

An Interview with Karen Raber*: Reflections on Posthumanist Shakespeares

The interview has been conducted by Robert Sawyer (East Tennessee State University, USA) and Monika Sosnowska (University of Lodz, Poland)

Monika Sosnowska (later as MS):

Can you briefly explain what “the posthuman” means?

Karen Raber (later as KR):

“Posthuman” refers to a being, object, or other entity that lies outside of definitions of “the human”—that is, it might be something like an amoeba or a dog, both of which are considered less than human; it might be a ghost or god, considered more than human; or it might be a robot or android, whose relationship to what we call “the human” is unresolvably vexed. Posthuman beings can be multiple in ways that contradict our notion of discrete, individuated identities, or they might have no fixed boundaries that allow us to recognize their contours (think of something like the hyperobjects that Timothy Morton names, including global warming, that are so massively distributed that it is impossible to think about them in the usual way). Posthumans are enmeshed with other forms of life (and death) in a web of relations; they cannot be reduced to binaries, but are rather entangled with matter of all kinds. What links these entities is that they present an ontological challenge to concepts of “the human” either by indicating the unstable nature of its ontology, or demonstrating its inadequacy to account for experience, phenomena, or forms of subjectivity. You’ll notice I put “the human” constantly in scare quotes to signal that I’m interrogating the claims that that two-word phrase inevitably smuggles under the radar—that there is such a thing as a human being who is all the things humanism says he is: male, of course; white and Western and probably Christian; autonomous, rational, perfectible, endowed with free will, all of which

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place him at the apex of creation. It is this construct, the by-product of centuries of humanism, that the posthuman, and posthumanism, contests. If we think of humanism, the system of thought that emerged during the Renaissance and was made central to Enlightenment philosophy, as the proposition that “the human” exists as I’ve just described it, then what that system erases or devalues is all the other modes of existence and kinds of relationships that might be possible for the subject. I think it’s important to formulate this as a hugely disjunctive, even in some ways a negative process, to emphasize what is lost in this extraordinary philosophical revolution: humanism, we should say, displaces or disrupts human beings’ sense of connection to that which rests outside the (white, male, individual, Western) human subject. This has what I think are obvious consequences for our own fate: how we treat nonhuman beings, how we treat the earth, what we are capable of doing to others we deem unworthy of full inclusion as “human” beings. Posthumanism is returning the favor, if you will, by dislocating and disrupting, in turn, opening our thinking to new or different ontological and ethical possibilities.

However, looked at from another equally valid perspective, what posthumanism is doing might simply be called clarifying and reorienting the process of investigating what a “human” being is or should be, and describing more minutely and accurately how that being functions in the world it occupies—thus participating in the original agenda of humanism itself. Posthumanist theory does often look elsewhere for its objects of study, discussing animals, plants, robots, objects, systems, and so forth. But in the end, its purpose is to transform human relationships to all those things, opening up new options for living in and with our environments, our politics, and our social worlds.

Robert Sawyer (later as RS):

What was the intellectual trajectory that took you from critiquing literary texts into looking at science and technology and the animal kingdom?

KR:

I started my career working on early modern women’s writing, using feminist theory and cultural materialist methods. I was trained as a New Historicist, with feminist leanings. But a huge part of my life has always revolved around horses: I’ve ridden and competed for more than fifty years (it was expensive, and a distraction from school, to their horror). As a graduate student, while I was engaged in a strong and activist program of scholarship in gender studies there was this other set of interests and commitments in the background, which sometimes seemed to intersect with the work I was doing, but mainly got left aside because there was no precedent for it as a scholarly focus. In the early 1990s, just for fun, I wrote a presentation on William Cavendish and

horsemanship for a conference in Santa Barbara (later it became an essay in Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt's book *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday*). That planted a seed: there was a whole world of cultural, social, economic, political analyses of human-animal relations that few people had bothered to examine before that point. About five or six years later, Erica Fudge's first book *Perceiving Animals* (1999) came out, and suddenly there was a paradigm for a career working on early modern animals. She specifically rejected the idea that writing about animals was "hobby history" and she brought to bear new kinds of theory and new perspectives that I think shook up the discipline. At that point I was already on the faculty at the University of Mississippi, and I gradually took advantage of the opening Fudge had created by writing more often in that vein—it allowed me to bring into alignment more parts of my lived experience. At the time I was mainly using a cultural-historical perspective, and only gradually did I engage with other kinds of theory.

