

## Article

# Care Ethics, Bruno Latour, and the Anthropocene

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**Abstract:** Bruno Latour is one of the founding figures in social network theory and a broadly influential systems thinker. Although his work has always been relational, little scholarship has engaged the relational morality, ontology, and epistemology of feminist care ethics with Latour's actor-network theory. This article is intended as a translation and a prompt to spur further interactions. Latour's recent publications, in particular, have focused on the new climate regime of the Anthropocene. Care theorists are just beginning to address posthuman approaches to care. The argument here is that Latourian analysis is helpful for such explorations, given that caring for the earth and its inhabitants is the dire moral challenge of our time. The aim here is not to characterize Latour as a care theorist but rather as a provocative scholar who has much to say that is significant to care thinking. We begin with a brief introduction to Latour's scholarship and lexicon, followed by a discussion of care theorist Puig de la Bellacasa's work on Latour. We then explore recent work on care and the environment consistent with a Latourian approach. The conclusion reinforces the notion that valuing relationality across humans and non-human matter is essential to confronting the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** actor-network theory; Anthropocene; Bruno Latour; care ethics; hesitation; Gaia; hiatus; modes of existence; relationality; translation



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## 1. Introduction

The 8 October 2021 issue of the journal *Science* offered a sobering yet not unfamiliar warning: “Intergenerational Inequities in Exposure to Climate Extremes: Young Generations are Severely Threatened by Climate Change” [1]. Co-authored by 37 scientists, the article applied historical data to environmental modeling to suggest that continued global temperature rise will result in future generations being exposed to many more extreme environmental events, including heatwaves, crop failures, river floods, and droughts than generations past. The authors indicate, “Aggregated across all the event categories, lifetime exposure to extremes is unprecedented at all warming levels and cohorts” [1] (p. 159). Furthermore, the scientists speculate that beyond the events they modeled, mass environmental migration and declines in life expectancy will occur. For anyone paying attention to the scientific community on climate change issues, these conclusions are not surprising, although the bleak reminder remains discouraging. Embedded in the article is a critical ethical note representing a dispassionate cry for readers to care about the climate data and to take action. After stating that younger generations are expected to face more extreme environmental events, the authors suggest, “this raises important issues of solidarity and fairness across generations” [1] (p. 158). Restating the obvious, if the body and its ability to perceive is our vehicle for having a world, the world is the vehicle for having our bodies and a world to perceive. We cannot disentangle human morality from environmental morality. Feminist care theorists have faced vexing and wicked social problems, but none looms as large as climate degradation. Furthermore, care scholars have generally not addressed non-human care as extensively as interpersonal care. Dire global necessity requires a broader construct of care.

In *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist Bruno Latour frames the Anthropocene as a fundamental crisis of modernity, in part because of modernism's abstract assumptions and emphasis on human detachment from objects of the material world. Rather than simply an issue for the left or progressives, Latour indicates that "we can understand nothing about the politics of the last 50 years if we do not put the question of climate change and its denial front and center" [2] (p. 2). In particular, leaders of nation-states and multinational corporations have treated the Earth as an object for manipulation and extraction, as mere means to human ends, rather than an essential constituent of our shared being. Latour notes that the powerful and super-rich have realized that their goals of unending growth are incompatible with the limits of our environment. Thus, the new "fairytales of unending economic growth," to borrow a term from activist Greta Thunberg [3], including their schemes for escaping the Earth and finding new worlds to exploit. Latour points to the irony in this privileged dream of geo escapism. He describes how this turn of events gives new meaning to the term "postcolonialism" in that the settlers stole the land but are about to squander and lose it anew [2] (pp. 7–8). *Down to Earth* continues Latour's ongoing indictment of modernity in its valorization of human exceptionalism. He concludes that until we reframe our thinking to address the Earth and its elements—rocks, trees, oceans, etc.—as actantial participants in shared solutions, the Anthropocene cannot be adequately addressed. Latour calls for an inclusive, reflective process that respects interdependency to

avoid the trap of thinking that it would be possible to live in sympathy, in harmony, with so-called "natural" agents. We are not seeking agreement among all these overlapping agents, but we are learning to be dependent on them. No reduction, no harmony. The list of actors simply grows longer; the actors' interests are encroaching on one another; all our powers of investigation are needed if we are to begin to find our place among these other actors [2] (p. 87).

The concern for an expansive notion of relatedness is nothing new for Latour, who has built an intellectual legacy in highlighting the associational and heterogeneous as part of the nature of networks. Similarly, relationality is the currency of care theorists, and, unlike modernism, care theory has emphasized the personal and particular; that is, how do we care for unfamiliar others? The Anthropocene forces us to consider how we care for the non-human material world—very unknown others.

A few care scholars such as Vivienne Bozalek and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa have pushed care thinking into considering the realm of posthumanism in a manner consistent with Latour. Keep in mind that posthumanism is not antagonistic to the insights of the humanities or caring relations but problematizes human-exclusive thinking and human exceptionalism. This reframing or decentering of the human is essential in understanding and analyzing the Anthropocene, a term proposed as a successor era to previous geologic periods (Holocene, Pleistocene, etc.). Although the start date of the Anthropocene is disputed, many scientists favor the beginning as the 1950s, when human involvement in climate change began to grow exponentially. Posthumanism suggests a shifting of values to counter dominant worldviews of human primacy that resulted in a devaluing and degrading of the non-human world. Philosopher Francesca Ferrando describes, "As the Anthropocene marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level, the posthuman focuses on de-centering the human from the primary focus of the discourse" [4] (p. 32). This article addresses how Bruno Latour's work might assist care theorists in developing a posthuman framework, not by overlaying another philosophical paradigm but rather because Latour's thinking is fully relational.

Puig de la Bellacasa is one scholar who has endeavored to translate aspects of Latour's work for care theorists in a limited manner. Accordingly, in this project, we extend Puig de la Bellacasa's analysis to further place Latour's work in conversation with contemporary feminist care theory. Latour's body of scholarship is vast, eclectic, and complex, so any short treatment is somewhat of a caricature; however, we endeavor to draw some particular insights to prompt further discussion. The aim here is not to characterize Latour as a care

theorist but rather as a provocative scholar who has much to say that is significant to care thinking. We begin with a brief introduction to Latour's scholarship and lexicon, followed by a discussion of Puig de la Bellacasa's work on caring for the "more than human worlds of technoscience and naturecultures." Her book, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, is one of the few lengthy treatments of Latour from a care theory framework. Moreover, it is also one of the few works addressing non-human-centered care explicitly.

