

SONIA BAELO-ALLUÉ*

The Pandemic as a Gateway to the Posthuman in the Digital Novel *The Silent History*

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic has been explored from different standpoints and, like many preceding pandemics, often interpreted as a rupture, undermining faith in human progress and exploring human vulnerability. Literature has also traditionally reflected pandemics in this light. However, with the rise of post-human studies, new ways of thinking about pandemics have emerged, inviting a re-evaluation of what it means to be human. As a situation of, and metaphor for, transformation, pandemics challenge traditional humanist narratives, offering new forms of identity, agency, and consciousness and providing new ways to reflect the human/non-human entanglement and the relationship between humanity, technology, and the environment. This article focuses on *The Silent History*, originally published as a touchscreen serialized novel that depicts a pandemic that renders children unable to use and understand language and challenges restricted definitions of what counts as human. The novel explores a post-anthropocentric world-view, questioning the centrality of language to human identity and experience as well as the conception of life as a continuous line of enhancement. *The Silent History* challenges entrenched notions of humanity and conventional forms of storytelling as it combines the technological affordances of iPhones and iPads through images, interactive maps, sounds, videos, presentations, and GPS technology, with a string of serialized character “testimonials.” The pandemic is not presented as a rupture but, rather, as a gateway into a new human condition akin to a networked existence, where human identity is redefined through its entanglement with technology, the environment, and other non-human entities.

KEYWORDS: posthumanism, *The Silent History*, digital storytelling, pandemic literature, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION: THE POSTHUMAN, PANDEMIC NOVELS, AND *THE SILENT HISTORY*

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a standstill, even as it incited profound technological, economic, social, and cultural change. Consequently, many writers, philosophers, and academics have interpreted the

* Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

pandemic through the language of rupture as a “great reset” (Schwab and Malleret) or, as Arundhati Roy beautifully puts it, as a chance “to break with the past and imagine [the] world anew. . . . It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” Where some approaches to the pandemic focus narrowly on specific disciplinary perspectives or domains, this article takes a more holistic, multidisciplinary stance by offering a posthuman perspective on COVID-19 as well as the challenges it presents to the normative definition of the “human self” from an anthropocentric standpoint. Being a contagious zoonotic disease (allegedly, a result of the commercial or scientific exploitation of animals), the COVID-19 pandemic highlights humanity’s shared vulnerability and interconnection to the non-human. In *The Posthuman Pandemic*, Saul Newman and Tihomir Topuzovski reflect on how this major global crisis evinces the posthuman condition as it forces a new understanding of the limits of the human experience: we must see the human not as a single macro-organism but, rather, as an “assemblage” of micro-organisms (3). From a posthuman perspective, the pandemic is both a driver of transformation and an event that is symptomatic of our posthuman realities.

Posthumanism challenges human exceptionalism and traditional human-centred visions of the world by considering interconnections between the human and the non-human. This “non-human turn” of New Materialism and Object-oriented Ontology furnishes a holistic vision of life in which the human intertwines with animals, objects, the environment, and technology, and human agency is understood as a collective endeavour with non-human participants (Grusin). This posthuman convergence and cross-species transversality, Rosi Braidotti argues, “relates at the same time to the Earth – land, water, plants, animals, bacteria – and to technological agents – plastic, wires, cells, codes, algorithms” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 46). This convergence sees the pandemic undermine “our faith in human progress” because it disturbs “our conceptions of human agency and autonomy” (Newman and Topuzovski 3), even as a critical posthumanist standpoint illuminates post-anthropocentric human/non-human “interconnectedness and entanglement[s]” (6). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has been viewed as foretelling future pandemics and climate change, serving, as Bruno Latour argues, as “a dress rehearsal for the next ecological crisis, the one in which the reorientation of living conditions is going to be posed as a challenge to all of us, as will all the details of daily existence that we will have to learn to sort out carefully.” Because the pandemic overlaps and merges with ecological and political crises, it opens up an arena for exploring the (post)human condition: to rethink the still-dominant understanding of humans as the measure of all things, a concept that has been passed down from the Renaissance through later Enlightenment Humanism.

Through the lens of such posthuman perspectives, this article examines the pandemic and its representation in *The Silent History*, a digital novel that in its novelistic form, themes, and content reflects on, and engages with, posthumanism to address wide-ranging social and political issues about transformation in a more-than-human world (Horowitz, Quinn, Derby, and

Moffett).¹ Created by Eli Horowitz, with designer and technologist Russell Quinn and writers Matthew Derby and Kevin Moffett, and released in 2012, *The Silent History* is a touchscreen serialized novel for iPhones and iPads. It evinces elements of gothic and epistolary novels. Like Max Brooks's *World War Z* and a suite of nineteenth-century gothic epistolary novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Silent History* includes multiple perspectives and narrative voices that provide first-hand, intimate, and multi-linear accounts of events. This structure invites readers to piece together the story from fragmented perspectives, enlisting them as active agents in solving the unfolding pandemic of the novel. Thus, *The Silent History* also resembles the serialized novels of Charles Dickens or Alexandre Dumas, which were often published as weekly instalments in literary magazines and journals – a steady and measured process of an unfolding narrative that builds anticipation and suspense. In adding digital elements like maps, graphics, images, and video, *The Silent History* takes these epistolary and serial structures further as it digitally (and, in some cases, physically) increases reader participation in an immersive and interactive engagement with the narrative.

The novel also stands in the tradition of the pandemic novel, a mixture of dystopian and disease narratives. *The Silent History* shares with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, to note a few examples, the use of epidemics, pandemics, and plagues to drive the plot. As the pandemic novel draws on medicalized gothic and dystopian narratives, authors explore human fears and vulnerability in a world that changes rapidly. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has renewed interest in literary works in which the stories overlap with the many challenges that COVID has created. In *The Stand*, Stephen King depicts a deadly influenza strain that brings humanity to the brink of extinction and in *The Eyes of Darkness*, Dean Koontz portrays a virus called "Wuhan-400" that becomes a biological weapon developed by laboratories in Wuhan, China.

