
Editors' Introduction

Before the trains of thought have been laid down so firmly: The premodern post/human

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Being in the world does not add up, it never arrives at the complete picture, the conclusive verdict. There is always something more that exceeds the frame we desire to impose.

Iain Chambers, *Culture after Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity*

The best possible time to contest for what the posthuman means is now, before the trains of thought it embodies have been laid down so firmly that it would take dynamite to change them.

N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*

Consider this anecdote, culled from the pages of the 26 October 2009 *New Yorker*: in the small 'third-tier' factory town of Lishui in Eastern China's Zhejiang province and in the smaller surrounding villages, workers in various export industries make zippers and electric-outlet covers, dye nylon, sew colored beads onto children's shoes, assemble light bulbs, and among other piecework labors, even create cheap oil paintings of European and American scenes for foreign buyers, which typically end up in restaurants and hotels in other countries (Hessler, 2009). One of these painters, a young woman in her early twenties by the name of Chen Meizi, has no acquaintance whatsoever with the actual locations she paints (typically copied from photographs and filed under ID numbers, such as HF-3127 for the Eiffel Tower):

Through trial and error, she had learned to recognize some of the landmark buildings of Europe. She had no idea of the names of St. Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace, but she knew these places mattered, because even the tiniest mistake resulted in rejection. (Hessler, 2009, 70)



Although trained to paint at a local art school, Chen has no real interest in the painting she does, nor does she care for any particular painter or artistic period, and she does this work in a place in which, according to the author's article, Peter Hessler, 'the outside world is both everywhere and nowhere at all': 'important brands base themselves in bigger cities,' products made there go somewhere else for their final assembly, and European and American businessmen never visit (Hessler, 2009, 70–71). No one in and around Lishui seems bothered by this, as long as there is work, and globalization, while it brings jobs, does not necessarily add to anyone's understanding of the larger world. Further, as Hessler writes, the 'fact that [Chen's] vocation was completely removed from her personality and her past was no more disorienting than the scenes she painted – if anything, it simplified things. She couldn't tell the difference between a foreign factory and a farm, but it didn't matter' (Hessler, 2009, 74).

Further underscoring the nature of the disconnect between Chen's paintings and their relation, or non-relation, to the rest of the world, Hessler visited Park City, Utah, whose streets and buildings form the subject of one of Chen's commissions. One of these buildings in particular, the Miners Hospital, has a long and rich history since being built in 1904, and from the 1950s forward, when the hospital became defunct, it has served alternately as a bar, youth hostel, library and community center, and was even moved across town in the 1970s to make way for a ski resort. But no one in Park City knows anything about Chen's paintings of the building or why they might have been commissioned by businessmen overseas: 'the people who painted the scenes, and the people who actually lived within the frames, were equally mystified as to the purpose of this art' (Hessler, 2009, 77). And although Hessler does not reflect upon it, we can easily imagine yet another scene within this chain of transnational, impersonal commerce: a German businessman sleeping in a bed in a Russian hotel, above which hangs Chen's painting of the Miners Hospital, or of a Venetian street scene, one of Chen's more sought after subjects.

In such a scenario, we can see that new technologies and transnational modes of commerce do not so much knit together the various inhabitants of the world in tighter, more productively and mutually supportive communicative networks, as they simply make more entrenched our isolation from each other, while at the same time the work of painterly 'representation' flourishes, albeit in a space (both geographical and conceptual) in which a kind of cultural blankness and historical disconnection operates. What of the human, or of human history, obtains here, especially as it is related to the expressive arts and their travel as cultural artifacts (and why might that matter, or not)? In what sense have the persons caught up in the making, selling, buying and viewing of Chen's paintings become actors in an assemblage, or multiplicity (which includes human and non-human components) that de-centers historical identity (while also instantiating new historical identities and simulating



older ones)?¹ And why might these historical identities matter, anyway, especially in a world that seems both saturated with and drained of historical memory simultaneously?