To foreshadow the liminal spaces that Latour operates in, a brief review of his notion of translation (discussed further below) is useful as both a Latourian hermeneutic and a metaphor for this Special Issue of *Philosophies*. Translation is an essential concept for Latour in making networks functional. The contributors to this issue are endeavoring to translate the work of significant philosophers to those interested in care theory and, reciprocally, care ethics for those steeped in mainstream philosophy. Latour describes his actor–network theory (ANT), a framework of dynamic relational existence including humans, non-human beings, and matter, as a "sociology of translations" [5] (p. 106). For Latour, translation is not merely transportation, a conduit of passing from one point to another. Instead, he describes translation as relational and impactful: "a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting" [5] (p. 108). This characterization is far from a transactional account of interaction so common in neoliberal modernity. Similarly, caring can be viewed as a rich form of translation. Effective caring is not a simple process of need satisfaction through an exchange. Good quality or effective care involves humble inquiry, inclusive connection, and responsive action. Humble inquiry is an active effort to gain knowledge of a particular other; inclusive connection is the empathetic and emotional attachment that we form, which motivates and participates in our engagement; and responsive action consists of the practices required to meet the needs of the other. The actors are not just mechanically reciprocating as in a transaction. Their mutual engagement is transformative to all involved, engendering more than additive impacts. Care can be described as deep translation work in the spirit of Latour. Effective caring is a translation of engrossment and inhabiting of the other, such that connections are built. The response not only foments the flourishing of the other, but the one caring is no longer the same being as prior to the encounter.

## 2. An Introduction to Latour

From his first book co-authored by Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979), to *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004), to *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013)—his magnum opus—to his recent books on the ecological mutation of the Anthropocene, *Facing Gaia* (2017), *Down to Earth* (2018), and *After the Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* (2021), Latour has challenged how we produce knowledge, how we account for experience and the manner of life amidst an intimately entangled world of fellow humans, plants, animals, microbes, instruments, texts, habits, political disputes, geological forces, disintegrating ecosystems, and much, much else that comprises the heterogeneous tapestry of our world. He has developed and deployed several provocative concepts and practices from his studies in neuroendocrinology at the Salk Institute, the work of Louis Pasteur, the nature of religious speech, the French administrative law court (the Conseil d'État), and most recently, the earth scientists whose work defines the critical zone within which life on Earth subsists [6,7]. Out of this rich array, we draw upon a handful of Latour's concepts that we wager are useful in understanding how care ethics can best respond to the challenges of climate change: the operation of translation and the role of the hiatus in the composition of continuity from the discontinuity of experience, the tonality of modes of existence, modal crossings where modes engage one another, and the necessity of hesitation which allows for scrupulous reflection in the face of ethical dilemma.

In the unpublished English translation of *Cogitamus. Six lettres sur les humanités scientifiques*, a primer for students, Latour early on makes the Archimedean claim: "Give me the concepts of translation and composition, and I will move the earth." What does

Latour mean by these terms? We begin with Latour's notion of translation and composition. With regard to translation, Latour states, "I use translation to mean displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents" [8] (p. 32). By employing the term "composition," Latour is endeavoring to navigate the notion that "things have to be put together" while "retaining their heterogeneity" [9] (pp. 473–474). These terms are indicative of Latour's amodernist liminality that seeks to frame the world and its processes as it is rather than forcing it into discrete linguistic categories.

To see translation and composition in action, let us accompany Latour to a study site near Boa Vista, the capital of the Brazilian state of Roraima. This journey may seem far from the concerns of care ethics, but it is a trip worth taking [8]. In the early 1990s, Latour accompanied a small group of naturalists who were studying a boundary between the forest and savanna, seeking to establish whether the savanna was pushing into the forest or the forest into the savanna—a matter of importance at a time when the extent of tropical forests and their removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere was of concern, as it is now. What does Latour observe as he follows the naturalists? First, the botanist collected plants at the boundary, attaching metal tags to trees to create a Cartesian grid and recording those locations in her field notebook. This is a translation. The land is mapped, translated from a tangle of plants rooted in the soil onto a grid of markers; the collected plants are referenced to the site map. The botanist has performed a rudimentary translation; a piece of the savanna/forest boundary is now a paper record. Next, the plants are taken to her laboratory, where they are keyed out, pressed, and stored in a coded cabinet. The study site stays in place while its coded and translated representations travel step-by-step; all the while, the botanist's carefully articulated practices work to establish continuity.

Other members of the naturalist team are pedologists; they study soil. They, too, create a map to mark the places from which they take soil samples, boring down into the Earth and removing meter-long earthen cores. Each of the cores is cut into small pieces along its length, and the pieces are carefully placed into a pedocomparator, a wooden box containing empty cardboard cubes, in an order according to their position along with the core. Each soil core has become a pedolibrary; the clods of earth are dropped from the scientist's hand across a gap of a few centimeters and land in the appropriate cardboard cubes. In an instant, a translation has occurred. The earthen clods are now signs in a boxed Cartesian grid, each cube within the grid being individually designated. A clod of *matter* has been translated into a *form* that locates the clod along the core's length; it has been differently materialized. There is more: the two pedologists, Armand and René, are not done with the soil clods. Small pinches of soil are rolled around in the hands of these expert pedologists who engage in a back-and-forth conversation as their embodied, tactile, material experience of soils is used to categorize the texture of the earthen clods: "Sandy clay or clayey-sand?" "No, I would say clayey, sandy, no sandy-clay." "Wait, mold it a bit more, give it some more time" "Okay, yes, let's say between sandy-clay and clayey-sand" [10] (p. 63). Hence, a translation of the earthen clods into verbal and written descriptions. Additionally, the soil samples are described using a tool, the Munsell color codebook, to reference soil color to soil type. Thus, the pedocomparator "form" (an ordered array of the boxed clods) has become the "matter" upon which other "forms"—the tactile "feel" and the color coding—can be applied. Much later, the collected samples are taken to a laboratory for chemical analysis and translated into still other paper forms—those of the soil chemist.

