

## **Transhumanism and the Alien-to-Come**

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**Abstract:** In the face of dominant Western conceptions of the human, there has been notable pushback. From Du Bois' account of the double consciousness of the Black subject in America, to Fanon's inversion of Sartre's existentialist credo, to Wynter's critique of the scientific construction of the human in modernity, powerful and compelling problematizations have taken root in contemporary philosophical discussions, and great work has been done to unlearn oppressive and hegemonic discourses. Despite the success of decolonial critiques, the vestiges of the human hobble along, continuing to infect our discourse and reasserting themselves in nominally 'post-human' subjects. Indeed, despite the attempt to undo the totalization of the human post-Renaissance, a conception of a static subjectivity and essential identity still lingers just beneath the surface.

This project aims to take us in another trajectory, one in which we read attempts to overcome the human—'transhumanism' in its most literal sense—not through the lens of white-flight Silicon Valleyites, but through a more critical Promethean lens that questions the substantial identity as such. Drawing upon critiques of subjectivity as static and givenness as objective, I aim to drown the 'humanism' of transhumanism in an acid bath so as to allow the bottom to fall out, giving us not a transhumanism as *new* humanism, but ~~transhumanism~~ as existence yet-to-come and always in production. From this launching pad of a humanism devoid of the human, I point to the works of contemporary cyber- and xenofeminists who are genderhacking themselves away from legacy accounts of subjectivity, towards a more open, fluid, and *trans*-subjectivity. My aim here is not to minimize existent decolonial work, but instead to shine another light upon the presuppositions such work brings along. For if there is to be a radical humanism, one must abolish the human entirely.

### **0: Introduction**

Even before it was birthed from the basement of reason, the figure of 'the human' was, at least as early as the Renaissance, the subject of critique. While perhaps not framed in the critical method us post-Kantian scholars are familiar with, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's text from 1486, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, is filled with buds that would eventually sprout into larger critiques of the human subject and later give rise to transhumanist movements. Within the *Oration*, Pico espouses the glory of the "Supreme Maker" whom, when creating man, had no "archetype" to follow, thus allowing for a "creature of indeterminate image."<sup>1</sup> Pico, recounting God speaking to Adam, relays to us the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans., A. Robert Caponigri (Chicago, IL: Regnery Gateway, 1956), 6.

“Oh Adam [...] The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. [...] You may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer.”<sup>2</sup>

While Pico certainly did *not* have in mind genderhacking technologies and testosterone shots used to disrupt the ‘puritanical natural order,’ his thought nevertheless leads us there. Indeed, as Nick Bostrom (whom I know is cancelled, but provides a good history) notes in his “History of Transhumanist Thought,” “[t]he human desire to acquire new capacities is as ancient as our species itself. We have always sought to expand the boundaries of our existence, be it socially, geographically, or mentally.”<sup>3</sup> It is this lineage that is uniquely human that serves, ironically enough, to undermine the figure of the human subject. What I want to do in this presentation is twofold: first, I want to recognize contemporary scholars from various traditions who have worked to undo—or at least *alter*—the figure of the human, noting some lingering concerns while not launching a full-scale attack; and second, I want to try to explicate my formulation of the transhuman as an effaced and empty, yet thoroughly creative entity.

## 1: The Post-Modern Human

For want of time, this section must necessarily be far briefer than it should. Nevertheless, we are stuck within the strictures of linear temporality, and I must make do. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and perhaps earlier—the human subject has been attacked from various angles. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir critiques the figure of the human as historically situated as ‘masculine,’ with the ‘feminine’—or women—being seen as a negation of a fundamentally positive figure. Her analysis, striking as it was in 1949, finds its way running through the works of later feminist thinkers such as Shulamith Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex*, Monique Wittig’s *Straight Mind*, Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” and countless others.

From another angle, we see W.E.B. Du Bois, both in *The Souls of Black Folk* and his excellent short story, “The Comet,” examining how racialized bodies are forced to, on the hand, adopt a certain standard of humanity—white civil society—while on the other, retain their own existence. Drawing out the implications of this in *White Skin, Black Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon notes an ontological and existential disunity wherein racialized bodies are essentialized—that is to say, *known*—before they exist—a perverse inversion of Sartre’s existentialist credo. Such bodies must therefore, like the Black American for Du Bois, shed one’s culture and adopt a different standard for subjectivity.

