above relational propositions that aim to decentre the human and challenge anthropocentrism. My argument here is that from a historical perspective it is logical that relational entanglement is increasingly emphasised in the context of late capitalism. As such, I engage a basic assumption by proponents of the nonhuman turn: that human-nonhuman entanglements have changed drastically in recent decades and centuries. As I will show, however, many nonhuman turn interventions shift the focus from the structurally negative effects of these changes and how these have come into being historically to instead emphasise *that* 'the economic is configured by, and dependent upon, more-than-human processes and relationships' (Barua, 2019: 664; cf. Steele et al., 2019). As a result, these interventions, even those that take political economy and history seriously, risk becoming (selectively) ahistorical (cf. Arboleda, 2017).

My second aim is to acknowledge and build on the emancipatory political objectives of the nonhuman turn while moving beyond the problematic aspects of its relational propositions. Here my argument builds on Eva Giraud's (2019: 7) crucial point that 'the paradox of relationality . . . is that it struggles to accommodate things that are resistant to being in relation, including forms of politics that actively oppose particular relations'. I further argue that a resolute emphasis on ontological entanglements can lead to a form of ontological idealism that often does not adequately distinguish between consequential and inconsequential distinctions on epistemological and practical levels so critical for ecological politics.

I make these arguments by emphasising one particular element within the uneven historical trajectory of capitalist development: the intensification of alienation. Alienation, in essence, refers to estrangement or, more broadly, (negatively) changing connections or relations. While other authors have highlighted the importance of alienation (Foster, 2016; Sullivan, 2010), I emphasise the *intensification* of alienation over time, not as teleological necessity but as the outcome of the imperative of capital itself. I link colonial and platform capitalism – an emergent form of political economy that uses online algorithmic technologies to process big data as the basis for value – to illustrate how and why *consequential* differences between humans and

nonhumans matter to ecological politics and that acknowledging certain forms of human exceptionalism is no impediment to convivial more-than-human relations. In fact, it is often critical do so in practical ecological politics. Processes of alienation and their intensification through capitalist history are the ontological backbone to how these consequential differences have developed over time *and* how these are regularly displaced through a focus on the immanence of relationality.

Central to my argument is Biro's (2005) distinction between 'basic' and 'surplus' alienation. Basic alienation refers to the deep historical transformation from the rest of nature that allowed humans to develop distinct and exceptional forms of sociality and political economy. Surplus alienation relates to how estranged interrelations between human and nonhuman natures are (re)produced in and through political-economic systems of instrumentalisation and domination. The aim to decentre the human often ends up downplaying – or even denying – basic alienation while denouncing the problematic aspects of surplus alienation. Indeed, a central starting point for many nonhuman turn theorists is that capitalist systems of domination are inherently entangled with animal and other nonhuman lives and that this cannot be properly understood by taking (only) humans as the starting point of analysis. This point is important and, following Barua (2019), could broaden academic alliances that challenge capital. At the same time, this emphasis is limited by its focus on the immanence of relationality. By downplaying alienation, interventions based on nonhuman turn propositions not only risk becoming (selectively) ahistorical but can also lead to an ontological idealism that fails to differentiate consequential and inconsequential distinctions on epistemological and practical levels so critical for ecological politics.

To address this concern, I propose two theoretical shifts. The first is a shift away from 'decentring the human' to emphasise a dialectics between more-than-human and 'less-than-human'. 'Less-than-human' is meant to indicate a state or process of dehumanisation. Hence, this shift aims to illuminate how recent dynamics in global capitalism are the latest in a long line of historical developments that structurally diminish both humans and nonhumans and that decentring humans does not solve this conundrum. Instead, I propose a politics that pivots between de- and recentring humans where needed. This argument may lead to a rapprochement between the postcolonial theoretical emphasis on historical and contemporary dehumanisation and a recognition of the importance and rights of nonhumans. The second shift is to a focus on how historic capitalist intensification of alienation has, through extreme unevenness and heterogeneity, led to contemporary 'more-than-life' contexts. This term captures the increasing felt pressure on planetary life-in-general and how this could lead to 'ghastly futures' (Weston, 2021). The 'Anthropocene' is one currently popular way to conceptualise 'more-than-life' pressures under late capitalism. In the paper, however, I focus on platform capitalism to show how this new manifestation again dramatically intensifies alienation and the diminishing of humans and nonhumans (Büscher, 2021; Zuboff, 2019).

Together, these shifts lead to an overarching conclusion that it is precisely because we live in increasingly intensified alienated forms of entanglement that (re)centring nonhuman life by 'decentring the human' becomes important. Phrased differently, it is because humans are increasingly – though extremely unevenly – alienated from ourselves and the rest of nature that emphasising 'multispecies entanglements' has become important. Addressing this problem necessitates a deliberate analytical division between ontological entanglements and the epistemological and practical consequences of distinctions so critical for ecological politics. This point extends Giraud's (2019) call to develop an ethics of exclusion in relational theory by arguing that we also need to think about what entanglements built through capitalist development need to be *unmade* altogether (Collard, 2014; Feola, 2019). A focus on alienation may so provide a rallying point around which contrasting theoretical energies could find some common ground.

In what follows, I first discuss recent critiques of the three central nonhuman turn propositions and how these relate to several recent interventions in more-than-human geography. The aim here is not to give a genealogy of more-than-human geography

scholarship. Rather, I will highlight and discuss several specific examples that link more-than-human concerns to ecological politics in late capitalist contexts to both illustrate and nuance the critiques. This discussion lays the basis for the core of the article: contextualising the nonhuman turn propositions by theorising the relations between alienation, nature, and the (non)human in the context of broader histories of capitalist development and intensification. This will allow me to extend and nuance the critiques by discussing the two proposed theoretical shifts, illustrated by a brief foray into platform capitalism. I conclude by emphasising the importance of (surplus) alienation and intensification under capitalism and how otherwise fractious theoretical energies may find common ground to challenge them.

Nonhuman propositions and recent critiques

The central aim of the nonhuman turn, as mentioned, is to 'decentre the human'. Or, as Cary Wolfe phrases it in his book *What is Posthumanism?*, to move beyond 'classic humanist divisions' to argue that the human should be seen as 'but one life form among many' (Wolfe, 2009). This central aim encompasses myriad nuances and differences that are beyond the scope of this article. Moreover, there are important reasons for 'decentring the human'. Like other theoretical movements, the nonhuman turn has opened up space to give voice and texture to (historically) subaltern, colonial, subjugated, and other (non-white, non-male, non-western, non-heterosexual, nonhuman and other) experiences, positionalities, and contexts. The political and analytical significance of these projects should not be understated.