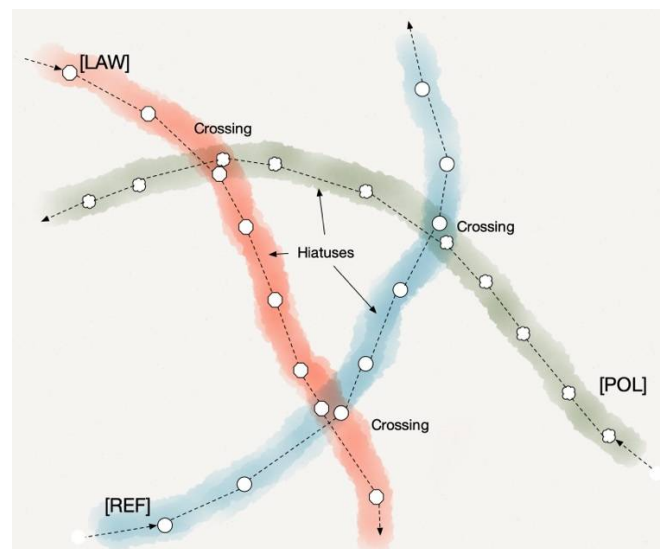
We are witnessing a series of *matter-form-matter-form* translations—small leaps taken across gaps as a series of transformations. We see a *network* being composed. Each transformation, each translation, is a *different* composition. Different tools, instruments, and standard protocols are utilized at each step. Here, we should note that those tools and protocols, now stable and taken for granted, are each possessed of earlier histories of development and use, which, too, consisted of a series of networked translations and compositions. No matter where you look, there are networks of translation, of stepwise recomposition, of scientific *reference*. Moreover, what of the research findings? The field

study results are published, and the core samples, now represented in data tables and a schematic of the forest–savanna boundary’s soil composition, travel in journals to libraries and the desks of fellow scientists. The findings are presented at conferences; the results appear in biology classes. The article, encoded as a PDF, can travel across the globe in seconds. The Boa Vista forest–savanna border is mobile. The findings may enter into other compositions—of tropical forest management, the design of timber harvesting practices, the comparative study of different tropical soils—thus elaborating further networks where different scientific, political, and economic stakes are at issue. Should a controversy about the results arise in those subsequent uses, one can move back along the trajectory of translations to the study site, where the land is once again beneath one’s feet. In short, we can see a webwork of compositions preceding the Boa Vista study and following it; wherever we look, we see discontinuous leaps, but not disarray. Agreed-to practices are available to establish and stabilize continuities of stepwise translations. Thus do we carry on *in medias res*—networks of translation behind us, an uncertain future of networked transformations in front of us. The work of translation never ceases for long.

This process may seem all well and good, but what of situations that are more complex than a field study involving only scientists using relatively simple tools and stable and uncontroversial protocols? What do composition and translation look like when, as in the case of the growing turmoil resulting from dramatic climate change, decisions about the actions involve science, law, politics, religion, morality, and economic forces? How heterogeneous are the composites that take shape amid dispute, amid institutional forms of practice that differ (law is not science, politics is not economics)? Where and how, amid the tangles, does care come into play? What more do we need to know of Latour’s approach when dealing with networks that are dramatically more perplexing than those of the Boa Vista study?

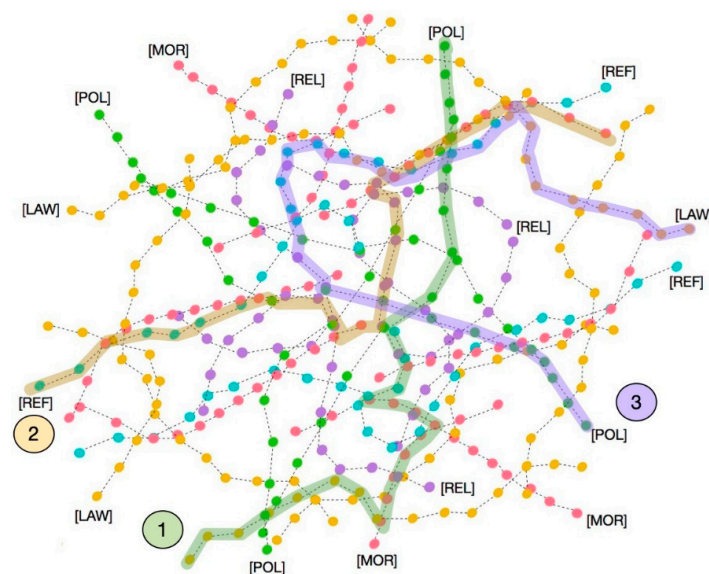
In 2012, a largely invisible project in the works for over 20 years made its public appearance with the publication of Bruno Latour’s *Enquête sur les modes d’existence: Une anthropologie des Modernes*, the English translation being published a year later [11]. In addition to the book, an interactive website was created to aid in portraying and understanding the modes of existence.<sup>1</sup> In this book, Latour identifies fifteen modes of existence. Each mode operates according to a rationality or tonality of its own. We, as well as non-human actors, make our world and our way through it by deploying these modes. Each mode of existence makes sense differently, each being characterized by the nature of the gaps (the discontinuities) that must be bridged, the mode-specific trajectories of subsistence that are employed, the felicity/infelicity conditions involved, the beings that are engendered, and the alterations that are aimed for [11] (pp. 488–489). So, for example, science advances its claims in a many-fold manner quite distinct from law’s form of rationality; the mode of political existence is unlike that of religion or morality. As with the case of soil science at work in Boa Vista, each mode operates in a stepwise fashion; all modes extend their operations and the fashioning of beings across a series of discontinuities: “if no alteration, then no being” [12] (p. 39). All compose the continuity of their trajectories of subsistence across gaps that Latour calls *hiatuses* (as we illustrate in our discussion of Figure 1 below). None of the modes advances its continued existence on its own; rather, “We try out the Other” [12] (p. 319). The extension of a mode is a plural affair—and substantially multimodal. For in Latour’s notion of being-as-other (his alternative to being-as-being), “it is always via the other that being is extracted” [12] (p. 327). Thus, modes routinely cross through one another and, as a consequence, quite different modal rationalities come into play, producing differences of compositional practice that must be resolved. As Latour states, “Each mode will define itself through its own way of differing and obtaining being by way of the other” [12] (p. 316). As we will see, it is for this reason of ongoing negotiation and reconfiguration of modes that translational crossings are often perplexing and equivocal.



