



50TH ACADEMY SYMPOSIUM 13-15 NOV 2019 BRISBANE

50 YEARS  
OF THE  
AUSTRALIAN  
ACADEMY OF  
THE HUMANITIES

# Humanising the Future

## UNFELLOWS: TRANSEXUAL AESTHETICS AFTER THE HUMAN

### Professor McKenzie Wark

The New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang College, New York City, USA

After Nietzsche announced the death of God it was only a matter of time before the death of Man. Foucault's image if this seems poignant now: as if Man was drawn in the sand by the sea, and the sea washed him away.

Giorgio Agamben asked whether Man does not collapse into animal being if He is no longer suspended between God and animal. Donna Haraway asked whether that would really be such a bad thing after all. Frank Wilderson insists that Man always violently excludes blackness as part of its core constitution.

Man seemed hedged around with figures who did not quite get to be human: women, the non-white. Primates became experimental subjects for testing means of control for the human animal. Meanwhile the border between human and technics always seemed a troubled one.

The whole project of a humanism, and hence of the humanities, turns out to be a house of cards. Sure, you can try adding new cards to it: the woman card, the race card, the cyborg card, the disability card—and so on. But at some point it collapses.

Maybe that's not a bad thing. The concept of the human might be embedded in forms of social-technical organization that can't last. What if the human as a concept was just a waste product of extractive capitalism as a mode of production with a very short life-span?

This civilization is over and everyone knows it.

I was out dancing to techno late one night, or morning, with another trans woman, a trans woman much younger than me. We took a break from the buffeting beats and the lasers lashing us like rain and the artificial fog of the dance floor and made our way in the confusing dark to the chill-out space in the yard. Dawn was breaking, that blazing sun. I asked her what we were going to do when this civilization falls apart and there's no power to generate those beats, and we can't get our hormones. She answered immediately: we're going down with the ship. And we laughed.

What if there is no future? Lee Edelman's delicious provocation is to lean into the death drive and forget about clinging to that faith in the future that is such a part of reproductive heterosexuality. I think this struck a chord far beyond the queer culture for whom it was intended.

Rather than futurize the human, what if we admitted this species-being might not have a future? Why does fighting against extinction depend on the artifice of faith that warding off collapse is possible? Here I think of the work Beth Povinelli does with Karrabing, work in which indigenous people deploy wit and improvisation to abide the collapse of two worlds: the indigenous one pre-contact, and the settler-invader one falling apart around them now.

To what extent is the organization of the knowledge of which we are a part itself a part of the problem? Maybe the university is more part of the problem than part of the solution. What would an organization of knowledge look like that was wasn't a component part of an accelerated extractivism?

That was what I was getting at in *Molecular Red* and *General Intellects*. The former looked for historical precedents and the latter tried to show how, at least in the humanities and qualitative social sciences, one could approach the interstitial spaces between so-called disciplines a bit differently. What if we all gave up our claims that our particular means of producing knowledge was sovereign over all the others?

Particularly in the humanities, the claim to be sovereign knowledge seems a futile strategy. In actuality our ways of knowing are not sovereign at all, and we resent the sovereignty claims of those forms of knowledge that really do have power, such as economics and computer science. So we pull the classic will to power move and claim that there's a ineffable, poetic, qualitative state of affairs that has more being than all the others and we are the special guardians of this higher knowledge.

The problem is that this depended on a faith in Man just as the sovereignty claims of theology rested on a faith in God. And while a much more desperate kind of faith in God has made a come-back, I don't think faith in Man is coming back any time soon. And since I've excluded myself from being a 'man' I'd not be eager to see it back anyway.

Maybe this is all the perspective of someone who fell so far out of the order of representation that I'm not a Man anymore, and to some, not even a Woman. I'm a trans woman. There's a strand of feminism all too keen to join the religious right in declaring me just a delusional man. Having lost my mind I thus don't even count as a man.

Moral panics around trans women might not be a bad place to look for symptoms of the current state of denial about the collapse of this civilization. Certainly, we are a convenient scapegoat to blame for it. We show the mutability of both bodies and subjectivities and the weird interference between the two. We're cyborgs, transversal connectors ignoring sovereign hierarchies of being. And now that the sky really is falling--it's our fault.