The Silent History has thematic affinities with two pandemic texts, in particular. Similar to Nobel Prize winner José Saramago's *Blindness*, in which characters lose their vision, and Octavia Butler's short story "Speech Sounds," where a pandemic destroys the characters' abilities to read, write, and speak, *The Silent History* is a body-based pandemic narrative in which the loss of a human sense or physical capability shapes the story. In the novel, starting in the early 2010s, children are born with what is deemed a "language impairment," an incapacity to learn, understand, or use language, even though they can vocalize sounds: "They could laugh, cry, scream, make any kind of sound you could think of, but they just wouldn't cross the threshold into the world of words"

1 A print version of the novel was released in 2014. In this essay, *The Silent History* is cited from both its 2014 print edition and its original 2012 app version. Citations from the print novel refer to the work by Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett (2014), while citations from the app also acknowledge Russell Quinn as the app's developer.

(Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 47). August Burnham, a scientist who studies the “silence,” initially concludes that the condition is produced by an environmental toxin rather than through contagion (an etiology that changes mid-story). Contracted in the womb, the virus targets the neural pathways in the brain where language acquisition occurs. The disorder is known as emergent phasic resistance (EPR), and the children affected by it are colloquially known as “silents.” Unlike Saramago’s and Butler’s human-centric fictions of disabling illnesses, however, *The Silent History* acknowledges the entanglement of the human and the non-human as a root cause of the illness and its transmission. When the prenatal virus mutates into a contagious airborne version, the entire population of earth runs the risk of “com[ing] down with the silence,” hinting that a new world and new humanity will emerge (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 485). Unlike characters in Saramago’s and Butler’s texts who struggle with their “disabilities” (labelled as such in the eyes of the uninfected), many silents in *The Silent History* embrace non-linguistic forms of communication. As the pandemic spreads, and shifts from the margins to the centre of society, it serves as a gateway into the posthuman and as an example of Latour’s “dress rehearsal” of an alternative, reconstructed future for humanity.

THE MULTIMEDIA NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF *THE SILENT HISTORY*

The Silent History is a serialized novel designed as an iOS app for iPads and iPhones that originally released textual snippets, which are known as “testimonials.” The core of the story is 120 serial testimonials that are transcriptions of oral accounts by twenty-seven narrators. According to the information presented in an introductory video in the app edition of the novel, these narrators include “families and medical professionals . . . teachers, classmates, little league coaches, government officials, faith healers, cult leaders, militia members, pilgrims and imposters” (Horowitz, Quinn, Derby, and Moffett). The 120 testimonials and the epilogue span the years that the novel covers (2011–41) and are, as Horowitz remarks, insistently textual: “We really wanted to make the text the main event – we were trying to reimagine the possibilities of the novel, so we resisted most temptations toward multimedia” (qtd. in Friedman). This testimonial-based corpus of characters’ stories, it is hoped, will archive and preserve a linguistic account of the pandemic before the widespread loss of spoken language. The testimonials are complemented by “field reports,” texts written by readers that are uploaded and incorporated into the digital novel. The authors and designers note in a “FAQ” section of the app that the reports are not “necessary” for the enjoyment of the novel and “are designed for readers who would like to explore the phenomenon in more depth and breadth.” Otherwise, the “testimonials function as an entirely self-contained, fully realized narrative, roughly the length of a 500-page book” (Horowitz, Quinn, Derby, and Moffett).

The digital dynamics of *The Silent History* are, in a word, posthuman as the novel's multi-linear content and form emerge through the content and digital inputs of iPhones and iPads and include text, images, interactive maps, sounds, videos, presentations, and GPS technology. *The Silent History*, as the novel's webpage describes it, "uses serialization, exploration, and collaboration to tell the story of a generation of unusual children – [who are] born without the ability to create or comprehend language, but perhaps with other surprising skills of their own" (Horowitz, Quinn, Derby, and Moffett). One of the novel's authors, Matthew Derby, argues that this design positions the story delivery device itself (the iPad or the iPhone) as a storytelling medium "as opposed to a platform for reading electronic scans of print books" (Minor). Indeed, the digital composition of the novel follows Marco Caracciolo's contention that the "best posthumanist stories use the resources of narrative form to explore the animal origins of the human and its embeddedness in the material world ... the story performs posthumanist ideas instead of merely articulating them conceptually" (1099–100). This may be achieved through the use of non-human characters and narrators or by disrupting the chronological sequentiality of the story that may follow multiple trajectories and resist closure. The posthuman emplotment and structure of the digital novel facilitates both synchronic and diachronic reading practices; it encourages active reader participation through site-specific field reports – text written by readers that are incorporated into the novel but which can only be read at the location where the report is set. The reports complement the main story line by offering a participatory experience: readers jointly experience and further the transmission of the EPR pandemic linguistically as well as visually through the videos, graphs, and maps that depict the spread of the silence. Thus, the digital novel performs a posthuman story that enacts human and non-human co-creation with immersive and visual elements.

The Silent History opens with an "Introduction and Prologue" screen/page that offers users/readers an overview of the novel in three sections: "The Archives," "The Condition," and "The Prologue" (see [Figure 1](#)). The sections are, generally, multimedia in content and orient readers to broad narrative elements (plot and setting). "The Archives" is a two-minute video that explains the historical and curatorial structure of the archive project, including the content and scope of the testimonials and field reports. When clicked, "The Condition" section provides a PowerPoint-like presentation from the "Department of Health and Human Services" that explains the transmission of EPR through geographical and temporal infographics. The slickly edited stream of quotations, motion graphics and timelines, charts, maps, and images concludes with the anonymous narrator in "The Archives" video signalling a kind of posthuman (and postmodern) narrative structure to *The Silent History* because the story it tells raises "some questions [about EPR that] may never be fully answered, and new ones will surely arise in the years to come" (Horowitz, Quinn, Derby, and Moffett).



