

# (Non-)Human Education in the Capitalocene



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**Abstract** In this chapter, I deal with four different approaches concerning posthuman education. These four are humans morphing with technology, human and other animals, the posthumanities, and the end of humanity. I connect these four approaches to potential pedagogical concerns and the idea of a democratic world. The Work of Donna Haraway (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, history and crisis of capitalism*. Kairos, 2016a, *Staying with trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University, 2016b), Vinciane Despret (*What would animals say if we asked the right questions?* University of Minnesota, 2016), and Hallam Stevens (*Life out of sequence: A data-driven history of bioinformatics*. University of Chicago, 2013) to stress the importance of the rise of the Capitalocene and posthumanism.

We could simply let the human-animal distinction go or...not insist on maintaining it.

—Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, 2008: 149.

For the first time...associations of humans and nonhumans can finally enter into the collective in a civil way. No one requires them any longer to split in two...separated into objects and subjects.

—Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, 2004: 164.

[1.]the stone (material object) is *worldless*; [2.] the animal is *poor in world*; [3] man is *world-forming*.

—Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 1983/1995: 177.

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## 1 Introduction

What if we started with Calarco's recommendation and did not insist on creating strict demarcations between the animal called human and other animals? What would an education look like if we officially acknowledged and invited other animals into institutions of learning? They are most certainly already there involuntarily partaking in pharmaceutical laboratory experiments and biology lessons, scurrying about the halls and walls, supporting some humans with their intellectual and physical needs, and providing eggs and milk to schools as they roam the premises. What if we assumed human animals were not the only creatures to educate their young? What a wonderful pedagogical experience we would offer our novice learners if we showed them how other species educated their young and how we human animals collaborated and coexisted with other animals.

What if we took Calarco's recommendation one step further and invited Bruno Latour into our conversation and created a parliament of things at all levels of learning? We now would not only have to think how human animals learn alongside non-human animals but how things are also part of the educative process. It would require us to accept that computers, books, chairs, playgrounds, beakers, Bunsen burners, and other things were not inanimate objects placed merely for humans to manipulate and use, but were actual participants in a conversation about truth, learning, knowledge, democracy, life, death, and an infinite other topics. The question is not how other non-human animals and things might influence the education of human animals. Instead it is how open are human animals to acknowledging the limits of humanism that historically placed human animals on a pedestal outside of nature and into its own kingdom where they ruled not as co-inhabitants with other species but as omnipotent and omniscience despots? How poor a world Heidegger formed when he continued the long-standing Western tradition of banishing non-human animals from the world of creation, and turned them into automatons that could not speak, feel, learn, mourn, or think. Human education in the third millennium needs to understand how other animals are world forming as well.

Let's place human animals and non-human animals and newly renamed non-sentient actants into a broader, dire context often referred to as the Capitalocene. Most observers of the current state of earthly conditions refer to this era as the Anthropocene, but I follow Donna Haraway's (2016a, 2016b) lead and refer to it as the Capitalocene. (Haraway [2016a] in her most recent book, *Staying with trouble*, refers to this era also as the Chthulucene.) I do so because to name it the Anthropocene is to continue a dangerous anthropocentric tradition in which human beings are viewed as the only players in the high stakes game of survival. Naming the current era the Anthropocene assumes humans caused the current environmental disaster, which they have, but it also assumes that only humans have the solutions to our earthly problems and only human perspectives matter. To name our era the Anthropocene places human beings at the center, once again, and demonstrates we have learned nothing. The current environmental crisis demonstrates humans are not the center of earthly existence. If anything it is proving we are merely the center of most earthly

problems. The Capitalocene I think better captures that the problems we face are not fatal, unless ignored, but rather a direct result of how humans order the world in their economic, political, and intellectual mindsets. It is capitalism that has engrained in the powerful and affluent that it is good and right to view the world from a perspective of self-interest and that this perspective is rational. Capitalism has rationalized that everything is an economic object, everything can be quantified, and everything, and everyone, is an economic entity in which their value is reduced to a monetary figure. It is this mindset that has reduced the earth to a Heideggerian standing reserve and created a frenzy for every last seam of coal, drop of oil, bead of sweat from the brow of all humans and non-humans, and every second of time in the name of utility and profit. While humans gluttonously feast at the altar of Wall Street and multinational corporations, the overfed dismiss and ignore the extinction of non-human species, the growing number of wars, the rise and reemergence of diseases, and the emaciation of millions as minor setbacks in the accumulation of wealth. What will the precious few who survive eat when sustenance is no longer possible in depleted soil and waters? Can a capitalist eat his stash of gold? No one can run away from the problems created by the Capitalocene because it is not the elephant in the room that no one wishes to address. It is the room. If the Capitalocene with its self-destructive tendencies is not addressed, it is impossible and unnecessary to address any educational issues in the third millennium because there will be no educational institutions and no third millennium.

