

Research Article

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Indonesia as a Post-foundational Archipelago: Cultural Studies After the end of the World

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Abstract: In this essay, I sketch the implications of the new materialist injunction to “make room for the nonhuman” for cultural studies. Using the example of Ernesto Laclau’s poststructuralist discourse theory, I argue that the pursuit of the new materialist call for nonhuman inclusion does not necessitate a complete break with the conceptual and theoretical tools of cultural studies. Drawing then on the Indonesian context, I show that the profound more-than-human relations new materialism enjoins us to recognize are compatible with the aim of cultural studies, in Lawrence Grossberg’s formulation, to “tell the best story that can be told, about any context, within that context.” However, I also suggest, partly against certain tendencies within discourses of the Anthropocene inspired by new materialist thinking, that the volcanic communities and more-than-human worlds of the Indigenous peoples in Indonesia hint at a thesis highly relevant to the intellectual and political objectives of cultural studies, at the supposed “end” of the modern, anthropocentric world: that a more-than-human political imaginary must begin with the recognition that both humans and nonhumans are – to borrow from Oliver Marchart’s work on post-foundational political thought – implicated in “a world formed and deformed by antagonism.”

Keywords: discourse theory; post-foundationalism; Indonesian archipelago; political ontology; new materialism

1 Introduction

In his rejoinder to criticisms of new materialism by Andreas Malm, Slavoj Žižek, and other (post-)Marxist thinkers, new materialist political theorist Mads Ejsing asserts that “[t]heories of new materialism do not deny the role and agency of situated human beings” (Ejsing 2024, p. 65). What “the new materialists are trying to do,” according to Ejsing, “is re-balancing the scales after centuries of anthropocentrism in order to show that human beings, their thoughts and their intentional actions are inhabiting this world alongside a whole range of other things and beings whose agencies matter too” (Ejsing 2024, p. 65). Hence the injunction from Lars Tønder, another new materialist political theorist: “*Break the sociocentric bias and make room for the non-human!*” (Tønder 2025, p. 20, italics in the original).

The pursuit of this new materialist injunction in social theory and the humanities tends to go hand in hand with the affirmation of the Anthropocene as the “end” of the modern world – Timothy Morton (2013, 2017) and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015; Tsing et al. 2017) are two notable representatives of this approach – and with strands of posthumanism (Haraway 2016) and decolonial pluriversalism (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Escobar 2020) that speculatively explore onto-epistemologies and worldings of Indigenous peoples to imagine a plurality of ways of being-with-nonhumans that “we moderns” must now learn. While the relation between new materialist approaches and the Anthropocene may be interpreted variously, it seems safe to say that the theoretical

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and ontological premises of new materialism are deeply entwined with an ethico-political imaginary of the Anthropocene, one whose implication for intellectual and political practice, i.e., critique, is nothing short of the radical “transvaluation” of critique itself (Chandler 2018, pp. 190–212).

That new materialists and theorists of the Anthropocene have posed some of the most urgent questions in our moment of multiple planetary crises is undoubtable. Along with the recent revival of interest in Marxism, driven substantially by its “ecological” turn (Clark and Foster 2016), these thinkers have paved the way for much-needed alternatives to myopic “culturalism” (Chibber 2022) and “sociocentric bias” (Tønder 2025) within cultural studies. At the same time, however, some new materialist approaches appear to severely undermine certain key concepts that cultural studies has tended to mobilize. In this essay, I suggest, using the example of poststructuralist discourse theory, particularly as proposed by Ernesto Laclau, that the pursuit of the new materialist imperative for nonhuman inclusivity does not necessitate a complete break with the conceptual and theoretical tools that have long informed cultural studies. Moreover, I argue that the recognition of profound more-than-human relations that new materialism enjoins is compatible with the aims of cultural studies – a point I illustrate by turning to the Indonesian context. Although I emphasize the possible continuity between cultural studies and new materialism, I also consider why *politics* may be where stronger bridges between the two are needed. I sketch a path forward, through a brief discussion of the communities that live near central Java’s most active volcano, Merapi, and the more-than-human world of the Indigenous peoples of West Papua.¹ I propose that the possibility of a more-than-human project of transformative politics must begin from the recognition that both humans and nonhumans are – to borrow from Oliver Marchart’s work on post-foundational political thought – implicated in “a world formed and deformed by antagonism” (Marchart 2018, p. 159).