In the process, several philosophical propositions have gained much traction, and it is these – not the emancipatory political project – that have recently led to stern critiques. These contentions around relationality, agency, and distinction have, in different ways, been influentially posited by scholars like Donna Haraway (2016), Bruno Latour (1999), Sarah Whatmore (2002), Jane Bennett (2010), Rosi Braidotti (2013), and others, always with an aim to 'decentre the human'. Bennett

(2010: 11, 36–38), for example, famously argued that humans are but 'a particularly rich and complex collection of materials' and hence that agency resides in 'assemblages'. Similarly, Braidotti (2013: 35, 45) asserts that all 'matter, including the specific slice of matter that is human embodiment, is intelligent and self-organizing'. Following Latour, she emphasises agency as 'an assemblage of human and nonhuman actors'.

These and other prominent interventions have received critical engagement from various perspectives that I will not rehearse. The ensuing discussion focuses on selected recent interventions connecting more-than-human geography and ecological politics under capitalism to lay bare how they differ on the central nonhuman propositions. I first discuss the critiques. This will set the stage for discussing the potential and problems of several recent more-than-human interventions, which in turn shows the need to both extend and nuance the critiques.

In a critical review, Foster (2016: 409) depicts the nonhuman turn as follows: 'the new left hybrid theories are fond of references to cyborgs, quasi-objects, bundles, and imbroglios: anything that suggests the blurring of boundaries between humans, animals, and machines'. He believes that 'in the Anthropocene, however, such a perspective easily takes on a reactionary frame insofar as it removes sharp contradictions, replacing them with nebulous imbroglios'. Precisely this – removing contradictions, based on consequential distinctions – is portrayed as dangerous by recent critiques. Based on work by Frédéric Neyrat, Swyngedouw and Ernstson (2018: 17) argue that 'the effort to contain and transcend the nature-society split or dualism through ontologies of internal relationality disavows the separation upon which relationality is necessarily constituted'. Or as Carolan has it, 'once we begin to see these two realms as being ontologically inseparable . . . we lose analytic force to distinguish between different *types* of hybridity' (2005: 394–395). In other words, because nature and society are inherently interrelated, we need to distinguish between their different elements; only then can we meaningfully understand the relations that constitute their inter-relation. Analyses steeped in ontologies of entanglement may be good at grasping

complexity but find it difficult to pinpoint what defies entanglement or what *should* not be entangled (Giraud, 2019).

This is not a new argument. As Harvey (1996: 61) argues: 'Marx was in general highly critical of the "common sense" view which whenever "it succeeds in seeing a distinction it fails to see a unity, and where it sees a unity it fails to see a distinction"'. Consequently, precisely because nature and society are so deeply intertwined, we cannot dissolve nature-society distinctions according to Foster and others. They contend that we need to see both integration *and* separation to be able to identify the problems caused by human-induced environmental change. Malm (2018: 30) takes this further by arguing that we cannot attribute environmental problems to human actions if it were not for some idea of an 'independent nature'. He holds that if we resolve all distinctions between nature and society, both research and activism concerning environmental politics will become harder, if not impossible.

Next to this critique of relationality, these interventions also criticise the decentring of agency away from humans. According to the critics, while animals – not matter – clearly have agency, there is something disturbing about removing a unique form of (political) agency from humans, as this 'evacuates the world of recklessness, improvidence, liability, responsibility and whole range of other moral parameters' (Malm, 2018: 95). Hornborg (2017a: 7) asserts that 'although it may sound innovative – even subversive – to urban academics comfortably at home in their offices, for many rural people it has always been obvious that sheep, mice, trees, and weeds have purposes and agency'.[2]

Most fundamentally, therefore, critics of the nonhuman turn argue that the ultimate cause of our environmental crisis, the political economy of capitalism, cannot be confronted without drawing meaningful distinctions between humans and nonhumans, nature and society, etc. To quote Soper's (1995: 40) earlier argument: 'all ecological injunctions ... are clearly rooted in the idea of human distinctiveness. For insofar the appeal is to humanity to alter its ways, it presupposes our possession of capacities by which we are singled out from other living creatures and inorganic matter'

(which for her includes the very appeal to take animals more seriously). Hornborg (2017a: 7) therefore concludes that promoting posthumanism 'is ultimately tantamount to looking away while neoliberal capitalism continues to destroy the planet'. Foster (2016: 409) similarly states that the result of these propositions could undermine radical practices and so end up supporting business-as-usual. The way out of this conundrum is to emphasise relational, critical realist dialectics, where 'parts and wholes are mutually constitutive of each other' (Harvey, 1996: 53).

Based on my reading of nonhuman turn literatures, I believe Malm, Foster, Soper, Hornborg, and others provide a crucial corrective to much current theory that overemphasises hybrids and entanglements. At the same time, we need to be careful not to swing the theoretical pendulum back too far: insisting on hard(er) distinctions can be critical for environmental politics but could also (re)enforce disturbing racial, colonial, gender, and other inequalities (Giraud, 2019). Instead, we must place ourselves firmly within the dialectical tension that the co-constitution of nature and society represents, which is always an epistemological, analytical, *and* political balancing act that responds to forces of power and other (inter)relationships. This is not only necessary to do justice to the violence of capitalism, but also to see how this developed historically.

Several recent more-than-human interventions illustrate but also nuance this point. Indeed, as I will show, these interventions are highly critical of contemporary capitalism and aim to incorporate a more-than-human sensitivity into this critique. At the same time, and given the central contentions that inform this sensitivity, another critique emerges: that without (sufficient) attention to human agency pushing for particular intentions and goals, historical developments and their effects (can) appear overtly contingent.

A first example is Barua's work linking the more-than-human to political economic critiques of capitalism, in relation to the commodification of lions in Indian ecotourism (Barua, 2017). Barua argues that human and animal labour are analogous since 'intentionality and functionality' are 'immanent in the labour process'. Barua downplays

distinctions between how animals and humans enter 'into social relations of production', even as his material shows that humans orchestrated and organised the 'labour' of lions. His description of these dynamics highlights two points. First, that lions are not just 'raw' material, but have agency of their own. Second, that this makes capital and accumulation 'lively'. In Barua's (2017: 283) words, this 'renders visible' the 'ecological and material lives of living commodities themselves'. This is a valid point. Wildlife and nonhuman natures affect, change, and shape human lives; they are deeply entangled in manifold ways. But this does not explain *consequential* distinctions in human-nonhuman entanglements, like how and why the lions came to labour in the first place. By emphasising ontological immanence rather than the dialectics of consequential differences between human and nonhuman labour, the analysis becomes selectively ahistorical.

A second example is Colombino and Giaccaria's (2016) analysis of the commercialisation of Piedmontese bull semen. This more-than-human analysis of capital accumulation shows that bulls are killed soon after their semen is extracted, following which only technical-biological details and public relations stories around them survive to represent and imbue the remaining semen with a 'force of life' to sell them on the market. The case seems straightforward, in that 'the semen is literally what is left' and 'maintains the *potenza* (potentiality) to generate life for years after the donor has been slaughtered and transformed into minced beef' (Colombino and Giaccaria, 2016: 1052).

