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Posthumanism in Literature: Redefining Selfhood, Temporality, and Reality/ies through Fiction

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Posthumanism in Literature: Redefining Selfhood, Temporality, and Reality/ies through Fiction

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ABSTRACT

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by Eileen Kelley Pierce

While fictional novels are often seen as a way to escape reality, their relation *to* reality and the ways in which they distort or reinforce our understandings *of* reality can provide significant insights into our cultural values and beliefs. Using posthumanist theory, I examine how understandings of selfhood and its relations to time and reality are complicated within three works of fiction and how those complications represent and articulate a societal shift in meaning and knowledge that is supported by posthumanist ideologies. The three works, *No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood, *Wolf in White Van* by John Darnielle, and *The Maddaddam Trilogy* by Margaret Atwood, portray differing but interconnected interpretations of the posthuman condition, a condition brought on by the inadequacies of the Humanist notions that pervade our societal structures. The complexities of contemporary society coupled with Humanism's ideological shortcomings then intersect with our lived realities and become the foundations of the posthuman condition. In comprehensively examining the constructions of identity and relationality, I support the need for a posthumanist understanding of the world we exist in today in order to make sense of and act within our current reality. I show that fiction is one avenue in which authors are attempting to create new meaning that is relevant and necessary to understand and cope with lived reality. Because fiction is seen as apart from reality, it allows for a safe and separate space to consider what otherwise can feel like monumental and overwhelming contradictions to our current understandings of ourselves, our reality, and our temporality, contradictions that are nonetheless just as prevalent in our material realities as they are presented in these fictional texts.

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Introduction

To exist in a time in which ChatGPT can mimic the voice and style of a person, CGI is used to reanimate deceased actors in movies, and you can communicate instantaneously with someone 12,000 miles away and 26 hours ahead via a common everyday object, inevitably means that our understandings of seemingly-fixed truths are being disrupted. This is the posthuman condition in which we all exist. In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti demonstrates how the posthuman condition "introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relation to the other inhabitants of this planet. This issue raises serious questions as to the very structures of our shared identity – as humans – amidst the complexity of contemporary science, politics and international relations" (1-2). Robert Pepperell, in *The Posthuman Condition*, describes it as "nearing an awareness of the energy of existence —— there is the tangible crackle of a storm in the air" (iv). What this condition refers to is the way in which Humanist ideology is still firmly embedded in our modes and structures of being, despite its incompatibility with our current reality, especially as it is comprised of new technologies, science, and knowledge. It is this chafing of incongruous ideas and lived realities that creates the posthuman condition.

Humanism, to give a general overview, is a philosophical system of beliefs that came into fruition during the Enlightenment period, and which still persists in contemporary culture. Though Humanism encompasses many different principles, the one that is most enduring and most relevant today is the separation of body and mind, "a commonly held belief that the brain determines or causes mental phenomena, in particular the phenomena of consciousness, with the consequence that in much philosophical discussion of consciousness the body and the world beyond are largely neglected" (Pepperell 13). This version of Self encounters a plethora of

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problems within the contemporary era due to its incompatibility with the globally-integrated, technologically-mediated mass network of humans, animals, and ecosystem that makes up our world.

Many works of literature grapple with the incongruities of Humanism in lived experience, either consciously or not. Literature offers an avenue to explore this condition through fictional narratives, offering a constructed distance in order to safely reimagine what it means to be human. The three works discussed in this paper are vastly different in their genres, scope, and style. However, each work, through a unique approach, explores the posthuman condition. Before we get into the ways in which these novels depict the difficulties of Humanist thinking in a posthuman landscape, we need a more in-depth understanding of what Humanism is and does, and how posthumanism attempts to reimagine new ways of being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A quick Google search of the term "posthuman" will bring up scientific and medical studies, technology forums, science fiction novels, ethical debates, and other wide-ranging and sometimes-contradicting fields. Mainstream culture has co-opted the term to encapsulate a variety of twenty-first century subjects surrounding biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and other technological advancements, usually in the context of whether it means the end of humankind as we know it. While some of these aspects are relevant to posthumanism, the term is often conflated with transhumanism, a philosophy which does not necessarily reject Humanist ideology but focuses on how to improve humans by bio-technological modifications, reinforcing the superiority of humanity in relation to the world. Posthumanism, however, is a theory born out of a need to rectify the problematic structures and belief systems created through Humanism, a

philosophy that dates back to ideas conceived during the Enlightenment period in Western Europe.

To grasp the essential tenets of posthumanism, it is necessary to first discuss the inherent problems within Humanism that led to the former's development. At its core, Humanism asserts that "*Homo sapiens* [are] the highest point of evolution" (Pepperell 1), imbuing humans with intrinsic value and placing them above the earth, the environment, animals, non-living objects, and dehumanized humans (those who fail to meet the criteria of humanness, historically the criteria being educated, white, male, protestant, and land-owning). Much of the Western world is founded on its lasting legacies of individuality, human centrality, the privileging of rational, objective, scientific thought, and the supposed teleological destiny and progress of humankind.

The damages of Humanism that posthumanism strives to counteract are numerous, but for the scope of this paper I will outline only the pertinent foundations in which I will situate my argument. Perhaps the most enduring of Humanistic thought is the conceptualization of human consciousness, put succinctly in Rene Descartes's overwhelmingly proliferated pronouncement, "I think; therefore I am." Enlightenment-era thinkers contended that human consciousness is located exclusively in the mind and is separate from the material body and the surrounding environment. They considered the mind to be a discrete, unchanging identity, often linking it metaphysically as the home of the soul, in contrast to the decaying body. A hierarchy was then constructed between mind and body, with the mind as master directing the vessel. Posthumanism challenges this assumed truth from several different angles. Robert Pepperell, a foundational posthumanist, argues that "[g]iven the right combination of genes, tissues, nutrients, chemicals and environmental conditions the property we know as 'consciousness' emerges. We cannot precisely define what this quality is, where it occurs or how it might look in isolation from those

conditions — *it is a consequence of all those conditions*" (1). Advocating for the concept of embodied consciousness, posthumanists emphasize the ways in which our material bodies play an integral part in our ontology, our process of being, with certain theorists focusing on our inseparability from not just our bodies but the environment, other people, and non-living objects (Braidotti, Pepperell, Hayles). In a similar vein, some posthumanists focus on different forms of consciousness, such as that of animals, the environment, and potentially artificial intelligence, questioning the strict boundaries Humanism places on categories such as sentient versus non-sentient (Hayles, Pepperell, Wolfe). Theorist Rosi Braidotti concentrates her work on philosophical posthumanism and examines selfhood in terms of subjectivity, considering consciousness beyond the individual self and species and calling attention to the ever-changing criteria for being classified as "human" both in the past and present. Braidotti's contention that "the human, [instead of] being sacralized as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended" (60) emphasizes the evolving understandings of what it means to become and be considered human.

N. Katherine Hayles, literary critic and theorist, focuses on cybernetics and complex systems in understanding the self, arguing that ideally, "emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature" (288). Instead of positioning the human as subject enacting agency upon non-human objects, posthumanism places humans, nonhumans, objects, and the environment on an equal plane, each playing an active role in co-constructing dynamic subjectivities.

Humanism also insists that there is the external — that which exists outside of the mind such as the surrounding environment — and the internal — the thinking being. Idealist philosophers such as Descartes believed that "the whole structure of reality is to be understood through consciousness" (Pepperell 31), enforcing the separation of the two and the supposed objectivity of the mind. Posthumanism calls into question whether consciousness and reality (or the internal and external) are such discrete, objective categories. Rapid technological advancements are accompanied by a pervasive fear of how we depend on and integrate ourselves with technology, and moreover, what these implications mean for how we define and understand consciousness. Braidotti emphasizes that this posthuman predicament forces "a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance, between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems" (89). As the parameters of humanity that have appeared to be distinct and definable begin to unravel under closer scrutiny, such as human / machine, human / animal, so too do the distinctions of how we define what is real, natural, or organic.

Finally, Humanist theory depicts time as linear and mankind as teleological, approaching a final, predestined point, always moving toward complexity and progress. Contradictions to this can be found throughout history, on a large scale through the way humanity alters and rewrites past events and on an individual level through the way we think, remember, and process, often sporadically and in random sequence. Moreover, in today's technological age, the notion of linear time feels especially precarious. With the ability to preserve things within time through a global digital network and the immediacy of access to different time / space configurations, linearity in time becomes untenable, failing to encapsulate our current reality. Pepperell

emphasizes that "the 'point-and-click' environment of the Web, giving simple access to inconceivable volumes of data, allows Web cites to become natural extensions to the multimedia desktop, giving the impression of an 'info-world' devoid of the restrictions of time or space" (5). Simultaneously as time can be paused, it can also be accelerated in the immediacy of global news and information and mis-information, changing the rate at which we process and interact with the larger world. These contradictions to a definable, one-dimensional timeline point to the need for a more complex understanding of how time functions within the posthuman era.

Many theories have been developed in an effort to combat the negative impacts and inadequacies of Humanism, such as poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonialism, and others. Each of these theories has influenced and enhanced posthuman theory, but they often unconsciously reintegrate certain Humanistic beliefs in their arguments. Because of this, threads of these theories will intertwine with the posthuman arguments put forth here, though I will be predominately maintaining a posthumanist view to actively work against integrations of Humanist thought.