In an era of hyper-globalization (whatever that might mean and however it might be described – by economists, sociologists, political theorists, cultural historians and the like), we might well pause to consider the complex web of relations that inhere between the Now(s) and Then(s), the Here(s) and There(s) caught within the inter-temporal meshwork of our contemporary moment, especially when, as Iain Chambers has written, that moment is marked by the ‘refusal of a formal distinction between reality and the simulacrum,’ which is itself ‘tied to the increasing blurring, confusion and permeability of boundaries, the continual crossing of frontiers’ (Chambers, 1994, 56). The human *self* may be an increasingly indefensible subject, both because of its ethno- and phallogocentrism, but also because it lacks any kind of real ‘center’ or ‘unity’ and only really becomes legible when it is mapped as a kind of embodied, yet also *distributed* cognition that is always part-human, part-something else²; nevertheless, how different *singular persons* in different times and places manage, and have managed, to compose a sense of self (or ‘I’) in the face of struggles over agency, expression, embodiment, identity, well-being, resources, community and the like still matters a great deal and likely always will, especially when, as John Caputo has written, justice is often conceived as a ‘hypersensitivity, a hyperresponsiveness and responsibility, to the smallest and most singular’ (of ‘giving singularity its due’), which ‘mentions everyone by name’ (Caputo, 1993, 89). At the same time, within the university, there has been not only a thoroughgoing deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject (and the humanist discourses that found that subject), but also a significant turn *beyond* ‘the human’ – a ‘turn,’ moreover, that is often accompanied by a nod to the ‘end of history.’ But how to account, nevertheless, for our supposedly novel (and potentially historically de-stabilizing) post/human present (and future) precisely through a (re)turn to what Julian Yates in this issue calls the ‘contact zone’ of the past? It is to that exact question that the contents of this inaugural issue of *postmedieval* are directed.

Many of the discourses on post/humanism – within the humanities, social sciences *and* the sciences – have described the ways in which work in fields such as biotechnology, robotics, cybernetics, informatics, artificial intelligence, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience and the like have destabilized the liberal humanist subject and the supposedly unique singularity of human being, leading in some quarters to distress over the supposed threats to human authority and dignity, the dismantling of the humanist foundations of democracy, and maybe even the supersession of humanity itself by machines or other ‘intelligent’ technologies (the futurist-dystopic view).³ Other discourses have concentrated on a theoretical reform of humanistic philosophical and social-scientific traditions (from classical antiquity through modernity)

1 On the theory and ‘realist’ ontology of social, institutional and governmental assemblages and networks, see DeLanda (2006).

2 On distributed cognition and the idea that we have always been, in some sense, ‘natural-born cyborgs,’ or ‘human-technology symbionts,’ see Clark (2003, 2008). See also Brooks (2002) for the idea that humans have always been machines and further, that the world itself is made up of different machine assemblages, whether biological, mechanical, intelligent, cybernetic or otherwise.

3 For some prominent examples of the



- 'crisis' perspective, see Baudrillard (1988), Bauman (2000), Fukuyama (2002), Gergen (1991), Virilio (2000) and Winner (1987).
- 4 For an excellent overview of 'critical humanisms' and 'anti-humanisms,' see Halliwell and Mousley (2003). See also Soper (1986), Todorov (2002), Wolfe (2003a) and Wolfe (2009).
- 5 For a variety of futurist-utopic viewpoints (and also for positive viewpoints on the post/human that come with certain critical cautions), see especially Bostrom (2008), Braidotti (2002), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Grosz (2001), Grosz (2005), Halberstam and Livingston (1995), Haraway (1991), Haraway (2007), Kac (2007), Kurzweil (1999), Kurzweil (2005), Moravec (1988), Parisi (2004), Silver (1997) and Stock (2002).

believed to have produced an oppressive 'history of possessive subjectivism' (Chambers, 2001, 4).⁴ Within the contemporary humanities, especially, much critical theory has been devoted to the idea that, in Foucault's words, 'man is an invention of a recent date ... one perhaps nearing its end' (Foucault, 1994, 387). And in some circles (primarily scientific and computing studies, but also cultural studies), the post/human turn has led to some giddy and more measured discourses over all the ways in which we – whatever 'we' might be – might finally be able to escape or somehow make less vulnerable (and more pleasurable and multi-extensive) the death-haunted trap of our all-too-human bodies through various 'enhancements' (the futurist-utopic, or transhumanist view).⁵ Katherine Hayles's work, from her book *How We Become Posthuman* (1999) forward, has been especially important, we believe, for both delineating the ways in which human subjectivity has never really been in full control of the 'emergent [and often chaotic] processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are produced' (that is, we have always been post/human), while also dreaming of a post/human future 'that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life as embedded in a world of great complexity' (Hayles, 1999, 5, 288). Hayles's work has also been valuable for insisting that both bodies and embodiments 'are emergent phenomena arising from the dynamic flux that we try to understand analytically by parsing [them] into such concepts as biology and culture, evolution and technology' (Hayles, 2002, 298).