Following the nonhuman propositions, however, the authors assert that 'liveness and deadness are not two distinct realms, separated by a knowledgeable border – the event of death'. They argue that if a buyer of semen is not informed that the bull is already dead, this 'creates a threshold in which the animal is trapped in-between life and death', and that 'under biocapitalism, animals are productive even after their deaths' (Colombino and Giaccaria, 2016: 1046, 1056, 1057). These statements are meant to ontologically hybridise life and death, yet lack historicity based on consequential distinctions on epistemological and practical levels. Not

knowing that an animal is dead does not create a 'threshold' between life and death. It simply means that someone does not know an animal is dead. Moreover, an animal does not itself remain productive after death; *humans* render parts of animals productive after their death. Ergo, the event of death is, from many perspectives, a very consequential and absolute distinction that creates two starkly different 'realms', namely life and death. Here, the drive to decentre the human again leads to selective ahistoricity while relinquishing analytical force by not clarifying when and how distinctions become consequential and for whom.

A last and more nuanced example is Alyssa Battistoni's (2017) discussion of the 'work of nature'. She argues that we need to substitute 'natural capital' for 'hybrid labour' when incorporating nature into political economy. In her words: 'scholars are beginning to highlight the human labour and care that go into maintaining ecosystems, granting these often-invisible forms of work critical recognition. But we must also recognize the generative, productive forces of "nature itself" as part of this labour. The daily remaking of the world requires more-than-human activity: thus the importance not only of replacing "capital" with "labour," but "natural" with "hybrid"' (Battistoni, 2017: 20). Battistoni's analysis carefully outlines consequential differences between humans and nonhumans to emphasise a 'political sensibility' where humans 'realize that our futures are bound up with those of nonhumans, that we need each other to go on living and recreating our shared planet' (2017: 23).

One drawback in her account, however, is something she herself points out: that the suggestion to replace natural capital with hybrid labour works mostly on the symbolic rather than the material level. In this way, her analysis comes close to an idealist account that may confirm Hornborg and Foster's worry that it does not stimulate radical ecological politics. This seems corroborated in her berating of Marx for focusing the category of labour only on humans and her statement that the concept of hybrid labour does not 'aim to supplant or subsume other forms of human-nonhuman relationships, but to add a critical dimension to them' (Battistoni, 2017: 25). Not wishing to supplant other

relationships but rather focus on an 'expanded we' that must tend to nature's life-enabling propensities seeks to decentre the human from the concept of labour.

This way of framing 'we' overlooks Marx's (1976) positing of labour as one part of an antagonistic relationship – capital versus labour – that for him plays a crucial role in effecting (the need for) revolutionary change. In a postcapitalist world, therefore, the term hybrid labour might be generative, but it is not clear how it can presently function as part of an ecological politics that confronts capital and the powers behind it. Here, the 'expanded human-nonhuman we' falls apart seeing how animal labour cannot confront capital in the ways human labour can (Arboleda, 2017). Moreover, since deliberate *human* labour historically made capitalist entanglements, so it will take self-conscious *human* labour to unmake these.[3] This is where ontological idealism slips into the analysis, arising from the desire to decentre the human rather than to de- or re-centre as appropriate, based on the consequentiality of distinctions.

These examples illustrate some of the consequences of the influential nonhuman turn propositions, so corroborating the above critiques. At the same time, yet other recent analyses nuance the critiques. Scholars like Collard, Dempsey, Shukin, and others also combine more-than-human with political economy but seem more cautious regarding entanglements. Collard (2014: 162), in her analysis of illegal wildlife trade, for example, aspires 'to highlight the ways that humans and animals are fundamentally materially and discursively entangled while also remaining cautious of being too celebratory of these entanglements and remaining hopeful for a recognition of animals' spatial requirements and of the risks that stem from being brought into direct contact with humans' (cf. Collard and Dempsey, 2013; Ginn, 2014).[4]

The point that Collard and Dempsey stress against other nonhuman turn contributions is that the emergence and development of human-dominated forms of political economy continuously change the status of entanglements and hybrids (Carolan, 2005; Soper, 1995). They show that emphasising *that* there are entanglements does not

help us understand *how and why* these have changed. And even though 'multispecies' or nonhuman turn authors do acknowledge the latter to greater or lesser degrees, this often gets downplayed in the drive to emphasise entanglement (Van Dooren et al., 2016). One reason for this is that entanglement is deemed ontological. Yet this ontological emphasis is often not clearly distinguished from more grounded epistemological and practical distinctions, as in the work of Collard and Dempsey.

Having said this, even from an ontological perspective it is important to rethink the fixation on (the immanence of) entanglement, which leads me to the broader argument this article makes to extend the above critiques: it is precisely at a time when nature-society entanglements are increasingly *alienated* that it makes sense to emphasise hybridity and relationality. If nature and society, human and nonhuman are 'organically' entangled in everyday life, it makes little sense to 'decentre the human'. Hence, it is precisely because we live in increasingly alienated entanglements that re-emphasising our (human) bonds with and dependence on the rest of life becomes important. This is the argument I will work out in the remainder of the article.

Alienation, nature, and the (non)human

In the 1844 'Paris manuscripts', Marx develops the basic elements of his theory of alienation. Clearly, this far exceeds alienation as estrangement or (negatively) changing relations, though this simplified conceptualisation will prove useful. Focusing on alienation under capitalism, Marx argues that because the worker sells her labour to the capitalist, she is alienated, estranged from the product of her labour, which belongs not to her but to the capitalist. Under capitalist conditions, however, this is necessary; the labourer must sell her labour in order 'to exist, first, as a *worker*; and, second, as a *physical subject*' since only work allows her to receive the wage she needs to purchase the means of subsistence on the market (Marx, 2007: 71). Yet this is only the initial stage of alienation under capitalism. Marx (2007: 70, emphasis in original) argues that: 'the *alienation* of the worker in his product means

not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside* him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien'.

This phrasing is rather generic but was meant by Marx to signal how 'alienation from social processes' works under capitalism, as distinctive from 'alienation from nature' (Biro, 2005: 116). Following Biro (2005), these two forms of alienation can be labelled 'basic' and 'surplus': basic being the historical transformation from the rest of nature that allowed humans to develop distinct and exceptional forms of sociality and political economy. Surplus alienation relates to how changing interrelations between human and nonhuman natures are (re)produced in and through (political-economic) systems of domination. I will discuss these in turn, to illuminate why Marx's points are crucial to contextualising the nonhuman turn.