Methodology

To understand how fiction can articulate the posthuman condition, I will be examining how three representative works of literature grapple with selfhood, time, and reality: *No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood, *Wolf in White Van* by John Darnielle, and *The Maddaddam Trilogy* by Margaret Atwood. I will explore the questions of how understandings of subjectivity in relation to time, reality, and technology function within them and how those configurations reflect and articulate a societal shift in meaning and knowledge. The dissonance between the experiences of the characters and their (in)ability to process them through their internalized Humanist beliefs represents the foundations of the posthuman condition. These

questions, arising in challenge to Humanism's ideological shortcomings, intersect with our lived realities to create the posthuman condition. By choosing three novels of differing genres – semi-autobiographical fiction, psychological fiction, and science fiction (or speculative fiction according to Atwood herself) – I will show how authors utilize different forms of fiction in an attempt to question or subvert specific Humanistic understandings within their works. Each novel produces a slightly different representation of our current culture, one providing a personal look into someone's existence within the culture, another delving into the psychological effects of the culture on the individual, and the final a speculation of how the culture might evolve if continued on its current path. The different genres allow for a more extensive insight into the multiplicities of the posthuman condition that can be represented in fiction. Because the novels in this study have unique trajectories of contending with the posthuman condition, it is worth giving a comprehensive synopsis of each novel in order to avoid confusion as the argument progresses.

Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam Trilogy* takes place in the United States in the near-distant future. Atwood amplifies the current political, scientific, and moral crises of our current society to create a potential landscape of speculative-future society. In it, corporations have totalitarian control over employees and their families who all live and work together in private compounds. Biogenetic engineering has reached its zenith, resulting in new cross-species, radical medical advancements, and commodification for cosmetic uses. Globally, the world is politically volatile, with an escalation of assassinations, government coups, and extortions. Technology has advanced so much that it becomes difficult to tell what is real or fake, and extreme violence and pornography have become commonplace. The reader learns about this society in the past tense, as the central character Jimmy, who now calls himself Snowman, recounts his past life. In the

present timeline, Jimmy/Snowman is likely the only human survivor of a manufactured pandemic that wipes out all of humankind, except the genetically engineered neo-humans (referred to as Crakers) created by Jimmy's best friend Crake. Crake, essentially a mad scientist, designed the Crakers to embody his version of an ideal human, one who does not fight or rape, is sustained by foraging, and is overall utterly self-sufficient. The subsequent novels follow two other human survivors, Ren and Toby, and others they encounter in the post-apocalyptic landscape, and finally converge with all of the human survivors and the Crakers meeting and attempting to stay alive and rebuild human society.

Wolf in White Van by John Darnielle follows Sean, a disabled man who creates games for a living. Attempting to cope with the traumatic event that led to his disfigurement, Sean creates the game Trace Italian, a text-based role-playing game enacted through the mail. The game takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States, in which players have to attempt to find the Trace Italian, a fortress built by survivors, but when two of the players attempt to enact the game in real life resulting in the death of one of the players, Sean is taken to court to determine his responsibility for their actions. Jumping around through time, Sean reflects on his own mental state and the complicated reasons he has for creating imaginary worlds in the first place.

No One Is Talking About This by Patricia Lockwood follows an unnamed woman who has become semi-famous for a viral social media post on the internet. Written as though it is a collection of random thoughts (or tweets) the book details the woman's changing identity as she becomes more and more enmeshed in online space, or as she refers to it, "the portal." Referencing nonfictional political and cultural events throughout, the unnamed woman attempts to balance her involvement with the online world and the sudden knowledge of her sister's child being born with a rare, fatal syndrome that gives the baby months to live. Grappling with this

life-changing news, the woman questions the importance of the online sphere, first feeling as though she has wasted her time online, but then slowly recognizing the ways in which technology has played an essential part in constructing her identity and facilitating her relationship with her family members and dying niece.

These works of literature portray the tensions of subjectivity, chronology, and reality in full force within our current culture. Though we might explore these tensions through a variety of critical lenses, I am using posthumanism for its direct challenge of normalized Humanistic thinking, the dominating structure of cultural thought and perception in Western culture. The specific topics of each novel reflect issues within contemporary society that have been compounded by the incompetencies of Humanism in accurately engaging with our global, technologically-mediated world. Because these texts articulate and create meaning through their production within a specific moment in time, the era of the posthuman, as well as their consumption by the people existing within that era, it is only through posthumanism that the complex questions, values, and critiques brought forward in the texts can be examined most accurately. Through this lens I will examine the content of each novel, the way each of these themes is presented and fulfilled or left wanting, as well as the narrative techniques of each piece and how these articulations reflect or distort an exemplification of our current culture. I will address the style, form, and structure of the novel and how those elements enhance or complicate the depictions of these posthuman conditions of the construction of self in relation to temporality, technology, and reality. I will analyze what is being reproduced, perpetuated, and subverted in relation to these concepts and how the reader might respond to these continuations or divergences as well as how it might challenge their previous understandings of them.

I will be grounding my argument on the key tenets of posthumanism as put forth by some of the most influential theorists within the school of thought, including Rosi Braidotti, Robert Pepperell, and N. Katherine Hayles. To situate my framework in the posthuman, I will emphasize the incongruities of Humanism that leave us questioning its basic concepts, which have already been complicated and undermined by overpopulation, global warming, and technological advancement, to name a few. More specifically, I will put forth the posthumanist contradictions to Humanism to support my framework that selfhood is produced through continual interaction with our surroundings and is not fixed nor constant and that our knowledge of the world and assumed truths are subject to change and evolve as the world and technology change and evolve, supported by theorists like Braidotti, Pepperell, and Hayles. Because posthumanism was born out of and intersects with many other theories, such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and more, I will utilize some tenets from these as well, in order to present the most comprehensive understanding of my argument.

In thoroughly examining each of these aspects, I aim to support the need for a posthumanist understanding of the world we exist in today in order to make sense of and act within our current reality. I hope to show that fiction is one avenue in which authors are attempting to create new meaning that is relevant and necessary to understand and cope with lived experience. Because fiction is seen as apart from reality, it allows for a safe and separate space to consider what otherwise can feel like monumental and overwhelming contradictions to our current understandings of ourselves and our world, contradictions that are nonetheless just as prevalent in our material realities as they are presented in these fictional texts. New literary history critic Rita Felski argues that an important function of literature is its way of "drawing us into certain attitudes, postures, and modes of engagement" (xii). These works of literature

facilitate reimaginings of our understandings of being in the world through the act of reading them.

Analysis

Part 1: Self

Despite the fact that the fields of artificial intelligence, consciousness studies, neurobiology, literary and rhetorical criticism, cultural studies, and other emerging disciplines are increasingly acknowledging that consciousness cannot be separated from its embodied and embedded state, the general Western perception of selfhood has undergone little change since the ideas formed during the Enlightenment era over four hundred years ago. Though Pepperell highlights that both scientific and multi-disciplinary advancements and "the increasing respect given to what is broadly called eastern philosophy has made the continuity between object and subject more readily acceptable," (i), the enduring belief that the Self begins and ends in the mind still lingers in our cultural values. Braidotti emphasizes that the Humanist and Eurocentric ideas produced during the Enlightenment have become so embedded in modern Western culture that they become "more than just a contingent matter of attitude. It is a structural element of our cultural practice, which is also invented in both Theory and institutional and pedagogical practices" (15). To call attention to these structural codes that permeate multiple facets of our daily lives, certain authors have used their fictional works to encourage a reimagination of selfhood, one that is inseparable from its body, its environment, and its experiences, forcing readers to consider their interlocking significance in human lives. To continue to advance this reimagination, we must consider how the world, environment, and experiences have direct influence on our subjectivity, shaping and altering it through constant contact, just as water erodes a rock.

Perhaps the least controversial entrance into the idea of the self as a changing, mutable entity is through the passing of time. As time passes and new experiences are had, a person changes and evolves, sometimes subtly and sometimes in extreme and drastic ways, especially from traumatic situations. Humanist thinkers explain this as the attempt to find one's true Self, such as influential psychologist Abraham Maslow who argued for self-actualization, that is "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (qtd. in Vinney). In contrast, posthumanism defines the subject "within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (Braidotti 49). Furthermore, where Humanism locates the Self in the immaterial mind, posthumanism advocates for embodied consciousness. Pepperell concedes that the brain is a significant part of the system of consciousness, but finds fault with Humanist thinkers who in turn label it the seat of consciousness, arguing that "unless the brain, or parts of the brain, can be shown to produce the mind on their own, without the need for any other tissue or activity, then it is mistaken to assume that the brain alone contains the 'hardware' or 'software' of the mind" (29), emphasizing the interdependence of brain and body. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, psychiatrist and researcher Bessel van der Kolk highlights studies that show "recalling an emotional event from the past causes us to actually reexperience the visceral sensations felt during the original event" (118), supporting the posthuman contention that consciousness is produced within and throughout the body.

