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# Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights by Alan Smart and Josephine Smart

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## **Toward a Non-Anthropocentric Anthropology**

***Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights***  
by **ALAN SMART** and **JOSEPHINE SMART**  
University of Toronto Press, 2017 \$19.95

Reviewed by **DAVID SHAW**

Alan and Josephine Smart's *Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights* offers a concise yet extensive introduction to the critical discipline of posthumanism and its increasing importance to the work of anthropology. Throughout the text, Smart and Smart outline their conception of a "non-anthropocentric anthropology" (65), an approach to anthropological inquiry that does not take for granted any binaric division between the human and the world, but rather attunes itself to the entangled interactions between human and non-human beings.

*Posthumanism* undertakes two distinct but interrelated projects over the course of four brief chapters. In the broadest sense, it aims to provide an introductory overview to posthumanism as a critical discipline. Smart and Smart address a wide range of issues that are all loosely aligned under the banner of "posthumanism": they discuss the microbiome and the increasing critical suspicion of an ontically fixed boundary to the human body; they outline complications in the relationship between human and nonhuman animals and mount a critique of liberal humanism's anthropocentric exceptionalism; they sketch out the contours of posthumanism's conception of the relationship between the human and technology and provide useful terminological clarification on the difference between posthumanism and the more technologically utopian *transhumanism*. Each chapter is appended

with discussion questions for students and a selection of recommended further reading in which these issues are developed more fully, as well as a selection of film recommendations thematically related to each chapter's content.

This ambitious approach pays off somewhat unevenly over the course of the text. For instance, its third chapter, on the relationship between human and nonhuman animals, gestures toward a wide range of concerns including indigenous animism, the kuru infection, and the culinary future of insects at a pace that might risk disorienting readers unfamiliar with the issues being highlighted. Readers are given the impression that each of these topics are worth discussing on their own terms, but the peripheral engagement that the text offers somewhat obscures the thread that connects each issue to the text's larger project. This constitutes an unfortunate missed opportunity, as the text touches on several issues that are often overlooked in commentary on posthumanism. This is particularly evident when Smart and Smart point to Danielle DiNovelli-Lang's work on the tension between critical posthumanism and indigenous ontologies, which asks whether posthumanism's project of dissolving the boundary between "nature" and "culture" might implicitly entail a kind of epistemological colonialism, as it lays claim to a set of ideas that have been central to many traditional indigenous knowledge practices. As she argues, indigenous knowledges pose an uncomfortable and under-discussed challenge to the discourse of posthumanism, but one that must be taken seriously, especially in the context of settler-colonial nations such as Canada. Smart and Smart gesture toward this problem, but move past it at a pace that could be seen to undermine its significance. Thought out the book, Smart

and Smart demonstrate a keen sense of posthumanism's most relevant issues that is sometimes undercut by the overall brevity of their engagement.

The real accomplishment of *Posthumanism*, though, is its mobilization of these same basic tenets of posthuman thought into an examination of anthropology itself, which, as one might expect, has a tendency toward a kind of reflexive anthropocentrism. In this sense, Smart and Smart position posthumanism not as yet another trendy "post-ism," but as a necessary and timely corrective within their own field. As they point out, traditional approaches to anthropological research have tended toward fairly rigid domains of inquiry: social and cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, archaeology, or linguistics. While these specialized fields have served to produce robust (if somewhat homogenous) frameworks for the production of knowledge, their relatively inflexible boundaries have foreclosed a more nuanced examination of the entangled processes through which these boundaries emerge in the first place. As such, Smart and Smart employ the framework of posthumanism to emphasize the importance of "holism" in anthropology, in an effort to address the degree to which being human "has always entailed being 'more than human'" (95). For example, in their examination of the relationship between humans and technology, they discuss the notion of "cyborg anthropology," which, following theorists such as Donna Haraway, aims to examine "the incorporation of technology within human bodies and the addition of prosthetic extensions to those bodies" (77).

While much of the work of cyborg anthropologists has focused on surgical implants such as pacemakers, recent work has turned to more complex points of interaction between humans and technology, such as brain-computer interfaces, and cochlear implants that interface directly with auditory cells. As Smart and Smart suggest, these technological interventions into the body are best understood not as simple tools but as direct mediations of how we understand "the human." That is to say, the anthropological study of "the cyborg" extends beyond reductive anthropocentrism into a complex assemblage of interconnected concerns that cannot be cleanly isolated from each other. In this way, Smart and Smart's *Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights* offers a compelling and accessible glimpse into the entangled modes of knowledge production that posthuman thought aims to provoke.

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