“Part-Object”: Response to MLA 15 Panel on Aging and the Posthuman

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“…we should die of that roar that lies on the other side of silence.” George Eliot quoted in Rose Braidotti

I am delighted to offer a brief critical response to three projects that take up the conjunction between aging/age studies and posthumanism. Dr. Cynthia Port, editor of the recently launched, AgeCultureHumanities: an Interdisciplinary Journal, introduced the idea of a conversation between these two very current fields of inquiry. After reading through the drafts of
the presentations for this panel, I am convinced that age studies has much to contribute to
current posthumanist discourse, the area of this encounter where I am most conversant.

I begin with a highly personal and affective response to Kathleen Venema’s contribution,
"Posthuman Alzheimer’s: Loving the Virtual (M)Other." There is certainly a risk in claiming the
personal as a space to begin a conversation with age studies, a field so significant currently in
terms of its critical interventions and yet emerging at a cultural moment overwhelmed by fear of
the personal, economic and affective stakes of aging, and thus potentially evoking a tendency
toward intimate reactions. But as my experience serves as a kind of embodied performance of
queer dislocation (queered re-scaling) — a theoretical register briefly introduced in Venema’s
piece — I will risk it.

Venema’s paper opens with a series of reflections on letters exchanged between her and
her mother. The letter swap begins early in Venema’s life, during her move away from home to
do work in Nairobi, and continues well into later adulthood. As Venema says, this “epistolary
pact” with her m(other), a framing borrowed from Janet Altman’s work on epistolary form,
becomes a technics through which Venema comes to terms with the intimately affecting,
disparate, lost-found, dislocated, multiple, and dismantled identities of her m(other) (both mother
and Other). Venema traces these conversations from her youth up until her mother’s diagnosis
and subsequent affliction with Alzheimer’s.

Having lost my mother to Alzheimer’s just last year, I found Venema’s discussion
personally affecting; but not in the context of remembrance or mourning. At one point in her
theorizing of the “archive” that has been created of her exchanges with her mother (a project
that includes recorded interviews with her mother, something both mother and daughter agreed
to as the disease progressed), Venema wonders if something like Judith Halberstam’s concept of
“queer time” might not apply to the “non-normative temporalities of dementia’s distributed subjectivities,” a multiplicity of subjectivities that the *technics* of the letters and recorded interviews make evident in a way that an emotional or affective return to the memory of someone’s represented consciousness or “humanness” might not allow. That is, Venema recovers an access to something well in excess of “loss” of her mother’s identity or consciousness, uncovering instead a temporal and spatial dislocation of what Rose Braidotti has referred to as the “former Man’ of classical humanism” (quoted in Venema). This “Othering” of the mother in this context has the power — at an affective level — to ask what it might mean, beyond explicit cognitive commitments to a renewed sense of the posthumanist object world or a transversal ecology of a decentered humanism, to be becoming the human “no longer the human of humanism” (Venema).

Indeed my “personal” response to reading Venom’s presentation was on the order of a queered rescaling of my locatedness as a reader. Venema’s recorded conversations with her mother allowed me to reenter my own (albeit, non-textually recalled) memories of exchanges with my mother, many of which in my context took the form of stories related by my mother — some quite elaborate. In my mother’s “interviews” (informal, though at times highly aware that there was a second order discourse about her Alzheimer’s taking place) objects often were the principal focus. In one story, she relates how a pair of shoes goes missing during the course of a car ride with a nasty aunt. Here is an excerpt from a short blog post I wrote right after that storytelling event in 2006:

Some Alzheimer’s sufferers actually develop more acute memories of the distant past, losing instead their grasp on the moment-to-moment events that constitute
short-term memory. I am persuaded that the “shoe” in that story that came back again and again that day was its own kind of pulse, an encapsulation of an actual childhood memory, but also a kind of metonymy of things lost that leave traces, that refract the future by virtue of having gone missing. The shoe emerges as a kind of “dropped step” that, while signifying loss, also insists on finding its way back into the forward amble of narrative as its own memory. I can picture my family member as a small child curled in the back of an old Packard, realizing twenty minutes out on I-40 that the shoes bounced out, fearfully maintaining the illusion of continuity, knowing that the story won’t change until the car stops and the discovery is made that something has been lost. I can think of an old black, creased pair abandoned next to a trashcan in a parking lot of ice-worn asphalt. A very sad object, indeed.

Or, perhaps she crawled in the back of that car and subtly kicked those shoes from the side door, knowing all the way back to Pittsburg that Grumpy, Arrogant Aunt was remembering this trip very differently from how it actually happened. What power.