The Humanist construction of the Self is disrupted and convoluted in *The Maddaddam Trilogy* by Margaret Atwood through the central character of the first novel being depicted as two different people. The novel flashes back and forth between two different time periods, one being the past of the character, originally named Jimmy, the other being the present for

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Snowman, Jimmy's new persona. The trauma that Jimmy experiences, from witnessing the global pandemic that eradicates nearly all of humanity, to realizing it is his best friend Crake who is responsible for their deaths, to watching Crake cut the throat of their shared lover Oryx, alters his selfhood so drastically that he no longer identifies with that person, referring to his past self in the third person so as to distance himself from that version. Throughout the novel, Jimmy represents the persisting Humanist subject, unable to let go of Humanist ideology that no longer connects with his circumstances. Because Humanism contends that the Self is a constant, stable identity, Jimmy does not know how to reconcile the complete dissociation he feels with his past self. To resolve this dissonance, he creates an entirely new self in order to make sense of how vastly he has changed, instead of acknowledging that his traumatic experiences and his abrupt environmental changes have altered his subjectivity so drastically that he no longer recognizes it. What Jimmy ignores, however, is the role of the body in determining the self, and the ways in which trauma is stored not just in the mind but in the body. It is through constant dreams and involuntary flashbacks that the reader learns more of Snowman's past — as his body makes him remember. He makes clear that it is not of his own volition that he recalls the past, grumbling that "he hates these replays. He can't turn them off, he can't change the subject, he can't leave the room" (68). Van der Kolk argues that "traumatized people feel chronically unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs" (120). Instead of recognizing that his past traumas are still present within his body and that his experiences and interactions have changed his subjectivity, he attempts to reinvent a new selfhood to fit within a Humanist framework.

It is not only trauma that causes the reconstruction of self for Jimmy/Snowman, but also that his environment has so drastically changed. Because selfhood is not an innate, fixed given, it

must be shaped. That shaping is done by the world around us, through our constant interactions with other people, animals, objects, and the environment. Pepperell, in his essay "The Posthuman Conception of Consciousness: A 10-point Guide," makes the following assertion:

> Consciousness, body and environment are all continuous. . . . There is a continuity between the 'thinking being', the tissues in which the thoughts are manifest, and the world in which those thoughts and tissues exist. Just as the brain needs the body to create conscious activity, so the body needs the environment to create conscious activity. A body without an environment, like a brain without a body, ceases to function — consciousness stops. Not only does this mean that the environment is connected directly to our consciousness through the body, it also means that consciousness is connected directly to the environment — ultimately they cannot be separated. (2)

Because consciousness cannot be separated from the environment, when Jimmy's environment is destroyed, so too is his existing identity. The emergence of Snowman is in direct reaction to the new environment he finds himself in, one so severely different from what he once knew. He even chooses his new name based on how his circumstances have affected his being, giving him "a bitter pleasure to adopt this dubious label. The Abominable Snowman — existing and not existing" (7). This response to environment highlights the flaws in labeling the self as disparate subject acting upon the dependent entities of the universe around it. Were this to be true, we would not see Jimmy changed from his transformed environment. While a person evolving based on their experiences may seem an undisputed idea, this understanding of the self as fluid and nebulous is the basis that we will build upon to explore more complex ideas of subjectivity and is therefore worth asserting.

In *Wolf in White Van*, we see a different depiction of fluid identities. As the game creator and moderator of Trace Italian, Sean sends the player a letter each month detailing the current situation their character is in and offers them different options of how to proceed, essentially a slow-form of a "choose your own adventure" game. Through the construction of an alternate reality, Sean creates a way for people to become player characters, a different version of themselves. Instead of arguing this as a representation of disembodied subjectivity, I wish to emphasize the ways in which the landscape of the game creates a physically, albeit imaginary, embedded sense of being linked to the player's consciousness. Sean interacts with his players only through the landscape of the game, remaining isolated from them in the material world apart from the mailed letters. He constructs his version of their identities through their moves, writing:

> A player's first move isn't necessarily the truest or clearest view of the person I'll get, but it's often the most naked, because it takes a while to situate yourself within an imaginary landscape. When you respond to the initial subscriber packet with your opening move, you haven't had a chance to get much of a sense of the game's rhythms, so you're awkward, halting, more likely to overplay your hand. (26)

What this points to is the way the imaginary landscape of the game influences the choices of the player within it. Their awkwardness derives from the sudden incorporation of their subjectivity into a new environment, much like a baby must work to adapt to its new surroundings in its first months. Braidotti emphasizes the priority of "the relation and the awareness that one is the effect of irrepressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of" (100). Consciousness is altered in response to the environment in which it finds itself, even if that environment is a fictionally created one.

Not only do the characters morph and adjust based on their changed reality, they also bring parts of their material reality into the game landscape with them. Sean learns pieces of their material identities, as "they scatter details of their daily lives throughout their narratives; some friend who used to play the game but is gone now, God knows where—dead? lost? got too old?––will appear mid-letter, a ghost whispering an idea to a player as he writes" (29), highlighting the interaction between different subjectivities — that of the player character and the person. These multiple subjectivities intertwine, anchoring "the subject in an ethical bond to alterity, to the multiple and external others, that are constitutive of that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the 'self'" (Braidotti 100). This interconnection of selves across and through imaginary landscapes shows the possibilities of what it means to reimagine the boundaries of human consciousness.

The significance that even non-living entities have on our subjectivities is shown through one of Sean's players, Chris, who chooses to end his gameplay by killing himself within the game. His letter is written in first person, stating, "I take the knife and stab myself in the neck" (43). Notably, Chris does not say he is going to stop playing the game, but instead "I . . . stab myself," because he feels he has to kill this other version of himself which has become as integrated into and as real as his material self in order to move on. Chris's reason for ending his imaginary life is because the distinction between the game and reality have become blurred. He tells Sean, "I got up last night at 2 am thinking about how to repair my rifle, I don't even have a rifle except in the Trace" (43), and even this phrasing points to how Chris views the game. He doesn't write that he doesn't have a rifle at all, he writes that he doesn't have one *except in* the game. His word choice emphasizes that the game is as real as the material world to Chris. It is influencing his thinking and his actions, altering his sense of identity. The impact of non-material

spaces on our material beings as portrayed in this novel might seem irrelevant to non-game

players, but these same effects are mirrored in social media's significance in our daily lives.

Stepping away from imaginary and future universes, I next wish to highlight a virtual

universe that is no less real than our material space, as portrayed in the novel *No One Is Talking*

About This by Patricia Lockwood, in which social media takes on an other-worldly dimension.

The main character, an avid Twitter user, visits this "portal" obsessively. Within, she finds her

subjectivity merging and melding with other subjectivities in the portal, creating a larger whole

made up of everyone within. She physically experiences this joining, as "she lay every morning

under an avalanche of details . . . the world pressing closer and closer, the spiderweb of human

connection grown so thick it was almost a shimmering and solid silk" (8). The more she connects

with this mass of interweaving subjectivities, the less she feels the boundaries of her own self,

noting that "her pronoun, which she had never felt particularly close to, traveled farther and

farther away from her in the portal, swooping through landscapes of *us* and *him* and *we* and

them. . . . Mostly though it passed into *you*, *you*, *you*, *you*, until she had no idea where she ended

and the rest of the crowd began" (10-11). What Lockwood illustrates is the posthuman condition

of attempting to reconceptualize self in relation to changing technological advancements.

Braidotti argues that "the main thrust of micro-electronic seduction is actually neural, in that it

foregrounds the fusion of human consciousness with a general electronic network" (90). This

fusion of the protagonist's consciousness with a general electronic network fuses her to every

other consciousness that is also fused within the network, creating a humanoid entity, filled with

multiple subjectivities, but acting as a hive mind, following trends, patterns, and group

mentalities. The boundary of self becomes liquid, poured into a massive stream of blending

subjectivities.

Returning to Atwood's Snowman, we can further explore this posthuman convergence of multiple subjectivities within his consciousness. The first novel is written in third-person omniscient, giving the reader direct insight into Snowman's cognitive construction which shows him often thinking in other people's, animals', or inanimate objects' voices. That is to say that his subjectivity is made up of an amalgamation of the people, animals, machines, recordings, games, books, and other things he has encountered, such as Alex the parrot, old teachers, instructional videos, self-help books, and more. Throughout the narration, other voices make up Snowman's thoughts, such as, "*So who wants to screw in a lightbulb?* says the voice in Snowman's head, a standup comic this time" (37) or "*It is important*, says the book in his head, *to ignore minor irritants, to avoid pointless repinings. . . .* He must have read that somewhere. Surely his own mind would never have come up with *pointless repinings*, not all by itself" (45-6). There is no mind all by itself, but rather an embedded consciousness, comprised of ongoing interactions. Snowman's self is created out of many different subjectivities, and its boundary is much more permeable than the solidity of his skull.

Similarly, Jimmy/Snowman's object of desire, Oryx, embodies several different identities throughout the novel. Jimmy first believes he has seen Oryx in one of the child pornography videos he and Crake watch casually as young boys. He recalls the moment he saw her on the screen, saying, "Her name wasn't Oryx, she didn't have a name, she was just another little girl on a porno site" (90). Jimmy saves a picture of the child on the screen and shows it to the woman he knows as Oryx, who responds "I don't think this is me" which Jimmy ignores, pressing that "it has to be! Look! It's your eyes!" (91). When Oryx points out that there are many little girls who were on these shows and it could be any one of them, Jimmy is disappointed, so Oryx tries to appease him, saying, "It might be me. Maybe it is" (91). Then a few moments later when

Jimmy asks her what she was thinking in that moment, she responds, "I was thinking that if I ever got the chance, it would not be me down on my knees" (92). There is an obscurity as to whether or not Oryx was this child, or simply a different child that experienced this same abuse.