Now you can certainly do animal studies and have nothing to do with either posthumanism or science and technology. But the social justice component of animal studies (now sometimes identified with Critical Animal Studies) tends to intersect with ecological and other concerns driven by the ugly nexus of environmental degradation, global warming, capitalism, colonialism, and other human-made systems of exploitation. For me, that ethical pull was important. At the same time, theory from Derrida to Latour provided important insights that nudged my work on animals toward posthumanism. But my interest, informed by my non-academic pursuits, has always been on bodies—on the dance that human and non-human bodies do on a daily basis and the ways they shape and are shaped by one another and their environments. So thinkers like Vicki Hearne, Donna Haraway, and Vincienne Despret were all equally influential. I think the truth is that I first did vaguely posthumanist work and then later on tried to understand the wider range of theory that description implies and embrace it.

Posthumanism is an umbrella that covers a lot of different approaches and schools of thought, but cybernetics and systems thinking lies at its roots in the work of, for example, Humberto Maturana, or N. Katherine Hayles; most who fall clearly under the umbrella like Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Cary Wolfe, Karen Barad, Niklas Luhmann or Graham Harman, work interdisciplinarily across fields like biology or physics or computer programming, sociology, anthropology, history or literary criticism. To practice as a posthumanist literary scholar is therefore inevitably to become familiar with at least some of these interdisciplinary avenues and comfortable with the multiple disciplines that most speak to a particular topic.

I do think animals require the engagement of more than either side of the binary that we think divides our poetic souls from our analytical brains. In training horses, for instance, the animal connects to the rider on so many levels that we mere humans are unable to keep up. Horses have the equivalent of

multiple PhDs, only they're in disciplines of smell, bodily gesture, skin response, spatial judgment, environmental assessment, atmospheric pressure, and so on. Understanding animals in the training relationship thus requires that we think in multiple dimensions, which in turn requires some understanding of the sciences that can explain bodies, minds and how both interact with environments. Technology, in its original sense of *techne* or the knowledge that results in making or doing is a natural part of posthumanism because of its importance in reshaping us and our worlds; many or most animals, certainly domesticated ones, are products of technology—they are what Haraway would call a nature culture syntheses. So training is also linked to technology, whether we think of it that way or not. We are most successful in apprehending nonhuman others if we use all the tools of body and mind, which coincides with posthumanist thinking. So I would say that my current interests arose out of that particular human-animal relationship, rather than it preceding or developing from any other agenda.

RS:

What led to your latest monograph and how do you understand its intervention in both Shakespeare and posthumanist studies?

KR:

Shakespeare and Posthumanist Theory is an attempt to introduce readers to the field. I lay out as many of the concerns and possible avenues for scholarship as I'm able to in a short book, first by summarizing the work that others have done, and then modeling the practices I've summarized through new readings of the plays. Doing the latter required that I learn some new things—about disability studies, for instance, or about the machinery of war, or about Renaissance art and the techniques for representing volume, among other things. For me, a book that doesn't require you learn something new is probably not worth writing: I'm easily bored! But the book's goal, as I see it, is to demystify much of what has been done in posthumanist theory, to make accessible what theorists often seem to be unable to convey clearly. I will acknowledge that the book boils—but I hope does not dumb—the theory down. However, with any luck the result is a more usable template for those who don't have time or inclination to spend years with the theory and its philosophical antecedents. While Cary Wolfe grumbles that we shouldn't merely be “talking about a thematics of the decentering of the human” and wants us to grapple with “*how* thinking confronts those thematics” (2010 xvi), the average undergraduate or even the average graduate student is unlikely to get to that noble objective without taking more manageable steps toward it. My book is meant to be one of those steps.

At the same time, I've tried to send a few added messages, not least about how Shakespeare figures in posthumanism in general, and the advantages

and pitfalls of working on one of the most familiar signposts of literary high culture. On the one hand, Shakespeare has so much cachet that one hardly has to justify using his plays and poems as proof-texts for theory; on the other hand, as I say in the book's conclusion, if we simply and unthinkingly make Shakespeare a posthumanist *avant la lettre*, we may just be indulging in another version of bardolatry—celebrating individual “genius,” which is of course one of humanism's concomitant phenomena. The book advises against these kinds of responses and uses. Shakespeare can let us think about how what we call posthumanism is not a modern invention, part of a teleological historical process that always moves forward and beyond (which, in another register, is again the kind of triumphal narrative of perfectibility that humanism would endorse). The wide access and importance of Shakespeare lets the theory percolate differently through our culture, moving it from an abstruse and limited philosophical proposition to become part of a critical literary practice that our students and others can appreciate. Posthumanism will not save us or the planet; but it can make us think differently about both ourselves and our environments, and who knows, with enough of that we might indeed end up changing, as Wolfe requires, *how* we are able to think, and, in turn, what we are able to imagine and thus do.

