

Redefining Humanity: Posthuman Passion in a Digital Age

By Marianne Apostolides

Reviewed in this essay:

When Species Meet by Donna Haraway. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

The name alienates before we begin: “*posthumanism*.”

Posthumanism?

Post humanity?

This must be one more theory concocted by out-of-touch academics. I can picture them now: pale bodies and prodigious brains, working madly in ivy-entangled towers, breathing air that’s stale, chilled from the timeless eternity of ideas. Who *else* would want to embrace a notion called ‘posthumanism’?

Surprisingly, the editors of the prestigious University of Minnesota Press hope that *you* will. Five years ago, they launched a series of books on posthumanism. An early offering is *When Species Meet* by Donna Haraway, a scholar who entered popular consciousness in the 1980s with “The Cyborg Manifesto,” a romping rethinking of female identity. I opened Haraway’s posthumanism book with slight trepidation. I girded myself, prepared encounter a science-fiction fantasia of “machine-man” meeting “canine-companion” on some strange, space-age terrain I couldn’t quite fathom. Not from down here, at least: here, on the lowly ground outside the ivy towers.

Well, it turns out that I was wrong.

It turns out that posthumanism is a passionate philosophy, one that urges us to reconnect with the physical — with touch — to engage ourselves in our obligations and pleasures. Posthumanism is the next major theory in the History of Ideas, the next construction of how we conceive of ourselves in our world. Its movement is muscular; its force will shape our imaginations, our very possibility.

Okay. But what *is* posthumanism?

Grasping Posthumanism

The theory starts from a basic premise: human beings are not exceptional. We do not stand alone among living beings, lifted onto a sun-drenched dais, enlightened by our language, logic, and consciousness. In fact, we don't even stand alone *at all* — at least not as independent, fully-constituted entities.

The human genome, Haraway writes, exists in only 10% of all cells in “the mundane space I call my body.” The rest of the cells belong to bacteria, fungi, various microscopic organisms. By relaying this disconcerting fact, Haraway isn't denying the power of that “mundane space” that is each human being — quite the opposite.

Posthumanism celebrates us, but *not* as humanist thinkers once did. We are not rational entities, separate from beasts and graced by God; instead, we must see ourselves as flux, as flow, as dynamic nodes of interaction with other entities, both organic and technological.

The enthusiasm of Haraway's writing is compelling:

Accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions; these mundane, prosaic things are the result of having truck with each other.

Touch does not make one small; it peppers its partners with attachment sites for world

making. Touch, regard, looking back, becoming with — all these make us responsibility in unpredictable ways for which worlds take shape. In touch and regard, partners willy nilly are in the miscegenous mud that infuses our bodies with all that brought that contact into being.

Those words are exciting, inspiring. They swirl with “becoming” in fluid touch and sense and yet this dynamic node, infused with mud — i.e., *me* — is currently thinking: the hands that type these words look pretty solid. And when I wonder how I’m going to describe this theory to you, I’m feeling fairly constituted as a conscious entity. My essential “being” is still mine — still me. So what does Haraway mean by “knots of being” and “infoldings of the flesh”? And how does that relate to you, who’s staring at this screen, thinking your own thoughts, not completely convinced (perhaps) by this new theory?

Haraway explains.

Everyone knows we need bacterial flora — separate living creatures that live inside our bodies, enabling our digestion — but that’s just the beginning. We also need genetically-engineered laboratory mice on whom new medicines are tested — medicines that reduce our blood pressure or regulate our thyroid or otherwise keep us alive. We need computers to store information that our brains can’t organize and retrieve — information that’s essential to our work, social relationships, basic economic exchanges. We need food to form our muscle and hormones and blood — food (i.e., animals and plants) whose production and transportation entail pollution, habitat destruction, the slaughter of sentient creatures. If we removed these aspects of ourselves, we wouldn’t be “us.” We simply couldn’t exist as ourselves in this physical, mental or spiritual form.

This fact of our interdependence doesn't make us creepy aggregations of biotechnology and living organisms. Instead, it makes us creatures who "contain multitudes." As Haraway writes, "the mind-body is not a giant computational exercise but a risk in play."

