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# Earthly births

## The messianism of natality in the climate crisis

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The aim of this article is straightforward: to present two clarifications of Hannah Arendt's seasoned political concept of natality and to conclude by positioning this new account of natality within the context of the climate crisis. In many ways, this concluding section, where natality is read as a form of historical emancipation, hinges on the degree to which I succeed in reframing existing conversations around natality. In the first instance I submit an 'earthly reading' of natality before turning to discuss the historical implications of this 're-earthed' natality as enacting a form of weak messianism akin to that of Walter Benjamin. Rethinking natality in this way, I present an account of Arendt's work as always already inclined towards the issues brought to light in the climate crisis. And so, while the forms of emancipation and redemption that I locate in natality may already be commonly read in natal actions, which break spontaneously into the world and recall the originality of appearance, I nevertheless contend that its political implications reach new grounds with the revisions that I offer in the body of my article. By way of conclusion, I join critical Anthropocene theorists in contending with the 'slow violence', 'willed racial blindness' and 'crises of the imagination' that the climate crisis elicits. This is the setting that sits behind my intervention into natality and, in turn, it is this setting that I suggest can be illuminated through the weak messianism of a 're-earthed' natality. Arguing for Arendt's latent consideration of the earth, I hope to expose the ruined fragments of the past that shape the present crisis and gesture towards their radical redemption. If I succeed in showing that natality can be used as a resource to rethink both the prehistory and the present of the climate crisis then I will have achieved a reorientation in thinking about Arendt's politics. Which is merely to say that I will have revealed concerns for the earth as intrinsic to natal actions and, in turn, their appearance as messianic disruptions on the earth. Prompted by the need to think critically about the historical appearance of the climate crisis whilst retaining, at the same time, the injunction to think expansively about future action – that is, as not determined exclusively by the violence of the climate crisis – this article defends a reconsideration of natality as a form of critical historical intervention. Formulating this reconstruction is then 'operationalised' in the concluding section where I invoke its revolutionary force in remapping the history of the climate crisis.

The question that motivates this article is one prompted by the radically destabilising inauguration of the Anthropocene.[1] With the advent of a new geological era, an injunction is made: to rethink the endurance of those concepts central to philosophical reflections on politics. As noted by others, what the declaration of the Anthropocene enjoins is the need to 'recalibrate the cat-

1 Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen reminds us that the 'Anthropocene' serves as an 'umbrella term for the disastrous transgression of ecological safety boundaries by human societies' (2020: 240), which remains under dispute from both scientists and humanities scholars.

egories of political thought', to respond to a moment in which the 'world is in upheaval' and to renew the logic through which the reality of experience, and hence the reality of the Anthropocene, is grasped (Hyvönen 2020: 240; Mann and Wainwright 2017: xi). Taking up this injunction, here I reread the political condition of natality central to the writings of Hannah Arendt, asking what it means to think 'beginning' in a world overwhelmed by endings: extinction, glacier retreat, deforestation and biodiversity loss, to name but a few. Following Arendt's own identification of the injunction to reconsider the human condition 'from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears' following the launching of the Russian satellite Sputnik (1957) and the subsequent suspension of earthly primordiality, here I seek to resituate the political concept of natality from the vantage point of the Anthropocene.[2] No longer poised at the precipice of a new historical age, but already thrust into it; hurled, whether unwillingly or unknowingly, into a geological age the creation and maintenance of which can be attributed to none other than the eponymous Anthropos – us – any notion of 'what was' becomes a form of nostalgic lament.[3] If Heidegger's existential analytic, Dasein, was forced to reckon with the world into which they were 'thrown', a world that they could rightly assume was not of their own making, the inverse task befalls us today: to respond to the Anthropocene, namely to a world and earth that are precisely of human making (Heidegger 2010: 130–6; see also O'Byrne 2010: 23–30; Withy 2011).

As if to demonstrate the uncanniness of this position, the major climate summits of recent years in Copenhagen, Paris, and Kyoto have displayed a consistently underwhelming response from the political institution (see Johl and Duyck 2012). At the same time, the declaration of child activists that 'the house is on fire' falls on largely deaf ears (Thunberg 2019). The rise in a prophetic branch of climatic science has been juxtaposed with a growing mistrust in scientific authority (see Hulme 2009). Beyond the politicisation of science, action to protect the planet has become the playground of eco-fascists and a particular strain of violent biopolitical management (see Chaturvedi and Doyle 2015; Monbiot 2017; Parenti 2011). As if to crystallise the claim that the climate crisis signals a climate *of* crisis in which thoughtlessness reigns, the 'global pause' brought about by the pandemic COVID-19, produced in the troughs of unsustainable livestock practices that fuel the climate crisis, has failed to ignite the question of the underlying causes of either the crisis or its broader symptoms – pandemic included.[4]

2 Arendt 1998: 5. Arendt explores similar questions in the essay 'The conquest of space and the stature of man' (in Arendt 2006b).

3 On the origins of the Anthropocene see Bonneuil and Frezzoz 2017; Davis 2008; Lewis and Maslin 2018. On the geological status of humans, see Wood 2019. While my intention is not to collapse the accountability of individual human actors, I adopt this term in favour of the invitation it enjoins for a collective anthropogenic response. The decision to invoke 'anthropocene' rather than 'capitalocene' is thus motivated by a desire to think into terms of responsibility, read as response-ability, rather than accountability. On response-ability see, Haraway 2016.

4 On the zoonotic origins of COVID-19 linked to the climate crisis, see United Nations Environment Programme and International Livestock Research Institute 2020. On the link between livestock and the climate crisis see Oppenlander 2013.

