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Afterword: Posthumanism—Past, Present and Future

Of words and terms, I often think, *they are what they do*—or what can be done with them. I want to ask, in this brief afterword, not what posthumanism is but *what it does*, which is also a way of asking, *what it does now* and *what might it do* for those who still invoke it. So the point becomes to say, with Robert Sawyer, Monika Sosnowska, and the contributors "we have always been posthuman," but also then to ask "what can and should we do with that *now*?"

　　Although most references to origins are dubious (and the unsavory powers associated with them), I start with two early invocations of both postmodernism and the posthuman, fully aware, in the context of this special issue, that it would be no surprise to succumb to the temptation to add "early" before any use of the term modern, modernism, or modernity, or to substitute "early modern" for any of the references to either modernism or postmodernism. This was of course very much on my mind in the years of collaboration with Scott Maisano on the volume *Renaissance Posthumanism*, which we thought of not as a variety of posthumanism but as an attempt to understand how the stage for later (including recent) disenchantment with and the de-centering of the human was more than capaciously set by the thinkers and the writers at heart of anything one might call Renaissance humanism.[1]

　　In the heady days of 1976, as postmodernism was taking root both as a way of describing the world and as a staple of academic discourse, Ihab Hassan seems to have coined the term "posthumanist" in "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture," which was first the keynote address at the International Symposium on Postmodern Performance and then later a published text appearing in the *Georgia Review*.[2] "Prometheus as Performer"

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[1]　*Renaissance Posthumanism*. Eds. Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

[2]　Ihab Hassan. "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" *The Georgia Review* 31.4 (1977): 830-850.

was, notably subtitled "A University Masque in Five Scenes." I cannot speak to the conditions of the original "performance," but the text indicates a series of speakers—Pretext, Mythotext, Text, Heterotext, Context, Metatext, Postext, and Paratext. Much more might be said of this work, which was conceived in the context of performance and with reference to a court theatrical form, the masque, critical to the late medieval and early Tudor cultures that shaped William Shakespeare.

If the overall goal of the masque is to "place the subject of postmodern performance in a wide and speculative context" that wide context gets no less wide and no more specific when it comes to whatever "posthumanist" culture might be or mean. Early on Pretext calls it an "emergent culture" and "the matrix of contemporary performance," while later Metatext will indicate that "posthumanist culture is a performance in progress" (Hassan 831). In between, Text refers to "the process leading us to a posthumanist culture" which "depends mainly on the growing intrusion of the human mind into nature and history, on the dematerialization of life and the conceptualization of existence" (835). Alongside the ambiguities of posthumanism would be the ambiguities of Prometheus, who Text admits to Mythotext "may be a vague metaphor of a mind struggling with the One and the Many." But he also indicates that "His mind is where Imagination and Science, Myth and Technology, Language and Number sometimes meet. Or put it both prophetically and archetypically: Prometheus pre-sages the marriage of Earth and Sky. Only then, perhaps, will posthumanism see the dubious light of a new day" (835). Whatever is at issue in posthumanism, I would stress, one might draw from Hassan that it is an *ambiguous performance codified by a deeply but fascinatingly outmoded form*, one might say an *anachronistic and allegorical*, form.

In the perhaps less-heady days of 1992, Donna Haraway published "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape."[3] Haraway, perhaps more so than any other of the early proponents of terms like posthuman and posthumanism, focused not only on the ethics of technological impacts on and extensions of the human body but also the question of how varieties of gendered identity might *not* be effaced in invocations of universality. "Humanity," Haraway suggests, "is a modernist figure":

> and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape. Humanity's face has been the face of man. Feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures; but, I believe, we must have feminist figures of humanity. They cannot be man or woman; they cannot be the human as historical narrative

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[3] Donna Haraway. Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape". *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Eds. Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott. London: Routledge, 1992. 86-100.

