



“Always Becoming”: Posthuman Subjectivity in Young Adult Fiction

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Tarr, Anita, and Donna R. White, editors. *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*. UP of Mississippi, 2018. 304 pp. \$70.00 hc. ISBN 9781496816696.

Anita Tarr and Donna R. White’s edited collection, *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, interrogates the extent to which post-humanism is conveyed and explored in young adult (YA) literature. The collection is organized into four parts and comprises twelve chapters. The contributors come from a variety of disciplines, including education and pedagogy studies, media and cultural studies, and English, with specializations in British and American literature, Victorian literature, and children’s and YA literature. Tarr and White deftly frame the work with an introduction that succinctly positions how posthumanism is defined within the context of the collection, and they provide a convincing argument for the focus on the posthuman in YA literature.

Throughout the book, a significant distinction is made between liberal humanist and posthumanist perspectives on what it means to be human, and who and what are denied this designation. Where the liberal humanist “portrait” of the human experience includes unified and universal characteristics of rationality, independence, and autonomy (ix), posthumanists “deny the . . . definition of *human* as bounded, exclusive, unique, expectational, or naturally dominant” (xi). Rather, posthumanists view human intelligence, bodies, and behaviours as “interconnected with other species and the environment” (xi). The interconnected nature of the posthuman is emphasized throughout the collection, and this leads many of the contributors, including the editors, to argue that at its core a posthuman identity is “networked and communal, fluid and changeable, always becoming . . .” (xvi).

Tarr and White also explain and defend the collection's focus on YA literature by arguing that the genre's focus on the developing subjectivity of adolescent characters aligns particularly well with the posthuman perspective that humans never reach a "fixed state," but are "always dynamic, still changing, always evolving. Always becoming" (x). Nearly every author in the collection echoes or restates this argument. However, Tarr, White, and some of the other contributors further argue that YA literature which depicts posthuman identities can "create vibrations that emanate outwards, causing the walls that define humanism to come tumbling down . . ." demonstrating to implied readers that "[o]ur speciesism, our sense of privilege as (male) humans, our fortressing against the Other have all been performances, socially constructed acts based on fear and dominance" (xxi). The editors argue that exposure to depictions of posthuman identities may convince implied readers that "[w]e are all hybrids," and that "[w]e are all networked with others and the environment" (xxi). If the editors' hypothesis that implied readers are urged to reconsider their humanist subjectivities is correct, then reading posthuman YA significantly impacts how readers interact with their surrounding communities and the wider world.

The first part of the collection, "Networked Subjectivities," comprises two chapters that interrogate the common tension in YA literature of budding subjectivity versus conformity to society. Mathieu Donner considers "ethical subjectivity" (3) in Octavia Butler's *Mind of My Mind*. According to Donner, Butler does away with the humanist conception of complete autonomy and repositions her characters in "a wide network of similarly connected individuals . . ." (12). In doing so, she redefines being human as a performance: it is not what one is, but what one does that makes one human, or not. The performance of humanity entangles what it means to be human with one's "ethical treatment" (21) of others.

Where Donner sees an empowering depiction of a posthuman network, Shannon Hervey examines adult anxieties in four YA novels about social media networks: *#16thingsithoughtweretrue* by Janet Gurtler, *The Future of Us* by Jay Asher and Carolyn Mackler, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson, and *The Unwritten* by Mike Carey and Peter Gross. The novels position social media as a form of self-writing that can "allow and encourage the emergence of a collective voice," but Hervey argues that they depict this network as "a

system that silences” (39). Hervey finds the texts do not attribute “many, if any” positives to a network of adolescents, but instead focus on the “cultural anxiety/fantasy of information disembodiment takeover” (51). What Hervey does not consider is how the conservative nature of the novels may also be symptomatic of adults’ anxiety over youths’ social media networks. Youths’ digital networked communities cannot be fully monitored and controlled by adults, which makes those communities potentially “dangerous,” as they disrupt the power imbalance between youth and adults.

Part II, “The Monstrous Other: Posthuman Bodies,” includes five chapters. The focus of the chapters is predominantly on characters’ bodies, but like Donner and Hervey, the following contributors continue to emphasize that individual identities are formed in relation to networks. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are closely related in their examination of YA protagonists’ posthuman bodies. Both Angela S. Insenga’s and Ferne Merrylees’s chapters examine Marissa Meyer’s *Cinder*, with Merrylees also considering Julianna Baggott’s *Pure*, and Maryna Matlock examines Leigh Bardugo’s Grisha Trilogy. *Cinder* and *Pure* feature cyborg protagonists—ones that combine organic and mechanical materials. For Insenga, *Cinder* “reflects the gradual displacement of the liberal humanist organic subject . . .” (55). Merrylees pushes Insenga’s arguments further by asserting that the cyborg protagonists create a space for readers not only to consider body image but also to contemplate how bodies can become environments “in the sense that their [the characters’] bodies are made up of a combination of organic and inorganic material” (86). Matlock’s chapter builds on the notion of the body as an environment; she argues that the Grisha Trilogy subverts the conception that the human body has clear and defined boundaries that separate it from the surrounding environment (97).