According to Hayles, the humanities 'have always been concerned with the shifting definitions of the human,' and therefore 'the human has always been a kind of contested term,' but 'what the idea of the posthuman evokes that is not unique to the 20th century but became much more highly energized in the 20th century, is the idea that technology has progressed to the point where it has the capability of fundamentally transforming the conditions of human life' (quoted in Solomon, 2007). As Hayles elaborates, even though 'one of the deep ideas of the humanities is that the past is an enduring reservoir of value, and that it pays us rich dividends to know the past,' there are some things 'that have never happened before in human history ... we've never had the possibility for manipulating our own genome in a generation as opposed to 150 generations. We never had the possibility for individually manipulating atoms as in nanotechnology, and so forth' (quoted in Solomon, 2007). The post/human condition, then, in some respects, is thoroughly modern because of its important relation to certain technological and medical innovations that could not have even been imagined in the past, and it has to be admitted that in most post/humanist discourses circulating within the university, whether in the humanities or the sciences, the scholarship of those who work in premodern periods (such as classical antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance) is often not considered



relevant to the discussion⁶ – even when that scholarship is concerned, as some of it definitively has been, with issues of the human and the animal, self and subjectivity, cognition and theory of mind, singularity and networks, corporality and embodiment, bare life and sociality, flesh versus machine, and so on.

And yet, when Cary Wolfe claims that the human ‘is not now, and never was, itself’ (Wolfe, 2003b, xiii), he raises the question of the relation between the post/human (or never-human) and the past, a question that has been explored by Jeffrey Cohen in his book *Medieval Identity Machines*, where he writes that, even in the Middle Ages, human identity was, ‘despite the best efforts of those who possess[ed] it otherwise – unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous’ (Cohen, 2003, xxiii). In all times and places, as Cohen has argued elsewhere, being human really means ‘endlessly “becoming human.” It means holding an uncertain identity, an identity that is always slipping away from us’ (Cohen, 2008, 373–374), and this resonates, actually, with Hayles’s idea that human subjectivity emerges from and is integrated ‘into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it’ (Hayles, 1999, 291). Nevertheless, the question of why and how, exactly, the study of the premodern past might shed critical light on the post/human future remains open and even problematic.

In the prospectus he wrote for the book series he edits, posthumanities, for University of Minnesota Press, Wolfe argues that ‘the question of “posthumanism” ... references not just chronological progression (what comes after the industrial, the modern, and so on) but also takes on fundamental ontological and epistemological questions that are not reducible to purely historical explanation’ (Wolfe, 2006), by which Wolfe means traditionally historicist teleologies. But what we think he also means here is that history is not altogether sufficient to the matter of the post/human, or, in a sense, post/humanism undoes or evacuates in advance the traditional, ‘rationalist’ foundations of humanistic inquiry, and therefore undoes history itself. For Wolfe, post/humanism is ‘not “against” history, of course, but against historicism in its more unreflective and problematic forms’ (Wolfe, 2006). Here, we believe, there is room for premodernist interventions into contemporary post/humanist discourses in order to draw critical attention to the *historicity* (the ‘when’) of certain issues that pace and fret around the turn to the post/human in contemporary life and thought, as well as to better describe, from the longest possible historical perspectives, the ways in which bodies (human and non-human) and the world have always been emerging together out of various dynamic material processes and fields of interpretation.

