

The Uses of Tentacularity:

Towards a Kraken Theory for Earthly Survival

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Abstract: This article offers some tentative reflections on the question of what mode of theorizing might be particularly productive for the critical humanities in the face of the multiple urgencies of the present. Building on the methodology of conjunctural analysis inherited from British cultural studies, and taking inspiration from Donna Haraway's notion of "tentacular thinking," the contribution outlines a syncretic and pragmatically oriented "Kraken theory," which thinks the contemporary moment along radically relational and processual lines, in terms of a cultural logic of impurity, whose many tentacles reach in numerous different directions, and which hence bridges or mediates between oppositions such as high vs. low, strong vs. weak, or paranoid vs. reparative theorizing.

Keywords: Anthropocene, conjunctural analysis, cultural studies, posthumanism, the reparative, theoretical modes

Thinking the thinkable is not worth the effort.

—Hélène Cixous

Theory survives. All declarations of its demise notwithstanding, theory, as John Mowitt puts it, "stubbornly survives its death." If theory, put simply, means a more or less systematic reflection on ourselves and the world, then it will always remain indispensable. It cannot ever really die. Yet, that being said, it is of course also true that we can very well identify different cycles, constellations or—to already use a term I will speak about in more detail shortly—conjunctures of theory. When, in his 2003 book *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton claimed that "[t]he golden age of cultural theory is long past," I believe he was at the same time right and wrong. For it was in fact not theory per se that he was talking about, but (as he himself conceded) what is frequently called "high theory." And although I would want to differ from the assessment that we are living in

the aftermath of high theory, I nevertheless think Eagleton was quite right to observe that a shift of some sort had indeed taken place. In broad terms, this shift can perhaps be characterized as a general retreat from large-scale, holistic types of analysis, that is, from those forms of social theory that aim at a more or less comprehensive “big picture” of the social totality as a whole—a retreat that can undoubtedly be contextualized, among other things, through reference to the widespread skepticism towards “grand narratives” within the humanities and social sciences on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to a consolidated global hegemony of neoliberalism, now stabilized by a powerful “capitalist realism” (the notorious “end of history” and the “cancellation of the future”—celebrated by the likes of Francis Fukuyama, lamented by thinkers on the left). However, as I have indicated, this new constellation or conjuncture did not entail the “end of theory,” but rather a shift in what we may perhaps call “modes of theorizing.”

What exactly is a theoretical mode? Following Rita Felski, modes of theorizing can be understood as particular styles of thought, involving specific epistemological, ontological, philosophical, political, ethical, and affective orientations as well as distinctive formal characteristics. Thus, to speak of a theoretical “mode” means to refer to a unique way of “doing theory,” which entails particular analytical assumptions, conventions, and expectations, an identifiable sensibility, disposition, and mood, as well as distinguishing forms of tone, style, and narrative. Thus, the change that Eagleton speaks about can, I think, in part be understood in terms of a shift—partial, untidy, and incomplete—from the mode of “high” to the mode of “low theory.”

In what follows, I want to think about what kind of theory, which mode, or modes, of theorizing might be particularly productive for the critical humanities in the face of the multiple crises, or better, urgencies, of the present. I begin by making the case for the usefulness of the tradition of “British cultural studies” or the “Birmingham school.” In particular, the article suggests that the methodology of “conjunctural analysis” central to this tradition can serve as a helpful basis or framework for the fashioning of a genuinely multi-modal type of theorizing. Such an outlook would think the contemporary moment along radically relational and processual lines, in terms of a cultural logic of impurity or hybridity, and in this way try to remain as true as possible to the complex messiness of the present, mapping it in its manifold determinations. I argue that in order to be able to do so, this sort of approach must itself assume the form of an assemblage. Thus, taking inspiration from Donna Haraway’s notion of “tentacular thinking,” the contribution outlines a syncretic and pragmatically oriented “Kraken theory,” a theory of the third space and

of the excluded multiple, whose many tentacles reach in numerous different directions and which hence bridges or mediates between oppositions such as high vs. low, strong vs. weak, or paranoid vs. reparative theorizing.

