

Editorial

# Introduction: Race, Politics, and the Humanities in an Age of “Posts”: Rethinking the Human/Race

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This Special Issue of *Humanities* comes at a time when the viability of the humanities are challenged on numerous fronts. On the one hand, the humanities face material threats as the politics of austerity continues throughout Europe and the United States, diminishing public support and making profit margin and “job creation” the primary measure of value or the basis of state university funding decisions. On the other, the humanities face conceptual, theoretical and ethical challenges, as the emergence of post-racial and post-humanist discourses signal what Foucault called “a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge.” The defining boundaries of constructs such as “race” and “human” have been radically called into question, challenging us to rethink the classificatory systems that found hierarchical relationships between, for example, the “fully human” and sub-human or non-human others. Despite dominant nations’ professed commitment to a universal human rights paradigm, racialized identities are still often the targets of disenfranchisement and dehumanization, while the exploitation and destruction of the natural world continues in the name of “progress” and profits.

What is at stake for the humanities in this presumably post-racial, post-human age, and, in particular, how do we forge sustainable political projects, human alliances or collectivities without resorting to an idiom of classification, bias or exclusivity? How do we move beyond the binary oppositions that privilege certain identities and subjectivities at the expense of others, yet still advocate for the recognition and protection of vulnerable groups? How do we find a way out of the trap of anthropocentrism, speciesism or human exceptionalism, yet retain and reaffirm universal human rights as an ethical imperative?

The contributions included in this issue offer a range of perspectives and approaches to these and other relevant concerns. Critical engagement with these questions is especially urgent given the increasingly precarious conditions and acts of violence endured by members of target human collectivities across the globe. At a time when xenophobic, nationalistic, and reactionary strains are renascent across Europe and the United States, universality of rights remains a seductive but elusive aim. But the conditions we face—geopolitical and economic, human and animal, technological and environmental—should also remind us that that while precarity is “distributed unequally,” all living things exist in a state of precariousness, all are, ultimately, vulnerable.<sup>i</sup> Thus contributors to this volume participate in a conversation that is not merely academic, i.e. exclusive to an elite, to Western institutions, or echo-chambers of our own making. Our project arises, in part, from an incentive to consider “the political implications of those normative conceptions of the human that produce, through an exclusionary process, a host of ‘unlivable lives’ ...” [xv].<sup>ii</sup> It reflects a tacit understanding that how we delineate the conceptual boundaries of the “human”—or for that matter, of “woman” “civilization” or “race”—matters.

There are certainly indications that we are leaving behind or transcending old paradigms and assumptions about what it means to *be human* and what responsibilities or obligations that entails. But this recognition also compels us to engage the ethical dilemmas posed by the ubiquitous “post.” Words such as post-humanist, post-feminist, post-racial, and most recently, post-truth (Oxford Dictionary’s 2016 international word of the year) may imply that we have abandoned or moved beyond aspirations and pivotal events that gave shape and meaning to modern societies and energized collective resistance. In some cases, the “post” can work as a means to disavow, deflect, or negate the current state of race relations or global inequalities. Under the guise of having resolved or “moved beyond” America’s “race problem,” for example, leaders exploit post-race discourses as a

means to reverse hard-fought gains in civil rights, affirmative action, or voting rights. Here “colorblind” policies proclaim the end of race as a factor in political or legal decision-making, citing the election of a black president as a sign that we have entered a “post-race” age. Meanwhile, “race” endures in a system of mass incarceration, in the rising anti-immigrant sentiments that helped hand Donald Trump the presidency, and in an ongoing “War on Terror” that has morphed into a war on Muslim citizens and refugees. It is also implicated in the environmental collateral damage wrought by corporate-centered policies, which tend to enrich an economic elite while disproportionately affecting the lives and resources of vulnerable populations, particularly Latino and African Americans living in the poorest areas.<sup>iii</sup>

To many critics, this discursive turn seems to herald the end of the humanities as we know them, or at least, a retreat or capitulation that heralds the advent of a “post-political” world ruled not by ideological conflicts but by a complacent neo-liberalism, the “logic” of markets, or identity politics recast as consumer choice and lifestyle preference.<sup>iv</sup> For others, the “post” throws out those troublesome universals, only to replace them with a radical individualism compelled by personal desire or need. “What post-politics tends to prevent,” Žižek explains, is the “metaphoric universalization of particular demands: post-politics mobilizes the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content” [204].<sup>v</sup> In the absence of collective alliances and mobilization, we cede the political arena to fundamentalists, extremists, con-men and carnival barkers.

