



UNIVERSITY OF
PLYMOUTH



Plymouth Institute of Education
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business

2021-05-24

A humanist university in a posthuman world: relations, responsibilities, and rights

Jocey Quinn *Institute of Education*

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

General rights

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

Take down policy

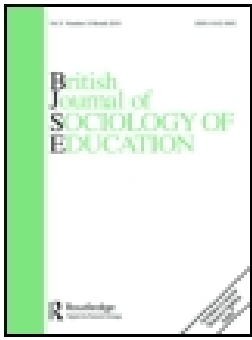
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please [contact the library](#) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/pioe-research>

Recommended Citation

Quinn, J. (2021) 'A humanist university in a posthuman world: relations, responsibilities, and rights', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, . Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1922268>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business at PEARL. It has been accepted for inclusion in Plymouth Institute of Education by an authorized administrator of PEARL. For more information, please contact openresearch@plymouth.ac.uk.



A humanist university in a posthuman world: relations, responsibilities, and rights

Jocey Quinn

To cite this article: Jocey Quinn (2021): A humanist university in a posthuman world: relations, responsibilities, and rights, British Journal of Sociology of Education, DOI: [10.1080/01425692.2021.1922268](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1922268)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1922268>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 24 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 146



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

A humanist university in a posthuman world: relations, responsibilities, and rights

Jocey Quinn

University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the entanglement of humanism and posthumanism within the Western European University, focusing on ethical implications and the role of the university in protecting the marginalised. To illustrate its arguments, it draws on a small study conducted in an ancient Italian university which specialises in Humanities and Social Sciences. The paper focuses on two key knotty issues: relationships between university aspirations to posthumanism and the colonial legacies of humanism, and the implications of holding on to humanism as a guarantor of human rights for marginalised people. It concludes by discussing the limitations of a posthuman ethics of responsibility and proposes instead a posthuman ethics of rights for the university.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 April 2020

Accepted 15 April 2021

KEYWORDS

Posthumanism;
humanism; universities;
ethics; Italy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the complex relationship between humanism and posthumanism in a Western European university context and to focus specifically on the implications for protecting marginalised people, such as migrants. In addressing this issue neither a linear progression, nor a corrective model should be assumed. An easy shedding of a false humanism in search of a pure posthuman future is not possible. Posthumanism is already here but so too is humanism and there is no neat resolution: ‘we are already in the middle of the posthuman condition, its forces already entangled in the humanist fibre of our lives and thinking’ (Taylor 2016, 7). Humanism and posthumanism collide and co-mingle, it is not possible to disentangle them. Posthumanism is ‘only new in the sense that it puts humans back into the thick ontological and political relations in which they have always already been networked’ (Snaza and Weaver 2014, 43). At the same time, a humanist worldview is historically embedded in the Western European university, profoundly shaping how these relations are understood. The university is one of many loci where this paradox is lived out, but since it has a shaping power in defining knowledge, it plays a significant function in buttressing humanism or facilitating a more posthuman mentality. I will discuss how the relationship between humanism and posthumanism in the university can be understood, and to support my discussion I will draw on a small study conducted in an ancient Italian University which specialises in Humanities and Social

Sciences. The paper focuses on two key issues: relationships between university aspirations to posthumanism and the colonial legacies of humanism, and the implications of holding on to humanism as a guarantor of human rights for marginalised people. It concludes by discussing the limitations of a posthuman ethics of responsibility and proposes instead a posthuman ethics of rights for the university.

Background: humanism/posthumanism in the Western European University

Multiple forms of university exist globally: civic, private, technical, vocational, digital with different histories and publics (Holmwood 2017). However, the type of ancient Western European university considered in this paper plays a particular role in the university imaginary because of its mythical cultural status and its colonial history. Such universities have been given symbolic and material authority in producing and certificating the ‘ideal’ educated human. As such they may be considered one of the guarantors of a certain pervasive construction of the human as bounded, agentic, and superior to all other forms of matter. Taylor (2017) distinguishes between the English university tradition of Newman and the German of Humboldt, arguing that one produces elitist individuals and the other humans with a sense of civic responsibility, which could be built upon to produce a ‘posthumanist *bildung*’. However, in both traditions the desirability of being an educated person is never in doubt. Education has what Snaza (2013) calls an ambiguous and doubled role: it is only for humans, but without it we can never be fully human. In making this human the Humanities and Social Sciences have historically had a certain privileged status in the Western university.

Much of the sociological literature casts an elegiac tone, lamenting the ways in which universities have become shaped by a business model with the onus being on profitability. The consensus is that universities are not what they once were, or might hope to be, given the hegemony of neoliberalism (see, e.g. Evans 2020). Theorists such as Hassan (2017) roundly defend the Enlightenment values of reason and the centrality of the human against digital ways of being in the world, which are perceived as profoundly unnatural. He argues ‘the university must be defended not as a mere sector of economic activity, a “worldly space,” but as an unashamedly special institution, an “unworldly space” that has a unique place in the conception, formation and diffusion of knowledge’ (73). Using ‘worldly’ as a pejorative would be questioned by thinkers such as Bennett (2010) whose concept of ‘vital materiality’ suggests here is nothing wrong with the world, and everything human and non-human is an essential part of it. The drawing of hierarchies and the role of the university in making distinctions between the ‘unashamedly special’, between educated humans and their knowledge institutions and the rest, is under question in posthuman literature. Whilst much sociological literature suggests universities have been propelled into an alien and alienating landscape, the way that the human within them is perceived seems comfortably humanist: still a rational creature, still the one the world revolves around. Even the strong body of feminist theory, critical race theory or queer theory that has challenged dominant constructions of university life still places the human at the centre (see, e.g. Bhopal 2018; McMahon, Harwood, and Hickey-Moody 2016; Quinn 2004).