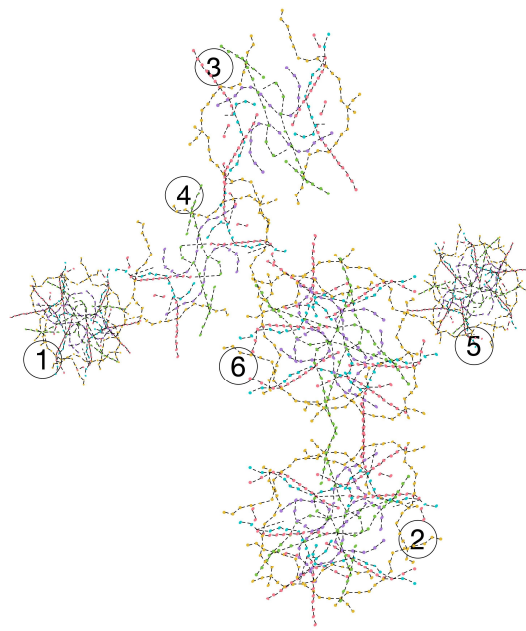


**Figure 1.** The crossing of different modes of existence: establishing continuity at hiatuses.

Before turning to our discussion of the crossings and entanglements of modes represented in Figures 1–3,<sup>2</sup> it is essential to describe, if only briefly, the fifteen modes of existence that Latour has gathered into five groups of three related modes. The first group—reproduction [REP], metamorphosis [MET], and habit [HAB]—concerns forms of *being as alterity* that multiply forms of persistence, multiply transformations, or rush forth into existence with dispatch, respectively [11] (p. 285). A second group—technology [TEC], fiction [FIC], and reference [REF] (the mode of science we saw in the Boa Vista study)—concerns *quasi-objects*,<sup>3</sup> while the third group [11] (p. 372)—politics [POL], [LAW], and religion [REL]—addresses *quasi-subjects*.<sup>4</sup> With these two modal groups, we see the conventional binary pair of subject and object replaced by entangled actors. Latour says succinctly: “What is an object? The set of *quasi* subjects that are attached to it. What is a subject? The set of *quasi* objects that are attached to it” [11] (p. 428). We are “sort of” subjects, interestingly and integrally adorned with a variety of objects. Objects are accompanied by a retinue of subjects. We are compositions; entities exist as filigreed, multimodal collectives.



**Figure 2.** Depicting the rhizomatic entangling of modes of existence—a snapshot of the multiple translations of the pluriverse of possibility.



**Figure 3.** The entanglement of tangles.

The fourth modal group, perhaps the most difficult to understand (and indeed the one that suffers most from the necessarily minimal characterizations we have offered here)—attachment [ATT], organization [ORG], and morality [MOR]—mingles quasi-objects and quasi-subjects in such a way as to move us Moderns to a position of agnosticism about “The Economy,” thereby freed up to compose a novel and scrupulous underpinning for economic valuation and exchange.

Finally, the fifth group—network [NET], preposition [PRE], and double click [DC]. The first two of these might be thought of as the primary gearworks of translation and composition. Before moving on, we will put [DC] aside, even as we recognize how troubling (and sometimes dangerous) it can be as the mode of taken-for-granted certainty; the stuff of bold-face terms in textbooks, of unquestioned claims, of the too-easily accepted bit of knowledge readily accessible with clicks of the mouse. For our purposes (and Latour’s), [NET] and [PRE], and their crossing [NET·PRE], are crucially important; they authorize the whole of Latour’s *Inquiry* and are central to our consideration of translation and composition and our attempt to enrich the conception of situations in which we seek to understand care in a climate-changing world of human and non-human actors. Let us allow Latour to lead the way as he crosses [NET] and [PRE]:

We shall thus say of any situation that it can be grasped first of all in the [NET] mode—we shall unfold its network of associations as far as necessary—and then in the [PRE] mode—we shall try to qualify the type of connections that allow its extension. The first makes it possible to capture the multiplicity of associations, the second the plurality of the modes identified during the course of the Moderns’ complicated history. In order to exist, a being must not only pass *by way of another* [NET] but also *in another manner* [PRE], by exploring other ways, as it were, of ALTERING itself [11] (p. 62).

Consider Figure 1, where three different modes are represented: [POL], [LAW], and [REF]. The hazy colors represent the tonal envelopes established by the three couples—[PRE·POL], [PRE·REF], and [PRE·LAW]—within which modes can fashion the next translation. [PRE] essentially says to a mode seeking to subsist, “Hey, there is the need for a proper envelope. What sort of envelope is this to be? You and I have to elaborate our continued subsistence in the proper direction and tone.” To which the mode [LAW] in this case) answers, “I am [LAW]. The hiatus I must leap across risks the dispersal of cases and actions; the trajectory I am to extend requires that I link cases and actions via legal means; I

must felicitously reconnect levels of enunciation and avoid the infelicity of breaking them. My job is to institute beings that are safety-bearers. And the alterations I am charged with? I am to ensure the continuity of actions and actors”.

Giving substance to the general example in Figure 1, it is not difficult to imagine cases of environmental law (the red trajectory)—be it about pipeline construction, the clearing of forests to establish a soybean plantation, or the ill effects of exposure to glyphosate—that will at some point involve political considerations (the crossing of the green trajectory where [POL] indicates political matters seen to be at stake and about which there may be controversy] as well as scientific findings (the blue trajectory where [REF] indicates the type of scientific leaps of reference like those we saw in the Boa Vista example). As the case proceeds, there is a juncture (the red/green crossing, [LAW·POL]) where matters of political rationality come into compositional play; later, a finding of science may be taken up (the red/blue intersection, [LAW·REF]). Although the law consists not only of law (i.e., it must pass in translation “in another manner”), the critical point is this: the *composition*, the *making* of law at the crossings occurs in accordance with *its* terms of rationality, even as those terms wrestle with, say, the terms of scientific or religious modes of existence. Though it is now in part comprised of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects of different modes, its envelope must be extended as that of [LAW]. At each step of the legal proceeding, different and heterogeneous compositions—of legal precedent, the effect of glyphosate on human cells, the ecological impacts of vast acreage being given over to palm tree plantations, and struggles for climate justice—must be crafted in a legal fashion, each step requiring uncertain decisions as to what collection of considerations, what translation, will best extend the life and power of the case. One must decide which composition amongst all the contingent possibilities will amount to a good engendering of means and ends, a [LAW·MOR] crossing.

Such decisions are complex; they are trying. One approaches a juncture, and another translation is required. The modal crossing at the juncture entails a difficult hiatus; there is hesitation, a weighing of uncertainties as heterogeneous possibilities present themselves, as one considers the room for maneuver before new associations are made. Consider a legal case involving a damaged ecosystem. There are many scientific studies to draw upon. Which will best advance our case when put into evidence? To what degree do we have to contend with the mix of local political sensibilities at trial? How should we fashion our next legal move? As we hesitate, which of the assembled case elements might we put aside, putting forth a somewhat different collection, an alternative translation, of political and scientific elements? What, in one’s estimation, is the right way to proceed? What moral scruples are relevant? Among the several possibilities, what trajectory of anticipated future translations across hiatuses ought one seek to extend?

Consider the additional complexity represented in Figure 2, a webwork of Figure 1 writ large. Here many and different trajectories of the several modes have made their way, tenuous leap after tenuous leap. Three courses of mode-crossing action are highlighted; they have twisted and turned as their multimodal translations sketch different paths of continuity through a discontinuous pluriverse of possibility. There are no domains here; there are no well-demarcated zones of science, politics, law, religion, and economy. The crossings are many, as are the occasions for scrupulous hesitation. This is a world of translation and composition in which one must pay constant and diverse attention to the uncertainties being faced.

