

# Posthumanism and Darwin in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Contemporary Conceptualization of Theatre and Performance

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## Abstract

Over the years, there has been a turn in the academy that is adopted as the postmodern era which encompasses the posthumanist, and a shift within it to new materialist, and affect theories. Human-dominant influence over natural elements such as flora and fauna, non-human animals, material, and immaterial objects is subjected to a radical shift. The innovative understanding of science and technology plays a crucial role in this current wave. Posthumanist thought comes in contact with a human-centered society, however, proposing a decentralized approach to the way humans perceive themselves in the environment. The politics at play here is not anti-humanist but a revisiting and acknowledgment of the environmental entities that make up the human space. Therefore, this paper takes an expository inquiry, querying if the knowledge of Darwin's evolutionary theory can be applied to the understanding of artistic performance through a posthumanist approach. Also, does posthumanism and the evolution of contemporary performance have what it takes to affect and effect the desired modification, granting agency not only to the human animals but to other non-human entities? Hence, humans must learn to coexist in the ecological space sharing power amongst things, plants, non-human animals, objects, and other forms of technological creations. Methodologically, the online library sources provide primary data for this research with a selection of works by three posthumanist performers to be analyzed. This research is pivotal to the artistic application of biology and technology, as tools in solving contemporary performance-related issues amongst humans, the organic and inorganic matter.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism and Evolution, Posthumanist Performance, Theatre and Aesthetics, Space and Technology, Cyborgs and Non-human Animals, Flora and Fauna, Objects and Care, Organic and Inorganic Matter.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: THE POSTHUMANIST TURN

With its appearance within the seventies, posthumanist study fixed its critique in enlightenment rationality and rendered the era and beliefs one in which the human becomes independent from the nonhuman entity. Posthumanism is considered a prospect from the hangover of enlightenment thought as it is part of enlightenment and a critique of it. Posthumanism demolished the sovereign and central human subject, unraveling the divergence between subject and object, human and animal, person, and thing [<sup>1</sup>]. Posthumanist study turns to the Enlightenment as a structure and a good example of the absurdities of humanism. It was/is an era that advocated for human freedom and individualism whereas institutionalizing regimes were

oppressive to those values, and the most notable is the abolishment of the transatlantic slave trade which it earlier created. Thus, enlightenment reasoning becomes posthumanism's dialectical opposite [<sup>2</sup>].

Specifically, posthumanism critiques humanist rational thought with a concentration on humans and the autonomous human subject of modernism. Hence, posthumanism aligns itself effectively with postmodernism, questioning reasoning, truth, science, aesthetics, and perfection. This is done to deconstruct and redefine what specifically it means to be human. Posthumanism is not anti-humanist however in keeping with the ideas of Cary Wolfe, it is a discourse that "comes both before and after humanism"—a discourse that surrounds humanism, circumscribes it, by

<sup>1</sup>Samantha Pergadia, "The Rise of Animals and Descent of Man, 1660–1800: Toward Posthumanism in British Literature between Descartes and Darwin by John

Morillo (Review)," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 53, no. 1 (2019): 134.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 134.

destabilizing its basic premises philosophically, and “naming” its approaching obsolescence historically...” [3]. In a posthumanist cosmology, human thought is hollow. A posthumanist could be a person that challenges principles, and the means that they can become vulnerable.

Robert Pepperell asserts that three parts comprise the state of the posthuman era. First, we have the end of a human-centered universe. Second, the posthuman condition regards the evolution of life, both genetically and mechanically, that does not essentially mean the extinction of the human species. Third, posthumanism issues itself with how we tend to live [4]. These exemplifications of the apparent degradation of humanism are formed in all equal and animal rights movements. Posthumanism has to do with the “recognition that none of us is distinct from one another. To harm anything is to harm oneself” [5].

Wolfe asserts that a posthumanist discourse steps back from “the human” to think about how its definition depends on external factors; we should acknowledge if we tend to be posthumanist, that the human is “fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with numerous styles of technicity and materiality, forms that are radical ‘not-human’ and nonetheless have made the human what it is” [6]. This is evident through the appearance of artificial body elements in human animals. There has been an advancement in the creation and fitting of prosthetic hands, limbs, legs, etc. within the twenty-first century, making humans match into the outline of a machine e.g., a cyborg.