But first, as a counterpoint, let's look for a moment at a different type of theorizing. The urgencies of the present have in the recent past prompted a number of attempts at interpretation, one of which is collapsology and the related postnormal times thesis. For sure, a mere passing glance at the contemporary world is enough to warrant the conclusion that we are living through an age of "global weirding" and that we have entered something like "postnormal times"—times, that is, in which "things we take for granted become uncertain, our understanding of things can become a form of ignorance, and long-standing norms, if not the very idea of normalcy itself, break down before our very eyes". With their emphasis on a profoundly changed sense of being in the world, on uncertainty, on (spatially and tempo- rally) wide-reaching disruptions, and the convergence of complexity, chaos, and contradictions (the "3 Cs" of postnormal times theory), diagnoses such as these certainly capture something of the domi- nant feel or mood of the times—of what may be called key affects or "structures of feeling" (Raymond Williams) of "Western" late moder- nity in crisis. And yet, such monikers are finally unsatisfying. Among other things, what is particularly problematic about these approaches is their persistent tendency to de-politicize what is going on and to present (social, political, economic) events and dynamics in terms of quasi-automatic logics or near-self-fulfilling prophecies. In this theo- retical universe, for instance, "[c]omplex networks generate positive feedbacks that can produce chaotic events such as Brexit". It's all just "complexity" and "chaos"—to the effect that actual complexity, the concrete analysis of complexity, is avoided. It simply is not enough to go on asserting that the world is chaotic—the task of theory is precisely to explain that chaos, to disentangle it, to show how it is produced. Instead, we are presented with a series of images of civilization on the brink of collapse, of a world run amok, out of control, no longer normal. What this ultimately amounts to is an erasure of the political itself, of the real as the site and result of decision-making, intervention, and— importantly—struggle.

Another issue with these diagnoses is the way they invoke the notion of the normal itself—a concept tied to a set of norms and performing specific exclusions and abjections: "Postnormal times have undermined the conventions about how society [is] supposed to function." In the case of the theories at hand, it appears to be, among other things, a distinctively "Western" model of liberal democracy and (social) market

economy that is charged with the power of the normative. The predictable byproduct is a regrettable universalizing rhetoric that falsely generalizes the (alleged) experience of a particular minority in the so-called “Global North” into an experience of humanity as a whole: “In postnormal times, all human cultures have lost their bearings; and every social, cultural, political, philosophical and religious outlook known to humanity needs to relearn how to engage with its own moral and ethical precepts.” Here, in other words, we once again encounter *Anthropos*, the figure of universal man (sic) at the heart of so many discourses on and of the Anthropocene and heavily criticized by a host of scholars, especially from fields such as Black or Indigenous studies. Thus, while the diagnoses of collapsology or post-normal times theory may be instructive for thinking about particular contemporary experiential and affective formations, their tendency to inscribe a particular idea of normality as an unquestioned normative point of reference is problematic. In fact, with a view to the history of the concept as a material force in the world—a history of violence!— we may actually well embrace the coming of a “postnormal” age.

To find a more productive theoretical model, one that is more attentive to the complex disorder of our present moment, I want to look to what, in reference to the University of Birmingham’s renowned Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1964-2002), is frequently called the “Birmingham tradition” of cultural studies—or sometimes simply (and misleadingly) “British cultural studies”—a school of thought associated with thinkers such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Paul Gilroy, or Lawrence Grossberg. By way of example, let me mention the 1989 volume *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, edited by Hall and Martin Jacques. I believe that, as a mode of periodizing and thinking change, the notion of “new times” may once again prove useful in the present day. As I see it, the concept’s significance is twofold: For one thing, it decidedly views the present as a transitional moment. It is an effort to think change not from its presumed end, teleologically and deterministically, but, so to speak, in *medias res*, that is to say, not primarily with a view to its predicted outcome, but in its unfurling and becoming, as it is taking place—and that, importantly, means thinking it in its open-endedness and contingency. For another thing, it is important to note that “new times” was an attempt to capture in one single term a whole range of different facets of change: social, political, economic, cultural, medi- atic, technological, and more, “none of which,” as Hall emphasized, “ha[d] any necessary connection with the other.” It was a program- matically multidimensional approach, tackling transformation in all of its complexity and refusing mono-causal explanations, uni-linear logics, and grand *récit*-like totalizations and absolutizations of partic- ular

factors. Taking these two aspects together, we can say that “new times” are—or that the analytic lens of new times considers the present as—both over- and underdetermined.

Taking inspiration from the work of Antonio Gramsci, this approach thinks the contemporary moment as an “interregnum,” marked by the fact that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” Hall explained that “[w]hat it feels like in that transitional state is to be “post,” living in the moment of the “post”—in his case, that meant terms like “post- modern,” “postindustrial,” or “post-Fordist.” I don’t think it is a coincidence that today, we once again witness a conspicuous proliferation of “posts,” or, indeed, of “post-posts,” such as “post-postmodernism,” “post-poststructuralism,” “post-post-Fordism,” or “post-post-politics.” As Hall said of the “posts” of his day, each of these “expresses a clearer sense of what we are leaving behind (“post” everything?) than of where we are heading.” It is interesting that the notion of “new times” never achieved anywhere near the prominence that the other terms mentioned by Hall have. And indeed, in comparison with others like these, the metaphor “new times” pales as far too unimpressive, bland, unspectacular. As an intellectual coinage and brand, it is astonishingly, almost provocatively, unsexy. And similarly today, who would want to speak of “new times” when we have a host of other, far more exciting concepts on offer—control society, Empire, platform capitalism, society of singularities, surveillance culture, pharmacopornographic era, and so forth? And yet, what makes the new times approach so compelling to me is precisely its refusal to reduce the complexity of change to any one determinate logic. It acknowledges that many of these periodizing concepts signify something important, and it takes them on board, but it decidedly rejects turning any of them into the kind of global meta-concept that can account for virtually anything and everything.