Decolonial theorists take the critique of the subject further, but I admit that I lack the requisite background to say anything remotely coherent. The point of all this, however, is to note that

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<sup>2</sup> Pico, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Bostrom, “A History of Transhumanist Thought,” *Journal of Evolution & Technology* 14, No. 1 (2005): 1–25, 1.

within each of these strands of humanist critique, for lack of a better phrase, one finds a critique of the traditional, Enlightenment subject—the white, European man. These critiques do excellent work deterritorializing the rational subject and bringing a plurality of voices into the mix, I absolutely do not want to minimize that. What I do want to add, however, is that various presuppositions follow such critiques. While the Enlightenment subject is, indeed, critiqued, it is not abolished. On the one hand, there are liberal reformist moves to *open up* the subject, to allow the non-White, non-European, non-male body to partake in traditionally Western subjectivity and rationality. Phrased differently, these are ultimately moves to assimilate the Other. On the other hand, there are moves to bring in new kinds of subjectivities, recognizing that culture informs the creation of the subject and thus peoples with oral-historical cultures operate differently, yet no less significantly, than the Western subject; that the ontological and existential status of various marginalized bodies are fundamentally different and ought to be taken into account; etc. To my eye, however, all of these moves still fundamentally reify the subject as such—that is to say, as a singular entity that is static, has some ‘nature’ to which we can point, and is, ultimately to some extent, knowable. This is where I want to depart. I contend that there is no singular entity, that the depths of our ‘Being’ (and I use that term as mockingly as I can) cannot be accessed. Of course, there are tons of questions that go along with that claim, but for now we’re going to have to stick with it.

From here, I want to move to what the transhuman might look like.

## 2: The Transhuman

Dumping a vat of acid on the human subject, we can attempt to get further in our critique by recognizing that not only are there a plurality of subjects, but the subject itself is multiplicitous. As Foucault argues in “What is an Author?” dreams of a unified subject are themselves products of a desire for control. The ‘I’ of the contemplative subject came about, as per Foucault, when “authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed for Foucault, the subject is always-already a plurality. Looking at

a hypothetical mathematical treatise, Foucault argues that the ‘I’ located within the text does not necessarily refer to a singular subject, but rather refers to a myriad of different subjects depending upon the context. Indeed, the ‘I’ of “I conclude ... refers to an individual without an equivalent who, in a determined place and time, completed a certain task” whereas the ‘I’ of “I suppose ... indicates an instance and a level of demonstration,” an impersonal ‘I’ that could be taken up by any third party as they demonstrate the truth of the treatise. The multiplicity of the ‘I’ does not stop there, however. There can always be another instantiation that serves as a justifier of the

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984 (Volume Two)*, ed., J. D. Faubion, trans., J. V. Harari and R. Hurley, 205–222 (New York, NY: The New Press, 1998), 212.

project, “one that speaks to tell the work’s meaning,” one who is situated within a cultural milieu and needs not say certain things.<sup>5</sup>

We can go further, however. As we wander around the world and engage with different entities, cultures, objects, etc., we are always adapting ourselves to the milieu in which we find ourselves. For example, my persona here is radically different than my persona at the local bar—indeed, it’s radically different from my persona in other academic settings; everything is tweaked. We might think that surely, beneath the various masks one wears as one bumbles around the world, there ought to be a true face, a *real* face. Surely there must be a real person known as Peter Heft. And of course, there is a body that has been ascribed that name, and there is an entity that somewhat looks like a real person. While it’s absurd—contra any solipsists in our midst—to deny that I’m standing here, what I do want to deny is that there is a singular entity standing here; that there is a locatable subject. This is fundamentally a question of finitude: is it simply that we can never know which mask is the *real* mask due to some limit on our knowledge? Or is there, in fact, no *real* mask. I claim the latter.