2 Discourse and Nonhumans

Theories of discourse developed by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, and Judith Butler – to mention just three from a long list of venerable names – have undoubtedly been influential for cultural studies, as evinced by Stuart Hall’s declaration that the “metaphor of ‘discourse’” is the defining “theoretical revolution of our time” (Hall, as quoted in Bowman 2007, p. 3). But if the concept-metaphor of discourse has been so central to cultural studies as envisioned and practiced by Hall and the associates of the Birmingham School, what various strands of new materialism together represent is precisely a challenge to its centrality in contemporary social theory. As a point of departure, I turn to Karen Barad’s new materialist appraisal of Butler’s work and Dirk Quadflieg’s (2021) instructive observation regarding the distance between new materialism and poststructuralist theories of discourse.

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad (2007) contends that despite representing a step in the right direction, the account of materialization offered by Judith Butler – that is, of how discursive practices constitute the “reality” of bodies, persons, and things – fails to offer a satisfying account of nonhuman participation in the formation of social and political power-knowledge relations, on which Butler and other theorists of discourse focus their attention. Diagnosing Butler’s shortcoming as lying in a disproportionate focus on anthropogenic practices of signification, Barad adumbrates a more comprehensive account by supplementing Butler’s account of gendered bodies with a discussion of ultrasonography, intended to demonstrate the agentic role of matter, such as piezoelectric crystals, in the emergence, or materialization, of a gendered fetus (Barad 2007, pp. 189–222).

In an essay that relates the concerns of new materialism to Adornian reflections on the subject-object relation, Quadflieg (2021) makes an interesting observation with reference to Barad’s critique of poststructuralist theories of discourse. Although the aim of new materialist theorists to highlight the constitutive role of matter within social and cultural phenomena is admirable, Quadflieg writes, their commitment to a “flat” ontology – the elaboration of which in new materialist literature often relies on Bruno Latour’s important work – means that

¹ West Papua (*Papua Barat*) is the term of self-identification used by Papuans to refer to the western half of the island of New Guinea under Indonesian jurisdiction. It is not to be confused with the Province of West Papua (*Provinsi Papua Barat*), a smaller administrative region in the northwest of the island established by the Indonesian government in 2007.

they must refrain from asserting that “the role of matter in or for discursive practices differs essentially from that of other ‘agents’ like human beings or concepts” (Quadflieg 2021, p. 18). But as a result of this restriction, Barad ends up giving only “a more detailed and complex description of the discursive materialization of a body,” which ultimately neither contests nor enhances the main premise of discourse theory, that social objectivity – the gendered body, in this case – is “nothing naturally given but becomes real through numerous reiterated discursive practices” (Quadflieg 2021, p. 18).

For students of cultural studies, the proximity of discursive and new materialist approaches may be something to be welcomed, since it could facilitate fruitful theoretical syntheses that open new paths toward more comprehensive redescrptions of natural-cultural reality. In fact, such paths have already been pursued systematically by, among others, media and political theorist Nico Carpentier (2017, 2019), who has defended a method of “discourse-material” analysis based on the works of Laclau and Barad. Notwithstanding the novelty of new materialism vis-à-vis discourse-theoretical approaches – which proponents of the former unconvinced by such syntheses may wish to emphasize, as seen, for example, in Ejsing and Tønder’s (2022) response to Carpentier – the proximity is not unexpected. After all, as Martin Hägglund (2019) has noted, *critiques* of anthropocentrism by new materialists are written predominantly for a *human* readership. Hence, despite its intention to assign “linguisticity” a “more modest” place (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, p. 98), new materialism in practice affirms, at least implicitly, the essential premise shared across all theories of discourse: the constitutive and transformative power of signifying practice. It is perhaps the untenability of denying the specificity of human agency and of the capacity of human signifying practice to *make differences* that leads Ejsing to respond, with reference to Jane Bennett, to new materialism’s (post-)Marxist critics as follows: the goal of new materialism “was never to eliminate all differences between human beings and the rest of the world” (Ejsing 2024, p. 65), but to “examine instead the affinities across these differences” (Bennett 2010, p. 104).

If, however, the essence of the “new materialist wager” as envisioned by Ejsing consists in greater attentiveness to “all that which is not human, which is more-than-human,” so as not to lose “our sight for a lot of the matters that matter,” all the while preserving the specificities of the human and human agency (Ejsing 2024, p. 65), then I wonder whether cultural studies was ever possible without taking into account the nonhuman at the level of generality implied therein. For instance, in light of the affinity to contemporary new materialist parlance exhibited by Deleuze’s (1992) explication of the concept, the Foucauldian *dispositif* – surely influential for many students of cultural studies – may be seen as an indication that concepts and analytical approaches deployed in cultural studies have never been closed off to the concerns that motivate new materialist theorizations. A similar point can be made, I believe, even with regard to a theoretical approach that was once denounced as a kind of linguistic idealism: the poststructuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau.