The aim of this article is thus straightforward: to present two clarifications of Hannah Arendt's political concept of natality that extend its political valence towards the climate crisis in such a way that Arendt's project is not merely applied to this new historical era, but exposed as always already inclined towards those questions raised by its appearance.[5] In many ways, the paper's concluding section, where natality is read as a form of unpredictable historical emancipation, hinges on the degree to which I succeed in reframing existing conversations around natality. In the first instance I submit an 'earthly reading' of natality, building on Arendt's recurrent references to the earth throughout her writing. Central to this section is her claim in *The Life of the Mind* (1978), that 'plurality is the law of the earth', a thesis that becomes meaningful once we recall the ontological boundedness of natality and plurality. Namely, that one depends upon the other for its actualization. The second claim that I submit regarding natality is its capacity to be read through the lens of Walter Benjamin's 'weak messianism'.[6] Without imposing a false theology over Arendt's writing, I suggest that the disruptive force of natality shares Benjamin's messianic potential to 'blast open the continuum of history' and rewrite the present in light of this past-present collision (Benjamin 1999: 254). This productive agonism of a 'syncopated temporality' is central to my argument that what is necessary in the political climate of the Anthropocene is a reconfiguration of the historical narrative that informs the appearance of the present.[7] Moving forward on this twofold rereading of natality, as both earthly and a form of weak messianism, I turn in the article's final section to the limited and racialised histories that coordinate the engagements with Anthropocene and the climate crisis more specifically. Locating natality as an emancipatory force operating in contestation of these racialised limits, I argue for a new understanding of the climate crisis 'shot through with fragments of the past' (*ibid.* p. 462). Pushing at existing efforts to decolonise the Anthropocene, I conclude with an appeal to unpredictability and natal rebeginning (see Davis and Todd 2017).

Locating the redemptive potential of this renewed account of natality in the interrogation it offers into the critical histories or 'prehistories' that are told about the crisis, I submit the final claim that implicit within Arendtian politics, and the politics of natality specifically, is the groundwork to engage the climate crisis.[8] While this hinges in part on the fact that for Arendt histories, and natality as the constitutive ground of history, have the power to give shape to the meaning of phenomenal reality, the central claim that the notion of natality can be read as illuminating the climate crisis relies on that final provocation of Arendt's in *The Life of the Mind* that 'plurality is the law of the earth' (1978: 19). What I thus hope to

5 For a general account of Arendt on natality see Bowen-Moore 1989; Champlin 2013; Totsching 2017.

6 For a discussion of the messianic aspects of Arendt's work see Gottlieb 2003.

7 The notion to a 'syncopated temporality' is made in reference to Anne O'Byrne's reading of natality's temporality, in which the meaning of natal action becomes meaningful after the fact. I use it in a slightly different sense here to refer to the entanglement of past, present, and future in conceptions of the 'now'. See O'Byrne 2010.

8 She describes her historical account of totalitarianism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as performing such a task, see Arendt 1994: 403.

achieve is a rereading of natality in which the earth is positioned as ontologically constitutive of natality. Which is merely to say that I aim to reveal the earth as ontologically constitutive of natal *actions* which appear in turn as unpredictable and messianic disruptions on the earth.

## Natality

At its most straightforward, Arendt's condition of natality signals the radical beginnings of which human beings are capable, a capacity that coincides with their status as beginnings in and of themselves. Arendt writes in frequent reference to St Augustine that 'with the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself' (1998: 177).[9] Yet, even with the emphasis Arendt places on an Augustinian account of beginning, and the apparent simplicity of natality as interchangeable with a notion of original beginning, its exact political valence remains opaque. Biblical references to the birth of Jesus that are employed in her writing to further bolster her claim that the existence of human beings is evidence of their capacity to enact miraculous beginnings are shown by readers of Arendt to be misappropriations.[10] For others, natality persists as Arendt's 'most important, if least understood, contribution to political theory' (Kiess 2016: 40). Thus, even when she writes that natality is 'inherent to all human activities' she stops short of providing a sustained exposition of the term (1998: 9). And yet, natality percolates throughout her work. While it attains to a particular centrality in *The Human Condition* (1958) in which Arendt presents natality alongside the political condition of plurality, her preoccupation with ideas of birth and the power to begin had already emerged in her doctoral thesis (1929) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).[11] Indeed, it was out of the violence of the Nazi regime that natality was realised as a political construct in her writing. She thus writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that 'with each new birth, a new beginning is born into the world, a new world has potentially come into being' (2017: 611).

Without resorting to human birth as framing a political theory of evolutionary difference and eugenicist potential – a move that would in effect recreate the racialised ground of Nazi theory – Arendt saw the moment of birth as providing the groundwork for a political ontology of

9 The line in question from Augustine is, 'initum ut esst homo creates est'.

10 The misappropriation in question is made by Arendt in reference to the Gospels when she describes the anthropogenic miracle of birth as 'unto us a child is born'. Adriana Cavarero is quick to point out this error: 'The citation is suggestive but wrong. The Gospels, which announce with true joy the birth of the child, do not include the phrase "a child has been born unto us," which instead appears in the book of the prophet Isaiah (9:6), where it is translated into the English with the formula "For to us a child is borne" (or, in the King James Bible, where is probably the source of Arendt's citation, "For unto us a child is born")' (Cavarero 2016: 108; see also Kiess 2016: 140).

