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Book review: Jeremy Knox on Posthumanism and the Digital University

Book review: Jeremy Knox on Posthumanism and the Digital University: Texts, Bodies and Materialities by Lesley Gourlay

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It would be somewhat easy, dare I say tempting, to see the 'posthumanism' in the title of this book as engaging a rather passé area of theory, given not only the particular prominence of the term in previous decades, particularly in the humanities, but also the sense of hesitation accompanying its early use: for Badmington, posthumanism was merely 'a convenient shorthand for a general crisis in something that "we" must just as helplessly call "humanism"' (2000, p2).[i] It doesn't take long for Gourlay to allay such unfounded scepticism through a rich book that not only attests to the enduring relevance of the term, but also establishes the university itself as a key site for posthumanist critique.

Gourlay's explicit engagement both education *and* technology is particularly welcome, given, on the one hand, a vibrant and well-established area of cultural critique around posthumanism that has appeared largely unconcerned with formal education (for example, Braidotti, 2013; Herbrechter, 2013; Ferrando, 2019),[ii] and on the other, a focused area of educational research that has been animated by posthumanist theory, but has too often seemed a little indifferent to the question of technology (for example, Snaza & Weaver, 2016; Pedersen, 2019). Gourlay's critique is therefore situated at a vitally important nexus which is too often overlooked in the exploration of posthumanism. While the educationalists offer such convincing accounts of the entrenchment of often-problematic humanist assumptions at the core of the project of education, and the critical theorists present rich analyses of the ways technologies trouble our comfortable sense of certainty surrounding the human condition, there is perhaps not enough attention paid to the juncture of these concerns. This is where Gourlay makes a significant contribution; in directing the profound and insightful lens of posthumanism towards the everyday practices of the university, as a crucial setting for both the potent subjectivity-forming practices of higher education, and, increasingly, their enmeshments with complex digital technologies. The question of audience for such work is important here. Bayne (for example, 2016; 2018) has been a prominent voice in examining the intersection of education and technology from the perspective of posthumanism, however with an underlying interest in a specifically digital rendition of the university, levelled principally, one might contend, at an education technology audience. Gourlay's approach appears a bit more agnostic with regards to the question of whether the university *should* embrace digitality, and concerns itself with the educational institution as it is, both analogue and digital, yet nevertheless co-constitutively produced through human, material, and technological agencies of varying forms.

While the underlying purpose of this book appears to be directed most clearly towards convincing educationalists of the worth of understanding their day-to-day teaching and learning routines in terms of more-than-human entanglements – and indeed Gourlay does a tremendous job of demonstrating how such posthumanist interpretations can enliven educational research – there is another important function here, one oriented towards the scholarship of posthumanism itself. Across all the ways in which posthumanist theorising has, arguably, invigorated diverse areas of research, from cultural theory (Badmington, 2004), to quantum science (Barad, 2007), to social justice (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2016), a more inward-looking acknowledgement of the importance of the mundane (albeit vital, materialist, more-than-human) life of the academy, the very thing that sustains the posthumanist scholar, has often been left curiously unexamined. Gourlay's underlying ethnographic sensibility results in 'pulling down' posthumanist theory from its sometimes-lofty concerns with relational ontologies, to the somewhat more commonplace situation of teaching and learning (commonplace at least for those working in universities). She suggests:

> a rarefied world of high theory and fantasy … can in fact have the effect of bringing us right "back down to earth", by anchoring our attention as researchers, theorists and practitioners in the fine-grained, detailed "nitty gritty" of everyday higher

> education *as it unfolds,* in a mesh of bodies, nonhuman actors and technologies.
> (Gourlay 2020, p19)

In this sense, a real strength of Gourlay's work is to target the gaze of posthumanist theorising back onto the institutions from which such ideas emanate, and the institutional practices that often end up failing to be recognised as a site for valuable critique.

