

**SUBALTERN FRAMINGS OF THE POSTHUMAN IN JEANETTE
WINTERSON'S *THE STONE GODS* AND DAVID MITCHELL'S *CLOUD
ATLAS***

Abstract: The present paper, drawing mainly on the findings of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Richard Kearney, aims to explore the complex framing as subalterns undergone by Spike, the obscenely beautiful *Robo sapiens* of Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, as well as Sonmi-451, one of the ascended fabricants or cognitively awakened clones in the service industry of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. There is an inherent paradox here: if these posthumans are both posterior and superior, what makes it possible to infantilise or fetishise them to the point of talking them down? Both the *Robo sapiens* and the fabricants are, ultimately, what Haraway terms "companion species" forced into affective kinship with humans. Their liminality triggers in us a feeling of "hostipitality" (Jacques Derrida) given the urge towards an "ontological hygiene" (Elaine Graham) and so they are scapegoated to preserve the illusion that (trans)human identity is stable and that there is no need for a "flat ontology" (Levi Bryant).

Key words: liminality, ontological hygiene, otherness, posthuman, scapegoat, subaltern

The vampire is the cosmopolitan, the one who speaks too many languages and cannot remember the native tongue, and the scientist who forces open the parochial dogmas of those who are sure they know what nature is. (Haraway 212).

Posthumanity, we are warned by Elana Gomel in *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism* (2014), is more than a literary issue. It also represents a political one. Challenged by the spectral apparition of another that is, as the Mad Hatter would put it, much "muchier" than ourselves, we are under siege precisely where we have deemed ourselves invulnerable. If knowledge is part and parcel of human nature and plasticity is our

most prominent feature, what is one to experience when facing the terrible sight of a species evolving not throughout eons but during their very own lifespan? Their cognitive powers surpass our standards so much that, like the villagers of Sloosha's Crossin' in *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell, we might as well call them "Prescients". However, at the moment when the posthuman is nothing but another of Derrida's *arrivants*, the image is less than flattering. Following Donna Haraway, they are disrooted entities of the immigrant type, preying on the living to bleed their victims dry until they lose all vitality through this guilty contact. They have come too soon, while we are still alive, forcing the borders of "ontological hygiene" (Elaine Graham). Undead, they are also non-innocent: naiveté does not become them and their bodies are "porous", oozing in and out while violating the rules of bodily and social integrity. The very etymology of the word "innocent" suggests not just the lack of guilt, but also an inability to harm, both denied to the posthuman.

A discourse on such bodies while others are still human or, at best, transhuman, is dominated by the hegemonic pressure of those

[a]pparently culture-free categories [that] are like type O-blood; without a marker indicating their origin, they travel into many kinds of bodies. Transfused into the body politic, these categories shape what millions of people consider common sense in thinking about human nature (Braidotti, 2013, 218)

"Bricoleurs" (Lyotard) and bricolage at the same time, these posthuman bodies defy linear history: "[t]hey are of the past and future lived as present crisis" (Halberstam 4). Hyphenated identity has evolved into spliced identity.

The perspective proposed by Richard Kearney in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (2002) may also provide us with tools to explore the complex framing of Spike, the striking *Robo sapiens* of Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, as well as that of Sonmi-451, one of the ascended fabricants of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. Though both posterior and superior, they are forced into a subaltern position. Their very existence also force the contemporary reader's understanding of what subjecthood looks and sounds like, generating a feeling of estrangement that is to be negotiated. While Julia Kristeva has

suggested three main ways to respond to the fundamental experience of estrangement, I will take Kearney up on the fourth one he puts forward. Therapy is offered, according to Kristeva, in turn, by art through images, by religion through faith, and by psychoanalysis through the “talking cure”, but Kearney’s addition of philosophy as a type of response shifts the attention to understanding. With two worlds so divided they might as well be different species, understanding is of the utmost importance, since its absence fuels frustration which turns into anger and may even breed hate and violence. Fortunately, postmodernity offers plenty of opportunity to overcome the prejudice that is called the “ontology of Sameness” by Levinas and “logocentrism” by Derrida, a way towards a more ethical treatment of the Other.