11 The dissertation was written in 1929 while Arendt was a student in Heidelberg. She kept a copy of the text with her as she fled Europe and eventually revised it in the 1960s in anticipation of a 1964–5 publication date. The manuscript remained unpublished, however, until 1996. Unlike Arendt's later writings, which can be credited with a certain directness, the dissertation is awkward and dense. Even with Arendt's 1960s revisions, it remains a challenging read. The revised English translation is accompanied by an illuminating interpretive essay that situates Arendt's later work in reference to the themes of love, Augustine and theology explored in the dissertation. See Scott and Stark 1996.

disruption and relationality that would be capable of responding to and resisting the violence of totalitarianism. She thus confronted totalitarianism in which the need to recover a 'new law of human dignity *on earth*', was made explicit through an ontology of political beginning, central to which is the contingent political condition of plurality (Arendt 2017: xi). Not only did the Nazi regime impose an ideological order of systematic murder in the world, it deemed itself 'ordained to reorder the conditions for earthly appearance' (Arendt 2006a: 279.) That is not then to say that the biological or biopolitical does not arise in Arendt's writing. Miguel Vatter asks quite rightly, 'if Arendt's political thought is so "anti-biological," then why does she root human freedom in birth?' A question he follows up on by writing that 'unless one comes to terms with this paradox, the sense of Arendt's political thought will remain unclear' (2006: 138). Reconciling this paradox does not, however, become synonymous with an emancipated biopolitics in which the necropolitical dimension of the biopolitical is reordered to expose an as yet uncovered political potential.

Greater clarity regarding the connection between earth and natality can be found by turning to plurality. Not only does Arendt come to the position that 'plurality is the law of the earth' in her final work, she persists throughout her writing in locating political beginning and individual difference out of the fact of human earthliness. She thus writes in the opening section to the essay 'Introduction *into* Politics' that 'politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man,* but *men* are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature' (Arendt 2005: 93). Recalling an ontology of original difference, it becomes possible to see the earth not as an essentialising ground but as the gravitational pull that informs the commonalty of politics. If we return to her discussion of plurality in *The Human Condition* this point can be made more emphatically. However, here I turn not to the definition typically taken from the book, namely, that 'plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (Arendt 1998: 8) but to the one offered on the previous page. With this definition the 'earthliness' of both natality and plurality emerges. She writes, 'action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, *to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world*' (*ibid.* p. 7, emphasis added). Importantly, she is *not* saying that the earth is determinative of human being, rather that it precedes and thus informs not only the fact of human difference – plurality – but is inscribed in those acts that attest to plurality, namely natality. Indeed, it is by virtue of the earth, which cannot be, to continue the confusion of Carl Schmitt, divided and recentred in relation to Europe, that plurality assumes political meaning (Schmitt 2003: 86). When Judith Butler locates a politics for cohabitation in Arendt's writing she finds it in reference to her discussion of the earth, arguing that it is precisely the 'unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation' of life on the earth that serves 'as the basis of our obligation not to destroy any part of the human population or make lives unliveable' (Butler 2012: 24). If Butler is correct, that prefigured within accounts of cohabitation is the earth, then so too is the earth prefigured within the actions that constitute cohabitation, that is to say, natality and the original drive to self-disclosure and co-being.

With just these cursory remarks, it is possible to trace the lines connecting natality and plurality, and hence politics itself, to the earth not only as a space of original experience but as an emergent ontological site. Moving beyond what is now perhaps an overly quoted, though under interrogated, line from the prologue to *The Human Condition* that the earth is 'very quintessence of the human condition', it is clear that the earth occupies a central space in Arendt's writing (Arendt 1998: 2). As already referenced, the status of earth assumed a critical urgency for Arendt during the twentieth century space race.[12] The push to leave the earth and assume a 'universe-dwelling position' struck Arendt as a political question of the 'first order' and prompted her to begin an inquiry into the 'stature of human being on earth' (*ibid.* p. 3). It was this turn to the status of the earth in her reflections on human being that led Arendt to follow Heidegger in clarifying the distinction between earth and world. And while I won't explore the full implications of Arendt's reflections on space travel here, I note them as further evidence of Arendt's preoccupation with the 'earthly placedness' of human beings.[13] Rather, my interest in Arendt's reflections on the status of the earth during the space race is motivated by the resolution it provides regarding the risk I take in reading natality into dangerously essentialist ground. Turning again to *The Human Condition,* where we learn that 'in addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions…' serves as the groundwork for this resolution (*ibid.* p. 9). In tension with the earth is thus an understanding of the world as a space of human construction.[14] What we thus see in her writing is the negation of a liminal and reductive account of the earth, as imposing exclusively material conditions for existence. Instead, by bringing earth and world together in a co-constitutive relation: the earth becoming earthly through the disclosure of original human worlds, Arendt establishes an ontological relationality between earth and world. To develop an understanding of natality and plurality in terms of their appearance in the world, the earth is thus viewed in excess of the biological limits it sets out. Beyond establishing the conditions for mere survival, the earth discloses the space out of which worlds of human meaning will be built.[15]

Where the earth thus exists as one of the ontological conditions preceding the political condition of natality, it is via acts of natality, namely action itself, that the world becomes meaningful. Arendt puts this point in stark terms, claiming that a life without speech and action – the preeminent modes of action – is 'literally dead to the world' (Arendt 1998: 176). Indeed, prefigured within the original act of natality, the affirmation of the potential to act, namely the child at the moment of birth, a

12 Other than her references to space travel in *The Human Condition* see Arendt 1963 and 'The conquest of space and the stature of man' in Arendt 2006b.

13 For further discussion of this question and a detailed response to the earth–world distinction in Arendt's writing see Oliver 2015: 71–110; Yaqoob 2014.

14 For a more extended discussion on the theories of earth-world relations in the context of the climate crisis see Malm 2018: 21–44.