Figure 1. *The Silent History*, iPad screenshot showing the three initial holders that give way to the multimedia information on the pandemic (reprinted by permission of Sudden Oak, from *The Silent History*, by Eli Horowitz, Russell Quinn, Matthew Derby, Kevin Moffett. Copyright © 2012–23 by Sudden Oak).

Written by Hugh Purcell, the executive director of the archives project, “The Prologue” is a short précis that offers his personal and professional experiences with EPR when it first appeared and continues through his decades-long career from a “junior epidemiological archivist” to a senior government official. From his own experience in primary school with silents in grade two through to his adulthood, Purcell discusses his first encounters with silence, his own first efforts to record testimonials, and the implementation of systematic efforts to record testimonials. Purcell notes his early days recording people’s accounts that his “duties appeared simple – find people who had come into contact with silents and record their testimony” but that “[m]ost of what I recorded was speculative third-hand info, wispy urban myths about how silence was a plague, or a conspiracy, or some sort of vague metaphor” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett, 3–4).

Purcell’s prologue works as an extradiegetic introduction as he offers a view of the EPR from within and shows us a reader (like us outside of the text) who has read a majority of the testimonials. Thus, his prologue models the larger narrative in miniature. As “a record of the past,” Purcell’s biographical

note, and the testimonials and reports that comprise *The Silent History*, connects to the posthuman shape and content of the app-based novel because the condition itself demands for him a re-examination of what makes us human. He strives for the “truth” even as he acknowledges that testimonials are highly subjective and speculative. Throughout the testimonials, he and other characters pinpoint language and narrative as key elements to defining humanity. In the middle of the spreading silence pandemic, for instance, he comes across an enclave of silents living in an abandoned bank. Language is lost to them so the material tools for composition and written communication that were part of the bank’s former function are useless, and “old whiteboards leaned against walls, revealing indecipherable, abstract drawings ... [and] reams of copy paper were used as a sort of crude papier-mâché” (6). The scene leads Purcell to wonder of the “strange condition” that is silence: “Are words our creation, or did they create us? And who are we in a world without them? Each of us must find our own path through these questions” (9).

Released daily to readers across six months from 1 October 2012 to 19 April 2013, the 120 testimonials are the core of *The Silent History* and are anthologized in six sections (or long chapters – the printed novel designates these as “volumes”). These sections are presented geometrically as circles comprised of twenty pie shapes that appear grey but are coloured once read. In [Figure 2](#), for instance, seventeen of the twenty testimonials have been read – with the light green indicating that the next is D. Dietrich’s testimonial, which is followed by two grey (or unread) testimonials. The six sections each span one to nine years in focus, detailing the transmission of, and social and technological responses to, the silence from 2011 to 2041. They are followed by an epilogue set in 2043. Unread entries must be read/unlocked in chronological order, but, once read, they can be returned to. Thus, a reader can unpack a synchronic thread in the text and follow the testimonials of an individual character. This narrator-based model often reveals a compelling macro-diachronic narrative as a reader follows the overall history and transmission of silence from one character’s perspective.

Unpacking the example of David Dietrich (the narrator identified in [Figure 2](#)), for instance, illuminates the dynamics of reader immersion in *The Silent History* as we draw together constituent plot elements. Reading synchronically, through the eyes of one narrator such as Dietrich, reveals a narrative thread that contains nine testimonials that span five of the six sections. These begin with his childhood in Decatur, Georgia, in 2017 when his fascination with the silents leads him to impersonate one and ends in 2040, when he lives in an abandoned US military “missile silo” with a community of silents and non-silents. Across these twenty-three years of testimonials, Dietrich becomes increasingly sympathetic to the silents, an empathetic allegiance that sees him become a silent “impostor,” learning their facial “microexpressions” and, later, a vigilante who attacks and disrupts protests against the silents. His allegiance with the silents aligns with his anti-government, libertarian politics, and he spends close to two decades travelling America looking for groups of

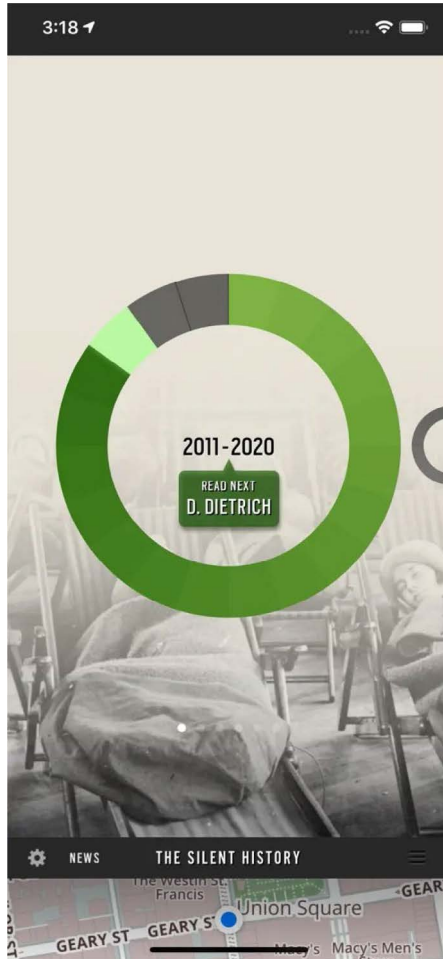


Figure 2. *The Silent History*, iPhone screenshot showing of one of the six circular holders connected to the specific time frame 2011–20. The green sections indicate the testimonials that have already been read (reprinted by permission of Sudden Oak, from *The Silent History*, by Eli Horowitz, Russell Quinn, Matthew Derby, Kevin Moffett. Copyright © 2012–23 by Sudden Oak).

silents who are, in his mind, “resistance” groups that he can join. Dietrich’s testimonials become increasingly emotional and political, and as his allegiance for the silents deepens, so does his hatred for the government and non-silent society, until 2040 when he questions whether he has become a “commando [or] mercenary.” The words are eye-catching, suggestively militaristic as they are, and it is not until we learn from another character’s testimonial (Steven Grenier’s) that Dietrich has been increasingly militant: while he does not discuss these plans in his testimonials, we learn that Dietrich destroys the