Humanism is not monolithic, and neither is it always on the side of power. Those considering the university from a decolonising perspective such as Andreotti et al. (2018) interrogate who and what the university serves globally, critiquing Western humanist

assumptions and practices; whilst retaining a focus on the marginalised human subject. They call on techniques of reimagining and rethinking that are familiar to posthuman literature (see the university experimentations outlined in Taylor and Bayley 2019); suggesting that lines of demarcation cannot easily be drawn. Recognising that Western European humanism provides the excuse for colonialism as a civilising move, with universities the agents, Dussel (1993) offers another form of humanism for the university. It is one which still endorses 'reason': 'We do not deny the rational kernel of the universalist rationalism of the Enlightenment' (75) but it is a 'reason of the Other', facilitating transmodernity: 'an incorporative solidarity, ... between center/periphery, man/woman, different races, different ethnic groups, different classes, civilization/nature, Western culture/Third World cultures' (76). From a posthuman perspective, whilst problematising the humanism of the Western European university, this vision is still constituted of binaries. What is missing from his list of the neglected 'others' are other forms of matter such as animals and birds, trees and plants, seas and rivers, machines and objects. The human remains at the centre. A university sustainability agenda does exist, which might be expected to decentralise the human, but instead is rather a form of managerial survivalism: what Alaimo (2016) calls 'sustainable this, sustainable that', a patching together of activities rather than a fundamental conceptual overhaul.

Nevertheless, posthuman thinking is growing, problematising human-centric institutions and practices including the university (Weaver 2010; Snaza 2013). Even those who take quite a neutral tone regarding humanism, critique its tendency to universalise and idealise the human (see Philipps, 2015, e.g.). As bodies and machines become increasingly entwined, Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) appears even more visionary, and the epistemological challenges of emerging transhumanism ever more acute (see, e.g. Sorgner 2020). Philosophical and methodological concerns in the posthuman literature on education include whether the post-human is educable (Pederson 2010) and how posthumanism shapes educational research (Taylor and Hughes 2016). Snaza (2013, 50) argues cogently for 'bewildering education' a pedagogy that practices openness to new relations across all forms of being. Within the field of Higher Education Mazzei (2016) generates a communal 'voice without organs' in her research with women academics in the USA, Taylor and Gannon develop diffractive methodologies to explore time and academic labour across the UK and Australia (2018), Murris (2016) constructs posthuman pedagogies in South Africa and the contributors to Taylor and Bayley (2019) explore a range of experiments in international Higher Education. Siddiqui (2016) considers how the Humanities curriculum in Canada might respond to posthumanism, whilst Weaver (2010) proposes moving curriculum studies into liberal arts or science faculties. Braidotti (2013b) optimistically argues that new interdisciplinary formulations such as 'Death Studies' (2017) are means by which posthuman formulations can flourish in the university of the future.

The difficulty of thinking beyond humanism within Western universities is fully acknowledged in this posthuman literature. Indeed Snaza (2013), argues that the weight of humanism prevents him from coming to any conclusions at all. Braidotti's affirmative approach, whilst producing a sophisticated reckoning with the 'posthuman humanities' (2013b) has been critiqued for its utopianism (Ringrose and Renold 2016). As Colebrook (2016, 104) argues, the 'capacity to have an ongoing truth or ethics of the future — such as justice to come—does retain an archival past that may or may not be retained'. Indigenous thinkers have access to different traditions that facilitate their critiques. In Canada, for example,

Higgins and Madden (2019) use indigenous knowledge to ‘contest the illusion of neutrality and the “pedagogy of placelessness”’ (294) that shape universities. However, respecting these perspectives does not equate with being able to use them with ease and posthuman thinkers may be caught uncomfortably between appropriation or false suggestions that posthumanism is inherently new.

A humanist/posthumanist paradox

The key problematic that I will explore in this paper is: would a move from the Western European construction of ‘the human’, the humancentric worldview and the traditions and values that stem from it, have a negative impact on rights and social justice for marginalised and vulnerable people? This is a question for the Western European university because its ethos has been to act rhetorically as an institution on the side of justice and as one of the protectors of rights; whilst at the same time often being a bastion of privilege and an arm and agent of colonial power. The university is what Rose (1993) calls a ‘paradoxical space’. It has afforded opportunities to produce academic critiques of its own inequalities and injustices in terms of gender, race, class, but it also goes on reproducing them. Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences is funded to address social problems and to foster positive impact on communities, yet the terms of engagement do not permit radical change. The notion of ‘the vulnerable’ is also not straightforward. From a posthuman perspective vulnerability, and consequently ethics, is not confined to the human (Barad 2007). All forms of matter may be considered vulnerable. In this respect to focus uniquely on the humanly vulnerable is short-sighted and ignores the interdependence of all matter. However, the vulnerable human, such as the migrant is enmeshed in more than human forces such as climate change: in effect there is no duality and separation between vulnerable human and planet and so every reason to focus on persons. Moreover, as Tamboukou (2020) argues, some posthuman theories produced in the university, such as Braidotti’s optimistic figure of the free female ‘nomad’, may act to deny material suffering; in this instance that of women migrants. I have consistently struggled with the challenge posthumanism faces in promoting its non-hierarchical, non-humancentric view of the world, whilst grappling with persistent systemic inequalities which persecute many humans (Quinn 2013a, 2013b). Untangling the ethics of humanism and posthumanism in the university is not helped by the fact that there is little empirical exploration of this issue. This paper uses the case of an ancient Italian university that specialises in Humanities and Social Sciences to help explore this paradoxical entwining of humanism and posthumanism. It asks where to situate the rights of particularly vulnerable humans such as refugees and considers what the role of the university might be at this time of crisis.