A route out of the Capitalocene is to rethink Anthropocentrism and recognize as Haraway (2016a) has that humans can only survive if non-humans and non-sentient objects are invited into the conversation to rethink the earth's current trajectory. Haraway is not a fatalist, or a humanist, nor a climate change denier. She is a realist. Haraway recognizes that humans are a part of the problem that has led to environmental disaster, but she recognizes we are also part of the solution. To accept that there is a serious environmental crisis throughout the earth and to attempt to join forces with non-human beings and non-sentient entities is to recognize that a problem exists and we can only survive it by joining together not in the name of profit but life. This is what Haraway (2016a) refers to as *Staying with Trouble*. It is no trouble at all to assume humans are the center of the universe or to assume that capitalism is the only way to live. It is the safe way to (not) think, but there is no future in it. It is, however, a lot of trouble to try to understand how non-human beings think and act in the world and how the current crises are impacting them, to rethink economic orders, or to acknowledge human destructive tendencies often done in the name of "prosperity." Anyone who insists on acknowledging the rights of non-human beings to exist and to undo capitalism is certainly staying with trouble, and trouble will follow for sure, but they are also staying with life, the only life we know and have.

The earth is a sinking ship in its current course, but it is also a lifeboat, perhaps a better word is an ark, with plenty of room in it for everyone, human, other animals, and non-sentient objects. In fact, the ark is bigger than the sinking ship, but it is a risk jumping on board. Changes will have to be made and accepted before anyone boards. It is a captainless ark. There is no Noah on this lifeboat. There cannot be because Noah and the theological tradition from which he is from is very much part of the

anthropocentric problem. Noah is a dominionist, and dominion theology proclaimed the earth was given to humans to do as they saw fit. Well we tried this theology and we know it has created environmental calamity. If we allow the dominionists on board the lifeboat, it will surely sink. Dominionists suffer from a Nietzschean Ressentiment, an envy that rages against life. What follows in the rest of this chapter is my attempt to begin a conversation of how we can rethink education in the third millennium at the end of the Capitalocene. I will refer to this conversation as posthumanism, the posthuman, and the posthumanities, and I will attempt to rethink the liberal arts as a core value in this troubling conversation.

## 2 Educating the Posthuman

When we think of the posthuman there are at least four ways to think about it: humans merging with technology, humans and other non-human animals, the end of humanity in the Capitalocene, and the role of the humanities in a posthumanities world. There are other viable ways of thinking about life after the Capitalocene such as Object-Oriented Ontology, New Materialism, and Affect Theory. Each provides a viable and vibrant understanding of our current state of affairs, but I will focus on the posthuman.

First, the posthuman as a merging with technology. There is a revolution brewing within the human body and its origins are external. Traditionally, technology as it relates to human bodies is seen as an object alien to the human subject, as an intrusion into a human body, or a human creation used for human needs. The word posthuman implies none of these assumptions. The posthuman is a morphing, melding, and molding of the human body with some form of permanent technology. Technology is not a violent intrusion into the human body; instead, it is a supplement, appendage, prosthetic, or an extension to the human body, thereby making it at the very least different and most likely better than a natural human body. It is in two areas where the posthuman is emerging: bioinformatics and data generation. It is these two areas that have the most dramatic pedagogical implications.

The rise of bioinformatics and data I think are the most impactful on the posthuman condition because they fundamentally reshape life. With bioinformatics, we are discussing the reshaping of the human or non-human body. For instance, it is becoming common practice as Hallam Stevens (2013) in his important work points out to take the natural body and alter it by removing a specific DNA strand and replace it with a presumably better strand. This process inevitably requires a non-human DNA sequence be joined with a human sequence making the human recipient something more than human. What we are experiencing at this moment is the creation of a different Homo Sapiens group that is potentially physically and intellectually superior to any natural human group. How will we educate a natural human being with presumed lesser physical and intellectual capabilities? Will we begin the process of redefining who is disabled and developmentally behind the new human species? Let us never forget too that posthuman history will not be much more different than

human history, maybe just more intensified. There is no reason to believe that the discriminatory tendencies we experience throughout the world today will somehow disappear with the advent of the posthuman. The well-connected, wealthy, privileged, and politically powerful will benefit from these biotechnological developments disproportionately more than less fortunate groups. How we address these concerns now will shape educational experiences to come.

