**Sapience + Care: Reason and Responsibility in Posthuman Politics**

***Introduction: Post/humanist Xenofeminism***

Posthumanism can be understood as a position that de-prioritizes or rescinds the privilege of the human in some way – frequently by attempting to think humanity as one element of a wider ecology of interdependent forces. This might be productively framed as a deliberate blurring of the distinctions at the edges of the species – that is, around the boundaries between ourselves and inanimate objects (such as technological devices) on the one hand, and between ourselves and non-human organisms (everything from other mammals to gut bacteria) on the other. Within critical forms of feminist posthumanism, this dismantling of categorical boundaries tends to be accompanied by a forceful critique of the anthropocentrism and speciesism that characterizes much of contemporary theory and philosophy. Rosi Braidotti’s insistence on *‘*expanding the notion of Life towards the non-human or *zoe*’ (2013: p. 50), for example, can in part be seen as a corrective to the historical centrality of *bios*,understood here as ‘a life that is formed, bounded and oriented to what man might make of himself’ (Colbrook, 2014: p. 65).[[1]](#footnote-1) In this article, I will be considering how such an encompassing notion of posthumanism might inform and operate in relation to xenofeminism – a philosophical project confronting the gender politics of technonatures.

First initiated by Laboria Cuboniks (the international feminist working group of which I am a member), xenofeminism, or XF, possesses several broad qualities that might be seen to correspond to the characterization of posthumanism offered above. For example, an interest in the assemblages within which social agents are embedded is apparent throughout 2015’s “Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation” – a manifesto very much alive to the entanglement and co-constitution of silicon-based and carbon-based actors. The text makes frequent reference to current technoscientific conditions, from globalized cultures of e-waste, to the hyperstitional phenomenon of the stock market, to suggestive but embryonic advances in open source medicine. In so doing, it points to some of the ways in which technological alteration might generate radical alterity. At the same time, ‘nature’ emerges as a recurrent force in the manifesto – not as an essentializing underpinning for gender and eco-politics, nor as an immutable onto-theological force, but as a technologized space of collective contestation with the power to fundamentally shape lived experiences. This is perhaps most forcefully captured in the manifesto’s ultimate call to action: ‘If nature is unjust, change nature!’ (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015: n.p.). The subject of xenofeminism, then, is neither woman nor human, if these terms are understood as suggesting discrete entities snipped from the wider fabric of technomaterial existence. Instead, to the extent that it advances ‘a non-dualistic understanding of nature–culture interaction’ (Braidotti, 2013: p. 3), the XF project invites the reader to see it as a call to, and for, the posthuman.

That being said, however, the manifesto also demonstrates considerable debts to some of the key tenets of earlier humanist thinking – not least in its reliance upon ideas such as reason, rationality, justice, and emancipation. This reliance is telegraphed at numerous points throughout the text, from the insistence on reason as an engine of feminist emancipation, to the explicit claim that ‘Xenofeminism is a rationalism’ (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015: n.p.). Given the posthuman trajectory of our approach to gender politics, readers might justifiably question the use of such well-worn concepts. For all its espoused interest in decentreing mankind-as-it-stands or in insisting upon the importance of a fuller range of factors that make up the complex assemblages of the contemporary world, it appears that xenofeminism still sits on the side of the human – an allegiance that we neither name nor interrogate within the manifesto itself. It is from this tension that the current article begins.

When and where do humanist tendencies reassert themselves within the manifesto, and how are readers to navigate this seemingly contradictory post/humanism? What are the affordances of throwing one’s lot in with the human when; *a)* various social groups (including women, queers, and people of colour) have never been granted full access to that category; and *b)* when many important feminist theorists are pushing in different directions – from Braidotti opting to ‘run with the bacteria’ (2015: n.p.) to Hito Steyerl aligning herself with inanimate objects (2010: n.p.)? Crucially, this article seeks to identify if and how certain humanist tropes, tools and ideas might better facilitate the accomplishment of feminist posthumanism’s stated aims. From a xenofeminist perspective, I will argue, qualities typically associated with arrogant anthropocentrism can themselves be reconceived of as potentially aligned with a productive posthuman politics of care. In order to develop this argument, I will begin from the recent writings of Donna Haraway, arguing that her work also finds itself in a somewhat uneasy relationship with posthumanism.

***Posthuman Possibilities: Rejections and Reclamations***

There are many obvious resonances between Haraway’s body of work and the general understandings of posthumanism that I have outlined above. “A Cyborg Manifesto” famously destabilizes the perceived boundary between the organic and the cybernetic as part of a pre-millennial socialist technofeminism, emphasising the idea that the ‘machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment’ (1991, p. 180), whilst also envisioning ‘lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines’ (p. 154). Her corpus also performs the widespread posthumanist manoeuvre of simultaneously challenging humanist values whilst deprioritizing the human itself by insisting upon its status as one actor within an ecology of other forces: ‘No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone: assemblages of organic species and abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too’ (2016, p. 100). However, despite a clear alignment with the broad tenets of posthumanism, Haraway has recently sought to distance her work from this critical position.