Researching in Italy

The research informing this paper took place in 2017 in a small regional university in Italy: one of the oldest universities in Europe, which draws on both a Renaissance humanism of art and culture and an Enlightenment humanism of reason. It was chosen because of its specific focus on Humanities and Social Sciences and for its motto ‘l’umanesimo che innova’: Innovation through Humanism. Both aspects made it an ideal location for my research

question: how are humanist universities engaging with a posthuman world? This is a university caught firmly in this dilemma of how to be posthuman and how to preserve a humanist legacy. Pastore (2019, 5) paints this issue in human capital terms, noting 'the disparity in demand (technical) and supply (humanistic)' across the Italian system. However, the question is also philosophical and cultural. Coming from the UK to live and research in Italy was itself a complex move. I was an outsider in this university, but an insider due to previous knowledge of the area and international research networks (see McNess, Arthur, and Crossley 2015).

Literature on posthuman methodologies has resisted the concept of reflexivity as suggesting a unified self that can reliably be fixed in place and returned to. In contrast Barad's (2007) notion of diffraction suggests that there can be no space between researcher and their research within which to reflect, all is enmeshed. Nevertheless, as Bennett (2020) argues, although the self may be considered relational not unified, and researcher and research enmeshed, there are flows into and out of these relations that affect what can be known and how. Her vision of the I as 'a porous and susceptible shape that rides and imbibes waves of influx-and-efflux but also contributes an "influence" of its own' (p xi) comes close to representing my own understanding of the process of being a 'human'. As a researcher the position I occupied was on the cusp, still imbued with a humanistic belief in rights, social justice, and equality, whilst interested in posthuman possibilities for rethinking the world. As a person with a traditional education in the Humanities and a nostalgic love of Italy, part of my desire was to immerse myself in the very world I sought to critique: a world somehow exotic but also familiar. I had much invested in the perpetuation of this university tradition, yet at the same time the questions raised by posthumanism seemed to me both urgent and interesting and I was somewhat frustrated by the lack of empirical work within posthuman literature. There were limits to my ability to undertake this task. In contrast to an indigenous thinker, I did not have the decolonised eye capable of fully perceiving the layers of oppression that had built the European university. All these factors created limits that I need to recognise throughout, without ever expecting that ambiguity can be resolved.

The university

As one research participant claimed: 'when you walk through this little city you have the feeling of a renaissance city, a late medieval city so the thing that goes through your mind is humanism' (academic, Economics). For posthuman thinkers, territories, land, or sea, are not backdrops, they are actors that help produce what is possible for the living creatures that inhabit them and do so in intra-activity with those creatures. In this university both the rural location and the cityscape make themselves particularly present. This city, one of many picturesque, walled places in the region, occupies a hilltop looking down across agricultural land to mountain ranges and across farms and various forms of small industry to the sea. The landscape made itself epistemologically present: 'See out of the window, those are mulberry leaves, something just green, but we need multiple disciplines to understand them' (academic, Culture and Heritage). Yet the city of my research also exemplifies the problems currently facing Italy. There are beautiful buildings and historical treasures with calm views from the hilltop position; but some of these buildings have been damaged by earthquakes. The ancient hall usually used for graduation and other significant occasions is currently under repair. The university buildings are prominent in the city, and theatre

and classical music are readily available, along with expensive designer clothes; but there is much visible graffiti and neglect in the side-streets and alleys. The same small number of African migrants repeatedly wander the streets begging: a constant reminder of the precarious existence suffered by those who survived crossing the Central Mediterranean to Italy (see McMahon and Sigona 2018). The dangerous lure of the past competes with fears of the future, in this city and across the country. Thus, right wing forces have gained power in Italy: fuelled by a racist backlash against migrants, by poverty and decline and by a sense that the political system is corrupt and dysfunctional (see Jones 2018). The ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic have hit Italy particularly hard and will only exacerbate these conditions. Reforms initiated by the university Rector in 2012 and embodied in the motto 'l'umanesimo che innova', explicitly aimed to engender a positive vision for the future, whilst maintaining strong links with the past. In all, the town and university are microcosms of global issues whilst also illustrating the shaping power of local situated positions.

The educational pathways of young people in Italy are notoriously haphazard and protracted. All those with a high school diploma are eligible to enter university and as unemployment is high very many do. Employment is a scarce commodity in Italy: even temporary and low-waged jobs are not readily available and student experience of work is minimal (Pastore 2019). Once at university they take much longer to graduate than in most European countries and the high dropout rate has been a serious concern for some time, both nationally and within the EU (Aina, 2013). Pastore (2019, 13) paints an alarming picture: 'At the university level, dropout (55%) and delayed graduation (40%) are the rule. The consequence is that most young Italians find a permanent job in their thirties'. Academic jobs are also a problematic issue, the high level of competition meaning that most academics work in universities at long distances from their homes. Both national promotion processes for those wishing to become full professors and national funding for institutional research, depend on the VQR process, the Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca (see ANVUR, 2016). Consequently, there are deep schisms between regions and institutions (Mateos-González and Boliver, 2019). The marked lack of confidence in public institutions and democracy is nevertheless matched by a pride in Italy's heritage and a sense that universities are part of that valuable past. Thus, there are tensions in Italy when it comes to making the kinds of university changes implied in 'l'umanesimo che innova'.