Basic alienation refers to the human alienation from nature. This is no dualistic statement, but a relational dialectical statement that indicates a changing relation between humans and the rest of nature. Basic alienation, according to Biro (2005: 30), is premised on an '"absolute dividing line" between the human and the non-human'. This divide, he argues, 'is historical, not biological. The historical event that constitutes the dividing line between the human and the non-human is human beings' *self-conscious* transformation of their natural environment. It is, in other words, the fact of humans' alienation from nature'. What, precisely, is meant by 'human-beings' self-conscious transformation of their natural environment' is a major debate (Soper, 1995) and trying to pinpoint its (pre-capitalist) origin would be futile. There is no specific moment of origin, as alienation is a historical and ongoing process (Biro, 2005: 78, 218). Similarly futile would be to insist that since (some) nonhumans contain rudimentary abilities similar to humans, their self-conscious or otherwise active transformation of their environment is (historically or potentially) similar to that of humans.

Yet, this is precisely what some nonhuman contentions lead to. Turner and Wels, for one, argue that we must get rid of human-animal divides altogether, since according to them scientific evidence shows that humans and animals 'only differ in degree, not in kind' (Turner and Wels, 2020: 310). Less drastically, Barua (2017: 279) argues that Marx's assertion about the differences between humans and bees being the intent behind production rests on 'tenuous distinctions'. Following the nonhuman propositions, he argues that both humans and animals submit to 'a productive dynamic immanent in the world' (cf. Steele et al., 2019). Purely biologically and if one believes that agency resides in ontological immanence, this may be correct. But 'the difference between humans and non-humans is not simply the biological *capacity* of human beings to self-consciously transform their environment; rather, it is the *historical fact* of this self-conscious human labour' (Biro, 2005: 30) and how this is consequentially different from how nonhumans transform their environments.

This distinction is crucial. It 'allows the historical fact of human alienation from nature to be more easily divorced from the thesis that human beings are separate from the rest of nature' (Biro, 2005: 30–31). Moreover, it allows us to challenge the destructive historical transformation of nature under capitalism not as something 'immanent in the world' but as the outcome of self-conscious human acts of making that are always entangled with more-than-humans. This focus on the historicity rather than the biology of the dividing line between humans and nonhumans not only rectifies the ahistorical selectivity of some more-than-human analyses, it also challenges the absolute contingency that results when consequential distinctions dissipate into an ahistorical ontological immanence.

Following the critics, it makes radical ecological praxis possible by promoting those forms of historical self-conscious activity that challenge capital or other forms of domination and violence. In other words, the consequentially different, self-conscious transformation that humans engage in is part of a changing historical relation between humans and the rest of nature. And it is the focus on this changing historical relation that moves us

beyond emphasising ontological entanglement (*that we live in multispecies worlds*) to a focus on *how* and *why* we are entangled and live in *particular* multispecies worlds.[5]

This is not to say that nonhuman turn scholars pay no attention to historical or contemporary systems of domination. To the contrary: they deeply analyse and challenge modes of contemporary domination that hurt both humans and animals (Hubbard and Brooks, 2021; Margulies and Karanth, 2018). In this way, they also fully acknowledge surplus alienation, or how changing relations between human and nonhuman natures are (re)produced in and through systems of domination. Yet paradoxically, they often do so by questioning distinctions between humans and nonhumans; by downplaying or even denying the basic alienation that surplus alienation depends on (Turner and Wels, 2020). Not accepting basic alienation means a focus on immanence becomes the only ontological way out. The alienation of entanglements arising out of the relational dialectics between wholes and parts, humans and nonhumans is positively ontologically reinscribed as something 'immanent in the world'.[6]

The consequence of this philosophical stance is that agency itself becomes immanent in assemblages and alienation or rifts become impossible. Indeed, speaking in these terms becomes suspicious, as they deny the ontological reality of the monist world. Some nonhuman scholars, like Braidotti (2013: 35, 60), are explicit about this. Others, like animal rights theorist Cochrane (2018), take this as a given and work out the logical consequences of the immanent, ontological entanglement of humans and other species for democracy and public policy. In the process, it is assumed that the immanence of relations can effectively challenge forms of domination that systemically degrade both humans and nonhumans. This renders ontological immanence into an ontological idealism that cannot be translated easily – if at all – into the (epistemological and practical) exclusions and disentangling necessary for effective ecological politics.

This established critique (see especially Hornborg, 2017b) can be significantly extended if we emphasise that the nonhuman turn and its critics share a deep concern about dualist thinking. The

difference between nonhuman turn proponents and critics, however, is that the former want to hollow out dualist thinking, not (primarily) by tracking, confronting, or resisting its alienating effects, but by *displacing* this with a politics that decentres humans in favour of nonhumans.[7] The problem is that the dominating and alienating consequences of dualist philosophies and practices do not disappear by decentring the humans that developed them. Indeed, since dualist philosophy was 'fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism' (Merchant, 1983: 193), the consequences continue to develop in (complex) interaction with new developments in capitalism, like the digital 'platform' manifestation I will discuss later.

The basis of these consequences and new developments are found in the dynamics of capitalist surplus alienation unearthed by Marx above. This is the alienation from social processes, which under capitalism 'prevents humans . . . from experiencing their objective world as their own creation, and from developing their potential as world-making social beings' (Martineau, 2016: 15). What this means is that the historical production of capitalism as a social system of domination begets the appearance of an external force that 'confronts' humans as 'something hostile and alien' (Marx, 2007: 70). Part of this force that confronts humans is a strong intensification of basic alienation, which itself is the outcome of two dynamics: a tendency towards intensification (discussed in the next section), and how under capitalism the human transformation of the environment has increasingly impacted nonhuman natures and led to a deep global environmental crisis. The nonhuman turn accepts and laments the latter but does not accept this as an intensification of basic alienation. In short: a focus on ontological immanence is itself the logical outcome of surplus alienation under historical capitalism.

If this is not acknowledged, it can lead to deeply problematic assertions. Take again Barua (2019: 229), who argues that we must see 'acts of nonhuman resistance as agential rejection of the economic structural conditions that renders animals ownable and commodifiable'. Here the displacement of the tracking, confronting or resisting of the alienating effects of dualist capitalist practices with a politics

of decentring the human becomes fully contradictory. For if it were true that nonhumans can self-consciously conceptualise and transform the environments in which they have been commodified or instrumentalised, it would *ipso facto* mean they are complicit in building or condoning them. The denial or downplaying of basic alienation not only weakens ecological politics by rendering humans 'no more liable for the effects of their occupancy of the eco-system than can any other species' (Soper, 1995: 160); it also runs the risk of playing into the hands of capital, abetting the very systems of domination nonhuman turn proponents say they wish to dismantle.

To substantiate this point, we should not only emphasise the less-than-contingent historicity of alienation and its violent consequences under capitalism but also how both alienated entanglements *and* their appearance as external or immanent have become historically intensified as an outcome of the imperative of capital. This is the purpose of the next section.