Despite the fact that empirical applications of discourse theory have often privileged textual analysis, Laclau’s theory of discourse is committed to a kind of materialism, the gist of which consists, according to David Howarth, in the affirmation that “conceptual and discursive forms can never exhaust the materiality of objects” (Howarth 2013, p. 10). Though it is true that in this formulation of Laclau’s – as Howarth terms it – “radical materialism,” materiality or matter appears to be consigned to the role of being an external limit to an essentially anthropogenic process of semiosis, the thesis nevertheless does hint that theories of discourse may not necessarily be structured around a binary opposition between realist essentialism and social constructivism, the need for whose overcoming new materialist social theorists have emphasized.

In fact, the materialism implied by Laclauian discourse theory may be pushed closer toward certain new materialist intuitions. Laclau’s thinking exemplifies a “trope of catachresis” that “‘creatively misapplies’ the concept of discourse to encompass all dimensions of social reality and not just the usual practices of speaking, writing, and communicating” (Howarth 2004, p. 265). In Laclau’s theorization, discourse does not imply a fundamental distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic elements or between “ideas” and their “material” conditions. Instead, his formulation of the concept of discourse draws on Wittgenstein’s view of the “language-game” as an “indissoluble totality” of “both language and the actions interconnected with it” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 108). In other words, a discourse – and the field of discursivity in general – comprises not only words or texts but also “objects, actors, and their material properties as well, all situated within a complex and structured system of differences” (Livingston 2014, pp. 303–304). It is this assemblage of words and things – which, in the

Laclauian conception, cannot finally overcome its immanent limits or inconsistency, i.e., the *real* in the Lacanian sense, restaged as *antagonism* by Laclau (Žižek 1989) – that constitutes “the ultimate locus of the multiple antagonisms” wherein “the possibility of any meaningful social or political intervention” resides (Livingston 2014, p. 304). Coupled with the “radical materialism” of his discourse theory, the fact that discourse for Laclau refers to *any* configuration in which signifiers are related to one another to generate their objectivity or meaning, where signifiers are understood not as acoustic images (as in Saussure) but as meaning-making elements *irrespective* of their substantive properties, entails that the constitution of objectivity in discourse theory cannot be subsumed under *only* anthropogenic processes.

What follows is that Laclau’s apparent elevation of linguistic structure as a seemingly transcendental framework to theorize the order of being – tellingly, Laclau (2004) accepts that his deployment of the category of language is comparable to Alain Badiou’s axiomatic decision to privilege post-Cantorian set theory as the discourse of being qua being – merits a more nuanced appraisal. This could involve shifting the question from, say, whether discourse is an anthropocentric category, to the question of the specific differences discourse theory articulates between the human and the nonhuman, the reality of which is not denied by new materialists. Laclau’s reflections on the inseparable entwinement of semiosis, being, and affect, sketched in some of his late essays (Laclau 2014), are deeply Lacanian, in that they pursue, in one way or another, Lacan’s thesis that “[the signifier] is the material cause of *jouissance*” (Lacan 1998, p. 24). But if, as Samo Tomšič has noted, Lacan and Deleuze partake in a common “*philosophical* displacement, not *against* structuralism, but *within* structuralism” (Tomšič 2017, p. 132), one of whose outcomes is precisely the interruption of the transcendental of language, then I would argue that Laclau’s theory of discourse must be situated in the legacy of that same displacement.

The point that I wish to make is not that there is nothing that could be rightly identified as anthropocentric or “logocentric” (Bowman 2022) in Laclau’s (and Foucault’s) thought. Nor do I wish to defend Laclau’s apparent lack of interest in new materialist reflections. I, for one, find his response to Elizabeth Povinelli (2012), in which he chastises Povinelli for her supposed failure to explain why the issues she raises cannot “be addressed within [his] own theorisation” (Laclau 2012, p. 411), to be unhelpful and unsympathetic. My intention, rather, has been to propose that discourse theory can be understood not as founded on the exclusion of matter and nonhumans, but instead as implying the participation of nonhumans in the inherently relational process of semiosis and social practice. This process is that of the constitution of all objectivity, which is – to allude to Merleau-Ponty’s account of corporeality, taken up by some new materialists – a “process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning,” in which language and matter are “interconnected” or “woven” into an “indissoluble totality” (Coole 2010, p. 101; Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 108).