The study

The small study which I have used to help illustrate my key arguments involved a two month Visiting Scholarship resident at the university. As such, it was a moment of privileged absence from the normal demands of full-time job and family. It included reading key national and local documents in Italian and English, attendance at university meetings, observation of some lectures and seminars, exploration of the material spaces of the university and the city, informal meetings with colleagues, two group discussions with post-graduate students, and in-depth interviews with twelve members of staff. These included academics from a range of disciplines: philosophy, education, law, culture and heritage, history and economics, and staff with key leadership roles, the previous rector, and administrative managers. They covered a wide age range from thirties to sixties, both women and men. Interviews mostly lasted for an hour and a half, in person in English, taped and transcribed by me. Full information was given about the study and ethical consent secured. All

contributions have been anonymised and data is securely stored. The interviews were open-ended but included some discussion about their role in the university, their thoughts about the university motto and their understandings of and views on post-humanism. Thanks to the excellent English of most participants the interviews were productive. In retrospect, I wish I had been confident enough to conduct interviews in Italian, as this would have opened the study to more people and lessened any sense of English global colonisation. It had the effect of limiting the sample to those who might be considered more cosmopolitan and created a hierarchy and a set of exclusions. Support staff such as secretaries and cleaners were not included in the potential sample because of the focus on academic issues, but again this perpetuated hierarchies and assumptions about where knowledge lies. Both limitations to the study might be ascribed to the very engrained and insidious humanist set of assumptions and practices that I sought to critique.

Methodological debates about how to engage in post-qualitative, posthuman (Taylor and Hughes 2016) research in education have revealed both the difficulties and the excitements of this endeavour. As St Pierre (2016, 26) asks: 'why is it so difficult to inquire differently?' In this paper I have focused on the entanglements of humanism and posthumanism, and my small study was also such an entanglement. Like Somerville (2016) I position myself as a committed empirical researcher, situating my research as occupying a mixed terrain, both ethnographic in form and with posthuman leanings in respect of what it attends to. My study was 'always in response to call from something, however, non-human it might be' (Bennett, 2010). It paid attention to space, bodies, objects, memories, affects and was alert to what Maclure calls the 'glow' of 'non-propositional' data 'that have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us' (2013, 661). I followed my data as 'data events' (Gale, 2014), as moving, not fixed and stable. However, I knew the capacity to form and reform was not unlimited. Forces I have already alluded to: migration, employment opportunities, right-wing populism, national HE policy and procedures all have a structuring capability. Agency may be distributed but it is not equal. Ultimately, I cannot claim to have conducted a posthuman study, there were too many traditional qualitative aspects for that. Moreover, when it comes to posthuman claims of pursuing a 'flat ontology' I have serious doubts that this is ever possible. A hierarchy exists the moment that I initiate a project, even though it can be said that the project called and created what I call 'me'.

The 'posthuman reality' and the colonial legacy of the university

As I have argued, there is an entanglement of humanism and posthumanism within Western European universities and this plays out on struggles over their survival and debates about what forms of knowledge are now valid. These are particularly troubling times for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Employability agendas call into question their utility, advances in science and technology undermine their validity and authoritarian regimes engineer their disappearance. One of the first actions of the right-wing populist government in Brazil was to propose eliminating funding for the university disciplines of Philosophy and Sociology (see Guardian Journal, 1st May, 2019, 2). In arguing that the university is not just business like any other, Collini (2012) mostly defends his own discipline of English Literature from attack. A university specialising in humanities and social science such as the one in my study runs the risk of perceived irrelevance in a world where employability is seen as the goal of a university education and European funding processes do not favour

these disciplines (see Pederson 2016). The university was actively struggling with this crisis, attempting a subtle repositioning whereby the skills of humanism could be repurposed as tools of innovation. ‘Maybe you don’t teach Socrates, or other fantastic writing when you graduate and get a job, but you do something based on what they give to you as a person’ (academic, History).

One of the possible solutions to this crisis of the Humanities and Social Sciences is to embrace posthumanism as a way of knowing the world and to break down traditional knowledge formations to promote this way of knowing. This was stated categorically by the ex-Rector: ‘The first goal for universities is to try to understand, have tools to interpret this reality; the posthuman condition is a reality’. His proposed solutions mirror Braidotti’s suggestions (2017) that the university curriculum should cohere around multidisciplinary ‘Studies’. The ex-Rector was considered a pivotal figure in the university, and it was he who had coined the motto. One could argue that his belief in an external ‘reality’ that universities are in a unique position to understand is itself humanist. However, spoken at the very heart of the university, it places posthumanism in a position of discursive power. His hailing and interpellation of a ‘posthuman reality’ in a sense brings it into being. He is not alone, there are also academics in the university whose research is becoming increasingly posthuman:

‘I think there is a world of biodiversity in knowledge-different forms of skills and knowledge, animals, plants, things that happen in our body that are still very mysterious... In my work I’m more and more fascinated in areas where there is blurry experience delusions, dreaming, drowsiness’ (academic, Philosophy).

