

# Towards A Posthumanist Methodology. A Statement.

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1. Essentialism suggests that specific sets of characteristics apply to defined categories. It emphasizes fixed traits over discontinuities; and a static view of nature rather than the processes through which knowledge is constituted as such.

In the emerging field of Posthuman Studies, extensive debate has been formulated on what is Posthumanism. The main focus has been directed towards the contents and meanings of a posthuman paradigm shift, while the methodology employed to reflect upon has hardly been disputed. The two aspects are not separated. The overcoming of dualisms called upon by Posthumanism includes the traditional divide between theory and practice. Posthumanism is praxis; it has to be comprehensive in its contents as well as in the way such contents are explored. In this statement, I will present Posthumanism, the reasons why posthuman theorists should reflect on methodology, and which methodological risks they may encounter, with a special focus on essentialism.<sup>1</sup> I will also address what it entails to adopt a posthumanist methodology, and how a posthuman approach marks ground for a radical reflection in the field of applied philosophy and normative ethics. Note that the notions of ‘posthuman’ and ‘posthumanist’ are interrelated, but

2. Posthumanism and Transhumanism reflect on similar subjects from different perspectives and traditions. Note that Transhumanist theorists use the term “posthuman” in a specific exception, referring to the condition which might follow the transhuman phase. On the differences between the two movements, see R. Ranisch and S.L. Sorgner (forthcoming).

3. The similarities and differences of the two movements have not been studied yet, and would require a much deeper articulation.

4. McLuhan 1964: 23.

not synonyms. ‘Posthuman’ applies to a broad field of studies, including advanced robotics, nanotechnology and bioethics. ‘Posthumanist’ mainly refers to a shift in the humanistic paradigm and its anthropocentric *Weltanschauung*. A posthuman text shall imply a posthumanist perspective, and *vice versa*.

### 1. Posthumanism

Posthumanism, which should not be confused with Transhumanism,<sup>2</sup> criticizes anthropocentric humanism and opens its inquiry to non-human life: from animals to artificial intelligence, from aliens to other forms of hypothetical entities related to the physics notion of a multiverse. In so doing, it articulates the conditions for a posthuman epistemology concerned with non-human experience as site of knowledge. Posthumanism calls for environmentalism, deep ecology, animal rights and robo-ethics, simultaneously emphasizing its own human-centrism on the grounds that Posthumanism is still theorized by and for human beings. For instance, its epistemological recognition of the encaged animal as an agent of knowledge can only be experienced by humans on an empathic level, underlying the limits of current interspecies communication. Furthermore, the symbolic relocation of the animal in a non-hierarchic value system may ethically conflict with the killing of other forms of life for human leisure. The posthuman refusal of the ontological primacy of human existence, invites a review of practices such as uncritical omnivorism, overharvesting, and the unrestricted consumption of nonrenewable resources. Posthumanism reflects on the terms of human sustainability, but it does not dismiss the significance of human survival: in not rejecting human or individual

rights, Posthumanism differs from Antihumanism.<sup>3</sup> The semantics of the two terms account for another discrepancy: more than an *anti*, Posthumanism is a *post/meta/trans*. In its attempt to avoid simplistic polarizations, Posthumanism does not neglect metanarratives or metaphysics, but it recognizes their instrumental use for intellectual and existential investigations. Its metanarratives are negotiable though; its metaphysics are located in agnostic perseverance, and related to the anti-realist and anti-essentialist challenge. Posthumanism offers a revisitation of the being as transcendent immanence, disrupting one of the founding splits of Western thought, the one between transcendence and immanence, which symbolically relates to every other traditional dualism, such as: the mind/body, subject/object, self/other, male/female, human/animal-alien-robot. According to cosmology, the universe is expanding at an accelerating rate. The physics hypothesis of dark energy, which permeates the universe and facilitates its expansion, gives rise to inconceivable ontological possibilities, which stretch our universe-centric perspective and might theologically resonate with panentheism. Posthumanism questions biocentrism and the concept of life itself, blurring the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, in a quantum approach to the physics of existence.

