

Book Review

Taylor, C.A. & Bayley, A. 2020. *Posthumanism and Higher Education: Reimagining Pedagogy, Practice and Research*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

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In her chapter 'Unfolding: Co-Conspirators, Contemplations, Complications and More' introducing *Posthumanism and Higher Education: Reimagining Pedagogy, Practice and Research*, Carol Taylor envisages this book as a trove of 'treasures' and invites the reader to dip in and discover them where they may. Certainly, there is much to explore here across disciplines, across different global contexts and from different positions within Higher Education (HE): including doctoral students starting out and well-known thinkers. As well as chapters, the book contains manifestos and viewpoints and emerges as a doing not an ending, a marker within an ongoing dialogue. What ties the book together is a thinking through of how posthuman ideas provoke changes across the spectrum of University life. Mirka Koro-Ljungberg opens the book with a dynamic 'Forward-ing', positioning the posthuman scholar as driven by questions including: 'How could collective, ecological, and more-than-human questions facilitate our goal for deeper acknowledgement of non-human and more-than-human forces, energies, and influences? How, then, might posthuman scholars ask different questions and ask questions differently?' (2020: 1) Of course, posthumanism is not the first challenge to entrenched values and norms in HE. Feminism/women's studies, critical race studies, queer and postcolonial theory have all regarded HE through a destabilising lens, without fundamentally changing structural inequalities in the system. What the book can do is materialise posthuman pedagogic, curricular, and methodological moments that show how HE can, and sometimes does, emerge differently, with an emphasis on joy, pleasure, creativity, and playfulness, as well as serious challenge. In a spirit of hopefulness, the book charts multiple starting points, with visual prompts that help to both energise and ground the text.

So, what are the treasures I have slipped into my pocket, the ones I choose today whilst tomorrow will always be different? Evelyn O'Malley's chapter 'Theatre for a Changing Climate: A Lecturer's Portfolio' from the UK fascinates, taking us through a careful diffractive reading of theatre and performance studies where she as lecturer works with students to attempt to destabilise human exceptionalism, and let matter such as weather (rather than humans) become the most active player on the stage. One of the points I appreciated here was the recognition that what we label as 'posthumanism' is not a new endeavour within many innovative disciplines and practices. In contrast, 'leadership' is surely one of the most neo-liberal fields in education and so I was very interested to see how Kathryn J. Strom and John Lupinacci attempt to flip this in their work with graduate students in the United States. In reading their chapter 'Putting



Posthuman Theories to Work in Educational Leadership Programmes', it is clear that this process is made possible by their own working-class histories, their commitment to equality, and the existence of institutional frameworks and programmes that explicitly support leadership for social justice. Within this framework, it becomes possible to use posthuman experiments to effectively contest dominant and common-sense assumptions about objectivity and human-centred leadership. Without this underlying structure, posthumanism might risk being a mere token and novelty. Again in the United States, in their Viewpoint, 'Undoing and Doing-With: Practices of Diffractive Reading and Writing in Higher Education', Sarah Hepler, Susan Cannon, Courtney Hartnett, and Teri Peitso-Holbrook take us through the processes of being part of a posthuman reading group as PhD students. They read Virginia Woolf, Ursula Le Guin, and Donna Haraway through each other in productive ways, and create a rich picture, which may also be helpful to other reading groups, in describing their use of multiple material and technological resources to facilitate the process.

The acts of reading and writing were our companions on long walks, while sitting in meetings, watching YouTube, visiting museums, and innumerable other places that are diffractively entangled with Haraway, Woolf, countless texts, theory, things, and each other. Attending to these thoughts brought awareness to the loose and wandering threads that frayed at the edges and became entangled. (2020: 150)

From Canada comes Marc Higgins and Brooke Madden's 'Refiguring Presences in Kichwa-Lamista Territories: Natural-Cultural (Re)Storying with Indigenous Place'. They contest the illusion of neutrality and the 'pedagogy of placelessness' (2020: 294) that shapes universities. Here Nature is but an empty space waiting to be made meaningful by Humans. Instead, by thinking with indigenous thinkers they are

working towards recognising the ways in which land is alive, agentic, and relating through a plurality of 'voices' so different from our own. This recognition is always already fraught and not-fully-intelligible within the ways-of-knowing-in-being that we inherit within the academy. (2020: 294)

They demonstrate that allocating posthumanism the status of a radically new ontology is just another form of colonialism that erases indigenous knowledge. One of the many things I liked about this chapter was that it introduced me to new authors and thinkers: a move beyond Barad, Braidotti, or Haraway who are ubiquitous throughout this book, thanks to the permeation of their influence. By understanding knowledge as communally created (including by non-human actors), this chapter inevitably questions the tendency of academia to venerate individual Thinkers; whether they be Gods or Goddesses; a tendency to which posthumanism is certainly not immune. In 'Posthuman Methodology and Pedagogy: Uneasy Assemblages and Affective Choreographies' Jennifer Charteris and Adele Nye foreground the affective in their account of

their research on online misogyny and gendered violence. Working with assemblages, they mark how they transform their research into poetry and present their work at a conference. This presentation was not neutral but imbued 'with a sense of anger, using fire as a starting image' (2020: 341). Their sensitivity to the dangers of evoking shame and pain, and their righteous fire of anger as counterblast spoke to me. They raise questions about past and memory. These include: 'To what degree do our own uneasy pasts contour and mark the assemblage, ...? ...What legacies come with these affects that are interconnected with the historicity of place ...?' (2020: 342). These are questions which posthuman thinkers have yet to work through well (and which my own posthuman reading group tussles with) and so I was glad to see them raised here. Annouchka Bayley also asks provocative questions in 'How Did 'We' Become Human in the First Place? Entanglements of Posthumanism and Critical Pedagogy for the Twenty-First Century'. She asks the foundational questions of 'who (or what) might be considered a teacher, a learner or a subject of knowledgemaking' (2020: 364) although she does not have the space to fully explore them in her short piece. As I suggested at the beginning of this review, these are not new questions, but posthumanism's contribution is in trying to unpick the very category 'human' that produces the idea that there are such things as 'teacher', 'learner', and 'knowledge' in the first place. The book ends with this seemingly open-ended quest, suggesting that there is so much more thinking to come for those engaging with posthumanism in HE.

Looking back. I can see that the treasures I have found in the book are entangled in concerns, puzzles, and pleasures that engage me in my life and work: as once a student and still a lover of drama, reluctant HE 'leader' and graduate educator, member of a posthumanist reading group, researcher in nature, space and place, former feminist campaigner against violence against women, academic who contests dominant constructions of knowledge and knowers. They also connect with the reading I am doing today: productively stitched into material memories via *Patch Work: A Life Amongst Clothes* by Claire Wilcox and crossing borders of time and place in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Not a Novel*. The book's treasures it seems are present, lively, and vibrating, not dusty relics, and they stimulate more thinking, and perhaps more doing, as I go about my way.

Readers will find their own treasures and their own treasure maps to posthumanist work in Higher Education in this timely book.

Reviewed by

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