Oryx's ambiguous identity can be read in two different ways: firstly, that like Snowman, Oryx underwent something so traumatic that her experiences reshaped her into a vastly different person, one that doesn't recognize her previous self, or secondly, that the child was not Oryx, and Oryx is constructed out of several different people through Jimmy/Snowman's gaze. Jimmy's perception of Oryx creates an amalgamation of several blurry, complex identities over time. The name Oryx is "not even her real name, which he'd never known anyway; it's only a word. It's a mantra" (110). Jimmy, despite being the one to attribute different identities to Oryx, is also the one who obsessively attempts to delineate and demarcate exactly who she is, wondering, "How long had it taken him to piece her together from the slivers of her he'd gathered and hoarded so carefully? There was Crake's story about her, and Jimmy's story about her as well, a more romantic version; and then there was her own story about herself, which was different from both" (114). Jimmy constantly tries to pin down exactly who Oryx is, as if he can contain her entity into a definable boundary, one that Oryx continually resists. When Jimmy asks detailed questions to find out where she was born, where she was sold to, who assaulted her, and on and on, Oryx refuses to answer with any specific details and instead gives vague generalizations. Oryx seems to embrace a posthuman understanding of self, recognizing that she has been many different people throughout her life and telling Jimmy, "I bet you saw more with me in. You don't remember. I could look different, I could wear different clothes and wigs, I could be someone else, do other things" (139). Oryx is unconcerned with whether she is or is not the little girl Jimmy thinks she is, instead remaining open to flexible, changing subjectivities,

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ultimately adaptable in order to exist in each environment she finds herself in, whereas Jimmy, limited to Humanist understandings of Self, needs to unite these potentially conflicting versions of Oryx into one cohesive whole.

In the third book of *The Maddaddam Trilogy*, one of the neo-humanoids created by Crake, called Blackbeard, is taught to read and write by the human Toby. Blackbeard's writing represents a new form of subjectivity, as the literal posthuman. His writing switches from first to third person, writing, "He (I, Blackbeard) asked Toby if the green branches were like the flowers that we give" (379), showing his disconnect with the pronouns of the language that help demarcate the boundaries of one self from another, instead using them interchangeably, an uncannily similar experience as to that which the unnamed woman from *No One Is Talking About This* undergoes while online. In contrast to Jimmy, who obsesses over defining himself and others, Blackbeard engages in a fluctuating ontological subjectivity. Blackbeard also understands reading and writing in a simplified yet illuminating way, explaining, "If you look at this writing I have made, you can hear me talking to you, inside your head" (376). Through defamiliarizing the acts of reading and writing, Atwood allows the reader to reconceptualize how those acts can connect different consciousnesses within one. Just as Jimmy/Snowman hears all the different disembodied voices in his thoughts, so too does Blackbeard redefine the ways in which our consciousness can extend outside of our bodies and into other entities. This also echoes the merging of different consciousnesses within *Wolf in White Van* in which player characters become blended and interconnected within and outside of the game space. Instead of a singular Self, these posthuman re-conceptions of selfhood incorporate and merge many different subjectivities, in a living, dynamic process of existence.

To summarize what we have so far established, a posthuman understanding of consciousness requires "a radical estrangement from notions like moral rationality, unitary identity, transcendent consciousness or innate and universal moral values" (Braidotti 92). Instead, we must recognize the concept of an extended consciousness, one which is co-constructed through our bodies, our environments, and other subjects, human and otherwise. By reimaging consciousness as such, it allows for new understandings of how we can redraw (or in some cases completely erase) the stringent boundaries of subjectivity that we have placed upon ourselves.

PART 2: TIME

Having de-solidified the fixed boundaries of the self, I now wish to explore other seemingly-fixed concepts that we take as immutable in Western culture. While exploring the expanding definition of self is relatively palatable, defamiliarizing ourselves with the definition of time is a more difficult task, as time is not only a central structure of functioning society but also the foundation of much of our scientific knowledge. There is no denying that the sun rises each day and sets each night, the earth revolves, and our bodies age and decay. What I would like to call into question, instead, is the way in which our culture defines, understands, and translates time. Essentially, how does time function in our lives and identities and how is our conception of it insufficient?

Part of Humanism's lasting legacy is that of the reinvigoration of Classical schools of thought, such as the "Great Chain of Being," a linear sequence rooted in Platonian and Aristotelian philosophy that maps out the increasing complexity of living beings and their corresponding closeness to God. It is unsurprising that humankind is represented as the most advanced. As theories of evolution became more robust in the 19th and 20th centuries, the concept

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of evolution as linear, teleological, and ultimately positively progressive became ingrained in Western culture. As Braidotti points out, however, "the uses and abuses of scientific experimentation under Fascism and in the colonial era prove that science is not immunized against nationalist, racist, and hegemonic discourses and practices" (32), and its immunity, or lack thereof, to Humanistic thinking is no exception. Dr. Alexander Werth, a professor of evolutionary biology, explains that "the seductive siren of teleology has long been recognized but recent studies reveal just how automatic and deep-seated our tendency is to explain natural phenomena in terms of purpose and how this contributes to our view of evolution as progressive. We are intentional creatures; we see intention everywhere" (251). By viewing humankind as existing on a one-dimensional linear trajectory, we culturally understand that the past is solidified and unchangeable once it occurs and that there is an ultimate final predestination in which every present moment is directing us toward that is similarly definite and assured. This creates rigid boundaries of what can, will, and should happen within a unidirectional chronology.

In contrast, posthumanist understandings of time attempt to complexify this rather simplistic definition of linear temporality. Braidotti's posthuman ethics calls for:

> A critique of the powers that dominant, linear, memory-systems exercise over the Humanities and social sciences. Creativity and critique proceed together in the quest for affirmative alternatives which rest on a non-linear vision of memory as imagination, creation as becoming. Instead of deference to the authority of the past, we have the fleeting co-presence of multiple time zones, in a continuum that activates and de-territorializes stable identities and fractures temporal linearity. This dynamic vision of time enlists the creative resources of the imagination to the task of reconnecting to the past. (165)

While embracing a conception of time that incorporates fluidity and complexity allows for a more intricate interaction of subjectivities, it can create a sense of upheaval for the Humanist subject whose sense of Self is based on the stability of linear time. If Humanism asserts that the Self is a constant, stable entity that persists throughout time based on the certainty of the past and the predetermined direction of the future, then by destabilizing temporality, the Humanist Self too becomes untethered.

In the twenty-first century, global technological advancements have made massive disruptions in how time functions within our cultures. From the rapidity of knowledge transmission, like live coverage of ongoing world events through a multitude of intersecting lenses, to the manipulation of time in digital spheres, such as "my 5-9 after my 9-5" vlogs that propose to show the details of the four hours after work despite the videos often being 60 seconds or less, it is clear that the way time functions in society is undergoing a great transformation. Before addressing that transformation though, it is important to recognize that even before these advancements, manipulations and convolutions in the concept of a linear timeline have been extant. Broadly speaking, when history is written and rewritten, the past becomes altered. As the world discovers new scientific theories, as our moral and civic notions evolve and progress (and regress), we revisit the past and what was once considered the truth, superimposing our present understandings to reinterpret those past moments in time. This means that what has already happened is not fixed in a linear unidirectional space insomuch as we continually redetermine the past.

To use an example from *No One Is Talking About This*, the protagonist writes about the infamous photograph of a nurse being kissed by a soldier in Times Square at the end of World War Two. She says, "We had seen it all our lives, and thought we understood the particular

firework it captured — and now the woman had risen from history to tell everyone that she didn't know the man at all, that in fact she had been frightened throughout the whole encounter" (11). This revelation changes how we view the photograph, as the woman notes that "only then did the hummingbird of her left hand, the uncanny twist of her spine, the grip of the soldier's elbow on her neck become apparent" (11). This information does not actually change the photograph itself, but rather our interpretation of it. The woman notices these suddenly apparent indicators in the photograph, but in fact it is her revision of the past that changes how she sees the exact same moment in time. Despite the event remaining the same, the point in time in which we view the photograph (before or after this new knowledge) changes the past.

Within the personal sphere, time can also take on new dimensions. As discussed in the previous section, there is still much that is not known about how consciousness functions, such as the intricacies of how we think and remember, and despite many research advancements, consciousness still holds many mysteries. We do not typically remember our lives in a purely linear route and our memories are often categorized out of chronological order, integrating past, present, and future in fragmented pieces. Cognitive neuroscientist Donna Bridge emphasizes the non-chronological and unobjective state of remembering, explaining, "Memories aren't static. If you remember something in the context of a new environment and time, or if you are even in a different mood, your memories might integrate the new information" (qtd. in Paul). In this way, we rewrite the past each time we consider it.