To make sense of this, we think via a convoluted analogy. In *Rogues*, Jacques Derrida argues that “democracy is always self-defining and in a constant state of self-revision”; it is, as he says, “a concept without concept.”<sup>6</sup> We may have a guess of what the thing is—or better yet, could be—based on various encounters we’ve had with particular instantiations, but those encounters don’t actually get us at the universal—democracy is always-to-come.

This is the ‘postmodern’ waterboarding of words that I want to apply to the human subject. We have tons of encounters with particular humans and we may draw generalizations from those encounters, but despite the generalizations we draw, we cannot exhaust the possibility of what it is to be human; we haven’t gotten closer to the ideal subject, as we can always be surprised. As Reza Negarestani argues in “The Labor of the Inhuman,” this openness, a conceptual nihilism of sorts (to channel Ray Brassier), is what allows us to remake ourselves. While Negarestani will argue that this is a crucial element of reason and rationality as such, I’m not sure we need to go that far. If the world is material—a big *if*, and I must apologize to any idealists of all stripes in the room, but I will not justify the claim—and we’re to be good post-Marxists and recognize that material conditions underwrite the superstructure—that is to say, the emergent properties of entities—then there is no reason to think that there is a givenness to us. *Philosophers* of biology will balk, screaming, “no! We have certain biological features to which we can point and say, ‘that’s human!’” but biologists themselves will recognize the futility of such a task. Sure, for heuristic purposes we can rely on species distinctions, but those are always tenuous, and with the microplastics and xenoestrogens in the water I’m drinking, they’re sure to get fuzzier. Thus, if there is no reason to suspect that there is a givenness to us—a nature or condition, to channel Arendt—then we are precisely what God made us as: “creature[s] of indeterminate image.” If, as for Bostrom, “nature [is] a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Heft, “Xenofeminism: A Framework to Hack the Human,” *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 12, No. 1 (2021): 121–139, 127. Foucault, “What is an Author?” 215–216.

<sup>6</sup> Heft, “Xenofeminism,” 127. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans., P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 32.

in desirable ways,” why not?<sup>7</sup> It is here that we ultimately come to transhumanism, the alien in the room. Remolding ourselves, changing our morphology, being something different is fundamentally a process—it is never complete. “Always overcoming previous limitations (trans-), our conception of the human is never complete (~~humanism~~) and is always being built so as to include ever more possible/potential subjectivities. *Humanism becomes an empty set.*”<sup>8</sup>

Whichever way you slice it, however, we are at a crossroad. We can fall back into legacy forms of humanism that stick with a static subject (even if such a formulation of the subject is implicit, hidden from view), a position that ultimately implies a givenness and thus limitation to our Becoming; or we can embrace that which God has blessed us with—that is to say, a lack of stable form—and transgress against ‘nature in whose name so many have been oppressed.’<sup>9</sup> As the Xenofeminist collective Laboria Cuboniks note in the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, “[w]e want neither clean hands nor beautiful souls, neither virtue nor terror. We want superior forms of corruption.”<sup>10</sup> Why wouldn’t we? “Being died in the führer-bunker, and purity belongs entirely to the cops.”<sup>11</sup> We must become “so materialist that even the historical materialists can’t stand it” by “[a]ffirming not only the *contingency and variability* of lived experiences, but of *life as such*”; “a rejection of stability and staticity in the name of experimentation.”<sup>12</sup>

From literary theory (see Barthes) to biology (see Haraway) to epistemology (see Negarestani) to ontology (see Brassier), the figure of the human is coming undone. Why not give it a final push?

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<sup>7</sup> Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30 (2005): 3–14, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Heft, “Xenofeminism,” 128.

<sup>9</sup> Reworking of the last two sentences of *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*. Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (London, UK: Verso, 2018), 93.

<sup>10</sup> Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Sadie Plant and Nick Land, “Cyberpositive,” in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Second Edition), ed., R. Mackay (Maya B. Kronic) and A. Avanessian, 303–313 (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic Media Ltd., 2017), 306.

<sup>12</sup> Heft, “Xenofeminism,” 136.