15 Arendt makes a lot more of this generative agonism, arguing that through the world, the creation of artificial, man-made things, the earth becomes 'home' in a proper sense. Oliver puts Arendt's point succinctly, writing that 'the world is what makes the earth a home for human beings' (Oliver 2015: 74).

*new* world is foreshadowed. To forgo disclosure of this world is to go against the human desire of original worldly disclosure.[16] To assume what Arendt calls a properly human life is to enact the worldly disruption that the appearance of the child evidences. For while irreducible to mere materiality, the earth persists for Arendt in a state of cyclical movement. Hence, it is only through the realisation of worlds that the earth is set forth in extension of nature and natural cycles. She writes in 'The concept of history' that the biological life of the universe, 'if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order' (2006b: 42). The cyclical rhythm of this order is broken up by the appearance of the disruptive child, who, in departing from its logic, is propelled across history in an original 'rectilinear line'. By virtue of this latter mode of living, 'instances, deeds and events' interrupt the circular movement of biological life. It is these interruptions that are, for Arendt, the subject matter of history.

Towards the end of her chapter on action in *The Human Condition,* Arendt develops these contrasting images of nature's cyclical order and the rectilinear movement of history in a manner that attains to a language of messianism. On the appearance of human beings out of the natural, cyclical order she writes:

> The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin (Arendt 1998: 246).

Prescribed at the moment of birth and enacted via that second birth, in which 'we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance,' natality constitutes a disruption to worldly order, which might otherwise have followed that cyclicity of an unworldly earth (Arendt 1998: 176–7). Working against these twofold circular states – the cyclical order of nature and the species cycle of human beings from birth through to death – is the appearance of the self as a natal being, who in taking up the charge of both worldly *and* earthly being, realises the disruptive force inscribed at the moment of birth. Here, we recall St Augustine, that humans are a beginning in themselves. Where natality resists pure conservation through the disclosure of new worlds, it acts against the logic of linear historical progression.[17] Working against conservation, acts of natality affirm the unpredictability of the new, in so doing they disclose what I want to argue are traces of Benjamin's weak messianism.

## Benjamin's weak messianism

Walter Benjamin's account of weak messianism is developed throughout his writing, however, it attains to a specific clarity in the essay 'On the concept of history'

16 Arendt develops this point through *The Life of the Mind.*

17 According to John Kiess, '… Arendt makes clear that the role of newcomers is not limited to conservation. The world's endurance is also contingent upon their resolve "to intervene, to alter, to create what is new" (2006: 192). For Arendt, the opportunity to undertake something new is what we conserve the world for, and it is this capacity for new beginnings, the action that takes place within the world, that in turn contributes to the world's renewal' (Kiess 2016: 139).

(1940). Having already established himself at a clear distance from other theological accounts of messianism, the theses developed throughout the essay make the revolutionary and secular politics of the notion explicit.[18] Central to Benjamin's interpretation of messianism was the dislocation of redemption from a theistic encounter to the revolutionary ground of anti-fascism and capitalist critique. Hence, redemption as the overcoming of the oppressed over the violence of a fascist or oppressive regime. Benjamin develops this language of oppression throughout 'On the concept of history', describing messianism in terms of the historical materialist who wrests history away from conformism; fighting for the oppressed against the oppressor. Developed from a Marxist and anti-capitalist critique of oppressive power, Benjamin's project builds on that already described by Marx in terms of an intergenerational weight born from the past into the present. Where Marx writes, 'the tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living' (Marx 1992: 14) we hear Benjamin respond, 'Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim' (Benjamin 1999: 246, italics in original). Marx goes onto describe the task of the living as 'engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them' (Marx 1992: 14). Benjamin, in turn, locates revolutionary transformation in the new beginnings inaugurated by messianism as the living grasp hold of the 'flashes' or spectres of past generations.

Marx's entanglement of history is thus central to Benjamin's own project in terms of the tradition of oppressive conformity that reigns over the present and the present which resists the force of history through historical redemption. Picking up on Benjamin's imagery, David Kaufmann describes weak messianism in terms of a suspension of 'the horrific train of "progress" by redeeming (and therefore fulfilling) the hopes of the past. Thus, the hopes and desires of the downtrodden serve as incomplete figures of redemption', their emancipation entwined with the revolution in the present (Kaufmann 2001: 172). The train of progress that Kaufmann sees is described by Benjamin as the 'storm of progress', which blows from paradise, pulling the present into the future.[19] It is in opposition to this historical tempest that weak messianism is redeemed, disrupting the progress of its movement.[20] The object of messianic redemption, whilst existing in 'the past' is thus always charged with the 'now-time' of messianic disruption. Hence, Benjamin's appeal for a present shot through with messianic time.[21]

Benjamin's project of complicating the

18 What Benjamin understands as theology is distinct from many of his contemporaries, particularly Gershom Scholem who is writing on messianism at a similar time. See de Wilde 2011; Kaufmann 2001; Löwy 2005; Rabinbach 1997; Richter 2016; Scholem 1995.

19 See Löwy 2005: 66 for a brief discussion of Benjamin's word choice.

20 The question of law and its suspension is central to Giorgio Agamben's rereading of Benjamin's weak messianism. See Agamben 1999: 160–76.