Yet a crucial Laclauian thesis must supplement the interconnectedness or interwovenness of humans and nonhumans, words and things. Namely, the thesis that any specific system, totality, or assemblage of words and things, of humans and nonhumans, will be a contingent and conflictual formation instigated by experiences of radical negativity, the Laclauian name for which is “antagonism.” The implications of this thesis will be explored further in subsequent parts of this essay. For now, suffice it to note its congruence with the view held by new materialists and posthumanist scholars that, in truth, “nonhumans were never cast out of the political fold” (Stengers 2010, p. 7). Indeed, with Isabelle Stengers, one could argue that nonhumans are necessarily implicated in anthropocentric constructions of the Human, insofar as this modernist category is founded on the reduction of “what causes humans to think and feel to human productions,” in order to allow humans “to claim exception, to affirm the most drastic cut between those beings who ‘have ideas’ and everything else, from stones to apes” (Stengers 2010, p. 7). Without the discursive inscription of their reduction or exclusion, there would be no objective referent of “human.” But if nonhumans are thus the constitutive outside of the anthropos, hence beings whose exclusion or reduction is the condition of possibility of anthropocentrism, then those nonhumans are partaking in the same field of discursivity that discourse theory foregrounds. In this theoretical recognition that matter and nonhumans are inextricable from the field of discursivity that constitutes the condition of meaningful social and political action, discourse theory effectively implies that human life and sociality are always already more-than-human.

3 Cultural Studies and the Politics of the Anthropocene

In the preceding discussion, I have tried to suggest that the new materialist injunction to make room for the nonhuman does not necessitate a theoretical break with the basic premises of discourse theory. A related point should be made regarding research in cultural studies. In empirical research, especially in non-Western contexts, the recognition of the more-than-human dimension of society has never ceased to be essential in following Lawrence Grossberg's advice for research in cultural studies: to attempt to "tell the best story that can be told, about any context, within that context" (Grossberg 2010, p. 9).

If one wished to highlight the distinctiveness of new materialism vis-à-vis well-established analytical perspectives in cultural studies, one could contrast new materialism with material culture studies pioneered by, among others, Arjun Appadurai (1988) and Daniel Miller (1998). The gap between new materialism and material culture studies in this case might consist in the former's problematization of the latter's ultimately anthropocentric focus on the ways in which humans engage with material objects to generate or maintain social relations, with the result that the "social life of things" is finally rendered as something derivative of human sociality. For contemporary Marxists such as Andreas Malm and Kohei Saito, who assert, *pace* Latour, that "the idea of 'actant' that distribute agency to things is incompatible with Marx's critique of 'fetishism'" (Saito 2023, p. 125), such a degree of anthropocentrism would be not only unavoidable, but also theoretically correct. Yet in certain empirical contexts, the distinction between human and nonhuman life or agency becomes much more ambiguous, or indeed undecidable.

It is to the credit of scholars inspired by new materialism that they have shown this convincingly in the Indonesian context. Anthropologist Nils Bubandt (2017) – whose significant contributions to the study of Indonesia include research on witchcraft through the Derridean notion of hauntology (Bubandt 2022) – has argued that the political struggles and dynamics of contemporary Indonesian society may be better understood by recognizing spirits (*jin*) as veritable political actors. Nor is it only in the modern institution of democratic politics that more-than-human actors play a role. Indonesia could rightly be described as a society in which even digital technology is "used to articulate spiritual realities perceived as faltering – to augment the spirit world rather than replace it" (Zhan 2025, n.p.). Without the luxury of a context-transcending analytical framework that allows for the determination of "reality" beneath the "merely apparent" – the sort of framework that underpins Saito's assessment that "flat ontology is equivalent to falling for a fetishized understanding that simply accepts what is given without revealing its social factors" (Saito 2023, p. 125)² – what one would find in the Indonesian situation is the *lack of grounds* for such a determination. In this situation, the dismantling of anthropocentrism that new materialism forcefully advocates has the critical function of exposing that the clash between "modernization" and "tradition" or between indigenous and Western onto-epistemologies – something all too familiar in a postcolonial context – constitutes political struggles whose outcomes cannot be decided *a priori*. This is a conclusion that one would expect from an intellectual tradition shaped by thinkers labeled "the heirs of Gramsci" (Anderson 2016). But if I am right that new materialism neither effectuates a necessary theoretical rupture from certain key concepts of cultural studies, as I have tried to argue in this essay via the concept of discourse, nor necessitates a radical shift in research orientation, the distance between cultural studies and new materialism is, in the last instance, *also* a political matter.

