The Problem of the Knowing Subject in Anthrozoologies of the Future

Stephanie S. Turner
UW-Eau Claire

In *What is Posthumanism?* (2010) Cary Wolfe undertakes a careful untangling of the knotty problem of the many “different and even irreconcilable definitions” (p. xi) of the term. These definitions of posthumanism can be broadly distinguished as systems of thought that decenter human subjectivity and practices that enable such decentering to occur. This is a subtle but important distinction. In the Western philosophical tradition, the knowing subject can never entirely escape itself, and thus will always to some extent be inside its own knowing even as it tries to establish an outside from which to see things objectively, “for what they are”—or, as I will be considering here, for what they might be, based on what is already known. Therein lies the sticky wicket. In framing this problem, Wolfe critiques the historicist strain in contemporary literary and cultural studies that tends to neglect examining its own ideological underpinnings. So, for example, when we critically examine the problem of an anthropocentric view of humans as categorically distinct from other living things—even ones that look and act a lot like us [slide 1]—we may also neglect to critically examine our equally humanist assumption that anthropocentrism impedes some notion of “progress.” Shouldn’t we still be evolving?

Wolfe’s most significant contribution to rethinking the knowing subject in *What is Posthumanism?* is his exploration of the engagement of posthuman modes of thought with Derrida’s “question of the animal.” A humanist subject position is by definition an anthropocentric one, and anthropocentrism is an especial problem for animal studies, for it limits thinking about subjects and histories through the human (Haraway, 2008, pp. 66-67). Some may well argue that this is just about the only option we have. [cite something here—Dennett, 1995?] Yet as Kari Weil helpfully observes in *Thinking Animals*, “thinking begins in the space between the animal I am and am not.” In the process of collapsing the category distinction between human and animal, we find ourselves in a new space that Weil identifies as being “at the foundation of thinking [by which I think she means rethinking] the ethical” (2012, p. 21). And, as Wolfe insists, Derrida’s “‘animal question’ is an integral part of the larger question of posthumanism” (p. xxiii), a mode of thinking in which we are faced (in Emmanuel Levinas’ sense of the word; ctd. in Wolfe 2010, pp. 146-47) with an ethical obligation to, at the very least, contend with that question. Posthumanist subjectivity,
Wolfe advises, requires thinking of, through, and with animals to critically examine humanist assumptions that, I will argue here, tend to unduly domesticate the largely non-human narrative of life on Earth before, during, and especially after, humans. In this paper I look for phenomena that both enable and obstruct posthumanist modes of thought in a number of speculative fictions about the world without people. I consider the problematic subjectivity of the narrators in these speculative works and the epistemological potential of speculation itself as a posthumanist tool. Who are the narrators in these literally posthumous posthuman Earths? What can such subjects see and know, and what might remain unseen and therefore outside of their (and thus our) view? This itself is destined to remain a speculative, that is, not fully answerable, question. So with that in mind I must also ask, to what extent does speculation, with its reliance upon mediation—for a spectacle must be “taken in” and subsequently “reported out”—inhibit its potential to imagine the sort of non-human realm that successfully resists the domesticating influence of the narrator? In what sense can it be said that the non-human realm—which is, after all, nearly everything—imagines itself when we’re not looking? These are tantalizing questions. They gesture toward Wolfe’s call for a mode of thought that constructively reflects on what thought itself “has to become” (2010, p. xvi) to decenter the human from such grand narratives as evolution and deep time; they hint at the space of posthuman possibility between “the animal I am and am not.” At the same time, however, in their very telling these accounts inhibit such reflection and restrict such space. Speculative fictions like Alan Weisman’s book *The World Without Us* (2007), the History Channel’s *Life After People* (2008), National Geographic’s *Aftermath: Population Zero* (2008), and Animal Planet’s *The Future is Wild* (2003), by overstating the conspicuous absence of the
knowing subject, suggest the intractability of the anthropocentric view. Even in the absence of 
an observer these works tend to shoehorn natural historical space-time into a neat humanistic 
package of categorically predictable outcomes. For example, in The World Without Us, our 
technology ripples forever outward in the form of intergalactic radio waves (Weisman, 2007p. 
274), while in The Future is Wild the promising wildness of an Earth finally devoid of all human 
traces hundreds of millions of years from now is tamed down in the symmetrical looping back 
to a new Pangea, implying a brand-new Eden and a sequel. In their stubborn 
anthropocentrism and utopian reset, however, these speculative fictions are also indicative of 
Wolfe’s notion that posthumanist subjectivity presents us with an ethical mandate to 
acknowledge that what must be witnessed is not only “what we cannot see” but also “that we 
cannot see” (2010, p. 167). It is this problem with seeing, vis-à-vis the representation of non-
human animals in these works, that I want to explore further.

