

More-than-human Conversations

BLOG SERIES: Dr Evelien Geerts on “The more-than-human materializations of violence, remembrance, and times of crisis”

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BLOG SERIES

[More-than-human Conversations BLOG SERIES: Dr Evelien Geerts on “The more-than-human materializations of violence, remembrance, and times of crisis” – The Posthumanities Hub](#)

The Posthumanities Hub is more than just a research group. It is a lively research environment across various borders, a platform, and a network of networks for postdisciplinary and more-than-human humanities, for philosophy, arts and sciences, informed by advanced cultural critique and creativity. It is also a space for discussions, transversal dialogues, synergies and conversations.

In order to go beyond the format of seminars, workshops, classes and traditional publications, in 2021 we have decided to create another venue for these fascinating, inspiring and – at times – challenging ideas, namely, The More-than-human Conversations BLOG SERIES, which will surely serve as an appetiser for anyone interested in what more-than-human humanities and feminist posthumanities research might mean.

It is thus our pleasure to present the first instalment in this BLOG SERIES, written by the Hub affiliated researcher, dr Evelien Geerts (University of Birmingham) and entitled ‘The more-than-human materializations of violence, remembrance, and times of crisis’.

The more-than-human materializations of violence, remembrance, and times of crisis

By Evelien Geerts

When the Posthumanities Hub members were recently asked to write a blog post on their current research projects, I felt a sudden—albeit also slightly caffeine-driven—rush of excitement that almost immediately turned into feelings of blind panic, as my multidisciplinary work tends to be rather rhizomatic in nature. Having been trained as a philosopher and critical theorist in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States, I have explored fields as diverse as *écriture féminine*, difference philosophy, queer theory, feminist science studies & STS, and critical pedagogies—fields that, at first sight, seem to be all over the place, discipline-wise, but actually share a Harawayan (1998: 578) preference for “epistemological electroshock therapy”. These fields and their critical epistemology-steered methodological frameworks therefore offer excellent theoretical, yet also praxis-embedded, tools with which we may challenge and deconstruct the still all-too-traditional, anthropocentric discipline of political philosophy.

This penchant for the critical epistemological—which, in my regard, cannot and should not be separated from the ethico-political, as it, to echo Donna Haraway’s words again, “matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts” (2016: 101)—is probably what drives all my thinking-doings (see Geerts & Carstens 2021). The implications of how phenomena, acts, and events are conceptualized, and what ethico-political connotations these conceptualizations might carry, is in addition to Haraway also underlined by Judith Butler’s (1993 and 2009) philosophical attachment to processes of framing and (non-)mattering—the latter being a crucial theme in contemporary critical theories that highlight the role of how a gendered-racialized-sexualized capitalist logic of (re)productivity steers this (non-)mattering (see e.g., Chakravartty & Ferreira Da Silva 2012, Chen 2012, Cooper 2008, and Halberstam 2011)—and Karen Barad’s (2007: 185) agential realist notion of “knowing in being”. Especially the latter agential realist idea

expresses the sentiment that philosophizing always already takes place *within* the world, and that there is thus a relational entanglement between the material, the idealistic, and the environmental that should be acknowledged when creating theory. Thought itself, together with its practitioners, should thus be carefully attuned to—and in tune with—these worldly connections, and responsibly integrate and articulate knowledge claims made. These three foregoing elements—the critical epistemological, an attentiveness to framing, and knowing in being—not only reveal the situatedness of the researcher and the research project in question, but also point at their theoretical-practical limitations, such as the fact that critical cartographies (see Braidotti 2011)—and even more Foucault-inspired genealogical projects—cannot encompass every point of view and tidbit of conceptual thought out there.