Much of the problem resides in the ways that the human was historically defined and characterized, failing to include, for instance, violence specifically targeting women in the universalizing discourse of human rights, or excluding non-human species from ethical considerations, or relegating racial others to “sub-human” or second-class status. Yet while scientific interest in human exceptionalism brought attention to race and gender as markers of essential mental, physical, and moral qualities in the eighteenth century, humanism helped to expand the boundaries of community and empathy, giving credence and emotional force to abolitionist movements, emancipatory political rhetoric, women’s suffrage, international policies, and numerous human rights projects. To its defenders, post-humanism is not intended as a rejection of humanism’s ethical demands, but a recalibration that more fully *incorporates* others who have been relegated to the margins or excluded entirely. In *Animal Rites*, Cary Wolfe conceptualizes post-humanism not as “the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited [47].<sup>vi</sup> As a critical discourse, post-humanism considers the effects of contemporary technologies on the human without forgetting “its non-human others, many of them of humanity’s own making and remaking – gods, monsters, animals, machines, systems.”<sup>vii</sup> But in attempting to counter, intervene, or reject humanism and its discontents, are we indeed finding new and improved paths toward social justice? Is the “post” a path out of the labyrinth of privileged subjectivity, or a reactionary response to the persistent clamor at the barricades?

Our analysis begins with Delphine Gras’ “Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*,” which reads Morrison’s latest novel as a timely challenge to post-racial and post-feminist discourses. Gras sets the novel in dialog with Morrison’s prior work, showing how her black female characters embody the legacies of slavery and how, despite claims to the contrary, this legacy endures in the ways that Black bodies are seen and treated in twenty-first century America. In “Vulnerable Life: Zombies, Global Biopolitics, and the Reproduction of Structural Violence” Steven Pokornowski turns our attention to the recent cultural ubiquity of zombie narratives, which in his view, parallels the resurgence of racial tensions and the highly publicized killing of black men and women in the U.S. Pokornowski notes how discourses that dehumanize and pathologize the zombie figure inflect legal and media reports about the deaths of blacks at the hands of whites. Violence against the racialized zombie figure is represented as necessary for the preservation of “humanity” and “civilization,” Pokornowski argues, while the rise of postracial and posthuman discourses facilitate the displacement of race onto a discourse of “monstrosity” that justifies and normalizes violence. Belinda Kleinhans’ “Posthuman Ethics, Violence, Creaturely

Suffering and the (Other) Animal: Schnurre's Postwar Animal Stories," offers a different take on the possibilities presented by a rethinking of classical humanist discourses. Arguing for a post-human ethics that avoids the traps of an exclusive, narrow human-centered worldview, Kleinhans sees this potential in the short stories written in the wake of the Holocaust by German author Wolfdietrich Schnarr. She contends that Schnarr's stories offer a bleak picture of an anthropocentric world in order to point towards the potential of a post-human ethics based on empathy and shared vulnerability.

The potential effects and uses of "post" discourses are seen in a less favorable light by Ron Scapp, whose "Of Pomo Academicus, Reconsidered" calls out the reactionary frameworks that Scapp identifies in post-racial and post-feminist discourses. Situating his critique in the world of academics, Scapp suggests how these discursive maneuvers often serve to reestablish and reaffirm the very types of thinking and structures that they claim to transcend or move beyond. Seeking an alternative paradigm that can fulfill the promise of universal human rights while avoiding its Eurocentric traps, Arnab Dutta Roy's "Ethical Universals in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies: A Posthumanist Critique of Universal Human Rights" envisions a way out of the ethical dilemmas suggested by post-humanism. Roy asserts that minority responses to oppression and human rights violations across the globe may offer models for non-coercive ethical thinking and human rights practice. In Roy's view, one such model is suggested by Ghosh's novel, which treats the issue of colonialism in South Asia during the 19th century by offering an understanding ethical universality largely absent from current human rights scholarship.