On the implications of Jane Bennett's vitalist materialism for radical democracy, Jean-Paul Gagnon comments as follows:

Understanding the nonhuman condition and how humans are situated, embodied and webbed in nonhumans whom they also affect (usually destructively), gives rise to opportunities for growth through losing the arrogant human mores and institutions that bind and direct so many of us. What limits us are the notions that we are better than animals, wiser than the mountain, masters of nature. Rejecting these claims, as Jane Bennett makes clear, gives us the opportunity to be less destructive toward nonhumans, our own bodies and those items that have hitherto been seen as "consumables." (Asenbaum et al. 2023, p. 591)

² Saito refers to Alf Hornborg's (2016) work in support of this assessment of flat ontology.

Object-oriented philosopher Timothy Morton makes even more explicit the connection between the nonhuman and the affirmation of the Anthropocene as the bankruptcy of Western onto-epistemology and its concept of the human:

We have lost the world but gained a soul – the entities that coexist with us obtrude on our awareness with greater and greater urgency. Three cheers for the so-called *end of the world*, then, since this moment is the beginning of history, the end of the human dream that reality is significant for them alone. We now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and nonhumans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of *world*. (Morton 2013, p. 108)

The discourse of the “end of the (modern) world” that Morton and other new materialist authors of the Anthropocene thereby articulate is, simultaneously, a discourse of a new commencement for a post-anthropocentric future, imbued with a kind of emancipatory implications for both humans and nonhumans. The issue is how this world after the end of the world is imagined.

David Chandler, in his wide-ranging commentary on the thinkers of the Anthropocene, from Donna Haraway to Timothy Morton, from Dipesh Chakrabarty to Walter Mignolo, contends that there is, among these thinkers, “a consensus that the end of capitalism would not be a solution to problems of climate change” (Chandler 2018, p. 194). Their stance is characterized by a deep suspicion toward traditional socialist imaginaries that prioritize productive forces and distribution of wealth, on the grounds that the achievement of those aims would “have merely speeded up the contemporary crisis” (Chandler 2018, p. 194). The opinion of many decolonial pluriversals, new materialists, and posthumanists regarding capitalism is summarized by Chandler as follows:

Capitalism may be problematic but it is no longer *the* problem: it is sometimes a catalyst or at least partly to blame but, more often than not, it is seen as merely a symptom or perhaps even an evasion of the problem, which is now cast in terms of the human, or rather the modernist construction of the human, itself. (Chandler 2018, p. 194)

Given new materialist suspicion toward the traditional socialist ideal, what should be asked is whether the decisive decentering of the modern conception of the human, or the overcoming of anthropocentrism in its various guises, that new materialism elevates into its prime theoretical, ethical, and arguably political objective is a sufficient condition of a future more amenable to nonhumans (and humans – in particular, hitherto marginalized humans, subhumans).

In the heyday of the Levinas-inspired “ethical turn” in social and political theory, which located the possibility of transformative experience in the encounter with the infinite alterity of the other, Alain Badiou asserted that “[a]ny experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences,” such that “infinite alterity” is simply what there is and not “the predicate of a transcendence,” understood as change or novelty (Badiou 2002, pp. 25–27). One might make a similar point against the new materialist call for nonhuman inclusion. Since, according to new materialism, human and nonhuman entanglement is what has *always* been taking place – sometimes across spatiotemporal scales that far exceed our everyday anthropocentric scale (Morton 2013) – humans coming to recognize and embrace this profound relationality with their nonhuman neighbors, at least in some cases, could amount to the simple affirmation of what Badiou has said with regard to infinite alterity: “the banal reality of every situation” (Badiou 2002, p. 25).³ That the dislocation of a hegemonic construction and the subsequent widening of the terrain of contingency in themselves entail no particular political consequence was the conclusion of Laclau’s (2007) hyperpolitical interpretation of the Derridean idea of undecidability. Thomas Lemke aligns with this Laclauian stance when he points out that “[t]he ‘nonhuman turn’ and the move beyond anthropocentric ontologies is not at all incompatible with techno-managerial projects and capitalist imaginaries” (Lemke 2021, p. 189). It is perfectly imaginable that rendering the boundary between the categories of the human and the nonhuman more porous could contribute toward more effective mobilization of nonhumans as agents of capitalist extractivism – one needs only to think of the mines and plantations of West Papua, which are enabled by the Trans-Papua Highway infrastructure, monitored by drones, and managed by “smart” farming systems (Eichhorn 2023; Widi 2024).

