

Introduction

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What does it mean to think after the human? Before we might begin to answer that question, the meanings of both “after” and “the human” must be clarified. As the essays collected here demonstrate, although there may be some consensus that knowledge in the humanities and beyond needs urgently to take account of the more-than-human world and to redefine its concepts and methods beyond anthropocentrism, precisely how these goals are best achieved remains a matter of considerable debate. This volume, *After the Human*, provides an overview of how theory and criticism have been changed by the recognition that the human as theorized in western, liberal tradition can no longer serve as the center for intellectual enquiry in the humanities. Rather than attempting to answer definitively what should emerge in its place, this book strives instead to map a number of ongoing conversations across established and emerging fields, thereby to illuminate what is at stake in the project of theory and criticism after the human. Who and what “counts” as human today, and what is at stake in doing such counting?

Despite the divergences and tensions among these approaches, a few core ideas are evident across the chapters, marking why the twenty-first century can be described as the critical moment after the human. First is a pervasive sense that too much of the world has been left out of the picture by previously hegemonic epistemologies – great numbers of people never recognized as fully human due to colonialism, racism, and sexism, to name only the most evident discriminatory systems of western thought; but also other species, the living world that sustains all life including human life, material objects, and complex systems combining several of these neglected others, such as the climate. Even an anthropocentric viewpoint still primarily concerned with the future of the human species must now admit that its survival cannot be disentangled from the more-than-human world, and many of the approaches documented here eschew anthropocentrism as well as critique the historical limitations of the term “the human.” Second

is a sense of the timeliness of asking such questions, driven by multiple crises that include ongoing mass extinction, pervasive climate change, and the inadequacy of western humanism to provide ethical and political frameworks sufficient to respond to growing economic and other inequality and to the largescale human migrations that are a consequence of how colonialism and capitalism have carved up the world to privilege a select subset of humans, what Sylvia Wynter calls the overrepresented Man of western modernity.¹ Not all of the projects described in this volume would embrace the term “posthuman”² – although it can function as a rubric under which to collect them together and put them into conversation – and this refusal to acknowledge “the posthuman” as a universal is important too: if so much of what is wrong with “the human” lies in its claims to represent all while ignoring so much, it is fitting that approaches to posthumanism are multiple, even at times contradictory: what is required is a conversation, not a fixed concept.

Equally fraught is the question of what is “post,” including contentions that the periodization implied by the prefix is part of the problem. As Stefan Herbrechter argues in Chapter 2, there is a sense of belatedness about this “post,” which is also always a before; to push this idea even further, as Mark Minch-de Leon contends in Chapter 14, perhaps the “post” still concedes too much to “the human” and what is needed is not a working through and beyond this figure, but rather its suspension. Various philosophies, interdisciplinary formations, and new objects of study that emerge from what we might call “posthumanism” have equally divergent origin points as well as ends, as Veronica Hollinger maps out in Chapter 1. Some of the traditions represented here seek to continue the project of philosophy, whether this be in the deconstructive tradition inaugurated by Derrida, the refusal of fixed identities pursued by those following Deleuze, or the epistemological critique of what “the human” both enables and obscures implicit in Foucault’s work. Other chapters initiate or extend projects of political and social critique, and Rosi Braidotti points out that we should recognize the emergence of fields such as women’s studies, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, and the like as protests against the narrowness of authorized western knowledge systems that are part of the longer intellectual history from which posthumanism emerges.³

An equally important context is the widespread saturation of daily life by science and technology, both the hegemony of western scientific epistemologies and the degree to which daily life is substantially mediated by – and to a large extent, is dependent upon – science and technology. As Marcel

O’Gorman explores in his provocative analysis of how posthumanist thought intersects with the digital humanities in Chapter 5, there are profound questions to be asked about what it means to be a tool-using /tool-making species, including whether it is even possible to conceive of “the human” without such prosthetics. Thus, a range of posthumanist approaches engage with questions of media and information technology, including the possibility that capacities once deemed exclusive to “the human” may soon be shared by machinic, AI beings. Even more influential, however, has been the sea change in the life sciences since the mid-twentieth century, from the mapping of the genome through to synthetic biology, all of which have rewritten philosophical notions of “life itself,” prompting new questions about our relationship with nonhuman species, our ethical and political ways of managing life across multiple embodiments. The framing of our contemporary era as the Anthropocene – a widely used, if also contested designation – is only the most recognizable of new intellectual formations that urge us to rethink the humanities in dialogue with the sciences.

