

Introduction: Recent Reflections on the (Post-)Human Condition in American Literature and Culture

María Ferrández-Sanmiguel

Esther Muñoz-González

Carmen Laguarda-Bueno

Abstract

The theories and notions around the posthuman have become, in recent years, a key framework to approach contemporary culture and its products. Inspired by the growing cross-disciplinarity in the field of critical posthumanism, as well as by the increased prevalence of posthumanist ideas in North American literature and culture, this Special Issue seeks to map some recent trends regarding the understanding of the posthuman at two different levels: in terms of critical approach and regarding the types of texts explored. Thus, the articles included in this Special Issue resort to the critical tools provided by critical posthumanism, trauma studies, new materialism, transhumanism and digital anthropology, bringing to the fore not just the outstanding critical currency of these disciplines by themselves and their usefulness to approach contemporary artistic products, but also the points of convergence and divergence among them. Apart from their emphasis on cross-disciplinarity, the articles that make up this Special Issue explore a wide breath of cultural products, giving readers a glimpse into the current relevance of posthumanist ideas in the North American literary and cultural scene. At the same time, the contributions in this Special Issue map recent aesthetic and narratological approaches to the posthuman, the non-human and the more-than-human world, pointing to posthumanism as a constantly evolving field. Overall, the articles included in this Special Issue bring together the most recent scholarship within the fast-changing field of critical posthumanism and explore different twenty-first-century understandings of the posthuman subject at a time when the task of (re)defining what it means to be human is perhaps more pressing than ever.

Keywords: critical posthumanism; trauma studies; new materialism; transhumanism; digital anthropology; non-human; more-than-human; narratology

The theories and notions around the posthuman have become, in recent years, a key framework to approach contemporary culture and its products. The field of critical posthumanism began to be articulated in the late 1990s with the publication of Donna Haraway's 'A cyborgs manifesto' ([1985] 1991) and N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). In the wake of Haraway's and Hayles's groundbreaking work, many scholars have provided an account of posthumanism that explores how modern technoscience has radically undermined the grand narrative of the humanist subject. While a great deal of criticism published recently continues to concentrate on the posthuman

as a technological and informational being, other strands of scholarship have emerged in more recent years that have expanded the scope of critical posthumanism towards a wider consideration of the radical interdependence between the human and the non-human. Thanks to the work of theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, Karen Barad and Stacy Alaimo, among others, recent approaches to the posthuman have established connections with other related disciplines, such as trauma studies, critical animal studies, new materialism and disability studies, highlighting the posthuman subject's embodiedness and embeddedness. Finally, probably fostered by the growing concern with environmental destruction, the idea of the posthuman has also recently become intertwined with the anthropogenic exploitation and degradation of the natural world in the Anthropocene.

Seemingly mirroring the fast pace at which new technologies are developed and commercialized in present-day society, and testifying to the disintegration of the liberal humanist subject and the increasing awareness of the risks associated with human intervention on the environment, posthuman(ist) notions and themes have in recent times also become deeply ingrained in contemporary literature and culture. Representations of cyborgs, enhanced humans, digital posthumans, non-human animals and more-than-human entanglements and embodiments have come to permeate the North American literary and cultural scene. These cultural products frequently present racial, social or sexual identities that challenge historical definitions of the human or engage with ethical or political concerns or challenges to the posthuman, the non-human and the more-than-human. Very often, they posit relationality and embodiment as two essential factors for the formation of a posthuman identity.

