

# **From Mad Cows to Posthumanism**

## **Becoming Aware of Anthropocentric Blindspots**

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Posthumanism, as I use the term, means the ways in which we are entangled with non-humans, and which expand our capacities (although in other ways they may diminish them, as with disease). Rather than being a feature of a future that is only now emerging, we have always been posthuman in this sense; indeed, the mastery of fire, cooking, language and other technologies is what made us into humans in the first place. Prior to the postmodern and textual turn, classic anthropologists usually incorporated non-humans (to use a perhaps over-general inclusive term that may obscure ontological questions by papering over them), such as cattle, yams, rice and places with spiritual power into their ethnographic accounts. The posthumanist approach invites us to return to such holistic approaches, but in a less geographically limited way, in order to develop a new kind of holism without boundaries.

My path into posthumanism, or more than human research, wasn't driven by a theoretical choice of viable or attractive choices, but by empirical research that led me into new areas. Through this research I discovered that anthropocentric bias was limiting my understanding of key issues.

We wanted to learn about the impact of the 2003 outbreak of “mad cow disease” (**bovine spongiform encephalopathy**, or BSE) in Canada. It caused an economic catastrophe for Alberta farmers, but resulted from microscopic agents: infectious proteins from cattle that could cause an incurable and terminal disease in humans. These proteins, which became known as prions, also changed the world in many ways. Global trade regulations, food safety rules and the entire meatpacking industry were profoundly modified. Doing research on BSE forced us to move far from the areas in which we had developed expertise, particularly with food producers and consumers, and learn about prion science and global policy making. We began this research in an anthropocentric vein, but before long had to question the adequacy of such perspectives. Doing research with people who were simultaneously responding to microscopic, previously hypothetical entities, animals they had invested heavily in (both emotionally

and financially), and distant bureaucrats, brought us into reading some of the key works in what we are labelling posthumanism (a label not all of these authors would accept). I list what I consider to be their most accessible work: Donna Haraway (2008), Katherine Hayles (2006), Ian Hodder (2014), Bruno Latour (2005), and Cary Wolfe (2010).



We<sup>1</sup> first became convinced of the utility of posthumanist ideas while thinking about the movement of non-human life across borders. This was an important part of understanding the impact of BSE in Canada, because with only a couple dozen cases in cattle, none of which resulted in transmission to humans, the disease itself was not very important. It was the closing of borders to cattle and beef exports that devastated the industry. In thinking through this issue for a chapter in a book on border studies (Smart and Smart 2012), we became aware of the way in which anthropocentrism produced a bias that resulted in a very incomplete understanding of the nature of national borders in mainstream border studies. It was like a set of blinkers that created a kind of tunnel vision in which only human issues such as trade politics and transnational identity could be seen.

Yet, when we read a wide selection of work outside border studies as a field, but which addressed borders in one way or another, we became aware of a very different but powerful set of influences on the historical development of borders. Microbes had an

impact on border crossing long before we had any idea of their existence. The first passports that are known of in history appear to be individual health passports that the Florentine Board of Health established during the 1348 outbreak of plague. Contemporary concerns about pandemic diseases have produced a powerful set of governmental programs to enhance “biosecurity”. But it was not only disease: early international treaties dealt with issues such as the protection of the flight paths of migratory birds in Europe. Current invasive species have become a major international concern. A posthumanist perspective allows us to go beyond the limitations of anthropocentrism and have a much more open mind about what borders do and how they are developed. Accepting that this bias had limited our perspectives in damaging ways encouraged us to think more broadly about posthumanist ideas.

Responding to the reviewers of our first book prospectus and then the finished book itself (Smart and Smart 2017) made us aware of a considerable degree of resistance within anthropology to the term “posthumanism”. This discomfort seems to have led to a disciplinary preference for talking instead about more-than-human approaches, as was evident in panel and paper titles in this vein at the last two CASCA (Canadian Anthropology Association) annual conferences.

*When we challenge humanism and adopt a symmetrical perspective including non-humans as agents, are we not just pulling the rug of individual coherence and species importance out from under the feet of peoples who only in the last century or so have regained self-determination?*

Descendants of populations subject to expropriation, displacement and genocide, that is all those whose predecessors lived in colonized places, can be forgiven if they reject posthumanist ideas for trying to strip away something that was only achieved in the decades after World War II, and often still only partially. If people are seen as only contingent assemblages of wider forces, as post-structuralists suggest, what does that imply for the freedom and self-determination that they have achieved against resistance from their oppressors and exploiters? Post-colonialism and postmodern anthropology find the theoretical arguments for the rejection of anthropocentrism a challenge in relation to their demand for equal space for non-Western subjects as resisting and transformative agents and knowers. After struggling for civil and human rights, it seems tragic to find the subjectivity they have achieved being dissolved in networks or webs of external forces.

Anthropocentrism is still operating in postmodern anthropology, whereas the post-structuralist position tends to adopt the position that we perform our parts, or voice our voices, through chains of social and material relations about which we have only dim awareness. Anthropological postmodernism tends to resemble postmodern architecture,

which Scott Lash (1990) argued was much more humanist than its modernist predecessors, in promoting (if rarely achieving) the anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism and anthropometristm largely rejected by modernist architects, who stressed function over form, and rejected ornamentation.

Strengths that anthropology once had, we suggest, are undermined by the postmodernist/materialist, science/anti-science divides that split anthropology in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and were part of the so-called “Science Wars” that widely affected academia. Divisions between the four fields might be less threatening, and our complementarities better valued and fostered, if we could encourage a less anthropocentric and humanist perspective within social and cultural anthropology. We would also need more engagement in social theory by biological anthropologists. If English professors can find esoteric debates in biology stimulating fodder for re-visioning their practices, surely anthropologists can benefit from greater conversation with our colleagues down the hall. Our recent book is in part a tribute to our good luck in being part of a Department of Anthropology where such mutual benefit was recognized and preserved, with the two main streams in our department both emphasizing social relations among people (social and cultural anthropology) and non-human primates (formerly primatology, now relabeled as biological anthropology) and respecting what the other stream contributed to knowledge. Such mutual respect was not common in anthropology departments after the advent of postmodernism, which made it more difficult to build on the holistic tradition of anthropology as a discipline with four perspectives on what it meant to be human: social/cultural, biological, archaeological, and linguistic fields of anthropology.

Reincorporating non-humans into the anthropological project opens up new and exciting prospects, inviting us to collaborate with a wide variety of humans working outside our subdisciplinary boundaries, in order to understand the collaborations with non-humans that work inside our body and around the world. In the Anthropocene, we can no longer afford an anthropocentric anthropology.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted jointly with Josephine Smart, who was the Principal Investigator for grants from the Alberta Prion Research Institute and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. She is also the co-author of a book entitled *Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights* that appeared in May 2017, just at the time of the Ottawa CASCA/IUAES roundtable on more than human anthropology organized by Paul Hansen.

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