“PhonCom facility” that housed the computer servers used to support language implants that the government mandated silents must use. As readers, we fill the narrative gap between Dietrich’s and others’ testimonials: we sense his increasing emotion, paranoia, and political leanings across the grain of his nine first-person testimonials, but he does not indicate that he has devised a “worm,” a computer virus, or built an explosive device that he eventually uses to destroy a government computer facility. We, the readers, bridge these narrative gaps as characters reside in an arena of narrative ambiguity (because the narrators are not intra-diegetically positioned; they do not have full access to one another’s narratives). August Burnham notes that “Dietrich’s actual intention is still unclear, although the possibility that it’s some sort of cosmic coincidence diminishes with each new piece of evidence the authorities uncover” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett, 481).

Reading synchronically through Dietrich’s thread exemplifies the thirty-two-year suite of the 120 testimonials that are emotionally charged narratives of individual characters’ lives and of the shifting attitudes toward the silents as they are variously disdained and labelled pejoratively as “mutetards” and, at times, as they are accepted into society. The arc of the testimonials is simultaneously narratological and medical, detailing the transmission of the silent virus. Indeed, the more we read, the more testimonials we unlock – the more cases of silence are revealed. The proliferation of textual testimonials reproduces the spread of the virus, as David M. Meurer explains, and the (inter-)connections between testimonials are topographically structured in the app version of the story. As the pandemic spreads, the initial network of testimonial nodes transforms into a multi-directional flow and formation of clusters around certain narrators, yielding “unexpected intersections and unifying narratives” (Horowitz, Quinn, Derby, and Moffett), as the authors note in their reflections on the intra-textual reading process of *The Silent History* included in a “FAQ” section of the app.

THE TESTIMONIALS: POSTHUMANISM, TRANSHUMANISM, AND SURVEILLANCE

Thematically, *The Silent History* critiques humanist assumptions, even as it foregrounds posthuman perspectives about human and non-human entanglements. The silents are for many people not human enough. In 2032, August Burnham opens his own research facility to find a “cure” for the silent pandemic because he realizes that “there was a very real sense in the public’s mind that people afflicted with EPR were somehow less human” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 226). Ideologically, this normative conception of the human can be traced back to Protagoras’s thesis that “Man” is the harmonious and paradigmatic measure of all things. Famously, this ideal finds embodiment in Leonardo da Vinci’s sketch of the Vitruvian man – a figure whose outstretched legs and arms fit perfectly inside both a square and a circle – and

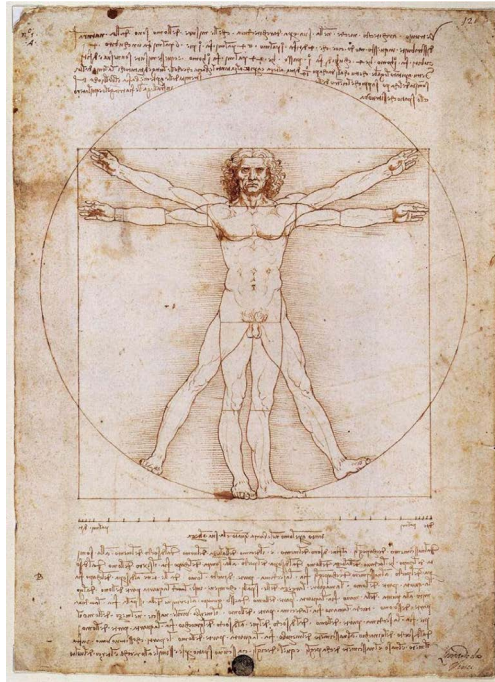


Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian man* (1492) (in the public domain).

later in the Victorian “Great Man” theory (see [Figure 3](#)). From the Renaissance onwards, this image of a white, Western, handsome, and able-bodied man comes to represent the prototype for being human. Critical theorists have challenged the so-called universality of the Vitruvian man, however, from the perspectives of feminism, queer studies, critical race theory, postcolonial criticism, disability studies, and the critical post-humanist movement. Specifically, posthumanism reconceptualizes the human subject: situating the organic body, the machine, and other life forms as relational, co-evolving, and interdependent. Rosi Braidotti critiques the humanist Eurocentric paradigm precisely because it establishes a binary logic of self/other in which the latter are positioned as inferior: “These are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (*Posthuman* 15). In *The Silent History*, August Burnham’s characterization of the silents as “somehow less human” demonstrates a humanist bias that works to other “non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, nonhealthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced peoples” (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 68). However well-intentioned Burnham’s efforts are to help, the grounds for his thinking reveal a humanist and ableist bias.

If Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian man represents “the image of Man as a rational animal endowed with language,” what is left of humanity when that

capacity is lost? (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 143). This is precisely the question that August ponders in *The Silent History* when he recognizes that human language is on a course for global extinction: “When our access to the great pool of knowledge is shut off, where will we be then? *What* will we be? How will we be able to go on living in communities, as nations? Can we then really consider ourselves human?” (482). Here then, we see the connections between the human and a Darwinian understanding of human language and identity as by-products of evolutionary history. As Martin Nowak observes, the meta-narrative of human progress is grounded in an evolutionary understanding of language as the defining characteristic of the species: “Language is the most important evolutionary invention of the last few million years. It was an adaptation that helped our species to exchange information, make plans, express new ideas and totally change the appearance of the planet” (1615).

