

Teacher Education and Posthumanism

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Introduction

The category of the human has great import in adjudicating the aims of educational praxes, and is therefore central to all questions regarding the purpose of education. Such discussions have been exacerbated within the context of neoliberalism, wherein the subject of education is increasingly seen through capitalist lenses and market logics that become equated with ethical and epistemological systems. And in most cases, the question of humanization emerges as central to the task of disrupting this understanding of student subjectivity. This is exhibited in *Educational Theory's* 2015 issue exploring the importance of humanity and the humanities in today's context. Here, Chris Higgins writes that now is "one of those times" in which "it has become necessary to remind ourselves" of certain "basic facts," namely the value of humanity to education (p. 116). Or, as Jason Wallin (2016) posits, "For what remains intimate to much contemporary education and educational research but the latent presumption that the world conforms to human thought" (p.3). Education, understood most basically, is articulated as a human project and, further, remains tied to this view of itself particularly when threatened by neoliberal overtaking. In teacher education, we see this largely

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in the form of arguments on behalf of the need for teachers themselves to be humanized—as bell hooks (1994) has famously asked, how are we supposed to expect students to engage in the process of humanization if teachers themselves are not allowed to and encouraged to be human?

In the face of this privileging of the human, posthumanist studies have pushed back on such narratives, though not entirely antagonistically, to challenge the assumption of humanization as inherently liberatory, and the human as a stable category for grounding educational and pedagogical aims. In *Posthumanism in Educational Research*, the editors of the volume, Nathan Snaza and John A. Weaver (2015) articulate the basic concern with the project of humanization for posthumanism:

Humanism, through a radical truncation of the definitions of the ‘world’ (so much is even suggested by the word’s etymology), has made a tiny part of the world (what pertains to ‘humans’) seem as if it were the whole. Humanism is, to combine phrases from classical rhetoric and Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy, a machine that produces the human world as synecdoche. ‘Man’ is *made to be* the measure of all things. When ‘man’ is the measure, it implies that humans and everything they do is inherently more valuable than any nonhuman animal or any thing. . . . As a result a hierarchical structure is invented to justify human actions and dismiss any other perspective that does not take into account or accept the predominance of a human viewpoint. (p. 2)

For education, this privileging of a small part of the world as if it represents its entirety is of concern because in asserting a division between the human, on the one hand, and the animal or thing on the other, the human has given itself too much power and privilege. We see this in many places in educational studies and practices, from the destruction of the natural world and its resources to the assertion of human rationality as the highest form of life, thus justifying innumerable projects of domination over the natural world and even other forms of human life that do not enact knowledge appropriately. Wallin (2016) also argues that this attachment to human superiority reflects education’s unwillingness to reconcile its reality over and against a world that might not be for the human and, further, that will likely survive far beyond human existence. It is therefore time for a blurring, a flipping, and a rethinking of this division and its political implications, for a rejection of “the privileged position of human philosophical access” (Wallin, 2016, p. 4) for a “positing the ontological priority of the monstrous” (Lewis & Kahn, 2010, p. iv). As for teacher education, this means founding pedagogical practices in ecological thinking, or, as Florence Chiew (2016) articulates, a logic that assumes the “fundamental inseparability of ways of knowing and ways of being” (p. 14) and therefore locates possibility in a relocation of

the epistemological foundations of the project of “education” to non-human ways of being.

However, the sound of Higgins’ (2015) own general point nonetheless resonates with many: the times we live in do still seem to necessitate a reassertion of the importance of the human precisely because it is part of what is threatened by neoliberalism’s adjudication of life along monetary lines makes it the non-profitable or productive life dispensable, exemplified by the turn in teacher education to conflate good teaching with good data collection. The question is, then, how do we reconcile the limits of the human as a category for improving teacher education, at the same time, reaffirm the overwhelming political and social value of demanding humanization? This question, as it applies to education, thus suggests the need for a closer interrogation of the idea of the “human” in relation to which both sides situate themselves. In other words, what is the idea of the human that is at stake in such discussions?