However, the material problem seems to be in putting this vision of the posthuman into action, considering the entropy that appears to be part of the legacy of Western European humanism. Although the university has ambitions to create a centre for the study of posthumanism this may prove difficult considering that: ‘We tried to create cross-university research centres, but we failed, we’ll try again’. (Research Manager, Humanities). Whilst those with a transdisciplinary mindset do exist, they are dispersed and sometimes isolated: what one participant called ‘an archipelago not a mass’ (academic, Education). The system of research judgement still: rewards high-ranking individual publications within the traditional demarcated disciplines:

‘It’s a very strict compartment. I have a friend who wrote a book, a very courageous experiment, because they say ‘what is this?! For someone at a junior stage it’s impossible or very dangerous to be creative in this way’ (academic, Economics).

A traditional sedimented Western humanism makes it very difficult to: ‘unravel traditional signifiers that haunt the concept of “quality,” such as logical, normality, purity, objectivity and human-centredness (and) disciplinary boundaries’ (Holmes, 2016, 2). The system is also still driven by an individualist vision of the elite specialist scholar who does not waste time on other activities. Transdisciplinary working synergises with posthumanism, but it may not help build a career path in the current system in Italy. The entanglements of humanism and posthumanism are knotted and extremely difficult to unravel.

As previously discussed, colonial legacies pose a particularly knotty problem. The question of the Western European university’s colonial history has engaged both posthuman thinkers, such as Murris (2016), and those, like Dassel, who seek a reconfigured humanism.

My study illustrates how pervasive and embodied such colonial histories still are and how complex are the emerging ethical issues. I attended an event at the university-run Museum of the School which explicitly aimed to break down divides between the university and the public. As such it is part of a broader drive for community engagement which has become a feature of many contemporary universities. This drive often naively ‘reproduces’ inequalities rather than ‘deconstructing’ them (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2012) and tends to ignore the multiple forms of learning that already exist outside the university (see, e.g. Facer et al. 2018). The university museum had recreated a classroom from the time of Mussolini, complete with original fittings. On the wall was a chilling reminder of hierarchical colonial humanism: a ‘chart of the races’, with the Nordic at the top and the African at the bottom. Such everyday objects were designed to create a bridge between curators and the public, but I could not believe this example of ‘thing power’ (Bennett, 2010, xvi) should be displayed. It seemed by no means dead and empty but just waiting to be redeployed in policing the everyday lives of migrants: a pedagogical tool that had never really gone away. The potency of historical objects and their capacity to do present harm is a question engaging universities internationally, for example, in the #Rhodes Must Fall campaign in South Africa and more recently in movements inspired by Black Lives Matter. The university museum demonstrates the paradoxical sense that the move to connect with the community also contains within it the power to repel and cannot easily be resolved by either humanism or posthumanism,

Another ethical dilemma stemming from the colonial tradition is what global relations should be like in the future and what role the university should take (see Andreotti et al. 2018). Many of those engaged in activism and human rights globally have had a Western humanist university education, but the same is equally true of dictators and tyrants. Embracing a ‘posthuman reality’ may be as much a pragmatic choice as an intellectual one. The university (encouraged by the ex-Rector) had set its sights on China as a distinctive marker of its cultural heritage, but also a valuable part of the ‘posthuman reality’ where Western humanism is no longer globally dominant. The university has historically strong links with China: evident in wall-hangings and objects around the university, in buildings and roads dedicated to famous China experts and in the surprisingly large numbers of Chinese students in the city. This is officially presented as knowledge exchange between equal partners requiring a neutral ‘third language’ (academic, History) of exchange; but it also depends on a colonising history of Western intervention in China. Ongoing relations with China challenge notions of neutrality whatever perspective is taken whether it be economic survival, posthuman concern for the planet, or human rights concerns for the Uyghur people. The university was pursuing relations with China with verve, despite reservations expressed by academics about Chinese human rights violations. Once again tensions about the entwining of posthumanism and humanism throw up concerns about impacts on vulnerable people.

Holding on to humanism in the university: implications for human rights

As previously discussed, the Western European University is saturated with a form of humanism that produces hierarchies: human at the top, but only certain kinds of human. As Braidotti (2013b) points out, women and slaves were not originally members of that

category. What once would have seemed ‘natural’ in the university I studied was now open to interrogation from a feminist wanderer who found herself displaced in time:

Humanities is a large University building near the gate I think of as unlucky. The names of all the classrooms are on the wall: every one is a renowned thinker/writer Shakespeare Dostoevsky, Dante and every single one is a man. (author, fieldnotes)

Nevertheless, as this secular humanism developed so did associated notions of human rights and social justice, with universities seen to protect both reason and the vulnerable. The contradictions that emerge can be seen in my study. Despite the conscious desire to adapt to a world perceived as posthuman, the humanist history of this university has by no means disappeared in a flurry of change. As Colebrook (2016, 103) argues:

we exist within differences and forces that have a power and potentiality beyond the present... even the past we carry with us (such as the archive of philosophy, literature, science, and inscription more broadly) has a capacity to “live on” in the absence of any of its original intentions or forces.