If I had been relating this event during analysis, it might be pointed out that the object here is not just an object that queers the narrative, temporally and spatially, but also is itself a stand in for what Melanie Klein, and later Deleuze, would call the “part-object” (in their work on the child). The “part-object” is a dynamic form of metonymy, where the subject’s consciousness attempts to make a partial object a representation of a more coherent whole. Yet, for Deleuze, this figure also comes to represent the figure of “the child” itself in humanist metaphysics: the
child becomes a metaphysical surrogate for the “whole” teleology of humanism (its logics, its rational unfolding, its sense of control over reproduction writ large). Deleuze insists that we can encounter a productive desiring dislocation of as much by returning to the performative of the metonymy itself, by engaging the active metonymizing of the part-object.

Indeed, this was my experience of reading Venema’s discussion of her “archive”: I was uncomfortably tangled in the “hyphen” of now-then, mother-daughter, present-past-future, critique-affect, moving across temporalities and (dis)locations, and caught in the act of wanting metaphysical closure, of wanting these movements to come to rest in a stable narrative, critically and personally. This is certainly an example of how queer time emerges in this work as a disruption of the narrative of aging, but it is also a powerful recoding of the figure of the child. “The Child” is not an explicit configuration in Venema’s project — not in the way that it appears in the other two papers for this panel, as I will explore in the remainder of this response — but one of the ghosts to Venema’s archive is the child (she is, after all, following a trajectory throughout that is about the child writing/reading the mother, and the mother writing/reading back the child). Yet Venema’s narrative manages a re-inscription of the figure of the child as a part-object in the Kleinian/Deleuzian sense. Venema’s archive (an only ever partial “pact” of technics, affect, narrative, performance) not only re-positions and queers the mother’s temporal and spatial logics but troubles the humanist locations of the child in interesting ways. To an extent, this is made possible by the fact that the child is a phantasm, a kind of ghost in the archive of this project. I find this child as part-object to dialogue implicitly with the two powerful critiques of the active representations and reproductions of the child in contemporary film presented by Rebekah Sheldon and Rebecca Schäfer.
Both Sheldon ("Humanity's Zoë") and Schäfer ("A Perfect Child Caught in a Freeze-Frame: Age, Aging, Temporality, and the Posthuman in A.I. Artificial Intelligence") explore the potential challenge to and reinvention of humanism enacted by the figure of the child. Sheldon moves beyond conventional critical narratives to offer a profoundly troubling (in the productive sense) re-reading of the assumed oppositions between bios and zoe ("human and animal, protected and exposed) within biopolitical theories — many of which position themselves as productive posthumanist interventions. To this end, she traces the figure of the child across several future apocalyptic films, Children of Men, Snowpiercer, and Beasts of the Southern Wild. Schäfer takes up the figure of the posthuman child in A.I Artificial Intelligence and reveals a fascinating intersection between the non-human, the child, and temporality that introduces an odd inflection of obsolescence into the narrative of aging across humanist and posthumanist narratives. I will focus on a couple specific (and striking) moments in both projects in threading together their interlocutions with one another and perhaps hint at aspects of the “part-object” child discussed earlier.

Schäfer begins with a look at how the tensions between and dialectics of the two children characters in A.I, one temporarily dead and in suspension and the other a robot suspended eternally within the temporality of childhood, work to expose the myths and fetishization of Western narratives of childhood. Via these two characters, biological birth and the normative temporality of aging are figured as privileged limits to humanness throughout the film. As Schafer points out, since there are no older or aged characters in the film, aspects associated with aging or “wisdom” are projected onto non-human objects and robots, and these non-human figures in many ways become the most human of all in terms of conventional narratives and logics of aging: there is Teddy, an antiquated toy bear who demonstrates symptoms of dementia;
and the out of
date or obsolete
robots (mechas)
who wander and
rummage in
hopes of
extending their expiry dates. As Schäfer emphasizes, these non-human figures largely reinforce
dominant depictions of aging and the Child within a humanist framework: “in the seemingly
ageless world of the posthuman robotic body, age discourses are established and written by
creation dates, model and serial numbers, as well as dysfunctional, outdated or obsolete
technologies.”

And yet, Schäfer identifies key moments where the boundedness of these narratives begin
to unravel. Perhaps the most significant scene to this end is the “flesh fair,” where humans chase
down and ritually destroy dysfunctional mechas in celebration of “purging themselves of
artificiality.” Teddy is a first introduction to this scene and is portrayed as wandering through the
flesh fair looking for his human, David, uttering statements meant to invoke the symptoms of
dementia. While Teddy reproduces standard depictions of human aging, he also functions as
and off-beat “cute” (and at times, creepy) character in the film.

