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Bio

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Abstract

TITLE: "The POSTHUMAN CONDITION and the CRITICAL POSTHUMANITIES"

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This paper builds on the definition of the posthuman as the convergence, of post-humanist critiques of 'the Man of reason' on the one hand and post-anthropocentric critiques of human exceptionalism on the other. It argues that their current convergence across the spectrum of cognitive capitalism, in the age known as the Anthropocene, is producing a chain of discursive, theoretical, and methodological effects that are more than the sum of their parts. They enact a qualitative leap in the direction of a trans-disciplinary field of scholarship: the Critical Posthumanities. To take the two pillars of this field: the Environmental and the Digital Humanities, the paper discusses the issues: what meta-patterns and which institutional developments can we detect in their recent exponential growth? What can make these posthumanities 'critical'? "

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WHAT ARE THE POSTHUMANITIES?

WHAT ARE THE POSTHUMANITIES?

(SLIDE 1: TITLE SLIDE)

DEFINITION

Contemporary posthuman scholarship is a **convergence phenomenon** unfolding at the intersection between post-humanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other.

The former criticizes the idea of 'Man' as the allegedly universal standard-bearer for the human, whereas the latter objects to species hierarchy and human exceptionalism.

Their convergence affects both the definition of the subject of knowledge and the modes of knowledge production.

(SLIDE 2: CONVERGENCE PHENOMENON)

Post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism are equally powerful discourses, but they refer to different theoretical and philosophical genealogies and engender different political stances.

These two strands neither follow logically from each other, nor do they occur simultaneously as world-historical events.

They are rather discrete and separate events that are currently converging, producing not so much a harmonious synthesis, as a contested qualitative leap in new directions.

The Vitruvian Man **(SLIDE 3: VITRUVIUS)**

Has gone Cyborg **(SLIDE 4: CYBORG)**

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THE ANTHROPOCENE

Considering the state of the public debate about climate change, it is important to situate the posthuman predicament firstly in the context of the **Anthropocene**, which is a popular but also controversial notion in the scientific community. In other words, just referring to the Anthropocene begs the question.

We need to address social justice and political concerns at the core of the geo-centered discussions, in order to operationalise the Anthropocene, notably some social-political analyses of the combination of fast technological advances on the one hand and the exacerbation of economic and social inequalities on the other. The Anthropocene is not complete without an analysis of socio-political conditions.

(SLIDE 6: ANTHROPOMEME)

Moreover, even as a relative neologism, the Anthropocene has already become another '**Anthropomeme**' (Macfarlane, 2016), spawning several alternative terms, such as 'Chthulucene' (Haraway, 2016.), 'Capitalocene' (Moore 2015), 'Anthrop-obscene' (Parikka, 2015a). And there are yet others: 'Plastic-ene', 'Plantationcene' (Tsing, 2015) and 'Mis-anthropocene' (Clover & Spahr, 2014).

The terminological vitality here reflects the accelerationist discursive economy of our times, and expresses both the excitement and the exasperation involved in accounting for the posthuman predicament within the Anthropocenic frame.

I propose therefore to look more broadly and widen the picture. My focus throughout the reading of the posthuman in the Anthropocene will be on the issue of subjectivity, that is to say what kind of subjects of knowledge we are becoming and what kind of knowledge we are producing in this context.

Clearly “we” are in this together, but in a secular frame of reference, I cannot and will not endorse an ontological kind of humanism that sacralizes the human and flattens out the structural differences that separate us. We are in this posthuman predicament together, but we are not One, because we are positioned in dramatically different power relations.

(SLIDE 7: SEA OF GARBAGE)

Following on from the critiques of European humanism from within Europe, from Nietzsche to Deleuze, I want to see differences as resources and approach the making of humanity as a political project, as well as an ethical endeavor.

“we” can only become “we” together.

This project is a concrete political praxis, to be implemented collectively, through the patient construction of alliances and assemblages.

WHAT ARE THE POSTHUMANITIES?

So let me give you some examples of what is happening in the field of posthuman knowledge production.

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(SLIDE 8: CRITICAL POSTHUMANITIES 1)

(SLIDE 9: CRITICAL POSTHUMANITIES 2)

(SLIDE 10: CRITICAL POSTHUMANITIES 3)

- Ecological Humanities
- Environmental humanities
 - Blue Humanities
 - Green Humanities
- Sustainable humanities
- Interactive humanities
- Organic humanities
- Greater Humanities

- Neural-Evolutionary Humanities
- Entrepreneurial Humanities
- Global humanities
- Medical humanities
- Bio-humanities
- Public humanities
- Civic humanities
- Community humanities
- Translational Humanities
- Resilient Humanities
- Posthumanities (Wolfe, 2010)
- The Inhuman Humanities (Grosz, 2011)
- The Digital Humanities (Hayles, 1990, 2005)
- Transformative Humanities (Epstein, 2012)
- Nomadic Humanities (Stimpson, 2016)
- Adjectival Humanities (de Graef, 2016)

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COMMENTS

Firstly, let me say that, far from being the symptom of crisis and fragmentation, these new discourses are a sign of great vitality and innovation.