As an ancient institution it was unsurprising that the university saw itself as the current holder of a very valuable humanist legacy. ‘We have a very strong tradition, a very strong reputation. This tradition is very important for us because it makes us who we are’. In this sense, totally repudiating humanism would be like cutting its own throat: ‘Your roots are part of your assets’ (academic, History). Nevertheless, forms of machinic capacity like Haraway’s (1991) cyborg seemed to hang in the wings, only too real and provoking a conscious defence of the human and of human capabilities. ‘If you do research only with tools you may make a discovery, but you don’t know if it is important locally and nationally, if its ethical or not and how it can change society’ (Social Sciences, Research Manager). Whilst I witnessed innovative use of mobile technology in classrooms there was also mourning for the death of the medieval university, where ‘the ideal pedagogic space would be a small, darkened room with a piano’ (academic, Law).

As previously discussed, the Humanities and Social Sciences are often afforded a public role in addressing problems of inequality amongst humans. As such the university presented itself as acting as an agent of protection for the powerless. Fliers for public events on violence against women or seminars on law and migration caught my eye around the university and in cafes and shops. The sense of a suffusing affect inflected by humanism and human rights was also one of the most striking aspects of university life revealed in interviews. More than feelings and emotions, communal not individual, ‘affect is a way of thinking about how subjective experience leaks between one person and another’ (Ringrose and Renold 2016, 225) and influences the space and atmosphere around them. As Robinson and Kutner (2019, 117) suggest, affect is ‘a haunting that is traceable but always slipping’. The humanist university may generate pleasurable affects amongst academics, as the ex-Rector recognised: ‘I said to them you cannot live all the time in your room, but this is something very human for us because as a scholar that’s why you like this job, you need this solitude’. Yet affect may also emerge as horror and fear. As Robinson and Kutner (2019) argue, there is a tendency in the literature to posit affect as always joyful and affirmative, but this is not always so. There was a living sense of European history in this university: ‘In Europe we know what happens when you lose humanism. The Nazis did not care about the Humanities. People were just things’ (Humanities, Research Manager. From this perspective a defence of

humanism is a defence of the most vulnerable and a responsibility towards history. This recoil from turning humans into things produced a declared fear of posthumanism amongst some I spoke to; if people and things both have agency, things might well replace people, and indeed already do. MacLure (2013) talks about the 'glow' of certain data which pulls you to it: for me it was the impassioned voices and sorrowful expressions of participants when they eloquently affirmed the humanistic values of social justice and human rights. This passionate attachment queers any attempt to see humanism as 'out there', a simply outmoded mindset. They felt the world was not humanist enough. 'We need humanism to restore the right balance. At the moment money and finance have been placed at the top and humans at the bottom, that is not right'. (Research Manager, Humanities) 'In our society humans are not valued, they are just treated as collateral' (academic, Politics). For such people, the university cannot be held separate it has a responsibility to act: 'the university and academics can certainly be agents of justice'. Here the university's possible role as a protector of the vulnerable cannot be ignored.

Posthumanism theoretically offers a holistic vision of justice for all creatures, a flat not a hierarchical ontology; but we are not all entering that virtuous circle from the same position. The by-products of the global posthuman world are unemployed humans, modern slavery, refugees, homeless people. It was 'data' that swirled around the university that had the brightest 'glow': the adolescent body of an African girl carrying her baby on the bus, the red burning eyes of the migrant beggar. It would have seemed presumptuous to speak to them, their gaze repelled any such approach. As Tamboukou (2020) demonstrates, it is vital that migrants have the right to their own story. There can be no claim to speak for them here or even about them; yet their potent presence could not be denied. Colebrook (2016, 16) warns that a crisis mode can simply serve to reaffirm the good 'human' as saviour and recuperator. 'The very declaration of hard times—of crisis, emergency, decadence, loss of reason, injustice—enables the pious elevation of the master thinker'. This is a point I shall return to, and I am sure that a deeply embedded desire to be a 'good human', not a bad one, directed my attention. However, the materiality of everyday crisis so evident in Italy, of destitute and desperate people following our footsteps, tugging at our sleeves, demands some response, however flawed. My study suggests that this university is tentatively shifting the human from the centre, whilst simultaneously agonising over where that leaves those who were always on the margins. It led finally to the problem of posthuman ethics and where the contemporary university might stand.

Conclusion: posthuman rights in the university

Posthuman literature is alert to the question of ethics, suggesting that we are caught in a posthuman web of ethical responsibilities (Barad, 2007). Barad argues that it is 'our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly' (2007, x). Davies (2016, 125) too focuses on responsibilities: 'how are we dis/continuous with the world's injustices'. Living justly entails justice beyond the human and a working through of what that might mean. It involves moving the human from the epistemological and ontological centre. Yet the term 'responsibilities' also seems to suggest a knowing figure who might be culpable of being unjust but is never themselves the victim of injustices. There is a trace of Colebrook's 'master thinker' (2016, 16) in this assumption of the mantle of responsibility. The deep attachment to humanism and human rights I witnessed in the university,

combined with the material conditions humans were living through around the city, made me question the validity of such posthuman ethics of responsibility. If the human is no longer at the centre what happens to the marginalised and dispossessed who have never even occupied that central position in the first place: are they now on the margin of margins? Alaimo (2010, 22) is helpful here with her focus on what she calls 'toxic bodies'. Here the marginalised human is brought back to the centre, not as the bounded figure of traditional human rights discourse, but as a fulcrum of myriad more-than-human systems and practices.

Toxic bodies may provoke material trans-corporeal ethics that turn from the disembodied values and ideals of bounded individuals toward an attention to situated evolving practices that have far-reaching ...consequences for multiple peoples, species, and ecologies.