Challenges to the “Human”

Posthumanism largely concerns itself with the divide between human and nature, or human and object, however the centrality of this divide has been challenged by scholars for whom “human” has never existed as a neutral or stable category of identity. It has, in fact, been largely the work of feminist posthumanist scholars to point out that much of posthumanist scholarship does need a more robust and nuanced conception of the idea it seeks to reconstruct. In such scholarship, the “posthumanist move” is critiqued as forgetting that the idea of the human it seeks to move past is a gendered and sexualized one, situated ideally in the categories of masculinity and heterosexuality. For example, in the work of Donna Haraway (1991) and Karan Barad (2007), posthumanism posits a rethinking of what it means to be human by transgressing previously stable categories of human, animal, machine, nature, and thing, primarily by challenging that stability through an analysis of gender.

Haraway’s infamous consideration of the ‘cyborg’ challenges all disciplines to transcend the boundaries of the human and animal, animal/human and machine, and the physical and non-physical. The value of this is in its challenge to Western systems of knowledge:

In the traditions of ‘Western’ science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of

production, reproduction, and imagination. This chapter is an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for the *responsibility* in their construction. (p. 292)

The value of posthumanism here is located in a concern for gender and is innately political, insofar as challenging such boundaries is seen as enabling frameworks through which the sorting and separating that categories of identity do, and the systems of power they affirm, might be challenged and possible coalitions might be reimagined. Here, patriarchy is the primary target of posthumanism's aim, given its systematic sorting through the maintenance of the existence and separation of men and women. Instead of assuming these divisions to be natural or best, posthumanism here recognizes the role of gender in adjudicating such divisions, and, as gender binarism becomes less stable, so goes the stability of those divisions. To take responsibility for where the boundaries between oneself and others are drawn, then, is to exist in a space of ambiguity so as to thwart oppression, particularly gender oppression. In the process, new boundaries that might produce new political futures outside of this Western framework are made possible. Posthumanism thus undoes the category upon which gender oppression operates by refusing to accept the definition of human as it is—as inherently gendered.

For Barad, too, political and ethical responsibility is at stake in the posthumanist move. Predicated on a concern for the ambiguous division between human and nature, Barad challenges dominant understandings of knowledge as a matter of accountability regarding the agential cuts, or boundary enactments in our experiences. That is, against Western notions of knowledge that depend upon a stable autonomous, rational definition of the human, knowledge from this posthumanist perspective is, “a matter of differential responsiveness (as performatively articulated and accountable) to what matters...Knowing is a matter of intra-acting” (Barad, 2007, p.149). She thus says, “Ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (Barad, 2007, p. 393). In her account, then, individualism and objectivity are fundamentally challenged by asserting the instability and irrationality of the linguistic and ideological carving out of the human as distinct from and superior to the rest of existence and the world. The boundaries the human depends upon are only agential cuts in our systems of language and knowledge, marking our interactions in the world and, as such, these cuts could be enacted differently. In its most basic form, taking responsibility for even the most banal divisions in experience is central to this view of posthumanism, which means being able to justify, be held accountable for, and respond ethically to the effects of those divisions upon ourselves

and others, even the non-human others with which our daily lives are incessantly intertwined. The fluidity of gender and the reconsideration of gender's relationship to "nature" and "animal" are particularly salient in this project as boundaries in need of challenging and reconstituting in order to reconfigure our politics away from its attachments to the human, in or in an ethically responsible way.

The Raced "Human" and its Non-Human Other

However, in the face of such gender-centered accounts, contemporary critiques of feminism as a white, middle to upper class project demand that we ask about race. If the central task of black feminism's critique of feminism is first to assert the interrelatedness of racial oppression and gender and sexual oppression and, second, to address the deeply raced nature of dominant feminism as it emerged in its so-called "second wave" form in the 1960s and 70s, the value and relevance of black feminism for posthumanism can be understood similarly. Even though both Haraway and Barad acknowledge the importance of racism and race as being at stake in their work, at the level of description of the problem, they have been critiqued powerfully by black feminists, including queer of color critics, for failing to address the raced elements of the category of "human" alongside its gendering. In understanding gender as the primary site for challenging the contemporary definition of the human, we thus ought to consider the consequences of detaching gender from race for the possibility of liberation. Thinking back to Sanza and Weaver's definition, then, when it comes to education, we only perpetuate the problem by neglecting to acknowledge the history of the idea of the human and, further, the relationship between gender *and* race and the human.