³ A more sophisticated version of this line of criticism has been made against Rosi Braidotti’s vitalist posthumanism by Ray Brassier (2022), one of the key interpreters of Badiou’s philosophy in English-language scholarship.

On the question of why popular culture matters for cultural studies, Hall writes: “it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it” (Hall 2006, p. 487). In a highly polemical piece targeting decolonial and pluriversal approaches, Jason W. Moore has criticized the proponents of these approaches, such as Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, for neglecting the need for political programs and “a revolutionary vision capable of engaging today’s planetary crisis” (Moore 2022, p. 134). Given its historical and theoretical ties to the socialist project, perhaps a question that cultural studies should pose, amidst contemporary discourses of new materialism and the Anthropocene, is how we could make not just – as Donna Haraway (2016) has famously recommended – “kin” with nonhumans but also “comrades.”

4 Indonesia: A More-than-Human, Post-foundational Archipelago

Marten Bayuaji is an artist based in Yogyakarta whom I first met while preparing to curate an exhibition in the city. Different in genre from his previous site-specific environmental artwork but continuous with it in motif, the new sculptures and drawings he submitted to the exhibition engaged with the unwritten knowledge of the people who live near Mount Merapi, one of Indonesia’s most active volcanoes located 30 km north of Yogyakarta’s city center.

During our first meeting on July 4, 2025, at his modest studio on the outskirts of Yogyakarta City, Marten spoke about spending three months climbing Mount Merapi 14 times, each time from a different side, with the goal of the climb being to “stop.” This was an attempt to practice the notion, common among the human communities living near the volcano, that the “peak” of a climb is not a fixed point but something that emerges contingently from the intra-action of the human and the mountain. This idea, Marten said, was applied to his creative process when he selected stone reliefs that would feature in his drawing from the ruins of Candi Lawang, a ninth-century Hindu temple at the northeast foot of Merapi (what Marten learned from the communities near Merapi might be understood as what Morton [2017] calls post-rationalist “modes of access”). Naturally, our conversation pivoted to the question of the existential condition that facilitates the profound human–nonhuman relation that people living by the volcano appear to demonstrate.

Interestingly, Marten explained that, despite the mantra of “harmony and balance” that defines Indonesia’s official state ideology taught at all levels of education (Hobart 2022; Kim 2026), throughout his study of the Merapi community, he found the word “harmony” to be “completely irrelevant” to the people who live there. According to Marten, their “fear, satisfaction, and gratitude are blended into one and cannot be simplified with the word ‘harmony.’” The rituals, dances, and prayers of the people who live near the volcano are means of living under a condition that does not allow the fear of eruption to be finally overcome. These rituals served as an inspiration for the other work Marten submitted to the exhibition: armbands worn by dancers from the communities around Merapi when they perform the role of a *buto*, a giant supernatural being that Marten takes to represent Merapi itself. In engaging with more-than-human forces through various cultural practices, those living in proximity to the volcano give expression to the truth of the entanglement of geological agents and humans: the nonhuman agents are not merely “blind” forces but *others* that can be destructive or cooperative, or, as the local imagination of the *buto* has it, neither inherently good nor inherently bad.

In *The Pulse of the Earth: Political Geology in Java* – the title is borrowed from Dutch geologist J. H. F. Umbgrove’s 1942 book – Adam Bobbette declares the Anthropocene to be “the Indonesian moment of the earth sciences” (Bobbette 2023, p. 175). As Bobbette puts it elsewhere, not only have Javanese cosmologies historically influenced modern volcanology, but they have also highlighted precisely what contemporary thinkers of the Anthropocene enjoin us to recognize: what Kathryn Yusoff and Nigel Clark call “geosocial formations,” or “the ways that societies enter into alliances, are enabled, and constrained by geological forces in deep time” (Bobbette 2024, p. 852). That Yogyakarta features as a key site in Bobbette’s work comes as no surprise. For in the central Javanese sultanate, “[s]overeign power and, by extension, the constitution of the political realm depended on diplomatic negotiations with geological agents” (Bobbette 2024, p. 852). Volcanoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis were the agents capable of calling into question the power and legitimacy of the sultans. “The shudder of a

volcano or an earthquake rumbling in the Indian Ocean could suggest,” Bobbette writes, “the necessity to enter negotiations with those deities through the giving of gifts” (Bobbette 2024, p. 852).

