

Introduction

Reworking the Human's Limits

LUCY BOLLINGTON AND PAUL MERCHANT

The protagonist of the Chilean film *Rey* (Niles Atallah, 2017), the eccentric French aristocrat Orélie-Antoine de Tounens, spends much time fantasizing about his ability to transcend the limits dividing his human body from the Araucanian forest in which he finds himself. “*Hijo del agua*” (son of water), he calls himself in the film’s opening sequence, as the spectator sees streams of water leap up from the ground to his fingertips. Later, Tounens communes with the spirits of the forest, strange creatures clad in masks made of papier-mâché, a medium that bears very clear marks of its creation by human hands. Tounens, a historical figure, declared himself “king of Araucania and Patagonia” in 1860. His attempts to forge alliances with Mapuche communities against the Chilean state led to his arrest and deportation in 1862. His subsequent attempts to return to his kingdom were fruitless.¹

Rey is an imagined archive of Tounens’s experiences, presented in a quasi-historical manner on grainy and scratched 16 mm and Super 8 mm film stock.² It is a resolutely cinematic work in the attention it draws to the textures and surfaces of film itself, while also being replete with the gestures and objects of theater (not least of which are its abundant masks). *Rey* thus plays with many kinds of limits: between the human and nature, between the European and the Latin American, between fiction and documentary, and between psychological inner life and external reality. Behind the negotiation of each of those borders, there are questions of power and hierarchy; Atallah’s film refuses to conflate the transgression of traditional epistemic boundaries with the leveling or erasure of

injustices and inequalities. Tounens imagines a kind of posthuman subjectivity that blurs the frontiers between the human and its environment and which is set up in opposition to the scientific positivism of the modern Chilean state. Yet this open subjectivity itself exists in order to further a European neocolonial project, a fairytale kingdom of American nature over which Tounens rules and by which he is seemingly bewitched. *Rey* is similar in this respect to recent Argentine films such as *Jauja* (Lisandro Alonso, 2014) and *Zama* (Lucrecia Martel, 2017), which explore the fragility of human colonial projects and the human psyche when confronted with objects, animals, and people who challenge a prior sense of the order of things.

The essays collected in this volume demonstrate that a critical perspective anchored in this zone of conflict and multiplicity at the edge of what is termed “human” can generate fresh assessments of the ways in which Latin American cultural production has confronted historical, ethical, political, and economic processes. Such cultural production at the edge of the human promotes awareness of the ways in which the decentering of the human subject, now so often invoked as a means of encouraging radical equality across species lines, has also been used as an instrument of oppression and exclusion across history, as we will explain in more detail over the course of this introduction. Questions of power and hierarchy, accordingly, run through each of the three parts of this book: “Necropolitical Witnessing,” “Animal and Plant Entanglements,” and “Ecology, Hierarchy, Horizontality.” We are not the first to suggest that frameworks such as New Materialism, posthumanism, or object-oriented ontology might be mobilized as tools of social critique.³ Our principal argument is that a conceptual focus on “limits” as figures of human-nonhuman relations allows for the opening up of new dimensions to longstanding debates around identity and difference, the local and the global, and coloniality and power in Latin American culture.

Our understanding of the limit is influenced by multiple lines of thought, from necropolitical scholarship to critical engagements with ecology, which we trace over the course of this introduction. One important interlocutor worth foregrounding at this stage is French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who interrogates the limit in his foundational work on the philosophical “abyss” dividing the human from that which the human calls animal (a singular category that in fact contains a multiplicity of beings).⁴ Derrida does not seek to erase the human-animal limit, but rather to “multiply,” “thicken,” “fold,” “delinearize,” and increase this limit so as to attend to “differences” and “heterogeneities” rather than the

“homogeneous and the continuous.”⁵ He coins the term “limitrophy” in order to frame such an approach, defining limitrophy as concerning that which “sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what *feeds the limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it.”⁶ In this vein, our volume incorporates a diverse set of examples of cultural experimentation at the edges, borders, and divides that encircle philosophical and culturally specific productions and frustrations of the human.

The essays collected here engage with a wide range of cultural forms, from the novel and historical chronicles to cinema and installation art, revealing points of contact across time and across media. In the broadest of terms, our contributors rethink the limits of life as the subject of culture and politics in Latin America. Within this field, at least two overarching conceptual perspectives can be discerned. One is the necropolitical loss of human life in spaces marked by extreme violence, and the aesthetic, representational, political, and ethical limitations connected to this loss. The second is the porous and kinetic relationship between the human and the nonhuman (whether animal, mineral, or other) across history. As such, this introduction traces the development of critical discussions around humanism and posthumanism in relation to Latin America, examining a number of areas in which such discussions have been particularly prominent (namely, studies of necropolitics, nonhuman animal studies, cyborg and science fiction scholarship, and ecocriticism). By offering a map of studies to date, we aim to show how the chapters of this book intersect with and contribute to major disciplinary and global debates.