In large part the “animal question” in posthumanist thought has to do with seeing how 
cultural artifacts are made to look, that is, undertaking a critical examination of 
representational practices that frame or delimit the non-human in humanist ways. Addressing 
the animal question in the context of contemporary art, Wolfe contrasts the more or less 
humanist works of Sue Coe with the more or less posthumanist works of Eduardo Kac. Wolfe’s 
aim is to examine not so much the content of the artwork as the representational strategies the 
artists use to create it. He asks, “When contemporary artists take nonhuman animals as their 
subject—our treatment of them, how we relate to them, and so on—what difference does it 
made that those artists choose a particular representational strategy?” (2010, p. 145). What
difference does it make, for example, that in Coe’s illustrations, industrial farm animals about to be slaughtered confront the viewer’s gaze, while in Kac’s works the viewer is virtually unable to see the biological content, whatever it is and whatever it may be doing? In the various “worlds without us” portrayed in the speculative fictions I’m considering here, non-human animals become the bereft subjects in a secular “left behind” scenario in which they must contend with our sudden and inexplicable disappearance. The sympathetic spectacle of their loss is a point I’ll consider in more detail below. For them, it matters not how the top predator species has disappeared. For us, however, the whole point of such speculation hinges on the inexplicability and totality of our disappearance. The lack of any sort of human spectator from within the narrative is what distinguishes these four works from the long tradition of other works that imagine a posthumous planet. Further, no apocalyptic event occurs to explain *Homo sapiens* away. There’s no one “on the beach” in these not-quite-apocalypses, not even any zombies. In *The World Without Us*, for example, Weisman ticks off a list of possible apocalyptic scenarios (“nuclear annihilation”; a “poisoned or parboiled” planet; any of assorted other “mass terrors”) only to brush them all aside and invite us to imagine instead “human extinction [as] a fait accompli. [. . . ] a world from which we all suddenly vanished. Tomorrow” (2007, pp. 3-4). While Weisman’s recitation of the familiar litany of anthropogenic catastrophes and subsequent dismissal of them may be the ultimate bait-and-switch strategy, the other works establish the scenario with less fuss, the quicker to delve into the narrative action. “This isn’t the story of how we might vanish,” explains the narrator in the opening of *Life After People*, as we see lights going out, bridges crumbling, and skyscrapers collapsing to the ground in a spectacle of urban decay porn (Jendrysik, 2011, p. 46). “It is the story of what happens to the world we
leave behind.” *Aftermath: Population Zero* takes a slightly different approach, one that comes closer to engaging a posthumanist mode of thought: “The only way to fully understand the scale of our influence is to witness the world without it. [...] Enter a desolate world.” Here, by being specifically invited to witness the desolation, the viewer is being held accountable. Yet how can such a seemingly impossible subject position be occupied? Greg Garrard (2012), in his discussion of novels and films that imagine a world “completely and finally without people” (p.40), describes such works as “disanthropic,” a characterization that is part “ordinary misanthropic hatred of ‘the crowd’,” part oddly satisfying contemplation of deep time fast-forwarded (pp. 41-42). In effect decentering the human subject in order to reclaim it, these works comfort us with the rather mundane thought that “life goes on even we don’t” (Taylor, 2012, p. 280). After all, everything dies, including entire species, we now know, and even our own, eventually. However, that we should take comfort in our own inevitable extinction stands in stark contrast to our current anxiety regarding the extinction threat faced by so many of the planet’s non-human animals. This, to me, seems a noteworthy shift toward what thought “has to become” in a posthumanist ethics, as the equation of human extinction with the extinction of non-human species seems to decenter human subjectivity.