What, I think, becomes clear in Marten’s and Bobbette’s accounts, as well as in other research on mythical representations of the volcano in Java (e.g., Schlehe 1996), is that the Javanese onto-epistemology accepts nonhuman geological agents as beings capable of *threatening* an extant social order.⁴ It is because of their destructive power, ultimately unmasterable by humans, that these nonhumans are invited into the realm of the social as beings with whom humans must attempt to diplomatically negotiate toward the restoration of order and peace. Sometimes personified as the deities of earth and sea in Javanese myths, these geological agents represent powerful beings whose willingness to coexist harmoniously with humans cannot be taken for granted.

This Javanese conception is not incompatible with Laclau’s understanding of the social as a world perpetually undercut by the negativity – theorized in terms of antagonism – that prevents the achievement of a harmonious whole: “the *social*, as distinct from *society*, is always going to be a *failed objectivity*” (Laclau 2014, p. 113). In other words, the ultimate instability of the order of being in which both human and nonhuman beings are inscribed as actors, hence the radical contingency of every more-than-human relationship, is the originary condition of (im)possibility for humans and nonhumans to co-articulate their relations and the effects thereof. This is why, from the post-foundational perspective Laclau exemplifies, the denial of the constitutive role of negativity in human–nonhuman relationality risks a depoliticizing closure.

I believe it is with a similar thought that some scholars within Indigenous studies assert that it must be possible to conceive “an Indigenous subject that exists in non-relation to the generative possibilities of the Anthropocene, or even figuratively refutes the relations that constitute its world for strategic purposes” (Gravlin 2025, p. 465). Indigenous subjects who refuse certain kinds of nonhuman relations are, of course, not uncommon in reality. Recounting an incident in Canada in which the Inuit people of Nunavut insisted on hunting polar bears to reduce their number – despite the bears being a threatened species according to mainstream science – after a member of their community was killed, David Chandler and Julian Reid observe that the “Inuit of Nunavut have no interest in fostering one of Haraway’s ‘multispecies partnerships’ with polar bears, nor with receiving its genetic material” (Chandler and Reid 2020, p. 499). That “Indigeneity is not given unconditionally to connection or collaboration” (Gravlin 2025, p. 465) is similarly corroborated in the Indonesian context by anthropologist Sophie Chao’s (2022) work with the Indigenous communities of West Papua.

Chao observes that the Indigenous Marind people of West Papua – a site of devastating internal colonialism – do not take “inextricable entanglements of nature, technology, and culture” as their “ontological starting point” (Chao 2022, p. 212). As I also argue elsewhere (Kim in press), what Chao’s work instead suggests is the inseparability of the possibility of more-than-human solidarity from that of more-than-human animosity (in one dramatic moment of confrontation, a Marind activist declares that sago is his *amai* [kin], his “grandparent,” whereas the “oil palm is no one” [Chao 2022, pp. 35–36]). In other words, the more-than-human society of the Indigenous peoples of Papua realizes an intense solidarity with nonhumans *against* other nonhumans, thus politicizing the new materialist imperative for nonhuman inclusivity. It is the ambivalence that this introduces into more-than-human relationality that is highlighted by Chao’s conclusion (which, incidentally, echoes the gist of Claire Bishop’s [2004] seminal Laclau–Mouffean critique of relational aesthetics): posthumanist ontologies must “account for the particular *kinds* of relations, forces, and actors that they entail – and whether they are embraced or eschewed” (Chao 2022, p. 212).

That more-than-human relations constitute the realities of the Indonesian archipelago is something that could hardly be disputed. Indeed, I am inclined to say that room for nonhumans has never been absent in the Indonesian archipelago. But the lesson that emerges from this archipelago – the same archipelago that gifted death to the firstborn son of G. W. F. Hegel, the great philosopher of modernity, the same archipelago that inspired Deleuze and Guattari to choose *A Thousand Plateaus* as the title of their book, central to many strands of new materialism – is that nonhumans are always-already implicated with humans in, to repeat Marchart’s formulation, “a world formed and deformed by antagonism” (Marchart 2018, p. 159). Perhaps what is attested by the

⁴ The discussion below draws on a forthcoming book chapter (Kim in press), in which I engage critically with Arturo Escobar’s pluriversalism and its emphasis on relationality from a post-foundational perspective inspired by Laclau and Marchart.

experiences of the Indonesian archipelago, “[i]n contrast to the claim of the thinkers of *Anti-Oedipus*, in which the lack or the negative is something imposed artificially,” is that “negativity is in fact the basic condition of all reality” (Flisfeder 2021, p. 24).