Yet this is but a part of even more extensive entanglements. Figure 3 ups the ante; six somewhat distinct composites are depicted as an entanglement of tangles. Again, there are no clear boundaries; the courses of action that have produced the entanglements are many and varied. Imagine cases of environmental law being pressed differently in different countries; different scientific studies of ocean acidification at different study sites; different political responses to news of court judgments and scientific findings; the diverse array of concerns expressed by members of COP 26 (the United Nations’ 26th Climate Change Conference held in 2021) delegations inside the meeting halls as compared to those of demonstrators in the streets outside; and much more—always much more.



In the face of the burgeoning Anthropocene, consider for just a moment what Latour, following Isabelle Stengers, has devoted most of his attention to over the past decade: the intrusion, the irruption of Gaia [13]—the rumbling, disorienting emergence into view of the Earth as an actor, as a mighty distributed force requiring us to deploy the modes of existence in new ways. What *is* this Gaia that now requires us to confront human/nonhuman collectives in our political, economic, moral, technical, scientific, artistic, and legal struggles for well-being, justice, and security? First, Latour endeavors to rescue the notion of “Gaia” from a new form of religiosity that references a goddess entity by considering a more holistic sense of collective agency: “the Gaia idea does not involve adding a soul to the terrestrial globe, or intentionality to living things, but it does recognize the prodigious ingenuity in the way living things fashion their own worlds” [14]. More recently, Lenton, Dutreuil, and Latour [15] argue that to trace Gaia’s extent and consequences, to identify the manner of that ingenious fashioning, we must identify all living beings on Earth, trace the material interactions between these living beings and what is outside their membranes, and establish which of those connections are relevant to Earthly habitability—Gaia being the entity isolated by the resulting network of such connections [15] (p. 253). In such a view, the currently witnessed events of the Anthropocene might then be understood as early indicators of the emergence of a new state of Gaia set into motion by global warming. We are thus facing an Earth whose composition will involve changing arrays of living beings, different chemical and material interactions, differently articulated conditions for habitability—a changed Gaia, a differently connected biotic/abiotic webwork within which we terrestrials are differently entangled. The Earth that is one is a new one. In line with the Latourian view that the Earth is one, Patrice Maniglier has advanced the especially important claim that a key meaning of Gaia, perhaps its first meaning, is *continuity of entanglements* [16] (pp. 67–71)—precisely the point of our focus on the risky composition of jumps across hiatuses. Gaia is the high dimensional manifold that occasions the transformations created by the continuous scrambling of entanglements as glaciers melt, seas rise, desertification increases, severe weather events grow in number, lobbyists argue for continued fossil fuel subsidies, croplands wither, and climate refugees flee their homelands.

The pervasiveness of Gaia’s irruption surely means that the number of novel crossings of our modes of existence will dramatically increase. At the crossings, there is equivocation; we are faced with the task, time after time, of composing continuity anew amidst conditions of heterogeneity and multiplicity. Imagine the trajectories of Figures 1–3 in motion (before we rendered the traces of such activity in the schematic snapshots) as they extend jump by jump, facing contingency after contingency. Multiple and varied trajectories are possible as science *meets* law *meets* morality *meets* politics *meets* the organization [ORG], attachment [ATT], and moral [MOR] modes that comprise the entanglement we call the economy. We move from equivocation to equivocation. Maniglier describes our current situation succinctly; we face “The Earth, this Great Equivocation” [16] (p. 123). No wonder we must hesitate at the edge of hiatuses, choosing our attachments, allies, and the terms of our leaps of composition with care.

A great many of the complex entanglements we have engaged with in the past must now be changed; we must disentangle from them to re-entangle anew, and differently so. We must become compositionists of a different sort [9]—and of necessity, the terms of our multi-fold translations must change. The occasions for hesitation will grow in number; the terms of the hesitation will be different. We must be more scrupulous than ever. We must take care differently, a shift we find in the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa.

### 3. Bellacasa on Latour (Matters of Care)

Through a series of articles, and in her 2017 *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, philosopher and transdisciplinary scholar at the University of Warwick, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa pioneered applying feminist care theory to natureculture, bringing together humanist and post-humanist thinking. She acknowledges that care is a “human trouble” but finds it absurd to disentangle human and nonhuman care relations [17]

(p. 2). Bellacasa offers a rich and layered analysis of care worthy of much reflection. Still, for this project, we focus on the first chapter of *Matters of Care*, where she engages Latour's notion of matters of concern (and from which she derives the title of her book).

It was inevitable that Latour's thinking would find its way into care theory. Philosopher Graham Harman suggests that "Bruno Latour is starting to look like Michael Foucault's eventual replacement as the default citation in the humanities" [18] (p. 249). Indeed, like Foucault and other modern philosophers such as Judith Butler, Latour questions critique's very nature and efficacy. In "'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,'" Latour is concerned that both society and philosophers have gone astray in their use of critical analysis. Donna Haraway agrees, describing Latour's article as "a major landmark in our collective understanding of the corrosive, self-certain, and self-contained traps of nothing-but-critique. Cultivating response-ability requires much more from us. It requires the risk of being for some worlds rather than others and helping to compose those worlds with others" [19] (p. 178). This risk of being for only some worlds hints at the particularism of care which begins in inquiry and understanding broadly construed. For Latour, the emphasis on propositional knowledge in the form of facts to be understood misses the point about how knowledge and meaning contextually exist in the world. The isolated and abstract fact cannot subsist without the gatherings or assemblages which bring them into existence. He problematizes the factual, propositional "thing": "A thing is, in one sense, an object out there and, in another sense, an *issue* very much *in* there, at any rate, a *gathering* the same word *thing* designates matters of fact and matters of concern" [20] (p. 233). A Husserlian phenomenologist may wish to peel away social meaning and noise to study the artifact or phenomenon. However, for Latour, the search for pre-phenomenal essence misses the point of seeking the whole: a gathering, a thing. The concern for matter is what inspires Bellacasa.