In this, the analytic of new times was characteristic of the Birmingham tradition of cultural studies more generally. As I understand it, this tradition can be characterized in terms of five defining “Cs,” some of which have already been touched upon: by an emphasis on contextuality, contingency, complexity, and the concrete, as well as by its political commitment. Its principal objective is the mapping of relations of power. These analytical principles and commitments arguably account for the centrality of the concept of the conjuncture in cultural studies (effectively a sixth, overarching “C”). Conjunctural analysis has long been an integral element of the field and is considered by some to be its defining methodology and key analytics of the power relations that shape the present. As Hall stated in an interview: “The commitment to understanding a conjuncture is what from the beginning we thought

cultural studies was about.” Although the notion of the conjuncture has a longer and diverse history in Marxist theory, it entered cultural studies predominantly through the work of Antonio Gramsci, who was the first to theorize it in more detail, and that of Louis Althusser. Put simply, a conjuncture can be defined as “a specific moment in the life of a social formation.” Thus, it is an object of knowledge that is determined temporally, spatially, as well as by a particular theoretical perspective. To speak of “conjunctures” means to primarily situate one’s analysis on an intermediate, meso-level of abstraction, more concrete than, say, an “epoch” or a “mode of production,” but also more abstract than a “situation” or a specific government. In particular, it means to approach such “moments” in terms of always specific and provisional constellations or “conjunctions” of a number of heterogeneous “relations of force,” which structure a variety of domains ranging from the economy, politics and culture to technology, media, and even ecology. The analysis aims at describing these different forces that are “condensed” in a moment as well as the distinctive nature of their interconnectedness or, as it is often put in cultural studies, their “articulation.” A basic assumption is that these linkages and relations can coalesce into relatively stable, seemingly uncontested “settlements”—paradigmatically, in the liberal democracies of the “Global North,” the post-war growth period of industrial capitalism that was combined with strong welfare states, or the period of *laissez-faire*, post-industrial financial capitalism (or neoliberalism) since the 1980s. However, following thinkers like Gramsci, British cultural studies has always emphasized the “struggle for hegemony” and the notion that even such seemingly stable settlements at all times harbor more or less strong centrifugal forces which can only be suppressed temporarily.

To give just one example, Hall et al.’s 1978 study *Policing the Crisis*, a seminal work that is frequently cited as paradigmatic of conjunctural analysis, developed a wide-ranging, multi-layered investigation of British society in the 1970s in terms of what the authors diagnosed as a profound “crisis of hegemony.” In a characteristic analytical move, the authors “entered” or approached their subject through an initial discussion of a (seemingly) minor social incident, a street robbery or “mugging,” to then propel their analysis into a spiral of increasing degrees of abstraction, examining the manifold political, economic, and ideological dimensions of the crime. In this manner, the particular event and the media discourses surrounding it were richly contextualized by drawing on a wide range of academic fields (e.g. law, criminology, media studies, political economy, semiotics, sociology of deviance), until the study eventually arrived at the level of the social formation “as a whole” (or at least significant parts of it), at what may be called “a ‘soft’ version of totality.”

Conjunctural analysts have been particularly interested, therefore, in times of crisis when, as Hall and his colleagues, quoting Althusser, write, “the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society, begin to “‘fuse’ into a ruptural unity.” Indeed, I believe that conjunctural analysis offers an extremely helpful analytics for thinking about, or with, “crisis,” one that is driven by the five “Cs” mentioned earlier and that therefore allows us to think crises in their overdetermination, their multiplicity, and complexity. As such, it seems to me to constitute an invaluable tool for a better, more nuanced understanding of our present era of multiple, overlapping urgencies. For, as Grossberg explains, cultural studies, and conjunctural analysis in particular, is eminently suited for the study of just such confusing, obscure, and uncertain moments as ours: “Cultural studies emerged in response to just such contexts, where we don’t know what is going on, or even what questions to ask, because the many struggles and contradictions don’t seem to offer up a coherent narrative. The result is that we don’t yet know what theories, concepts and methods may enable us to find useful answers, and to tell better stories. [...] It is such contexts that call for conjunctural analysis.”

For conjunctural analysis, to adopt a phrase from Virginia Woolf, nothing is simply one thing, nothing is ever simple. And it is because it sees historical moments as fundamentally “messy,” because it is set to remain sensitive and attentive to their essential complexity and multiplicity, that, as a theoretico-methodological framework, it is itself complex and multiple. This is what, in my view, makes it appealing as a model or springboard for a mode of theorizing for “our” times. For, as I see it, what is needed today is a distinctly “multi-modal” methodology—or, as I would like to call it, taking inspiration from Donna Haraway’s notion of “tentacular thinking,” a Kraken theory. Let me outline, in the form of what perhaps effectively amounts to a kind of wish list, the central contours of such an approach.