As mentioned previously, Marxist theorists tend to be skeptical of the new materialist account of nonhuman agency, claiming that relational or flat ontology risks “accept[ing] what is given without revealing its social factors” (Saito 2023, p. 125). A comparable point is made by Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, for whom Caribbean and Afro-pessimist thought demands a critical theory of the Anthropocene that fully recognizes the founding violence (the Middle Passage and chattel slavery) of the modern world:

A relational ontology – such as actor network theory, materialist semiotics or theories of multi-species entanglement – works at the level of the world as it appears, as given to us – and is developed through a temporality of growth and attunement to ‘beings-in-relation’ (as if the shifting interstices between relations or between subjects and objects could be documented, engaged, or instrumentally or ethically put to work). (Pugh and Chandler 2023, p. 35)

Even if these criticisms of relational ontology have merit, however, an outright dismissal of nonhuman agency would be overly limiting and, in my view, ultimately untenable for cultural studies in the Indonesian context. At this point, the post-foundationalist notion of antagonism as the radical negativity that makes a world both possible and impossible opens an alternative path: acknowledging the critical Marxist instinct to disclose “social factors” of more-than-human relations – something that Laclauian discourse theory may be able to account for through its notions of hegemony and ideological fantasy (Glynos 2021) – while also ensuring the irreducibility of those relations to purely “ontic” relations between objectively given identities, which owes to the fact that the *being* of the social (and of all social objectivity) is that of “failed objectivity” (Laclau 2014, p. 113).

The metaphor of “trembling” (or “shaking”) has been deployed by some post-foundationalists to refer to the experience of this negativity that inheres in a world constituted antagonistically (Kim in press; Roskamm 2021). For instance, Marchart, whose work has significantly contributed to the rethinking of antagonism as the “abyssal” (Heidegger) or “hauntological” (Derrida) *ground* of the social, draws on Jean-Luc Nancy’s statement that “[n]egativity makes all determinateness tremble, all being-all-to-itself: it injects it with a shudder and an unsettling agitation” (Nancy 2002, p. 45). Traumatic as such an experience of trembling – the experience of antagonism – may be, post-foundationalists argue that it is generative in its potential to instigate “projects of re-grounding” (Mihai et al. 2017, p. 511), i.e., projects of transformative politics. Politics, in this account, is a process that commences because “no social being” is “untouched by antagonism,” by its “reverberation” (Marchart 2018, pp. 157–158).

One of the tasks of cultural studies in the Indonesian context, or rather, what experiences of the Indonesian archipelago and its more-than-human social realities encourage cultural studies to attend to, then, is to recognize and trace how this trembling traverses humans and nonhumans alike. “Every archipelagic thought,” wrote the Martinican poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant, “is a thought of trembling, of non-presumption, but also of openness and sharing” (Glissant 2020, p. 143). For Glissant, archipelagic thought (*la pensée archipélique*) resonates with the “trembling of our world (*tremblement de notre monde*)” (Glissant 2005, p. 37). The Indonesian archipelago, which a post-foundationalism inflected by new materialism would reveal to be a world in which humans and nonhumans *tremble together*, may prove to be an indispensable site of archipelagic thought in the Anthropocene.

5 Conclusions

Reading Paul Celan, Jacques Derrida remarked: “There is no world, there are only islands” (Derrida 2011, p. 9). If the affirmation of the Anthropocene denotes the end of the modern, anthropocentric world, then it is perhaps unsurprising that recent discussions in the arts and humanities have often turned to islands and archipelagos for inspiration (De Leon et al. 2024; Pugh and Chandler 2021; Stephens and Martínez-San Miguel 2020). On multiple levels, Indonesia has something to contribute to islandic and archipelagic thinking, thus to discussions of the Anthropocene. By reading Laclau’s post-foundational political thought alongside new materialism and the ethnographic accounts offered by scholars of Indonesia, this essay has pursued that intuition toward the

following conclusion: the experiences of the Indonesian archipelago attest to both the desirability of and the potential for a synthesis of the post-foundationalist thesis on the constitutive role of antagonism in the (de)-formation of a world and the new materialist intervention, which has rightly refocused our attention on dimensions of reality hitherto under-explored by cultural studies, especially in Western contexts. Such a synthesis, in turn, points to a key task of cultural studies after the end of the modern world supposedly announced by the Anthropocene and the demise of anthropocentric constructions of the human: to sense and trace the reverberations of antagonism, to reimagine the possibility of the mobilization of agitated bodies, both humans and nonhumans, toward emancipatory ends.

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