For Bellacasa, Latour's work, and precisely his notion of matters of concern, holds promise but lacks an explicit connection to care: "Concern brings us closer to care. However, there is a 'critical' edge to care that the politics of making things matter as gatherings of concern tends to neglect" [17] (p. 18). Bellacasa discusses the divergent connotations of the words "concern" and "care." The former, according to Bellacasa, suggests worry and thoughtfulness, while the latter adds a sense of attachment and commitment [17] (p. 42). Bellacasa credits Latour for connecting these forms of regard to the technoscientific world. For example, she cites Latour's concern for the maintenance of technology and infrastructure [21] as a type of care. This concern is not simply for an artifact, a matter of fact, independent of its contextual assemblage—its thingyness. This concern is a care for the technology's becomings or what matter of concern it will become. A subway is not merely a collection of parts but an ethico-political assemblage. Concern for the maintenance and efficiency of the subway is more significant than a concern for metal, rubber, and plastic. It represents concern for the well-being of riders, the Earth, and the future. These gatherings of ideas, forces, players, and arenas in which "things" and issues, not facts, come to be and persist because they are supported, cared for, worried over. Such concern also embraces values as possible becomings or worlds are chosen over others.

Citing Latour, Bellacasa refers to Science, Technology, and Society scholars as "liberators of things" [17] (p. 45). Reminiscent of some indigenous ontologies in honoring the Earth and its artifacts, Bellacasa quotes Latour in imbuing (or instead, finding) the agential quality in matter: "Humanists see the imposture of treating humans as objects ('objectification' in feminist theory)—but what they don't realize is that there is an imposture also to treat objects as objects" [17] (p. 45). Western thought is so ingrained with human exceptionalism that grasping any investing of matter with value is challenging. Latour offers the contrast between two German terms, *Realpolitik*, which is a "positive, materialist, no-nonsense interest only matter-of-fact way of dealing with naked power relations," [22] and *Dingpolitik*, which Latour suggests is much more realistic than *Realpolitik* because politics has always been concerning things. As Latour states, "We might be more connected to each other by our worries, our matters of concern, the issues we care for, than by any

other set of values, opinions, attitudes or principles" [22]. Bellacasa employs the example of the SUV, an object of concern. Both environmentalists and certain car enthusiasts have strong feelings about SUVs. Bellacasa leverages Latour to find that strident positions on either side of the SUV issue cannot forget to care about those who hold positions about this object dear [17] (p. 48). Care for things is intertwined with care for people.

To reiterate, Latour is not a care theorist. Bellacasa modifies Latour's thinking to add feminist care ethical sensibilities. However, she understands and appreciates the relational potential and insight of his work in developing posthumanist care. Given the enormity of the current environmental threat, although care theory remains an influential innovation in moral philosophy, it must extend its relational reach to the other-than-human world.

#### 4. Current Work on Care Ethics and the Environment

Care ethics is a relational approach to morality that differs from traditional approaches to morality by valuing context, emotions, and empathy. Although care has normative implications, it also has epistemological and ontological significance beyond adjudicating moral dilemmas. The most quoted definition of care ethics is that of Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher, and it is indeed flexible enough to include the possibility of care for the environment:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web [23] (p. 19).

Historically, care has been a morally ambiguous word given that much oppression has been wrought in the name of care, as in, for example, colonialism. Care can be applied in harmfully paternalistic ways, bringing coercion to repressed communities [24]. Nevertheless, social and political care theorists have emerged across a wide variety of disciplines that are endeavoring to offer a care ideal to many of modernity's vexing challenges. There is no more wicked problem than the environmental crisis.

There have been several promising efforts to apply feminist care ethics to the environmental crisis [25,26], but only a few have engaged the work of Latour. One of the challenges for feminist care studies is that so much of the originary work in the field focused on naming the previously unnamed morality of care and drew upon easily identified manifestations of care in familiar relationships such as between a parent and a child. Although the field has moved on to consider social, political, and institutional approaches to care, care maintains much of its interpersonal connotation. Indeed, ultimately care is experienced on a personal level, but that does not mean that care cannot extend across time and space in a manner that is not proximal. As Thomas Randall has observed, environmental ethics is a demanding subject for care ethics given the intergenerational nature of environmental concern [27]. Such temporal and spatial abstraction makes the object of care much less relationally tangible. For example, care theorists have often emphasized reciprocity [28]. Noddings claims, "There is, necessarily, a form of reciprocity in caring" [29] (p. 71). Furthermore, some care theorists have emphasized the embodied basis of care [30] grounded in the face-to-face knowledge and presence of the other [31]. Because future generations have no possibility of reciprocity or presence, caring seems complicated under these terms.

Randall finds the work of political care theorists such as Joan Tronto more promising for intergenerational care because political constructs of care lack the focus on reciprocity. However, Tronto assumes the social, moral force of interdependency in her work on care [23] (p. xv). Interdependency is also absent when addressing the moral challenge of future generations. Dependency is unidirectional when it comes to environmental heritage. Christopher Groves explicitly offers a nonreciprocal intergenerational theory of care grounded in the idea that we can care about future generations, but not in a controlling manner [32]. Instead, care is a means for living with and through uncertainty and precarity [33]. Although Randall finds value in Groves's approach, he offers an

alternative method to thinking about intergenerational care akin to creating a present ethos of care. Two central notions for Randall's blueprint for intergenerational care are imagination and inheritance. Imagination is a necessary element of care, as manifested in empathy and considering responsive actions [29]. However, Randall employs the term "imaginal" as a hybrid between that which is imaginary and that which is constrained by reality [27] (p. 537). Imaginal activity opens up the possibility of a relational understanding with future generations beyond immediate proximal interplay. Randall suggests that we should create the best possible caring practices and spirit in the present with an eye toward leaving them as an inheritance to future generations. Accordingly, "the present generation forms imaginal relations with future generations by virtue of their being part of a transgenerational community. That is, persons use their imaginal content to envision how their community will be inherited by, and make better the lives of, future generations" [27] (p. 540). Imagination stitches together present and future in a relationship of inherited care.

This introduction to the current work on care ethics and the environment offers a glimpse into the nature of the recent discussion for which the work of Latour might be brought to care theory. One scholar who has endeavored to make an explicit connection between Latour and care ethics on the environment is Chinese literary scholar, Adeline Johns-Putra. She argues that "our construction of 'sustainability' is driven by a notion of care—care for the nonhuman environment enfolded with a concern for our human descendants" [34] (p. 126). Johns-Putra applies a new materialist approach to the environmental crisis, and she finds the liminal relationality of care to provide a vital moral force. New materialism is a family of interdisciplinary theories representing a post-constructionist, ontological, and/or material turn in contemporary theory. The dynamic notion of emergence is a focus of new materialism. Furthermore, this nascent field has a solid feminist influence and is sometimes framed as feminist new materialism [35] (p. 132). Bruno Latour, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Elizabeth Grosz are among those associated with new materialism. Dissatisfied with extreme linguistic and constructivist approaches, new materialists turn to the question of matter. Johns-Putra credits Latour's analysis of materiality and being as motivating new materialism. She describes new materialism as reorienting theory discussions in terms of verbs and action. Accordingly, ontology is reframed as agency, and the notion of being is associated with "becoming".