They open up new eco-sophical, posthumanist and post-anthropocentric dimensions for the Humanities. And – crucial for my materialist cartographic method – these developments are empirically verifiable; they are already here.

Moreover, it would be intellectually lazy to take the on-going proliferation of new discourses as the mere expression of relativism, let alone the much-despised postmodernism. And it may be tempting - but equally fallacious - to take the fast growth of the Critical Posthumanities as self-generating, in a sort of

schizoid spin. The fact that rhizomic, web-like, knowledge production backed by Internet may be going viral does not make it spontaneous.

The Critical Posthumanities today are rather the result of the hard work of communities of thinkers, scholars and activists – alternative collective assemblages – that reconstitute not only the missing links in academic knowledge practices: it is a collective praxis.

In other words, being posthuman is not a mark of contempt for mankind. It rather expresses the belief that the human is its own overcoming, because the human is a relational entity that becomes in and with the world.

SOME DEFINING FEATURES

The Critical Posthumanities assume that the knower – the knowing subject - is neither *homo universalis* nor *Anthropos* alone, but a more complex – embodied and embedded, non-unitary, but relational and affective subjects – collaboratively linked to a material web of human and non-human agents –the subject of knowledge is *zoe/geo/techno*-mediated.

(SLIDE 12: THE POSTHUMANITIES)

Posthuman scholarship celebrates the diversity of *zoe* – non-human life - in a non-hierarchical matter, recognizing the respective degrees of intelligence, ability and creativity of all organisms. This implies that thinking and knowing are *not* the prerogative of humans alone, but take place in the world, which is the terrestrial, grounded location for multiple thinking species – we are all eco-sophically connected. It is a becoming-world of knowledge practices.

Adopting non-anthropomorphic thinking is especially difficult for the Humanities, in that it positions terrestrial, planetary, cosmic concerns, as well as the conventional naturalized others, animals, plants and the technological apparatus, as serious agents and co-constructors of collective thinking and knowing. *Zoe/geo/techno*-bound perspectives indeed.

(SLIDE 13: NATURECULTURE CONTINUUM ZOE/GEO/TECHNO)

The objects of research and enquiry of the Humanities have ceased to be focussed exclusively on “Man” and his anthropomorphic others. Today, on top of human diversity, we will find have animal studies, eco and geo-criticism. In terms of object of study, today the Humanities are covering forests, fungi, bacteria, dust and bio-hydro-solar- techno powers.

We have meta-objects and the hyper-sea, while ‘human/imal’ and algorithmic studies ignite the imagination of our graduate students. Many papers in this conference have made this point abundantly clear.

Bu it is not just a matter of adopting **new objects of enquiry**- something else has changed, at the conceptual level. The evolution of “Media studies” is the best way to illustrate what’s happening, because the field posits human-technological relations as its core question. The position of media technologies shifts dramatically from the postmodern to the posthuman eras.

Whereas issue of representation, surfaces and images are central to postmodern discussions – down to the early debates on the simulacrum, today the agenda is about data processing, code, algorithms and network circulation.

This is a **materialist shift**, which brings the information technology to the core of the posthuman discussion about intelligent, self-organizing non-anthropomorphic life-forms- the onto-genetic capacities of networks.

What we have to confront today is vital materialism, the life-making capacities of inorganic devices. In my work I draw inspiration for this philosophical neo-materialism from Spinoza, that I re-read with my teachers Gilles Deleuze and Michel Serres. They teach us how to think the vitalist immanence of non-anthropomorphic life-systems.

This grants respectively to the earth and to the computational networks the same role and agency as the human subjects that inhabit them, while

acknowledging embodied and embedded, relational and affective differences in degrees and intensity of what they are made of and what they can do.

Of course there is a qualitative difference between accepting the structural interdependence among species and actually treating the non-humans as knowledge collaborators. But my point is that, in the age of computational networks and synthetic biology on the one hand; climate change and erosion of liberties on the other, this is precisely what we need to learn to do, in addition to all that we know already. We need to de-familiarize our mental habits.

The conventional Humanities are too anthropo-centric and suffer from a lack of adequate concepts to deal with the ecological environment, media-nature-cultural continuums and non-human others – although we provide most of the metaphors and representations for them.

