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WHO’S TALKING? (AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ‘US’?)

Provocations for beyond Humanist dialogic pedagogies

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Introduction

In this contribution, we aim to expand thinking around who can and should count as legitimate, credible and viable relational partners in dialogism by commencing a critical conversation with posthumanism. While we will soon outline what we mean both by ‘dialogism’ and ‘posthumanism’, at this early stage we want to flag that our interest is in what possibilities for self and other/s open up when dialogism and posthumanism are brought into contact and cross-fertilisation along the conceptual boundary of ‘the human’. We foreshadow in our conclusion some of the changes and openings made possible for the field of dialogism itself and dialogical research by this speculative conversation, and we will invite your activist investment in these spaces. Our approach (we hope!) is lively and provocative, along the lines of a thought experiment, although a thought experiment with vital ethical and political parameters, since for both of us, social-and-other-than-human justice and the transformations required for it are central to the planetary concerns at the heart of our shared and pressing precarity.

Our chapter is organised into three main parts. We begin by offering our reading of how ‘the human’ is variously configured by Humanism, dialogism and posthumanism and what these respective versions make intelligible and also as a consequence, effectively dis/allow. Using these readings of ‘the human’ as a conceptual backdrop, we then undertake an empirical exploration of how ‘the human’ plays out in terms of dialogism and posthumanism in our current respective research fields: namely critical disability studies (Kim) and place pedagogies (Peter). Through this empirical investigation, we put dialogical notions of self and other, voice, dialogue with difference and dialogue with the other on the threshold with posthumanism for generative effect. In our concluding part we wrap up our brief encounter with posthumanism by re-calling the radical relationality at the heart of dialogism and projecting its transformation of the subjects and the matterings of and for a beyond Humanist dialogism and dialogic pedagogies.
We now undertake our overview of ‘the human’ as it is configured in Humanism, dialogism and posthumanism. Our quick sketch will outline the central ways in which these three ideologies account for human and other/s forms of being and alterity since, by our reading, these ontological foundations determine the ways in which their respective epistemological truth claims unfold. It is from within the parameters of this rationality, as described by dialogism and posthumanism in particular, that we will take up the second and third parts of our chapter.

It’s timely, given some of the telling language used in the previous paragraph (e.g. ‘truth claims’ and ‘unfold’) to try to map ourselves reflexively within the context of these ideological frameworks and concerns. We identify ourselves as dialogical scholars. Peter draws upon sociocultural theory and practice, especially as it applies to education (Renshaw & Tooth, 2018), and Kim is an early career researcher who appropriated a Bakhtinian orientation to undertake her doctoral research on the sociocultural history of ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’ (Davies, 2016). Peter was also Kim’s PhD advisor, and they have written together using what they call ‘a dialogical approach’ to learning and subjectivity (Davies & Renshaw, 2013). As dialogical scholars, we believe and here acknowledge that the dialogism that is realised in our research (this current project included) is a hybridised discourse where we have taken the words of others and made them our own, following Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1935), so to speak. We also highlight that as academics we are immersed in a heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1935) of contending discourses and our dialogism – as a living discourse – is actually the way we are speaking ourselves into being, as members of a community of (dialogical) scholars, by taking up the voices of other speakers whose words and meanings we have appropriated and re-voiced for our own intentions (Bakhtin, 1935). Importantly for your reading of this chapter, this includes the Humanist heritage that remains the sedimented bedrock of Western positivist and post-positivist academic expectations and practices as well as the emerging discourse of posthumanism which, in many ways, functions as a centrifugal force destabilising this dominant Humanist authoritative discourse.

We also suggest that no ideology is discursively pure and the three that we represent here are already discursively and recursively engaged with each other in significant ways through the various chronotopic gateways (Bakhtin, 1938) that shape all of our meaning-making endeavours. Therefore, our internally persuasive discourse, and the one that you should be alert to as you critically read our work here, is best represented as a dialogism that is mongrelised by its involvement with the all of the discourses at play in our living through current times, which obviously includes the three we have targeted for analysis here. We are not apologising for this predicament, indeed as dialogicians we know it to be inescapable; rather we simply want to draw attention to our imperfect and probably impossible attempts to be critically reflexive about our ideological relationship to the focus of our chapter so that you can read our assessments and assertions with care and attention.