With these difficulties in interpreting time established, we can now explore these tensions within the novels. As discussed in the previous section on *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman's trauma results in a disjointed timeline, as he flashes back and forth between his present and past. The non-linearity of the storytelling mirrors his consciousness, as he jumps into past memories in

order to reexperience them with his contemporary knowledge, attempting to fuse two different points in time. While this attempted fusion is futile, as it will not materially change what has already happened, it is an act of two points in time merging, as his current knowledge warps and changes the past. Reflecting on his past interactions with Crake, he asks himself, "How could I have missed it? What he was telling me. How could I have been so stupid?" (184). His memories become altered with his contemporary knowledge and emotional state, reinscribing the past with his present subjectivity. We experience our memories (not just in our brains but in our bodies) both in the present as we remember them and as they were in the past. Because memories are not perfect recalls of the past but rather subjective through the viewer, as recent neuroscience research shows, "memories that are retrieved tend to return to the memory bank with modifications. . . . As soon as a story starts being told, particularly if it is told repeatedly, it changes — the act of telling itself changes the tale" (van der Kolk 228). In large part due to our internalized Humanistic desire to assign meaning and significance to past events, van der Kolk notes that we "cannot help but make meaning out of what [we] know, and the meaning we make of our lives changes how and what we remember" (228). This integration is a merging of past and present, joining two (and eventually infinite) disparate moments in time. Each time we remember then, we change the past, however slightly, constantly reinscribing a new time event on top of a past one until there are layers and layers of temporality coalescing into an indiscernible entity. In this way, Snowman is constantly revisiting and changing his own timeline. Because Snowman represents the Humanist subject, his anxiety about clearly delineating and solidifying what happened in the past is directly tied to his sense of self. Because he feels as though the past is inconstant and incomprehensible, he cannot ground his Humanist subjectivity in a stable chronological linearity. Instead, the more he recounts and attempts to

define the past, the more elusive it becomes, and the more unsure he becomes of his own sense of self.

Highlighting how cultural understandings of time are subjective, Atwood portrays Snowman's understanding of time as drastically unstable in the aftermath of the global pandemic, leaving him floundering in an attempt to hold onto the perceived stability of society's time. The lack of conventional time is mentioned almost immediately at the outset of the novel, emphasizing its significance. Snowman looks at his nonfunctional watch, observing that "a blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is" (3). Time itself has not ceased to exist, but all societal and cultural conventions of it have. Despite the watch being broken, Snowman continues to wear it because there is a comfort in what time once signified — unvarying constancy. The end of the novel circles back to the beginning (an apt analogy of the chronology within), as the final lines read: "From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face. Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go" (374). Despite over 300 pages elapsed between these two moments, the time remains the same: zero hour. Time as is culturally understood no longer exists in Snowman's world, but because the cultural construction of time is so integral to our identities, Snowman cannot let it go, even though it no longer functions in any meaningful way. Stuck in Humanistic thought, Snowman is constantly trying to hold onto previous signifiers of stability, despite their non-functionality in his contemporary space. Snowman's obsession with the watch is a fitting metaphor for all of Humanism, in that we are determined to hold onto it despite the fact that it no longer operates effectively in our current existence.

The second book in the trilogy, titled *The Year of the Flood*, travels back in time to before the engineered global pandemic and ends at the exact point in time as the first novel.

Atwood mirrors the narrative of the first novel, jumping back and forth between past and present but through two new characters, Toby and Ren. Just as the characters attempt to reinterpret the past with their new knowledge, the reader also must restructure the past with the new knowledge presented in the second book, so that even though the reader arrives at the same moment in time, the past has been altered. Even the title of the novel illustrates the restructuring of time as it is named after Year 25, also known as the Year of the Flood, according to the eco-religious cult of which Toby and Ren belong to. Further complicating the linearity of time, there is a third timeline that is silently present in the books, which is the contemporary time of the reader. The world conjured by Atwood is based on our current reality should we continue on our trajectory, meaning the reader is supposedly reading their future while simultaneously the characters reflect on their pasts as they exist in their present time. This means that the novels encompass three different facets of time: past, present, and future. Having these three different temporalities interact with one another within the novels creates a complex weave of temporality, one that is far from linear but instead intersecting and overlapping. The reader comes face to face with their potential future and experiences horror from looking at what might be, just as Snowman looks back at his past and experiences horror at what has already happened. Each looks at the same moment in time from two different spaces within their own time zone.

Like Jimmy/Snowman, *Wolf in White Van*'s Sean exists in a fragmented chronology resulting in part from the interruptions of traumatic memories. Opening the novel by reflecting on recurring past events of his father helping him bathe, he notes, "It's a cluster memory now: it consists of every time it happened and is recalled in a continuous loop. After a while, the scene blurred into innumerable interchangeable identical scenes layered one on top of the other like transparencies" (3). The separate time events merge together, becoming interchangeable, as one

time event dissolves into all the time. Yet again Sean compresses separate time events into one time that is also happening at all times in a different timeline, saying, "This happens several times a day, or it's a single thing that's always happening somewhere, a current into which I can slip when I need to remember something" (5). Sean describes this way of remembering as slipping into a current, just as in *The Maddaddam Trilogy* Pilar explains time as "not a thing that passes: it's a sea on which you float" (101). Both of these descriptions make time into a multi-dimensional entity — water allows for forward, backward, sideways, upward and downward movement, instead of a one-dimensional line. Braidotti argues that "posthuman time is a complex and non-linear system, internally fractured and multiplied over several time-sequences" (167). Memory then becomes an essential component of subjectivity because "freed from chronological linearity and the logo-centric gravitational force, memory in the posthuman nomadic mode is the active reinvention of a self that is joyfully discontinuous" (Braidotti 167). Though joyful may not be the first adjective these characters think of when considering their non-linear subjectivity, it cannot be denied that they are surpassing the limits of the Humanist Self (consciously or more likely not) to encapsulate the complexities of their posthuman existence.

We have already established that the people who play Sean's game are cultivating and being cultivated by their characters within the game as well as by Sean's actions as the game's creator. Their identities become further complicated by the integration of differing time relations between the game and the material world. The game is played through mail, meaning that when a choice is made by a player within the game, that action is then delayed in time during its physical journey to Sean's address, wherein upon its arrival, upon Sean's opening the letter, the time within the game is resumed as that action now becomes a certainty within the fictional reality by

both the player and Sean having recognized it. During that suspended time in which the characters of the game are in limbo, the material persons are ontologically ongoing within real spacetime. Pepperell asserts that a thought "is a dynamic process which is distributed across the journey rather than being located in any fixed place, and thereby implies a temporal dimension – – a thought is always experienced in time" (94-5). Thoughts, and the actions that arise from them, in this way mirror (and are literally a part of) the spacetime continuum, the four-dimensional continuum in which every event in the universe has its unique space and time that characterizes it. Thus, each moment is characterized by the time it took place in. Consequently, due to the time that has passed during the sending of each letter, the material persons are then essentially interacting with a past version of their character self, one that was acting based off of a past version of their material self, and so on. Because these past iterations of identity have tangible effects on the present, past and present time events become interstitial within real spacetime.

Having asserted that time has always been a complex and uncontainable entity, we now can complicate it further by examining its function within the era of technological globalization. In *No One Is Talking About This*, there is a distinct distortion of time within the digital world of the portal. Online, time behaves erratically, existing both in perpetual suspension and rapid instantaneity. Firstly, time stills in two ways. As the person engages with the digital space, the time passing in the material world becomes irrelevant. The protagonist explains her trancelike state, acknowledging that "when something of hers sparked and spread in the portal, it blazed away the morning and the afternoon, it blazed like the new California, which we had come to accept as being always on fire. She ran back and forth in the flames, not eating or drinking" (59). Despite her static appearance as material time flows past, her time within the portal has become

infinitely repeatable, as the same moment can be revisited over and over again, through the replaying of a video, the resurfacing of an old tweet, the frozen frame of a picture. This takes on a significant weight as the woman encounters the surge of videos of multiple Black people being violently killed by police in the United States in 2022. The videos spread vastly throughout social media, "and often the fluid moment of the killing rippled in the portal, playing and replaying as if at some point it might change" (32). Viewers are faced again and again with a moment in time in which a person who no longer materially exists in the world is sustained in a living, recurring moment. This ability to preserve and relive a moment in the past destabilizes the unidirectional timeline of Western culture and complicates the boundaries of the Humanist Self. Werth explains that "if evolution were to reflect an inevitable march of progress, a logical corollary is that modern-day phenomena can be explained by yesterday's precursors. This is especially common, and unfortunate, in explanations of human behavior" (257-8). Because there is no yesterday or tomorrow in the liminal space beyond the screen, human subjectivity becomes destabilized because it cannot be rationalized based on an established timeline. This seems to come into conflict with the prescribed linearity of the material world, but in fact just accentuates the inconstancy that was always there to begin with.

While time can be paused or repeated within the digital realm, it can also reach astonishing momentum due to the immediacy of information transmission. The woman wonders why her husband cannot understand that when online, "her arms [are] all full of the sapphires of the instant" (13). One of those instant sapphires is Heather Heyer, a woman killed by a domestic terrorist during a counter-protest in Virginia. Following the real-time coverage of the event online, including the reporting of Heather's death, the woman "knew a minute before her own mother did, maybe" (57-8). She is so involved that "she was there. Well, no, she wasn't there,

but her heart beat as though she were" (57). The immediacy of information spread is so extraordinary that a stranger who lives in a different state might know about the death of a person before their own mother. Time has reached a frightening speed that no longer conforms to conventional knowledge, wherein information is no longer limited by physical distance. These multiple convergences of instantaneous moments in time also destabilize a linear chronology in that one discrete moment no longer succeeds another. In the case of instantaneity, exponential subjective presents happen all at once, without necessarily any order or cohesion. This again disallows for a stable foundation in which to ground individual subjectivity.