Intensification

While many authors have highlighted the importance of alienation, I emphasise the *intensification* of alienation over time, not as teleological necessity but as the outcome of the imperative of capital itself. Intensification, in other words, is a central hallmark of historical capitalism. To make this point, I build on Jeffrey Nealon's (2008) thesis that Foucault's understanding of historical power is centrally concerned with a dynamic of intensification:

> On Foucault's account, power inverts and expands the functioning of 'intensity', turning the concept against its ordinary meaning of maximum bodily feeling and thereby abstracting, expanding, temporizing, and allowing the concept to access more sites. If intensity means 'especially great concentration or saturation', the word itself expands along with Foucault's analysis: power has become more maximal not merely in the direct bodily sense (that feelings are said to be intense), but in the more descriptive or physics-related sense: intensity as maximum saturation or penetration within a given field. (Nealon, 2008: 33)

Following Foucault, Nealon undertakes a genealogy of the intensification of power from the 17th to the 20th century wherein sovereign, social, and disciplinary forms of power are, most recently, not merely succeeded but intensified through what Foucault terms 'biopower'. Biopower, as is well rehearsed, is 'an even more intense and saturated form of power that works throughout entire populations and takes on its target, "life", quite directly' (Nealson, 2008: 45). It 'is a form of power that *infiltrates* and *intensifies* all others' (Nealson, 2008: 72) and, crucially, aligns closely with and indeed reinforces the intensification of contemporary cultural, platform, and financialised forms of capital accumulation. Thus Nealon concludes: 'Such is the global logic of intensity, then, on both the economic and cultural levels: in a world that contains no "new" territory – no new experiences, no new markets – any system that seeks to expand must by definition *intensify* its existing resources' (2008: 63).

This includes nearly *all* potential resources. In stifling capitalist terminology, this means that human capital, natural capital, intellectual capital, and numerous others all need to be governed as 'efficiently' and 'economically' as possible in order to contribute to the goals of economic growth and capital accumulation. This brings us back to Marx, who, after all, explicitly posited that capitalism develops into a powerful system that *necessarily* increases pressure on people, organisations, and (other) resources in its quest for endless accumulation.

For Marx, the impetus for this drive comes from the definition of capital itself, as 'value put forth in order to generate more value', or, in short, 'value in process'. Capital, he showed, is a process of the circulation of commodities that continuously needs to be stimulated on both local or individual levels and on the level of the (global) economy as a whole. Or, as Marx put it, capital 'has to be mediated not only in each of its moments, but as a whole of mediation, as a total process itself' (1973: 255). The totality of the global circulation of commodities and capital – and hence the modes of (bio)power that go with these – has to be constantly renewed and stimulated. This not only leads to an enormous

pressure to speed things up, consume more, travel faster, and so forth, but also to Marx's contention that capital develops into an alienated 'coercive external force' that becomes 'an end in itself' (Marx, 1976: 253, 381). This is the source of the historical intensification of capitalist becoming, which leads to the conclusion that while concrete historical events are always contingent, the logic driving this intensification is not. It is why David Harvey (2006), for example, posits 'accumulation by dispossession' as a structural feature of capitalism over time, rather than only a 'primary' moment.

In what follows, I posit that part of this is an intensification of alienation in both basic and surplus forms which have contributed to the nonhuman turn focus on 'decentering the human' and its propositions, including a focus on ontological immanence. Yet by downplaying the intensification of basic alienation that undergirds surplus alienation, nonhuman turn interventions can lead to a problematic ahistoricity and ontological idealism. Two analytical shifts that do justice to different phases across historical capitalism may remedy this.

Shift one: Towards a dialectics between more-than-human and less-than-human

The first is a shift away from 'decentring the human' to emphasise a dialectics between more-than-human and 'less-than-human'. More-than-human here signals a concern for the nonhuman and indicates that the concept of the human itself is diverse and unstable.[8] Less-than-human, as a shorthand for states and processes of dehumanisation, signals that despite this diversity and instability, it is still critical for (marginalised, dehumanised) peoples to be included in that category (importantly: in a biopolitical way that allows them to live and be, not 'let die'). Together, this shift emphasises how the importance of more-than-human relations always needs to be accompanied with attention to how capitalism *structurally* diminishes both humans *and* nonhumans, as well as how addressing this requires a politics that pivots between de- *and* recentring humans where needed.

In this politics, attention must be paid to how this diminishing can be blunt but also very subtle. For example, it is noteworthy that the nonhuman turn has become so influential during the rise of platform capitalism, where absolute distinctions – ultimately between 1 and 0 – allow for a political economy that thrives on the appearance of the immanence of lively relations. But while the below exposé on platform capitalism illustrates how online forms of connection and relationality lead to less-than-human dynamics of objectification and dehumanisation, the bigger point is that these accentuate and intensify much longer processes of diminishing certain humans to empower others (Smith, 2011).

Most obviously, this relates to the colonial and slave-trade histories that degraded and diminished a particular category of (black) humans (Mbembe, 2017) but also includes subtle and not-so-subtle ways of diminishing particular groups of people and their relations to more-than-human worlds (Todd, 2016). Clearly, segments of the nonhuman turn aim precisely to allow for destabilisations of the human so as to critique processes of dehumanisation. Yet they do so by decentring the human (in a generic sense) to allow for a politics of life that is not reduced to the historical structures of domination behind these processes. The problem, as mentioned, is that these structures of domination do not disappear as a consequence of this move. Quite the opposite, as the previous section showed: these have continued to intensify.

This point again nuances *and* extends the above critiques of the nonhuman turn, namely by acknowledging the importance of moving beyond capital and capitalist structures of domination while at the same time emphasising how humans *and* nonhumans have structurally – yet unevenly and in different ways – been degraded under centuries of capitalist development. This argument builds on Braun's (2015) attempt to dialogue between new materialist and neoliberal nature literatures by doing justice to the politics of the nonhuman turn, especially by not placing 'nature's innovative potential squarely on the side of capital', but also by placing the nonhuman turn in the 'historical and political context from which our ideas emerge' (2015: 12). However, I disagree with Braun on one critical

point, namely that the relation between capital and nature (or much else) is merely '*contingent* rather than *necessary*'; that at any point in history, things *could* have been different (2015: 6). In between histories of contingency and necessity are yet other options, including histories of the *probable*. The difference is precisely that between 'new' and 'historical' materialism.

Humans live within social and political-economic contexts that carry deep historical weight (Mbembe, 2017). This is 'the tradition of all dead generations', which according to Marx' famous quote, 'weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' (1994: 4). The historical logic of capital now weighs heavily on living humans precisely because of intensifying processes of alienation that render many people 'less-than-human'. This historical logic is never necessary or inevitable, but with the accumulated weight of institutionalised power of capital over time, it can (and has) become *probable* at many critical junctures. So, while factions of the nonhuman turn are right to question ideal-types of the human, their decentring of the human and the distribution of agency may lead them, like Braun, to emphasise the contingency of *particular* historical events over the similarity across capitalist history. My argument, to be clear, is not against contingency. Rather, it aims to balance the contingent and the accumulated historical weight of the probable.