### 2. A Posthumanist Methodology

Generated from Postmodernism, Posthumanism seems to resist the notion of ‘method,’ and it actually does. A posthumanist ‘methodology,’ for lack of better word, finds its rhizomatic outlines in the postmodern critique of objective knowledge and absolute truth. It is in no way definitive, but dynamic, mutant, shifting; it has to be aware of the state of things in order to acknowledge current challenges and be open to possibilities. It resonates with Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (1975), in the sense that its value is merely transitional and contingent. A posthumanist methodology has to be adaptable and sensitive; it has to indulge in its own semiotics, hermeneutics, pragmatics, meta-linguistics, in order to be aware of the possible consequences which they might enact on a political, social, cultural, ecological level. Such effects are based on what Posthumanism theoretically states, as well as on how it expresses its own narratives; on what kind of traditions it situates its claims, and which language it uses to offer its contributions. To quote McLuhan “the medium is the message.”<sup>4</sup> A posthumanist methodology does not recognize any primacy to the written text; it is aware that Posthumanism can be performed in many ways. It is inspired by multi-sited ethnography for its “diffuse time-space” approach (Marcus 1995:

5. One of its main developers, Kevin Warwick, defines it as “a form of AI realised by growing biological neurons” (Warwick 2012: 139).

96), and by auto-ethnographic performance (Spry 2001) as a vehicle for relocating the ‘I’ and the body in scholarly reflection. It is closely related to alternative ways of handing down history, such as oral history, proverbs and songs. A posthumanist methodology also involves distribution and divulgation. It sympathizes with the legal system of creative commons and open source to promote knowledge in a ‘share alike’ way, in order to offer the generations to come an accessible cultural heritage.

### 3. Theoretical and Methodological Risks

Posthumanism originated in the radical deconstruction of the ‘Human,’ which began as a political cause in the Sixties, turned into an academic project in the Seventies, and evolved to an epistemological approach in the Nineties. For the first time in recorded history, several categories of people, whose existence had been previously symbolically obscured by one specific type of embodiment (male, white, Western, heterosexual, physically able et cetera), formulated their own narratives as subjects, producing a multiplication of discourses. The posthuman extensive inclusion of perspectives, from animals to unknown forms of life, is historically rooted in the acknowledgement that the difference is embedded in the human species itself, with all of its gendered, racial, ethnic, social, individual varieties. The difference is the kernel of Posthumanism: it cannot be erased in its praxis without simultaneously undermining the theoretical identity of the posthuman perspectivist approach. Posthumanism is decentralized and does not employ representative democratic practices: no specific type of human can symbolically represent humanity as a whole, just as no species can hold any epistemological primacy.

Posthumanism is aware of the strategic role of academia in developing cultural practices of knowledge production, historically performed through elitist schemata and *ad hoc* methodologies. In the praxis of a posthumanist methodology, there are many risks which can be encountered, such as the possibility of flattening difference (Luft 2009), and the difficulty of including non-human voices. At present, non-human standpoints are arduous to be engaged in, outside of an empathic approach by humans reflecting in an ‘as if’ mode. In the future, such limitation might be overcome. For instance, biological AI<sup>5</sup> and advanced robotics may become fully aware and able to express their phenomenological perception of existence in a human accessible-code, so ending the human solipsistic supremacy in the intellectual domain, and opening to the configuration of an actual posthuman methodology. In the meantime, while the possibilities related to non-human perspectives should be mentioned and recognized, it is crucial that posthumanist texts reflect the human experience in its full spectrum. This attempt can be pursued by quoting theorists and thinkers coming from different backgrounds and disciplines, offering alternative standpoints: from what has been historically portrayed as the human margins (hooks 1984), to what has been represented as the center; an intersectional approach should be adopted (Crenshaw 1989). I will now focus on an extremely common methodological fallacy in the current posthumanist debate and literature, which consists in losing the openness and inclusiveness of the posthuman approach by strictly referring to hegemonic traditions, a routine which becomes evident in the chosen references—note that I am only referring to the written tradition, although similar practices may be traced in other semiotic conventions.

