

ON THE POSTHUMAN

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Why dedicate a thematic issue to the posthuman? Why make the posthuman a matter of concern now – decades after the publication of what are considered formative works in the field of Science and Technology Studies: Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1984) and Bruno Latour's *Science in Action* (1988)?

We would like to begin by saying that recent explorations into the posthuman and posthumanism have emerged as a response to the current economic, political, cultural, and ecological crises affecting us all. They also point to the crisis of the notion of “the human” as an autonomous and rational being, as well as to the consequences of human actions on our planet. The posthuman enables a scrutiny of what it means to be human and what its limits are. In a time when concepts such as agency, self, and “life” are being extended to include nonhuman others – animal, machines,

and things – attention to the posthuman is urgent for many reasons. First, as stated in the call for papers for this issue, the posthuman figure allows for alternative perspectives and positions from which to question, destabilize, and decenter the human, including modern binary categories. Second, a focus on the posthuman as a cultural configuration requires a displacement of traditional disciplinary boundaries in favor of interdisciplinary approaches that involve literary and cultural studies, media studies, animal studies, and object-oriented philosophy, among other fields of critical practices. And, third, the posthuman can be understood as an umbrella term sheltering different but often overlapping concerns, such as those of critical vitalism, new materialism, the ontological turn, non-(or post-) representational theory, speculative realism, and discourses about the Anthropocene.

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As Katherine Hayles (1999) argues, the posthuman does not mean the end of the human or the beginning of the anti-human, but the decentering of the human so that it can be conceptualized in new ways, e.g., in its entanglement with nature, culture, and technology. For Rosi Braidotti, speaking from a Deleuzian perspective, critical posthumanism, anchored in theoretical formations such as post-structuralism, new materialism, anti-universal feminism, post-colonialism, and (we would add) queer studies, attempts to reject individualism or human exceptionalism while forging a Zoe-centric ethics that takes into consideration *all* forms of life – human and nonhuman. The nonhuman, according to Richard Grusin, can be broadly conceived as “animals, plants, organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems” (2015, p. x). In fact, for this author, the nonhuman would be a better terminological choice than the posthuman, since it would avoid the pitfalls of a teleology embedded in the prefix post – the posthuman as historically coming after the human. Grusin contends that the nonhuman turn, on the contrary, emphasizes how human and nonhumans have always coevolved, coexisted, and collaborated. This view is also shared by many other authors such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Jane Bennett, Cary Wolfe, Brian Massumi, to name a few.

So, one of the most significant theoretical interventions of the posthuman or nonhuman turn has been the subversion of all kinds of dualisms, particularly the binary nature/culture and its privileging of the human to the detriment of other ontologies and agential entities. As Grusin explains, citing Massumi,

The critique of social constructivism for stripping the nonhuman world of agency or inherent meaning or qualities has been widespread. Perhaps most powerfully, the nonhuman turn challenges some of the key assumptions of social constructivism, particularly insofar as it insists that the agency, meaning, and value of nature all derive from cultural, social, or ideological inscription or construction. (2015, p. xi)

In that vein, the work of anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2015) on Andean indigenous communities

sheds ethnographical light on the limits of our conceptual tools in the presence of “earth beings.” She examines how these communities’ summoning of sentient entities (such as mountains, water, animals) in anti-mining protests (conceived by her as “earth practices”) are re-signifying the very meaning of culture. That is, in bringing nature and its materiality into the realm of politics, indigenous activist groups are denying the Cartesian separation between nature (matter) and culture, making matter a question of politics as well. In other words, in conjuring other than human creatures into the anti-mining protests, they negate the ontological distinction between humanity and nature that has been a hallmark of Western modernity. These earth practices, such as considering the political needs and desires of sentient entities, enact the respect and affect necessary for maintaining webs of relationality between the human and its nonhuman others in such communities. To introduce “earth practices” into social protest invites us, in the words of Stengers (2005), “to slow down reasoning”,¹ since it brings about a very significant epistemic rupture. As de la Cadena argues, the political sphere has always been configured as ontologically distinct from the sphere of nature, and this difference was a key element conspiring to the disappearance of pluriversal worlds, understood as partially connected heterogeneous social worlds, politically negotiating their ontological disagreements. With the reintroduction of earth beings² into politics, we can open up spaces for a type of thinking that allows us to unlearn/undo the ontological violence represented by the nature/culture divide, hence allowing us to “slow down reasoning.”