In this manner, Johns-Putra characterizes care as always becoming and agential ("a means by which agency occurs") [34] (p. 134). She draws upon Latour for a vision of relational care that is not dependent on human initiation but part of the relational context of existence. To make this construction, Johns-Putra utilizes Latour's term "actants" to describe a universe (human and non-human material) as a collection of intra-active units or, again in Latour's words, a network [5] (p. 10). She asserts, "Care is part of the discursive and material mesh from which objects emerge. Care—in the act of being named and purportedly exercised—emerges from and re-submerges into that mesh" [34] (p. 134). Admittedly, this is a far cry from the notion of care put forth by Carol Gilligan in 1982 as an alternative to traditional justice approaches to human morality. However, this new materialism, fueled by Latourian thinking, demonstrates the broader potential of care as a way to think about being and becoming rather than simply as a moral theory.

## 5. Conclusions: Valuing Care Relationships to Confront the Anthropocene

Latour's desire to reassemble the social through actor–network theory, an analytical framework for which he is considered a founding father, along with Michel Callon and John Law, has relational implications even if he does not place the same kind of emphases as care theorists. For Latour, this reassemblage has at least three characteristics: (1) non-humans are raised in status to actors rather than "hapless bearers of symbolic projection" [5] (p. 10); (2) society must be viewed as dynamic without fixed or static categorical understanding; and (3) social network thinking is more than postmodern deconstruction and seeks "new institutions, procedures, and concepts able to collect and reconnect the social" [5] (p. 11). ANT is already fundamentally relational; however, in the spirit of Bellacasa, a care inflection

can help translate ANT more centrally into care theory. In this conclusion, we briefly examine how translation, hiatus, tonality, modal crossings, and hesitation can be framed as essential relational understandings in a caring reassemblage of the social. Furthermore, we explore several theorists taking on this work, employing a care lens in the face of the Anthropocene.

Returning to the notion of translation discussed earlier, scientists are collecting data on climate change and engaging in matter–form translation that not only makes the information intelligible to non-specialists but “induces two mediators into co-existing.” Given the relational ontology of care theory, such matter–form translation is not just a passing-through or even a creation of propositional knowledge but rather imbued with affective elements: it is matter to be cared about, an aspect of the *dingpolitik*. The matter of the Anthropocene is not simply one fact among many that we have to hold, but it is a complex assemblage of ideas that we are compelled to engage with. Effective caring—humble inquiry, inclusive connection, and responsive action—is taking the work of translation seriously in the profound sense that Latour describes.

Thus, hiatus can be understood as a respect for the task ahead: traversing the gap or interruptions between modes of existence. Care must be taken in the translation, and thus, methodology is just as crucial as epistemology in knowledge production and participation. Failure to respect hiatus damages relational integrity, as each mode has its tonality. One can see why Latour’s project can be interpreted in care theoretical terms because respecting, inquiring into, and understanding the depth of hiatus and tonality facilitates reassembling the social. It is a constructive project of effective caring that requires and builds trust—as was one of Latour’s stated goals in developing ANT. Hesitation, then, is not a sign of weakness, as masculinist and neoliberal narratives might have one believe. On the contrary, hesitation reflects the enormity of the task ahead, the gap between modes of existence to be forded, an example of the examined life. Humility and regard for the other are manifested in hesitation. In his book on the religious mode of existence, *Rejoicing: On the Torments of Religious Speech*, Latour employs the terms of his lexicon to remind his readers, “There is no other world, but there are several ways of living in this one and several ways, too, of knowing it” [36] (p. 34). We must address the Anthropocene together and without supernatural intervention, but we have tremendous capabilities at our disposal:

There is no control and no all-powerful creator, either—no more ‘God’ than man—but there is care, scruple, cautiousness, attention, contemplation, hesitation and revival. To understand each other, all we have is what comes from our hands, but that does not mean our hands have to be taken for the origin [36] (p. 144).

Latour often dances around the language of care without employing the feminist literature. Nevertheless, the resonance is there. Several scholars of late have also seen the connections and have taken Latour’s work in the direction of care theory.

Australian geographer Emma R. Power integrates Tronto’s notion of “caring-with” into Latourian concepts of social assemblage to understand how local networks of care operate. Tronto proposes “caring-with” as a communal and generational practice of caring about care. Pertinent to this article, Tronto’s “caring-with” suggests posthuman qualities. She describes caring about a future that is “not only about oneself and one’s family and friends, but also about those with whom one disagrees, as well as the natural world and one’s place in it” [23] (p. xii). Power is less interested in “caring-with” as a category of caring but rather as a conceptualization of care that “brings together related work from assemblage theories, actor–network approaches, and theories of dwelling” [37] (p. 765). Accordingly, à la Latour, Power conducts field research and then engages in matter–form translation employing a care hermeneutic. She empirically studies the care experiences of single older women living in precarious housing in Sydney, Australia. Her interviews reveal how care capacity is assembled under adverse circumstances:

Caring-with shows that the capacity to care is not a sum of the properties of entities embroiled in a relation of care, but rather emerges from the ways they



come together in relation—as bodies, markets, material structures, and so on generatively combine to shape the possibility of care. Caring capacity was constituted from within and without as women adapter their caring practices, accommodated to poor housing, and assembled new resources and networks in the hope of sustaining their capacity to care [37] (p. 774).

This work exemplifies what we are describing as a care-infused ANT. However, what of the Anthropocene? What does an analysis of caring practices have to do with environmental devastation? Network and assemblage thinking are efforts of leaving no agents out of the discussion. Modernist categories of value that do not honor the connection between the plight of people and the planet are set aside for a more inclusive approach.

Anna Krzywoszynska, a geographer from the U.K., brings together care and network theory to address how expanded attentiveness to soils is critical in the age of the Anthropocene. In particular, she is concerned with soil biota or the ecosystem that exists just below the ground. Krzywoszynska notes that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has indicated that humans have degraded one-third of Earth's soil [38] (p. 662). She proposes a care network as an inclusive method of enacting attentiveness to soils, particularly farm soils. Attentiveness has been a central component of care theorizing from its origin, but as Krzywoszynska points out, it is not often applied to the non-human world. Similarly, she notes the lack of attention given to soils generally. Citing Latour, Krzywoszynska contends that soils are shaped within human interactions rather than mere matters of fact [38] (p. 663). She describes her approach as employing a care network model defined as “the assemblage of interconnected entities whose existence enables the well-being of the primary object of care” [38] (p. 664). Her field research took her to speak with U.K. farmers about soil practices and their dispositions toward the soil. Krzywoszynska found farmers who were indeed attentive to the needs of the soil. Coinciding with the effective care cycle of humble inquiry, inclusive connection, and responsive action, those who truly “listened” to the soil found themselves in opposition to neoliberal agribusiness practices that favored short-term productivity above all other considerations. The results included decisions to change crops grown, alter crop rotation patterns, and in some cases, return some farmland to a more natural state (thus out of production). Like Power, Krzywoszynska is concerned that traditional individualistic approaches to ethical thinking are inadequate to the systemic and relational frameworks needed in light of the Anthropocene: “In the face of ecological and resource crises of the Anthropocene, a pragmatic and anthropocentric form of eco-sociality is emerging, in which caring for human survival and well-being starts to implicate caring for the survival and well-being of non-human entities” [38] (p. 672). Krzywoszynska and Power are just two recent examples of the potential for integrating Latourian insight with care theory. Bellacasa may have blazed the trail, but others are quickly following.