Inspired by the aforementioned cross-disciplinarity, as well as by the increased prevalence of posthumanist ideas in North American literature and culture, this Special Issue seeks to map some recent trends regarding the understanding of the posthuman at two different levels: in terms of critical approach and regarding the types of texts explored. Thus, on the one hand, the articles included in this Special Issue resort to the critical tools provided by critical posthumanism, trauma studies, new materialism, transhumanism and digital anthropology, bringing to the fore not just the outstanding critical currency of these disciplines by themselves and their usefulness to approach contemporary artistic products, but also the points of convergence and divergence among them. This Special Issue explores, for instance, the collusion of trauma studies and posthuman studies, two critical frameworks that have been hitherto used in isolation to analyse works of fiction but which have recently begun to be brought together to explore the wound of modern subjectivity that the posthuman condition represents as well as its possible liberating consequences (cf. Vinci [2020]; Ferrández-San Miguel [2018]; Baelo- Allué [2022]). Furthermore, special attention is paid to Afrofuturism, a Black cultural

movement and aesthetics which makes use of critical posthumanist – and sometimes new materialist – themes and tropes to denounce racial discrimination against African Americans and depict colour-blind futures. The analysis of the different cultural products discussed in the articles will hopefully lead to a better understanding of how these related frameworks can help us interpret our condition within the paradigm of posthumanity.

Apart from their emphasis on cross-disciplinarity, the articles that make up this Special Issue explore a wide breath of cultural products, giving readers a glimpse into the current relevance of posthumanist ideas in the North American literary and cultural scene. Thus, some of the articles focus on literary texts and films, but other audio-visual media and phenomena are also represented. This is the case, for instance, of the state-of-the-art phenomenon of VTubers – YouTubers or streamers who express themselves through computer-generated avatars. At the same time, the contributions in this Special Issue map recent aesthetic and narratological approaches to the posthuman, the non-human and the more-than-human world, pointing to posthumanism as a constantly evolving field. In the literary field, for instance, this Special Issue traces the emergence and the characteristics of the posthuman trauma novel in the twenty-first century, as well as the opening up of speculative fiction to include racial concerns. Furthermore, special attention is paid to the eco-weird as a recent development of the weird in the context of anthropogenic climate change, as well as to the merging of science fiction with crime fiction.

Sonia Baelo-Allué's essay, 'The posthuman trauma novel: Reconfiguring subjectivity in Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking about This* (2021)', opens this Special Issue, offering readers a glimpse into the recent confluence of the trauma and the posthuman paradigms of thought. The article stems from the premise that both trauma studies and posthumanism – and, by extension, trauma fiction and posthuman fiction – challenge the liberal humanist conception of the human being as stable and autonomous and emphasize instead the vulnerability of the self. Besides, Baelo-Allué argues that both kinds of fiction tend to reflect the fragmentation to which human beings are subjected under these two paradigms through formal experimentation. Taking North American Patricia Lockwood's first novel *No One Is Talking about This* (2021) as its subject of analysis – an autofictional text that emerges out of the encounter of the two paradigms – Baelo-Allué sets out to explain how the narrator and protagonist's loss of agency in the virtual world and the trauma of her losing a loved one come together formally and thematically in the novel. Baelo-Allué's main contention is that this trauma is precisely what allows the narrator to move from acting out to working through the wound she suffers as a result of being imprisoned in a disembodied digital world, re-establishing her sense of self and agency.

Ultimately, Baelo-Allué points to *No One Is Talking about This* as a novel that acknowledges the central role that social media and digital technologies play in our lives while also promoting an embodied and embedded conceptualization of the self.

Mónica Calvo-Pascual's contribution, entitled 'Ethico-onto-epistem-ology and traumatic memories in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep and Sorrowland*', also explores the connection between trauma and posthumanism, albeit from a different perspective. Calvo-Pascual's essay engages with two speculative fictional, Afrofuturist works by Rivers Solomon that offer a similar vibrant posthumanist approach to the historical trauma of the Middle Passage and the ghost of slavery. In her essay, Calvo-Pascual draws from the theoretical frameworks of critical posthumanism and new materialism, bringing together Rosi Braidotti's post-anthropocentric posthumanist views, Karen Barad's theory of agential realism and her notion of *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* and Staicy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality. Laying special emphasis on the texts' formal features, Calvo-Pascual shows how the posthuman characters in Solomon's works symbiotically intra-act with nature, processing their traumatic memories in embodied, transcorporeal ways while at the same time challenging hegemonic parameters of humanity and uncovering the white supremacist liberal humanist ideas behind transatlantic slave trade. In doing so, Calvo-Pascual's contribution also bears witness to a recent development in the field of speculative fiction: at the realization of the impossibility of using western narrative forms to access the traumatic past of the Black diaspora, writers of colour are currently pushing the boundaries of speculative fiction by incorporating magical realist elements and racial concerns to it.