As I have already suggested, it would be rigorously dedicated to the concrete, to the societies and worlds we (who?) live in/with/as. It has no truck with lofty abstractions and universal, totalizing logics. Yet, by no means should this be understood as an anti-intellectual, empiricist sort of argument. As Hall never tired of emphasizing, for a true understanding of the concrete, theory is a necessary, inevitable “detour.” This is because, following Marx, the concrete is understood as “the concentration of many determinations.” The concrete is emphatically not the simple. This is why the investigation of it is not opposed to, but actually demands the work of theory and abstraction. As Marx explained: “the reader who on the whole desires to follow me must be resolved to ascend from the particular to the general.”

As I already indicated, this was precisely the movement performed by the cultural studies classic *Policing the Crisis*, which set out from a discussion of a specific case of “mugging” and ended up as an analysis of the general crisis of hegemony in 1970s Britain. It was also evident, for instance, in the 1967/68 May Day Manifesto, as well as, to varying extent, in much other work in the field up until the 1990s, whether it related to the study of subcultures, media, popular culture, or other areas. In this kind of analysis, the concrete social fact, in its constitutive overdetermination, thus serves as an “entrance point into the context, an assumed point of articulation or a crystallization of lines of determination.” That is to say, for cultural studies, as Hall once put it, the central question is always: “what does this have to do with everything else?”

For our Kraken theory, this means that its tentacles must stretch near and far and try to reach onto a number of different planes of abstraction. It must zoom in and out (or rather, as I will suggest shortly, “touch” close and distant) and move back and forth between the empirically concrete and particular, its various (“structural”) determinations or mediations, and some (“softer”) sense of the totality. Thus, this type of theory would to some extent bridge the divide between so-called “high” and “low theory.” While generally skeptical of overly generalizing and ungrounded abstraction and of narratives that tend to be too “grand,” it also avoids any fetishization of the small and the local. It remains convinced of the value of “big pictures” and “cognitive mapping,” of the importance of trying to “see it whole,” yet insistently puts such eagle-eye points of view under erasure, emphasizing their inevitable provisionality, particularity and incompleteness, their constructedness, situatedness, their constitutive gaps and exclusions. Kraken theory thus operates beyond both, the modern and the post-modern—neither the majestic, authoritarian grand narratives of the first, nor the playful, relativistic small language games of the latter, but stories, as Haraway, adopting a phrase of James Clifford’s, puts it, which are “big enough”—stories, that is, in which “forces intersect but do not form a whole” and that hence are “able to account for a lot, but not everything—and without guarantees of political virtue.”

To this end, there are further tasks to perform by the myriad arms of our octopus. From the perspective of Kraken theory, a historical moment such as ours is best thought of as a heterogeneous assemblage. It is to be understood in terms of a cultural logic of hybridity. That means that at all times there is a multiplicity of different temporalities, logics, scales, and “social” dimensions to consider simultaneously—for instance, diachronically speaking, the complex interrelations between

developments taking place on the level of the conjuncture (which we may associate with terms like Thatcherism or Merkelism), changes of a “deeper,” perhaps more “epochal” nature (such as the transformations captured by the notion of “new times” discussed earlier), or indeed, with the often radically different time-scales of the non- and more-than-human (e.g. the deep time of rocks or evolution, or the distant and not so distant future of climate change). And at every level, there is complex movement, there are what Raymond Williams called contemporary, residual and emergent tendencies, a “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Ernst Bloch). Because of this, Kraken theory cultivates a principled skepticism vis-à-vis all forms of periodization that follow a totalizing, all-or-nothing logic, according to which either everything is new or nothing at all has changed. Relatedly, synchronically, in sharp opposition to all easy forms of determinism—be it Marxist economism or what has been described as a quasi-idealist culturalism—such an approach would try to pay attention to all the different layers or dimensions that make up “the social,” whether it is politics, economy, and technology, or culture, affectivity, and ecology.

In order to be able to do that, for its multitude of arms, our octopus also requires a multitude of tools. Following thinkers like Foucault and Deleuze, or, more recently, Andreas Reckwitz, this is what, for the Kraken, theories essentially are: toolkits, there to be used. Its orientation is thus a resolutely pragmatic one. As Bruno Latour explained, it is a “question of having the right tools for the right job.” Kraken theory is thus not a closed, pure, friction-free system, but an open, hybrid, and dynamic network. It is itself an assemblage—syncretic, transversal, rhizomatic. It is driven by the Deleuzo-Guattarian logic of “and ... and ... and” not the either/or-definitiveness of the verb “to be.”