Indeed, the archaeological record shows that human language emerged with a capacity for symbolic thinking, about forty thousand years ago (Pagel 1–6). Written language specifically allows for the transmission of complex information through generations to be stored and transmitted. Mark Pagel observes that human language “is distinct from all other known animal forms of communication in being compositional”: syntax, semiotics, and spatio-temporal referentiality shape the capabilities, contexts, and precision of human narrative (1). Such ideas about progress are reflected in the value placed on human language in *The Silent History* where the ability to compose and narrate lies at the heart of the novel’s thematic preoccupation with creating a collection of transcribed oral testimonials that trace the evolution of the silent pandemic. The aim is to leave a narrative account of human history – and humanity itself before language disappears entirely, as August Burnham notes, “the urge to speak is deeply human. It’s woven into our DNA, into the structures of our brains. In a very real sense, thought requires language” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 46), and, elsewhere, as Kouros Aalia observes, “the language instinct is so fundamental to our self-conception that it’s nearly impossible for us to imagine life without it. We can close our eyes or cover our ears and guess what it’s like to be blind or deaf, but how could we begin to imagine ourselves without words?” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 81). From a humanistic perspective, the emergence of the silents symbolizes a regression in the evolutionary process as a result of a virus mutation. Without language, the humanist ideals of self-determination, autonomy, exceptional rationality, uniqueness, and distinction from other life forms lose their significance.

Yet, through the representation of the virus and its growing contagion, *The Silent History* comes to challenge anthropocentric assumptions about human exceptionalism and language. Initially, when the first cases of children born with EPR appear to be isolated conditions, each family deals with the condition differently. Nancy Jernik neglects her silent son Spencer, while, as Theodore Greene reports, he did “everything I could to trigger some kind of speech in Flora” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 42). Small teams of doctors study the condition, while the existing school boards and curriculums try to

accommodate the silents academically and socially. In time, however, segregation begins, and “residential facilities” are created where the children of overwhelmed parents can be left. And early widespread societal segregation echoes the Jim Crow politics of America, as a gas station near one of the silent-segregated schools posts a sign in its door that reads: “No Speech, No Service.” Concerned parents and teachers, including Theodore Greene and Francine Chang, design and found well-intentioned educational facilities for silents, such as the Oaks School. Eventually, however, a change in attitude occurs. The first of the six sections of testimonials ends when Francine Chang realizes that the children communicate among themselves through facial expression, evidenced in “a brief surface ripple across [the] face” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 78). As another character notes, the silents possessed “a form of non-linguistic communication with a depth and breadth that continues to surprise us. We are only just beginning to unravel the inner workings of the communication, but the central locus appears to be the children’s faces – hence the inaccurate but understandably popular term ‘face-talking’” (82).

The silents share a non-linguistic form of communication based on micro-expressions (recorded later in the novel in a “two-volume *Encyclopedia of Microexpressions*”), which only they can decipher. In *The Silent History*, an expert observes that “[i]t’s not a language – glares and smiles are not nouns and verbs – but it is a rich form of communication nonetheless, capable of conveying emotional nuance more accurately, deeply, and immediately than any proper language could” (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 82). This fictional observation conveys a posthuman critique of the biases and limitations of anthropocentric constructions of communications and language. The observations of the expert in *The Silent History* sound like the insights of Asun López-Varela Azcárate, who studies posthuman intermedial semiotics and makes a similar point about language, explaining that “the fact that humans cannot perceive or make sense of certain sign systems does not mean that they do not exist. In consequence, cognition is shaped and structured by complex dynamic intermedial interactions” (1217). Other instances of language-based, post-human portraits emerge in the novel and track a Darwinian regression from the human even as an ambivalent posthuman portrait is sketched. For example, August Burnham comes across a silent girl in Ogoniland where he is from: “She never said a word. We were all scared of this girl. . . . She was like a wild animal. Her mother set a bowl of pepper soup out for her, and she would come when the sun went down and eat the soup and sleep on the hard ground” (102). Nancy Jernik observes of her silent-born son that “[h]e was like an alien in my house” (19).

This anathematization along anthro-centric lines shifts: at one point, a politician, John Parker Conway, notes the hesitation by silents to accept his offers of help, food, and shelter: they “thought I was a monster” (476). And the feral Ogoniland girl is rendered as a gothic, nocturnal prowling creature, although August marks a posthuman turn in the novel when he elsewhere observes that “all animals communicate – even the branches of a coral reef have a fairly

complex weblike biological communication system. So it's not surprising to me that we'd eventually see these kids make contact with each other" (90), and, as Kourosh Aalia asks, "What does sonar feel like to a bat? What does a scent look like to a bloodhound?" (83). *The Silent History*, then, registers a more encompassing understanding of the interrelationship between cognition and communication from a multispecies perspective. The acknowledgement that bats navigate acoustically through echolocation, emitting sounds beyond human hearing, highlights the limits of human sensory perception and knowledge formation. As such, *The Silent History* resituates human capabilities in a more-than-human world to reveal both the limits of human perspectives and a larger spectrum of communicative capabilities.

The novel registers, critiques, and challenges discrimination and anthropocentric attitudes toward the differently abled and non-verbal communication. The uninfected public's inability to comprehend the silents leads them to fear and rejection, especially when the silents form groups and wander the streets during adolescence and young adulthood. Many silents end up un-homed, living in abandoned urban spaces and warehouses as social outcasts. Margaret Lafferty, a prominent character in the app version of the novel, seeks a kind of ghettoization of silents as she calls for the erection of "Deaf Child Area" signs (referring to silent children) to be posted around these areas; elsewhere, uninfected protest protesters taunt a group of silent characters with "Speak up" and "We can't hear you" signs and chants. Increasingly, the offensive term "mutetards" is applied to the silents, and, yet in contrast, other people, such as Patti Kern, see them as "native native speaker" (209); this recategorization symbolically moves the silents from the margins to the centre of society. Indeed, Kern creates the first international silent community in Monte Rio and witnesses the birth of the first "native speaker" – the son of two silents (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 247). Nonetheless, ableist attitudes persist. As the silent population increases, and they cannot simply be expelled or ignored, an implant technology is developed to turn the (disabled) non-human silents into able-bodied humans again. By 2034 (in the fourth section/volume), a prosthetic device called a Soul Amp ("an amplified soul") is invented that neurologically facilitates speech. August Burnham, the inventor of the device, lauds his own achievement in quasi-spiritual terms: "We'd broken through the silence that had crippled Calvin [August's patient]. . . . My mission wasn't just to give the silents language – I had to give them back their souls" (264–65). Cartesian dualism inflects Burnham's thinking: if humans lose their capacity to use and understand language, he speculates that they will also lose their rationality and their soul as well as their humanity. Elsewhere, Burnham observes, "The urge to speak is deeply human. It's woven into our DNA, into the structures of our brains. In a very real sense, thought requires language" (46).