It is not our intention, with this inaugural double-issue of *postmedieval*, to draw the teleological pre-histories or points of origin of (or deep background to) the contemporary question of the post/human, nor to stress either the difference or sameness of the past with respect to the question of the post/human in the present. Indeed, with Jeffrey Cohen, we view the past as a kind of ‘unbounded’

6 One notable exception to this general rule of thumb, albeit with a narrowly-defined focus on the contemporary political effects of the history of the liberal humanist self, is the recent issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist and Cultural Studies* on *The Future of the Human*, which attempts to sketch out a genealogy of the dominant conception of the human, according to which humanity is necessarily distributed between the poles of the individual and the state (Armstrong and Montag, 2009, 2), and which incorporates commentary on classical, medieval, and early modern authors and texts. It should be noted, however, that the premodern past in this commentary is mainly viewed in negative terms for the ways in which it has developed a limited and limiting humanism (Armstrong and Montag, 2009, 8), whereas some of the contributors to our issue draw a more capaciously heterogeneous



picture of the humanisms and post-humanisms of the past. Our thanks to Michael O'Rourke for bringing this issue of *differences* to our attention.

space-time that is generative of human identity through a 'constant movement of irresolvable relations that constitute its traumatic effect, an ever-expanding line that arcs back through what has been even as it races toward what shall be' (Cohen, 2000, 5). Similar to this journal's mission to develop an interdisciplinary, cross-temporal and socially interventionist medieval cultural studies that would bring medieval studies into mutually beneficial critical relations with scholars working on a diverse array of post-medieval subjects, including critical theories that remain un- or under-historicized (and to bring a concerted focus to bear upon the question of the relations between the medieval and modern in different times and places that will help us to take better stock of the different roles that history and various processes of historicizing have played in the shaping of multiple presents and futures), we propose that the post/human present and future are predicated upon a plurality of different, discontinuous and heterogeneous temporalities: there are many different Nows existing alongside each other and within each of them, multiple pasts – pasts in which the human never was entirely itself (but in what ways and in which times and places and what is at stake when the human asserts itself in particular instances?). Further, it is our hope to show that contemporary discourses on the post/human raise a host of complex (and often anxious) questions relative to issues of embodiment, subjectivity, identity, sociality, free will, cognition, sexuality, spirituality, self-determination, expression, representation, well-being, ethics, governance and the like for which premodern history and culture provide invaluable resources for reflection.

To that end, we have gathered together here 29 scholars working in medieval and early modern studies, along with three respondents – Andy Mousley, Kate Soper and Katherine Hayles – who have made important contributions to contemporary discourses on critical, anti- and post-humanisms, with the aim of initiating what we hope will be a productive alliance across the so-called 'Enlightenment' divide with regard to the question of the post/human. More specifically, we asked our premodernists to write short essays (riffs and ruminations, really) addressing any of the following:

- The possible productive intersections (of any type) between studies in earlier historical periods and ongoing discourses on the post/human and post/humanism in the contemporary humanities and sciences.
- How certain aspects and discourses of premodern historical periods might problematize the assumptions of a post/humanism that considers itself to be either thoroughly modern or somehow outside of a 'deeper' history.
- The historicity, or the '*when*', of the post/human as a social, cultural, philosophical, and scientific category of thought, as well as a state of material reality.
- The ways in which the history and culture of premodernity might help us to address and perhaps begin to adjudicate some of the troubling questions raised by contemporary discourses on the post/human.



What might be at stake here is not only the future of the human itself, but also of the humanities. As Edward Said once wrote, ‘as scholars and teachers we believe we are right to call what we do “humanistic” and what we teach “the humanities.” Are these still serviceable phrases, and if so in what way? How then may we view humanism as an activity in light of its past and probable future?’ (Said, 2004, 7). If the humanities are to retain any sort of privilege as the critical site for the presentation, examination and re-imagining of what the human has been and could possibly be, our efforts to answer Said’s questions must be as broadly collective – across disciplines and historical periods – as possible. Since one of the greatest insights of post/humanist scholarship has been to demonstrate how the human functions, not as an autonomous self, but as part of a distributed system (and further, how the entire world is one system in which everyone and everything is connected), how can our longer histories be sequestered from contemporary life and thought? And while the meaning of human life, as Andy Mousley indicates here in this issue, may be impossible to ever fully answer, regardless of our increasing means of dissection (critical, scientific, technological and otherwise), the discourses of the humanities, newly invigorated by the question of the post/human, may continue to serve to invaluablely ‘animate’ the question.

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