So what does happen in a world without us? More to the point, what happens to the non-human animals left behind, how do we spectacularize their loss, and what difference does that make? Time scales figure prominently in all of these works; even without people there to keep track of time, the world without us is segmented into distinct periods. *Life After People* takes a rather modest approach, tracing the posthumous action only as far out as a thousand years, while *Aftermath: Population Zero* imagines further, to 25,000 years “A.H.” (After Humans). [slide 7--timeline] For Weisman in *The World Without Us*, not even the sky is the limit; as you can see on this timeline of post-human extinction events taken from the book’s companion website, our technological impact in the form of radio transmissions into deep space will still be detectable as far into the future from now as “forever” (which comes right after 5+ billion years on the timeline). Like contemplating the Zen koan “if a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” Weisman’s intergalactic radio signal, a uniquely human trace that would only “make sense” if perceived by some other entity of comparable sentience, seems to collapses the duality between subject and object. As far as we know, there is no one out there to contemplate any trace of our absence.

As for the non-human animals we’ve left behind in the immediate “A.H.,” the more proximate they are to the non-event of our disappearance from the world, the greater the pathos of their plight. [slide 8] In this still from *Aftermath: Population Zero*, for example, we see an escaped zoo camel wandering a cemetery, perhaps at dusk, possibly in mourning for their absent keepers and for those zoo visitors that like to look at them—at least, that is the connotation that the grave markers create. While we may worry that the animals we have domesticated would suffer the most in our sudden absence, this is not necessarily the case.
Herein lies a productive tension between what we want to see and what might actually unfold. *Life After People* explores this predicament first for the Queen of England’s corgis, trapped in a 775-room mansion, and then for Texas’s “state breed dog,” the blue lacy. In both cases, man’s best friend proves to be more adaptable than we might think.

Soon enough the corgis find their way out of that mansion and thrive “in a posthuman Britain” with neither natural predators nor rabies, becoming, after a mere five decades, “not a breed the queen would recognize,” if in fact a breed at all. And in this clip from *Life After People*, we see the survival skills of the lacy dog from the viewpoint not only of the breed expert, but from the dog itself as it enthusiastically—and successfully—navigates its new circumstances. (The odds seem to be against the Lone Star state’s cat population.)

The question of which non-human animals would survive, and in what kinds of habitat, serves as an illuminating counter-conceit to the parade of crumbling infrastructure that tends to dominate in these accounts. Weisman’s strategy is to frame his book with glimpses into two of the few relatively untouched habitats on Earth, the Puszcza Białowiesza, [puschtah bieloveska] Europe’s last remaining wilderness, and the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. Weisman’s emphasis on the species-density of these areas, though not inaccurate, reflects a rather narrow view of non-human others as consisting mainly of the mammals we prey upon, the Puszcza, for example, home to “weasels, pine martens, raccoons badgers, otters, fox, lynx, roe deer, elk and eagles” (Weisman, 2007, p. 10). Describing these pocket Edens as nearly perfect, except for their traces of human influence, the author relies on an anthropocentric view of nature as separate from and inherently besieged by humans. As Mark Jendrysik (2011) notes in his essay “Back to the Garden: New Visions of Posthuman Futures,” what makes the view that “nature will
survive us only if we disappear” problematic is its presumption that “humanity can disappear without taking nature along with it” (p. 42). This is, of course, the problematic duality of culture and nature that, at its worst, sanctions all kinds of cruelty and, at best, inhibits the “critical empathy” that Weil argues is so essential to thinking animals (Weil, 2012, p. 19). [slide 11] Kenn Brown’s illustration of “Manhattan without us” on The World Without Us website—a visual mash-up of urban decay porn and charismatic megafaunal mammals—like a poorly conceived museum diorama, misleadingly portrays the non-human animals as being “out of place” though many of them are the very same species that already share our habitats. Implausibly returning the absent viewer’s gaze from their various vantage points amid the posthuman urban jungle, these non-human others remind us that we have never been all that separate. Humanity is not, as Jendrysik reminds us, “outside the natural order” (p. 43)

The duality of nature at odds with culture is additionally problematic in that it function as a narrative device in these works that fuels the action. Nature, personified and now liberated with Homo sapiens out of the picture, is intent on extracting her revenge for the havoc human culture has wreaked. Yet Nature’s response too seems equally violent. As the narrator in Life After People, bluntly explains, Nature is “poised for an outbreak of violence and chaos, disease and disaster.” Hoover Dam without human oversight? There goes the neighborhood! Those 60 million U.S. hogs bred for slaughter? In no time, they’ll “break out into the wild,” where they’ll breed with feral hogs, becoming “leaner, meaner, and more mobile.” Without us, Nature is that much wilder. Even in the absence of humans, the nature/culture divide endures. This seems to be a problem endemic to the speculative mode itself, which looks on possible events that are contingent on humanist premises—e.g., wildness is what happens apart from and after culture. [Thus the vacillating tendency of posthuman subjectivity, i.e., we can only catch glimpses of the “natural” (if we can see it at all) because it’s only half of the equation.]