The dynamic instantaneity of information creates a warping in time, one in which new information is constantly available, though the information is often incomplete or possibly untrue altogether. Take, for example, the 2023 bombing of a hospital in Gaza during the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. Seemingly immediately, differing information was widely dispersed detailing who was responsible, with some saying that it was an Israeli airstrike while others claimed that it was a misfiring by a militant Palestinian group. With the mass scale at which these falsities can be spread, it becomes increasingly difficult to stem the flow of false information. While this might seem inconsequential, actions were taken based on unreliable information with significant outcomes. Daniel Silverman, a political science professor who studies war and information explains that there was "a flood of misinformation in a very short time, and in a way that is having a material impact on the diplomacy around the conflict, on the mass mobilization and protests, some of which have the ability to lead to violence" (qtd. in Bond). Within the novel the unnamed woman feels that she must be part of unfolding information, disregarding newspapers instead "for the immediacy of the portal. For as long as she read the news, line by line, and minute by minute, she had some say in what happened didn't

she?" (16). As is clear in the previous example, though, the ability to instantly react to immediate, uncontextualized information can be detrimental, causing tangible harm. The consequences of the rapid trajectory of time within digital spaces are not limited to only those spaces, but ricochet out into our material reality, requiring a reimagination of our cultural constructions of time.

However, this proliferation of immediate information without first being contextualized is not a clear-cut issue. Having immediate access sometimes allows for proof of certain events that might otherwise be obscured, as in the example of the numerous videos of Black people being targeted by U.S. police officers. While these videos cause harm in their own ways by objectifying and reducing the subject to only the violence enacted on them, they also offer proof of the heinous deeds committed, though even video evidence is not always enough to ensure a conviction. On the converse, the immediacy of information without context can cause harm, like in the proliferation of conjecture on who was responsible for the bombing of the hospital in Gaza. It becomes reductive and pointless to argue that technology and the temporal complexities it creates are inherently morally harmful or beneficial, but rather we must integrate these new functions of time into our cultural understanding in order to better operate within them. There is no point in resisting what is already true. Time follows different pathways in the global digital sphere and these divergences must be acknowledged and integrated into our cultural knowledge in order to minimize chaos. Similarly, our understanding of time in the material world needs reimagining in order to accurately encapsulate our complex subjectivities in the posthuman landscape.

Among the countless, there has been a recent social media trend in which influencers will post two photos side-by-side, one that is captioned "fake," in which the subject of the photo is usually posed, edited, and enhanced to fit specific beauty standards and one that is captioned "real," with the subject of the photo posing in a less conventionally-flattering position without any filters. This trend capitalizes on an ongoing dilemma of "truth" and "reality" in the age of social media and digital technology. Rather than asking what is "real," however, posthumanists argue that we need a new definition of "real / reality," and a reworking of the boundaries between the real and unreal, limited as they are by Humanistic rigidity. The persisting Humanist emphasis on rationality and reason mean that "there is an undeniable trajectory towards the goal of conclusive comprehension [of the ultimate nature of reality]" (Pepperell 39), a need to define and demarcate. Philosophy professor Paul Livingston helps elucidate the Humanist conception of reality, explaining, "Descartes and Cartesian metaphysics then take the revolutionary step of making the idea . . . something that can occur in the mind of a human being, the basis for our understanding and knowledge of the world" (7). Because immaterial thought and rational perception become the underpinnings of all certainty, "the truth of a thought is the adequacy or correspondence of an idea to its object. The thinking, willing subject now becomes the central location of the happening of truth" (Livingston 7). What this means is that because thinking (the unique quality prescribed only to humans) is the foundation of all knowledge, Humanism uses this so-called rational thought to construct meanings, then imbue those meanings with certainty and take them as accepted truths. Reality becomes a mutually-agreed-upon construct based on supposed logic, privileging certain truths over others.

However, these agreed-upon constructions, such as what is considered real / unreal, face intense difficulty in their inability to incorporate the massive technological advancements that are reshaping our realities. What happens in virtual or digital realities is no less real than our material reality in terms of its direct significance and interaction with our constantly evolving subjectivities. In her article *Extended Body, Extended Mind: The Self as Prosthesis*, Susan Stuart acknowledges the enduring capacity of Descartes's "idea of the self that is a persisting, purely immaterial, non-composite, thinking thing," explaining that "it is pure in its being the antithesis of the physically vulnerable, ultimately decaying body" (165). It is through this separation of the mind and body that Humanism enables a dissociation of harm to either mind or body affecting the other. Posthumanism enables us to incorporate the significance of multiple realities into our understanding of subjectivity because "at the beginning, there is always already a relation to an affective, interactive entity, endowed with intelligent flesh and an embodied mind: ontological relationality" (Braidotti 100). What this points to is that because posthuman consciousness is an embodied consciousness, what happens to either mind or body cannot be separated from the other (even using words like either and or implies an inaccurate distinction). Posthumanism asks us to associate consciousness with the material world (which encompasses digital and imaginary worlds as well as it is through and within the material world that they are constructed), and further to integrate them.

There is a clear establishment of hierarchy between what is considered real and unreal in Western culture, especially as it pertains to the digital sphere. From memes to news stories to political cartoons, older generations often commentate on the younger generation's obsession with the internet, and bemoan their disconnect with the so-called "real world." This hierarchy is rooted in a Humanist crisis of Self, in which the construction of the Humanist Self is threatened

by the technological advancements of contemporary society. Because the digital world is made up of human and non-human actors, online personas, trends, codes, clouds, algorithms, and machines, it integrates all of these entities into a collective subjectivity, one which cannot be sustained within Humanist delineations of Self. In a piece written by *New York Times* columnist Tara Parker-Pope, she demonstrates the fear of losing the boundaries of self, arguing, "It may be that the immediacy of the Internet, the efficiency of the iPhone and the anonymity of the chat room change the core of who we are" (Parker-Pope). Furthermore, the legacy of Cartesian dualism means that the digital sphere should not have any notable bearing on our physical world. Because the liberal Humanist subject is, as posthumanist scholar Elaine Graham puts it, "untouched and unpenetrated by invasive technologies" (288) and progresses through "self-regulatory and teleological ordained use of reason and scientific rationality" (Braidotti 37), He should therefore not be reconfigured by the all-encompassing Other, especially any non-real / non-human entities. As humans become increasingly technologically mediated, Humanistic values induce a panic as the self is no longer distinctly human nor distinctly superior. As Hayles highlights, "Every day we participate in systems whose total cognitive capacity exceeds our individual knowledge" (289). The posthuman process of reimagining subjectivity necessarily requires reimagining how non-human entities are incorporated into and are part of our process of being which then necessarily requires redefining our cultural reality. Stuart contends that boundaries of selfhood may seem clear, "but in reality we are only conceivable as selves in dynamic conjunction with our world, and the roles that technology plays in that conjunction alter irrevocably our perception of our location, our extension and our limitation" (168). Humanist-induced panic causes us to deny the "realness" of technological import in our subjectivity in order to preserve the perceived certainty of the Humanist individual.

Having made this assertion, it is important to acknowledge that there is an opposite extreme that posthumanism also works against. Technological determinism, in which technological advancements determine and direct societal and cultural evolution, incorporates teleological ideals which disregard the ontological process of diverse subjectivities. The 2023 U.S. congressional hearings on the potential banning of the popular social media app TikTok showcase the pervasive fear of technological determinism in mainstream culture. Republican Earl "Buddy" Carter of Georgia accused the C.E.O. of TikTok that "[t]he Chinese communist party is engaged in psychological warfare through TikTok to deliberately influence U.S. children" (YouTube), asserting that the technology is capable of indoctrinating children with radical political beliefs. Instead of erring on either extremity, either that of human mastery over technological objects or the endangerment of humankind to our future technological overlords, critical posthumanism argues for a more nuanced integration. Graham contends that "[t]he sense that humans and machines are increasingly assimilated, that human nature cannot be realized apart from its tools and artifacts (either as objects of fear or as instruments of mastery), is thus a more authentic understanding of post/human ontology in a digital and biotechnological age" (229). It is rather through our changing dynamics and emergent structures of being, of which both human and technological subjects are co-constructing, that a posthuman subjectivity is enacted. These dynamics are portrayed through the fictional characters of the novels as they grapple with these distinctions.