Nico Wood purports that the central project of a posthuman discourse is to directly challenge Protagoras’s proclamation and grant agency to non-human subjects (e.g., marginalized human “others,” animals, plants, the Earth, or even machines and cyborgs) [7]. The cyborg which is both organic and mechanical becomes a type of charm to posthumanism, with the understanding that the application of prosthetics revolutionizes contemporary humans as an individual in constant interaction with machines and the environment. Here, this paper aesthetically revisits the ideas of Charles Darwin and his influences on posthumanist thought in contemporary theatre and performance.

<sup>3</sup> Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxv.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Pepperell. “The Posthuman Condition.” (Bristol: Intellect, 2003), 171.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xxv.

<sup>7</sup> Nico Wood, “Devising Cybernetic Fruit: A Posthuman Performance Methodology,” *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 11, no. 7 (2012): 113.

## 2.0 Darwinian Evolution Theory in Relation to Posthumanism

In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin is set on destabilizing the concept that humans are the sole species capable of applying tools justifiably when he asserts that:

The promptings of reason, after very short experience, are well shewn by the following actions of American monkeys, which stand low in their order. Rengger, a most careful observer, states that when he first gave eggs to his monkeys in Paraguay, they smashed them, and thus lost much of their contents; afterward they gently hit one end against some hard body and picked off the bits of shell with their fingers. After cutting themselves only once with any sharp tool, they would not touch it again or would handle it with the greatest caution (Darwin, 74).

Darwin delineated the employment of primate tools, through Johann Rudolph Rengger, and this can be essentially ennobling. As an example, the primates do smash the eggs, yet they eventually learn to not smash them. Also, once the monkeys cut themselves with sharp things, they eventually learn to not try this again. Not simply the tool use, but the meticulousness with which these primates process tool use raises them to a near-human level. Posthumanist critics align with Darwin as they suggest that humans, the central figure, are simply a biological derivation and an ontological fiction of language.

The posthumanists dissociate themselves from the noted claim by the classical Greek theoretician Protagoras that “Of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not” [8] rendered merely as “Man is the Measure of All Things”. To this end, Karen Michelle Barad argues that essential posthumanism “does not presume that man is the measure of all things,” nor does it “presume the separateness of any-‘thing,’ not to mention the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart [9]. This means that in a posthuman worldview, humans are neither central nor completely individual.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua J. Mark, “Protagoras of Abdera: Of All Things Man Is The Measure,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Barad. “Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter.” *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), 136.

In a related vein, Darwin noted that humans do not seem to be the only species that can express internal and external emotions. There are certain emotions that humans cannot fully express externally. On this note, Darwin opines, Man himself cannot express love and humility by external signs, so plainly as does a dog, when with drooping ears, hanging lips, flexuous body, and wagging tail, he meets his beloved master. Nor can these movements in dog be explained by acts of volition or necessary instincts, any more than the beaming eyes and smiling cheeks of a man when he meets an old friend (Darwin, 22).

For Darwin, non-human creatures share many of the communication skills of humans and sometimes possess a particular assortment. Darwin noted that some variety of emotions is due primarily to habit, however, are partially modifiable by the organism's will. Other kinds of behavior by the animals are first performed consciously, and it later becomes a matter of habit. From Darwin's assertion, one can deduce that useful adaptations also involve the modification of the environment by the organism in keeping with its abilities for expression, and therefore the modification of habits.

From a posthumanist perspective, Antonio Damasio claims that there is nothing unique about human emotions since there are numerous non-human creatures having emotions in abundance. While there are emotions that are distinctively human, distinctively dog, distinctively fish, etc., outward signs expressed by emotions run deep into the evolutionary past [10]. Therefore, if all animals can realize the sense of a complete situation and express that sense outwardly, why should they be excluded from the processes of language, inquiry, communication, performance, etc.? Darwin also identifies outward emotional expression in insects when he states that even insects express anger, terror, jealousy, and love by their stridulation [11].

