

# All Humanisms, Until Now

Angel Callander

In his prominent 1969 *Playboy* interview, Marshall McLuhan explained the split in humans' conscious awareness between historical conditions, and the rapid changes to contemporary society through technological innovation – “a syndrome whereby man remains as unaware of the psychic and social effects of his new technology as a fish of the water it swims in.”<sup>1</sup> Literary critic N. Katherine Hayles took up this idea in the opening of *How We Became Posthuman*, stating that we must reckon with the radically shifting human form, inclusive of “human desire and all its external representations,” to re-envision 500 years of humanism towards the critical idiom of posthumanism.<sup>2</sup>

As a fan of science fiction and speculative world-building since childhood, mostly shaped by *Blade Runner*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and Philip K. Dick novels, my young worldview internalized the prevailing ideas of posthumanism as the inevitable cyberpunk, cyborg future. These stories are always historically determined, constructed through models of utopia, dystopia, and resolving contradictions in the events and situations from which we've evolved. Often they repurpose the tropes of alien enemies, where the hero is always the State.

Over the course of my philosophical education, I began to think about posthuman theory without technofetishism, eugenics (as in “transhumanism”), and neo-feudal relations – as something other than an exalted cyberpunk future with no critique of capitalist excess and imperial wars. Through thinkers like Rosi Braidotti and Sylvia Wynter, I have come to understand posthumanism as a world-building endeavour that starts with discarding classical Humanism and its outgrowths, with their entrenched tendencies of domination in all forms.

This is a speculative ground and open prompt to imagine future interactions between humans, ecology, labour, geography, affect, architecture, etc., in a world not touched by the history's imperial destinies. This particular speculation on posthumanism is also informed and grounded by artists such as Morehshin Allahyari and Jenna Sutela, whose works create complex narratives and characters based on myth, folklore, and historical artifacts, staking a claim in a non-Western-centric feminism and posthumanism that look toward a future rejecting Western and human dominance in technology, politics, and culture.

Classical Humanism developed as a universal ideology for what constitutes civilization and enlightened thinking. Fuelling the imperial destinies of Europe's colonial superpowers, Humanism inscribed a limited notion of who is considered ‘Human’ based on proximity to the default Universal Human born of classical Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. Rosi Braidotti, following the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, summarizes this ideal as “masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognized polity.”<sup>3</sup> How did posthumanism emerge as anything other than a grand opposition to the ideology that there was one type of human to begin with?

Morehshin Allahyari uses storytelling and archival methods to reconsider prevailing assumptions about history and myth, often creating videos, simulations, and 3D printed sculptures. She coined the term “digital colonialism,” which is as much about how tools like 3D printing are able to colonize various histories and cultures, as it is about the ways information is owned, accessed, represented, and hidden.<sup>4</sup> For Allahyari, refiguring monstrous female characters from ancient myths (such as the djinn) into contemporary digital contexts, as in her projects *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2017-2020) and *The Laughing Snake* (2018), is a way of resituating the power these characters and stories possess. Through her work, Allahyari posits the need for plural futures, rejecting the vision of the Singularity by Silicon Valley utopianists and technocrats.

In her work with Daniel Rourke creating *The 3D Additivist Cookbook* and its manifesto, the two produced a critical posthumanist work calling to push creative technologies (such as 3D printing) beyond their intended uses to provoke and speculate on unexpected outcomes. Compiling texts by artists, scholars, and other creatives working on the topic of posthumanism, the *Cookbook* covers politics, literature, materials, toolkits, instruction manuals, transhumanism and the body, and the negligible effect of human ethics within the framework of geological timescales. To quote Rourke, “what does it mean to ‘write’ our existence into a future we will never see?”<sup>5</sup>

Jenna Sutela's work expands on this idea, emphasizing what it means to be able to communicate with nonhuman life. Using various media, including bacteria and slime mould, Sutela creates installations and performances that touch on themes of language, interspecies symbiosis, and the precarity of technology in biological systems. Her audio-visual work *nimiia cétií* (2018) brings together the automatic writing and supposed communication with Martians of Hélène Smith, a 19th-century Swiss medium, with recorded excerpts in Sutela's voice over images of digital mountain landscapes and microscope images of *Bacillus subtilis*, which can survive on Mars. Creating this esoteric ecosystem, Sutela suggests a rethinking of the human place in the world. In *From Hierarchy to Hierarchy* (2017), use of the slime mould *Physarum polycephalum* – a primordial organism that can learn, make decisions, and retain memories – underscores the sophisticated and ancient intelligence of a rudimentary species, challenging the ascendancy of human knowledge alone in creating a workable future.

“When I think about the future, I cannot help but think of how it is bound to the past. I think of who wrote our history books, and how entrenched legacies haunt the present and our many potential futures.”

In considering the work of these artists, I come up against several questions about determining posthumanism's applications for reinscribing vital relations between the body, the natural world, and human-made systems. Namely, what would it look like to mass organize around a posthumanism that, ultimately, decenters the technocratic human as its object of study? How does the anti-capitalist post-human future look and feel? What is its environment? It is a speculative ground and open prompt to imagine relationships between humans, ecology, labour, geography, affect, architecture, etc., in a world not touched by empire. In this sense, we deal with an expanded posthumanism that accounts for abstract relations and does not grow out of classical humanism's hierarchies and power structures.

When I think about the future, I cannot help but think of how it is bound to the past. I think of who wrote our history books, and how entrenched legacies haunt the present and our many potential futures. Jacques Derrida's notion of ‘hauntology’ in *Spectres of Marx* uses the repression of history to understand our fixation on failed futures, demonstrating that events meant to be buried will always return as ghostly traces. Best stated by Marx in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: “To be radical is to grasp matters at the root. But for man the root is man himself.”<sup>6</sup>

Both Suleta and Allahyari engage in a poetic-speculative practice that uproots these notions of how the human historically figures into power structures for creating multiple futures. Rather, they are more interested in what other forms of life can and should wield that kind of power. Through storytelling and employing new technologies to creative ends, they suggest strategies for how we can contend with several hundred years of entrenched humanist thought – be it through the monsters of 15th century Arabic manuscripts, or billion-year-old acellular organisms.

1. “The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan,” *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969). Reproduced at <https://aml.ca/marshall-mcluhan-the-playboy-interview/>
2. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1.
3. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 65.
4. Anna Cahn and Morehshin Allahyari, “Re-Figuring the Future with Morehshin Allahyari,” The Rubin Museum, <https://rubinmuseum.org/spiral/re-figuring-the-future-with-morehshin-allahyari>
5. Daniel Rourke, “The Practice of Posthumanism: Five Paradigmatic Figures for Human Mutation,” doctoral thesis (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2019), 137.
6. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 137.

**Angel Callander** is a writer and editor in Toronto, currently Assistant Editor of *Peripheral Review*. She has written on a wide array of topics and interests, including: abjection and monstrosity, architecture, land use, fashion, cybernetics, surveillance politics, Net.art, posthumanism, materialist feminism, labour history, subculture, and the legacies of the Cold War system. Her work can be found in publications such as *Canadian Art*, *Public Parking*, *Cornelia*, and *C Magazine*, as well as in *Interface Critique I* (Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016), and *Architecture and the Smart City* (Routledge, 2019).