Atwood emphasizes the conflict of our cultural obsession over what is real through Jimmy and Crake's differing opinions on its significance. As early teens, the boys play chess together online. Jimmy asks Crake one day why they do not play with a real set to which Crake replies, "This *is* a real set" (77). When Jimmy argues it isn't, Crake responds that "neither is the

plastic men. . . . The real set is in your head" (77). Jimmy, as has been evidenced in previous sections, represents the Humanist subject, inculcated by cultural beliefs that argue that the material chess set is more real than the digital one. He relies on the agreed-upon Humanist construct of reality which does not legitimize the digital sphere, creating a disconnect between what is thought of as real and what he experiences as real. Crake, though differing from Jimmy's perspective, takes on a Cartesian viewpoint in arguing that the only set that is real is the one within the mind, just as Descartes asserts that it is through consciousness that reality is constructed. A posthuman interpretation would diverge from both boys' outlooks, instead affirming the reality of both the material and digital set, as both have physical dimensions and co-construct experience with the human players, doing away with restrictive dichotomies and hierarchies. Pepperell contends that the distinction between real and artificial, original and simulated, and organic and mechanical "for practical purposes . . . will become little more than semantic distinctions" (11), both because technological advancements will invalidate our standing definitions of these dichotomies and because the necessity of those boundaries will become obsolete. Posthuman embodiment is able to acknowledge and integrate non-material realities, so that "even though our worlds may be a given in our experience, there is no compelling reason why either they or our embodiment need be physical" (Stuart 173). This extension of self through non-material realities is integral to understanding subjectivity in the technological era.

Jimmy's need to differentiate real from simulated is especially intense due to the extreme circumstances of his cultural and technological milieu. Concepts like "digital genalteration," known in our contemporary time as "deepfakes," make it so that a person can be digitally altered to look like someone else or to say or do something that did not actually occur. This, coupled

with the proliferation and saturation of extreme violence and pornography, creates a space in which it nears on impossible to determine what is truth or fiction. This echoes Descartes' distrust of the senses (as part of the body and therefore inferior to the mind) and the necessity of reliance on the infallibility of reason. Crake tells Jimmy that "with digital genalteration you couldn't tell whether any of these generals and whatnot existed any more, and if they did, whether they'd actually said what you'd heard" (82). William Mitchell explains that due to the advancements of digital manipulation, "the connection of images to solid substance has become tenuous. . . . Images are no longer guaranteed as visual truth – or even as signifiers with stable meaning and value" (qtd. in Laflan 57). The certainty of what is culturally known to be real becomes precarious and untenable. While Jimmy, unable to cope with this monumental shift in knowing / not-knowing (because it is through stable boundaries that the Humanist subject can define himself in relation to the universe), adopts uncritically that everything he sees online must be fake in order to become aloof to the horrors he observes, by stepping away from the need to determine validity and instead focusing on the implications we can move out of the Humanist crisis and into a posthuman viewpoint. An additional form of reality must be taken into account, one that acknowledges that anything on the screen is real in the sense that we have witnessed it.

In Atwood's world, it is not just the digital world that has warped the meaning of real or fake, but also the advancements in biogenetics. Genetic splicing and cloning has progressed so far that new species are being created prolifically, both for human need and for entertainment. Jimmy questions Crake about the huge, brightly colored butterflies he sees at the high-tech compound where Crake studies. Crake responds, "You mean, did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of man? In other words, are they real or fake? . . . These butterflies fly, they mate, they lay eggs, caterpillars come out" (200). Yet again, Jimmy is concerned about their

realness, which he equates to natural and organic, whereas Crake views what is real only in the final results. In Crake's interpretation, the final product of the genetically-produced butterflies is indifferentiable from their natural counterpart, so they are just as real. While Crake appears more open-minded in his categorical definitions, his view eradicates the processes of becoming, instead focusing only on teleology. This proves to be detrimental to posthuman ideology because it ignores the ontological process of being — as we have already established, it is with constant interaction with others and one's environment that continually produces the self, so erasing those processes in fact generalizes and assimilates identities only into their teleological endpoints, of which there is no real endpoint to be found.

What becomes apparent is that Jimmy's concern for what is real or not stems from the significance he assigns to each category. If something is real, it can do real harm or have real impact. If it is not real, it cannot. This belief is apparent in Jimmy's willingness to watch violent and extreme pornography, including child rape and molestation. Watching the show where he first believes to see Oryx, he explains, "None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy — they'd always struck him as digital clones" (90). Jimmy protects his Humanist moral programming by believing that what he is watching did not actually happen in the material world. When Oryx looks at the camera lens, or through the camera lens at Jimmy, for the first time he feels "that what they'd been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control" (91). He believes that if what he watches is digitally constructed, it has no detrimental effects on himself or others. Subconsciously, however, his body knows differently. After spending hours switching back and forth between executions and pornography to the point where they blend together so he sees only a blur of body parts and fluids, Jimmy wobbles home, "feeling as if he'd been to an orgy, one in which he'd had no control at all over

what had happened to him. What had been done to him" (86-7). Physically and mentally, Jimmy

is deeply affected by what he watches, regardless of whether or not it actually happened.

As an adult, having met Oryx in person, Jimmy reflects back, remembering "himself

watching. How could he have done that to her? And yet it hadn't hurt her, had it?" (92). Zeb, a

central character in the final two novels, has a similar reflection after watching virtual

beheadings of naked historical figures, mitigating its violence by saying, "No harm in it really:

they'd already made the videos, so what he was doing was just a form of time travel. He wasn't

causing anything" (116), but he betrays his unease by continuing to wonder, "Were those naked,

kneeling, and shortly to be headless women real or not? He guessed not because reality online

was different from the everyday kind of reality, where things hurt your body" (118). Both Zeb

and Jimmy divulge their discomfort as to whether what they saw was real or not and if that

distinction truly has any meaning. Jimmy asks how he could do such a thing to Oryx by

watching, despite believing the sexual acts to be simulated, while Zeb reasons that he didn't

cause any pain because the videos had already been filmed. They both focus on the wrong moral

implications. Preoccupied with worrying whether or not the videos are real, they never stop to

question what the act of watching does to them, regardless of their authenticity. Both Zeb and

Jimmy draw the boundary line at the physical body, Jimmy by saying that the act of watching is

not equal to the act of doing, and Zeb by arguing that if it did not physically harm him, it was not

real. Ironically, they both watch these videos in order to produce a physical reaction within

themselves — arousal, excitement, or exhilaration, and therefore unconsciously concede that a

material impact is being experienced in and through their bodies. The characters are so obsessed

with the material authenticity of the content, they neglect the fact that it is irrelevant to the

overall significance of the experience, which still contributes to co-producing their embodied subjectivities.

Zeb, however, eventually acknowledges this significance and contradicts his previous statements. Working as a bouncer at a sex club, he gives rowdy clients a pill that makes them think they have just had an incredible sexual experience, despite nothing happening physically. Zeb argues that they ultimately do have this experience, "because all experience registered by the brain is real, no? Even if it didn't happen in 3-D so-called real time" (296). Zeb is able to do what Jimmy cannot — acknowledge that real is no longer a stable signifier and that different realities can still be integrated into material embodiment. Hayles explains, "As long as the human subject is envisioned as an autonomous self with unambiguous boundaries, the human-computer interface can only be parsed as a division between the solidity of real life on one side and the illusion of virtual reality on the other" (290). By disengaging from these fixed boundaries, we can begin to see, or rather, blur the delineations between reality and non-reality in terms of their tangible roles in constructing multifaceted subjectivities.

But what of the technology itself, not just the human-mediated acts committed through it? In our cultural understanding of reality, computers are not generally attributed agency, independence, or the ability to influence us. We associate what is real with what is natural, organic, living, physical, and tangible, all categories that we deny technology's viability within. Technology is considered artificial in two realms then: the virtual worlds experienced within it and its own non-autonomous, dependent state. However, as the novels and our current society show, these technologies can have unexpected outcomes, ones that directly affect and influence living agents. Humanist ideology gives itself the narrative of humankind as the master creator of all modern innovation, but fails to acknowledge the ways in which our creations are recreating

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and redefining us. As Graham puts it, "Technologies are the products of human creative activity – as are representational practices – but become in turn the media within which human ontology is realized" (224). In other words, the technology we generate then plays a part in how we continually generate our own subjectivities, our process of being in the world.

In Darnielle's novel, the fictional world of the game, similarly to the digital world, takes on a life of its own, one which Sean no longer controls absolutely. The other characters modify the game and their material realities through their choices, but even the game itself has its own autonomy according to Sean. He decides not to revise past iterations of the game because he "didn't have the stomach for it. Trace Italian had existed long enough to have earned self-determination" (59). The game is given attributes of autonomy, showing its hazy overlappings on the boundaries of reality. The word self-determination implies that there is a self of the game, one that is real enough to articulate its own will. In a similar vein, one of the extreme shows that Jimmy and Crake watch as young boys, streamed on a website called nitee-nite.com, shows live-streamed suicides with a prerecorded message from the person taking their own life. Jimmy mentions casually that "the assisted-suicide statistics shot way up after this show got going" (83). Despite the suicide being a choice enacted by a human agent, there is a non-human agent at play shifting the dynamics. The existence of the show actually increases people's desire to kill themselves — the screens and technology influence human decision. This agency again desolidifies the boundaries of our cultural reality, as something constructed begins to construct its creators. This is not a means for supporting technological determinism, but rather as Braidotti argues, for an integrated understanding of "the technologically bio-mediated other. This machinic vitality is not so much about determinism, inbuilt purpose or finality, but rather about becoming and transformation" (91). In this way, we can conceptualize the posthuman self as

composed of a balance of recognizing the intimacy of technological entities within our constructions of subjectivity without losing our own agency as subjective beings.