There is a methodological issue as well: the social constructivist approach does not always help to deal with the challenges of our nature-culture continuum and the zoe/ge/techno- mediated milieus.

ANALYSIS

Let me push the analysis further and focus on the pillars of the Posthumanities, namely the Digital Humanities and the Environmental Humanities, also known as “Green Humanities” if they focus on the earth, and ‘Blue Humanities’ if they focus on the sea and water.

(SLIDE 14: TWO PILLARS)

What are their defining features?

Well, the first striking feature is that both the Environmental & the Digital Humanities claim to be the real New Humanities, and to be best attuned to the times, being immersed in urgent contemporary socio-political concerns.

The Environmental Humanities are in the middle of the Anthropocene debate and the Digital Humanities reflect on new forms of technologically mediated sensibility, enhanced modes of perception, as well as issues of community and security.

Both are pragmatic and materially-based discourses, with a strong historical and literary component on the side of the conventional Humanities, but also a strong link to “science studies” and to cultural studies of science and technology.

Both are extremely popular in the corporate sector and management studies.

What is critical as well as posthuman about the Digital and Environmental Humanities?

It is a question of thematic, methodological and conceptual changes.

Thematically, both of them deal with non-human objects/subjects of study: the Digital with network culture and new media and the Environmental with Gaia or the planet as a whole.

Methodologically, they overcome the vision of a de-naturalized social order somehow disconnected from its environmental and organic foundations. They call for more complex schemes of understanding the multi-layered inter-dependence between “naturecultures” today.

Conceptually, the defining feature of the Posthumanities – which makes them critical – is their ‘supra-disciplinary’ character. The driving force for their knowledge production is not the policing force of disciplinary purity, or the zeal of minority politics, but rather the modes of relation and cross-hybridization these discourses are able and willing to engage in. They prosper to the extent that they show the ability and the willingness to move on.

The strength of the Critical Posthumanities is their relational ability to open up to the world. The acknowledgment of the porous nature not only of their institutional boundaries, but also of their epistemic core.

In this respect, the zoe/geo/techno-mediation that sustains the Critical Posthumanities, does not only take the form of a quantitative proliferation of new fundable fields, but also qualitative and methodological shifts.

The Critical Posthumanities represent both an alternative to the neo-liberal governance of academic knowledge and a re-negotiation of its terms.

The Critical Posthumanities as a supra-disciplinary, relational field of knowledge that is contiguous with, but not identical to cognitive capitalism. It functions at different speeds, moves on different time-lines and is fuelled by different ethical affects. It involves social and cultural movements, new kinds of economically productive practices and multiple curiosity-driven knowledge formations, that do not always coincide with the surplus-value profit motive. In other words, the Critical Posthumanities design a horizon of becoming that the contemporary university and especially the academic Humanities will benefit from.

Please note that this is not a relativistic scheme here, but rather a multi-layered and multi-directional account of what is already happening. The word I would use is “perspectivism”, different nomadic viewpoints from equally materially embedded and embodied locations, expressing the degree and quality of experience of different subjects. We need to acknowledge the multiple and internally contradictory aspects of our own knowledge practices by adopting a diversified materialist approach, which I would propose as the antidote to relativism. The difference is a matter of ethics: becoming as the realization of affirmative, collaborative ethics, as opposed to the axiom of profit and maximalization of consumers’ quantitative options.

Affirmative ethics must guide our politics.

Far from calling for a new order, a new mode of global governance, these fields of research show the self-regulating force of situated knowledge, Of multiple heterogeneous assemblages, inter-connections that plunging headlong into a post-disciplinary world.

NEO-HUMANISMS

This does not mean however that all analytically post-anthropocentric discourses are automatically post-humanist. On the contrary, one of the paradoxes of the current situation in the Humanities is a normative return to Humanism, coupled with a growing post-anthropocentric analytical framework.

- Single most important is non-European humanism, of the African (Ubuntu/humanitude) Buddhist and Hindu kind. Sartre, in his preface to Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* did foresee that the future of Humanism was not in Europe.
- 'compensatory neo-humanism', as in Peter Singer's animal rights theory (1975),
- And Martha Nussbaum's moral liberal philosophy (2006), post-anthropocentric analytic premises are combined with a reassessment of a number of humanist values, notably empathy and solidarity.

Post-anthropocentric neo-humanists converge on the need to uphold and expand on these values across all species and to practices an ethics of affirmation based on species-equality (Braidotti, 2006).