Premising and contingency are problematic in the speculative mode in other ways, too. The urgency to provide the mixed results of our extinction is mediated, in all of these works, by a scientific premising and presentation of likely outcomes. In Weisman’s book, the speculative mode is tempered by an accumulation of facts culled from experts that mask the omniscient narrator’s impossible subject position as the only one left to tell the tale of a de-peopled world. In fact, it is Weisman’s journalistic conveying of the facts through quotations from the experts he interviews that provide the most substantive information. The omniscience of a detached narrator simply conveying the facts as they are reported to him is further strengthened by Weisman’s global mobility. This vantage point enables him, as the disembodied narrator, to travel the world left without us, identifying corroborating evidence of what happens afterward among experts in diverse locations. [develop example] According to Simon Estok, this narrativizing of science in what are essentially ecophobic works [link to disanthropy] (2010).
The equation of mediated seeing with partial knowing is one formulation I want to emphasize here. All of these works mediate what we see of a posthumous planet from the vantage point of an omniscient narrator able to travel the globe to witness and report on the spectacle of a de-peopled planet. To some extent that narrator is the authoritative voice of science giving a reasoned account of the grand narrative of evolution, in which the ultimate of life forms and habitats can be reasonably predicted, including their ultimate extinction. [say something about the research influencing each of the works; “Rocks don’t lie”; this accounts in part for their gripping realism.]

[transition to the mediation via CGI, and the uniqueness of The Future is Wild in terms of time scale, the REALLY complete absence of H. sapiens (i.e., no urban decay porn), and the eventual extinction of all mammals by 200 myh. The likelihood of a post-mammalian future significantly ups the ante of a posthuman future; it forces us to contend with the possibility that such a literally posthuman future is not just “about us.” The fact that mammals receive so much of the focus in human-animal studies is no accident; mammals like elephants and kangaroos seem more like kin to us than do, say, non-mammalian invertebrates like scorpions and coral.

**Conclusion—Improbable Witnessing**

Situating us as improbable witnesses to a posthumous natural history, these works reflect an anthrozoological anxiety that we can link directly to the posthuman animal question as it contemplates, to paraphrase Derrida, an animal that cannot look back, because either it, or we, are no longer there. This anthrozoological anxiety is especially poignant given the gains we have made over the last few decades in understanding the considerable scope of non-human animal capacities. Just as we approach the point where we might be able to meet the animal gaze on something like mutually negotiable terms, non-human animals are disappearing at an alarming rate. By most accounts, we are in the midst of a mass-extinction event on a scale similar to that of the species die-off 65 million years ago at the end of the Cretaceous Period, which resulted in the extinction of nearly two-thirds of Earth’s species. However, while it is generally agreed that that event was caused by a large meteor crashing into the planet, the current mass-extinction event is generally agreed to be anthropogenic (Boulter, 2002). Meanwhile, the population of our own species continues to grow, with mid-range estimates topping nine billion people on the planet by 2100. Though not necessarily related in a causal way, these species-level population changes together inform the felt need to imagine the living world without people.
In this paper I identify moments of a specific type of improbable witnessing, with a witness in absentia both in place and in time. The moments in which humans are there and not there in relation to non-human others are the most nearly posthuman moments, in the sense they attempt to surpass anthropocentric ways of knowing. Witnessing, Weil comments in Thinking Animals, is inextricably linked not only to the acknowledgement of the (non-human) other, “whom we cannot presume to know,” as well as to the acknowledgement of trauma, the ethical obligation that Wolfe observes to distinguish between what we cannot see and that we cannot see. It is traumatic not to see, to be out of the picture, as in these works. At the same time, it is traumatic to contemplate non-existence—that of other animals as well as our own. Thus these works remain only partially posthumanist, yet thoroughly anthrozoological, either with or without us.

References