### 3.0 Conceptualization of Performance from a Posthumanist Point of View

In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin writes about external communication amongst species cohabiting within society. He purports that,

...With social animals, the flexibility of intercommunication between the members of the identical community ---- with other species, between the choice sexes, likewise as between the young and old – is of the easiest importance to them. This will be generally effected by means of the voice, but it is certain that gesture

and expressions are to a selected extent mutually intelligible... (Darwin, 64).

There is a level of conscious and unconscious intercommunication through actions and sounds between humans and other species in the environment. This brings posthumanism to the fore and the evolution of performance in human and non-human species. Pramod K. Nayar identifies two frames for outlining posthumanism which is beneficial to the consideration of contemporary aesthetic performance. Firstly, Nayar asserts that the term “refers to the ontological condition within which many humans now, and increasingly will, put up chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and/or in close conjunction (networked) with machines and other organic forms” [12]. Secondly, it refers to “a new conceptualization of the human” that endeavors “to move beyond the conventional humanist ways of puzzling over the autonomous, self-willed individual agent so to treat the human itself as an assemblage, co-evolving with other kinds of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology” [13].

Every aspect of human action is potentially conceivable as performance during the performance turn of the twenty-first century. Hence, the various sorts of human actions including everyday behavior are considered as performance. However, the posthumanist performances which will be critiqued for the aim of this discourse are restricted to the aesthetic performances inherent within the arts. This includes those performances that are processed, organized, or framed per the objects of research in theatre studies, related endeavors like performance studies, and art practices like performance art. The focus is on existing and emergent performances that may progressively demand more interface between human and nonhuman entities. Animals, plants, and intelligent machines as performers and dynamic hybrids are conceivable in performance or aesthetic performance.

### 4.0 DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS: A PICTORIAL AND THEATRICAL ANALYSIS OF EMERGING POSTHUMANIST PERFORMANCES

The contemporary period has witnessed an increase in the decentralization of the cultural hegemony of human dominance over the environment, thanks to this current wave of posthumanist thought and discourse across agencies. As such, there has been an evolution within the conventionality of contemporary theatre performance practice and study. Performance should be thought of in an exceedingly aesthetic sense that

<sup>10</sup>Antonio Damasio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. (New York: Harcourt, 1999), 35.

<sup>11</sup>Darwin, Charles. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, (London: J. Murray, 1872), 321.

<sup>12</sup>Pramod K. Nayar. *Posthumanism*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 3.

<sup>13</sup>Nayar. *Posthumanism*. 4.

interconnects the human and non-human entities together in a shared theatrical space and time.

This section of the paper critiques contemporary performances from a posthumanist perspective. I selected three performance practitioners useful to this discourse supported by a variety of online research materials, audiovisuals, and pictures found to be resourceful for this discourse. These posthumanist performers include Christopher C. Collins, Alys Longley, and Erik Sprague.

#### 4.1 Christopher C. Collins

The first posthumanist performance is Christopher C. Collins' "Animal Parade." Collins's research foci include environmental communication, communication theory, and aesthetics. His basic approach to research is based on posthumanism critical cultural studies and performance. Collins's first performance of the "Animal Parade" was in the year 2016 at the Hopkins Black Box Theatre at Louisiana State University with the title "Animal Rites". An adapted performance was presented in 2017 at the Stillwell Theater at Kennesaw State University, and

again at the Patti Pace Performance Festival at Louisiana State University. A third adaptation was presented in 2017 at the Interpreters Theatre at the University of Northern Iowa [14].

Collins' "Animal Parade" highlights ethical concerns on how we initiate relationships among humans, nonhuman animals, and so on the environment. The performance uses posthumanist theory, through aesthetic performance, to handle how discursive structures produce, limit, or rehabilitate humanist assumptions that result in ecological abuse. Hence, supporting such anxieties, the live performance challenges audiences to reexamine performative and nonlinguistic rituals of care to handle problems with the Anthropocene. The performance of "Animal Parade" becomes an element of a posthumanist future whereby, there is a repeated reminder that our posturing is relational bodily compartments that seek to deny the basic animality of our humanity. The performance of "Animal Parade" is split into scenes that have the Penguin and Icebergs, Inherit it All (Figure 1), Dance of the Jellyfish (Figure 2), etc.