And it is this awareness of the particularity of the cartography that the geopolitically situated researcher can sketch out, which connects the Posthumanities Hub Seminar on critical new materialist cartographies and interventions I delivered in November 2020 to the research I am doing now in the context of the Urban Terrorism in Europe (2004-19) project at the University of Birmingham. The above-mentioned cartographical monograph-in-the-making on critical new materialisms consists of a critical theoretical, explicitly non-nihilistic exploration of theorizing various contemporary crisis modes, such as the arrogance written into the Anthropocene, the rerise of fascist, now often post-truth-filled, politics, and global terrorism—modes that could all be regarded as interconnected existential assemblages driven forward by neoliberal extractive capitalism—from the ground up. The present research I am undertaking delves a bit deeper by zooming in on various phenomena that are connected to urban terror-inducing acts and events of political and counterterrorist violence on the European Continent. Yet, this study is still driven by a critical epistemological, materialist, and specifically Braidottian (2012, 2013 and 2019) new materialist way of thinking—meaning that special attention is paid to the macro webs and micro encounters of power as *potestas* and *potentia*, control, and surveillance that the human, more-than-human, non-human, and the dehumanized are all part of and also agentially resisting against.

Employing *critical* new materialist—which for me includes those new materialist theories that are driven by feminist, queer, and critical race studies interventions (see Geerts 2019 for an overview, and more specifically Bennett 2010, Chen 2012, Puar 2012, Shotwell 2016, and the earlier-mentioned Haraway, Braidotti, and Barad)—posthumanist, field philosophical (see Brister & Frodeman 2020), and post-qualitative inquiries (see Lather & St. Pierre 2013, Somerville 2016, and St. Pierre 2020) and conceptual frameworks, the current study on urban (counter-)terrorism consists of three layers, namely, looking into the more-than-human materialization of political violence, remembrance, and the potentially critical pedagogical praxes and teachings that can be deduced from living-with(in) times of terror-affected crisis.

Pushing for an alternative critical new materialist reading of urban (counter)terrorism as a *material-semiotic* phenomenon with affective, haunting qualities—qualities that by the way cannot be completely captured by theories that either solely center the lived experience of the human subject or stick to representationalist framings that continuously rip the knower, phenomenon-to-be-discovered, and knowledge produced apart—allows us to theorize something that already partially escapes our often too rigid regimes and strictly demarcated imaginaries of intelligibility. A *more-than-representationalist, more-than-human* reading furthermore provides us with the opportunity to better map the affect-laden lived experiences, intricate networks of power, inequalities, and exclusions, and legal-political structures that those (in)directly involved in (counter)terrorism are inhabiting and impacted by. Analyzing a variety of lively assemblages that arose during and after the Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016 attacks, micropolitical data that are linked to people's lived experiences, memories, and remembrances—and the artefacts that are affectively charged with the latter—are zoomed in on through the diffracting of Derridean (i.e., memories as traces), Deleuzoguattarian (i.e., memories as politics-infused micromaterials), and Baradian (i.e., memories as worldly tracings) perspectives.

One of the assemblages that will be examined in this study, is the more-than-human *Memorial 22/3*, which is located in Brussels' Sonian Forest and has been designed by the architect Bas Smets (see Divisare 2020). This particular memorial site was

constructed to honor the 32 victims that died during the 2016 Brussels attacks that took place at Brussels Airport in Zaventem and the metro of Maalbeek and was visited once by myself at the start of December 2020, when the Belgian COVID-19 measures were rather strict, but did not forbid nature outings. Other more traditional commemorative memorials have been created since 2016 as well, of course, including a monument near Schuman and the Parc du Cinquantenaire in the city center of Brussels, a commemorative mural by Benoît van Innis at the Maalbeek metro station, which acted as a follow-up mural to a more grassroots monument that had been constructed right after the attacks, and artist Moustapha Zoufri's *Flamme de l'Espoir (Flame of Hope)*—a beautifully-designed, apparently meant to be impermanent, monument that barely received any media attention, because of its location in the since 2016 stigmatized Brussels municipality of Sint-Jans-Molenbeek (see Schneider 2016). What makes the *22/3 Memorial* so fascinating in contrast to the foregoing monuments is precisely its non-urban location and the non-attention-drawing manner in which it has been built, as one can also see on the set of architectural sketches and my own set of emergent methodology-driven Narrative Clip pictures.[\[1\]](#)