#### 3.1 Hegemonic Essentialism

By ‘hegemonic essentialism’ I refer to the widespread habit of only referring to thinkers, artists or theorists who belong to the cultural hegemony. A text written by such standards might claim a posthuman content, but does not appear posthuman in its praxis. Its inner contradiction is obvious: while attempting to produce a discourse critical of humanism, it uncritically frames itself within those same traditions from which humanism developed. In self-limiting its approach, it reaffirms certainty and prevents to pursue epistemological pluralism. Within the field of Posthuman Studies, a surprisingly common example of hegemonic essentialism is a text which only quotes white male intellectuals. A related aspect to be noted, is that such a text usually

6. ORLAN was the first performer to employ plastic surgery for artistic purposes (“The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan,” 1990-1993). It is worth reporting that on her website ([www.orlan.net](http://www.orlan.net)), under “Frequently Asked Questions and Common Mistakes,” it is stated that ORLAN is written in capital letters.

7. As Vandana Shiva reminds: “Boundaries have been an important construct for ecological restraint. ‘Removing boundaries’ has been an important metaphor for removing restraints on human actions, and allowing limitless exploitation of natural resources” (Shiva 1995: 281).

does not situate its standpoints, but presents them as neutral and fit-for-all. Even if the writer is not aware of its political redundancy, such content is enacting a subliminal racist and sexist methodology, implying that no female, black nor black female thinkers are relevant enough for their contributions to be acknowledged. The academics who fall into this habit, often offer similar explanations: “these were the only theorists I could quote, and they happened to be white and male.”

Let us be clear. This is not a call for political correctness or affirmative action, but an invitation to fully embrace the posthuman in the way we, as academics, do research. It is an invitation to investigate perspectives we usually leave aside, as an intellectual exercise towards a posthuman future which will radically stretch the boundaries of human comprehension. I will offer a personal example of the richness that such an attitude can convey.

I recently completed an article in which I wished to assemble a feminist genealogy of the posthuman in the visual arts. As I explained in its methodological preliminaries, the reason was based on the fact that female artists are hardly mentioned in Posthuman Studies, with the exception of ORLAN.<sup>6</sup> After doing extensive research, I gathered a considerable amount of female artists who contributed to the configuration of posthuman aesthetics; at the same time, I realized that I had difficulty finding black artists, while I had included a decent number of Asian, European and Latin American women. I talked about it with an African-American friend of mine; she suggested that I should try to think about the same subjects while changing my perspective (and consequently, my key-words). As a result, I stepped into Afro-futurism and the enormous body of related works. What seemed to be

one of the most challenging parts of my research, became a source of inspiration which has enriched my own perception of Posthumanism. I am relating this experience in order to suggest that adopting a critical posthumanist methodology might be hard to pursue, but it can present unique insights. Its dialectic approach also facilitates an attitude of intellectual curiosity in constant search for knowledge. This enables the researcher, when discovering new knowledge, to perceive it and recognize it as such. Posthumanism ultimately exceeds academic theory and turns into a way of life.

### 3.2 *Resistant Essentialism*

Essentialism does not necessarily reflect a hegemonic standpoint, but it can arise from the place of resistance: I will refer to this other form of essentialism as ‘resistant.’ Resistant essentialism is not as common as the hegemonic one, but it still presents the problem of setting boundaries, which do not pertain to the posthuman approach, unless reconciled for strategic reasons.<sup>7</sup> As stated before, Posthumanism finds its roots in the radical deconstruction of the ‘Human.’ Women, people of colors other than white, gays and lesbians, differently abled people and many other outsiders challenged the hegemonic discourse from the back door, from the margins, from the closet (Sedgwick 1990). They had to maintain a position of resistance in order to protect their ontological survival; their effort was crucial in assembling a genealogy of knowledge which recognized and validated their own existence. As a reaction to the hegemonic intellectual discourse, and in order to give space to voices which otherwise would have none, they often produced essentialist accounts, that is women-only or black-only. In some cases, the entire production of key authors who were considered responsible in authorizing the traditional symbolic hierarchy was banned. For instance, in “Let’s spit on Hegel” (1970), feminist philosopher Carla Lonzi noticed that women were willing to place themselves in a subordinate position, if they held in high esteem those thinkers who promoted notions of female inferiority, or advocated the importance of postponing feminist demands to other more impelling targets. Consequently, Lonzi claimed a theoretical space free from uncritical respect towards the big names, such as Marx, Freud, Lenin. This kind of approach, which may be seen as a philosophical antecedent of the punk anti-authoritarian attitude, proved vital in producing fresh knowledge and insights, without the ghosts of the intellectual founding fathers silencing the voices of the new subjects.