RS:

What schools of thought are used in or exploited by posthumanist thinkers or theorists?

KR:

Posthumanism is, as I said, a very large umbrella. Like other recent theories that have dominated literary studies, it isn't in fact a single, coherent philosophical position traceable to a single writer or linked group of thinkers (unlike, for example, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, or Foucault and Derrida). It is an orientation that arises out of a number of schools of thought that enable consequent ways of reading, all of which decenter “the human” but in vastly different ways. Nor is it incompatible with the anti-humanist theories I gestured to parenthetically (Marxism and psychoanalysis, for example, both displace human autonomy and ego by referring human choice and action to forces that individuals don't control) but its main methodologies have emerged from a few significant domains. The advent of ecostudies and concern about how humans have found themselves in ecological crisis shifted attention to the ways that human beings interact with their environments. That played a huge part in bringing scholars' attention to non-human actors and entities; there is no hard correlation between ecostudies and posthumanist theory, but there is clearly an alignment. What we have usually called the new materialism, the turn toward ontology and beyond constructionism, has been an equally influential theoretical

methodology. The group of thinkers who “belong” is itself already diverse: Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett, Vicki Kirby, and Manuel DeLanda are all very different kinds of new materialists. All problematize the ways we have investigated and evaluated matter, critiquing the dismissal of objects as inert, passive, without significance. Likewise, Object-Oriented Ontologists like Graham Harman and Ian Bogost may not directly identify as posthumanists, but their work certainly inspires many of us. Those who deal with nonhuman animals have borrowed not only from Derrida, Haraway and Wolfe, but from Deleuze and Guattari, and from Mel Y. Chen, but we might equally find the writings of Steve Best, John Berger, Anat Pik, and others useful in our approach. If a posthumanist scholar started out being interested in cybernetics, then their lineage would look very different: they might have been reading Hans Moravec (the transhumanist futurist whose work provoked Hayles’s response in *When Did We Become Posthuman*); they’d certainly have read Hayles, and other second-order cybernetics figures like Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. If concepts having to do with the body, sexuality, or language have been a starting place for a critic, they might have been reading about zoopoetics or have picked up Merleau-Ponty and been inspired—or they might equally have already been using queer theory, or disability studies and simply become “posthumanista” without taking up the descriptor or the full scope of the theory. I think these days talking about schools of thought as if they’re coherent groups with well-defined borders is impossible. That aligns perfectly with the theory’s resistance to binarism and hierarchy.

MS:

Can we perceive Shakespeare as a proto-Posthumanist?

KR:

This brings up the problem of the “post” in posthumanism—which is not really about a historical divide. Yes, the more self-conscious versions of posthumanist theory date from the mid-to late-20th century, and yes it mainly engages with Enlightenment philosophy, and responds to some anti-humanist theory of the 1970s and after, but as several writers have pointed out, it is an approach, not a historical fact. Any author of any period can offer more (or less) posthumanist moments or insights. Shakespeare, because he writes well before Enlightenment Humanism carves the standards of humanist philosophy in stone, offers a flexible set of criteria for what “humanism” actually involves and how it fails to congeal a consistent answer to the question “what is a human?” Is the perfectibility of the human most important? Do Shakespeare’s tragedies or histories really bear out that version? Not at all. Is the masterful authority and agency of the individual definitional? The comedies surely don’t think so. As Rob Watson puts it, they undo the individual ego in favor of multiple sources of

agency.¹ In many ways, Shakespeare's deep skepticism makes him fertile ground for posthumanist thinking; but we could say the same (and some day I assume we will) about high-humanist authors like Erasmus, for instance, or later poets like Milton (Joe Campana and Scott Maisano point out that if anyone was doubtful about how smug humans should be, surely it was Milton!).² My position on Shakespeare is that his plays and poems should do the work we need them to do now. Even historical anachronism has its place for our purposes, just as much as it did for Shakespeare himself: speculative work interrogating the queerness of the plays, finding patterns of trans identity in the plays, imagining posthumans here and there in the mix of characters, turning a poem into a defense of ecological diversity, using his characters to think about how technology dismantles humanism—all this serves us well in no small part because Shakespeare carries such weight with our students (and their parents, and administrators and the general public). Perhaps we can renew Shakespeare in the service of what I think are ethical ends by exploiting the same aspects of his reputation and cultural power that have been turned to uglier, more culturally violent ends in the past and even undo some of the harms Shakespeare has been used to inflict.