Thus, scholarship referred to collectively as science and technology studies (STS) is as important to the emergence of posthumanism as are philosophical critiques of humanism. Evaluations of the knowledge-making practices of western scientific tradition – especially those by feminist and decolonial scholars – are central to the project of rethinking concepts, including the meaning of “the human,” in the western world. Indeed, such critiques of the discourse and practice of science have often opened up the intellectual space into which discussions of the posthuman emerged, apparent in the indispensable role of Donna Haraway’s thought to all of feminist science studies, the posthumanist conversation that followed from her influential “Cyborg Manifesto,” and the emergence of scholarship on human-animal relations.⁴ Although not as frequently labelled posthumanist, Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, a feminist retheorization of knowledge through quantum physics that insists that ontology, epistemology, and ethics are necessarily coproduced, all part of the intra-actions of matter that make the world, including humanity, is similarly central to STS scholarship premised on paying attention to matter as agential and thus conceptualizing meaning and culture as always more-than-human.⁵

Other STS and cultural studies theorists have addressed in myriad ways how changing quotidian practices related to developments in science and technology have demanded that we rethink humanist assumptions, from Andrew Pickering’s and Andrew Ross’ respective works on technoculture,⁶

to work on the implications of genomics and biotechnologies by scholars such as Sarah Franklin and Eugene Thacker,⁷ to work about the intersections of scientific practice, media, and quotidian life, epitomized by N. Katherine Hayles and Colin Milburn.⁸ Hayles in particular has been as influential as Haraway, if in a different sphere, charting the path for posthumanist scholarship about human-machine interfaces and co-evolution that has generated significant new ways of framing how we understand consciousness, agency, and cognition. Her work has shaped conversations about representation and mediation, in conjunction with technologies of meaning-making, and forged a connection between the fields of posthumanism and media studies. At the same time, STS work in the life sciences, including that in the emergent field of the medical humanities, frequently reflects the insights of posthumanism, although it does not always use this language, reflected in scholarship about how notions of “life itself” intersect with the biopolitics of population management. Research on the biopolitics of health and governance is necessarily in dialogue with the decentering of a particular history of the human that has long been hegemonic in western thought. Such thinking about life, health, and technology after the human takes up issues of decolonization and antiracism, crucial topics that have been neglected in the philosophical tradition of posthumanist thinking until recently.⁹

As this brief overview already begins to suggest, there is more than one posthumanism and, while there are several key figures who are cited repeatedly in this volume, there are also distinct traditions that frequently do not refer to one another. In addition to Haraway and Hayles, another central figure is Rosi Braidotti, who has long worked in a Deleuzian tradition to develop a feminist practice of non-hierarchical, in-flux, and ethically oriented becoming that she refers to as nomadic subjectivity. In her most recent work, she has embraced the figure of the posthuman as a way to conceptualize necessary transformations in western thought, arguing for an affirmative posthumanism as an opportunity to remake ourselves and our ethics. Her recent *Posthuman Knowledge* includes a sustained analysis of how the humanities can and should transition into the posthumanities, thereby overcoming the historical limitations and omissions of “the human,” as well as reinvigorating research cultures to rise to the challenges of contemporary crises which demand a non-anthropocentric mode of analysis.¹⁰ Other central figures whose work has been important to shaping distinct modes of thinking after the human include Claire Colebrook, Timothy Morton, and Cary Wolfe.