A final example of the expansive notion of Latourian-like care can be found in the recent work of Serbian-born French anthropologist Dusan Kazic. Like Latour, Kazic makes systemic observations about the inadequacy of dominant economic and political narratives while finding examples of new relationships between matter and people that suggest a different way of being in the world. Here is an extended quote from an article written during the COVID-19 pandemic:

farmers have never been in a relationship of “production” with their plants, but of “co-domestication.” Farmers domesticate plants just as plants domesticate farmers, and this has been going on since the dawn of time. In concrete terms, this means that neither farmer, nor carrot plant, nor tomato plant, nor courgette [zucchini] plant, nor chicken, cow, pig or sheep has ever “produced” a single carrot, tomato, courgette, chick, calf or lamb. If we eat and live on this Earth, it is thanks to our relationships with living beings, without which no-one could live. This is why we cannot say we are suffering with hunger more *during* the lockdown than *before it*. As we enter into a new world, then, it is entirely possible “to imagine preventative measures against the resumption of pre-crisis

production,” to use the title of Bruno Latour’s article—because we have never lived *in* production, but always in a world that is about more than merely the human [39].

In *Quand les plantes n’en font qu’à leur tête* (*When Plants Do As They Please*), Kazic tells the stories of poor farmers and their relationships to the land and the land’s inhabitants. He begins the book with an anecdote about one farmer who has a field covered with slugs. However, rather than eradicate them, he collects and observes them. He engages them with humble inquiry and connects with the slugs. Through the time and effort of this relationship, the farmer discovers that the slugs’ slime heals the cracks in his hands that have arisen from tending the soil. The farmer declares that the slugs have a right to be there, particularly since neighboring farms have forced them away from other lands. Kazic explicitly describes the farmer as in a caring relationship with the slugs [40] (pp. 11–13). Like Latour, Kazic leverages the micro-observations of the particular, not to argue against farming for the purposes of feeding humans, but rather to make the point that thinking in terms of “economic production” does not provide all the answers. Resonating with care theory, Kazic desires a recentering on relationships, particularly human and non-human relationships. In one of his stories, Kazic engages a farmer whose relationship with weeds calls for apologizing to them for what must be done. Reminiscent of indigenous practices, apologizing recognizes the awareness of violence endemic to farming. For Kazic, apologizing is part of human–plant cohabitation [40] (p. 332). Given the threat of the Anthropocene, new ways of thinking are in dire need. Care can help provide a revolutionary means of seeing the world. As Kazic insists, his approach and what he recommends to others is not to bring a new critical analysis of neoliberal narratives but instead to imagine and speculate what is possible by observing what is going on [40] (p. 363).

Although care theory has garnered widespread attention and application up to this juncture, the liminality of care thinking and its implications for expansive ontology, epistemology, ethics, and politics provide perhaps the best opportunity for the complex and dynamic analysis needed to care for people and things in the shadow of the Anthropocene. Latour may not have foreseen such developments, but his insights and methodology cultivate the possibility of a care network assemblage approach. As mentioned earlier, care theorists have only begun to publish on the environment, and the available literature is not vast. Latour’s notions of translation, composition, hiatus, tonality, modal crossings, and hesitation are relational terms that invite care thinking. Furthermore, Latour’s method of translation and composition are able to address the political while maintaining the personal in a manner consistent with recent care scholarship. As Latour has stated, we were never really modern, and the Anthropocene may force scholars to think about collective and systematic care on a scale that defies the comfort of single-issue problem-solving. A co-created ethos of care that permeates each translation and composition may be required, given the enormity of the existential threat to humanity. Accordingly, the crisis of care and empathy is not a discrete issue from the Anthropocene, institutional racism, neoliberal precarity, and social alienation. The age of deconstruction has witnessed a warranted lack of trust in meta-narratives, but perhaps an inclusive, humble, and democratic meta-narrative of care still holds potential for both insight and hope for a better future. It will be exciting to see how scholars continue this research trajectory.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There are no limitations on the use of the site, but visitors are asked to register. The website (modesofexistence.org; accessed on 19 January 2022) is available in both English and French. The full text of An Inquiry into Modes of Existence is present on the website and includes a number of interactive features. An especially powerful feature of the site is the ability to interactively examine several examples of all possible two-fold modal “crossings” of the sort imagined in Figure 1 of the present text.
- <sup>2</sup> All the schematics were created by Michael Flower. They are not Bruno Latour’s.
- <sup>3</sup> Understanding Objects as quasi-objects, as instances of dynamic entanglement, offers us an avenue for seeing things differently. Consider COVID-19. It is a dynamic actant; it is an instance of *faire faire*. It forces a “making [others] to do”. COVID-19 is entangled with bodies that differ in their response to infection, but within which the virus replicates and mutates. The quasi-object COVID-19 does not travel alone. It is accompanied by testing protocols, epidemiologists, public health directives, political disputes, vaccines and disparities in vaccine availability, and more. When COVID-19 mutates, its successful variants (e.g., Delta, then the dramatically more transmissible form, Omicron) result in a change in its associates: testing protocols cannot keep up with the rapidity of transmission, epidemiological profiles change, health directives are rethought, antivax battle lines are redrawn, and more. The entanglement that is the quasi-object COVID-19, var. Omicron is a “making [others] to do” differently; it is dynamically different.
- <sup>4</sup> With this third group we see the rendering of persons as assemblages in a way that illustrates the inadequacy of the notion of Subject. “To sum up the originality of this THIRD GROUP in an overhasty sentence, let us say that, while following along the political Circle, humans become capable of opining and of articulating positions in a collective—they become free and autonomous citizens; by being attached to the forms of law, they become capable of continuity in time and space—they become assured, attributable selves responsible for their acts; by receiving the religious Word, they become capable of salvation and perdition—they are now PERSONS, recognized, loved, and sometimes saved”.

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