At a minimum Shakespeare's unshakable place in the study of the liberal arts can act as a bulwark against political suppression. It is easier to ban Critical Race Theory than to ban Shakespeare—but Shakespeare can be an extremely useful tool in advancing Critical Race Theory. The same is true for post-humanism's transformation of "the human" into something that can redress the social and environmental catastrophes of our time, a transformation that would raise hackles in some political circles. Shakespeare is a great vehicle for smuggling contraband into a curriculum.

MS:

What direction do you anticipate posthuman literary criticism to take in the future?

KR:

The first likely challenge to posthumanist theory in Shakespeare studies is already under way in the field's response (or lack of it) to the issue of race. Shakespeare studies has been energized, as have other fields, by Black Lives Matter and the wider academic engagement with Critical Race Theory. Brilliant work is being done on racialization in early modern texts and culture; scholars like Kim Hall, Margo Hendricks, Ian Smith, Imtiaz Habib, and Ayanna

¹ See Watson's essay "The Ecology of Self in *Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Ecocritical Shakespeare*. Eds. Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. 33-56.

² See their introduction to *Renaissance Posthumanism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. 1-37.

Thompson have demanded Shakespeareans take account of race, and now a whole new generation is galvanized by our current political climate into asking even louder and more provocative questions. But how does this development articulate with posthumanism and posthumanist theory?

One answer might be that posthumanism has failed to recognize and so honor its Black forebears. For example, Alexander Weheliye's 2014 *Habeas Viscus*, which "recalibrates" and "rectifies" (his words) biopolitical discourse to take account of race, racialization, and the human, cites its roots in the work of Black Studies theorists Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter.³ In his introduction, Weheliye specifically calls out Cary Wolfe for a subtly racist set of comments on Toni Morrison in Wolfe's *Animal Rites*, pointing out that Wolfe's remarks on Morrison are "spiteful" and not unlike other animal studies thinkers who "brandish" comparisons of enslaved humans to nonhuman beings, comparisons that lead, unimaginatively, to the conclusion that Black emancipation can only come at the cost of the further exploitation of animals (10). Weheliye, whose work deals with racializing "assemblages" and "flesh" harmonizes with posthumanist theory. But he is committed to the proposition that Black subjects should not bear the unique burden of relinquishing liberation (which has usually been coded as becoming fully human) in order to rectify the abuses or failures of humanism. What he advocates is not the extension of the category "human" to include others, but the radical rethinking of "human" to address the way in which suffering is inherent to it, rather than a weight some groups must bear. Critical Race Theory in general also implicitly and explicitly rejects exceptionalism; yet it does not entirely toss out a version of humanism that has admittedly never yet been achieved, but which might look very different from the tarnished fantasies of liberal humanists. To be fair, Wolfe pursues many of the same ethical ends as Weheliye. But the difference between them points to a failure: posthumanist theory has been predominantly white, oriented toward the concerns of white, Western practitioners, and slow to see its own biases. How, for instance, do we talk about the place of technology and science without also thinking about the social exclusions in and of that discussion? Who gets to embrace or dismiss the option of transhumanist transcendence in favor of a more diffuse posthuman being in the world? Who gets to speak, and whose speech is remembered, cited, recirculated, in academic circles? And how do the underlying assumptions of the theory disenfranchise whole sectors of the globe and its populations even as they suffer more acutely from the failures of humanism?

³ Zakkiah Iman Jackson has offered the same rebuke to posthumanist studies, likewise citing Wynter as well as Aimée Césaire and Frantz Fanon who all "challenge the epistemological authority of 'man'" well before posthumanism's advent in the 1990s. See her "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism." *Feminist Studies* 39.3 (2013): 669-683.