Burnham's implant technology, the Soul Amp, aligns with the transhumanist belief that science and technology, especially technologies like biotechnology, cognitive science, nanotechnology, and genetic manipulation, can be used to transcend human limitations (Tirosh-Samuels 20; Young 44). Unlike

critical posthumanism, transhumanism is anthropocentric, “an intensification of humanism,” and is based on the idea of enhancement, striving for longevity, enhanced cognition, and liberation from suffering (Wolfe xv). As a transhumanist, Burnham seeks to “solve” the silent problem, first through the Soul Amp technology, then through an implant called PhonCom, which is linked to a centralized networked database (that is, a language bank). The data centre streams millions of words and phrases through each individual implant so the silent can communicate orally using (trans)human speech.

The Silent History challenges transhumanism and its humanist underpinnings. Patti Kern, the leader of PhonCom implant resistance movement, opposes the procedure since, as she alleges, the technology is a form of “psychic genocide” because it erases the silents’ “native consciousness”:

I felt stray voltage the moment I walked into that medi-park, an ugly ecstatic clamour. A miracle, everyone said. Hook all the native speakers up to machines, snuff out their instinctual language so that they can join the great jabbering din. Never mind that what they’re communicating can’t be translated into words, that it’d be like trying to reproduce a sequoia with popsicle sticks. A night sky with yellow crayons. (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 272)

As a result, implanted silents turn into cyborgs in the posthuman sense, since, according to Hayles, in the posthuman “there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 3). Despite Kern’s and other people’s resistance to implant technology, by the end of the 2030s in the novel, a federal law in the United State is passed that makes PhonCom implantation compulsory. Its objective is to ensure that there is a widespread adoption of the implants, yet it has the effect of marginalizing non-implanted silents as it aspires to restoring them to a humanist ideal of identity. This compulsory implantation portrays the non-normative disabled body as deficient, infra-humanizing them as they are viewed as lacking full human “able-bodiness.” August defines them as “marginalized people who couldn’t talk, couldn’t work, couldn’t learn. Human in form but incapable of taking part in human society . . . taking shelter on its periphery” (345–46). The non-implanted silents are seen as dangerous dissidents because they challenge the dominant ideology of transhuman transcendence. Carrying a prenatal testing kit to detect EPR markers as well as a portable device for applying the PhonCom implant, “implant cops” are dispatched in search of undocumented and non-implanted silents. Non-augmented silent people are represented as inhuman and as illegal fugitives.

Categorized as non-human, the silents are subject to censorship and other forms of violence. The PhonCom can be customized by adding, at an extra cost, accent mods or content-blocker mods that parents can potentially use to gate their children’s speech. Connected to a central networked database,

PhonComs allow doctors to probe the minds of implanted silents, putting into question their agency and autonomy. Calvin, who works for August Burnham, the inventor of Phoncom, uses a calibration helmet to remotely “massage a stranger’s neural pathways in the hope of eliciting some kind of verbal response” (351). In one specific case, he logs into the implant of “64.2775.243. Eloise Gibson” in an effort to improve her ability to “verbally express sexual desire” (350). Calvin himself is the subject of such an implant recalibration when Burnham edits Calvin’s PhonCom and prevents him from speaking a mocking contortion of “Dr. Burnham” as “Dr. Burnt Ham.” In treating technology that intrudes in people’s private space and thoughts, *The Silent History* touches on contemporary global anxieties surrounding “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff) and “shareveillance” (Birchall): terms that refer to the combination of covert data surveillance and the (mis)uses of open government data transparency. People willingly accept surveillance culture: they provide personal information on consumer behaviour patterns and preferences through social media, online forums, search engines, messaging apps, smart devices, and e-commerce platforms, among other examples. Both the augmented silents who use PhonComs and the “humans” who are constantly online suffer from a diminished sense of agency and privacy, just as many of us have during the pandemic when we were surveilled and tracked (the algorithms of our streaming preferences were monetized for corporate profit). As such, the representation of the virus and its proliferation enables a wide-ranging posthuman critique of society to emerge.

THE FIELD REPORTS: SURVEILLANCE, AGENCY, AND DIGITAL NARRATIVES

While the employment of *The Silent History* thematizes surveillance and diminished agency in the digital age, especially as embodied by the PhonCom technology, the inclusion of site-specific field reports alongside the testimonials creates a multilinear narrative that blurs the lines between author and reader. “The integration of 27 testimonial narrators using a hybrid focalization strategy,” as Meurer argues, “establishes conditions for incorporating user-contributed Field Reports” (247). Composed by readers of the novel, these reports can only be accessed onsite, making use of the technological affordances of iOS devices including map and GPS technology. Unlike the uncontrolled spread of the silent virus in the testimonials, the reader-submitted field reports have to be approved by Horowitz who edits and curates the submissions. Interested story contributors must read the “Guidelines for Prospective Field Reporters,” which specify style, narrative, and editorial criteria. For a reader-generated field report to be effectively included in the novel, its setting in the world has to be relevant, and it must fit key parts of the story: “A successful field report integrates the setting in creative and enriching ways, earning the reader’s trip to the location; in fact, Field Reports should be incomplete if read

anywhere else" (Horowitz, Quinn, Derby, and Moffett). Although Vasileios N. Delioglani argues that "locations do not really become part of the narrative, but they merely embellish the narrative experience" (142), these reports build an extra-diegetic bridge between *The Silent History* and its readers as they blur boundaries between the virtual and actual and between the digital and analogue. Readers also rediscover their environment and reconnect to place:

Beyond all this, the location is your chance to bring readers to an unexplored corner of your city, a beautiful crumbling banister, a strangely menacing warehouse, an inexplicably tiny door – all the overlooked treasures of our daily surroundings. This guided exploration can have an immediate appeal beyond the particular concerns of the silent phenomenon. The technological aspects of this project should provide an opportunity to look outward, not further downward. (n. pag.)