Inevitably, this means tensions, even (self-) contradictions—but the Kraken is willing to tolerate, even work with these. Like Haraway’s cyborg, it believes in the need for irony as an ethico-onto-epistemological commitment, which is about “the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.” Afterall, as Haraway points out, “[s]ingle vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed [or -armed] monsters.” Kraken theory is therefore an emphatically “un-disciplined” form of knowledge production. It is too slimy, too multiple, too nomadic; as such, it does not have a place in the current, hierarchical “order” of the humanities and social sciences—not until these are transformed into posthumanities or humusities (Donna Haraway). It is at its core a radically “response-able” mode of thinking; it is not “in dialogue” with many different theories, fields, and sciences—it is that dialogue. Our Kraken is thus also a gifted bricoleur, always busy

with the challenging work of mediation, “translation” and articulation, a work that is driven by curiosity and openness vis-à-vis the new, and one that can never come to an end. And of course, the Kraken is itself multiple. After all, this theoretico-analytical work of mapping I have sketched cannot be carried out by one person alone. It is a decidedly collective and cooperative effort. The Kraken is many—and not a Leviathan, but a multitude. That is to say, this type of intellectual work would also run counter to the long and powerful tradition of (possessive) individualism central to “Western,” capitalist modernity which still fuels present-day neoliberalism and the neoliberal university, and instead—in sync with much contemporary thinking—conceive subjectivity and sociality in relational and processual terms and aim at the production of knowledge as a common. In such knowledge practices, the heroic (academic) Subject would disappear like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

In its place, from the liquid amorphousness of this sea, arises our Kraken. Everything about it is truly revolting, in both senses of the word. The slime, the baseness, the formlessness—while all of this is an affront to modern, humanist sensibilities, squids have recently been identified as the ideal cipher of the posthumanist and non-modern (intellectual as well as material) dynamics of the Post-/Anthropocene or Chthulucene.⁵¹ It all marks Kraken theory as resolutely postanthropocentric, as aimed not just at human but at multi-species survival, and indeed, the survival of the entire ecological web. In fact, in order to avoid not just anthropocentrism and speciesism but also biocentrism and our dominant biontologies, instead of “survival,” let’s speak of “earthly ongoingness” (Donna Haraway). Ongoingness in times of urgencies rather than survival in the face of apocalypse is what this mode of thinking is committed to. Not unlike British cultural studies, which Hall famously characterized as a “political project” more than a mere academic discipline, Kraken theory’s orientation is thus interventionist. Its revolting cephalopodal ontoepistemology links up with the revolt of its cephalopodal politics. The maps it draws up and the stories it tells are also about and for resistance. And here, too, Kraken theory remains committed to multiplicity. If, to appropriate Gramsci’s imagery (though I dislike its militarism), political struggle can be thought as a permanent “war of position,” then our understanding of its many “fronts” or “trenches” probably needs to be broadened even beyond what Gramsci spoke of, to comprise a variety of different levels and forms, some of which are “louder” while others are more “quiet.” This includes what may perhaps be called “representationalist” or “voice”-based (Albert Hirschman) forms of politics—from political parties to trade unions or social movements—as well as those which attack forms of power that are not (primarily)

representational—the politics of affect, infrastructure, matter, and much more. It encompasses the diverse dimensions of struggles for hegemony, the array of forms of micropolitics, as well as the more “imperceptible politics” of “everyday resistance” (James C. Scott) and varieties of withdrawal, desertion, and “escape”—for instance in dissident “forms of life” or “counter-communities”—and sometimes mere (“mere”?) modes of endurance, potentiality, of the otherwise. It means thinking from micro to macro, from the “pre-individual” (Gilbert Simondon) to the systemic, from process to event. Kraken theory thus tries to bypass the old antagonisms of reform vs. revolution, micropolitics vs. political economy, etc. and proceeds from the assumption that political struggle, too, needs to be multiple. And it ultimately casts its lot with all these many forms of resistance which fight for more equal and just ongoingness. Unlike Tennyson’s (with whom it does not have much in common), our Kraken’s sleep is not dreamless—it dreams of a better world.

But it slithers past other dichotomies as well. As mollusks, octopuses certainly cultivate a soft, supple, unarmored kind of thinking. In this vein, while many—for instance, Bruno Latour and several of his critics—have seen what has been termed “strong,” “paranoid” modes of thought on the one hand and “weak,” “reparative” ones on the other as incompatible opposites, Kraken theory rather considers them as endpoints on a continuum and hence as virtually always entangled—sometimes more, sometimes less. It softens or weakens the hard and strong and, in its characteristic pragmatic spirit, refuses having to choose between them, instead emphasizing their role as heuristics that have different affordances. Each, as Felski points out, “does some things well and other things poorly or not at all.” Once again, it is a question of “tool-being” (Graham Harman), of usage and context, of having the right instruments for the right job. We need both, the “de” of critique—deconstruction, demystification, denaturalization, etc.—and the “re” of repair—reassembling, recuperating, restoring, and so forth. By drawing on both, we can go beyond naive optimism as well as cynical pessimism. Though to proceed in this way inevitably throws up tensions and contradictions that need to be dealt with, our analytical arsenal is significantly widened. As the many tentacles of our Kraken simultaneously trace and describe actor-networks and investigate regimes of accumulation, conduct on-the-ground empirical and phenomenological work and theorize the totality, decenter and recompose, negate and affirm, combine close and distant, deep and surface readings, interweave thick and thin descriptions, and so on, a host of other supposedly irreconcilable dichotomies are overcome as well: constructivism vs. realism, discourse vs. matter, nature vs. culture, essentialism vs. anti-essentialism, and more.