We mess with what I will all too casually describe as western metaphysics. Deleuze wrote a fabulous essay on this, 'Plato and the Simulacrum.' What is real is the ineffable idea, or form. A thing is an imperfect embodiment of the idea. A representation is an imperfect copy of the embodiment of the idea. But a simulation – well, that's where it gets interesting – that's a representation that doesn't represent anything. For which there's no legitimate body, behind which there is no idea, sovereign reality overall.

The claim against us trans women that conjoins religious conservatives and trans exclusionary reactionary feminists is basically that we are simulations. We are abominations to the sovereign order. The claim has two variants: we are abominations to the order that God commands for Man; we are abominations to the order that nature prescribes for Woman. Structurally, they might be pretty much the same claim.

Curiously, both charges rely on claims to sovereign knowledge. In the one case, as if revealed knowledge of the will of God was sovereign over all others. In the other, as if the experiential knowledge of cis women was sovereign more specifically over the experiential knowledge of trans women.

But wait, don't both trans exclusionary reactionary feminists and religious authoritarians claim also to speak on behalf of nature? Yes, but not from the natural sciences. It turns out that biological sex is weirdly complicated and variable. Even in humans, not all of us have XY or XX chromosomes and even then they don't always neatly express into two distinct sexes. So much for nature. Nature here is just another name for the ineffable idea, as if the order it prescribed was natural law.

Trans women are a problem for sovereign forms of knowledge that like a nice neat hierarchy of being, and so we are consigned to the lowest rung on it. Above is god or nature, below that man or woman, below that representations of man or woman, and below that simulations – trans women. Copies of no original, travesties, dupes, frauds, deviants, perverts, or traps. Which among other things is why, if men are attracted to us but the recoil from the recognition that their desire is for a trans woman – we can be legally killed in most states of America. We are not, in Judith Butler's terms, among those who need to be grieved.

There's two responses to this from trans culture: one is to insist that we really are human. That we belong in the order of presentation and representation as who we claim to be, and that our claim to know our place in the order of representation is as valid as any other human claim. Janet Mock's book *Redefining Realness* would be an example of this strategy. It probably has to be the dominant approach to our cultural self-defense.

The one I find more interesting is really to go the other way: ok if we are not legitimate in the order of being—so much the worse for the order of being. It seems like the exhaust fumes of a collapsing civilization anyway. Whether there's a future or not for it may not matter that much for those of us denied being in its present anyway.

So let's hear from trans people who fuck with the sovereign order of knowledge.

For instance, Andrea Long Chu's deliciously perverse little book *Females*. She is not interested in Man's capacity for sovereign reason. She thinks rather than to be human is to be subject to desires over which one has no sovereignty at all. Nobody is a man because nobody is sovereign over desire. Therefore, *everyone is female*, including all men.

I've not said much about trans men, as it's outside my own experiential knowledge. But here I want to mention Paul B. Preciado's work, which heads out of the hierarchy of being in a different direction. In his world, all bodies -- both the trans body and its opposite, the cis body -- are products not just of Foucault's disciplinary apparatuses but of what he calls a *pharmacopornographic regime*.

We're all enmeshed in the technics of pills and porn. Endocrine system hacking is not unique to trans people. One wonders how many transphobes are on hormones for birth control pills or for menopause or from surviving testicular cancer, just to give some of the uses that are actually described in the leaflets that come with the hormones I inject.

Preciado picks up on Haraway's sideways move out of the order of being, refining and updating a certain aspect of our cyborg being. C. Riley Snorton shows how, in the United States at least, categories of gender are built out of those of race. Marion Sims built his reputation as a pioneer gynecologist on experiments he conducted on female slaves, without their consent. The 'nature' of the cis woman's body derives from knowledge generated through experiments on female bodies denied the status of womanhood—because they were slaves.

Eva Haywood opens up the question of the boundary, not between the human and technics or the human and the racialized other, but the human and the animal. Much the same techniques as are used by both cis and trans bodies of the human to hack or tweak our endocrine systems are also used on livestock. The estrogen used by trans women and menopausal women in the late twentieth century was a 'red pill' extracted with considerable duress from horses, from the urine of mares. And of course a good deal of the exogenous hormones ingested by humans is pissed out again into the water supply.