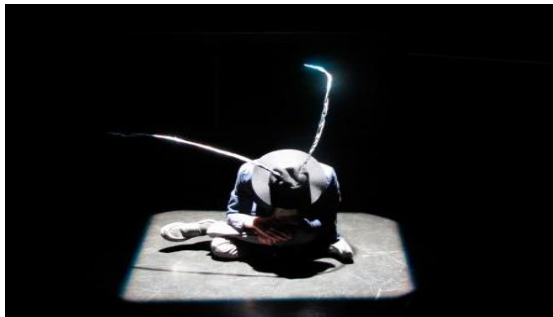


Figure 1



Figure 2

The performers and narrators of "Animal Parade" present a conundrum for interpretation as they represent and embody both human and non-human animal features in equal time and space. Animal Parade serves as a preliminary incursion into the posthumanist space with its performative and productive blurring of the hierarchy between humans and animals. This aesthetic performance of "Animal Parade" juxtaposes and highlights the eerie similarities and eccentricities between humans and non-human animals. Through his posthumanist works, Collins proposes that anthropomorphism is not confined to only the way humans imagine themselves in animals. Instead, it is the acceptance of a shared worldly condition, reciprocal and entwined lives of multispecies performance.

#### 4.2 Alys Megan Longley

The second posthumanist performance to be analyzed is Alys Megan Longley's "The Fluid City

Project". Longley is a lecturer, researcher, and performance maker. Her current research interests include performance writing, interdisciplinary projects, art and ecology, ethnography, narrative research, somatic education methods, and inclusive dance education [15]. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Dance Studies Program at the Faculty of Creative Arts and Industries, University of Auckland, New Zealand. She led the performance writing project alongside other collaborators, "Fluid City" which is an art-science-education project on water sustainability. In 2012, the project was staged in a high-density populated area of Auckland's waterfront.

Longley believes that if the understanding of 'language' is extended to creative practices like design, dance, visual art, music, and performance, there will be a good extension of what humans are ready to articulate, know and share in relationship to space, place, and

<sup>14</sup>Christopher C. Collins, "Animal parade," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2019): 160.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.creative.auckland.ac.nz/people/dance/a-longley>



meaning [16]. Such practices also carry an effectual resonance that allows complex, positive, playful, and imaginative responses to ideas around sustainability and ecology. Longley worked with (New Zealand-based?) Charlotte Sunde, Kathy Waghorn, Jeffrey Holdaway, and Paula Kramer in the development of this



**Figure 3**

The “Fluid City Project” contains moving images of life in water and texts that appear small and lightweight when folded, and about the scale of a letter that may slot in a customary envelope. The texts crease and flow off from themselves, little rivers formed by the processed flesh of pine trees and designed to be held. These are rivers performing with paper bodies of images, ideas, and words. Each of the samples of performance writing emerged out of Longley’s intention to make a distinct map of a felt relationship to space, time, sense, and fluidity [17]. The creative movement provides an instance for considering how posthuman relations provide insights into developing dance, aesthetic performance, and performance writing.

Conversely, these new approaches to dance, performance, and performance writing will provide insight and answers to propositions around new materialism and posthuman relations. This aids in engaging the diverse public to puzzle over the roles, values, and wishes of water. Audiences are propelled to think about waterways needs and what is needed from waterways essentially, for daily living. Longley and her team developed methods for creating through site-

performance piece. Longley’s performance texts “Moving Writing Living River Book” (Figure 3), “Driving out of Parihaka”, and the found poem on “brittle maps” (Figure 4), were part of the mappings of the “Fluid City Project.”



**Figure 4**

specific art practices. The performance spaces are specially created to impress human bodies to sense water and feel their co-extensiveness with waterways.

In explaining her performance work, Longley noted that every one element of her research, from dancing to talking to developing works for pages, are considered as a documentation of time. Thinking in this manner allowed her project to decentralize and move beyond traditional boundaries where the performance work is at the center and the documentation is the satellite [18]. She equally considered dance, score, writing, drawing, and photography as a documentation of time, hence, dissolving the binary relations between research and performance.

#### 4.3 Erik Sprague

Fans understand Texan Erik Sprague on-stage and known professionally as the Lizardman. (Figures 5 and 6) Posthumanist performances naturalize both human and non-human animals. For instance, Lizardman performs in his modified body as entertainment, thereby changing himself into an object that ironically portrays both nature and culture.