Postcolonial theory shows why this is critical (Stoler, 2016). Most importantly, it critically acknowledges the foundational violence against black bodies in the history of capitalism. Wilderson (2003) arguably takes this furthest. This violence, he argues, is not merely 'one component' of historical capitalism, *it is constitutive of it*. As he puts it: 'capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent'. Hence, 'violence against black people is ontological and gratuitous as opposed to merely ideological and contingent' (Wilderson, 2003: 229). Wilderson emphasises that this continues into the 'modern bourgeois-state' and hence that there is ontological historical continuity to violence against black people under capitalism. He and others have translated this into a broader theory of 'Afropessimism' that expounds this thinking (Wilderson, 2020).

Rendering violence against blacks *ontological* is a strong, universalist position. It is also highly problematic if one aims to maintain the belief that change is possible and racial violence is not ontologically universal. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that this violence is more than just contingent and also changes over time (Murphy and Schroering, 2020). I build here on Achille Mbembe (2017: 4–6), who argues that historical capitalist conditions are now turning into a globalised condition that he calls the '*Becoming Black of the World*'. What he means is that 'the systemic risks experienced specifically by Black slaves during early capitalism have now become the norm for, or at least the lot of, all of subaltern humanity' and that a 'potential fusion of capitalism and animism' have now led to the 'very distinct possibility that human beings will be transformed into animate things made up of coded digital data'.

Mbembe ties together two distinct historical events and experiences – colonial and platform capitalism – into a logic where 'Becoming Black', a *structurally diminished existence*, has dramatically intensified. Moreover, he theorises a 'Black reason' that 'equated Blackness with the nonhuman in order to uphold forms of oppression' (Mbembe, 2017: backflap, 87). Obviously, this connotation to the 'nonhuman' expresses a stark irony, especially in a time of #BlackLivesMatter protests: just at the time when there is a great push for diminished 'nonhumans' to become recognised and treated as fully human, there is a concerted theoretical push to 'decentre the human'. As stated before, the latter would not argue against the former – to the contrary. But, as I also showed, the propositions that accompany the nonhuman turn may have the unintended effects of rendering less-than-human turns contingent rather than structural and persistent, and hence less equipped to challenge structural forms of capitalist violence and dehumanisation.

This is why I argue for connecting more-than-human sensibility with attention to structural less-than-human turns: there is a pervasive historical logic under capitalism where changing types of entanglements between the human and nonhuman continue to produce familiar outcomes: diminished humans *and* nonhumans. Challenging this logic, as

many nonhuman turn scholars do, demands *recentralising* the category of the human when needed, not just for a more effective ecological politics but also to challenge legacies and continued manifestations of colonial and other forms of dehumanisation and objectification (Mbembe, 2017; Smith, 2011).[9]

Emphasising the long historical, highly uneven intensification of different forms of capital accumulation does not mean that all creativity or vitalism is on the side of capital. Rather, it takes the power of capital accumulation over time seriously while recognising that this power is dialectically bound to and dependent on life forces within and beyond its control (Harvey, 2006; Lorimer, 2015). It is life itself that is (ontologically) contingent and it is through this contingency that capital has brokered a highly uneven, yet also remarkably inveterate, path. The corollary is that the diminishing of nonhuman and human life is always intricately connected even as they are not reducible to each other. This is why I suggest rendering more explicit what is already latent in the nonhuman turn: to connect a concern for the more-than-human with the critical importance for challenging *structural, violent* 'less-than-human' turns.

Shift two: From more-than-human to more-than-life

The second proposed shift is from more-than-human to 'more-than-life'. This shift is meant to emphasise the increasing pressure on life-as-a-whole through contemporary capitalist biopower, which necessarily encompasses human and nonhuman life. The added 'more-than' signals the importance of a theory of alienation to connect human exceptionalism with deep concern for the nonhuman. My argument here is that the *ontological immanence of relationality* in the nonhuman turn becomes, from the perspective of the intensification of alienation, a relational dialectics between parts and whole and between humans and nonhumans within a broader context of historical capitalism. This historical dynamic of intensification leads current capitalist pressures to feign the *appearance* of external forces that, from the perspective of an ontology of entanglement, find a concomitant expression in the immanence of relations.

Importantly, this 'appearance' is not the caricatured Marxist cloak that hides some objectively – or worse, biologically – 'true' relations. It equates, in my interpretation, to the historical development and intensification of the pressures that accompany and emanate from the drive to accumulate capital. The intensification of alienation through a globalised, highly uneven capitalist biopolitics comes to be experienced by humans as more-than-life, as a 'coercive external force' (Marx, 1976: 381). This is why above I called for 'critically challenging' these appearances, and not for 'stripping them away', so as to 'reveal' something more truthful.[10] Again the focus is on the *historicity* of capitalist development and what this adds up to in terms of its structural effects. This is in line with Biro's understanding that basic and surplus alienation 'co-evolve, so that the removal of the latter cannot be achieved simply by stripping back the historical layers until only basic alienation remains' (Biro, 2011: 218). It also concurs with Merchant's argument that dualistic and monistic philosophies have co-evolved historically and cannot be separated with hindsight.

The other element of this proposed shift responds to the ontological idealism embedded in the aim to decentre the human and to challenge capital through an 'expanded human-nonhuman we' (Battistoni, 2017). My argument here is that while a more-than-human sensibility is critical, it should accompany, not displace or downplay, the distinctly human burden to bear the *cumulative* historical weight of the violence and pressures of capitalist entanglements and to self-consciously organise to challenge and unmake these. The ontological idealism of thinking of entanglement itself as ontological may, following Giraud (2019: 7), allow for a deep acknowledgement of complexity and heterogeneity. Yet, in doing so, it not only 'struggles to accommodate things that are resistant to being in relation', but also struggles to show how this diversity and heterogeneity of entanglements and exclusions still add up, through the historical imperative of capital, to 'more-than-life' contexts.

Hence, a shift from ontological idealism to the consequentiality of distinctions is important for two reasons: to do justice to the ever-changing and extreme uneven dynamics of capitalist development in order to gain a more realistic understanding of how to challenge capital; and to show how this extreme historical unevenness has led to systems of domination that appear to pressurise the whole of life. These 'more-than life' contexts confirm surplus alienation as a foundational threat and form of violence of our times.

Arguably the most well-known example of a more-than-life context is the 'Anthropocene' and associated connotations of a 'damaged' (Tsing, 2015) and 'overheated' (Eriksen, 2016) planet. A central element of the Anthropocene is that we witness a 'great acceleration' across many socio-economic and ecological variables that point towards the utter unsustainability of the contemporary global trajectory (McNeill and Engelke, 2016). And while the pertinence of these terms is rightly criticised (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016), they do signal an intensification of power and capital accumulation on the scale of the global political economy as a whole as well as on myriad local and intermittent levels (Eriksen, 2016). In other words, they signal that the intensification of historical capitalism has reached a pressure point that can be referred to as a global 'more-than-life' context.

