Performing the Posthuman: An Essay in Three Acts

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STEFANIE FISHEL, OCT 15 2017

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Setting the Scene

The posthuman is defined by its conceptual complexity. It is not quite a temporal creation of what will come after the human, but is often thought of in the future tense. What will *homo sapiens* become *next*? Alternatively, the posthuman, like postmodernity, often overlaps with the modern and the pre-modern. The posthuman can be located in the ethical writings of Spinoza (Braidotti 2013), Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan (Shapin and Schaffer 1985), and Mary Shelley's Creature (Carretaro-Gonzalez 2016). The posthuman can be the 'more-than-human' (Massumi 2014) or an ethical understanding of a subject that can traverse worlds, both human and nonhuman (Braidotti 2013; Mitchell 2014).

In theorising the posthuman, we return to the world of the nonhuman animal or rethink biopolitics writ large as a 'displacement of the subject' (Parikka 2015). Thinking the posthuman is part of a tradition that knows that any theories of subjectivity must include the embodied nature of what we then name 'subjects' (Braidotti 2006). It questions the divisions we have created between these subjects and objects, the human and animal. While it is not always a biological entity or an evolution of the human animal, it is entangled with both natural and technological systems. As a cyborg, the posthuman can redefine our relationship to nature (Haraway 1991) or be the sum of human fears that our technology will overcome and control us.[1] The Terminator is at the top of the list for favourite movie hero and villain simultaneously (Singer 2008).

Like Lyotard's (1984, xxiv) definition of the postmodern, posthumanism is inclined toward incredulity when it crosses metanarratives. Therefore, the posthuman can be aligned with other approaches and techniques that question universality, rationality, and scientific objectivity. As its very name implicates the post*human* in humanist traditions, using language—as spoken and written language is seen as what makes humans exceptional in the great chain of being—often obfuscates other understandings of the world through affect, art, and desire. Those imagining the posthuman would have to ask if the master's tools could dismantle the master's house (Lorde 2007, 110-114)? This includes discourse, history, science, and technology—at least those birthed from Western civilization are deeply implicated in what the posthuman may desire to leave behind. 'So what of the humanities,' Colebrook (2014, 169-70) queries, 'if anything at all, might we say is worth saving?' Humanism is actually quite inhuman, she answers, but what can posthumanism offer? Perhaps it is contaminated and possessed by the repressed, by all that colonialisms and capitalisms have buried and tried to hide, murder, and torture. The posthuman knows that the subject, as we have created it, has a special relationship to the degradation and dismissal of objects and the objectification of subjects. These distinctions between the two are a story about our modern world-making and this tale of intertwining needs to be retold to create more just and peaceful relationships.

As scholars, we often speak of the posthuman as a noun. Our debates revolve around whether the concept can be

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housed in some kind of bounded subjectivity that we can define and attach to particular bodies. Can we know it, secure it, nurture it, theorise it, dismiss it, ignore it? Is it cyborg (Haraway 1991, 191)? Zombie (Lauro and Embry 2008)? Fossil (Yusoff 2013)? Android (Dick 1996)? Hybrid (MacCormack 2016; Chen 2012; Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015)? Digital (Adams and Thompson 2016; Gibson 1984)?

Cary Wolfe asked, 'What is posthumanism?' (2010), but for this essay the question becomes: 'What is posthumanising?'

Learning and being open to how to cultivate the conditions to become otherwise: this is posthumanising. We must build the conditions that make the human obsolete; to follow Buckminster Fuller (1970) in *I Seem to Be a Verb*, we can't fight existing reality. We need to create models that make the old ones obsolete. This is systems biology and quantum physics, monism not Cartesian dualism. Most importantly it is interrogating the violence of the nature/culture dichotomy (Morton 2010) and that the distinction between object and subject are not what we thought they were (Gane 2006) or that they were never there (Latour 1993). Following Haraway and Latour, if we have never been human or modern what does it mean to be posthuman?

To answer this, I want to focus on this desire to be something different. Not as teleology, but rather what the process of evolving, either biologically, intellectually, or culturally may mean for our quotidian lives.

To further the feeling of action, the remaining will continue in classic three-act structure. This essay is equal parts tragedy and comedy, as catharsis must come from both grief, for the terrible changes wrought by a fossil fuel economy, and hope that this test will leave us will new skills. This catharsis will give us a sense of who the human might become to better live within our planetary limits: to find 'wild laughter in the throat of death' and use mirth to move our souls to action (Shakespeare 1598).

This figure of the posthuman will dispersed into becoming not being, process not product, desire not completion. If not a subject coming into itself, then is it a plea? A plea to a future to hear, to witness that we crave to become *transformed*.

The posthuman is an acknowledgement of the despair and exhaustion wrapped up in what it must mean to be modern, to be human. We are so tired of being what we are now: murderous, hateful, warlike, wasteful, narcissistic, violent, careless, vicious, cruel, and belligerent. Through this shell of the human it becomes hard to move toward the antonymic of that which we are tired of being and enacting.