A dedicated agent of entanglement and connection, wary of all absolutes, the Kraken feels its way around binary oppositions. As Haraway has pointed out, the word “tentacle” comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, meaning “feeler.” This—touch—not seeing, is the prime sensorial universe of our octopus. Kraken theory, in other words, is committed to alternative ways of knowing which, as María Puig de la Bellacasa puts it, attempt to “esche[w] abstractions and detach- ments that have been associated with dominant epistemologies of knowledge-as-vision” and hence “problematize epistemological distances—between subjects and objects, knowledge and “the world,” and science and politics.” Shunning all “god tricks,” the haptic designates a type of knowledge that is situated, embodied, worldly, that is sensitive to the materiality of thinking, including, crucially, its mattering effects. It is a transformative, “caring thinking,” expres- sive of material interdependence and relationality, and hence marked by (mostly non-bilateral—squids have many arms) reciprocity (being touched by what we touch), accountability, and response-ability. Not so much a theory than a Kraken (con)tactory or contagiory. A bundle of earthly limbs, not the binocular eyes of “sky-gazing Anthropos”—“[m] ay they squirt inky night into the visualizing apparatuses of the tech- noid sky gods.”

Such a theory would also aim at accessibility: Its tentacles would try to reach beyond the walls of the academy and to touch, respond to, and link up with other knowledges and practices in a number of elsewheres, and in ways in which the “public” or “organic intellec- tual” does not appear as the vanguard. Relatedly, it would affect and infuse our educational practices, reorienting them in the direction of a popular, open, critical, collectively empowering pedagogy, one in which the “teacher” is replaced by an “ignorant school-Kraken.”

Finally, while driven by the belief in the survival of theory, by the conviction of its inevitability as a “necessary detour,” this mode of thinking would at the same time cultivate what Hall called the equally necessary “modesty of theory,” a humbleness through which we continue to hold theoretical and political questions in an irresolvable tension and which thus guarantees that, as Hall memorably put it, “theory [does not] let you off the hook.”

Kraken theory is a theory of the third space, of the in-between and beyond, of the excluded middle or, indeed, the excluded continuum, the excluded multiple. It is dedicated to complexity, relationality, and processuality. As such, as we have seen, it is in numerous ways marked by friction, even contradiction. It is a constant balancing act— an octopus dancing on a web of high ropes. Yet, there is little danger of falling, once we lose our fear. The ropes will carry us; we can bounce on them as if on

trampolines. To think with, in, and as multiplicity means to navigate in a network of “checks and balances,” too. Tentare, the root of “tentacle,” also means “to try.” Kraken theory is an emphatically experimental approach. It is not afraid of tensions and it has no fear of failure. After all, as Jack Halberstam has so impressively demonstrated, failure often constitutes an opening to an otherwise.

Octopuses cultivate glitch(ing). Let’s fail well, fail often, and learn how to fail better. Though the type of theorizing I have outlined is obviously not only not ready to hand, but also an incredibly difficult and demanding endeavor—so that my wish list is perhaps somewhat akin to a wishful thinking—in this exploratory manner I believe we can begin to fashion it, as an ongoing process, an unfinished conversation, a collective work-in-progress towards an ever-receding vanishing point.

Ultimately, while certainly not exactly a new Copernican revolution, Kraken theory is an exercise in alien phenomenology (Ian Bogost) or thought—an incitement—and an enticement—to think otherwise, beyond an onto-epistemology based on dualism and clear-cut, self-contained wholes. It sets the otherwise to work in the domain of theory itself, in our very mode of thinking. By provoking us into alternative ways of seeing and being, into new “distributions of the sensible,” novel worldings, its many tentacles encourage us (who?) to think again and anew about questions of survival and ongoingness. Why not follow its invitation to becoming-squid?

Notes

1. This essay has grown out of and is in dialogue with several earlier interventions. Cf. esp. Florian Cord, “Critique, Repair, Escalation: Three Modes of Posthumanist Theorizing,” *Interconnections: Journal of Posthumanism* 1, no. 2 (2022): 1-23 and “In Repair: The Reparative as Theoretical Mode and Structure of Feeling in Times of Crisis. An Outline,” *SubStance* 53, no. 2 (2024): 3-20.