We are not suggesting that Humanism, dialogism and posthumanism are generationally successive. No, that would impose an oversimplifying pedigree, structuring logic and linear connection that would obfuscate the messiness of their relational entanglements. But we do draw your attention to their historical and sociocultural contingency and suggest that each is distinctly constituted by and through its relationship/s to the others.

As English-speaking scholars currently working in neoliberal universities, Humanism is so much more than our intellectual heritage; it forms the (sometimes literal) architecture of how
we approach, appraise and make sense of ourselves and our material and sociocultural worlds. It is so much a ‘naturalised’ part of our being-in-the-world that it is astounding that we can distance ourselves sufficiently from ‘Humanism’ to be able to attempt to identity ‘it’ and tease out its effects on our mis/perceptions and mis/understandings of self and others. This particular reflexive exercise is itself an instantiation of our Humanist inheritance since the world that Humanism posits is an anthropocentric one where ‘thought’ can be brought to bear on ‘reality’ to test the veracity and thus the Truthfulness of all manner of hypotheses and other claims. Nature is just a complicated set of patterns – intrinsic, universal, immutable – and humans are the self-appointed pattern readers to decode and make legible not only ‘Nature’ but our own ‘special’ place in it. Typically, we read Nature’s patterns into a narrative that places us at the pinnacle of development, strangely separate from and superior to the world that we study and claim as our own. This Humanist world is a place of clearly demarcated insides and outsiders, Truth and falsehoods, animate and inanimate matter organised in a hierarchy from the ‘lowest’ and most ‘primitive’ living forms to the pinnacle of Life itself: the huMan. It is a world where, in dualist mode with his mind split from his body, Man’s cool reason subdues his passionate, embodied senses and Science outweighs belief; a measurable world of compulsive development, viewed as a linear progression from blind (?) ignorance to masterful Enlightenment which will be signified, presumably, by the final, complete and perfect understanding of Everything. It is a knowable world whose secrets are not mysteries, just ‘facts’ awaiting discovery through appropriate empirical testing, verification and peer review. It is a world to be known – by humans – so that its resources, including its human resources, can be put to appropriate productive and profitable use. Individual human enterprise and initiative is the engine driving this perpetual advance, constrained by a morality – again anthropocentric – that occasionally interrupts ‘progress’ with Humanist notions like ‘human rights’, ‘animal welfare’ and ‘social justice’.

In our reading of Humanism, ‘self’ is sameness; alterity is difference, and a distinct gap marks their differentiation. The former brings privilege and comfort; the latter, insecurity and outsidership and possible exclusion. It is timely to draw down the most significant implications for this Humanist accounting of ‘self’ and ‘other/s’ as we begin the lead into our outline of dialogism and its theorisations about who counts and how it is that they count as ‘human’.

In addition to its anthropocentrism and as a consequence of its origins and geo-political projects and impacts, Humanism is also Eurocentric with normative inscriptions cutting deeply and painfully across its discursive progeny, including the categories of ‘race’, ‘gender’, ‘class’ and ‘ability’. As Braidotti (2013) notes ‘Humanity is very much the male of the species; it is a he’ (p. 24); ‘he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied’ (p. 24); ‘an ideal of bodily perfection’ (p. 13); ‘implicitly assumed to be masculine, white, urbanised, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognised polity’ (p. 65); ‘a rational animal endowed with language’ (p. 15). For critics however, this normative white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied ‘human’ at the heart of Humanism is empty and remains hollow – if relatively secure – by virtue of what it excludes on the other side of its normalising boundaries and through the intended and unintended effects that the Sciences and associated disciplinary professionals (like teachers for example) have when patrolling, policing and patching these ‘normal’ (human) insider and strange (non-or-less-than-human) outsider limits (see Graham & Slee, 2008).