The toxic bodies Alaimo foregrounds are women with breast cancer, but the migrant beggar circumnavigating the university right now is also a body made toxic. He demands from me a relational ethics of rights. Here all forms of matter (whether they are human, animal, plant, mineral) have a right to actions that protect their survival and promote their flourishing. All those that have the capacity to take these actions must do so. Universities would provide unique contexts and mechanisms across disciplines to explore the ramifications and the applications of these principles. The migrant beggar would have the right be an equal member of the (currently very white) university, not an object of its pity, and his knowledge of the world would help shape the development of its knowledge generation as well as its future ethical relations. Although it may seem utopian a posthuman ethics of rights is not an impossibility. As Colebrook (2016, 103) argues:

the very existence of concepts such as justice, democracy and hospitality enable the promise of something beyond all conceived present possibilities: the only impossibility is the determination in advance that certain events would be impossible.

I began this research out of intellectual curiosity; but it has ended with a sense of historical urgency. I flew from Italy and watched the land recede, comfortable in the sense of having completed my self-appointed task. 'Italy like a cauliflower protruding beneath them, extending into a really blue luminous expanse of sea, a green hem by the beaches like boiled glass' (Laing, 2018, 35). Shortly after I left this lovely city, a fascist gunman toured it and shot at every black person he saw. Since then, polarisations and persecutions of vulnerable humans have ratcheted up across Europe. As one of the few possible sources of protection for marginalised people, universities have a key social role in promoting posthuman rights for them and for the more than human world in which they live. This is more urgent than ever at this pivotal moment when Europe is in danger of collapsing into climate chaos and right-wing nationalism.

Disclosure statement

There is no conflict of interest raised by this paper.

Funding

This research was funded by a Matteo Ricci Visiting Researcher Award.

References

- Aina, C. 2013. "Parental Background and University Drop out in Italy." *Higher Education* 65 (4): 437–456. doi:10.1007/s10734-012-9554-z.
- Alaimo, S. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Alaimo, S. 2016. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Andreotti, V., S. Stein, A. Sutherland, K. Pashby, R. Susa, and S. Amsler. 2018. "Mobilising Different Conversations about Global Justice in Education: Toward Alternative Futures in Uncertain Times." *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 26 (Spring): 9–41.
- Anvur 2016. Accessed 15 April 2018. <https://www.researchitaly.it/en/projects/anvur-report-2016-on-the-state-of-italian-university-and-research/>
- Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway-Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant Matter*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J. 2020. *Influx and Efflux*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bhopal, K. 2018. *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*. University of Bristol, Bristol, Policy Press.
- Braidotti, R. 2013a. "Posthuman Humanities." *European Educational Research Journal* 12 (1): 1–15. doi:10.2304/eeerj.2013.12.1.1.
- Braidotti, R. 2013b. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. 2017. *Aspirations of a Post-Humanist*. Keynote, Yale University.
- Colebrook, C. 2016. "What is the Anthro-Political?" In *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols*, edited by T. Cohen, C. Colebrook, and J. Hillis Miller, 81–126. London: Open Humanities Press.
- Collini, S. 2012. *What Are Universities for?* London: Penguin.
- Davies, B. 2016. Ethics and the new materialism. A brief genealogy of the 'post' philosophies in the social sciences. *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. 39, 113–127. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01596306.2016.1234682>.
- Dussel, E. 1993. "Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)." In *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, edited by John Beverley-José Oviedo, 65–76. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Evans, M. 2020. "Navigating the Neoliberal University: Reflecting on Teaching Practice as a Teacher-Researcher-Trade Unionist." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 41 (4): 574–590. doi:10.1080/01425692.2020.1748572.
- Facer, K., K. Dunleavy, K. Salt, D. Bryan, C. Forsdick, O. Kahn, and M. Malek. 2018. *Common Cause Research: Building Research Collaborations between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities*. Bristol: University of Bristol.
- Gale, K. 2014. "Moods, Tones, Flavours: Living with Intensities as Inquiry." *Qualitative Inquiry* 20 (8): 998–1005. doi:10.1177/1077800413513725.
- Guardian Journal 2019. "Humanities Need the Humanities. Societies Need Social Science," 2.
- Haraway, D. A. 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge.
- Hassan, R. 2017. "The Worldly Space: The Digital University in Network Time." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38 (1): 72–82. doi:10.1080/01425692.2016.1234364.
- Higgins, M., and B. Madden. 2019. "Refiguring Presences in Kichwa-Lamista Territories: Natural-Cultural (Re)Storying with Indigenous Place." In: edited by C. A. Taylor and A. Bayley, 293–313.
- Holdsworth, C., and J. Quinn. 2012. "The Epistemological Challenge of Higher Education Student Volunteering: "Reproductive" or "Deconstructive" Volunteering?" *Antipode* 44 (2): 386–405. C 2011 doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00844.x.
- Holmes, R. 2016. "My Tongue on Your Theory: The Bitter-Sweet Reminder of Every-Thing Unnameable." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37 (5): 662–679. doi:10.1080/01596306.2015.1075704.