Crucially, it is often the points of tension or disagreement among these traditions that are most productive for thinking today, pushing scholarship after the human beyond a critique of western humanities and into territories not even conceivable from its vantage point. Not everyone using the term posthuman means the same thing by it, which is true not only today but also throughout the philosophical history from which today's theory emerged out of diverse roots. All of the scholarly traditions represented in *After the Human* respond in some way to perceived limitations of humanist tradition – intellectual, political, and practical; they do not always agree, however, on how best to redress such failings. Interest in human/machine couplings expressed in transhumanism, for example, is often seen as intensifying rather than ameliorating the hierarchical way of thinking that has characterized human exceptionalism. Many of the approaches represented here prioritize questions of ethics vis-à-vis living beings, concerned with animals, microbes, plants, and the ecosystems that sustain the possibility of life at all, but others suggest that the life/nonlife binary, too, is a barrier to transitioning fully into non-anthropocentric thought. Some scholars seek to deconstruct or otherwise revise existing discourses from new perspectives, while others want to invent entirely new ways of thinking. Both Susan McHugh's chapter on Animals (Chapter 7) and Stacy Alaimo's chapter on New Materialisms (Chapter 12) draw attention to resistance within their respective fields to the term posthuman. Two kinds of tension are evident. On the one hand, there exists within these fields a sense that posthumanism remains too complicit in the anthropocentrism of humanism, too much an abstract philosophical discourse insufficiently committed to political praxis. On the other, those most immersed in philosophical traditions of posthumanism sometimes see scholarship about entities such as animals or ecosystems as insufficiently rigorous, which perhaps betrays a reflexive privileging of anthropocentric frameworks even as the project of humanism is critiqued. Other differences abound: the deconstructive project of critical posthumanism emphasizes the constitutive role of human language, the tradition of speculative realism attempts to escape such hermeneutics into what it argues is an objective realm of things-for-themselves, and the affirmative tradition championed by Braidotti critiques both for their failure to be sufficiently attentive to entangled bodies and their affects.

Such disagreements do not fall simply into differences between modes of critique versus more radical approaches to change, as Michael Richardson's chapter on Embodiment and Affect (Chapter 4) and Mark Minch-de Leon's chapter on Race and the Limitations of "the

Human” (Chapter 14) make clear. Both chart necessary interventions in the discussion of thinking after the human and yet also document significant reasons why scholars committed to rejecting “the human” as a racialized concept remain wary of (some discourses of) posthumanism. As Richardson puts it, understanding “after the human” as a movement “beyond the human” is often seen as a step in the wrong direction to those bodies – black, crip, queer, colonized, Asian – that have never fully been afforded the category of human in the first place.¹¹ Minch-de Leon thus insists that when we assess posthumanist knowledge production and its capacity to transform scholarship and practice, the most important question to ask is, “Have [such discourses] combatted a white supremacist racialized regime or contributed to it?” There is still much to overcome regarding the historical operation of “the human” as an ideal.

By documenting these tensions and the range of responses to the question of what the practices and politics of knowledge production after the human might be, this volume strives both to provide a map of the existing terrain and to open up space for further research that will follow from moments of convergence and from points where various posthumanisms disagree. *After the Human* documents research that begins from the premise that there is much to be gained from paying critical attention to objects and domains of knowledge that have traditionally not been considered appropriate to the humanities. All are committed to ethical and political projects of remaking knowledge – and thereby the world – by interrogating and in diverse ways refusing the hierarchical binaries that have grounded western thought and the privileged position “the human” occupies within them. A few key motifs recur across the chapters, suggesting something of an emergent frame of reference for posthumanist investigation. First, economic critique and the role of capitalism as a force that, hand-in-glove with humanism and colonialism, has produced a world beset by threats of extinction, including perhaps our own. Second, new conceptualization of subjectivity and agency, as well as a questioning of their relative importance as grounding rubrics for being, given that discourses which previously attributed specific capacities as the sole province of “the human” can no longer hold. Third, a sense of absence or omissions that must be ameliorated, apparent in the language of ghosts and hauntings across several chapters, as well as in the new objects and methods of study that are invented as ways of renewing the project of ethics. Importantly, this is not simply a case of bodies/subjects that have been left out of the humanist frame, but those who actively have been excluded by a process of dehumanization. If one thing can be claimed as central to all the chapters

collected here, it is the recognition that “the human” is always coproduced with an abjected nonhuman.