### 3.3 *Neither Resisting, nor Hegemonizing*

These two types of essentialisms—the hegemonic and the resistant—do not equally carry the same amount of theoretical and methodological risks. In the West, essentialist accounts coming from the perspective of the resistance have been officially recognized only since the 70s. The theorists of such accounts had to be deeply aware of the hegemonic discourses they were resisting, so they could be considered “bicultural,” as pointed out by the standpoint theory and the elaboration of the concept of “strong objectivity” (Harding 1991). Furthermore, such theorists strategically situated themselves, as a response to the universalism of traditional writings. Resistant essentialist writers actually shaped the critical tools which allowed the integral deconstruction of the ‘Human’ enacted by Posthumanism. They are mentioned here because the posthuman approach might encourage them to leave the safe, but still marginalized, position of the resistance, to find a theoretical environment which should not include their views for conservative reasons, in order to protect them from being ignored and erased, but should merge with them and think through them, as means of unique intellectual investigation, necessary to offer deeper and less partial narratives.

On the contrary, hegemonic essentialist accounts (typically, the ones giving full primacy to the symbolic Western white man) have been produced since the beginning of recorded civilization and presented as objective truth. They seem to possess the phoenix capacity of being reborn from their own ashes, surviving their own deconstruction and foundational critique: there should be much more attention towards avoiding such accounts, since the risk of recreating them is very high. Falling into the white male essentialist mode means choosing a position of illusionary intellectual comfort (the *ipse dixit* regime as an easy way to validate one’s own claims), while losing the challenge of the posthuman perspective. Ultimately, Posthumanism should not position itself in the hegemony nor in the resistance, but it should promote a dynamic openness which reflects its intellectual and existential inquiry. If posthuman theorists are truly committed to envisioning the future, they first need to be aware of the fact that the future is already present, and that any biases will hold them back and make their vision less accurate.

## 4. Conclusions

Posthumanism should be performed in a way which expresses its full meanings and ambitious purposes not only by paying lip service to a new fashionable academic trend, but through a research which finds

in the difference its theoretical kernel. Posthumanism has to acknowledge the whole human experience in order to be receptive to the non-human and be open to unknown possibilities. Such inclusiveness must be reflected in its methods. A posthumanist methodology should not be sustained by exclusive traditions of thought, nor indulge in hegemonic or resistant essentialist narratives. It should be dynamic and shifting, engaging in pluralistic epistemological accounts, not in order to comply with external requirements of political correctness, but to pursue less partial and more extensive perspectives, in tune with a posthuman future which will radically challenge human comprehension. In so doing, Posthumanism may ultimately become a mode of existential inquiry to be applied in everyday life.

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#### SUMMARY

In the emerging field of Post-human Studies, extensive debate has been formulated on what is Posthumanism. The main focus has been directed towards the contents and meanings of a posthuman paradigm shift, while the methodology employed to reflect upon has hardly been disputed. This statement argues the potential of Posthumanism as a research method, presenting the reasons why posthuman theorists should reflect on methodology, and which methodological risks they can encounter. It addresses what it entails to adopt a posthumanist methodology, and how a posthuman approach can be employed in applied philosophy and normative ethics, ultimately turning into a way of existential inquiry.

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