Posthumanising is not a plea, but a roar to a world that has silenced so many for so long. 'My barbaric yawp,' crowed Walt Whitman (1949, 1088) in 'Song of Myself': 'I too am not a bit tamed—I too am untranslatable; I sound my barbaric yawp over the roof of the world.' Dr. Suess's Horton (1954) the Elephant heard it, too. His ear heard a Yopp! from the Whos as he listened to the clover held in his trunk. That speck of dust on a clover that made noises in greater amounts: 'We are here. We are here. WE ARE HERE…And that Yopp, that one small extra Yopp, put it over, finally at last from that speck on that clover.'

What if this shout and this demand to be heard cannot be a *something* at all? Even more precisely, what if housing this desire, this striving, this yawp in a body has taken us down the wrong path? Put differently, what if the focus is shifted from what the posthuman is to what the posthuman can do? The posthuman is an action word, not a person, place, or thing. Posthumanising is a performance of our desire to change ourselves.

Performing the Posthuman: An Apocapolitical Tragicomedy in Three Acts

Act I: The exposition, or posthumanising ethics

The fundamental ethical question surrounding the posthuman, or how ethics could be posthumanised, is to acknowledge that humans have speciously separated themselves from other living things and processes on the

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planet and called it *nature*. We then, through religion and dominion, humanism and natural law, turned the earth and its many other beings into resources to be used with no moral, intrinsic worth except that which humans could take and use for their own ends. Other world-views that were counter to this were colonised and even eradicated, leaving this dichotomy with little to stand against it. With this backdrop, the ethical issue most at stake is how we treat other living beings (Waldau 2007).

One of the most serious elisions in much of the posthuman literature is not acknowledging that many humans have been treated as things, objects, and likened to the nonhuman animals we use and abuse. This is unacceptable for both. For those who have not been considered fully human, the posthuman is an intolerable erasing of suffering and violence added to a toxic misunderstanding of world history and the complex relations of power that exist globally from North to South, East to West, black to white, female to male, rich to poor, human to nonhuman animal. These past and present hierarchies will reproduce the same power structures if we are not vigilant.

The posthuman can be recognised as an always already racialised and gendered body born from the flesh of the slave, the incarcerated, the oppressed (Weheliye 2014). It stands opposed the Enlightenment Man and its monopoly on subjectivity based on white, male European bodies (Hayles 1999). The posthuman can shed 'Man's' allegedly neutral and apolitical skin for a rainbow cloak of plurality and multiplicity.

Posthumanising recognises this and moves to create radical solidarity along all lines of difference (Morton 2017). This includes overcoming the human/nonhuman distinction and nurturing an ethics of entanglement in multispecies communities and co-evolved nonhuman animal companions (Haraway 2003; 2007). Disconnecting ourselves from nature has led toward violence to nonhuman others and legitimates that violence and suffering (Wright 2014). Extending care to nonhumans and thinking across species lines will increase our ability to create deeper cultural and social connections among humans, too (Waldau 2007). Posthumanising will recognise that fighting for the dignity of human and nonhuman animal life will improve the lives of all. Our fates are inextricably linked and all must be protected, honoured, and liberated together. Even if posthumans will think in verbs, we cannot denigrate the noun and we must recognise and celebrate life and things (Bennett 2010).

Posthumanising will be hard work that builds a planetary geontological (Povinelli 2016) politics that does not rest on hidden exclusions and violence. Posthumanising will create healthy diverse communities – human and nonhuman – rather than maximising profit and personal wealth. It becomes paramount to recreate ourselves around a new materialism that values the earth for more than what we can consume from it.

Act II: The conflict, or a compromised biome and ecosystems facing collapse

There is urgency involved in rethinking ourselves: this is not just an exercise in high theory or pedagogy for the classroom. The human and its position on Earth is a topic of much concern in global neoliberal capitalism and those arrayed against its rapacious and utilitarian use of fossil fuels and human capital. It is vitally important that we change who we are. As subjects created for consumption, Earth and its inhabitants are facing an unprecedented crisis. Due to the actions of human beings, the earth has entered a geologic epoch named the Anthropocene. The term was coined by Paul Crutzen in 2002 and has now been recommended for adoption after a prolonged study of human activity on our planetary systems. In September 2016, the International Geological Congress reported that, indeed, due to radioactive materials left by nuclear testing, plastic and power plant pollution, to name but a few, the Anthropocene can now be recognised as a reality. The end of the Holocene—the previous era—is marked by sea level rise, increased carbon dioxide emissions, deforestation, development, and global mass extinction of nonhuman species. The naming of this new era after *anthropos* can be taken as evidence toward our entangled relationship with the planet that provides the conditions for life. It is a view that reminds us of our bodies and connections, rather than the ultimate homage to our self-absorption. As Wright (2014 online) stresses, 'looking at the world from the perspective of the Anthropocene reveals patterns of connection that bind flesh to earth, sea and sky on a multispecies planet.'