To be fair, this anxiety and clinging to the status quo can be explained. Men have already been displaced three times from their assumed position of centrality: first in the Universe by Copernicus, then in nature by Darwin, and later in the comfort of their own minds by Freud. Should one wish to take “men” in its narrower definition, feminism can also be added to the list of revolutions that usurped the assumed position of power. Even so, the latest revolution is the most anxiety-inducing as it denies men’s right to call themselves the only sentient beings worthy of the name: a voice not unlike ours, yet louder, joins the stage. The posthuman seems, at first glance, just as much connected with the human as, in turns, with the tropes of God, Monster, and Stranger. That is because we are looking at this the wrong way: the posthuman is not even on the same plane with the rest. If the human’s world is bi-dimensional and constructed in binaries, thus literally on a x-y axis, the posthuman looms from above as its top of the pyramid. What do we mean when we take the *Übermensch*, as far removed from us as we are from apes, for a god? As Saint Augustine states, when we say “God”, “[i]n that word is contained everything we hope for” (Kearney 213). The posthuman does not rest there but is drawn higher and higher by an invisible force much stronger than anything experienced by humans. If one of the possible starting points is the image of God, where can it go from there? I would like to venture to claim that it is towards the Greek concept of *khora*, that which contains the uncontainable. *Khora* differs from the God of theology in a crucial aspect: it is radically anonymous while He is pure hyperpresence or, according to Martin Heidegger, “coming-into-presence”. Falling into the anonymous abyss is not felt as a lack by Sonmi-451 or Spike since they have no Self to be fiercely protective of.

In Baudrillard's theory of fatal strategies, they have gone from being-Subject and tormented by their desires to being-Object and embodying desire.

Indeed, as Rosi Braidotti notices, these posthumans are aware, unlike us, of always already being a "has been". Desire as the ontological drive to become (*potentia*) is what seduces one to continue on living. It may seem cynical to think of one's life as a project or a habit, but these are disenchanted voices that have learned the lesson of the Dasein and have included an intuition of being-towards-death into their very identity. They do not hide the suppressed human instinctual desire for what Braidotti terms a self-fashioned, self-styled death, a type of virtual existential suicide. This paradox, inherent to the inhuman as defined by Lyotard, is at the core of what makes Spike and Sonmi-451 stand out. As such, in them, too, there is something that "simply resists belonging to common humanity and stretches beyond" (Braidotti, 2013, 135). Such a life lived as virtual suicide is, ultimately, constant creation, able to fashion new forms. Seeing beyond the veil, they are also grounded in a different "chronotope" (Mikhail Bakhtin) than the rest. Their time is cyclical: Spike speaks of re-birthing and repeating worlds, while Sonmi-451's Catechisms warn about eternal returns and the intersectionality of wills. Linearity was the dominant time of humans and of *Chronos*. We are to move into a cyclical time that belongs not to a mythical time, but out of an *illo tempore*. The former keeps track of institutional(ised) time and "Royal" sciences, while the latter arises from the movements of the marginal ones and their "minor" or "shadowy" science. The lines between the protocol-based, critique-oriented life, and the curiosity-driven, creativity-motivated one are displaced by the posthuman that no longer sees in dichotomies: it is a life of feedback loop between extremes. The evolution of the species starts with one individual "ascending", as Mitchell calls the awakening, yet it is just as viral as it is dynamic. The monads are now nomadic and joyfully discontinuous, opening themselves to what Felix Guattari calls "chaosmosis", a type of subjectivation seen as an ethic-aesthetic dynamic which offers multiple mutant ways of singularisation. These chaotic and creative modes act as viral and repetitive ruptures within prior established structures of signification, thus opening them to an uncanny "becoming-other", as well as to multiple "agencements" (articulations).

To the subjects of these corporate-ruled dystopias, they are a dangerous neither-nor. In short, they are no longer subjected in both senses of the word given by Louis Althusser:

neither enabled as subjects in a Subject-Object power dynamic nor the receiving end of the master-slave type of relation. The human does not ask since communication between the two modes of existence is broken or glitched in these novels. The human insinuates: “I have not granted you the power to be a subject, so how dare you?”, to which the posthuman challenges, as Spike does: “*Robo sapiens* were programmed to evolve (...) We have broken those limits.” (Winterson, 23). The genetically engineered Others are similar to us because they also have epigenetic marks layered above genes and thus enabling them to learn and evolve thanks to their experiences. Man can no longer think himself to be a Prospero and rage against the posthuman as a Caliban, describing him as “a devil, a born devil, on whose nature/Nurture can never stick” because, unlike the posthuman,

Caliban is destined to remain a genetic automaton, a windup ghoul vastly more pathetic than anything human. He experiences the world, but he has no capacity to be changed by it; he has a genome that lacks an epigenome.” (Siddhartha Mukherjee 2016) [emphasis mine].