Our portrait of Humanism is painted with broad brush strokes and does deserve more detailed elaboration, research we hope to take up as we continue our work with the possibilities for ‘beyond Humanist dialogism’. However, our interest in a productive encounter with posthumanism stems from our concerns that dialogism has become bound by its Humanist threads, understandable as this may be given its emergence as part of the Humanist inher-
itance and in response to weaknesses with and worries about Humanist theorisation. The
dialogism we take up is based upon the intellectual legacy of Bakhtin (1919; 1919–1921;
1922–1924/1977–1978; 1935; 1938; 1952–1953; 1984) and those scholars who have taken
up his work and applied it across the humanities and social sciences since its translation from
Russian in the latter stages of the twentieth century (e.g. Brandist, 2002; Emerson, 1997;
Erdinast-Vulcan, 2013; Holquist, 2002; Morson & Emerson, 1990; Matusov, 2007; Peeren,
2008; Steinby & Klapuri, 2013; Todorov, 1984; White, 2013, among others) For us, the expla-
atory power and ethico-political appeal of dialogism lies in its de-centring of the human into
the context of discursively mediated sociocultural fields, chronotopically governed (Bakhtin,
1938) yet specific and unrepeatable because of their temporal and proximal eventness (Tarulli,
2001, p. 117). It theorises ‘the human’ as an intersubjective accomplishment, unfinalised yet reli-
ant on others for the words that, when voiced, give accountable personhood to the speaker,
a being in process of becoming, with no alibi for living (Bakhtin, 1922–1924/1977–1978). For us, this idea/l of ‘the human’ in-and-as-relation is a much-needed balm to the narcissism,
myopia and contrived autonomy of the Humanist human.

The strongest Humanist thread that dialogism picks up and re-weaves, perhaps naturally
enough, is the focus on the human as the instrument of knowledge making. Like Humanism,
dialogism also considers itself a scientific and science-making enterprise. Also like Humanism,
dialogism begins and ends with ‘the human’ although this dialogical human is very differently
located, not floating slightly above the rest of the world but firmly grounded within historicised
sociocultural contexts and complicated intersubjective and other relational webs. As a positioned
and interdependent being, the dialogical human is also primarily a communicator, agentive in
contrast to the cerebral Humanist thinker, relying on language use for participation in the pro-
cesses of self-and-other making. Alterity is thus fundamental to a dialogical theory of human
development; it is embraced – theoretically at least – as the way we come into being ourselves.
Within dialogism, different others are not to be feared as a potential threat to our individual sov-
ereignty since they are in fact indispensable to our personhood. With acknowledgement of the
centrality of alterity and dialogue with, through and across human differences, comes a particu-
lar dialogical sense of accountability for the mutuality of self-making. Dialogical accountability
exceeds a Humanist’s reflexivity since it acknowledges through the notion of transgressience
(Bakhtin, 1919–1921) that the individual cannot ever have either transparent or complete self-
understanding and moreover, that such independence is illusory. Significantly and in marked
distinction to Humanism, for dialogism, humans do not

simply display our pre-formed characteristics to each other when we communicate.
Rather, in communication, each person is an actor who is oriented to others so that
the distinctive features of utterances (such as tones, genres, lexical choices) are context-
specific choices made from a plethora of possibilities available at that moment.

(Davies & Renshaw, 2013, p. 397)

The human as it is configured through dialogism is thus not only answerable for their words
and deeds but also is part of a mutual process of self-other creation that remains, always, unfinal-
isable (Bakhtin, 1919). As Markova (2003) concludes ‘To be means to communicate, and to
communicate means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself’ (p. 257). The features
of the dialogical human that sets it apart from its Humanist heritage is summarised by Linell as
interactionism, contextualism and other-orientation (2010, p. 18). These are the features of dialogism
that blur boundaries and extend our horizons beyond individuated Humanist preoccupations
and offer, to us, so much promise on the threshold with posthumanism.
We have highlighted the Humanist threads that dialogism has picked out, pulled apart and woven anew in its own distinct configuration of the human. Despite these important elaborations and differences, there do remain fibres that link and bind them: you can pick the family resemblance when we place them side-by-side. The dialogical configuration is still essentially anthropocentric: the human – albeit in mutually constitutive relationships – remains at the centre of the dialogical universe and the most significant interrelationships are those between humans.