But post-anthropocentric neo-humanism is an internally contradictory position, that leads to aporia and to the tensions of combining the flawed legacy of European humanism with more vibrant, but less institutionalized non-Western traditions of humanism.

I would propose affirmative posthumanist values instead. Turning the differences into grounds of encounter, re-reading Bergson and Spinoza with Deleuze and Glissant.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The key word remains: **convergences**.

Although I am perfectly aware that the dominant institutional model of the Environmental and Digital Humanities is a combination of corporate and academic interests, backed by public policies and funds, I wish to approach these emergent studies as the seeds of what they are in the process of becoming: their virtual capacity. What kind of knowing subjects are emerging here, whose potential for understanding and knowledge has not yet been realized?

What I aspire to is to combine the Environmental and Digital Humanities – as prototypes of the Critical Posthumanities – with practices and theories of subjectivity, that combine ‘species thinking’ and ‘network thinking’, within post-anthropocentric configuration of the subject of knowledge and affirmative ethics.

We need to work towards a culture of mutual respect between the hard and the subtle sciences, pushing their respective complexity to explore multiple potential visions, while resisting the pitfalls of relativism. Towards the actualization of shared, commonly held, community-oriented technological mediation.

They can mobilize the capital of knowledge of the conventional Humanities, notably literature, music, poetry, science-fiction, cinema and media, but they also draw from the original sources provided by many generations of critical “studies”, which have grown all around and in-between the disciplines.

The Critical Posthumanities are uniquely placed to encourage people to reflect upon and possibly change their living habits in order to confront the current challenge. They can steer the process in an affirmative direction away from flat consumerism, in order to make the most of this incredible opportunity. The posthuman subjects of knowledge need to want to change, i.e: they need to become subjects who desire otherwise.

HOW TO CRITICIZE THEM?

(SLIDE 15: 2 PREMISES)

2 premises:

- The human is not a neutral term
- Cognitive character of advanced capitalism

THE HUMAN IS NOT A NEUTRAL TERM

(SLIDE 16: NOT A NEUTRAL TERM)

Humanity is not a neutral term but rather one that indexes access to specific powers, values and norms, privileges and entitlements, rights and visibility.

Critical questions about the limits of humanist universalism were raised from the 18th century onwards.

- Olympe de Gouges
- Toussaint l'Ouverture

No amount of universalism can conceal the fractures, the internal contradictions and external exclusions that have always composed a notion of the human.

And leaving the question of the subject out of the posthuman picture altogether just begs the question (ANT).

COGNITIVE CAPITALISM

(SLIDE 17: COGNITIVE CAPITALISM)

The frame of cognitive and bio-genetic advanced capitalism and media and information technologies. What constitutes capital value today is the informational power of living matter itself, its immanent qualities and self-organizing capacity, which enhances the ability to generate profits from the scientific and economic comprehension of all that lives. The systemic exploitation of living matter through advanced technological mediation is at the core of a political economy of “bio-piracy” (Shiva, 1997), which is the norm in advanced capitalism.

(SLIDE 18: GREENHOUSE)

What this means is that there is as much if not more knowledge and scientific research produced today outside the university and academic institutions as inside. This is the cognitive character of advanced capitalism. It provides ammunition for the many political forces who want to dismantle the university as we know it and reduce the humanities to a museum function.

The so-called “advanced” aspects of contemporary bio-technological developments paradoxically contain archaic components, in terms of the dehumanizing impact they exercise on many humans, as well as in the systematic depletion of non-human life-forms. In other words, these bio-technologies create as many problems as they solve, particularly if you broaden the picture to include the issue of anthropomorphic subjectivity.

Thus, the greenhouses – as other bio-technologically mediated agricultural fields – may look like Moon stations, but their produce is mostly picked by unregistered migrants who move from one site to another during the harvest season. They constitute the proletariat of today – economic fodder vulnerable to

widespread vilification and xenophobic rejection. Disposable bodies, invisible but indispensable, they compose the necro-political face of bio-power.

(SLIDE 19: BLUE BODIES)

(SLIDE 20: REFUGEES)

There is no room for technophobia or Luddite rage: we ARE our technologies: or trains, planes, iphone and laptops... we are co-extensive with the very conditions we are also critical of, but technology is NOT the enemy.

PLANETARY DIFFERENTIAL HUMANITIES: THE EMERGING MISSING PEOPLE

Another way of saying all this will take me to the last stage of my argument, namely that the Critical Posthumanities, by tracing a different mode of relational subjectivity, through affirmative ethics, help us to compose a new humanity, as a virtual project, that is to say a PRAXIS – a “missing people”.

That is to say a: “we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same” kind of people. posthuman subjects of knowledge.

