

Posthumanism is Right in so far as Humanism is Not Human Enough: Introducing Vol. 11 No. 2

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Alongside the “Anthropocene,” “posthuman” undoubtedly counts among the most prominent keywords of today’s academic discourses. Its increasing prominence in the Indonesian academia was reflected in the theme of the Sanata Dharma Berbagi conference held in October 2023.¹ The title of the fifth edition of the ASLE-ASEAN Ecocritical Conference held in Chiang Rai, Thailand, just a month later, too, was “Posthuman Southeast Asia.”² If the conference series had understandably close affinity with broadly posthumanist orientations from its inception, the title of the fifth iteration of the conference perhaps distinguished itself with its constative resonance, that Southeast Asia already *is* posthuman. The avenues for thought that the posthumanist wave clears, particularly in the Indonesian context wherein it represents advances beyond a myopic culturalism that so often constrains research in the humanities, deserve full intellectual attention from those in the field of cultural studies in the country. However, even though I myself have recently defended certain theoretical projects that are sometimes associated with posthumanism,³ I

¹ Min Seong Kim, Venzha Christ, and Ivo Trias Julianno Julianno et al., *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Seni Dan Budaya “Poshuman dan Interdisiplinaritas”* (Yogyakarta: Sanata Dharma University Press, 2023).

² The call for papers for the 5th ASLE-ASEAN conference is available here: <https://cris.mfu.ac.th/asleasean/index.php/call-for-papers/>

³ For example, in the conference paper presented at the Critical Island Studies Conference held at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 2 October 2023. Proceedings publication forthcoming under the following title: Min Seong Kim and Rangga Kala Mahaswa, “The Nusantara Assemblage: A Manifesto for the (Re)Commencement of Indonesian Thought” (Critical Island Studies 2023 - UGM Conference, Yogyakarta, Indonesia).

still remain hesitant to ride the wave of posthumanism at full speed. For I have also found myself wondering whether the great strides promised by posthumanism risk obfuscating alternative paths forward potentially opened by other lines of thought.

Not very long ago, I came across a perceptive observation on posthumanist discourses in Alexander Ghedi Weheliye's 2014 book, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. In calling for the overcoming of the human, Weheliye argues, posthumanism and animal studies tacitly assume the Western-centric "Man" as the final stage of humanity. The assumption that underpins posthumanism, in other words, is that that "we have now entered a stage in human development where all subjects have been granted equal access to western humanity and that this is, indeed, what we all want to overcome."⁴ The problem with such an assumption is that it risks undervaluing the ongoing struggles by marginalized peoples, especially those outside the West and its world of Man, *for their humanity*, which can be seen as struggles to push humanity beyond its current Western-centric limits but *not* as struggles to overcome humanity as such. Weheliye's remark struck me as pertinent because it captures a part of the critical impetus of David Chandler and Julian Reid's discussion of a controversy involving the indigenous Inuit community of Nunavut, Canada, to which I had referred during my presentation at the abovementioned conference at Sanata Dharma University. According to Chandler and Reid, the Inuit community of Nunavut proposed to "hunt and slaughter the bears in defense of their own human security," after a member of their community was killed while defending his children from a polar bear (the Inuit experience was that, contrary to the mainstream Western knowledge according to which they are an endangered species, there are too many polar bears in Nunavut).⁵ Taking a jab at posthumanist calls to practice multispecies love, and targeting in particular Donna Haraway's "speculative fabulation" in *Staying with the Trouble*,⁶

⁴ Alexander Ghedi Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014), 10.

⁵ David Chandler and Julian Reid, "Becoming Indigenous: The 'Speculative Turn' in Anthropology and the (Re)Colonisation of Indigeneity," *Postcolonial Studies* 23, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1745993>.

⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts,

Chandler and Reid write that the “Inuit of Nunavut have no interest in fostering one of Haraway’s ‘multispecies partnerships’ with polar bears, nor with receiving its genetic material.”⁷ Is this perhaps an indication that in those indigenous worlds often celebrated as distinct from the anthropocentric world of the moderns in their recognition of the reality and dignity of other-than-human beings, there still persists a certain *preponderance*—with all its Adornian complexities—of the human?

Against academic posthumanists who tend toward abolishing categorical distinctions between the human and the animal, the Swedish philosopher Martin Hägglund has insisted on separating human freedom and animal freedom.⁸ Whilst such a distinction might appear unexpected from a philosopher whose earlier works had engaged so profoundly with the thought of Jacques Derrida, who famously had criticized Jacques Lacan’s attempt to distinguish between the human and the animal on the basis of their command of language (and whose reflections on the animal has been influential for posthumanists⁹), Hägglund asserts that even those most strongly opposed to the human/animal dichotomy must commit to a salient difference between human “spiritual freedom” and animal “natural freedom.”

