CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ALREADY POSTHUMAN WORLD

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The claim that "we have always been posthuman" has become a commonplace in critical discourse (Braidotti; Hayles; Wolfe). While the distinctive affordances of digital communication and Fourth-Industrial-Revolution technologies have intensified the entanglement with the nonhuman, such relationality is hardly unique to the twenty-first-century subject. At the same time, the reality of the networked self implies the redefinition of the sense of agency as identity and community are increasingly articulated as online performance (Papacharissi). However, the pull of the human is not to be underestimated. The already posthuman self finds expression in imaginaries and institutions of the Anthropocene, and it continues to struggle against deeply ingrained anthropocentric ways of knowing, thinking, and acting. Tracing whether the discourses of this posthuman self materialize as dreamlike utopia or nightmarish dystopia is one of this special section's central aims.

The contributors to this section explore a wide range of literary, audiovisual, and cultural manifestations of the posthuman in the present and the recent past. The narratives and discourses under examination participate in and help shape the "*novus ordo seclorum*" that Miriam Fernández-Santiago associates with the synthetic aesthetics of the Neo-Apollonian (229-30). Together, the essays showcase the richness and diversity of perspectives enabled by critical posthumanist approaches to contemporary culture. A cursory glance at their keywords—including, but not limited to, Afrofuturism, affect, artificial intelligence, colonialism, ecoterrorism, fascism, and queer desire, kinship, and temporality—reveals the complexity of this genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise.

Drawing on Black antihumanism, queer theory, and critical posthumanism, Mónica Calvo Pascual opens the discussion with a fresh reading of Rivers Solomon's debut novel, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*. Her essay argues that the novel surpasses its usual labelling

as Afrofuturist writing by entering the space of Black utopia, exploring not-yet-realized possibilities of hope and change existing in society. The narratological study of Aster as the main focalizer leads to a pertinent discussion of the role of neurodivergence and body deviance in resisting and reappropriating established notions of normalcy and humanity. Equally crucial is the proposed interpretation of queer radical kinship as a form of resistance. The recognition of the political and revolutionary potential of bodily pleasure and the erotic destabilizes the heavily hierarchized community aboard the spaceship Matilda—a science-fiction setting dependent on the exploitation of Black bodies and thus mirroring the dynamics of the plantation. Ultimately, Calvo Pascual highlights the novel's participation in a utopian project grounded in relationality with shared knowledge and experience.

Naiara Berganzo-Besga offers a reading of Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy focused on the feminist reappraisal of the figure of Lilith as a monstrous posthuman agent. After contextualizing the character within Jewish and Christian traditions, Berganzo-Besga explores Butler's interpretation of this archetype of female rebellion not only as the abject, liminal other, but also as the cyborg vessel for a sublime, hybrid progeny. Embodying the integration of multiple realities, Butler's Lilith dismantles traditional boundaries rooted in dualistic thought while instituting new paradigms of motherhood and womanhood. Viewed through the lenses of post-apocalyptic utopia and female Gothic fiction, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy stages the horror experienced by the exploitative patriarchal order when confronted with a threatening alien power. The essay also attends to how Butler's fiction incorporates and reworks the codes of captivity and slave narratives in an expressly Afrofuturist fashion. To this, an ecofeminist dimension is added, in which the ecocidal practices that lead to apocalypse are contrasted with the promising posthuman future—freed from hierarchical domination—announced by the genesis of a human-alien species.

From a different angle, Adriana Kiczkowski explores the affective and empathetic "capacities" of artificial intelligences and their potential implications for new relational forms of care. By positioning technology as the new caregivers, discussions on class distinction and social structures emerge. For the matter, she examines technologically mediated care in Alexander Weinstein's "Saying Goodbye to Yang" and Lemire and Walta's comic *Sentient*, arguing that caring machines provide space for new debates on affect, responsibility and kinship. In

Weisten's analysis of Yang, Kiczkowski sees a commodified "big brother" figure easing cultural heritage transmission (for a Chinese child adopted by US citizens). Within this context, Kiczkowski brings forth debates on colonial desires and social inequalities. In *Sentient*, Kiczkowski interprets Valarie's emergent "cyborg motherhood" within catastrophic circumstances as a new condition which reframes care as adaptive plasticity and distributed agency. The narrative presents the paradox of simulated empathy coexisting with mechanisms of surveillance and disciplinary power. The comparative reading posits care as ambivalent and reproductive of hierarchies (gender, race, and class). The essay's contribution lies in theorizing care as a posthuman relational practice that includes nonhuman agents and infrastructures, where ethical considerations should be taken into account.