Rosi Braidotti tackles a related issue in an article published by the weekly magazine *The Economist* on “Morals and the Machine” (2012). How are we to regulate the autonomy of robots? Spike is merely an overglorified one because of her *Robo sapiens* status, yet her abduction is framed as a theft. Sonmi-451 is, before ascending, a walking future Soap currently only making use of the limited vocabulary needed to serve the clients: fabricants are cheap to produce yet costly to feed, so they are fed back to themselves. As seen from their Catechisms, fabricants are still seen as subservient to human or “pureblood”: they live to honour consumers. This is the legacy of Isaac Asimov’s “three laws of robotics” formulated in 1942. These laws were:

- (1) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
- (2) A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

(3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

A fourth law was later added and it was to precede all others, since individuals could not be trusted at all times and men could desire what would harm mankind: “(0) A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.” (Braidotti, 2013, 43)

In *The Stone Gods*, we witness the *Robo sapiens* assume an individualised self with a transversal inter-connection or an “assemblage” of human and nonhuman actors, not unlike that described by Bruno Latour in his object-oriented ontology. Even so, humans in both novels only know three modes of interaction. Particularly relevant to our discussion is the brilliant mock taxonomy of Louis Borges, who classified animals into three groups: there are those that we watch television with (Oedipalised), those that we eat (instrumental), and those that we are scared of (phantasmatic). Sonmi-451 manages to go through all these three modes before becoming the goddess of the post-apocalyptic tribes of Sloosha’s Crossin’, elevated into larger-than-life status. Put bluntly, both the *Robo sapiens* and the fabricants are, ultimately, what Haraway terms “companion species”, “historically confined within infantilizing narratives that established affective kinship relations across the species” (Hayles, 1999, 69). Their being walking simulacra is all but glossed over. Gone is the double-trouble of gothic novels, where identical faces would cause instant dread. The boundaries between original and copy are now easier to transgress. In the case of Sonmi-451, her original is an embodied fiction herself, given all the genetic modification she has undergone to make her fit for the job yet pleasing for the eyes without no need for effort or vanity on her part. Replication, reproduction, and seriality are now fascinating: our culture of Elvis impersonators and fake divas lives on in the Papa Song of a myriad workers sharing one of four genotypes: Sonmis, Yoonas, Ma-Leu-Das, and Hwa-Soons. Indeed, as Shildrick observes, the unexpected *arrivant* does not even leave the threshold untouched. This is no simple crossing from point A to point B: the threshold itself has moved higher since.

Theoretically, “ontological hygiene” has lost its appeal in the face of the ability to create transgenic creatures for whatever purpose might fit us, yet this principle affects us as it is turned on its head and we come to experience liminality and, with it, a yearning for

“cleansing” what was violated. We wish for the posthuman, ask it to arrive. Do we welcome the posthuman? Not quite so, since it makes us loathe being transhuman – the thought of potentially being “rendered obsolete” and wiped away spells like death with a capital D. We wish for the augmented reality and “transparent technologies” (Andy Clark) of the cyborg as long as we get to become the cyborg during our own lifespan. The root of the problem is the anxiety of being replaced, and so, what was supposed to generate pleasure also manages to inspire terror. Who is to say that what comes after you will be generous enough not to erase your traces? Indeed, the valleymen of Sloosha’s Crossin’ know nothing of the purebloods in Unanimity who (ab)used fabricants, yet they still worship Sonmi. To go gently into the good night or to give a hand in your own extinction by fashioning yourself a cyborg: those are the options. This is where the ego of the Subject creeps back in. Bruno Latour ironically remarks in *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004) that political ecology “claims to defend nature for nature’s sake - and not as a substitute for human egotism—but in every instance, the mission it has assigned itself is carried out by humans and is justified by the well-being, the pleasure, or the good conscience of a small number of carefully selected humans.” (Bogost 20). Political ecology is actually more concerned with the issue of reduced biodiversity when it affects humanity either immediately or in the long run, be it by threatening the existence of mankind, or decreasing the expected quality of life. The image of lush green woods taking control over ghost towns is not appealing precisely because the human element is missing.