A deep consideration of race in relationship to the posthuman requires, then, asking how race came to define "human" in the first place. Especially within queer of color scholarship derived from black feminism, the raced nature of the idea of the human is so widely understood that discussions of this category of existence are rendered fundamentally problematic if there is no discussion of the way that concept was also always one constructed on the basis of whiteness. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2015) questions:

What and crucially *whose* conception of humanity are we moving beyond? Moreover, what is entailed in the very notion of a beyond? Calls to become 'post' or move 'beyond the human' too often presume that the originary locus of this call, its imprimatur, its appeal, requires no further examination or justification but mere execution of its rapidly routinizing imperative. (p. 215)

Jackson thus calls into question the extent to which posthumanism, including its feminist underpinnings and offshoots, neglects the troubling history of the idea of the human itself. Citing the many ways in which people of color have been refused to be seen or treated as human in modernity, she adds, "I want to caution that appeals to move 'beyond the human' may actually reintroduce the Eurocentric transcendentalism this movement purports to disrupt, particularly with regard to the historical and ongoing distributive ordering of race" (Jackson, 2015, p. 215). Additionally, in highlighting the ways in which the very emergence of Western thought, and its dominance, was grounded in the need to effectively *ensure* "human" did not apply to everyone, she argues that such moves towards "post" and "beyond" "effectively ignore praxes of humanity and critiques produced by black people, particularly those praxes which are irrelevant to the normative production of 'the human' illegible from within the terms of its logic" (Jackson, 2015, p. 216). That is, far from being a universally accessible and applicable idea, the "human's" racial history suggests its deeply contingent and selective quality.

In failing to reconcile the very marginalizing, politically divisive and often violent category of the human that frames Western discourses, posthumanism, when either universalized or grounded solely in gender analyses, also fails at ensuring such selectivity isn't perpetuated. Assuming that in bypassing the idea itself, we can walk away from the problems the idea contains within it is, in this way, itself a kind of violence; rather than reframing the problem, posthumanism instead erases the problem and, in a sense, moves the bar for those who are continuing to seek recognition as human. To return to the impact of posthumanism on educational research and thought, posthumanism's suggestion that by rejecting the human/animal divide, education can be more liberatory becomes altogether concerning for those students who were never fully subject to that divide in the first place. Simply put, what do we do with those of us, particularly racial and/or sexual minorities, who have a history of being refused humanity, of being compared to, grouped alongside, or even blatantly labeled as animals, things, or objects, all in the service of concentrating power in the hands of a select few, in the face of posthumanism's newfound admiration for such labels?

This concern highlights the ways in which the division between human and animal, or human and thing, challenged by posthumanism reveals itself to be, *contra* to its intentions, understood as a division *within* humanity. In fact, as noted previously, making cuts even within the category of the human has been a centerpiece of Western Enlightenment rationality—what it means to be human was centrally tied with being able to demonstrate rationality in a particular way. Here, again, I

am referring to or the dominant mode of thought regarding what constitutes truth and knowledge that emerged out of the Enlightenment based on a commitment to abstract, disembodied rationality, empiricism, and objectivity. Whether it be through, as Haraway (1991) and Barad (2007) acknowledge, patriarchy, or through colonization, indentured servitude, slavery, and even science and education, among many other institutions, such an understanding of knowledge has had as its most effective tool for maintaining power the division and hierarchicalization of human life, and the demarcation of many as sub-human, as animals or objects.