Unfortunately, near universal scientific acceptance of this epoch has not been matched politically. The Paris Convention (COP21) agreement in 2015 represents a major international decision on climate change action, but the

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nature of international treaties leaves it open to failure at the state level: ratification of the treaty must happen in each state and then laws and policies must change to reflect the international commitment. Previously, I, and my co-authors (Burke et al. 2016, 500), have argued that we need a politics to match our planet:

Global ecological collapse brings new urgency to the claim that 'we are all in this together' – humans, animals, ecologies, biosphere. To survive, we must ask questions that are intimately connected to capitalism, modernity, and oppression. We must ensure that our diplomacy, our politics, and our institutions are open to those who will bear the brunt of ecological change.

Most importantly, this change from noun to verb aids in seeing ourselves as not individuals in the humanist, liberal tradition, but as an active part of an entangled and complex web—or nested sets of permeable vessels—of both human and nonhuman life on a shared planet (Fishel 2017).

Posthumanising will include acknowledging the planetary real and recreating systemic human agency that recognises earth systems and their boundaries. The Anthropocene should be presented as an era that reminds us that we are in it together and not another retelling of the story of dominion over a natural place external to the world of the human.

Act III: The resolution, or posthumanising activism

This focus on posthumanising will emphasise two broad areas as possible avenues for action: the ethical, and the political/disciplinary, through activism. Active posthumanising will mean engaged and direct action in multiple contexts and across multiple registers. Politically, how might posthumanising be deployed into concerns that also support those from ecological, feminist, queer, postcolonialist, and anticapitalist standpoint (Behar 2016)?

Posthumanising academic disciplines remains a challenge. Our very ways of thinking are firmly rooted in humanism and siloed into different disciplines in the modern neoliberal university. This hierarchical and isolated institutional matrix for intellectual work makes asking complex questions across disciplines difficult. There is a clear disciplinary division of labour between the social sciences and the natural sciences. For Andrew Pickering (2005), they carve up the world in systematic ways: the natural sciences study the world of things where people are absent and there is a clear idea of objectivity and a need to understand the systems themselves divorced from the researcher's place in the systems. In the social sciences and humanities, researchers talk about people and not about things with an idea that the social is separate reality from the world of things that natural scientists study. As discussed above, this is a beautiful dualism: world of things and world of people. The posthuman view, according to Pickering (2005), is that which allows us to 'see double', to overlap people and things in our research programs, matters of concern, and telling of events. Posthumanising the disciplines will have us reject these units of analysis because the world does not impose that division of people and things on us. We make the world and impose legibility upon it. The units of analysis can be shifted, the posthuman can see double (Pickering 2005).

The tragedy and scale of destruction brought on by climate change challenges all of our political systems and institutions. Do we need to learn how to die as a species, as Roy Scranton (2015) declares? Or, as Naomi Klein (2014) argues, do we need to take up the challenge of the climate crisis as our best chance at creating a new world, and see that crisis as causing a fracture in our collective subjectivity that will allow us to tear through to new relations and practices? The nation-state will continue to decline under ecological crisis and cannot offer solutions that it had claimed to in the last century. In this assertion, Klein (2014) echoes Guattari's writing on the ecological crisis. He wrote: 'Instead of clinging to general recommendations we would be implementing effective practices of experimentation, as much on a microsocial level as on a larger institutional scale' (Guattari 2008, 24). Change will happen from the grassroots level. While global level change is necessary, it must be fought and redefined at the level of specific practices and sites, like Standing Rock. In other words, planetary change could lead to the discovering of the creative potential of people – in all parts of the world and from all social positions – to reshape the priorities of regions, states, and economies (Connolly 2017).

We can think of Fuller's (1970, 1) famous quote: 'I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I

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am not a category. I am not a thing — a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process — an integral function of the universe.'

If used as a starting point, the posthuman could see this rephrased for the Anthropocene: 'I live in love with the Earth and its beings, and I am always becoming what I am. I know that I am a category. I am enmeshed—a thing living entwined with other things. I seem to be a verb, an ever changing process—a cosmic roll of the universal dice.'

This crisis could be the beginning. It is our last, and best chance, to make another world rather than just mutely witness the end of our fossil-fuelled civilization. If last century was more about freeing the carbon than it was about freeing humanity from its chains (Wark 2015), this century could be able to understand our posthuman condition, and build new kin groups (Haraway 2016) in such a way that a world could emerge that is more equitable, loving, and just than the last.

Notes

[1] I leave aside transhumanism in this chapter as it takes a fundamentally different approach to technology and the human body. See Hayles (1999) for a history of cybernetics and bodies and Kurzweil (2005) for an application on transhuman values to human bodies.

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