21 For a discussion on the critical valence of thinking temporality in terms of 'now-time' see McFarland 2013.

linearity of history is shared by Arendt, who, if we only recall her refrain to the 'rectilinear' appearance of human life which cuts through and interrupts historical flows, is equally preoccupied by the disruptive appearance of human singularities. There is an injunction in the third of Benjamin's theses in 'On the concept of history' that seems to pre-empt the potential Arendt locates in natality, namely that 'only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has the past become citable in all its moments' (Benjamin 1999: 246). Benjamin goes onto write that the injunction is fulfilled by virtue of the historical materialist, who acts into history and recovers those moments pushed to the periphery of history. The overlap with the responsibility Arendt describes at the end of the essay 'The crisis in education' to save the world from ruin and 'prepare [children] for the task of renewing a common world', can be seen as recasting Benjamin's claim to a historical or generational entanglement (Arendt 2006b: 193).

Connections of this sort are made all the more explicit in sections from Benjamin's unfinished *magnum opus, The Arcades Project,* in particular convolute N, 'On the theory of knowledge, theory of progress'. Here, he grounds the link between a hermeneutic of the past and the establishment of the future, that passages such as those from 'The crisis in education' seem to rely upon. Namely, that comprehension of the present as a space of potential is only made possible via inquiries into the past and the recovery of those experiences that have been silenced by the force of history's onward flow. The shape of the present that emerges as the product of this material, or alternately messianic, intervention into history is one that acts in acknowledgement of this past. Foreshadowing where this article will lead, Jason W. Moore invokes such an account of the past when he appeals for a narrative of the climate crisis that is an 'uncomfortable story with uncomfortable facts' (Moore 2016: 595). Moore's invocation is pitted against the spectacular history of petrochemicals, atom bombs, coal and energy transformation that typically form the prelude to explanations for the climate crisis.[22] Donna Haraway elicits a similar appeal that 'we *must* change the story [of the climate crisis], the story *must* change' (2016: 40). Each of these petitions work in advance of laments such as that of Amitav Ghosh that we live in a 'time of concealment', unable even to imagine the climate crisis (2016). With this need to rethink the history of the climate crisis and the emergent messianism of Benjamin, I want to turn now to think the messianism of a 're-earthed' natality.

## Weak messianism of natality

The connections between Benjamin's account of weak messianism and natality reveal themselves first and foremost in their shared emphasis on an original and unpredictable beginning. Where Benjamin heralds a form of revolutionary messianism aimed at the redemption of history rather than theistic absolution in the future, Arendt posits humans as beginnings in themselves. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb makes the connection between natality and messianism explicit, claiming that 'where Benjamin

22 Moore echoes this sentiment later on in his essay. 'While there is no question that environmental change accelerated sharply after 1850, and especially after 1945, it seems equally fruitless to explain these transformations without identifying how they fit into patterns of power, capital and nature established some four centuries earlier' (2016: 596).

speaks of a "*weak* messianic force," Arendt develops an account of the *vita activa* that organizes itself around the weak redemptive power of action – weak because action, for all its redemptive potential, is precisely not sovereign strength' (Gottlieb 2003: 22). Beyond the densely messianic language of natality, 'the miracle that saves the world … in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted', it is Arendt's emphasis on the syncopated temporality of action, that it involves past, present, and future that recalls Benjamin's original messianic project (Arendt 1998: 246). Even where Gottlieb goes as far as to claim that *The Human Condition* 'belongs to the tradition of Jewish messianic thought', it is this synonymy between the being of human being and beginning that really grounds the connection between messianism and natality (2003: 139). Gottlieb pushes at this point, arguing that as Arendt 'replaces Benjamin's vague word *generation* (*Geschlecht*) with the technical term *natality*, [she] goes one step further than her friend in constructing an account of "the human condition" according to models of thought developed within the parameters of Jewish messianic traditions' (*ibid.* p. 139). And so, even where Gottlieb refers to Arendt's messianism as 'inconspicuous' – Arendt herself never uses the word messianic in relation to natality or action – the broader schematic of a weak messianic intervention that Benjamin develops contra theistic messianism is interpolated throughout Arendt's political condition of natality.

Without explicitly enjoining a messianic figure, even in terms of Benjamin's weak messianism, Arendt is able to retain the currents of secular redemption and emancipatory potential that were so central to Benjamin's iteration of the messianic. Indeed, the messianism of Arendt's ideas assumes a singular force if we return to the historical context out of which her writing and political theses first emerged. When she first wrote about the miracle that saves the world from ruin in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* she was a stateless person only six years after the war's end.[23] In the preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* she counters both the restorative and religious messianism of Gershom Scholem ('We no longer hope for an eventual restoration of the old world order with all its traditions') and ideas of a faux-cosmopolitanism ('or for the reintegration of the masses of five continents') with an appeal for absolute newness (Arendt 2017: ix). And yet, she seeks a 'new law on earth' only through 'the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be' (*ibid.* p. x). Beginning in the world, enacting a miracle out of the ruin of European totalitarianism then emerges precisely as a form of worldly redemption. Gottlieb thus describes 'the catastrophic events of the twentieth century' as showing Arendt 'how thoroughly the connection between responsibility and history could be severed' leading her to undertake the unpredictable task of responding, namely of acting anew into history (2003: 1).

As the condition for action not only does natality then signal a disruption in the long unfolding of the catastrophe, it presents the possibility of re-imagining the role of the past in the present. As Arendt writes in *The Life of the Mind,* the appearance one makes in the world, the disclosure of the self

23 Arendt lived as a stateless person for 18 years. She arrived in New York City in 1941, but it was another ten years until she received American citizenship. See Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's biography *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (2004) for a comprehensive account of Arendt's time in exile.

through natality is a 'primordial event' that marks out time (Arendt 1978: 20). Here, she draws on William Faulkner, citing that 'the past is never dead, it is not even past' precisely because disruptions, whether natal or messianic – although here we can begin to think of these terms almost interchangeably – can be made on the claim of history's onward flow. What is clear is that like Benjamin, Arendt holds onto a form of action that can act into the past and remake the present shot through with messianic time. While there isn't space to explore the temporal dimensions of natality here, both Peg Birmingham (2006, 2007) and Anne O'Byrne (2010) have made the connection between natality and history explicit. Birmingham through her anti-teleological account of natality as an 'an-archic event' and O'Byrne's Heideggerian reading of natality through the idea of 'thrownness'. It is sufficient, however, to recall once again the haunts of Augustine: 'that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody'. A disruption is posed to history with the very appearance of humans, the arrival of whom signals a new beginning.