In terms of criticism and theory after the human, we see a repeated emphasis as well on questions of representation and narrative, on how – if – we might interact with and create knowledge about the more-than-human world. As we move away from chapters documenting the critique of humanism and toward those seeking to install something else in its place, we see a shift away from concerns with signification and toward issues of process and relationality. Yet strategies for making the more-than-human world perceptible remain key, evident in the fables and stories to which theorists often turn to concretize their assertions, and in the collective conviction that there is a politics implicit in whose stories are told, by whom, and in the ontological weight we allow stories. This is why each of speculative fiction (Chapter 15) and the biological arts (Chapter 16) recur as examples in many other chapters as well.

Yet the most important thing that unites the scholarship collected here is a sense that posthumanism is an ethical and political project – even if there is no consensus on precisely what its interventions should be. What the scholarship analyzed in *After the Human* reminds us again and again is that not all beings are fostered and valued in existing systems, and that the human has been a major technology in producing such divisions historically. This is not to assert that all beings should necessarily be regarded as “equal” in some kind of undifferentiated vitalism, but it is to remind us that “the human” has never been a neutral term – it is coproduced with racism, ableism, sexism, and classism, and the like – and more rigorous ways of thinking through what we value, and why, and by which logics, are urgently needed. The myopic vision inherited via a western metaphysics obsessed with individualism and agential subjectivity is at an end. What remains to be decided – indeed, is a vibrant field of ongoing enquiry – is how to ensure that the posthuman does not become the next iteration of a privileged subject that continues to render invisible its abjected outside and other. Undoubtedly, new ethics are needed, but the work that remains is collectively to negotiate what they might be, from a perspective of solidarity that simultaneously leaves space for difference. This is neither an easy nor a self-evident task but it is a necessary one.

After the Human contributes to this work by documenting the range of conversations shaping the field right now, thereby to point toward places where new conversations might emerge. Part I contextualizes the field in terms of a long history of posthumanist thought, often ideas in circulation before the term became prevalent. It includes an overview of the field’s

emergence from multiple strains of western philosophy (Chapter 1); an analysis of the relationship between the linguistic turn in critical theory and the posthuman (Chapter 2); an analysis of the centrality of questions of representation and narrative practice to the project of rethinking subjectivity (Chapter 3); an engagement with Deleuzian and related traditions that followed, resisting the (over)emphasis on language to turn to queer posthumanism (Chapter 4); and, finally, a theorization of the relationship between meaning making and technological extensions of human capacities, which opens on to another way this philosophical history might have unfolded (Chapter 5). As a whole, this part charts the origin of posthumanist concepts in western philosophical skepticism, but also reveals that this line of thought has ended up at quite unanticipated destinations.

Part II foregrounds the new objects of analysis and new methods of study that emerged following the critique of humanist concepts and their ways of framing research agendas. As Braidotti argues in *Posthuman Knowledge*, such scholarship is not only an attempt to think beyond anthropocentrism, but also redefines the human “as materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational” (11). This requires not merely new ways of thinking and reading, but of relating, being, perceiving, inter- and intra-acting with the world: once we change what is considered a proper object of knowledge, we also bring into question how to conduct research and thus introduce the possibility of collaborative methods that do not reduce the more-than-human world to a resource for human projects. The perspectives highlighted in this part are AIs, robots, machines, and systems (Chapter 6); animals (Chapter 7); life understood as distinct from its embodiment in specific living organisms (Chapter 8); the world conceived of as a system of intrinsic value for multiple agents, not as a space of rightful human dominion (Chapter 9); and a critique of how the life/nonlife binary has been foundational to western thought, which anticipates some of the critiques of “the human” from non-western points of view (Chapter 10).