This thematic issue on the posthuman is an attempt to make us “slow down reasoning” and, heeding Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2009) call, develop a new kind of thinking – *species thinking* for the Anthropocene.

The articles collected in this issue are organized into three sections: *Mapping the posthuman*; *Readings of the posthuman*; and *Posthuman tropes in contemporary literature*. The three articles included in the part entitled *Mapping the posthumans* how a concern with an understanding of what it means to become posthuman both in regard to questioning the construction of a

human ontology (as figured in discourses that define the human in relation to nonhuman animal species) and to the revision of the limits of aesthetic perceptions in response to the art forms produced in post-human times.

In his “Antes do Pós-humano: insetos sociais, ‘mamíferos superiores’ e a (re)construção de fronteiras entre os humanos e os animais na modernidade” (Before the Post-human: social insects, superior mammals and the (re)construction of boundaries between humans and animals in modernity), Hugo Ferreira revisits some of the founding narratives of the human in relation to animals – from early Western texts to the contemporary discourses of sociobiology and social anthropology. His review stresses the oscillations in the perceptions of “human nature”, from an approximation with insects – aligned with a view of human essence – and moving towards its association with biology. Such logic is perceptible in the “primatization” of the human brought about by the construction of new forms of classification of living beings, in a notable “biologizing” trend appearing in explicit dialogue with Darwinian evolutionary theories. In its overall take, the essay stresses the ways in which such historically situated constructs have filtered into an anthropocentric economy of subjectivities, thus leading to the questioning of the frontiers between humans and nonhumans and to the consideration of the bioethical issues that have risen in the context of the posthuman turn in culture. Between the lines of Ferreira’s essay, readers may hear echoes of Donna Haraway’s (1991) ideas on the colonization of simians, cyborgs and women. This North-American scholar’s work is brought to the scene via her conceptualization of cyborg politics in the articles that follow. Jean Cardoso’s “O ciborgue entre a bio-arte e a arte distúrbatoria” (The Cyborg between Bio-Art and Disturbatory Art) raises questions regarding artistic protocols in times of posthumanism. From a cross-reading perspective that promotes a confrontation between (1) the sign of the cyborg, its ontology and politics, as elaborated by Donna Haraway; (2) the ethics of bio-art, as explored by Luiz de Quintais’ critique of transgenic artistic experience; and (3) Arthur Dantos’ notion of disturbatory art, which he extends in order to speculate on bio-artistic performance. Cardoso exposes the very limits of the

idea of representation as a useful apparatus for thinking about the posthuman in an aesthetic context in which nature and culture are indistinct: the transgenic beings of aesthetic experimentation are simultaneously seen as artistic composition, philosophical conceptualization and living being. He then proceeds to discuss Fausto Fawcett’s *Favelost* (2012) in light of the convergences among the theories mentioned above. His effort is to reflect on posthumanity à la *brasileira*, and to open up perspectives for the understanding of the posthuman.

In “Race as Technology: From Posthuman Cyborg to Human Industry”, Holly Jones and Nicholaos Jones critique a relentlessly materialist notion of the cyborg – which for them stands in for the posthuman – to argue that posthumanism inhibits our understanding of the ways in which social contexts create and sustain racial classifications and hierarchies. They claim that their humanist interpretive framework of racial hierarchy as industrial technology is better able to account for phenomena such as passing and “stationarity”. Their argument, however, deploys what we believe is a limited account of Haraway’s cyborg as a hybrid of “organismal biology and machinic construction”, overlooking, for example, her “argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction” (Haraway 1991a, p. 150). Readers may decide for themselves whether this characterization of posthumanism undermines the authors’ conceptualization of industrial grounds and conditions for racial hierarchy as industrial technology.