And yet while every human appearance on the earth signals a redemptive potential of this form, Arendt is cautious not to reduce human action to this one appearance. Hence, the introduction of the 'second birth', the moment at which 'with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world … in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance' (Arendt 1998: 176). In other words, the mere fact of being born is insufficient to the task of natality; only in action, the 'second birth', is the potential and the politics of natality realised. What is thus inscribed in natality is the latent potentiality of original action. In her final work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt locates a critical awareness of this potential in the will, the temperament that inclines the natal subject to action. In this respect, she writes, 'Man [*sic*] is put into a world of change and movement as a new beginning', the affirmation of which (the second birth or self-disclosure through action) reifies the movement of the world. When Arendt then writes that natality 'creates the conditions for remembrance, that is, for history' she begins to explore the way in which beginning responds to the givenness of the world as an original historical act (Arendt 1998: 9). While natality as coeval with birth signifies utter newness, the second birth acts in accordance with the historical context of its appearance, it thus attests to both the unpredictable newness intrinsic to natality and what is manifestly given in the world. And so, without reducing the scene of birth to messianism, a viable claim can be made regarding the disruption of Benjamin's weak messianism as intrinsic to the *second birth*; namely, the actions that attest to natality.

## Messianism of the Anthropocene

In the previous sections of this article I have sought to reposition natality, and with it those natal actions that spring forth from the beginnings that humans are, in light of the earth and the weak messianism of Walter Benjamin. In so doing, I have begun to expose dimensions of natality that incline it towards the destabilising world of the Anthropocene, in which notions of beginning and assurances of the earth as the primordial ground of experience recede from common view. In what follows I seek to 'operationalise' this earthly account of natal messianism, recasting natality as a political condition not simply in relation to the ontological (and earthly) ground of action, but as capable of reorienting the way in which the climate crisis is understood

within the broader narrative schematic of the Anthropocene. Central to this reorientation is the retrieval of a further condition of Arendtian action: unpredictability.

In spite of its intrinsic instability, it is via unpredictability that Arendt is able to outline the covenant of promising that holds together the political community in which natality and plurality appear. Rather than a tenet of action to be overcome, unpredictability is thus what motivates the continuation of politics as a common project. In other words, precisely because action is unpredictable the question of politics cannot be 'solved' or subsumed to an eschatological project, but remains a perpetual agonistic problematic. Indeed, when Arendt first introduces natality and plurality in extrapolation of the birth scene in which mother and child are present as original members of a plurality, she relies upon the unpredictable world disclosed by the child to the mother to highlight the degree to which the meeting of plural actors cannot be predicted in advance. In extension to mere originality and difference we thus have an account of action the very appearance of which is unpredictable, produced in the unpredictable encounter of two or more unpredictable actors. What unpredictability then attests to is the novelty of natality and the singularity of plurality. In the chapter entitled 'Action' she writes that the 'unpredictability of [an action's] outcome is closely related to the revelatory character of action and speech, in which one discloses one's self without ever either knowing himself or being able to calculate' (Arendt 1998: 192). Unpredictability thus appears twice over in action: once in terms of the conditions of its appearance and once again in terms of its unpredictable ends. Resonant here is the syncopated temporality of natality that O'Byrne outlines, where the meaning of action becomes clear only after its performance, a dislocation in time that further alienates prediction from the temporal specificity of action (2010: 95). To act, even in pursuit of a predetermined goal is to unleash something unpredictable into the world, the meaning of which – even what might be read retrospectively as its predictable end – can only be gleaned after a matter of time.

Knowing that unpredictability is not without its own set of particular dangers is remedied by Arendt through an appeal to forgiveness. Rather than an act of pardoning and forgetting, Arendt provides an account of forgiveness that stops the onward progression of the past and the consequences inherent to a past act. Where promising thus assumes political presence as the covenant of mutual action, forgiveness insures that in spite of the unpredictability of action, the consequences generated do not have to become definitive of the present. Forgiveness and promising thus work in tandem to restore faith in the asynchronous temporality of action, creating a paradigm in which the unpredictability of action does not assume a totalising reign over history.

In this final section as I work towards an Arendtian politics of the Anthropocene, the uncanny pairing of unpredictability and predictability is a central problematic. For it is indeed the case, that in the present history of the climate crisis, matters of unpredictability and predictability seemingly coincide. On the one hand, 'freak' weather events appear out of nowhere, forcing communities to suddenly comprehend the extremity of the natural world; on the other hand, images abound of the apocalypse to come, the prophetic fate of climatic futures seemingly foretold as infographics. In both these instances, however, a further question of the predictable arises, one that makes stark the influence of historical

narratives to coordinate understandings of reality. What gives certain communities the confidence to disregard the reality of the climate crisis while others, such as the island nation of Kiribati are forced to reckon with rising sea levels that pose worryingly existential threats (Bayes 2018; Vaha 2015; UNHCR 2016), can be illuminated through Benjamin's declarative reading of the present as a 'state of emergency'. Hinged upon the normalisation of violent exposure and the subsumption of experience to oppression, the state of emergency captures the force of Benjamin's historical narrative, which left unchecked invades and conquers the present. What a reading of the Anthropocene within the schematic bounds of Benjamin's state of emergency or limited historicism makes clear is the need to reconcile the supposed unpredictability of the present with the currents of prediction that run throughout it.