- Holmwood, J. 2017. "The University, Democracy and the Public Sphere." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38 (7): 927–942. doi:[10.1080/01425692.2016.1220286](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1220286).
- Jones, T. 2018. "The Italian Election." *London Review of Books* 40 (5).
- Laing, O. 2018. *Crudo*. London: Picador.
- MacLure, M. 2013. "Researching without Representation? Language and Materiality in Post-Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 26 (6): 658–667. doi:[10.1080/09518398.2013.788755](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.788755).
- Mateos-González, J. L., and V. Boliver. 2019. "Performance-Based University Funding and the Drive towards 'Institutional Meritocracy' in Italy." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40 (2): 145–158. doi:[10.1080/01425692.2018.1497947](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1497947).
- Mazzei, L. A. 2016. "Voice without a Subject." *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 16. doi:[10.1177/1532708616636893](https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616636893).
- McMahon, S., V. Harwood, and A. Hickey-Moody. 2016. "Students That Just Hate School Wouldn't Go': Educationally Disengaged and Disadvantaged Young People's Talk about University Education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37 (8): 1109–1128. doi:[10.1080/01425692.2015.1014546](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1014546).
- McMahon, S., and N. Sigona. 2018. "Navigating the Central Mediterranean in a Time of 'Crisis': Disentangling Migration Governance and Migrant Journeys." *Sociology* 52 (3): 497–418. doi:[10.1177/0038038518762082](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518762082).
- McNess, E., L. Arthur, and M. Crossley. 2015. "Ethnographic Dazzle' and the Construction of the 'Other': revisiting Dimensions of Insider and Outsider Research for International and Comparative Education." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 45 (2): 295–316. doi:[10.1080/03057925.2013.854616](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2013.854616).
- Moran, J. 2018. "The University: A Guide for Depressives." *Times Higher Education*, March 1.
- Morris, K. 2016. "#Rhodes Must Fall: A Posthumanist Orientation to Decolonising Higher Education Institutions." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30: 274–294. doi:[10.20853/30-3-653](https://doi.org/10.20853/30-3-653).
- Pastore, F. 2019. "Why so Slow? The School-to-Work Transition in Italy." *Studies in Higher Education* 44 (8): 1358–1371. doi:[10.1080/03075079.2018.1437722](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1437722).
- Pederson, D. B. 2016. "Integrating Social Sciences and Humanities in Interdisciplinary Research." *Palgrave Communications* doi:[10.1057/palcomms.2016.36](https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.36).
- Pederson, H. 2010. "Is 'the Posthuman' Educable? On the Convergence of Educational Philosophy, Animal Studies, and Posthumanist Theory." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31: 237–225.
- Philips, A. 2015. *The Politics of the Human*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quinn, J. 2004. *Powerful Subjects: Are Women Really Taking over the University?* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Quinn, J. 2013a. "Theorising Learning and Nature: Posthuman Possibilities and Problems." *Gender and Education* 25 (6): 738–754. doi:[10.1080/09540253.2013.831811](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2013.831811).
- Quinn, J. 2013b. "New Learning Worlds: The Significance of Nature in the Lives of Marginalised Young People." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34 (5): 716–730. doi:[10.1080/01596306.2013.728366](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.728366).
- Ringrose, J., and E. Renold. 2016. "Cows, Cabins and Tweets: Posthuman Intra-Active Affect and Feminist Fire in Secondary School." In edited by C. A. Taylor and C. Hughes, 220–242.
- Robinson, B., and M. Kutner. 2019. "Spinoza and the Affective Turn: A Return to the Philosophical Origins of Affect." *Qualitative Inquiry* 25 (2): 111–117. doi:[10.1177/1077800418786312](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418786312).
- Rose, G. 1993. *Feminism and Geography*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Siddiqui, J. R. 2016. "Restyling the Humanities Curriculum of Higher Education for Posthuman Times." *Curriculum Inquiry* 46 (1): 62–78. doi:[10.1080/03626784.2015.1133220](https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2015.1133220).
- Snaza, N. 2013. "Bewildering Education." *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 10 (1): 38–54. doi:[10.1080/15505170.2013.783889](https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2013.783889).
- Snaza, N., and J. A. Weaver. 2014. *Post-Humanism and Educational Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Somerville, M. 2016. "The Post-Human I: encountering 'Data' in New Materialism." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29 (9): 1161–1172. doi:[10.1080/09518398.2016.1201611](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1201611).

- Sorgner, S. L. 2020. "Postumanesimo. Metaumanesimo, Transumanesimo: Come Andare Oltre L' Humano." *Civiltà delle machine*, Fondazione Leonardo, May 29.
- St Pierre, E. 2016. "Rethinking the Empirical in the Posthuman." In edited by C. A. Taylor and C. Hughes, 25–37.
- Tamboukou, M. 2020. "Feeling the Real: The Non-Nomadic Subject of Feminism, *Theory*." *Culture and Society* 1–25. doi:[10.1177/0263276420942803](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420942803).
- Taylor, C. A., and Hughes, C. Eds. 2016. *Posthuman Research Practices in Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Taylor, C. A., and Bayley A., Eds. 2019. *Posthumanism and Higher Education: Reimagining Pedagogy, Practice and Research*. London: Palgrave.
- Taylor, C. A. 2017. "Is a Posthumanist *Bildung* Possible? Reclaiming the Promise of Bildung for Contemporary Higher Education." *Higher Education* 74 (3): 419–435. doi:[10.1007/s10734-016-9994-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-9994-y).
- Taylor, C. A., and S. Gannon. 2018. "Doing Time and Motion Diffractively: Academic Life Everywhere and All the Time." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 31 (6): 465–486. doi:[10.1080/09518398.2017.1422286](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1422286).
- Weaver, J. A. 2010. *Educating the Posthuman: Biosciences, Fiction, and Curriculum Studies*. Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.