Images 1 & 2 (above): ©Bureau Bas Smets 2020 (in: Divisare 2020)



Images 3–6 (above): ©Evelien Geerts 2020

The monument is first of all not that easily locatable—there are no special walking routes announced when you enter the Sonian Forest via Watermaal-Bosvoorde, for instance—and the construction as such is also not immediately recognizable as a memorial. It simply *exists* with(in) the natural, more-than-human landscape, and exactly because of its inconspicuousness and environmental embeddedness, most passers-by do not seem to engage with the monument at all unless they have developed some kind of personal relationship to it. Each of the victims is moreover said to be symbolized by a silver birch tree and a block of Belgian blue stone—two very concrete, material objects that could be regarded as representing cyclical renewal (as birch trees lose their leaves, but are quite sturdy) and death (as most tombstones in Belgium are carved out of Belgian blue stone). It is interesting to note that the overall inconspicuousness of the memorial is underlined by the fact that there are only two tiny, very serene commemorative plaques to be found a couple of minutes away south and north of the memorial. The serene atmosphere that the memorial furthermore affectively provokes, clashes with the more sensationalized commemoration narrative that is still upheld by the Belgian media today; a narrative that by the way has always focused more on the perpetrators and their acts than on the victims and their families.

Using the critical new materialist approaches named earlier, this project will examine the more-than-human materializations of violence, remembrance, and times of crisis in more

detail by zooming in on the *Memorial 22/3* by means of the following questions and set of topics:

- How are processes of knowing in being activated in and by critical new materialist theories on worldly crisis events?
- How can we further reflect upon processes of artistic representation and representation's limits in the context of critical new materialist theory, e. g., how can one for instance truly 'represent' and give form to pure, intelligibility-transcending violence and carnal affects, such as trauma, but also anger and grief?
- How do we approach these artistic-commemorative processes of (re)materialization, e.g., what is being rematerialized here exactly, and what is the material-semiotic message attached to the natural materials chosen for this monument? Does one wish to rematerialize life, death, or both, and how does the bio-/necropolitical come into play here, given that the perpetrators are absent from the memorial itself but are at the same time still haunting the processes of commemoration, remembrance, and even public archiving of grief and other affects?
- And how can we use the *Memorial 22/3* assemblage to help us think through processes of attribution and (de)humanization, e.g., for whom are these memorial sites designed, and who gets to be included in them and how? And do post-terrorist (if there even is such a term) more-than-human memorial sites carry any messages about national identity and (exclusionary) citizenship?

I am hoping to explore all of the above, plus what more-than-human memorials such as the *Memorial 22/3* could teach us, pedagogically and ethico-politically speaking, in the upcoming year, while also cartographically sketching out the conceptual resemblances between (counter)terrorist lockdowns and COVID-related lockdowns in Belgium and France in relation to a second, related research project.

Notes:

[1] Gathering from the main text, it is clear that my work is driven by poststructuralist philosophies that take the problem of the limitation of power-laden representational processes and theories seriously. Although this project will also employ field philosophical perspectives, these field philosophical research trips and visits will not be

steered by a fixed, a priori-decided methodological framework. I will in fact use a more emergent methodological approach, which is in line with Deleuzoguattarian, critical new materialist, and post-qualitative philosophies. During the above-mentioned December visit, I actually used a lifelogging tool—a so-called Narrative Clip—that randomly takes shots and short video clips instead of merely snapping shots myself. This forced me to let the tool or apparatus itself—and the potential failures that go along with experimenting with new tools—also play a role in the knowledge producing process. See Get Narrative 2017 for more information about the tool used.

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