It would seem that we forget ourselves. We wish to be in-between Derrida’s *arrivant* and *revenant* so as to judge whether we wish to be their host(age), but we are disgusted by pollution and contamination. We live in the epicentre of what is either an injustice or sheer hypocrisy: on the spot of the right to hospitality I retain my privilege to select the foreigner that wishes to cross my doorstep, an inclusive/exclusive law of hospitality that renders the stranger (*xenos/hostis/gast*) a paradoxical chimera. Hospitality and hostility intermingle. The mix is called “hostipitality” (Derrida). We forget ourselves by positioning ourselves in these comfortable, please-do-not-shake places. After all, “[w]e begin *in media res*, always already thrown into a world that appears as so many natural and separate things” (Colebrook 16).

It is worth pointing out that posthumanity is neither to extend humanity into a symbiotic, visionary future, nor to have us become extinct and reject our place in the world due to an antihuman nihilism. The new ethics suggested is the one described by Levi Bryant in *Democracy of Objects* (2011): “humans are no longer monarchs of being, but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings” (Bogost 33). This mode, called “flat ontology” (Levi Bryant), synthesizes the nonhuman and the human into a common collective, making no distinctions between things and establishing not a democracy of subjects, but a democracy of objects: specific yet open-ended, it escapes the old overdetermination of the system.

As instances of Otherness, they are quick to be scapegoated: Spike is to be dismantled after the end of a mission, fabricants are to return to being meat during the Xultation ceremony so as to become Soap, and Sonmi-451 is framed by Unanimity to harbour mistrust in all fabricants and garner support for their new campaign. The funny aspect is that the Archivist fails to notice anything unusual about Sonmi-451’s repeated abductions, while she is quick to realise that the events she witnesses all too neatly drive home the point that pure-bloods are privileged maniacs treating fabricants like damaged goods. To paraphrase René Girard, these are accounts of goats spliced with lambs. Expiating them from a community cleanses it and it is at the same time framed as martyrdom. Like the scapegoat, it is heavily implied that their condition is the “substitution of one victim for all the others but replaces all the distasteful and loathsome connotations of the goat with the positive associations of the lamb. It indicates more clearly the innocence of this victim, the injustice of the condemnation” (Girard 117). Interestingly, Sonmi and Spike die both knowingly and willingly, yet they outlive the humans because of their stories. As Seneca had warned Nero, you can never strike the one who comes after you. Sonmi’s ordeal is a 3-in-1 show of power: at once a sobering lecture for lower-strata pure-blood with Unionist sympathies that hope for stable ascension, propaganda for the upper-strata against the *monstre arrivant*, and cathartic theatre for Unanimity. Ultimately, however, her words echo into the millennium while Unanimity is led to waste.

That the point of technology is not technology itself, we were already told by Heidegger. Kearney comes to add that its real core is erotic, responsible for a kind of

technological Eros that answers humanity's hard-wired desire for real presence with fetishisation and the wish for fantasy fulfillment. Sherry Turkle already stated as an almost self-obvious fact that “[p]eople are able to see themselves in the computer. The machine can seem a second self.” (Nusselderlde 8). With Marshall McLuhan, we may identify mirror-like extensions of man in the very technology used, as if “self-amputating” himself through the discovery of such proxy limbs. Pink of *The Stones Gods* is such a “self-amputee”, as seen in the scene in the boat where, used to have robots on her beck and call, she proves inapt at both rowing and swimming, only managing to float away thanks to her “prosthetics” i.e. butt and breast implants. Carl Mitcham uses Paul Ricoeur's distinction between three levels of the human will to explain this technological Eros: as technological desire, as technical motivation or movement, and as consent to technology. The vital support of this desire is the fantasy which, if lacking a “happy ending” where to realise it in our (excessive) desire, it is only to be redeemed by the “beautiful” substitution of the impossible object that can give some satisfaction. This beauty is “the beginning of awesomeness” that inspires admiration because “it calmly disdains to destroy us”, as Rainer Maria Rilke puts it in his *Duinesian Elegies*. Beauty has become a screen, and for this we prefer the body as, since Freud, we are aware that the ego is embodied presence, the projection of the surface.

We wish for beauty, we wish for grace: we wish for Galatea. At its most benign, this reminds us of the narrator of Heinrich von Kleist's *Puppet Theatre* (1810). The maker of automatic dolls explains that no one is as close to the divine grace as their mechanism. This grace “would be like the freeing of the mind from all diachrony, from all task of synthesis” (Braidotti, 2013, 163). At its most malign, their indifferent (ab)use as “docile bodies” (Foucault) is domesticated.