<sup>16</sup>Alys Longley. “Communicating Water Sustainability through Interdisciplinary Creative Practice: The Fluid City Project,” <http://sustainablepractice.org/2015/04/01/communicating-water-sustainability-through-interdisciplinary-creative-practice-the-fluid-city-project/>

<sup>17</sup>Alys Longley. “Skeleton Boat on an Ocean of Organs” and other stories: understanding and evoking posthuman relations through site-based dance, somatic practices, performance writing and artist-books.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2016): 237.

<sup>18</sup>Alys Longley, “Skeleton Boat on an Ocean of Organs,” 242.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Lizardman articulates a critique of traditional performance modes as a precise part of his work, while other modified bodies perform an implicit critique by the merit of their eccentricity. Lizardman performed from 1999 through 2001 with the Jim Rose Circus Sideshow and one among the five sideshows that toured the country at the end of the twentieth century [19]. The sideshow featured inborn exceptional bodies alongside those modified by choice, demonstrating unusual skills like fire-eating, sword-swallowing, and feats of strength, agility, or endurance.

Michael Chemers argues convincingly that a lot of sideshow performers possess skills and professional accomplishments comparable to entertainers whose appearances fit social norms, but who often enough attract fans through their kind of freakishness [20]. Chemer explains that the freak performer inhabits the borders of the human and is related to the cyborg and the non-human animal. These categories exist to bracket off forms of life to define humanity. Olga Solomon did remarkable research on this subject, and she states that there lies the potential for canine facilitation of human interaction, for instance, dogs have been used therapeutically for nearly fifty years.

Ultimately, Solomon asserts that dogs perform social actions that are “highly anticipatory, unhurried, structurally simple and straightforward to interpret,” thus creating a well-organized background for interaction that helps children with autism to simply anticipate the following move [21]. The habitual action by dogs happens over and over, thereby, permitting the kids to follow being intentional, and intersubjective agents.

<sup>19</sup> Carlson, “Furry Cartography: Performing Species,” 199.

<sup>20</sup> Michael M. Chemers, *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 114–16.

<sup>21</sup> Olga Solomon, “What a Dog Can Do: Children with Autism and Therapy Dogs in Social Interaction,” *Ethos* 38, no. 1 (2010): 157.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

Darwin states *On the Origin of Species*, that “...the structure of every organic being is related, in the most essential yet often hidden manner, to that of all other organic beings, with which it comes into competition for food or residence, or from which it has to escape, or on which it preys” [22]. Hence, Shauna M. MacDonald in agreement, asserts that posthumanism takes the question of “others”—human and nonhuman—quite seriously, requiring a rethinking of the politics of exclusion and difference [23]. Therefore, the question of, however “others” are formed should be modified, since humans do not seem to be plausibly separate or rather transiently separable from other non-human entities.

Conclusively, Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus suggest that posthumanism ought to be thought of as “a paradigm for care” [24]. This sense of feeling connotes close and important attention to the considerations of human and non-human entities inside the biological and technological environments. Thus, humans are responsible for continually providing for the sustenance, maintenance, and protection of these entities.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Darwin. *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection, or, the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. (London: J. Murray, 1859), 80.

<sup>23</sup> MacDonald, Shauna M. “Performance as Critical Posthuman Pedagogy.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2014): 169.

<sup>24</sup> Stefan Herbrechter, and Ivan Callus, “What Is a Posthumanist Reading?” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2008): 109.

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  - Figure One: Preacheracha Antennas, Performer – Gregory Langner, 2016. Christopher C. Collins. Sculpture. Cardboard, metal wire, glue, felt. Photo by artist. (300 DPI)
  - Figure Two: Squibster, Performer – Patrick McElearney, 2016. Christopher C. Collins. Sculpture. Yarn, foam, plastic, cotton. Photo by artist. (300 DPI)
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  - Figure Three: Moving Writing Living River Book created by Alys Longley, Jeffrey Holdaway, and Paula Kramer. (2016) Source: Photo by Jeffrey Holdaway

- Figure Four: Brittle Maps River Book created by Alys Longley and Jeffrey Holdaway. (2016) Source: Photo by Jeffrey Holdaway
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