Particularly within a liberal context, such a division has been useful in maintaining an understanding of the human subject as an autonomous, rational decision maker, thus rendering those with different ways of knowing, different criteria for knowledge, and different ways of forming relationships with others excludable from participation in a variety of political spheres. These differences can be largely traced by lines of both gender *and* race. The tension presented at the beginning of this paper, then, can now be understood as one of defining knowledge and subjectivity and therefore as having deep theoretical, political, and, of course, educational relevance and implications. As we turn to an epistemological analysis, then, I follow Roderick Ferguson's (2003) understanding of epistemology as "an economy of information privileged and information excluded, and the subject formations that arise out of this economy" (p. ix). This is both a rejection of the narrowing of epistemology enacted through "sociological and national depictions" (Ferguson, 2003, ix) of knowledge and of the depersonalization of epistemology that occurs in the reliance upon such sources of inquiry.

By neglecting the racialization of the idea of the human, the question of the tensions between humanism and posthumanism raised at the beginning of this paper takes on a new tone. The tension between the two fields is not just about how to balance the value of asserting humanity in the face of increasingly systematic neoliberalism and the oppression inherent in the assertion of the human in such projects. Instead, the problem is with understanding how to address difference without succumbing to rationality's tendency towards hierarchicalization. Examining the political and social structure of oppression from an epistemological position is therefore essential because it directly intervenes upon posthumanism's maintenance of hierarchy through its detachment from race. This challenge to the logics upon which posthumanism rests exposes the racial and racist erasure and silencing caused by the already "nonhuman disruption and/or displacement" of the very idea of the "human" (Jackson, 2015, 216). Jackson (2015) is clear that these decontextualizations and erasures essentially make necessary

thinking beyond the human in a way that can only have as it's "beyond" an antiblack nonhuman. In other words, if "human" was already an exclusive category, to move beyond it without challenging this structure does not challenge or reverse such exclusions but, instead, can actually perpetuate them. This is the legacy, Jackson (2015) argues, that we are left by those thinkers for whom the very status of the human as it emerged in science and philosophy was detached from raced bodies.

First, in confronting the epistemological assumption of universality and homogeneity of human life underlying the idea of the human, and thus posthumanism, we see the more radical need to resist language of the human all together. Building off of the work of Sylvia Wynter, the only possibility of any kind of movement that can challenge the idea of the human, Jackson (2015) argues,

would not arise from beyond the imperatives of viewpoint and judgment, but as position or the entanglement of judgement and viewpoint. This alternative movement, a transvaluation of the human, will require a change in the underlying structure of Man's being/knowing/feeling 'human' in a manner such that we no longer make any reference to the transcendentalist conception that many are eager to move beyond. (p. 217-218)

Posthumanism's failure to reconcile the very idea of the human that it seeks to trouble, then, leaves it complicit in perpetuating a narrative that does not challenge the reduction of knowledge to rational judgment, and the reduction of the human to the ability to adhere to such rational judgment. Again, this means that post humanism, at the political and epistemological level, ultimately maintains the hierarchy of life it claims to challenge. Finally, challenging the idea of the human therefore requires challenging the dominant conceptions of knowledge that are advanced, depended upon, and argued with and through, in most public and academic discourses. This is the "change in the underlying structure" that posthumanism fails to enact on its own, and, further, to which humanism so often clings in its pursuit of recognition, agency, self-definition and definition, and autonomy: because such goals only make sense in relationship to a definition of the human predicated on at least some Western epistemological principles, both the "humane" and "post human" must be recognized as dangerous.