(SLIDE 21: WORLD MAP)

This “we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same” kind of people is a subject that acknowledges it is intertwined with the totality of things – including *zoe/geo/techno* “things”. A subject that aspires to compose missing alliances and relations by actively working towards the creation of milieus and planes of encounter.

This is what I mean by a ‘missing people’, a people in the process of becoming not-One – a complex multiplicity – held together by shared ethical passions for and a social imaginary supportive of affirmative alternatives.

Historically, all sorts of communities were already empirically missing. Whether we look at women and LBGT+, indigenous knowledge systems, at queers, otherwise enabled, trailer-parks, non-humans or technologically mediated existences, these are real-life subjects whose knowledge never made it into any of the official cartographies. Their struggle for visibility and emergence also affects the knowledge they are capable of generating.

But the other missing people are the virtual ones, those that can emerge only as the result of a neo-materialist praxis of affirmation, aimed at constructing the plane of composition for such an assembly. This composition requires affective and relational alliances of a high degree of subtlety and complexity. They need to go beyond identity claims, not by denying them, but by expanding them into diversified embedded & embodied materialist platforms of different “missing people” creating – in their own ways – different methods of creating knowledge.

The transversal alliance of the missing people today is technologically mediated and it always involves non-human agents (land, water, plastic, wires, information highways, algorithms, etc.). New border-crossings are being set up that aim at actualizing the virtual knowledges and visions of these missing peoples.

The energy of the field is already providing some answers. The Critical Posthumanities are in constant process, inter-breeding through multiple alliances, topics and missing links. Which does not mean that anything goes, but rather that rhizomic multi-directionality is the rule.

PLANETARY DIFFERENTIAL HUMANITIES/CRITICAL POSTHUMANITIES

(SLIDE 22: PLANETARY DIFFERENTIAL HUMANITIES 1)

- Intersection of the ‘classical’ Environmental Humanities and indigenous epistemologies

- Postcolonial Environmental Humanities
- Postcolonial Digital Humanities
- Decolonial Futures of Digital Media
- Transnational Environmental literary studies knowledges and cosmologies
- Indigenous

(SLIDE 23: PLANETARY DIFFERENTIAL HUMANITIES 2)

- Non-nationally Indexed Humanities
- Feminist Humanities
- Queer Humanities
- Migrant/Diasporic Humanities
- Poor/Trailer Park Humanities
- Post/De-colonial Humanities
- A Child's Humanities
- Otherwise-abled/Disabled Humanities

And the list is open.....

NO PAN HUMANITY

We should avoid hasty reconstructions of 'Humanity'. The focus must remain on changing perceptions of the human as an effect of our globalized, technologically mediated and ethnically diverse world, the differential politics of location and how they affect the production of knowledge. "We"- the dwellers of this planet at this point in time- are confronted by a number of painful contradictions: an electronically linked pan-humanity which however is more fragmented than ever and split by convulsive internal fractures, xenophobic fears and violence. Humanity is re-created as a negative category, held together by shared vulnerability and the spectre of extinction, but also struck down by environmental devastation, by new and old epidemics, in endless 'new' wars, that innovate on ways of killing, in the proliferation of

migrations and exodus, detention camps and refugees' centres. The staggering inequalities engendered by the global economy make for violence and insurrection; the appeals for new forms of cosmopolitan relations or a global *ethos* are often answered by necro-political acts of violence, destruction and assassination.

We must beware of re-compositions of corporate humanism, which is just a pretext for consumerism.

(SLIDES 24 and 25: BENETTON)

Starting from philosophies of radical immanence, vital materialism and the feminist politics of locations, I want to argue against taking a flight into an abstract idea of a “new” pan-humanity, bonded in shared vulnerability or anxiety about survival and extinction.

What we need instead is embedded and embodied, relational and affective cartographies of the new power relations that are emerging from the current geo-political and post-anthropocentric world order. Class, race, gender and sexual orientations, age and able-bodiedness are more than ever significant markers of human “normality.” They are key factors in framing the notion of and policing access to something we may call “humanity”.

Yet, considering the global reach of the problems we are facing today, in the era of the ‘Anthropocene’, it is nonetheless the case that “we” are indeed in *this* anthropocenic crisis together. Such awareness must not however obscure or flatten out the power differentials that sustain the collective subject (“we”) and its endeavor (*this*). There may well be multiple and potentially contradictory projects at stake in the re-composition of ‘humanity’ right now.

It may be more useful to work toward multiple actualizations of new transversal alliances, communities and planes of composition of the human: many ways of becoming-world together.

WE NEED PLANETARY DIFFERENTIAL POSTHUMANISM.

(SLIDE 26)