> has staged that generic universal [sic]. Feminist figures cannot, finally, have a same; they cannot be native. Feminist humanity must, somehow, both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility. (Haraway, 86)

Notably, Haraway would later turn away from posthumanist as a term, preferring "companion species" and a series of other terms largely because posthumanism, she suggests, too easily leads to forms of "transhumanism" or fantasies of exceeding through technology the limits of human corporeality.[4] For the moment, what I find most provocative here is that Haraway does not abandon the human. Rather, her goal is quite specific, which is to strip away the "generic face" and "universal shape" of the human or of humanity. From my point of view, far more effective than invocations of the decentering of the human would be a de-generalizing or better yet *a specification of the human*. Human and associated terms (like humanity and humanism) might be useful and even necessary even amidst the multi-species assemblages of a blighted planetary moment I might call the Anthropocene except it would provoke conversation about the utility of that over-invoked term.

I also want to appreciate that Haraway's subject is, in fact, the figure of the suffering body crystallized by the figure of Ecce Homo, "a rich, dangerous, old, and constantly renewed tradition of Judeo-Christian humanism" with readings of Jesus and Sojourner Truth to ask "how recent intercultural and multicultural feminist theory constructs possible postcolonial, nongeneric, and irredeemably specific figures of critical subjectivity, consciousness, and humanity—not in the sacred image of the same, but in the self-critical practice of 'difference,' of the I and we that is/are never identical to itself, and so has hope of connection to others" (Haraway, 87). Much suffering results from the dominance of a certain version of the human to which a term like posthumanist responds. How interesting that for Haraway, appropriate attention to *figurations of the suffering human* might offer a way to undo the damages of anthropo-centrism.

It is hard not to be stirred by Haraway's powerful call for "new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility" (87). Indeed, I have turned in these brief engagements to two of the earliest to think with terms like "posthuman" or "posthumanism" to try to tap back into the frenetic early energies of those terms. One might say there is an historical reason for doing so. To date from Hassan, is to conceive of nearly 50 years of something called posthumanism, posthumanist, or the posthuman. To date from Haraway is to consider 30 years. Critical terms don't merely have a shelf life; they have life

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[4] See, for example, Donna Haraway. "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?" interview by Nicholas Gane. *Theory, Culture & Society* 23.7–8 (2006): 135-158.

cycles. If at first a coinage or a new use of a term is attended upon by mystery (or a masque even!), then an often-frenzied phase of definition and codification ensues, which often leads directly to the equally frenzied overuse. At such a point, terms either seem to fall out of use or to become so vague and generic, they merely signpost once-impactful histories and intensities: sometimes usefully, sometimes not. One might quip, "Once there's a _____ *Reader* published, it's really over."[5] One might say this even admiringly, because such readers often seem retrospective codifications (at times elegiac in tone) rather than prospective or anticipatory. But the most interesting thing that can happen, it seems to me, is that a term continues *to work*, which is to say that it functions, enhancing critical conversation by *doing* or *performing* to provoke, clarify, and incite. The essays here suggest that there is much still to do and perform and that the literature and culture of early modern Europe amply, if unexpectedly, fulfils Haraway's call for "new turns of historical possibility" (Haraway, 86).What follows, then, are provocations, sentiments that crystallized during and after Renaissance Posthumanism and that have a new lucidity, lit as they are by the inquires in this special issue.

Like postmodernism, no version of posthumanism (in no matter what era it is practiced) can afford to take religion for granted. This is not to re-enchant the world, per se, but if the patterns of thought in question are those that locate the human relative to other creatures and things, early modernity offers proof positive that this cannot be understood out of the context of world views anchored not only in ancient cosmology but in a series of active theological and institutional conflicts. Indeed, it might be more interesting and useful to think of a *Reformation Posthumanism* than a *Renaissance Posthumanism* at this point in critical history.