If, today, an insistence on specifically human spiritual freedom—or, as some, though not Hägglund himself, might prefer at this point, *subjectivity*—appears outmoded, this certainly owes in part to the immense success of posthumanism in establishing itself as the “cutting-edge” theoretical-practical perspective within the academic world. In fashioning themselves as representing the intellectual supersession of the limits of anthropocentric and humanist paradigms, posthumanist discourses tend to insinuate that any apparent “return” to humanism today would be tantamount to a conservative or regressive gesture of those unwilling or unable to come to terms with new realities opened by technology, human and non-human entanglements, or the ethical-political demands of other-than-human beings. However, if, as Weheliye suggests, posthumanism assumes “Man,” or some approximation of that notion, to be the last incarnation of

Anthropological Voices (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 134.

⁷ Chandler and Reid, “Becoming Indigenous,” 499.

⁸ Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019).

⁹ Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

humanity, then posthumanism would run a comparable risk of elevating a humanism that broadly aligns with liberal humanism as the most developed stage of humanism achievable, were it to decide in advance that any attempt to restore a certain centrality and specificity to the human vis-à-vis other-than-human beings is, as such, regressive.

In the end, the simple truth of the matter is that posthumanism does not monopolize the passage beyond existing forms of humanity and humanism. On the contrary, some of the most important and innovative thinkers in European philosophy of the past three decades have sought to think humanity or humanism entirely distinct from, if not antithetical to, liberal humanism. Writing on Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux, Catherine Malabou, Michel Serres, and Bruno Latour, some of the most prominent French philosophers who had risen to prominence within that period, Christopher Watkin argues that if the ideas of the human that emerge in their works are “neither humanist nor antihumanist in the way in which those terms are usually used, then neither are they posthumanist.”¹⁰ Owing to Badiou’s reinvention of notions often maligned within both liberal humanists and posthumanist discourses—such as eternal and universal truths, terror, discipline, and communism—his text represents perhaps the most straightforward and provocative instance of a kind of “humanism” distinct from any dominant ideological humanisms that simultaneously distances itself from posthumanist thought, about which Badiou himself has expressed no interest to date.

As one commentator puts it, Badiou elaborates “a philosophical anti-humanism in order to provide a framework for a type of reinvigorated practical humanism.”¹¹ To use a term that Badiou himself occasionally employs, Badiou’s stance—which is, of course, far from any sort of liberal humanism but is also not posthumanist, as shall become clear shortly—might be defined as *in-humanism*.¹² While Badiou himself does not seem to refer to it explicitly, Jean-François Lyotard’s thesis that “what is ‘prop-

¹⁰ Christopher Watkin, *French Philosophy Today: New Figures of the Human in Badiou, Meillassoux, Malabou, Serres and Latour* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 4.

¹¹ Ed Pluth, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 125.

¹² Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 178.

er' to humankind" is being "inhabited by the inhuman [*l'inhumain*],"¹³ I would like to suggest, insinuates a certain sense of the inhuman that is relevant for Badiou as well. Within the Badiouian text, the inhuman dimension of the human might be understood as that which allows human beings to ascend "out of the abysses of finitude,"¹⁴ that is, to break from their enthrallment to the everyday *qua* merely "animal" beings (I should note that Badiou's pejorative deployment of animality in his works has raised the ire of some posthumanist thinkers¹⁵). Conceptualizing the subject not as consciousness or person but as a realization-in-progress of the transformative effects and novelty in a given situation that compose a *truth*, Badiou holds that "human animals" can "rouse or resurrect [themselves] as Immortals" through their participation, as subjects, in the "processes of truths" that transform the worlds they inhabit.¹⁶ By establishing the ontological "genericity" of truths and their power to puncture holes in knowledges (so as to new knowledges can come to be) and abolish identitarian differences, while at the same time affirming humanity's inhuman capacity for truths, Badiou's philosophy finally defends the "truth of the fact [that] over and above their vital interests, human animals are capable of bringing into being justice, equality, and universality."¹⁷ But if bringing justice, equality, and universality into being constitutes the inhuman possibility that paradoxically is the most properly human, as per the aforementioned sense of in-humanism, then the humanity that has fallen short of doing so is *not quite humanity*. In fact, Badiou goes as far as to declare: "Humanity, prior to the real forms of egalitarian politics, simply does not exist, either as collective, or as truth, or as thought."¹⁸

If Badiou's reflections on humanity are followed, the critique of the human of humanism as the universalization of a particularistic, exclusionary, Eurocentric notion ("Man"), cannot be regarded as a critique of hu-

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 2.

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths*, trans. Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 101.

¹⁵ See, for example: Wolfe, *Before the Law*, 28.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 513.

¹⁷ Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 87.

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), 175.

manism *per se*. For Man pales in comparison to what humanity can be. The struggle for humanity, to become human or to realize a finite part of the generic infinitude that humanity *is in truth*, has never been confined to the world of Man and is necessarily alien to any ideological humanisms hitherto known. Emmanuel Levinas, observing the rise of the anti-humanism in French philosophy (a rise whose beginnings might be traced to Claude Lévi-Strauss's critique of Jean-Paul Sartre), remarked: "anti-humanism is right insofar as humanism is not human enough."¹⁹ From the perspective of those who continue to think radical possibilities of humanity but without allowing the latter to dissolve in the posthumanist wave of "more-than-humans," Levinas's remark would merit a contemporary update: *posthumanism is right insofar as humanism is not human enough*.