Again, context is a core feature of the dialogical approach to understanding human communication, development and ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1935), but the contexts we investigate as influential are human relational contexts, like ‘culture’, sociolinguistics, classroom interactions and communication patterns. These are undoubtedly vital research and practice concerns, and the contribution of dialogical scholarship in these areas has been outstanding; however, so far there has been very limited take-up by dialogical scholars of the notion of context and interrelationship beyond the human. It follows, given the privileging of interdependence and contextualisation within dialogism, that communication is a central concern and essential feature of the dialogical human. This is evidenced, for example, by our take-up of ‘the utterance’ as the basic unit of analysis (Bakhtin, 1935) in dialogical research. Yet the communicative models and practices that feature in our research themselves privilege a particular ideal sort of human – the ‘normal’ i.e. able-bodied human. The dialogical communicating human is fundamentally a thinking human, and it seems that the Cartesian duality lingers and our dialogical human is still far from fully and diversely embodied. Despite a very small handful of studies (see Bagatell, 2007; Davies, 2016; Davies & Renshaw, 2013; Good, 2001; Linell, 2009; Linell, 2010; Linell, 2017), dialogism has been largely unconcerned with matters of disability or bodily differences. And this is despite Linell’s assertion that “nowhere it seems easier to demonstrate the relevance of dialogical theory (other-orientation, interaction, contexts) than in communication with persons with disabilities” (2010, p. 25). Cresswell and Teucher’s (2011) work has prompted us to consider a phenomenological approach to the communicating body in dialogism, an invitation that dialogical scholars have so far not fully explored. He – the human in dialogism – still remains largely ‘male’ since gender, unlike ‘culture’ and ethnicity and even socioeconomic background, is not a prominent focus of dialogical research. In identifying the ways in which the dialogical configuration of the human remains constrained by some of its Humanist legacy, we are not wishing for or anticipating a perfect totalising theory of Everything. Rather, we are drawing attention to what we have argued are unnecessary limitations to what dialogical scholars are enabled to research because of how their Humanist inheritance continues to limit conceptualisations of communication, relationality and contextualisation. We wonder if and how the posthuman configuration of the human might loosen these ties that bind, and we approach that threshold now.

Our outline of the posthuman configuration of the human is largely informed by Braidotti (2006; 2011; 2013; 2017), whose work is itself indebted to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as well as Donna Haraway (1991). Braidotti stretches the notion of human becoming far beyond the unfinalisability of dialogism and its humanist legacies, and we approach this posthumanist threshold aware that for Braidotti (2006), posthumanism is a consciously anti-Humanist and explicitly political project. Indeed she frames her work as the invention of ‘conceptual schemes that allow us to think the unity and the interdependence of the human, the bodily and its historical others at the very point in time when these others return to dislocate the foundations of the humanist worldview’ (p. 203).

Starting with the body, Braidotti’s human is neither a biological nor sociological category, but an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces; a surface where multiple codes (sex, class, age, race, etc.) are inscribed’ (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2013, p. 5) and as such, Braidotti offers a process-oriented political ontology, ‘a self beyond its traditional fixed moorings’ (Goodley, Lawthom, & Runswick-Cole, 2014, p. 346). This process ontology is,
however, located, embodied and intensely relational. Braidotti (2006) describes ‘location’ as ‘a materialist temporal and spatial site of co-production of the subject, and thus anything but an instance of relativism. The politics of location, or situated knowledges, rests on process ontology to posit the primacy of relations over substances’ (p. 199; emphasis added). The human in this formulation is ‘a radically immanent intensive body (in) an assemblage of forces, or flows, intensities and passions that solidify in space, and consolidate in time, within the singular configuration commonly known as an “individual self”’ (Braidotti, 2006, p. 201). We have a new human emerging here (at least in terms of a Western Humanist tradition) and what Braidotti (2017) herself describes as

a convergence of antihumanism, on the one hand, and anti-anthropocentricism, on the other. Antihumanism focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of “Man” as the universal representative of the human, while anti-anthropocentricism criticises species hierarchy and advances ecological justice.