No novel makes the case quite so strongly for the revision of reality through a posthuman lens than in *No One is Talking About This*. Firstly, Lockman makes real the digital space by giving it a physical dimension through which the protagonist enters. The unnamed woman is astutely aware of her changing perception of her boundaries the more she interacts online. Looking at a photo of a black hole, she wonders, "Was it anything like the portal? Possibly. Both were dimensions where only one thing happened: you revised your understanding of reality" (75). As her time spent online changes her understanding of herself, of time, and of the world around her, the boundaries of what is considered real begin to disintegrate. She writes about "the stream-of-a-consciousness that is not entirely your own[.] One that you participate in, but that also acts upon you" (42). As discussed in earlier sections, we have re-conceptualized the self as extended and interconnected with other selves, especially within the digital sphere. We can take this a step further now, and note that the digital sphere is integral in this unification of many consciousnesses across time and space, and as such plays its own active role in defining, determining, and constructing that consciousness. Using Facebook as an example, Laurie McNeill explains that a collective self is collaboratively produced through the network, "in ways that suggest a 'posthuman collectivity' in which the 'I' [is] transformed into the 'we' of autonomous agents operating together to make a self" (72). McNeill accounts for the interconnectedness of individual actors in a collective self, but is somewhat obscure in defining what is included in the category of autonomous agents. Surely the network itself is part of this collective whole. Braidotti maintains that "all technologies can be said to have a strong bio-

political effect upon the embodied subject they intersect with" (90), helping to co-produce subjectivity.

Speaking of the different communities available online, the unnamed woman writes, "Now we chose them——or believed we did. A person might join a site to look at pictures of her nephew and five years later believe in a flat earth" (24-5), again acknowledging the role of technology in shaping the person, specifically how algorithms determine which people see what sites. The technology, evaluating the person's data, deems certain communities more relevant than others, mediating human actions and responses. The algorithms determine what people see, and how often, partially orienting their thoughts and identities. This creates a paradox for Humanistic logic, in which we might question not just the realness of the digital world but the realness of humankind. If society equates realness with having independent existence, what does it mean that our existence is not independent but rather partially constructed by non-human agents?

As the novel progresses, the woman begins to more explicitly refer to the portal as a subject with agency, as she questions the evolution of humor and communication within the digital age. She asks, "Why were we all writing like this now? Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote" (63). Hayles explains:

> When changes in incorporating practices take place, they are often linked with new technologies that affect how people use their bodies and experience space and time. Formed by technology at the same time that it creates technology, embodiment mediates between technology and discourse by creating new experiential frameworks that serve as boundary markers for the creation of corresponding discursive systems. (205)

The created technology, in this case, Twitter, limits its human interactors to 140 characters thereby producing fragmented pieces of thought and specific ways of communicating with other users so that this becomes the way that the portal itself writes, even influencing the way people speak outside of the digital space, as they bring these specificities into their material locales. Again, the woman switches from attributing agency to the collective of people within the portal to the portal itself. She wonders at the strange realities she exists in, in which "the unmeaning machine would one day produce a phrase like *Europe.Is.A.Fag*. . . . That after all, her father would say, pointing to the unmeaning machine, it was the only one that told the truth. That she might stand there speechless, then turn to her own unmeaning machine for a response, accept the piece of paper it spat happily into her hand" (103). The unmeaning machine becomes its own entity, one with autonomy that instructs its human followers on what to say and how to behave. While this example creeps toward a technologically deterministic stance, the woman tacitly admits to her own agency in collusion with technology by stating that she "accepts" the paper it gives her, reaffirming the co-construction of living beings and technological machines.

Both Atwood's and Lockman's novels make allusions to the Humanist fear of the autonomy and independence of technological devices, with the unnamed woman ranting, "What do you mean you've been spying on me? she thought — hot, blind, unreasoning, on the toilet. What do you mean you've been spying on me, with this thing in my hand that is an eye?" (95), and the eco-religious cult members exclaiming about a phone, "Such a thing can hurt you! It can burn your brain! Don't even look at it: if you can see it, it can see you" (67). The unnamed woman does not explain who the "you" is in her question, leaving it up to the reader to decide if it is a person or the phone itself. Furthermore, she assigns a human body part to the device, alluding to the underlying suspicion that it is much more humanlike (in terms of independence

and cognition) than Humanist definitions allow. The cult members label the phone an It, but again allude to its ability to see, connecting it to a living entity. The unnamed woman asks, "what was it? A brain, a language, a place, a time?" (164-5). It is all of these things which it was never meant to be. Humanist constructions of what is considered real unintentionally create a structure in which technology becomes more real in terms of its independence and autonomy, and humans become less real in terms of their interdependence. Instead of attempting to reconfigure Humanistic values to better fit within the contemporary age, we require a radical shift in our cultural constructions of what is considered real, tangible, and conscious in posthuman terms.

Humanism desperately fears the advancements of technology and our changing definitions of sentience, as they destabilize the construction of humankind as superior, independent, and uniquely possessive of cognition. Posthumanism argues that the predicted future of sentient, self-determining machines is already here, though not under such dire terms. As put forth here, computers are already acting in autonomous ways and exerting their influence over us, but instead of creating a zero-sum ultimatum of us versus them, we must accept that we are co-constructors of one another, necessarily changing how we define ourselves and our reality. Avoiding the temptation to assign a moral verdict to this evolution, we must recognize that it is already in existence in order to adapt. As Hayles contends, "mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain the results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures" (288). The chaotic dynamics and emergent structures of the digital era are too complex to be able to be contained within Humanistic values, instead requiring a reconfiguration of the self that is interconnected and interactive with the physical, digital, and imaginary realities it inhabits.

Conclusion

Despite these works of literature being fictional, all of the examples presented here have a correlating truth in our contemporary world. We have seen an increasing difficulty in defining the self in relation to our expanding global and technological infrastructure, we have experienced shifts in our definitions of time and identity as humanity becomes more interconnected and less limited by physical distance, and we have witnessed a difficulty in enforcing boundaries of constructed classifications of what counts as real insofar as it affects our material being. Envisioning subjectivity as a discrete category that is separate from the body does not encapsulate the embodied experience of consciousness. Envisioning the self as teleological, predestined, and unchanging does not account for the ways that constant contact with the world and its inhabitants shapes our subjectivities. Positing that time is linear and one-dimensional does not capture the complexities of memory, trauma, and technological advancements that complicate and expand a unidirectional chronology. Demarcating what is considered real / artificial and prescribing more significance to the former over the latter does not account for the material roles that non-real entities play in co-constructing our lived experiences.

Fictional works are able to accentuate, distort, and manipulate Humanist values in attempts to articulate the posthuman condition, that incongruity of what we are taught to believe in contrast to what we actually experience. Through focusing on these conflicting actualities of human existence, authors encourage the reader to examine more closely what they take for granted as certain. Felski argues that works of art such as literature "invite us to take up a certain disposition and guide us through a sequence of feelings, thoughts, and attitudes" (x). Summarizing Elizabeth Fowler's arguments, she contends that the pliable space within literature fosters "an experiential relationship to form or language as we are led along certain paths or

invited to take up certain postures (an invitation that we may of course refuse)" (Felski x). In this view, art becomes a way of encouraging a specific orientation, "an aesthetic program of bodily experience that configures thought, perception, and sensation along certain lines." (Felski x). To then integrate this view into a posthuman perspective, we can argue, as Rhetoric Professor Marilyn Cooper puts forth, that "writing is an embodied interaction with other beings and our environments" (qtd. in Boyle 538) that facilitates a symbiotic relationship between author and reader, as the two interact to co-construct subjectivity.

Through these characters, readers are presented with different trajectories in dealing with our changing existence. The unnamed woman is open to reimaginations of selfhood and time, stretching her previous assumptions to allow for new understandings of what it means to exist in the twenty-first century. Sean similarly does not attempt to stay anchored to Humanistic values. Though both the woman and Sean struggle with adapting to new and radical subjectivities, they remain open and malleable to the world in which they inhabit. Jimmy, on the contrary, is resistant to any changes to his preestablished notions of being, and therefore does not allow for the incorporation of these new practices. In each case, the reader travels the journey of the character and comes to similar realizations, resistances, doubts, and curiosities along with the character as they explore these new ways of being.

Hopefully, a case has been made here that the enduring tenets of Humanism are not only insufficient in dictating our lived experiences in a posthuman world, but that they are actively detrimental to our ability to understand and interact with/in our global space. The works of fiction presented show how these incongruencies are becoming more pressing to individuals as they attempt to grapple with existing in these unprecedented times. However, Scholar Neil Badmington emphasizes an important note of warning:

The writing of the posthumanist condition should not seek to fashion 'scriptural tombs'

for humanism, but must, rather, take the form of a critical practice that occurs inside

humanism, consisting not of the wake but the working-through of humanist discourse.

Humanism has happened and continues to happen to 'us' (it is the very 'Thing' that

makes 'us' 'us,' in fact), and the experience — however traumatic, however unpleasant –

– cannot be erased without trace in an instant. (22)

As much as posthumanism fights against the lasting legacy of Humanism, it is only through

understanding and revisiting Humanist discourse that we can begin to re-envision new and

radical constructions of subjectivity especially as it relates to our lived experiences in a

chronologically-destabilized, digitally-mediated world.

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