The articles presented in the second section, *Readings of the posthuman*, problematize the conventional hermeneutic modes through which we experience reading and writing. They provoke disturbing moves towards the exploration of renewed literary experiences as we witness the (near)disappearance of the posthuman author, or have our “human” reading positions challenged by discourses that demand a posthuman stance. In this direction, Ermelinda Maria Araújo Ferreira and Joanita Baú de Oliveira explore issues related to the posthuman in their “Inventário Poético: anotações sobre os resíduos do humano na literatura” (Poetic Inventory: notes on the remains of the human in literature). Following a discussion of literary

figurations of what they term “remains of the human” in relation to authorship as aesthetically encoded strategies which provoke specific reading effects, the authors examine the work “Frequently Asked Questions about *Hypertext*”, by Richard Holeton (2006), pointing out its ironic intertext to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), a parodistic work in itself. In light of the notion of electronic literature, as proposed by Katherine Hayles, they argue that, in its humorous textual maneuvers, Holeton’s work raises disturbing questions regarding authorship in posthumanistic times.

While Ferreira and Oliveira’s analysis place the author at the center of their focus, the readers’ roles and reading strategies are examined in the two essays that follow. “Derramam-se os horizontes: por uma experiência literária cinética” (The Horizons Come: in defense of kinetic literary experiences), by Ligia G. Diniz, the author argues that the reading of literature has been limited to its subordination to reason and to the crystallized interpretive processes derived from a rationally-based nexus. Proposing a move beyond such a hermeneutic tradition, the author revisits ideas by J.M.Coetzee (as voiced by his alter ego Elizabeth Costello) and by Maria Esther Maciel in order to defend a way of reading, of *living* literature, centered on an affective perspective aligned with post-human times. Diniz resorts to selected images from poems by Ted Hughes, Vicki Hearne and Matthew Rohrer in her illustration of a space of sharing a non-rational consciousness which is engendered in the act of confronting the radical otherness embodied by the non-human animal. Problematizing the privilege of reason as the principle underlying traditional views of reading, the article boldly prompts us to revise the concept of representation itself and stresses the world-widening quality of the poetic investigation of interspecies connections and of non-human animal consciousness, suggesting renewed forms of being affectively in the world. Once again, readers who are familiar with Haraway’s (2003) elaborations on interspecies relations will be reminded of her idea of “significant otherness” as a fruitful way to conceptualize the relations between human and non-human animals as a possible, renewed mode of existence in post-human times.

This idea may similarly illuminate the next article, about the need to deterritorialize both our humanity and the non-human “others” around us. Luana Barossi’s article, “A Zoo(po)ética de Agualusa” (Agualusa’s Zoo(po)etics), also argues for the attempt to construct modes of reading and interpreting literary works beyond the conventional hermeneutical practices which are, in themselves, “territorializations”, i.e., “programmes of truth” that reaffirm a colonialist nexus by means of a dynamic that presupposes human superiority. Taking her cue from Donna Haraway’s notion of “cyborg writing”, insofar as this metaphor is suggestive of the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human, she examines the figure of the *animot* (animal/word) in two novels by Angolan author José Eduardo Agualusa, *O Vendedor de Passados* and *Teoria Geral do Esquecimento*. In her reading of Agualusa’s zoo(po)etics, she demonstrates that this figure allows us to envision zones of indiscernibility fictionally inscribed in the destabilization of boundaries that separate human, non-human and hybrid characters. Away from allegorical modes of reading that reinscribe a binary, Manichean view of the relations between the species, Barossi’s strategy provokes a parallax in reading perspectives, thus opening up a route in the direction of a renewed human/non-human animal ethics.