Finally, Part III explores in greater details some new sites of knowledge formation and transformations of existing modes of enquiry that are attendant upon the emergence of posthumanist frames of reference. It asks how the human is co-entangled with other entities and it explores genealogies of thought neglected in anthropocentric, western tradition. It includes an analysis of how the biopolitical governance of life is significantly reshaped by the erosion of human exceptionalism (Chapter 11); an argument for new kinds of environmental politics enabled by thinking through new materialist frameworks that refuse to see matter as inert

(Chapter 12); an overview of how and why speculative realism attempts to think fully outside of human concepts (Chapter 13); an argument for decolonializing posthumanism through a politics of refusal that suspends the divisions that have been wrought by “the human” (Chapter 14); and analyses of new ways of making culture and meaning in the light of the turn toward the more-than-human world in humanities scholarship as manifested in speculative fiction (Chapter 15) and in the biological arts (Chapter 16).

Braidotti cautions that

Statements like “we humans”, or even “we posthumans”, need to be grounded carefully on materially embedded differential perspectives, for “we-are-in-*this*-together-but-we-are-*not*-one-and-the-same”. “We” are immanent to, which means intrinsically connected to, the very conditions we are *also* critical of. The posthuman convergence is a shared trait of our historical moment, but it is not at all clear whose crisis this actually is. Because we cannot speak of an undifferentiated humanity (or an undifferentiated “we”) that is allegedly sharing in a common condition of both technological mediation and crisis and extinction, extra work is required of critical thinkers. (157)

The scholarship collected here begins this necessary, urgent work, attentive to its difficulty and to the multiplicity of neglected voices it adds to the conversation, to the diversity of “answers” being provided to ongoing crises. *After the Human* does not seek to be the final, definitive statement on criticism and theory after the more-than-human turn, but it does assert that they can no longer remain as they once were, in this light of rethinking the human.

Notes

1. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR: Centennial Review*, 3 (3) (2003): 257–337.
2. Among my reasons for using this term to collect these approaches together, despite tensions among them, is my conviction that there is much to be gained from a dialogue among them. Too often scholarship fragments, with scholars striving to introduce a multiplicity of terms such as the ahuman (J. Paul Narkunas, *Reified Life: Speculative Capital and the Ahuman Condition* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2018]) or the infrahuman (Megan H. Glick, *Infrahumanisms: Science, Culture, and the Making of Modern Non/Personhood* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2018]), to name only two I have recently encountered – and intellectual work seals itself off into unproductively

narrow conversations. To be clear, I do understand the resistance that some scholars express toward using the term given that early posthumanist conversations failed to engage colonialism and antiracism in a meaningful way. Moreover, I do not mention Narkunas or Glick to critique the ideas expressed in their work. Rather, my concern is that an opportunity to further decolonize posthumanist scholarship is missed when such important correctives are positioned as being parallel to rather than part of a broader conversation. I do, however, think it is important to differentiate between a range of posthumanist approaches that rethink knowledge outside of the structures of domination that have been the hallmark of humanism, versus transhumanism as a project of uber-human transcendence.

3. Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 104.
4. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.
5. Karen Bard, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
6. See Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) and Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991).
7. See Sarah Franklin, *Dolly Mixtures: The Remaking of Genealogy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and Eugene Thacker, *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics and Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).
8. To name only their most cited texts, see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Infomatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Collin Milburn, *Mondo Nano: Fun and Games in the World of Digital Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
9. Important examples of such STS scholarship include Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) and Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
10. See Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*. Crucially, Braidotti sees in the Critical Posthumanities not just new ways to do humanities research in the absence of “the human” as a guiding object of analysis, but also a way such scholarship could resist the neoliberal transformation of the university into an engine of capitalist accumulation: “Politically, the Critical PostHumanities represent both an alternative to the neo-liberal governance of academic knowledge, dominated by quantitative data and control, and a re-negotiation of its terms” (102). With Maria Hlaajova, Braidotti has also put together an encyclopedic *Posthuman Glossary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) which catalogues an