Part of this derives from Gourlay positioning her work in the specific context of 'technological posthumanism' (a sub-domain of the umbrella term of posthumanism suggested by Bayne, 2018), which 'allows for better theoretical, descriptive, granular and ethnographic purchase on the nature of practices and meaning-making … in the university' (Gourlay 2020, p19). This particular orientation to the application of posthumanism usefully distinguishes Gourlay's book from the 'critical' and 'ecological' forms of posthumanism (also sub-categories suggested by Bayne 2018) that are perhaps more prominent in educational research elsewhere, concerned generally with the undoing of anthropocentrism. This provides the theoretical grounding for Gourlay's book to, not only challenge humanist views of agency and knowledge in the university, but also confront ideological assumptions of practice through situated ethnographic observations and encounters.

Stark chapter headings – 'More-than-human', 'Mater', 'Body', 'Presence', 'Interfaces', 'Wayfaring', 'Quantum', 'Document' - unfurl to intricate accounts of the scholarly practices, weaving together an impressive array of concepts. What Gourlay modestly suggests to be a '"messy", speculative approach' (2020, p21), produces an engrossing encounter with theory, assembling and diffracting ideas from a range of writers. Specific texts are quoted liberally and systematically within each chapter, which, while conveying a sense of authenticity, can at times feel a little too attentive to the original source. Nevertheless, Gourlay's method of 'interviewing' various objects and practices provides a genuinely apt approach to research in more-than-human times. The focus of this method ranges from such deceptively simple objects as a laptop in 'Matter', to the much-hyped Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in 'Body', to the now ubiquitous 'Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in 'Interfaces'. In 'Presence', Gourlay also provides a particularly refreshing critique of the 'flipped classroom', as 'the logical end-point of a performative culture of education', conflating 'observation interlocution, participation, engagement and learning into one observable construct' (2020, p87).

While the first five chapters are engaging, it is with 'Wayfaring', and 'Quantum' that things get particularly interesting, and where Gourlay develops posthumanism in especially productive directions. 'Wayfaring' connects 'text trajectories' from linguistic ethnography with Tim Ingold's (2007) work with lines (from which the title of the chapter gets its name), interlaced through an interview of the notion of 'hyperwritng', derived from Hayles's 'hyper reading' (2012). Here the focus on texts as 'agentive, mutable, and lively' (Gourlay 2020, p117) seems particularly lucid. Perhaps the most speculative of the chapters, 'Quantum' engages recent work in the area of new materialism to explore the concept of 'quantum literacy', which brings 'ideas from the world of quantum physics to literacy education' (Gourlay 2020, p140). Here Gourlay attempts to draw out key ideas, such as the materiality of thinking and the co-constitutive relationships between observer and observed, in order to consider the ways in which the Open Education Practices (OEP) movement might be 'situated', rather than remaining 'somewhat idealized, abstract, and also underpinned by a valorisation of a particular type of "active" engagement' (2020, p147).

Ultimately, it is this 'situating' – an acute attentiveness to the everyday practices of the digital university – that is the core, and very worthwhile, contribution of this book. In conclusion, Gourlay warns that the various ideological assumptions and imaginaries saturating the higher education sector restrict:

> our ability as educational researchers and theorists to "see" clearly what is happening
> on the ground, in the intricate, unobserved pathways and passages being forged, the
> threads being tied and unravelled, the meshwork in which students and scholars are
> entangled (2020, p165)

This book undeniably provides both the inspiration and means to bring posthumanism 'down to earth', and to shine a much-needed critical light on the corridors and conduits of the digital university.

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[i] Badmington professes to have 'abandoned' the use of the term in 2010, although for personal reasons rather than assuming it to be a 'dead' area of theory: https://gemsugent.wordpress.com/2016/02/22/6-questions-to-neil-badmington/

[ii] Braidotti (2013) and Herbrechter (2013) discuss the 'posthumanities' specifically, in the sense of considering how posthumanist theory might shift the concerns of 'humanities' disciplines that have been overtly constructed around the assumption of the centrality of the human condition. However, this is somewhat distinct from a specific concern for the day-to-day educational functions of the institution, and indeed the practices of teaching and learning.