2. John Mowitt, “Offering Theory,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 33, no. 3-4 (2006): 272.

3. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (Penguin Books, 2004), 1.

4. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

5. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

6. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 37.

7. Cf. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (Penguin Books, 2011); Ziauddin Sardar (ed.), *The Postnormal Times Reader* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2019); Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens, *How Everything Can Collapse: A Manual for Our Times* (Polity Press, 2020); Pablo Servigne, Raphaël Stevens, and Gauthier Chapelle, *Another End of the World Is Possible: Living the Collapse (and Not Merely Surviving It)* (Polity Press, 2021); David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (Tim Duggan Books, 2020).

8. John A. Sweeney, "Global Weirding," in *The Postnormal Times Reader*, 204.

9. Ziauddin Sardar, "What Just Happened?," in *The Postnormal Times Reader*, 9.

10. Sardar, "What Just Happened?," 10, emphasis added.

11. Sardar, "What Just Happened?," 11, emphasis added.

12. Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Routledge, 1996), 224.

13. Cf. John Clarke, "A Sense of Loss? Unsettled Attachments in the Current Conjuncture," *New Formations* 96-97 (2019): 136.

14. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers, 1971), 276.

15. In Les Terry, "'Not a Postmodern Nomad': A Conversation with Stuart Hall on Race, Ethnicity and Identity," *Arena Journal* 5 (1995): 67.

16. Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," 224. In this context, it is telling that 2021 indeed saw the publication of a volume with precisely this title: *Post Everything: An Intellectual History of Post-Concepts*, edited by Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen (Manchester University Press, 2021).

17. Cf. Florian Cord, *Posthumanist Cultural Studies: Towards a Toolbox for the Capitalocene* (transcript, forthcoming). The following two paragraphs were written in dialogue with Ronja Waldherr, whom I would like to thank for her contribution.

18. Cf., e.g., John Clarke, "Conjunctures, Crises, and Cultures: Valuing Stuart Hall," *Focaal* 70 (2014): 113-122; Jeremy Gilbert,

Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics (Berg, 2008); Lawrence Grossberg, "Does Cultural Studies Have Futures? Should It? (Or What's the Matter With New York?)," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 1-32; Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Duke University Press, 2010); Lawrence Grossberg, "Wrestling with the Angels of Cultural Studies," in *Stuart Hall: Conversations, Projects and Legacies*, ed. Julian Henriques and David Morley (Goldsmiths Press, 2017), 107-116; Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies in Search of a Method, or Looking for Conjunctural Analysis," *New Formations* 96-97 (2019): 38-68.

19. Quoted in Grossberg, "Does Cultural Studies Have Futures?," 4.

20. Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Red Globe Press, 2013), xv.

21. Moritz Ege, "Konjunktur/Konstellation," in *Theoretische Reflexionen: Perspektiven der Europäischen Ethnologie*, ed. Peter Hinrichs, Martina Röthl, and Manfred Seifert (Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2021), 179.

22. Grossberg, "Cultural Studies in Search of a Method;" Jürgen Kramer, "Policing the Crisis: A Particular Mode of Analysis, Re-Constructed and Emulated," *Coils of the Serpent* 3 (2018): 102-118.

23. Cf. John Clarke, "Stuart Hall and the Theory and Practice of Articulation," *Discourse* 36, no. 2 (2015): 275-286; Jennifer Daryl Slack, "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, 112-127; Jennifer Daryl Slack, "Articulation Theory," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jensen et al. (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect177>.

24. Kramer, "Policing the Crisis," 107 (here referring to Martin Jay). In this context, cf. also Florian Cord, "Soft Totalities: Conjunctural Analysis and/ as Assemblage Analysis," *New Formations* 113 (2024): 51-70.

25. Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, xv.

26. Cf. recently also Eugene Brennan, "Crisis as Method: Politics, Temporality, and Agency," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2024): 231-254.

27. Grossberg, "Cultural Studies in Search of a Method," 39.

28. Cf. Florian Cord, "Dirty, Messy Business: Stuart Hall, Politics and the Political," *Coils of the Serpent* 3 (2018): 27-42.

29. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Duke University Press, 2010), 32.

30. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30-57.

31. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, 270.

32. Karl Marx, "The Grundrisse," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 237.

33. Karl Marx, "Marx on the History of His Opinions (Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy)," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 3.

34. Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, 26.

35. Hall made this comment in his contribution to a plenary panel at the "Cultural Studies Now" conference, held at the University of East London in 2007. A transcript of the panel can be accessed at <http://culturalstudiesresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/ccsrtranscripttalk.doc>.

36. On "low theory," cf. esp. Jack/Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 15-18 or the work of McKenzie Wark.

37. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), esp. 51-54.