If the state of emergency signals the normalisation of oppression, the question of emancipating those oppressed under it requires a more critical look at the historiography that maintains the emergency. It is here that I wager an answer can be found in the limited perspectives that coordinate the history of the Anthropocene. Problematising the 'we' who are seemingly ordained to write history, a history which then becomes determinative of the lens through which the present is engaged, is instrumental to the overcoming of Benjamin's limited present of emergency. The inclination to locate the inaugural moments of the Anthropocene in the 1800 Industrial Revolution is favoured by social scientists (Malm 2016; Moore 2016), not least because it offers a path to salvation coordinated around an inversion – though not a negation – of technology, structured this time around the initial expansion of green energy and culminating in the claim to total human sovereignty in acts of geo-engineering. In other words, by locating the 'problem' of the Anthropocene in the mess of technology, 'solving' this problem becomes a matter of changing, adapting and improving technology. And yet, as Kathryn Yusoff tells us 'this is the tale of entrepreneurship of a few white men transforming the world with the ingenious creations or of a political economy that is aggressively sutured to the earth's processes via the lifeblood of fossil fuels' (Yusoff 2018: 39). Relocating the history of the planet within the confines of the European project, the experience of the non-European – or the one deemed external to the European narrative – is not only denied access to the history book of planet earth; their presence is rendered obsolete to what is essential to earthly existence today. Developing a critical account of the Anthropocene's history, where the actors both in terms of those who suffered under its inauguration and those who inflicted suffering assume presence, is thus essential to the project of developing an impartial history of its appearance.

If we return to Benjamin's project of historical materialism, what is contingent to the messianic moment, indeed what he outlines in the third thesis of 'On the concept of history' in terms of a historical Judgment Day, is the redemption of humankind whose 'past has become citable in all its moments' (Benjamin 1999: 246). In other words, it is only by engaging the history of humanity with impartiality that the conditions contingent to the realisation of the messianic assume form. We can then extend this to the rereading of Arendt's messianism: namely, that if natality is going to construct the conditions of historical remembrance, conditions which simultaneously act in concert with 'plurality as the law of the earth', an impartial account of history is necessary.

The question posed to both Benjamin and Arendt then pertains to those moments that might precipitate Judgment Day in the era of the Anthropocene. What questions might be asked that would allow the fullness of Anthropocene history to become citable such that judgment of past, present, and future might be possible? Yusoff offers a compelling answer, noting that while the effects of capitalism cast during the Industrial Revolution 'undoubtedly transformed the atmosphere with the production of greenhouse gases (GHGs) through the burning vast quantities of coal, the creation of another kind of weather had already established its salient forms in the mine and on the plantation' (Yusoff 2018: 40). Yusoff would have us think of the bodies and land exploited in order that there were an Industrial Revolution. What she thus offers is a critical *prehistory* to the history told of the Anthropocene. In this way, she responds to Jason Moore's injunctions that what is needed is an uncomfortable story with uncomfortable facts. Indeed, Yusoff challenges the racialised lens through which the Anthropocene has been read in disconnection to the violence preceding not only the Industrial Revolution hypothesis but other claims that date the Anthropocene to the atomic age, arguing that 'each moment of the proposed origin stories of the Anthropocene is a colonial displacement' (*ibid.* p. 60). The title of Yusoff's book, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None,* forms part of the testimony of resistance to these histories of limited perspectivism, enjoining a future in which a redeemed humankind will move forward in dialogue with those 'voided' by history and denied access to the present. To engage Benjamin and Arendt in the development of a critical and emancipatory politics of the Anthropocene must then attend to those 'voids' or fractures to the impartiality of Anthropocene history.

Indeed, the notion of a 'void' or the 'voidings' of history emerge in Yusoff's work evocative of the marginalisation of the oppressed in Benjamin's reflections on the status of history. The moments of erasure that Yusoff identifies in the unspoken histories of black and brown bodies pushed to the periphery of history's onward flow resound as those figures Benjamin's historical materialist seeks to recover. When Benjamin describes the class struggle of the oppressed who have a 'retroactive force and will constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers' he can be heard as speaking to the joy-filled battles of indigenous activists asserting claims to sovereignty and environmental justice over and against corporate lobbying and occupying states (Benjamin 1999: 246). When protestors at Standing Rock stand against police brutality and the construction of a 1,172 mile-long oil pipeline that cuts through unceded indigenous territory of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, mobilising their resistance through music, they are joined by Canadian resistance group Idle No More and the young people's environmental movement Sunrise. Each fighting ecological injustice with solidarity and something that might be understood in terms of Arendt's *amor mundi,* an expressive love for the world, their fight is one that finds strength in allyship. While the call to 'decolonize the Anthropocene' has already been sounded by many working at the intersection of environmental justice, decolonialism and indigeneity (Birch 2016; Davis and Todd 2017; Estes 2019; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Weizman and Sheikh 2015), I want to spend a few moments amplifying the voices of the oppressed dispelled by narratives of the climate crisis and draw them into a renewed plurality in which a messianism of earthly natality might be possible.