Recent admonitions from conservationists illustrate this by arguing that 'the planet' is at risk if we do not put 30%−50% of the globe into protected areas as a response to the emergence of the Anthropocene (Wilson, 2016). The context of the Anthropocene is thus seen by many concerned with nonhuman nature to pressure *all of life*. Yet, many conservationists do not take capitalism seriously and thus ironically risk a further intensification of alienation on a yet-unforeseen scale (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020). This example, however, is rather blunt. We also witness more subtle forms of alienation currently intensifying rapidly. One of these is the emergence of 'platform capitalism'. A brief foray into this recent dynamic poignantly illustrates the article's arguments and need for the two proposed shifts.

Platform capitalism

Following Srnicek (2017), 'platform capitalism' signals how online platform tools used by organisations like Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, and others, have drastically reorganised global capitalism over the last decades.[11] Platforms are 'digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to communicate', and positioned as 'intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects' (Srnicek, 2017: 43). As such, they are also the infrastructures through which sign-values increasingly get produced, consumed and 'co-created', including those that enable or direct 'multispecies entanglements' by – quite literally – aiming to incorporate all of life into digital monitoring and tracking systems. Bakker and Ritts (2018) refer to this growing environmental platform infrastructure as 'Smart Earth'. Smart Earth 'datafies' nature, for example, by putting sensors on animals or plants to track their movements, ecosystemic functioning and habits or by applying big data analyses to inform environmental conservation.

The more data platforms can access and record, the more they can link patterns and (try to) predict our behaviours, preferences, and 'likes'. This is why it is crucial for Facebook, LinkedIn, and other platforms to push us to 'complete your profile' and get as much access to data as possible. This allows them to become more useful to you, and hence entice you to spend more time on them, which renders you more useful – and more *profitable* – to them (Büscher, 2021). And even though the platform economy is still ontologically steeped in and dependent on more-than-human relations and processes, it clearly illustrates a highly consequential distinction, namely that both 'you' and 'them' here refer *exclusively* to humans. And these humans – those exposed to online platform dynamics – are rapidly being turned into specific types of diminished and, according to Sadowsky (2020: 59), 'dehumanized' objects through data and algorithms.

This objectification is not straightforward or even hard to recognise as such. Instead of becoming objects for platforms, its human users are turned into what I refer to as 'technologically mediated

abstractions of a subject-object' (Büscher, 2021: 119). The term 'subject-object' indicates the tension between the importance attached to agency in target individuals and how technological mediation through web 2.0 technologies renders this agency a generic abstraction as part of a pool of objects (or 'you's') trying to get out of platforms whatever they (think they) want. This is what platforms enable: a '2.0' customisation of our online experiences that individualises and socialises humans in new and far-reaching ways (Zuboff, 2019). Clearly, and even though platforms 'organize the world for us, and we have been quick to welcome this data-driven convenience', this has significant consequences (Pasquale, 2015: 6).

Socially, it has led to a 'nichification' of audiences, where our online realities – and how these depict the world – are increasingly customised, leading, according to Pasquale (2015: 79), to 'increased insularity', 'reinforced prejudice', and enhanced potential for social polarisation. In political-economic terms, it means that an increasing amount of 'free' time, energy, and consciousness is absorbed and rendered profitable by capital in a way already foreseen by André Gorz in 1989: 'the functional rationalization of individuals' behavior takes the form of a subtle and insidious manipulation which instrumentalises non-economic values for economic ends' (Gorz, 1989: 50). It becomes 'alienation in reverse': what *appears* as relational or connected is now part of the disconnectedness of platform customisation and so-called 'SMART' optimisation.

It also has manifold consequences for (thinking about and relating to) nonhuman nature. Platform capitalism and algorithms deeply influence the ways humans imagine and relate to more-than-human nature, seeing how these increasingly happen online. And nature online necessarily gets reduced to data. What this means, firstly, is that the entanglements between humans and nonhumans take distinct forms, but also often do not exist at all in any meaningful way. Online entanglements with nature, as Igoe (2017) shows, often become completely fictitious. Secondly, for platforms, all natures that are shared are inanimate pieces of mechanical data that provide clues upon which users may be understood

and advertisers may be directed. As data, they are the same as Barbie dolls, celebrity pictures, and much else (though you might, of course, get rather different advertisements!). They thus diminish both humans and nonhuman nature, though the direct targets are always 'less-than-human' subject-objects (Sadowski, 2020).

At the same time, thirdly, for most of the users the natures they share, view, and 'like' are very much alive. As shown in my earlier work, many people passionately follow, like, share, and defend myriad natures online even if the online natures they defend may have little to do with the offline natures they are supposed to represent or save (Büscher, 2021). What is more, mediated natures have become increasingly spectacular in order to keep people interested and attracted (Igoe, 2017). It is this contradiction then, *the intense, lively spectacle of inanimate natures*, that platform capitalism facilitates and profits from, and which adds another important dimension to Collard and Dempsey's (2013: 2694) call to carefully distinguish the stakes in the commodification of nature: while the contradiction sounds like a deep entanglement, it is literally an *appearance*: one distinct side of this contradiction – the liveliness of online natures – can only come into existence through the 'other' side: rendering nature inanimate through datafication. In the process, only humans become objectified as 'technologically mediated abstractions of a subject-object'.

Altogether, this illustration represents a stark intensification of alienation, in that the relationality between humans and the rest of nature becomes part of a new form of capitalist domination and power that reconfigures the *appearance* of connection such that they become livelier and more spectacular than ever (Igoe, 2017). In a sordid but familiar twist, these online mechanisms even offer to relinquish the broader alienation of nature by turning 'reconnections' into commodified spectacles that take alienation to yet new levels. Of course, in empirical reality, these mechanisms and their effects are highly uneven and not straightforward. Yet they still play out in a context of the intensification of platform capitalist power that is rapidly becoming another 'more-than-life' global context of

intensified pressure and alienation (Sadowski, 2020; Zuboff, 2019).

Interestingly, a focus on digital technology is central to some proponents of the nonhuman turn. Grusin (2015), for instance, emphasises how 'digital media technology' has had a tremendous 'nonhuman impact on academia and the humanities'. He takes nonhuman literally, arguing that, in 2012, '51 percent of internet traffic was already nonhuman' and that 'socially networked media transactions multiply and quicken with or without human intervention'. For him, this proves that the technological nonhuman has equal agency. Reflecting earlier examples of ontological idealism, this is a failure to historicise technology (cf. Arboleda, 2017). The alternative is to look at how this more-than-life context came into being, how it became a 'weapon of math destruction' and how specific humans, such as modellers, law-makers, and others, developed it *and* can change it (O'Neil, 2016).