The final set of articles, grouped under the section *Posthuman tropes in contemporary literature*, explore recurring narrative tropes associated with posthumanist fictions: catastrophe, contamination, utopian and dystopian bodies, transhumanism. The Anthropocene as represented in the posthuman “anthropo-scen” – figured in works written from the 1990’s by Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, Greg Bear, and Alejandro Morales – induces Sonia Torres’ readings in “O antropoceno e a antropo-cena pós-humana: narrativas de catástrofe e contaminação” (The Anthropocene and the Posthuman Anthropo-scene: narratives of catastrophe and contamination). Her focus shifts from a consideration regarding the initial conceptualization of the Anthropocene in the sphere of geology towards an examination of it as a signal of our cultural scene, in which scientific and discursive uncertainties predominate. The itinerary she constructs starts with

an allusion to the thought of anthropologist Bruno Latour, particularly in his recognition of human agency occupying the center of the natural-cultural stage in ways that drastically differ from understandings of the human in earlier discourses. From that starting point, Torres moves on to examine SF literature as a genre that thematizes the effects of the Anthropocene. Her main point is that their dystopian narratives of catastrophe and contamination provide readers with a *locus* from which to explore and map the discursive sources that “contribute to a new repertoire of theoretical and disciplinary challenges”.

Metaphors of utopian/dystopian post-human bodies also provide the focus of the last two articles. In “Os dilemas do indefinido: utopia, fluidez e subjetividade em *Stone*”, de Adam Roberts (The Dilemmas of Indefiniteness: utopia, fluidity and subjectivity in *Stone*, by Adam Roberts), André Cabral de Almeida Cardoso and Carla de Figueiredo Portilho look at Roberts’s SF novel in its reconfiguration of utopian possibilities as depicted in two ways: by the fluid net woven by the invisible and ubiquitous nanomachines that monitor posthuman bodies in a futuristic interplanetary society; and by the individual bodies forming a larger social corpus – subjects which adapt and modify themselves according to their desire, connected by a technological web. In their reading, which draws on Zygmunt Bauman’s idea of a utopia without a *topos*, and on Michel Foucault’s theories on utopian bodies, they stress that, in Roberts’ fiction, the notion of utopia as a well-defined social project is replaced by the image of technologically enhanced utopian bodies, thus questioning clear cut definitions of the human and the posthuman body.

The transhuman aspect of the posthuman body is explored in the essay “A justaposição do pós-humano e do transumano no gênero distopia: Uma análise das trilogias *Divergente* e *A 5ª Onda*” (The Juxtaposition of the Posthuman and Transhuman in the Dystopian Genre: an analysis of the *Divergent* and *The 5th Wave* trilogies), by Eduardo Marks de Marques and Anderson Martins Pereira. It offers an analysis of the ways in which contemporary dystopian trilogies by Veronica Roth and Rick Yancey re-signify the human component

in ways that can be aligned with the philosophies of the transhuman and of the posthuman. By pointing out the representation of bodies as transfigured by technological capitalism, their readings stress the transcendence of the frontiers of the human. Looking at the fictional works vis-à-vis current theorizations of post-humanism and transhumanism, the authors argue that what is at stake in contemporary dystopias is less a concern with the future decline of the human subject as a social being than this subject’s failure as a “concept”. This aspect is clearly noticeable, they contend, in the fear perceptible in these dystopias of the social traces that de-privilege the human, i.e., that reduce the human side in the human/nonhuman interface.

The essays collected in this thematic issue, not without controversies, contribute to advance recent conceptualizations of posthumanism. In Cary Wolfe’s terms, this involves a comprehension of

what amounts to a new reality: that the human occupies a new place in the universe, a universe now populated by what [he is] prepared to call nonhuman subjects. And this is why, to [him], posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited. (2010, p. 47)

The challenge that lies ahead, thus, requires an ever-increasing awareness, to use Haraway’s words, of the “arrogance of the human” which underlies so much of our practices and texts, so that we can envision the utopian possibilities in the horizon of our dystopian posthuman times.

Notes

1. According to Stengers (2005), “slow down reasoning” refers to the generation (might we say, engendering?) of a new space for reflection by decelerating thinking, thus creating the possibility of a new awareness of the problems and situations that mobilize us.
2. Earth beings, in the political discourses of Western science, refer to beings or “natural resources” that exist separately from the human sphere. In indigenous cosmology, the term refers to those other beings living in nature and who have always interacted with humans, for

they are a constitutive part of the latter. For de La Cadena (2015), earth being is any entity that demands respect from both human and nonhuman others, including mountains, animals, plants and other smaller creatures.

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