Recognizing the disciplinary tensions related to understanding the implications of posthumanism for education amounts to a disciplinary critique. Taking seriously queer theory and queer of color analysis, women of color feminisms, colonialism and Native studies, and intersectionality and its critics as sources upon which we can *ground* readings, analyses, critiques, has unique potential to enable new, emergent possibilities

for education. At the level of academia, we can see what is at stake in education's relationship to interdisciplinarity. Namely, the genealogical lineage upon which education rests assumes the inherent value of either humanism or posthumanism to educational thought and offers almost no critique of that assumption. As a result, educational discourses are able to perpetually reaffirm their dependence on the human as legitimate. Alternative discourses, though, impede this assumed affirmation, calling into question the consequences of such an assumption. We therefore, in our courses, classrooms, offices, conferences, and journals, need to open a more vibrant space for interdisciplinary research on education and take seriously the critiques other disciplines and traditions make of our work. Here, I am concerned with what Ferguson (2003) calls the "normative infrastructure" of the archives of education and educational theory, or the processes of valuation of authorities and kinds of sources that get included within the canon (p. viii). As Ann Laura Stoler (2002) argues, archives exist as one of the most important objects of study insofar as they reflect particular political investments, especially where colonialism rooted: they are cultural artifacts that pose as facts, but must be explored more deeply to better grasp their authenticity and reliability. Education, and educational theory, especially as it wrestles with what to do with the "human", must interrogate its own use of particular archives and canons that form the normative and political commitments reflected in their creation and use over time. Here, then, I am attempting to challenge and expand education's archives to include those not typically deemed part of the field of education, or of philosophy, as well as those that offer a critique of education from beyond education's disciplinary boundaries. Doing so offers new insight into the role of posthumanism in education.

In the face of this, though, Wynter (1990) makes clear that the task is to create new ways and spaces to "de-code the system of meanings of that other discourse...which has imposed this mode of silence for some five centuries, as well as to make thinkable the possibility of a new 'model' projected from a new 'native' standpoint" (p. 363). To return to Wynter's (1990) call, we ought to begin to wrestle with the value of operating from and on 'demonic models' of 'being/feeling/knowing,' in contrast to the "'consolidated field' of our present mode" of such (p. 364). In asking her readers to reconceive of what it means to be of 'primal human nature' at the deepest epistemological and linguistic level, she asks that we begin from the standpoint of the excluded and non-human (Wynter, 1990, p. 364).

Those interested in the implications of this non-human starting point might therefore begin by positing Sylvia Wynter's 'demonic models' of 'being/feeling/knowing' as a temporary foundation for resituating our

educational discourses of pedagogy, perhaps alongside a concerted effort to resist language that explicitly depends upon the “human” (Jackson, 2015, p. 217-218; Wynter, 1990, p. 363). The task is to offer a radical epistemological position outside the current system of meaning out of which alternative systems of knowledge and meaning can grow. At the very least, in challenging ourselves to refuse to use this language, even in its posthumanist iterations, I hope we can begin to see the value in reimagining education not from a commitment to unity, practicality, democracy, humanization, freedom, among others, which are all but inseparable from humanity, but from a commitment that is most threatening to them: the divergent, radically different, impossible, strange, and disruptive. This does not mean a complete rejection of these ideas, but rather a deep troubling of them, and a serious attempt to ground our discussions of education, particularly within teacher education, elsewhere. This is itself an imaginative project. As such, I argue it can begin to be attained through the use of speculative or science fiction in the teacher education.

Speculative Teacher Education

If the task of reimagining education requires the capacity to imagine, our pre-service teachers themselves must be given space to practice and cultivate their imaginative skills. Imagination has, of course, a long history in educational research, and in teacher education, as being valued for its relationship to creativity, empathy and freedom. However, as Lewis and Kahn (2010) argue, much of this discourse in education erases the fundamentally disruptive and dangerous nature of imagination in focusing on these relationships. They argue instead that imagination is “both dangerous and liberatory,” and, as such, locate its potential at the limits of pedagogy and discourse, not within it (Lewis & Kahn, 2010, p. 11). This implicates the content of imagination as well, as in order to imagine, the object around which the act of imagination orients itself is at stake. The task of imagination, then, is not just to imagine the possibility that things could be otherwise, but to recognize the vast unrecognizability of this “otherwise” and its affectively contradictory and unfamiliar possibilities. That is, “Schools betray the monstrous multitude as an unruly beast that must be tamed and gentrified through either sacrifice or separation” (Lewis & Kahn, 2010, p. 11). This betrayal, I argue, takes the pedagogical form of teaching *about* imagination rather than engaging preservice teachers in the act of imagining. Speculative fiction, though, offers preservice teachers a way of engaging imaginatively with the non-human that does not allow them to imagine new, freer possibilities for human life, but puts them

into conversation with a “monstrous multitude” of ways of being that can radically disrupt dominant systems of knowledge and, as a result, bring about a real, felt change in students’ view of the relationship between education and the human.