(p. 9)

At play here is a transversality, not bound to or by individuated humans, but a nomadic subjectivity of ‘complex, generic singularities, not universal claims … taking place in between nature and technology, male and female, black and white, local and global … in assemblages that flow across and displace the binaries’ (Braidotti, 2017, pp. 11, 12) in what Harraway famously calls ‘naturecultures’ (2003). Thus ends

the categorical distinction between life as bios, the prerogative of Anthropos, and the life of animals and nonhumans, or zoë (Braidotti, 2006). What come to the fore instead are new human-nonhuman linkages, which include complex media-technological interfaces of biological and nonbiological matter. The double mediation, bio and info-technological, is of crucial importance to the posthuman predicament. These discourses express not only the critical interrogation of the category of anthropocentrism, or species supremacy, but with it the awareness of the relational structure of the embedded and embodied, extended self.

(Braidotti, 2017, pp. 12–13)

Braidotti’s posthumanism has its roots in a Spinozist or monist tradition, and this allows her to theorise in non-binary ways, in contrast to the limitations imposed by Cartesian dualism on Humanist and dialogical versions of ‘the human’. But more than this, Braidotti’s new materialism foregrounds

the positivity of difference as a process of differential modulation within a common matter … The key notion is that matter … is not organised in terms of dualistic mind/body oppositions, but rather as materially embedded and embodied subjects-in-process … This emphasis on the monistic univocity of life does not deny the power of differences, but rather argues that they are not structured according to the dialectical principle of internal or external opposition, and therefore do not function hierarchically.

(Braidotti, 2017, p. 16)

Braidotti’s move beyond dialectics and binaries enables not just an egalitarianism among species but invokes a radical relocation of difference as an active process of differing or perhaps
difference-ing that exceeds and replaces the essentialist and fixed tropes of Humanism. This postanthropocentric, beyond-human subjectivity involving ‘multiple ecologies of belonging’ (Braidotti, 2017, p. 17) requires also a beyond-human ethics of ‘compassionate co-construction of transversal subjectivity’ (Braidotti, 2017, p. 17). Braidotti (2006) describes this beyond-human ethics as concerning the ‘creation of a new kinship system: a new social nexus and new forms of social connection with these techno-others. (She asks) what kinds of bonds can be established and how can they be sustained?’ (p. 202). This profound transversal interdependence ‘anchors the subject in an ethical bond to alterity’ (Goodley et al., 2014, p. 353) where codependence is affirmed as enhancing ‘because an ethics based on the primacy of the relation of interdependence values life in itself’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 95; emphasis added). This is a momentous expansion beyond dialogism’s transgression (Bakhtin, 1919–1921), but it does indicate some of the ways in which aspects of Braidotti’s posthumanism are nascent within Bakhtinian theorisations and why we believe conversations on this threshold can be so generative, for dialogical pedagogies in particular. Braidotti’s post-human configuration of ‘the human’ gifts an intense affinity through affective connection with all of life. She pleads for an ‘affirmative politics grounded in immanent interconnections … (bound) by the compassionate acknowledgement of interdependence with multiple others most of which, in the age of the Anthropocene, are not anthropomorphic’ (Braidotti, 2017, p. 22). Braidotti’s post-human is in some ways a logical extension of the dialogical self, located but mobile, unfixed and unfinalised, accountable and ethically responsible through the processes of co-agency and co-being for communal processes of shared becoming and mutual enhancement. The main difference, from our reading of both configurations, is that for Braidotti (and perhaps all of us) it is time to move beyond human concerns. We will explore some of these implications for a renewed dialogism in our next section where we dip into our empirical research.

Empirical explorations

It’s time now to take these various con/figurations of the human and use them as theoretical resources in a couple of different empirical research contexts. Kim will explore anew the self-making work at WrongPlanet.net and how posthumanism extends the insights afforded through a dialogical reading, and then Peter will consider how his work with place-based pedagogies has been expanded and made richer through its engagement with posthumanism.