Arunima Kundu's contribution, 'Mediating otherness: The Afrofuturist planetary posthuman in *Black Panther*', shows how Black science fiction has also, in recent times, made the leap to the big screen. Specifically, Kundu analyses Ryan Coogler's film *Black Panther* (2018), which stands as the first Black motion picture – that is, a film directed by a Black director and that features a Black superhero and a Black cast – to be generously funded and to become a commercial success (Cunningham 2022: n.pag.). After tracing the origins and evolution of Afrofuturism, Kundu sets out to explore how critical posthumanism, debates around the concept of planetarity, and ultimately the film *Black Panther* contribute to the discussion on ethnicity and otherness by promoting the development of a subjectivity based on relationality and non-binary thinking. As Kundu argues, the protagonist of the film – who is also a cyborg and the ruler of Wakanda, a futuristic state in the African continent with privileged access to technology and other resources – shows a planetary posthuman

subjectivity in his willingness to share his country's resources with the rest of the world, an act which is simultaneously interpreted by Kundu as liberating for the Black diasporic community.

Juni Kvarving's contribution, titled 'VanderMeer's eco-weird doubles: (Post)human transformation and the tipping point', also presents the evolution of the human into a posthuman being as a necessary step in addressing the ills of contemporary society, specifically those derived from anthropogenic climate change. Kvarving reads Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) as an example of the eco-weird, a new form of the weird that has gained momentum within the context of environmental degradation and impending environmental catastrophe. Combining an exploration of the evolution of the weird in literature with a close reading of VanderMeer's novels, Kvarving delineates the eco-weird aesthetic, which differentiates itself from its predecessor in that human transformation is regarded with more hope than fear. In the particular context of VanderMeer's trilogy, the sense of familiarity and hope which characterizes the eco-weird is achieved, Kvarving argues, through the doubling of the characters and their inversion of the well-known trope of the uncanny double. Ultimately, the eco-weird, VanderMeer's novels and Kvarving's contribution suggest that only by letting go of anthropocentrism and embracing the strangeness of the posthuman will human beings be ready to face, and ideally prevent, the radical changes that are bound to take place in contemporary society as a result of anthropogenic climate change.

María Abizanda-Cardona's contribution, 'Beyond SF: Reading the posthuman in crime fiction', also focuses on the development of new narrative trends concerned with the representation of the posthuman. Abizanda-Cardona starts from the premise that while science fiction has traditionally been the main literary medium to explore technoscientific change, it has recently started *colonizing* other genres, such as crime fiction. Thus, in her essay, she traces a growing body of twenty-first-century literary works that incorporate the *topoi* of the posthuman era into the traditional narratives and conventions of crime fiction. Despite their critical and commercial success, little scholarly attention has been paid to these works so far. To try to address this gap in academic research, Abizanda-Cardona sets out to demonstrate why the conventions of the genre make it suitable to challenge prevailing conceptions of the posthuman, as well as to articulate alternative visions more aligned with critical posthumanist thought.

Finally, Luise Erbentraut's essay, 'Posthuman icons: Virtual YouTubers' bodies beyond the cyborg', explores a phenomenon which, due to its very recent emergence, has still not received very much academic attention either: that of VTubers. As this critic explains, VTubers are YouTubers who make use of computer-generated avatars and motion-tracking software. Erbentraut's contribution

stands out, on the one hand, for the critical and methodological approach taken: the author brings digital anthropology and critical posthumanism together, drawing from, and transcending, the figure of the cyborg to show how VTubers open up a space for re-negotiating ideas of the human body and its limits while also rendering this negotiation visually tangible. Therefore, special emphasis is laid on the visualities of the VTubers' bodies and on the embodiments of their avatars, as well as on how they are perceived by users in interaction. On the other hand, Erbentraut's contribution testifies to the spread of critical posthumanist ideas across different media, specifically digital platforms.