The work of the human requires less decentering or displacing than specifying, connecting and scaling. This is also a way of saying that the world may not get better through patient readings that call out the various anthropocentrisms afflicting the planet, no matter how destructive they are. From one point of view, this is because "the human" is persistent, retrenched, and always most present when most appearing to be absent (or when having been banished). More useful would be to pluralize and specify the human, to refuse generality of invocation, to locate connection and disconnection between humans and the planetary systems of which they are part, and to think of the human not as a measure of all things but, rather, as the inverse: *an entity defined*

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5   See, for example, the most recent forays: *Posthumanism in Art and Science: A Reader*. Eds. Giovanni Aloi and Susan McHugh. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021 or *Posthuman Studies Reader: Core Readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism*. Eds. Evi D. Sampanikou and Jan Stasienko. Basel: Schwabe Verlagsgruppe, 2021.

by the negotiation of a range of scalar paradoxes. Such paradoxes range from what early moderns might have thought of as the microcosmic to the macrocosmic and what now might be described from quarks to cosmoses.

It seems to me that one tendency worth reflecting on is a strategic self-abnegation of the human. I, too, am often struck by the desire to get "the human" out of the way. But that is because I can only understand the enmeshed, open-weave creatures called humans in the multi-species ecologies in which they live by not setting humans aside out of the understandable desire to not limit other entities to human definition and to recognize the extent to which other entities already participate in some qualities historically cherished as human. Even so, one wonders if reassigning human concepts or capacities (agency or personhood or governance) to other entities changes these capacities. The oddities of early modern natural history offer ample opportunities for this task, and more writing, research, and editing of these works makes available a laboratory for exploring articulated systems of creaturely connectivity across centuries, geographies, and media. How Pliny is translated and circulated, or Conrad Gessner, matters. The extraordinary archive of works on furry, four-footed creatures as well as trees and bees and even "humans" has witnessed somewhat of its own renaissance in recent years, but that work has only just begun.

"Shakespeare" may be even more retrenched than "the human." Of centering Shakespeare, I too am guilty—often happily so. The danger is not that one is doomed to become a Harold Bloom by writing about Shakespeare. And, in fact, "Shakespeare" is always a strange assemblage of various hands and voices and media that give us these texts in their moments and in long, strange subsequent histories. Such magnificent work—particularly with respect to the concerns of this issue—have arisen from engagement with Shakespeare. So, I am ambivalent about this formulation, but I do wonder what texts, what authors, what genres, what anonymous phenomena offer as-yet-unheralded perspectives on Renaissance (post)humanist dilemmas.

One benefit of studies anchored in Shakespeare, especially in a journal like this one, is that *adaptation, translation, and remediation rise to the fore in (post)humanist approaches*. Whether one thinks of the vibrant translations of early modernity or the global dissemination of early modern works (primarily if not exclusively Shakespeare), the many languages and cultures that touch these works offer opportunities for critical insight. Similarly, the adaptation and remediation of early modern works (within early modernity or our own era) also highlights how bodies, environments, technologies, and a range of other factors fundamentally condition what we construe to be or not to be human. In an increasingly virtual moment, as tech billionaires fuel trillionaire corporations funding flights of fancy to outer space to bring disaster capitalism and extractive practices to the stars, clearly the impact of *technological sea changes on our ideas of the human* will only increase. More attention to the histories of science

and technology from early modernity to the present will be required to counter transhumanist fantasies, to counter extractivism in its new guises, and to offer perspective on transformations too rapid and intense to understand with any long-term point of view inside one's own historical moment.

It may be an all-too recursive strategy to suggest that the future is the past. And yet so many of the pillars of recent posthumanisms have deep roots in the early modern past—and some might argue even earlier. I have no interest in wars of periodization ("no, our period invented that!"). But to honor Haraway's still-resonant call for "new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility" (86) is to keep as wide an archive as possible of the moments, languages, and cultures, that help us understand the complex situation not of The Human but of specified and scalable humans who are complexly connected to and disconnected from the living and unliving systems of the planet. These humans may not be as singular as once was hoped for the Human. But whether sited in early or late modernity, these humans are in fact a whole lot more familiar.

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