In regard to data, I cannot overstate the importance of educational scholars to come to grips with the reality of data collection. It is literally everywhere and everything. Data defines who we are and what we might become. The bitterly ironic part of the data revolution in the posthuman era is that more data is being collected on students than ever before, but teachers and students are inadequately prepared to interpret this data. This means data only reifies the status quo and benefits the wealthy and powerful, thereby jeopardizing any hope for a future democratic world to come. The data-driven posthuman future only points to an oligarchical world. In 1979 Jean Jacques Lyotard (1979/1984) published his famous report on French-speaking Canadian universities. This short report is remembered for ushering in a two-decade long debate over what postmodernism might be and coining the phrase an “incredulity toward meta-narratives.” What is often forgotten about this report is he asked fundamentally important questions that we still have not addressed. Lyotard noted that a key to our future world will be who controls the data banks. So far we know a partial answer to his key question. Powerful nation-states, Facebook, Amazon, and other powerful multinational corporations control the data banks and humans do not. This disproportionate control of data by these entities is a direct assault on democratic rights and needs to be addressed immediately before democratic ideals fade into the past. The key pedagogical question regarding data is how do educational institutions help young people to access and control data? This means we need to teach young people how to interpret data and create meaning from the data. I have always been influenced by J. Hillis Miller (1992: 256) in this matter. To interpret is a fundamental act of life. To be alive is to interpret sensory data that educates our bodies every moment of our existence, this holds for human and non-human bodies. To not interpret is to be “safe, but dead. Not to interpret is death.” We have created throughout most of the world safe but intellectually dead students. This cannot hold if we wish to create a viable, sustainable planet in a post-Capitalocene era.

Second, the posthuman is the end of anthropocentrism, and its educational arm, humanism. Peter Sloterdijk (2009) suggests that humanism in its Western traditional form is a series of love letters. The catch is in order to be addressed by these love letters one must be literate and not everyone was deemed literate in the human sense of the term. The initial letter writers were Greek and anyone not Greek could not receive a letter, then the Romans came along and only citizens of the empire could receive a letter, then the church emerged and only Christians could receive one, then the nation-state and only citizens could receive a love letter. Now we enter a new era in which the nation-state is being usurped by multinational corporations and only consumers can receive a letter. We have never experienced a time in which all humans were recognized as worthy of receiving a love letter. A posthuman education has to do two things regarding who is worthy of a love letter. The first thing we need to do

is to make sure everyone is recognized as having a universal right to an education from pre-kindergarten up to and through graduate school.

The second thing we need to do is to recognize that all living sentient beings are worthy of receiving a love letter, we humans just have to learn how to communicate with these beings in order to speak their language. We need to invent a radical notion of literacy that includes all sentient beings. To begin this redefining of literacy and education, we need to acknowledge the limits of anthropocentrism and humanism. As Western humanists began to write love letters to their fellow humanists, they also developed a knack to inflate their abilities as unique. These humanists rationalized that only humans were sanctioned by god to reign over the earth. They rationalized that only humans suffer, but other animals know pain and anguish too. Humanists also proposed that only humans have language. This has always been the key foundational pillar to anthropocentrism. Yet ethologists and animal psychologists like Vinciane Despret (2016) point out all animals communicate in some form. They just do not communicate like humans do. Humanists argued that only humans suffered from stress and anxiety, again animal psychologists point out that other animals suffer from psychological maladies too such as depression. Art, now there is something only humans can do. Right? No, other animals create art. The only question that really remains is not what is it that humans can do that other animals cannot do. It is, rather, why is it that humans think they have to be superior to other animals? The pedagogical challenge for posthumanists is how can we create an educational environment in which humans learn their uniqueness without assuming it makes them superior.