But if we, who "contain multitudes," are not inherently unique among all animals, we can no longer claim special rights over the earth and its resources. The natural environment is not our private playground. "Everything is food for man; man is food only for himself and his God," Haraway writes, describing the bygone tradition of religious humanism. "In this feast, there are no companion species, no cross-category messmates at table. There is no salutary indigestion, only licensed cultivation and husbandry of all the earth as stock for human use. The posthumanities — I think this is another word for 'after monotheism' — require another kind of open. Pay attention. It's about time."

And what is our time, exactly? What is our historical moment — the specific conjunction of scientific, cultural, political, and technological factors that give rise to posthumanism?

How We Became Posthuman

We live in a digital, virtual age. The information era has created a network of knowledge that extends horizontally, endlessly, data always one click from the tips of our fingers to the tips of our tongues where we talk, talk about elections, earthquakes, bombings and blonde bombshells rising and falling around the world. But as we slide along the surface

of information, we don't touch anything. The tips of our fingers — let alone the tips of our tongues — don't feel the actuality of the information we possess.

(*Streaming* is now for videos, not water; *flicker* describes a website, not the hem of a dress.)

In our age, we perform ourselves inexhaustibly, constructing our virtual selves through photos and videos and hoardings of clever, attractive Friends. We self-express on social networking sites, sharing our opinions in a democratic landscape unimagined by be-sandaled ancients walking on the dusty Acropolis. But in this democracy, our actions and thoughts are limited to the surface: the conversations can't sink into the screens on which they take place.

We, this mass of human posthumans, are vaguely aware that we're missing something. Beneath the hum of our laptops, we can almost hear a lower resonance: the constant thrum of governments, corporations, and planetary biology that act without regard to us. And so we are left here, clicking on the web where our knowledge is impossibly wide but never too deep. Here, where we are anxious and seeking, smeared with unstated ill-ease that we are guilty of an unidentifiable wrongs.

By our very lives and lifestyles — no matter how modest — we are implicated in remote, worldwide, seemingly unstoppable problems. In this circumstance, we have no adequate response, and therefore no responsibility.

After all, what is an adequate response to the knowledge that polar-bear cubs are drifting into death, separated from their mothers as polar ice caps melt and split? How are we supposed to take responsibility for the fact that people are systematically being starved in the Darfur region of Sudan, their bellies bloated and eyes too weak to appeal

for help? How are we to judge policies about the war in Afghanistan, creating some cohesive opinion about that country's course toward peace, prosperity, equality for women who want to remove their veils — assuming they do — which maybe they don't... although, of course...

In the postmodern era, this wouldn't have been a problem. Back then, we would've slipped inside the skin-tight suit of irony and pranced through a world without Truth or Beauty, a world recently bereft of its unifying “Masternarrative” — a narrative that told us who we were, where we were going, and how we'd arrive at salvation. Back then, in the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodernism produced potent critical thought and artistic innovation, particularly in photography and prose. It also provided space for the voices of women, minorities, colonized people — groups whose stories had been repressed in the past.

The problem was this: with everyone talking, no one was listening. Why bother with the effort of repression? Speak all you want! Give us your narratives, your opinions, your insights! But just be aware: no one is required to listen or respond. In the postmodern world as it evolved, everything was relative. You have your truth and I have mine and that's the end of the story — the only end we'll ever attain.

That world fell in September 2001, toppled in a spectacular collapse. The era of irony was declared dead, crushed beneath the rubble of towers; sobriety and solemnity would now be ascendant. Although theorists couldn't have predicted the specifics of that event, they did anticipate a break with postmodernity. They developed their abstract concepts, moving with the slow force of historical ideas and occurrences, expressing them in books like *When Species Meet*.

The Specifics of Interspecies Love

Posthumanism, as described by Haraway, provides the possibilities for a different engagement with our world and each other. In fact, this theory *necessitates* it. Let me give you a simple example: the take-out coffee you bring to your lips connects you to female bean-pickers in Guatemala, cows and agribusiness in Wisconsin, plastics and politics of the petroleum industry, caribou whose habitat is cut through by pipelines. Go ahead, take that sip.... With each suck, feel the centrifugal force pull you into a web of associations with specific people, animals, histories, technologies.