Many scholars have pointed to the pedagogical import of speculative fiction. Jessica Langer (2011) has argued that speculative fiction plays a particularly important role in disrupting coloniality, arguing that speculative fiction uniquely situates the reader in a complex relationship with the Other in such a way that can be used to problematize colonial imagination and postcolonial discourses. She argues,

The figure of the alien comes to signify all kinds of otherness, and the image of the far-away land, whether the undiscovered country or the imperial seat, comes to signify all kinds of diaspora and movement, in all directions. Their very power, their situation at the centre of the colonial imagination as simultaneous desire and nightmare, is turned back on itself. (Langer, 2011, 4)

As such, speculative fiction can play a pivotal role in helping students engage with systems of othering in ways that unsettle the seemingly inevitability of the categories of identity through which education operates. Further, Gina Wisker (2014) has argued that the very idea of higher education can be challenged through speculative fiction, particularly insofar as it disrupts the marriage of capital and college.

Speaking more directly to the topic of college education, Krista Karyn Hiser (2010) argues that novels about the future can “creatively engage first-year students in critical thinking about consumerism and global environmental sustainability” (p. 154). Similarly, Sarah L. Webb (2016) asserts the necessity of futurist pedagogy to the classroom. Speaking directly to what she calls the “societal machine,” of the feeling of a lack of agency and efficacy in education in the face of overwhelming systems of human organization, she argues that the value of futurist pedagogies is in the way that it

focuses on imagining and creating ethical forms of technology in the present to influence the future. It pushes us beyond the now cliché rhetoric ‘preparing students for the future.’ That idea is not only inadequate; it’s downright hazardous. This notion of being prepared for the future suggests to all parties involved that our futures are inevitable and determined solely by forces far outside of ourselves. (Webb, 2016)

On Webb’s account, this means using and inventing new “technologies, practices or systems that make such futures possible.” One of these technologies or practices might be using speculative fiction. This is Gough’s (2005) point in his argument for the use of speculative fiction in and

for social education. Speculative fictions, he argues, might help social educators to produce anticipatory critiques of the possible ways in which drivers of large-scale social change such as globalization, digitalization and cultural diversification are transforming democratic societies and conceptions of civic life and citizenship in the contemporary world” (Gough, 2005, pp. 15).

Education faces a tenuous future, straddling a growing divide between a no-longer-relevant past and an uncertain future, a future that calls into question the future of humanity altogether. In the face of such a future, posthumanism stands as a reminder that the divides we make in education are unstable, that things *could* and likely *will* be otherwise, and that our education ought to be held accountable to the world beyond as it exists to and for humans. Here, I have aimed to disrupt the social and political implications of posthumanism for education, calling into question the “beyond” it seeks by being attentive to the raced, gendered, and sexual stakes of such an aim. Situating this critique within a conversation about teacher education, the need for critical and speculative imagination comes to the forefront, demanding a release from traditional educational discourse for the sake of dismantling current regimes of knowledge or modes of thought and being that keep in place a view of the human that reproduces gender, sexual, or race based exclusions. In reclaiming the practice of radical imagination of the non-human, the monstrous, the demon through the use of speculative fiction in teacher education courses, we are able to reorient our students towards the future critically and disruptively, challenging the dominance of neoliberalism in education through an unsettling of one’s sense of self, one’s relationship to others, and one’s place in the world. Doing so would, at the very least, make visible the extent to which education, especially in teacher education, continues to resist existing for all.

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