Third the posthuman is the end of humanity but not necessarily in the literal sense. Eugene Thacker (2010: xv) noted in his book *After Life* that posthumanism is a “challenge of thinking a concept of life that is foundationally, and not incidentally, a non-human or unhuman concept of life.” This basic statement unmoors the assumption that humans are the center and purpose of life. What would happen to the world if humans were not the center of all life? Some would say the world would become healthier for other species. This though is often a cynical statement against life in the name of life. More importantly, those who think the earth would be better off with no human species at all demonstrate they are no different from the apocalyptic fundamentalists of religion or the genocidal, megalomaniacal, and exploiting capitalists. Thacker is not raising an apocalyptic point. He instead is asking for a rethinking of what life means and who/what counts as life. This becomes an important pedagogical question we should pose to the young. If humans are not the center of life or the definition of what is “valued” life then how can we, as humans, live alongside and with other species without assuming our lives are more important? Who then decides who/what should live and who/what should die? This is a question that should infiltrate every curriculum from the pre-kindergarten level to post-secondary education. This question would change the way we think economically, theologically, historically, culturally, and philosophically, and, therefore, it should change what and how we teach our young. Ironically, if we as humans begin to ask these questions there are plenty of groups of humans (women, religious minorities, LGBTQTI individuals, the poor, ethnic minorities) who might for the first time count

as human life worthy of life. In other words, it is not hyperbolic to suggest that all human life may finally be cherished when all non-human life is finally honored. But this should not be the reason humans begin to value all non-human life. If complete human equality becomes our motivation to value all life, then it becomes just another form of anthropocentrism.

Finally, there are the posthumanities. Like the other forms of posthumanism discussed here, the posthumanities grow out of a crisis. As humanism rose to prominence as the major way Western empires educated their elites, including subjugated elites, so did the humanities. When monarchical empires were replaced by nation-states, the humanities remained a bulwark of what it meant to be “civilized” and a “citizen.” In the United States for instance early curriculum inventors did not reject the idea of literature as a necessary curriculum subject in order to create United States citizens. It was British literature that was rejected. The humanities remained central to the task of inventing a nation and it took at least 75 years after independence for a thing called USA literature to emerge.

It also holds that dismantling a nation is faster. With the decline of nation-states and the rise of multinational corporations as the dominant form of human organization, the humanities are in crisis. Literature is no longer needed to invent citizens, consumers are only needed and utility is the measure of value not literacy. History is no longer needed, the past is not profitable nor profit making. Philosophy is no longer needed, who needs someone asking pesky questions when the only question that needs to be asked is “what are you doing today in order to make money?” As Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth (2015) point out the humanities are still viable disciplines of study on university campuses. The old arguments supporting them though no longer seem to hold. Now return of investments and future employment seem to dominate rationales. This shift in “value” has created a crisis for the humanities and as a result a posthumanities has emerged. Now instead of national literatures there is comparative literature that looks not only at print material but scientific documents and technological innovations. Instead of Eurocentric histories, there are now postcolonial histories as well. Instead of just neoclassical economics, there is also feminist economics and the rhetoric of economics. There are now studies movements that look at identity formations rather than at nation-state formations. These curriculum developments saved the humanities from the cold hands of utility. It is time for primary and secondary schools to see the value of the posthumanities and reshape their curriculum accordingly.

### 3 The Necessity for a New Liberal Arts

I have spent the bulk of this chapter arguing that the liberal arts (mathematics, rhetoric, poetry, literature, history, philosophy, and economics) are anthropocentric and Eurocentric, and there is a need to rethink everything including the liberal arts in light of an environmental crisis I refer to as the Capitalocene. Now I want to suggest the liberal arts is not by its nature anthropocentric or Eurocentric. Its history is, but its future need

not be. A non-anthropocentric and Eurocentric liberal arts is already taking shape and this new shape demonstrates how the liberal arts approaches posthumanism. It is historians (Pearson, 2012), philosophers (Calarco, 2008; Derrida, 2002), and writers (Arimah, 2017; Coetzee, 2003; Ghosh, 2016; Sinha, 2007) who are leading the way in helping us to understand the impact the Capitalocene has on the world and how humans can rethink their role in shaping the world. Reclaiming the liberal arts from a utility logic will require us to rethink our curriculum but more importantly rethink why we adopt certain topics of discussion, discovery, exploration, and research over other topics. We have miseducated our young to think an education at any level is earned because it will lead to better earnings. This is literally a dead-end for all of the world. We should not take history, literature, poetry, philosophy, mathematics, or sciences classes at any educational level because it will lead to more material success but because these topics will help us see a future in which all species can survive and thrive. If humans are truly unique as humanists have argued for centuries, then we humans better find ways to think differently before the world is destroyed. If we cannot see this as human beings, then we are not unique at all no matter what any humanist might think. We are merely extinct.

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