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Though the debate between humanism and posthumanism might appear to be an unusually abstract topic for an editorial introduction to a non-thematic issue that is traditionally reserved for a short summary of the articles published in that issue, I am inclined to emphasize that, as a journal that identifies as a "journal of humanities," *Retorik* must remain attentive to the transformations in the research in the humanities in an era that enjoins researchers to think posthumanities beyond humanities. Might Vol. 11 No. 2 of *Retorik* contain the beginnings of a reply from the positionality of a humanities journal to the question of what humanities research means today?

In this issue of *Retorik*, the posthuman condition is the explicit theme of Helmi Naufal Zul'azmi's contribution, "Posthuman Conditions in *Mon-grel* (2021) by Sabda Armandio." In his reading of a recent work of Indonesian speculative fiction serially published online, Zul'azmi examines the work's portrayal of a community in which a dichotomic, hierarchical, or confrontational division between humans and nonhumans are overcome, as well as its sober messages on how capitalistic exploitation, too, may reinvent itself with the advent of the posthuman condition. But if its focus on the posthuman condition appears to set Zul'azmi's contribution thematically apart from other contributions in this issue of *Retorik*, it should also be

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 182.

emphasized that the one of the enduring lessons of humanities is precisely that the *human* in humanities never was and never will be *just* human. For the human is intersected by the capitalist process of commodification that relentlessly colonizes possibilities opened by technological advances, as Elisha Orcarus Allasso's contribution, entitled "Stand Up Sinden: Commodification in Shadow Puppet Shows and Youtube Live Streaming," investigates in the context of *wayang*. Human existence in the Global South is conditioned by the "unsettled business" of postcoloniality, as evinced by Ivo Trias Julianno's article, "Antonio José Bolivar is Us: Image of the postcolonial subject in Luis Sepúlveda's *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*." In "Detattoo: The Contested Embodiment of Identity," T.A.R. Dewanti examines the practice of tattoo removal, which reveals the fleshy surface of a human body to be a contested site between individuality and piety, wherein the latter is called forth by a dimension that wholly transcends the former. But if the demand to reorient one's action sometimes is experienced as a demand from the transcendent above as in the case of piety, such a demand can as well emerge from relatively more mundane, material circumstances.²⁰ One such circumstance is the subject of Dominikus Sukristiono's article, "Examining Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Work Is Not Always Good," in which the author contests a highly valorized notion within the academic world, which has also had significant implications apropos research funding and publication opportunities.

Articles in this issue of *Retorik*, regardless of whether they engage explicitly with posthuman themes or not, show how processes such as religion, history, and market reducible neither to the human individual nor to the human collective, act on the human being, exerting forces that the latter cannot entirely master. Subject to such forces, human beings are *dislocated*. Yet, that dislocation paradoxically points to the proper place of the human. Unless it were dislocated by processes or forces that exceed itself, a human being could not emerge in its condition *as subject*, in so far as subjectivity implies failed objectivity.²¹ The impossibility of human-

²⁰ Material conditions also affect subjective responses to demands, if not the very possibility of a response. One of the recent articles in *Retorik* has explored the force of ethical demand in the context of late capitalist society. See: Laurensius Bagus Winardi, "The Specter of Radical Demand: Ethical Subject in the Shadow of Reflexive Impotence," *Retorik: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 10, no. 2 (2022): 107–25, <https://doi.org/10.24071/ret.v10i2.5742>.

²¹ I base this idea on my reading of Ernesto Laclau. See: Min Seong Kim,

ity, as individual or as collective, to finally achieve objectivity—a self-same humanness, as it were—ensures the possibility of a future in which it will have become *otherwise*. If this is right, could it not be said that the *human* that concerns the humanities, in so far as humanities research is never merely a descriptive enterprise, had always been the human that is non-identical to itself, that the human of the humanities was *always-already* other-than-human?

I will close this editorial by noting that this issue of *Retorik* contains an interview as well as a book review. The interview with the Yogyakarta-based artistic collective Taring Padi was originally conducted as part of the collaborative work between me and Heronimus Heron in the aftermath of the controversy around their work at Documenta Fifteen.²² The interview, which discusses the collective’s political orientation, creative process, and the events of Documenta Fifteen, is published in full in *Retorik* with permission from Taring Padi. The book review by Krisnawan Wisnu Adi provides a summary and evaluation of Taomo Zhou’s *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War*, first published by Cornell University Press in 2019. In principle, interviews are commissioned. However, prospective interviewers and interviewees are encouraged to submit proposals to the editor. Book reviews are highly valued at *Retorik* and unsolicited book reviews will be considered for publication, provided the reviewed book is reasonably recent (published within the past five years) and its subject matter falls within the focus and scope of the journal.

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²² Our article is forthcoming in *Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya*: Heronimus Heron and Min Seong Kim, “Insiden Penurunan Banner *People’s Justice* di Documenta Fifteen dan Tidak Mulusnya Komunikasi Antar-Budaya,” *Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya* (forthcoming).

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