We then revisit the zombie figure through Claire Mouflard's "Zombies and Refugees: Variations on the 'Post-human' and the 'Non-human' in Robin Campillo's *Les Revenants* (2004) and Fabrice Gobert's *Les Revenants* (2012–2015). Mouflard considers the use of the zombie (or the "returned," the literal translation of the French term "revenant") as a narrative trope that evokes the recent wave of migration from Syria into Europe. Situating her analysis in the contemporary French context, Mouflard notes that Campillo's and Gobert's works both express their concern for the treatment of refugees in France through the figure of the zombie, initiating a new genre in French fiction that would serve to express and denounce the characterization of Others in France as "non-human." Our final essay, "Post What? The Liminality of Multi-Racial Identity" by Danielle Fuentes Morgan argues that the successes and failures of 21st-century satire reveal the myth of post-raciality while simultaneously dismissing racial essentialism. Fuentes Morgan focuses on three critical moments: the commercial success of Mat Johnson's *Loving Day*, a text and forthcoming television show that examines the shifting self-identities of mixed-race individuals; the inability of a potential love interest on the television series, *Louie*, to accept a black woman as the ex-wife of the titular protagonist's phenotypically white daughters; and Barack Obama's self-designation as "black" on the census shortly after his election. She shows that the widespread reach of these instances, coupled with audience engagement and response, underscores the ways that the public realm frames a contemporary understanding of race as both meaningful and absurd.

The ideals of "human" rights, grounded as they are in the humanities as an ethical, aesthetic, and social project, have always had an ambiguous and troubled relationship with racialized, gendered, or non-human others. For Paul Gilroy, this moment should compel a rethinking of the connection between the less-than-human (Gilroy's term is the "infra-human") and the history of racism and inequality. In "The End(s) of Human Rights and the Humanities," Costas Douzinas points to the "persistence throughout history of the barbarians, the non-human, the 'vermin' and the 'dogs' who have populated our older and more recent concentration camps...indicate that even this most banal and obvious of definitions is neither definite nor conclusive.... there is nothing sacred about any definition of humanity and nothing eternal about its scope." The disconnect between the rhetoric of "post" discourses is consistently countered by a reality that reaffirms the enduring categories, exclusions, and denigrations that sustain global economic and social inequalities as well as local policies and attitudes.

This Special Issue thus raises more questions than it answers, as we recognize the ways that humanism failed so many while grappling with the implications of post-discourses that could facilitate new forms of oppression. It is against this "background of ideological presuppositions and

opinions" (Žižek 103-4) that the humanities must reimagine and reinvigorate itself. In the context of these competing perspectives and visions, the humanities can not only survive but thrive to confront twenty-first century ethical challenges. Slavoj Žižek reminds us that "in a radical revolution, people not only have to 'realize their old (emancipatory, etc.) dreams'; rather, they have to reinvent their very modes of dreaming."<sup>1</sup> We who value and labor in the humanities disciplines continue a tradition that has always invigorated and inspired artists, thinkers, and visionaries: imagining possibilities and dreaming the world anew.

**Conflicts of Interest:** "The authors declare no conflict of interest."

## References

- <sup>i</sup>. Judith Butler. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso, 2009.
- <sup>ii</sup>. Ibid. *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2006.
- <sup>iii</sup>. Flint, Michigan's water crisis is just one recent example of the links between poverty, race, and environmental damage in America, though it also reflects a global disparity. The dangerous lead contamination levels found in Flint's drinking water resulted from toxic wastes dumped by factories, especially General Motors, into the Flint and Saginaw Rivers. Flint's population is 65 percent African American and 42 percent Latino, and is among the poorest in the nation.
- <sup>iv</sup>. Though beyond the scope of this essay, a popular form of post-humanism extends this narrative of choice to a celebration of the ways that we can now alter organisms or "improve" our bodies. See, for example, Christopher Dewdney. *Last Flesh: Life in the Transhuman Era*. Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998. Dewdney claims that "we are on the verge of the next stage in life's evolution, the stage where, by human agency, life takes control of itself and guides its own destiny. Never before has human life been able to change itself, to reach into its own genetic structure and rearrange its molecular basis; now it can" (1).
- <sup>v</sup>. Slavoj Žižek. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. New York: Verso, 2009.
- <sup>vi</sup>. Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 2003. Wolfe notes that "the term "post-humanism" worked its way into contemporary critical discourse in the humanities and social sciences during the mid-1990s" (xii), though it can also be traced first to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* in the 1960s and to Donna Haraway's 1985 essay, "Manifesto for Cyborgs."
- <sup>vii</sup>. Ivan Callus & Stefan Herbrechter. Introduction: Posthumanist Subjectivities, or, Coming after the Subject." *Subjectivity* 5 (2012): 241–264.



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