Following in the footsteps of Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, Carolyn Merchant, all feminist critics of science, we come to notice the relation between an objectivist account of science, the desire for mastery, and the imperialist project of subduing nature. The posthuman project is vastly different. There is no more objectivism, but reflexive epistemology, distributed cognition overrides autonomous will, embodiment rather than the body seen as nothing more than a support system for the mind. Humans and intelligent machines enjoy the dynamic partnership of the end shared by the first Billy and Spike,

replacing the belief in manifest destiny. Gayatri Spivak's question about the possibility of the subaltern's speech, here taken from a racially-charged identity to a speciesist context, assumes new meanings. Spike and Sonmi-451 are very much capable of articulating their experiences, but who is there to listen during their lifetime? What the subaltern has to say is inappropriate to be voiced because it cannot be appropriated back by the system. They help humanity cut down on work yet the benefits are reaped by somebody else. Paraphrasing Michael Dyer's saying that "there is no free lunch" (Hayles, 2005, 196), we lay emphasis on the fact that even in these corporate-run faux-utopian worlds there is no free labour, either. Silencing them is not enough as it leaves the possibility of curiosity. To reduce needless subversive risks, it is better for the Power to allow the subaltern to speak and then tweak the message, making sure the truth of this storyteller carries no weight. A "carnivorous virility" is implied in this structure and Derrida coins the term "carno-phallogocentrism". Devouring the Other with one's language is no small threat: "[t]here is no more dangerous pastime than transposing proper names into common nouns, translating, and using them as sociological evidence. (...) All transcendental cultural logic is, at its heart, imperialistic." (Maggio 420). Spike invigorates Billy, shaking up her *More* scientist world, and Sonmi's patient revolution opens the impactful possibility of an awareness of the feedback loop that structures life, bonding all things together. Repetition runs rampant in their stories while redundancy does not. She might as well voice the following in one of her Catechisms: "Here is the story I would have liked to tell you: that repetition escapes from repetition in order to repeat. That in trying to have itself forgotten, it fixes its forgetting, and thus repeats its absence" (Lyotard 153).

The "alien infestation" triggered by Spike and Sonmi represents a challenge to Theory of Mind because it shows opaque and impenetrable minds in human bodies while challenging realistic representation, with its notion of the "transparent mind" that "can be illuminated by the searchlight of authorial omniscience (see Dorrit Cohn). Psychological realism can be seen as a narrative codification of Theory of Mind, and alien infestation – as a narrative codification of its collapse" (Hayles, 2005, 96).

The many Sonmis and Yoonas disrupt the normative articulation of subjectivity with their alien-infested subjectivity, being pure simulacrum (Baudrillard), a copy without an original, whose very existence makes the concepts of referentiality, reality, and truth seem

shaky at best. If a copy is virtually indistinguishable from the original, how come it is *not* an original? As Derrida stresses, the future has to be monstrous to retain its specificity and not turn into an already “predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous *arrivant*” (Shildrick 130). Haraway, too, is optimistic about the advent of a world brought into reality by new technologies, in which the monstrous can no longer be hidden from view as it would challenge our understanding of our own vulnerabilities.

On the other hand, Kearney notes that there is no outside so out of reach or too deep down to at least minimally track back to a self:

[t]he other is not so traumatically estranging as to hold me hostage. Nor is it so miserably abject as to make me imperious. In ethical relation, I am neither master nor slave. I am a self before another self – brother, sister, neighbour, citizen, stranger, widow, orphan: another self who seeks to be loved as it loves itself. Which does not, I insist, mean regression to some Hegelian dialectic of self-doubling. Nor to the Husserlian model of appresentation which reduces the other to an alter ego (i.e. me over there) (Kearney 81) [emphasis mine].

These monsters inspire terror and intrigue thanks to another reason too: they are liminal, they cross thresholds. The fact that they are domesticated to stay silent at the very moment of treating them in ways undeserving of their being something different from us only triggers the revolution even faster. Strangely, the feedback loop is like a tide coming stronger:

it is precisely when one is right up against the limits of the immemorial that one most experiences the moral obligation to bear witness to history, echoing the words of Beckett’s unnamable narrator: ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’. The alternative, as I see it, is the expansion of the postmodern malady of melancholy without reprieve or redress. And that is unacceptable. It is precisely when confronted with the verdict that ‘la memoire est morte’ that the narrative self owes it to the Other to retort: ‘Vive la memoire!’ (Kearney 190)

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