38. Alberto Toscano, "Seeing It Whole: Staging Totality in Social Theory and Art," *The Sociological Review* 60, no. S1 (2012): 64-83.

39. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 50, 185n54.

40. James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 8, 201.

41. Andreas Reckwitz, *Das hybride Subjekt: Eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne* (Velbrück, 2006).

42. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

43. Cf. Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," 232.

44. As Vinciane Despret's "Autobiography of an Octopus" explains, for an octopus, "everything is material for playful exploration." Presented with an object (or a concept), "it quickly moves on from the question of what it is dealing with to the consideration of what it can do with the new

thing.” The result is “a constant alternation of dis-appropriation and re-appropriation,” which “liberates things from their essence” (Vinciane Despret, “Autobiografie eines Kraken oder Die Gemeinschaft der Odysseus,” in *Autobiografie eines Kraken und andere Zukunftsgeschichten* [Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2024], 98-99, my trans.). No behaviorism—levers that promise a reward are not activated, but bent.

45. Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 475.

46. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.

47. Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (Norton, 2010), 2190, 2196.

48. In the English language—unlike, e.g., German—the word “Kraken” refers only to the mythical creature, not to the actual octopus. If I am using these terms interchangeably here, it is also to point up Kraken theory’s post-disciplinary and non-Occidocentric acknowledgment and combination of different knowledges, epistemes, and ontologies, beyond the “Western” division between “science” and “myth.” With my remarks on “discipline” and “order,” I am here effectively alluding to Michel Foucault’s well-known lecture *L’ordre du discours*.

49. On the “common” as I understand it here, cf. Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (Pluto Press, 2014), esp. ch. 6.

50. Cf. Georges Bataille, “Formless,” *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31; Ben Woodard, *Slime Dynamics: Generation, Mutation, and the Creep of Life* (Zero Books, 2012). For an earlier, fascinating post-anthropocentric take on the octopus, cf. Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012). More recently, cf. the work of Eugene Thacker, in which “tentacles longer than night” signal the absolutely unhuman and indifferent “world-without-us”: Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (Zero Books, 2015), esp. 150-156. However, cf. also his recent reflections (together with Dominic Pettman) on ‘pathetic facticity’ and the possibility of ‘impersonal intimacy’ between (radically) different creatures (such as human and octopus in the 2020 documentary *My Octopus Teacher*): Dominic Pettman and Eugene Thacker, *Sad Planets* (Polity Press, 2024), 280-290.

51. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 54-55; Roger Luckhurst, "The Weird: A Dis/Orientation," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1054.

52. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2016).

53. Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies."

54. For very helpful endeavors to "update" Gramsci's thinking on hegemony for the present day, cf. Alex Williams, *Political Hegemony and Social Complexity: Mechanisms of Power After Gramsci* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams, *Hegemony Now: How Big Tech and Wall Street Won the World (and How We Win It Back)* (Verso, 2022). On "escape," cf. Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson, and Vassilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the Twenty-First Century* (Pluto Press, 2008). On dissident "forms of life" and "counter-communities," cf. Daniel Loick, *Die Überlegenheit der Unterlegenen: Eine Theorie der Gegengemeinschaften* (Suhrkamp, 2024); Philip Wallmeier, *Rückzug als Widerstand: Dissidente Lebensformen in der globalen Politik* (transcript, 2021). On endurance, cf. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2011); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

55. Here as elsewhere, other "monsters" like King Kong, cyborgs, and zombies are among the Kraken's (un)natural allies. Cf. Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020); Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs;" Florian Cord, "Towards an Insurgent Zombie Collective," *Alienocene* 9 (2021): 1-43.

56. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 8.

57. Here as elsewhere, theories and philosophies associated with the so-called "nonhuman turn" are indispensable resources. Cf. Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

58. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.

59. María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 20. In the present context, cf. esp. the entire third chapter of Puig de la Bellacasa's inspiring study.

60. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-599.

61. In this context, cf. Bernard Stiegler 's play with the French words *penser* (to think) and *panser* (to bandage, to heal, to care for), which Daniel Ross has translated into English as “care-ful thinking” and “thought-ful caring” (Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, ed. Daniel Ross [Open Humanities Press, 2018]). In addition, with a view to the above remarks on Kraken theory's commitment to “ongoingness,” cf. Puig de la Bellacasa's description of (haptic) care as the “fostering of the endurance of objects through time (maintenance against breakdown)” (Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 171).

62. Cf. Sabine Hark, *Gemeinschaft der Ungewählten: Umriss eines politischen Ethos der Kohabitation. Ein Essay* (Suhrkamp, 2021), 38, *passim*.

63. Cf. etymology: Lat. *theo-ria*, speculation, looking at, vs. Lat. *tactus*, touch.

64. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 53, 186n57.

65. Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford University Press, 1991). For stimulating reflections on such a pedagogy, cf. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 6-15.

66. Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” 273.

67. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

68. Cf. Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2020).

69. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).