I think we must also worry that ecological crisis will outrun us, in the sense that emergency and catastrophe will drown out the more nuanced “slow” critique that has developed in the field. The COVID pandemic might be a warning sign: while in one sense the pandemic should have been a humbling experience of our global and environmental interdependence, any such insight has been muted by the disaster’s practical effects, and the speed at which theory causes change seems outpaced by cascading events. How do we talk about the leveling, decentering aspirations of some posthumanisms while taking responsibility for immediate change? Who do we reach with our writing and speaking, and how effective are we? I am fully convinced by Rob Nixon’s description of “slow violence”⁴—but slow violence now requires a fast-paced political/governmental response as well as a massive collective shift of focus and action. How does theory accomplish that, or can it?

RS:

What do you see as the connection between politics and posthumanism?

KR:

There are a number of dimensions and levels involved in that question. When Bruno Latour describes a “politics of nature” which includes a “parliament of things” (*We Have Never Been Modern*, 1991; *Politics of Nature*, 1999) it is clear that his sense of “politics” is meant to describe more than the limited workings of government, although his vision includes that too—he is proposing a radical new way to imagine relationships on a planetary scale. For someone like Jane Bennett (*Vibrant Matter*, 2010) the goal is to “explore social hegemonies” but to add to them a sense of “thingly power, the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts” (xiii). Bennett too wants to reimagine how traditional concepts of political theory might be transformed by a consideration of material entities as actants (she uses Latour’s term) in the world. At the end of her chapter on political ecologies she poses the question “Are you ready, and at the price of what sacrifice, to live the good life together” (109)—a question redolent of terminology familiar to us from the history of political writing from Aristotle to Marx and beyond. What is different in Bennett’s and Latour’s view is that the idea of “together” must extend beyond the human, and requires a kind of humility and profound abnegation not necessarily accounted for in past political thought.

Many posthumanists interested in affect theory also implicitly or explicitly reject the Platonic model of the rational citizen, given the proposition that affect—emotions understood as somatic effects that precede the forms of social and other interpretation that categorize, justify, or elaborate them—is the origin and target of much of what we call politics. This kind of work often

⁴ See his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

addresses the way capitalism, gendered ideologies, and other structures of identity and attachment obscure the role of bodily processes in determining political choices, fictions, or movements. Here I'm including a huge range of thinkers in the big bucket of "posthumanists," ranging from Lauren Berlant to Sarah Ahmed to Brian Massumi and many others. All are engaged in one way or another in dethroning humanist descriptions of and prescriptions for political life and ideas about natural law and human sovereignty.

But at the level of current political movements and individual commitments, we also see a range of those represented in the theory. Cary Wolfe is clearly concerned with the way animals suffer the consequences of anthropocentrism, as are Donna Haraway and Mel Y. Chen, for instance, and all are clearly committed to an activist politics beyond academic philosophizing. Many of the scholars who bring a posthumanist methodology to their work on Shakespeare are likewise moved to imagine post-anthropocentric political options in our future that might have unique roots in overlooked aspects of Renaissance literature and culture. Bennett says she embraces a non-Marxist tradition of materialism, reaching back to a Lucretian version of monism: who would understand better the implications of such a position and the politics it enables than someone working with Renaissance literature and Shakespeare? Hamlet, at Wittenberg at the turn of the seventeenth century, would have been steeped in Lucretianism, and thus encouraged to examine matter itself in ways not unrelated to Bennett's investigation.⁵ Posthumanist politics, like the theory, thus includes an element of *déjà vu* for Renaissance scholars. Take for example Laurie Shannon's brilliant *The Accommodated Animal* (2013), which has plenty to teach Wolfe or even Latour about a historical moment when "cosmopolity" could include zoopolity. Shannon demonstrates the ways that animals could be imagined as political subjects until Descartes renegotiated their status, making them scientific objects instead. Shannon's own background as a constitutional lawyer is central to the way she re-reads Genesis and discovers its (non-hexameral) potential as a kind of legal template for zoopolity. If Latour imagines a future parliament of things that could encompass non-human animals represented in a new post-modern constitution, Shannon shows us that such a prospect is not necessarily futurist utopian fantasy, but was once thinkable as a religiously sanctioned version of God's creation. What else have we forgotten that Shakespeare and the Renaissance can teach us? What "new" political relations can we uncover in old texts? Whatever Shakespeare's own politics might have been, the plays and poems thus yield some pretty radical possibilities for the politically-oriented posthumanist.

⁵ There's a vast literature about Lucretianism in the Renaissance, too vast to cite here, but for this argument about Hamlet, see R. Allen Shoaf. *Lucretius and Shakespeare On the Nature of Things*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

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