In the little bit of time left I want to talk a bit about art by trans people that I think opens up this space outside the order of being and representation, and points to other possibilities. Not necessarily more ethical or ideologically or ecologically sound. Not ones that necessarily have more future. It's a condition of medical transition in many American states that one consent to sterility in order to receive treatment – under such conditions why should we give a shit about reproductive futurity?

We have always existed, but perhaps under other names, in different kinds of social ordering of gender. Jordy Rosenberg's historical novel *Confessions of the Fox* recreates 18<sup>th</sup> century London at a moment when the kind of regimes of policing Foucault famously studied don't quite yet exist but are coming. He asks what the gender nonconforming body might have experienced in that world. One of its strengths is its lack of nostalgia for a past before gender was policed in the way it is now.

She is a controversial figure among trans people, but I have a soft spot for Natalie Wynn, who conducted her transition in public, on Youtube, in a series of increasingly ambitious video essays, in which she turns her philosophy grad school training on the contradictions and elisions of popular discourse, on race and gender among other things. The videos increasingly highlight the artificial and constructed nature of trans being at the same time as she herself becomes a more and more completely 'passing' trans woman. The artifice of the productions pull against the stealth technics of Wynn herself.

Juliana Huxtable is having a brilliant career as a techno dj, but I also appreciate her visual art and writing, which dive further into the pharmacopornographic than Preciado. Via her black, trans body she dives into internet porn genres such as race play and the furry scene, showing how desire does indeed seem, as in *Chu*, to be unbidden and deeply strange. On the other hand, maybe there's something in Huxtable about a kind of agency, not to resist a desire, but to channel it, to shape it. And maybe that's what aesthetics is now. Aesthetics as shaping unbidden desires into situations, performances, ambiances for their harmless flourishing. Just as happens when one dances to techno, that most abstract and uncoded sound.

The ineffable and mutable body so beloved of queer theory finds some resistance among trans people. Our experience can be a lot more banal, ordinary and everyday. Raymond Williams and Henri Lefebvre may have more to tell us about how to think our lives than the juxtaposition of Foucault's institutional power and romantic excess so characteristic of queer theory. Perhaps trans theory needs to break up with queer theory for a while, even if, as happens, we see each other on the same scene all the time.

Here's its worth mentioning how important it was that trans people had our own press for a while: the New York based Topside Press. It didn't last long, but it did publish Imogen Binnie's *Nevada*, which changed the face of trans writing, at least in English. It was not written for a cis audience, it was written for other trans women, including those who did not yet even realize they were trans. Hence its careful packaging, none of which screams 'trans.' It was meant to circulate as a kind of open secret.

Topside also published and enabled a burst of trans apocalyptic fiction. Sybil Lamb really was in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, and gives a detailed account of what life for a lot of us will be like, and perhaps fairly soon. Torrey Peters' book *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* imagines an apocalypse in which no human bodies can produce endogenous sex hormones and everyone has to take their pills or shots.

The last tendency I'd like to mention is trans aesthetics which finds utopian moments in the present. T. Fleischmann's *Time is a thing a body moves through* is a lovely example, as is Jessie Rovinelli's feature film, *So Pretty*, which I highly recommend. Eve Sedgwick gave queer theory its double task, of being particular but then also of taking the particularities of queer experience as the basis of a universality. I think trans culture is at the same juncture, moving from the particularly of Topsy Press books to risking a claim to say what it means to be human outside of the order of being and representation, which I think work like that of Rovinelli and Fleischmann get to.

In sum, the house is on fire, and we all know it. One of the casualties is a self conception of the humanities as sovereign knowledge over an ineffable idea, whose sublime pinnacle was Man. The exits are clearly marked. The irony is that the exits used to be entrances, barred by velvet ropes and Kafkaesque door policies, to keep the others out. One of those exists is marked: transsexuals. We generally know where the best parties are.

I've offered a rather New York centric view of trans culture, sorry to say. It is where I've lived for 20 years, and where I transitioned. And I've concentrated on new work. So let me close with a shout out to my trans theory ancestors, particularly the late Leslie Feinberg, Susan Stryker and Sandy Stone, the latter of whom I met in Sydney in the 90s. When I came out as trans, Sandy wrote to me: "now you know, when you met me, why I made you nervous." Shout out also to the three Australian trans woman who I had the privilege to meet at Macquarie University in the 80s whose example I did not know what to do with until many years later: RW Connell, Kathering Cummings and the late Roberta Perkins.