While Teddy certainly reanimates dominant conceptions of the aged advisor, an obsolete
object personified as an elderly human, he also embodies the complicated registers of the “cute.”
Cuteness defined here not just as the cuddly and adorable, but, as Sianne Ngai’ (Ugly Feelings
(2007)) has explored, a figure at the margins of contemporary commodity culture that exists at
the threshold of a “thing” both threatening and welcoming, one that you seek to level through its
cute designation. To call something cute is to express both adoration and a suppressed violence, and to colonize and possess it through diminution. Thus, in many ways Teddy represents our complicated relationship with objects within both humanist and posthumanist frameworks as non-human agents that we strive to dominate but which also withdraw from our control, our narratives, and even our dominant modes of consciousness and perception. Along these lines, Teddy, like all of the mechas at the flesh fair, demonstrates how representations of posthuman machines and non-humans almost by default return us to scenes of Western slavery, domination and the violence of colonization (the flesh fair ultimately mirrors scenes of racialized violence).

In Rebekah Sheldon’s terms, Teddy is a remainder, a “fleshy surplus” to zoé and bios, a reminder that neither category is antecedent to humanist configurations of race and gender. He is also, literally, a “part-object” a metonymy for childhood yoked metaphysically to a predictable narrative of aging that falters and breaks in its association with the racialized scene of the “flesh fair.”

Rebekah Sheldon’s purpose is to locate that space beyond the disruptive potential of the figure of the child that is claimed in many posthumanist fantasies, to trouble both the salvific figure of the child and claims for its capacity for a “radical reconstruction and and decolonization of what it means to be human.” Sheldon asks, what else might the child prefigure in these representations in the context of neoliberal biocapitalism? She covers a lot of ground here, and in many ways, this project in particular signals an important re-reading of biopolitics within a posthumanist context. In her work with Children of Men, an apocalyptic-future film where humans become sterile and unable to reproduce, the focus is on a character added to the filmic version, an Afro-Caribbean refuge who becomes the one pregnant woman in a completely sterile society. Her function as an embodiment of a posthumanist Eve is juxtaposed, as Sheldon
examines, with images of a kind of over-fecundity amidst human reproductive sterility. In particular she focuses in on the scene of a burning pyre of sheep in the film: “The sheep pyre can be understood as a metonym for all the processes whose overgrowth threatens the regularity of the natural world that allows for the production of profit.” In the end, Sheldon reveals how the figure of reproduction, the promise of a return of the Child, is imbricated with all of the conditions of reproduction more generally within biocapitalism (from massive scale agricultural to nanotechnology and genetic modification). “From the outset, then, *Children of Men* presents us with profitless, uncontrolled proliferation coupled to species-threatening sterility…. [A] fungible exchange of pregnant refugee and livestock.”

What I find so striking about about this version in Sheldon’s study, to my mind, of the “part-object” of the mother-child configuration — what she refers to at one point as a “single pieta formed by mother and child” — is the extent to which uncovering these metaphysical energies serves not just as a critique of the employment of this figure in these apocalyptic fantasies, but of vitalism within biopolitical schemas and posthumanism as well. In the context of Sheldon’s work, amid her considerations of many of the critical theoretical underpinnings to biopolitical post humanism (Foucault, Agamben and forward) one is left wondering if the hyphenated metonym for reproduction she uncovers in these films might also apply to some of the theoretical antidotes set forth within posthumanist theory itself. Jane Bennett’s and Karan Barad’s posthumanist reworkings of the vital fecundity of objects, for example, are powerful decenterings of reproductive myths of an outdated humanism; as are recognitions of “the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself” (Braidotti quoted in Sheldon). Such “runaway vitality” indeed may portend a “fantasy of human extinction” within
posthumanist discourse; but is it also potentially a return or recuperation in some senses of the very dyad of proliferation and sterility at the heart of biocapitalism that Sheldon reveals?

_No Totality to Come_

Rose Braidotti makes the plea of a critical posthumanism that allows for even greater “conceptual creativity,” a term that is meant to resist tendencies toward fantasies of transcendence or annihilation (_The Posthuman_). And while we now have a proliferating field of critical posthumanism, encounters with embodiment (reproduction) and technology still tend in places toward apocalyptic fantasies of transcendence. Technological determinism still has its hold on posthumanism, for sure, though it has been dispersed through the theoretical optics of object-oriented ontology, new hybridity, necropolitics and so on. The intersection of aging studies/age with posthumanism explored in this panel offers a re-ordering of the “technical” (traced in my formulation as “part-object”) that is perhaps an opening back into Braidotti’s call for an “ethics” and a “politics” to posthumanism that distracts us a bit from the extremes of the post-anthropocentric: the complete leveling of the human/non-human; transcendence over embodiment; an ecstatic trans-human commercialization of “life” and biological and cognitive capital.