Who’s Talking @ WrongPlanet.net? (Kim)

WrongPlanet.net is described as ‘an online community for individuals with Autism and Asperger Syndrome (AS). The site was started in 2004 … and includes a chat room, a large forum, a dating section and articles describing how to deal with daily issues’ (Wikipedia.com retrieved January 22, 2010). I will briefly revisit a series of comments to the Adolescent forum thread ‘Why is aspergers such a negative thing?’ posted between March and September 2007 to show how my understanding of this self-making work can be diffraeted in useful ways through contact with posthumanism to make a fuller dialogical account. In my PhD research I explored how the posters to this thread came together and through their posts about their different identifications with and experiences of ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’ formed a momentary, virtual community of not just mutual support but mutual subj ectification through the transitory materialisation of their versions of ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’. I understood these events at the time in dialogical terms as a process of ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1935) where some of the posters adopted as an authoritative discourse a medical model of AS as a disability and spoke themselves into being as someone with or having Asperger’s Syndrome. For example when Kilroy posts that ‘personally
I think it’s terrible because it’s alienated me from the world the world doesn’t want me and I desperately want to fit in I keep saying how much I hate my AS and wish it would go away’. Other posters however identified themselves as being ‘aspies’ taking this same medical diagnosis and re-working it into a different, neurodiverse way of being in the world, transforming it into a source of affirmation, distinction and self-respect, a way of staking an ontoepistemologic claim against normal, neurotypical ‘others’. These posters embraced the classic triad of autistic impairments not as deficits or disordered genetics but as core components of healthy personalities, including these attributes ‘positively different’ (Topher); ‘successful’ and ‘similar to Einstein’ (jaydog); ‘special’ (1Oro2); ‘achieving against the odds’ and ‘amazing’ (mutti). At the time, I thought this was a novel and fruitful reading but having spent some time on the posthuman threshold I realise just how much I missed by limiting my analysis to a Cartesian-bound, discursive reading of these posts. I missed reading the posters and recognising the technohuman assemblages that they were, by virtue of their be-coming together through these online encounters. I acknowledged at the time, in a standard dialogical way, the affordances of the Internet, but I missed that the World Wide Web was not a technical convenience, it was these posters and their AS, with them, of them, as them and not separate. I also missed the phenomenological nature of this assemblage by focussing exclusively on the discursive analysis of the various synchronous posts. The Internet was these posters and their embodiments of their AS for the duration of their online encounters and for this period of time they became technohumans, hooked into a virtual world through a web of wonderful networks. These diffractions do not override the previous dialogical conclusions, rather they enrich the Bakhtinian analysis by moving the Humanist human beyond its dialogical tethers and releasing it into a new world of mobility, multiplicity, experimentation and affirmative embodied alterity. I remember being concerned at the time by how ‘vulnerable’ the posters were to the clinical gaze. Now I am more respectful and more concerned about the epistemic violence that issues from a researcher’s normative Humanist arrogance: disability crip what it means to be human and has ‘the radical potential to trouble the normative, rational, independent, autonomous subject that is so often imagined when the human is invoked’ (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016, p. 2). Being non-normative ‘is not a tragedy but a possibility, an affirmation, a “queer” or “crip” space for rethinking what it means to be human, to live a quality life and a life with quality’ (Goodley et al., 2014, p. 348). It also means starting to hear some home truths about what it means to be ‘normal’, to be held to account and to ask ‘Who’s talking here and what does it mean for “us”’?

Who’s talking about place? (Peter)

Place pedagogy provided me (Peter) the space to begin rethinking dialogism (see Renshaw, 2017) and the humanist assumptions that have tethered it narrowly to human–human relations rather than to an encompassing relationality that entangles humans with the more-than-human world (Braidotti, 2013). Notions of ‘Nature’ arising from humanism have separated ‘the human’ from the natural world and positioned humans as stewards and rulers of that world. Nature, as the non-human ‘other’, is subservient to the interests of humans and available to be exploited to satisfy human needs. Nature, known through Science, is managed through technologies that increase its utility for capitalist exploitation and profit – ‘cheap nature’ (Moore, 2015, p. 17). The consequences of this humanist ideology are being felt currently in our precarious epoch, the Anthropocene, characterised by unprecedented extinction of species, habitat destruction and escalating climate change (Brennan, 2017; Harraway, 2015). Clearly, this separate and exploitative notion of place derived from Humanism could not provide the basis of a pedagogy designed to connect children to the more-than-human world.
But dialogism with its relational framing of self and other as “human” also didn’t offer a clear way forward to rethink the relationship between Nature and humans. It offered what Snaza et al. (2014) have described as a ‘resolutely humanist’ framing of how we ‘relate to animals and things’ (p. 40). As a dialogic scholar, I proposed (Renshaw, 2017) that we need to extend the notion of the ‘dialogic other’ beyond the human sphere to the more-than-human-world. Indigenous peoples have long conceived of their selves as intricately related to place, and many Indigenous cultural practices entail dialoguing with the more-than-human-world in specific places (Somerville, 2010; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). Various efforts are being made by posthumanist researchers and educators to draw children into a sensuous and empathetic openness to the more-than-human world, where the ‘other’ is noticed, listened to, loved, cared for and appreciated aesthetically (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015).