Readers observe their surroundings in new ways, finding unnoticed details that become relevant and enhance the story by further immersing the readers in it. Such locative storytelling adds dimensionality and creates a posthuman narrative through the interactions of technology and humans. N. Katherine Hayles underlines how our embodied participation in the digital work is produced by the manner in which we join the cognitive assemblage that *The Silent History* creates not only through our ears, eyes, and brain "but also throughout our bodies as we trace the geography of the digitally augmented terrain of the Field Reports and associated narratives" (*Postprint* 141).

Like many digital productions, *The Silent History* blurs the boundary between author and reader by allowing members of virtual communities to participate in the project. The fiction enables a shift from consumer culture to participatory culture as readers take on an active role as navigators and co-creators. A reader becomes, in Espen Aarseth's well-known terminology on ergodic texts, "a player, a gambler" who can "explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery" (4). While a chronological reading of the story is possible, especially of the testimonials, the presentation of the narrative also invites an ergodic reading that requires "nontrivial effort" to allow the reader to generate a literary sequence. Among other options, a reader can move backwards to previous testimonials in any of the completed testimonial sections, advance to the next, move between testimonials of the same narrator, or read any of the field reports if they are close to one of them. Thus, *The Silent History* engages formally with posthumanism by challenging the linear structure of storytelling. Caracciolo explains that

[w]hen narrative follows multiple trajectories and resists closure, linear temporality and teleological reading strategies come into question. This destabilization of linearity can enact a more general destabilization of audiences' imagination



Figure 4. *The Silent History*, screenshot showing a world map with small red icons indicating the location of specific field reports of one of the textual testimonials in the novel (reprinted by permission of Sudden Oak, from *The Silent History*, by Eli Horowitz, Russell Quinn, Matthew Derby, Kevin Moffett. Copyright © 2012–23 by Sudden Oak).

of the nonhuman, including animals, landscapes, and ecosystems – a destabilization that is particularly valuable from a posthumanist viewpoint. (1100)

The app version of *The Silent History*, unlike its printed counterpart, allows for a reading experience that breaks away from the linear progression provided by traditional printed novels. This departure creates opportunities for new forms of experiencing narrative, transcending the limitations of the traditional realist novel, which has historically been considered the prototype of structured storytelling rooted in humanism.

The field reports are displayed in a navigable, interactive world map in which more than three hundred small icons indicate where the site-specific reports are located and where one can read report details such as the title, posting date, and author (see Figure 4). These field reports can be accessed only when the reader is physically present in the location where a specific report is set, making the text and setting enhance each other as the reports deepen the central narrative of the testimonials. New user-generated testimonials attached to specific locations become new dots on the map and can be found globally. With these reporting capabilities, *The Silent History* takes the form of a locative media narrative, a form of place-based storytelling that leverages mobile technologies such as an integrated global positioning system (GPS) in devices to display geolocated content. As Jason Farman observes, we are people on the move and our dominant media are also mobile (“Introduction” xi). Experiences

of virtual space are increasingly part of everyday life because of the worldwide adoption of mobile technologies, including navigation systems for pedestrians or car drivers, applications for finding on-street parking spaces, location-aware social networks like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, or alternate reality- and location-based games like Pokémon Go or Geocaching. Emerging interface technologies include smartwatches, digital glasses, head-mounted displays, and mobile projectors, but the most common interface technologies and devices are smart phones and tablets that serve as convergence points to give users access to a wide range of media (Farman, "Introduction" xiv).

The field reports in *The Silent History* represent a form of "spreadable media," a term Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green employ to refer to a hybrid mode of circulation "where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways" (1). The public does not simply consume media but participates in its creation by sharing, reframing, creating, and spreading it. Audiences are not passive consumers, and social networks and communities play a vital role in media production and distribution. It is easy to draw an analogy between this idea of media as "spreadable" and rapidly disseminating through social networks and the way in which a virus can spread through a population. We often talk about viral content, cultural contagion, and exponential growth, terms that draw from the vocabulary of viral transmission. Field reports exemplify the way in which readers can take an active role to generate and spread new content.

The digital version of *The Silent History* offers a visual representation of viral infection on an interactive world map where dots appear to indicate the number and spread of infections globally. As time passes, the virus spreads in the main narrative, and more field reports emerge with more readers becoming writers of new testimonials. Horowitz explains how the first reports were written by a couple of friends, "then it was friends of friends, then friends of friends of friends – wider and wider circles, in order to simulate the even-wider circles that'll soon be upon us" (*Contents*). These expanding circles of writers also resemble the way in which viruses spread through close circles that expand the illness. The map serves as a visual representation of the narrative contagion, mirroring the linguistic contagion of the testimonials and illustrating how stories, like infectious agents, can move from one location to another. This visual depiction of the story mirrors the silents' non-linguistic form of communication and underlines the collective character of the pandemic depicted in the novel.

The GPS-based map also reflects the surveillance culture prevalent today, symbolically exemplified in the story through the PhonCom implant technology and its connection to a central networked database, which raises questions about the agency of the silents when using it. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, cities became laboratories for biopolitical surveillance and control as people became confined, reproducing what Michel Foucault defines as the "sites of confinement" of nineteenth-century disciplinary societies. Such "sites of confinement" appear in *The Silent History* when the silents are confined in

institutions or effectively exiled to abandoned sites in the city. The way in which the silents disconnect from the PhonCom technology and the central language bank resembles a growing digital fatigue in which individuals disconnect from the Internet. *The Silent History* sees solitude and introspection not as regressive steps but, rather, as necessary elements for personal growth, self-awareness, and reclaimed agency.