Toward a Latin American Posthumanism?

In an introductory essay to a special issue of the *Revista de crítica literaria Latinoamericana* in 2008, Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues that any application of critical perspectives typically denoted as posthumanist to Latin American culture must take into account the particular development of humanist criticism in the region in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. Sánchez Prado reads the utopian vision of an autonomous cultural public sphere proposed by the Mexican Alfonso Reyes, for instance, as an attempt to “*proveer a la cultura americana de una genealogía histórica consistente*” (provide American culture with a consistent historical genealogy); in other words, to contest a Eurocentric, Hegelian narrative of history that relegates the Americas to a peripheral position.⁷ Sánchez

Prado is not the only recent scholar to recognize that humanism itself is an idea with multiple meanings and multiple locations. Rosi Braidotti, in her overview of ideas of the posthuman in critical practice, notes that “differences of location between centres and margins matter greatly, especially in relation to the legacy of something as complex and multi-faceted as Humanism.”⁸

This complexity is familiar to scholars of Latin American history and culture. To give one prominent and early example, the work of sixteenth-century Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, which Nicole Legnani analyzes in chapter 5 of this volume, has frequently been seen to challenge the racial and geographical limits placed on the human by the Spanish colonial administration and to propose a more capacious understanding of humanity. Yet Legnani argues that Las Casas in fact “queers,” rather than does away with, “the classification scheme performed and produced by coloniality, while, at the same time, remaining—at times—complicit with it” (129, this volume). This queering occurs, Legnani contends, in part through a writing of history “in counterfactuals, that is, the subjunctive mode” (144, this volume). This notion that a questioning of the limits of the human brings with it a questioning of established narratives of history recurs, in this volume, in a range of contexts, from nineteenth-century Brazil to contemporary Chile. One implication of this idea is that the articulation of a *posthuman* perspective, especially insofar as it imposes a particular understanding of historical progression, might not be the only or in fact the most appropriate means of contesting humanism’s undeniable imperial and colonial associations. Indeed, Braidotti asks her readers whether “a residual form of Humanism [is] inevitable, intellectually, politically and methodologically, after all.”⁹ As will be explored in more detail below, the critical variant of posthumanism that Braidotti espouses, which seeks to elaborate “new ways of conceptualising the human subject” rather than to abandon it entirely, has found particular resonance in recent studies of Latin American cultural production.¹⁰ The essays in this volume inscribe themselves within that current. They nonetheless also open up new lines of enquiry, particularly in relation to the narration of history, projects of colonization and other forms of world making, and questions of intermediality and humanity’s ecological entanglements.

So that the contributions of this volume might be clearly perceived, it is worth dwelling a little longer on the historiography of humanism and posthumanism in Latin American culture. For Sánchez Prado, a careful reading of certain early- and mid-twentieth-century cultural criticism in Latin America allows for a critical, decolonial conception of the humanist tradition:

Conforme pasan por la mente nombres como Roberto Fernández Retamar, Ángel Rama y Antonio Cornejo Polar, cabe abrir la pregunta sobre las posibilidades críticas del clasicismo y del humanismo no como la fijación de un canon excluyente, sino como el modelo de recuperación de la tradición americana y occidental como forma de ruptura con las configuraciones del colonialismo y el poder que atraviesan el continente.¹¹

[When one considers figures such as Roberto Fernández Retamar, Ángel Rama, and Antonio Cornejo Polar, it is possible to conceive of the critical possibilities of classicism and humanism not as the fixing of an exclusionary canon, but rather as a model for the recuperation of American and Western tradition as a form of rupture with the configurations of colonialism and power that cross the continent.]

Any elaboration of posthumanism in Latin America, Sánchez Prado states, must moreover acknowledge that the role of the humanities as a critical voice in the public square has not been as diminished in this region as in Europe or North America.¹² The key claim here, in short, is that the apparently temporal value of the “post” in posthumanism cannot apply; instead, new perspectives on assemblages of cultural subjectivity and power can be gained at the intersection of humanist and posthumanist critiques. This claim, which is a key point of departure for this volume, has been echoed in more general terms by other scholars, such as Cary Wolfe, who writes that posthumanism “comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world,” but also *after* in that it “names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks” can no longer be ignored.¹³

The essays collected in this volume show Latin American culture to be a particularly fertile ground for investigating the implications of Wolfe’s assessment. Some work has already been done in this field; Oswaldo Zavala has argued that it is a mistake to see the deconstruction of the subject in the writings of Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others that underpins the politics of (Latin American) cultural studies as an “antihumanist” gesture, but rather as one that opens the figure of the human beyond “man” as authoritative, rational subject (and it is “man” whose erasure Foucault famously predicts).¹⁴ Examining Foucault’s reading of the recursive narratives of Jorge Luis Borges, Zavala