In her decidedly interdisciplinary approach to the animated series *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*, Stephanie Rincón Ramos adopts ecocritical, postcolonial, and critical posthumanist perspectives to analyze the ethical and affective dimensions of a post-apocalyptic world. The setting of the story—a landscape ruled by sentient mutant animals—facilitates the dismantling of human exceptionalism in fundamental ways. Challenging all-too-conspicuous Western fears of reverse colonization and racial replacement, the show helps us envision alternative multispecies futures defined by kinship and becoming, in which hybrid identities and alliances counteract racist and imperialist hierarchies. Through a discourse of more-than-human relationality, the series offers a hopeful way out of the fatalistic narratives of crisis and fear typical of the apocalyptic mode. As Rincón Ramos argues, the adventures of Kipo and her companions celebrate the creativity of all beings—human and otherwise—while imagining new forms of identity and community in the face of cultural and ecological crisis.

In her essay on Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous*, Laura Larrodera-Arcega challenges dominant anthropocentric representations of the cyborg in science fiction. Even though Newitz's enhanced humans and biobots appear embedded in heteronormative codes, Larrodera-Arcega draws on theories of the inhuman and the posthuman relational subject to argue that the novel pictures a double transgression of desire, depicted as a leaky, productive force that withstands coding practices. Biohacking and chemical alteration generate a literal transhumanist transgression of the body, in contradistinction to the metaphorical critical posthumanist

transgression arising from the embodied interactions between the human and the inhuman—that is, the liberating queer encounters that transcend human-centered models of subjectivity. In her reading, the queerness of *Autonomous* permeates both temporality and narrative structure. Meanwhile, the biobot Paladin invites an examination of the haptic as a new epistemic mode for the posthuman—a queer mode of perception that collapses the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, urging us to reconsider our current assemblage with the machine outside heteronormative and anthropocentric frameworks.

Amaya Fernández Menicucci's article considers Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* tetralogy as an example of the posthuman development against a backdrop of traditional humanist binary forms shaping the human/nonhuman, and agency, among others. Drawing on critical posthumanism, she examines this weird fiction and its ecological disasters as new ontological opportunities of hybrid evolution. What initially seems to be an anthropocentric horror, Fernández Menicucci contests, is in fact a metamorphosis for regenerative continuum based on affective relationality and ontological permeability. She contends that ecological catastrophe becomes an opportunity to see the monstrous narrative as an acceptance of hybridity and interconnection, thus demonstrating that VanderMeer's literary production is foundational in the exploration of narrative constructions of the already posthuman enmeshment, embeddedness, and continuum assemblage.

Ecological disasters and trauma are central in Laura García Soria's examination of the history of ecological groups in the US from the 1990s until now. She reads the speculative fiction work *The Ministry for the Future* as a literary space that anticipates cultural, political and ecological tendencies in the ecological catastrophe we are living in. In this respect, she argues that movements towards saving the planet and thus, humanity, are derived from ecological affect, a subset of environmental affect that fosters awareness and action. This awakening toward ecological engagement, is, as she states, rooted in the response to ecological trauma. Originating from this state of vulnerability, ecoterrorism arises as a form of defense against environmental disaster. Therefore, she argues that speculative fiction enhances awareness and management of current and future environmental reactions and responsibilities.

Richard Hardack's work offers a critical exploration of artificial intelligence as a corporatized tool that perpetuates patterns of

neoliberal and fascist tendencies. His main argument is that the prime intention of this technology is to promote the power of corporations to overrule governments. In his introductory analysis, he presents the eschewal of transparency and accountability as a blueprint scheme that is analogous to both fascist and corporation frameworks. Furthermore, AI is revealed as a technological dream that facilitates the deflection of the human onto an imaginary agential and autonomous corporate personae in a zero-sum paradigm. Hardack continues to corroborate his contentions through the examination of AI's capacity to generate hallucinatory scenarios through selected and neglected data input that can consequently override epistemology and ontology. Moreover, he identifies AI through its imperial algorithms as "the new colonial form of (virtual) empire."

In conjunction, these articles highlight supposedly fictional socio-cultural scenarios that are already ingrained in the posthuman world. The authors provoke us into reconsidering humanist concepts of ethics, care, and synergetic cohabitation by presenting the perils of power and control in hierarchical social structures with entrenched technology. They also provide a basis for discussing the role of literature as an adjudicator in the transition from the exceptionalism of the Anthropocene to an ontology of relationalities, fluidity, vulnerabilities and materiality in a *novus ordo seclorum.*

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