But what are you supposed to do? Stop drinking coffee? Forget it. Become an activist to preserve the pristine nature of earth, as if time could stop? No. This argument is utopian, idealistic and rather adolescent — at least in light of posthumanist theory. We can't return to purity. By living, we consume. We create waste. We destroy, as we must. That's how nature works. This reality doesn't nail us to the wall, but it doesn't let us off the hook, either. Instead, it leaves us on the solid ground of responsibility.

But don't get overwhelmed before you even begin: we're not responsible for everything. Instead, we're responsible for what we touch deeply. And what we touch deeply, according to Haraway, is whatever comes in contact with our passion.

In a posthuman world, a centripetal force is pulling us back in, taking us deep into a tight space, dense with nodes of connection. We are returned to our bodies — our limbs and physical, our desire and hunger, our sensations. Here is where we can truly encounter other people and critters, as well as their stories and histories. Here is where we can fall in love again. “To be in love,” Haraway writes, “means to be worldly, to be

in connection with significant otherness and signifying others, on many scales, in layers of locals and globals, in ramifying webs.... Once one has been in touch, obligations and possibilities for response change.”

In other words, this act of love is serious business.

Your love might be snowboarding or Southeast Asian cooking, guitars or golf. Whatever it is, your passion connects you with history, ecology, politics, and ethics. You can't tee off without considering the pesticides put on that soil, or the history of racial discrimination in the sport. You do not bear the burden of that discrimination; you are not responsible for making reparations. But you *are* responsible for regarding that history. What you do from there is not prescribed: Haraway certainly doesn't tell us. No one will. That's the part each person has to figure out for himself.

In a posthuman world, then, everyone is offered a challenge: when you find your passion, you must pull together the disparate strands of the resulting connection, acting like a muscle contracting, fibres gripping, fed by an interest that is personal, pertinent, and physical. Ethical concerns, and the resulting behaviours, are no longer widespread abstractions. The virtual is now made veritable, verifiable, vital within our bodies. “My premise,” Haraway writes, “is that touch ramifies and shapes accountability.” The implications are no less than “who is in the world” — which species and cultures and peoples will survive this century, and how those of us who *do* survive will do so with a sense of joyful significance.

With these kinds of stakes, posthumanism's tenets are, unsurprisingly, quite demanding; it would be a mistake to downplay the sacrifices required. As a result, posthumanism will not be embraced by international power centres, let alone by most

individual power centres like you and me. Policy and behaviour will not shift in seismic proportions, drastically changing the way that governments, businesses, and individuals operate. Change, *if* it comes, will be small, local, and specific; societal shifts will result from the accumulated movements of individuals as they follow their passion mindfully.

Please note, however, the conditional *if*: success in this process is not assured. No one can promise some bright, sun-shiny future with verdant fields and frolicking children — a posthuman version of paradise. But that isn't really the point of posthumanism. *The future is fundamentally irrelevant in our age*. We are ethically obliged to attempt to make change, now, regardless of the outcome.

In short, Haraway is imagining Mankind in its robust maturity. We've left behind our childhood, when God the Father looked over our shoulders, judging, punishing and protecting; we're not adolescent either, rollicking through the 'anything-goes' of partying postmodernism. Now we are all grown up. Responsibility for our actions — for what we touch and taste and kill in the messy process of living — is ours alone. It's time for us to respond, without any impetus except our own search for morality and meaning in a world without certainty, with no guarantee of success.

The Communal Meal, Posthuman Style

Throughout her book, Haraway invokes the 'communal meal' as a metaphor for this theory. Here, myriad "messmates" converse, consume, experience the occasional indigestion — that necessary discomfort caused when two irreconcilable notions, both of them true, are held within one body. Having read *When Species Meet*, I can envision this dinner party. It is boisterous and loud; the table is long and the cutlery does not match;

aromas intermingle, arising off each individual dish. Snouts are on laps, prescription pills are downed, opinions are debated with passion and urgency; glasses are clinked, glances are exchanged, artificial hips swivel in a chair. A cat entwines around the ankles of a girl.

Grace is not contained in a prayer.

This is posthumanism.

Dinner anyone?

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