Rick Dolphijn suggests that we are currently witnessing an inverted panopticon “in which you find yourself in the centre, and you are surrounded by an infinity of potential eyes” (149). The historical and cultural systems of confinement are no longer necessary, and new digital ones have their own language of chains of zeroes and ones. Like the language of the silents, it is a language that we cannot understand and that the machines “speak” and use to interchange information, which is also gathered in energy-consuming data centres. Hayles has interpreted *The Silent History* in this way. For her, the book reflects the anxieties of a print culture that is enabled but also threatened by the digital (*Postprint* 134). Like the silents in the story, we suffer from selective digitally mediated a-semiosis as we are unable to understand the codes of digital texts, and this cultural anxiety is represented in the novel through a biological virus. As Hayles remarks, it is ironic that *The Silent History*, being a digital work, further contributes to this anxiety, revealing a constricting circularity that is also made visual through the six sections displayed on the screen that organize the testimonials (140). Digital technology use proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic – we Zoomed and video-conferenced, streamed movies and television shows, among many other online activities. Such activity left digital footprints that revealed our movements and activities. The interactive world map in *The Silent History* app visually reflects these surveillance practices that were intensified by pandemics like COVID-19, where increasing numbers of icons mark the emergence of new cases and their name and exact locations. Amy Hungerford notes how when app users access one of these field reports, they mirror implanted silents in the sense that “you find yourself manipulated by a central processor that pipes language into your brain” (110).

For many, the pandemic has amplified public distrust of traditional political institutions and mainstream media. As Newman remarks, “COVID-19 has released, after a long period of incubation, political viruses that are transforming the social landscape” (82). This discontent becomes apparent at the end of *The Silent History*, when Spencer and Flora, both unimplanted silents, have a silent child (Slash) and end up escaping to Canada to begin a new life. The central server controlling the implants is attacked and destroyed by David Dietrich, a loner obsessed with becoming a silent who causes the mutation of the virus with his attack. This act of sabotage leads to the destruction of the central implant, bringing neurological disruption and silence back to its users. Isolation ensues for those who were implanted when young and either never possessed or lost the capacity for non-linguistic assimilation. Eventually, they recover this capacity when Slash, being unimplanted and the son of

two silents, retransmits silent thought patterns to their implants through Burnham's PhonCom recalibration helmet that restores their consciousness, autonomy, and (post)humanity. The destruction of the central server releases the virus, and it becomes airborne. What was originally a condition that only affected a limited number of children now becomes the new human (or rather posthuman) condition, and testimonials become the only trace or archive of a past in which communication was possible through language.

CONCLUSION: THE PANDEMIC AS AN AFFIRMATIVE PORTAL INTO THE POSTHUMAN

In the near future of *The Silent History*, in the events that presumably will occur after the novel's epilogue, the silents, and what in the ableist perspective of the speaking population were seen as unable/disabled and disposable humans and bodies, will become the norm. This is August Burnham's reading of the situation as he expresses the horror of witnessing "an entire civilization . . . retreat into this lonely and isolated space – a lifetime of solitary confinement" (Horowitz, Derby, and Moffett 482). The novel, however, does not take this position, favouring a critical posthumanist understanding of life after the pandemic that challenges the Vitruvian ideal of man, which models racially and politically restrictive definitions of humanity. The novel portrays the end of classical humanism not through a destructive crisis but, rather, by representing a model of a new world. Taking an affirmative position characteristic of the critical posthumanist perspective, *The Silent History* realizes Braidotti's model of posthumanity as "rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere" (*Posthuman* 51).

After the silent pandemic has extinguished linguistic communication, the language of the future will be a bodily language of the senses – of touching, smiling, hugging, and looking. In her reading of *The Silent History*, Hayles views the silents as metaphorically representing a positive embodied language that arises out of the cognitive assemblages of digital media (and which are often viewed by us as epistemologically and culturally incarcerating and limiting) (*Postprint* 140). *The Silent History* uses digital forms of storytelling to immerse readers in a narrative experience that challenges conventional forms of storytelling and entrenched notions of humanity. The digital app's touchscreen and locative field reports reinforce the idea that the story is told in an embodied way, with readers needing to travel to specific locations to experience the additional reports. The field reports add dimension to place by inserting the stories in the real, material world. Locative media narratives blur the online and the offline as they merge body and mind, allowing for an embodied "on-life" conception of telling and reading stories that, as Luciano Floridi sees it, bridges the Cartesian gap between mind and body. Regarding this physical instantiation in a digital age, Farman claims that the virtual and material are "collaborative spaces that produce embodiment" ("Stories" 105). Mobile

locative media do not create digital simulations to replace the material world. Rather, they produce “sensory experiences of layering” and ways in which “the virtual and the material interact in meaningful, embodied ways” (107). Literary geocaching is one way of merging the virtual and material worlds through locative media by asking readers to visit specific physical locations. Instead of searching for some hidden treasure, they can access and download specific stories or parts of stories.

Unlike other narratives with a similar subject, *The Silent History* uses the motif of the pandemic and the dynamics of contagion to explore a post-anthropocentric world-view beyond human exceptionalism. At the threshold of a new era, the novel questions traditional notions of identity and consciousness and embraces a posthuman understanding of life that exposes our shared vulnerability and interconnectedness. Through a digital form that makes full use of the technological affordances of iPhones and iPads by using images, interactive maps, sounds, videos, presentations, GPS technology, and written serial testimonials, *The Silent History* (re)presents the pandemic as an immersive portal and gateway into a new (post)human world. We can choose to take our prejudice, hatred, avarice, data banks, and dead ideas with us or (to return to Arundhati Roy’s beautiful words) “we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.” The latter, affirmative pathway is the one *The Silent History* prompts and invites readers to pursue.

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SONIA BAELO-ALLUÉ

Department of English, University of Zaragoza, Spain

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