Overall, the articles included in this Special Issue bring together the most recent scholarship within the fast-changing field of critical posthumanism and explore different twenty-first-century understandings of the posthuman subject at a time when the task of (re)defining what it means to be human is perhaps more pressing than ever.

Acknowledgements

This introduction and special issue were supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under grant PID2022-137627NB-I00, and the Aragonese Regional Government (DGA) under grant H03_23R.

Works Cited

- Baelo-Allué, Sonia (2022), 'Posthumanism and trauma', in S. Herbrechter, I. Callus, M. Rossini, M. Grech M. de Bruin-Molé and C. John Müller (eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 1119–38.
- Coogler, Ryan (2018), *Black Panther*, USA: Marvel Studios.
- Cunningham, Phillip Lamarr (2022), 'Resounding success of *Black Panther* franchise says little about the dubious state of Black film', *The Conversation*, 1 December, <https://theconversation.com/resounding-success-of-black-panther-franchise-says-little-about-the-dubious-state-of-black-film-194506>. Accessed 26 May 2024.
- Ferrández San Miguel, María (2018), 'Appropriated bodies: Trauma and the posthuman in Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild* and James Tiptree Jr.'s *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*', *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo- American Studies*, 40:2, pp. 27–44.
- Haraway, Donna ([1985] 1991), '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, pp. 149–81.
- Hayles, N. Katherine (1999), *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Lockwood, Patricia (2021), *No One Is Talking About This*, London: Bloomsbury.

Vinci, Tony M. (2020), *Ghost, Android, Animal: Trauma and Literature Beyond the Human*, New York and Abingdon: Routledge.

Contributor Details

María Ferrández-Sanmiguel is an associate professor at the University of Zaragoza. Her main research interests lie in contemporary US speculative fiction, with special attention to the representation of trauma and the posthuman. Her most recent publications include 'Mourning the human? Posthuman death and ontological vulnerability in Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach* Trilogy' (*International Journal of English Studies*, 2024) and 'Towards an ethics of affinity: Posthumanism and the question of the animal in two SF narratives of catastrophe' (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2022). She has also written the monograph *Trauma, Gender and Ethics in the Works of E.L. Doctorow* (Routledge, 2020).

Contact: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, University of Zaragoza, Pedro Cerbuna 12, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain.

E-mail: mfsm@unizar.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4402-0815>

Esther Muñoz-González is an associate professor at the University of Zaragoza. Her main research interests lie in contemporary US fiction from a posthumanist perspective, particularly in dystopian representations of the future and cli-fiction intertwined in contemporary gothic texts and modes. She has published the results of her research in various impact journals (among others, *Complutense Journal of English Studies*, *Journal of English Studies*, *BRNO Studies in English*, *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, *Atlantis* and *English Studies*, and in edited volume chapter format (St. Kliment Ohridski University and Routledge). She has recently published a monograph titled *Posthumanity in the Anthropocene: Margaret Atwood Dystopias* (Routledge, 2023).

Contact: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, University of Zaragoza, Pedro Cerbuna 12, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain.

E-mail: emunoz@unizar.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8768-4075>

Carmen Laguarda-Bueno teaches at the Department of English and German Philology of the University of Zaragoza. Her present research focuses on contemporary US fiction and her main research interests range from trauma studies to transhumanism, critical posthumanism and bioethics. She is the author of *Representing (Post)Human Enhancement Technologies in Twenty-First Century US Fiction* (Routledge, 2022). Her most recent essays include 'Mark McClelland's *Upload* (2012): The perils of leaving biology behind to achieve virtual immortality' (*Journal of English Studies*, 2022) and 'Trauma and existentialism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)' (*Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 2019).

Contact: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, University of Zaragoza, Pedro Cerbuna 12, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain.

E-mail: claguarda@unizar.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3056-2608>