Platform capitalism is thus another 'more-than-life' context; one that shows how extremely uneven processes of technological development have led to a 'less-than-contingent' system of domination that structurally diminishes both humans and nonhumans and appears to pressurise life-as-a-whole. In fact, as Zuboff (2019: 142) argues, in this case its main proponents even literally aim to pressurise and control all of life. At the same time, it was particularly consequential to employ a dialectics between more-than-human and 'less-than-human' to understand the specific entanglements of humans and nonhumans in this case: only by 'recentering' humans and how they are being structurally diminished could we also see that there was no immanence to the lively entanglements, only spectacular appearances.

Conclusion

This article reflected on contemporary discussions on human-nonhuman relations, particularly how recent critiques have pushed back against popular 'nonhuman turn' appeals to 'decenter' humans. In relating these critiques to recent more-than-human interventions, I argued that they needed to be extended and nuanced in important ways. I extended them by arguing for more attention to how human agency pushing for particular intentions and goals, historical developments and their effects can become seen as overtly contingent as an outcome of the nonhuman turn contentions. I nuanced the critiques by showing how there is great diversity in the nonhuman turn and that there are important analyses that do effectively combine a more-than-human sensibility with attention for consequential political economic distinctions and histories.

These engagements served two overall aims. The first was to suggest a way to acknowledge and build on the emancipatory political aims of the nonhuman turn while moving beyond the problematic aspects of its relational propositions. I argued that a focus on the intensification of alienation shows that downplaying consequential distinctions between humans and nonhumans in order to 'decentre the human' may be barking up an impossible historical tree: challenging the instrumentalising and commodifying aspects of capitalist dominance over the nonhuman arising from surplus alienation cannot be challenged by downplaying basic alienation; the two are historically intertwined. It also does little to challenge the violence of the myriad less-than-human turns across the history of capitalism and how they diminish both humans and nonhumans. These have continued to intensify, including through current platform capitalism.

To be clear, this is not a call for unbridled human supremacy or to depreciate attention for the nonhuman. It is about making political distinctions as to when and where it is exclusively up to humans to make or resist particular choices within contexts that are always already entangled with nonhumans. Only so, I hold, can we hope to challenge new-yet-familiar less-than-human turns in intensifying more-than-life contexts. Indeed, this strategy might even hold the promise of alliances across difference of exactly the type mentioned by Kymlicka (2019) in relation to his point that animal rights activists are still often seen as 'orphans of the left'.[12] I agree that animal rights activists might indeed become allies of a broader left project, but only if they stop – as do Kymlicka and others (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, 2016) – automatically equating humanism with species hierarchy and 'human

supremacy'. Although this often occurs in practice, recentring the human to fight dehumanisation does not have to entail moral grandstanding about 'human supremacy', as Kymlicka asserts.

The way around this, I have argued, is to historicise both human difference and the political economies of domination it enabled as the intensification of basic and surplus alienation. Surplus alienation, to reiterate, relates to how the interrelations between human and nonhuman natures are (re)produced in and through (political-economic) systems of domination. I hold that there are opportunities for nonhuman turn scholars and their critics to join a broader ecological politics that challenges these systems of domination. Hence why I proposed two shifts: one away from 'decentring the human' to emphasise a dialectics between more-than-human and 'less-than-human'; and another that focuses on how the intensification of alienation has despite – or rather because of – extreme historical unevenness led to current 'more-than-life' contexts, like those of platform capitalism and the Anthropocene.

Together, these shifts lead to the second main aim and the overarching conclusion of the article, which contextualises the tremendous interest in the nonhuman turn over the last decades, namely that it is because we live in increasingly intensified alienated forms of entanglement that (re)centring nonhuman life by 'decentring the human' becomes important. Phrased differently, it is precisely because humans are increasingly – though extremely unevenly – alienated from ourselves and the rest of nature (in general and as a consequence of capitalist development and its structural, violent systems of domination) that emphasising 'multispecies entanglements' becomes important. Acknowledging this historical contextualisation seems to be a crucial first step to, at the very least, critically reflect on the relations between *ontological* entanglements and the epistemological and practical consequentiality of distinctions so critical for ecological politics. And even if this may still prove a step too far in getting nonhuman turn scholars and their critics to find some common theoretical ground, they may still conjoin across difference to build postcapitalist platforms and concrete proposals for unmaking alienating entanglements.

This point adds to Giraud's (2019) call to develop an ethics of exclusion in relational theory by arguing for more vigorous and open discussion on what relations and entanglements built through historical capitalism need to be *unmade* altogether. Following Feola (2019: 979), this means going beyond the concept of 'decolonization of the imaginary' to highlight 'more material and mundane dimensions of decolonization, or unmaking'. Feola proposes concrete mechanisms for unmaking that can be tied to broader postcapitalist platforms for promoting more convivial human-nonhuman entanglements, such as that of 'convivial conservation' (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020). Starting from this position of building postcapitalist platforms might not only allow the conjoining of radical theoretical energies for necessary transformative change, but also find its way back into theoretical reflection, this time perhaps through an 'expanded we'.

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Notes

1. In a way, my analysis mirrors the aim of Castree's (2002) analysis of the debates between Marxism and actor-network theory, though takes as its starting point the three nonhuman turn propositions while making very different arguments. A reader familiar with Castree's article will see that my analysis tries to avoid the 'strong' versions of the different approaches I discuss.
2. A similar point, from a 'multispecies' point of view, is made by Kelly Linton: https://www.natcult.net/on-eating-and-killing-multispecies-entanglements-and-

implications-for-ecology/ (accessed 16 October 2019).

3. Unless, of course, all or most humans are somehow wiped out by a catastrophe or other disastrous event.
4. I leave out the work of Jason Moore, arguably one of the scholars who has gone furthest in integrating ecology and political economy following nonhuman turn propositions. This has been criticised by Malm and others but it is beyond the scope of this article to weigh into these debates.
5. For a careful multispecies analysis of how this works out in gentrification processes in cities, see Hubbard and Brooks (2021).
6. This is different from asserting that there may be immanent forces in the world (Sullivan, 2010).
7. In practice, this often also means decentring the dualist philosophies that have, according to Carolyn Merchant (1983), enabled the 'death of nature' to instead focus on the liveliness and potential that always remains.
8. Including how the human itself is differently conceptualised by different human communities, see Bawaka Country (2016).
9. To be sure, 'recentralizing' here is not about rendering something 'the center' but about doing justice to consequential differences.
10. Although I would hold that this 'critical challenging' can certainly lead to more truthful understanding.
11. This is not to say that 'platforms' now completely dominate global capitalism. The precise nature of platform capitalism in relation to other forms of capital accumulation, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.
12. I agree with Kymlicka that domination of other humans through forms of dehumanisation and the domination of animals often go together.

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