In theorising an alternative place pedagogy with my colleague Ron Tooth (Renshaw & Tooth, 2019), we were drawn to the work of Margaret Somerville (2010) who drew upon her long partnership with Indigenous women as co-researchers to theorise place as storied, embodied and contested but above all as relational. This Indigenous sensibility to place preceedes the formulation of postmodernist ontologies and epistemologies but provides a parallel and highly authentic basis for designing place-responsive pedagogy that entangles students with the more-than-human world. We were also influenced by Bill Neidjie, an Indigenous elder who devised a pronoun ‘e’ to reference the flattened ontologies fundamental to Indigenous relationships with ‘Nature’. Not ‘I and thou’, but ‘I and e’. Morrissey (2015) commented on Bill Neidjie’s way of speaking about human–Nature relations:

The use of the pronoun ‘e’ means that an equal subjection is attributed to male and female, flora and fauna, natural phenomena and ancestral beings. This simple but refined linguistic economy (e) is perfectly adequate to the task of representing the reciprocal and transparent interrelationships of birds, animals, humans, trees, and ancestral beings.

(p. 6)

Our research (Tooth & Renshaw, 2019) on children’s accounts of their experiences during the place-responsive pedagogy revealed evidence of their entangled sense of relationality and emotional connectedness to the more-than-human world. We noted changes in the children’s sense of bonding with ‘Nature’ and becoming part of ‘Nature’ (‘I feel as if I’m a part of the environment’), as well as a changed view of ‘Nature’ itself where agency and knowledge are represented as simultaneously part of the human and the more-than-human world (‘Nature talks to me and it has so many stories to tell’). Children reported a sense of solidarity with ‘Nature’ that motivated them to speak-up for ‘Nature’ (‘I learnt that a group of people can save a whole forest it is truly stunning’). Across their accounts, an emotionally attuned sensibility to the more-than-human world was evident. And a sense of sharing life with e, as one child wrote, I think the most important discovery I made today was we’re not the only living things that live on the earth (Tooth & Renshaw, 2019).

Conclusion

This is where we end our brief encounter on the threshold with posthumanism. We wonder what you make of the virtues (and not merely the research merits) of loosening the Humanist ties that bind dialogism to Cartesian notions, normative human-only bodies and binary oppositions? We hope you are now interested, like us, in a re-newal of dialogism’s radical relational-
ity and a resurgent radical engagement with otherness – a beyond-Humanist otherness and a beyond-human otherness too. We can only imagine what differences dialogic pedagogies that embrace and are informed by posthumanism might make to our capacities and commitments to share our world justly, with a loving and careful attentiveness. The next and not last word goes to Stetsenko (2007) who urges us all in this ethical, activist and transformative project of a ‘relational ontology coupled with the centrality of alterity’ (p. 750). She writes

Both dialogicality and answerability are intricately connected … because each and every act or deed inevitably connects the person with other people, comes out of a life of commitment and embodies this commitment, changing forever the whole dynamic of one’s life and that of other people too, through each and every deed. In this sense becoming-through-doing conveys acknowledgement of one’s participation in the world, one’s “non-alibi in it” … Therefore it is one’s responsibility (or answer-ability) to be aware of the impact that each and every act or deed carries for both the present and the future, for the totality of one’s life and one’s lifeworld, and in light of one’s interconnectedness with others, for other people too.

(Stetsenko, 2007, pp. 754–755)

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Who’s talking?