The following two chapters argue for the humanity of “monstrous” and othered characters: mutants and clones. Patricia Kennon claims that in Michael Grant’s *Gone Series* the characters who have developed “superpowers” such as telekinesis and advanced strength “negotiate the boundaries between natural human abilities” and their unnatural powers (117). With a radical premise, Kennon asserts the series ultimately abides by the “conservative humanist view regarding what constitutes being human and privileges conservative concepts of normality, adult authority, and hegemonic power regimes” (118). Most convincing is Kennon’s example

of the young protagonists being considered monstrous by adults. The adults subdue the youth characters, who end the series with the simple goal “to live . . . quietly and . . . as normal members of humanity” (132).

Donna R. White’s chapter considers *The House of the Scorpion* and its sequel, *The Lord of Opium*, by Nancy Farmer. The clone protagonist, Matt, offers readers new conceptions of humanity, and White argues that Matt embodies a new kind of self “that is fluid, collective, and networked” (137). White makes several insightful arguments, but most fascinating is her contention that Matt is a posthuman subject because he incorporates his humanist self—the monstrous autonomy, agency, and authority of El Patrón, from whom Matt has been cloned. For White, Matt is an excellent example of a posthuman subject in that he remains an assemblage throughout the two novels, and his character is never fixed but “always changing, fluid and multifaceted . . .” (153).

“Posthumanism in Climate Fiction” is the third part of the collection and has two chapters. Lars Schmeink examines Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* and *The Drowned Cities*, and finds that the novels urge readers to reject “humanist notions” of human exceptionalism and superiority and embrace a zoe-centric subjective—a subjectivity that is concerned with the interconnectedness of all life, including the natural environment. Phoebe Chen continues to examine zoe-centric subjectivities by interrogating three YA novels that depict connections between humans and nature that compel characters to adapt to their environments: Janet Edwards’s *Earth Girl*, Stacey Jay’s *Of Beast and Beauty*, and Sherri L. Smith’s *Orleans*. Chen, like Kennon and Hervey in previous chapters, finds that the novels are not as radical as they appear because characters’ posthuman characteristics tend to slip into liberal humanist identities (181). Regardless of their conservative nature, Chen, like Schmeink, argues that the novels remain significant as an “imaginative platform” that runs speculative imaginative scenarios about being human in a world that is “increasingly out of sync with its own ecological and biological rhythm” (181).

The fourth part of the collection, “Accepting/Rejecting Posthumanist Possibilities” includes three chapters. Torsten Caeners examines Ridley Scott’s film *Prometheus*. While Caeners admits the film is not YA literature, he argues that the characters Elizabeth Shaw and David

(an android) remain in adolescent stages. The sustained adolescence of David and Elizabeth leads Caeners to argue that the film defines the posthuman condition as that of “continuous adolescence” in that humanity and identity remain “in flow, . . . to constantly adapt, shift, change, and question one’s received notions of identity” (203).

Lev Grossman’s *The Magicians*, marketed as a New Adult novel, is the subject of Tony M. Vinci’s chapter, and Vinci argues that Grossman’s use of metafiction to parody fantasy narrative conventions and critique “anthropocentric humanism” reading practices situates fantasy more generally as a potential “entry point to posthumanist ways of seeing the multiple identities and realities we co-create” (230). Vinci posits that posthuman reading practices facilitate empathetic unsettlement in readers and thus dislocate human subjectivity from the concept of the liberal humanist idea of a unified personality (244).

The collection concludes with a chapter from Anita Tarr, who considers China Miéville’s YA novels *Un Lun Dun* and *Railsea* and finds that, unfortunately, they lack the complexity of his adult novels. Tarr believes Miéville holds back in his YA texts and in doing so misjudges his implied young readers by assuming “that young adult readers cannot deal with such heavy issues as violence . . . [n]or can they deal with posthumanist issues . . .” (255). Tarr’s argument that “[y]oung adult readers deserve more from Miéville” (268) can be applied to the previous chapters in the collection, which found that YA texts that appeared radical on the surface ultimately conceded to conservative liberal humanist perspectives. Miéville, like other authors critiqued in the collection, does a disservice to young readers in assuming that they cannot comprehend the complexities of posthuman fluidity and collectivity. This conservative turn may also be evidence that the authors themselves fail to fully comprehend what it means to be posthuman, and it may betray the sustained hold of liberal humanist perspectives.

The collection is unified from beginning to end, with the contributors reiterating Tarr and White’s own thesis, stated in the introduction, that posthuman identities are multifaceted, fluid, connected, and always in a state of becoming (xvi). The key texts on which Tarr and White ground their understanding of posthumanism are also called upon in nearly every chapter. Both Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future* and N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman* play a major role in the collection’s analyses. There is also a shared engagement

with key works of children's and YA literature scholarship, including Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens, and Robyn McCallum's *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature*; Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz's *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults*; and Elaine Ostry's article "'Is He Still Human? Are You?': Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age." The reiterated thesis, shared group of secondary sources, and at times recycled primary texts, constitute a double-edged sword; the collection is extremely cohesive, but the unification at times becomes repetitive.

Since posthumanism is a fairly new theoretical lens within YA literature, I believe the collection can be forgiven for its razor focus. Rather, I think this collection will be remembered as a fruitful foray into the intersections of posthumanism and YA, and it will ground many subsequent examinations of posthumanism in YA and, hopefully, children's literature. For this reason, readers of *Jeunesse* will find the collection a rewarding study that may push our own theoretical considerations of identity representations in children's and YA literature. The collection may even challenge, as it did for me, deep-seated considerations of the human subject as autonomous, unified, and superior, in favour of a more posthuman conception of human subjectivity as fluid, always changing, always becoming, and deeply connected to the people, species, and environment that surround us.

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