The hypothesis linking the Anthropocene to the violence of settler colonialism is advanced by geologists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin (2018). Dating the Anthropocene to 1610, the first recorded dip in atmospheric carbon dioxide, brought about by the death of over 50 million indigenous peoples in North America, Lewis and Maslin provide a stark account of the violence out of which the current crisis is cast. The force that they ascribe this moment puts into sharp relief Patrick Wolfe's poignant remark that colonialism is an invasion 'come to stay' (1999: 2). As Lewis and Maslin write in their book, *The Human Planet: How we Created the Anthropocene*, 'In narrative terms, the Anthropocene began with widespread colonialism and slavery: it is a story of how people treat the environment and how people treat each other' (Lewis and Maslin 2018: 13). Building upon this declarative stake into history, which draws the violence of fifteenth-century settler colonialism into the present, they shine a new light on the historical entanglement that Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) identifies in the 'now' of the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty's use of the notion of entanglement was originally used to describe the way in which a plurality of humankind is brought together by the climate crisis, specifically in regard to – or in spite of – their disparate connections to capitalism. His use of entanglement was thus aimed at exposing the insufficiency of capitalist critique to engage the 'now' of the climate crisis. He describes the limits of these critiques as failing to give 'an adequate hold on human history once we accept that the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism, or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations' (2009: 212). In many ways, Chakrabarty's engagement with the Anthropocene can be heard as speaking back to Frederic Jameson's great lament that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Conversely, the historical entanglement that Lewis and Maslin uncover exposes the asymmetry of Anthropocene history and an intergenerational entanglement that spans across time and space. Where Chakrabarty seemingly remains bound by a temporal limitation, whether or not the endurance of a capitalist critique is sufficient to a planetary problematic, Lewis and Maslin effectively restage the conditions under consideration. Drawing upon the spatial dimensions of capital and the way in which systems of power have been inscribed upon the earth, they move to consider the racialised lines literally etched into the earth upon which the Anthropocene assumes form as a historical category (Lewis and Maslin 2015: 177). With Lewis and Maslin's hypothesis, what is then made apparent is that not only is the Anthropocene a product of oppression but that it maintains a claim to oppression insofar as intrinsic to its historical ontology is the continued displacement of oppressed voices. The Anthropocene is thus not a new instance of indigenous dispossession, it is evidence of a sustained tradition – a normalisation – of colonial occupation and indigenous exploitation, marking every encounter with the Anthropocene as precisely an encounter with the normalised limits of racial history that sustain it. The battle over the Dakota Access Pipeline, for instance, is described by those engaged as a 'struggle over ancestral lands wrongly stolen through violence and guile. Reclaiming that land is both an assertion of indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice' (Curley 2019). Emphatically, it is about 'more than stopping a pipeline' (Estes 2019: 2). What statements like this attest to is the need to rethink the conditions of

history's appearance in the present, particularly when that appearance has a structural hold over the lives of those who occupy the present. Here, we might rightly ask whether the connection that Maslin and Lewis spell out, one that is further emboldened by the living testimony of those oppressed by the Anthropocene, constitutes the flash that Benjamin positioned both prior and contingent to the intervention of the weak messiah.

Yusoff's project provides further support of this claim, linking a critical prehistory of the Anthropocene with intergenerational dialogues. Realising the claim that Benjamin described past generations possessing over the present, Yusoff develops an account of the 'afterlife' of colonialism that is present in lived experience of colonial structures like the Anthropocene. Put otherwise, Yusoff's prehistory operates in dialogue with Christina Sharpe's appeal to theorise 'in the wake' (2014: 60). Reminiscent once again of Benjamin's depiction of weak messianism as endowed on *each generation,* Sharpe's appeal to wakes as spaces where the dead assume presence and the question of who is allowed to live and die emerges as a central problematic. When Saidiya Hartman tells us that we live the 'afterlife of slavery', in a world hinged upon the once categorisation of human life into the superfluous and those entitled to determine superfluousness, she pre-empts Sharpe's position, one that Yusoff further clarifies in terms of the 'afterlife' that is the Anthropocene. Sharing a concern for the need to decolonise practices of history, Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos argue that 'to the *thanatology* of facts that the white historian typically practices we must counter-pose the living force of history, the defiant being of the occupied that frames these facts and gives them their significance' (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014: 23). What must then be counter-posed to the force of the Anthropocene that unfolds along the racialised fissures of willed ignorance and racial blindness is a project of defiance, one that is irreducible to eschatological ends. Parsing Benjamin, what must be heralded is a moment of weak messianism, not the redemption of humankind from without, but a secular messianic change on earth, a miracle enacted by virtue of being human.

What can be felt throughout these moves towards a historical dialectic of intergenerational plurality is the injunction to rethink the conditions of historical (re)beginning. It is here that the pertinence of natality is clear. For more than simply the need to rethink the historical conditions that precede beginning as such, a return to natality and the unpredictability intrinsic to new beginnings reminds us of the conditions intrinsic to natality itself. Namely, that it is not the declaration of mere beginning but the *disclosure* of beginning from the meeting of plural and asymmetrical actors, the dependent child and the exposed mother. In turn, natality reaffirms the enduring presence of the earth in human life, natality in effect *is* because it is earthly. It is disruptive because it disrupts the earth, it is worldly because it moves against the earth and in its appearance reaffirms that plurality is not only the law of human difference and the groundwork for engaging cohabitation, but plurality is the law of the earth. To thus engage in an Arendtian politics is to engage in a politics of the Anthropocene. Returning to the third natal condition of unpredictability, to act in the Anthropocene is to resist the forces of predictive historicism that persist in colonial subjugation, not through the instrumentalization of indigeneity or decolonial practice, but through the embrace of the unpredictable new beginning that

coincides with the redemption of humanity. Engaging natality in this way, such that interventions into the Anthropocene converge with a redeemed humanity, citable in the fullness of its history and inclined towards an unknown future, unpredictable beginnings may assume political force again. ■

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