In her most recent book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Haraway declares that ‘we are compost, not posthuman’ (p. 55). This claim is connected to her rejection of human exceptionalism, and is folded into her argument for a new image of the future in which we ‘are at stake to each other’ and in which ‘human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story’ (2016: p. 55). We are of course, as *Staying with the Trouble* suggests, finite organisms entangled with other beings and tending towards the same kinds of decomposition as other forms of biological matter. Given how neatly this position slots into an existing framework, however, the motivation for Haraway’s resistance to posthumanism is somewhat unclear. It appears to be intended, at least in part, as a critique of the manner in which certain posthumanist visions of the future continue to position humans at their heart, in a partially disguised or disavowed manner. Within such visions, Man continues on as he has always been (namely, as a locus of innumerable intersecting privileges) whilst being made subject to just enough superficial updates, tweaks, and minimal revisions to pass as something else – something suggestive of his radical transformation.[[2]](#footnote-2) These ‘posthumanist’ projects can therefore be said to shore up the image of the human that they ostensibly seek to depose, whilst continuing to prioritize the species – or at least, its ‘hypothetical wide **“**descendants**”’** (Roden, 2015: p. 22) – above all other manifestations of the material forces of the web of life.

Haraway’s rejection of this designation, then, can partially be framed as an extension of her vehement refusal of anthropocentrism, and of her insistence upon including a wider range of actors within the purview of her political project. Certainly, this kind of perspective emerges frequently in Haraway’s earlier work – work in which she teases out the co-implication of companion species, and examines the dependency of human flourishing upon the labours of non-human animals, for example. However, whilst I appreciate elements of her stance against human exceptionalism *–* particularly her nuanced ethical engagements with the complexities of laboratory testing and the meat-industrial complex[[3]](#footnote-3) – I do not believe that her principled insistence upon an ecology of interdependent actors can fully account for her recent declaration that ‘[p]hilosophically and materially, I am a compostist not a posthumanist’ (2016. p. 97). After all, critical posthumanism has made vigorous (if imperfect) efforts to compromise the various perceived categorical distinctions between “us and them” – or rather, “us-es and them-s”. Isn’t such a position more obviously an ally in the quest for multispecies eco-justice than an appropriate object of anti-exceptionalist opprobrium?

The explicit dismissals within *Staying with the Trouble* also rather overlook posthumanism’s potential utility for Haraway’s own project. She is clearly invested, as she long has been, in the activation of the common imagination with regards to planetary survival and distributed future flourishings; that is, in our collective ability to learn ‘to narrate – to think – outside the prick tale of Humans in History, when the knowledge of how to murder each other – and along with each other, uncountable multitudes of the living earth – is not scarce’ (2016: p. 40). Rather than viewing the posthuman as a disguised extension of, or an excuse for, the human-as-it-is, I am rather more inclined to view it as a technology for galvanizing precisely such alternative narratives. As Braidotti puts it, we might

see the posthuman turn as an amazing opportunity to decide together what and who we are capable of becoming, and a unique opportunity for humanity to reinvent itself afﬁrmatively, through creativity and empowering ethical relations, and not only negatively, through vulnerability and fear. It is a chance to identify opportunities for resistance and empowerment on a planetary scale. (2013: p. 195)

It is important to remember that collective desire is synthetic, mutable, and open to influence. This is why utopia is sometimes described as ‘the education of desire’ (Levitas, 1990: p. 6) – because of its capacity to disrupt habitual kinds of aspiration in favour of radically different modes of wanting.

Utopia, then, can be said to hail desire as much as it describes it – and, through this process of hailing, to revise it. As we put it in the xenofeminist manifesto, the ‘task of collective self-mastery requires a hyperstitional manipulation of desire's puppet-strings’ (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015: n.p.) – that is, the ability to generate politically radical visions of the future which have the capacity to grip onto our shared imaginaries, to become vectors for a common want, and thereby to create the conditions required for their own emergence.[[4]](#footnote-4) The posthuman is a useful concept precisely to the extent to which it can facilitate the circulation of a new imaginary of what the species might become, beyond the wretched ‘phallic self-image of the same’ (Haraway, 2016: p. 11). Unlike compost – which, with its associations with decaying matter, may do little to mobilize productive political affect amongst those who have yet to be turned off from human exceptionalism – the posthuman is invitational, explicitly suggesting the emergence of trajectories beginning from the here and now, but also pushing species-thinking in transformative directions, carving out a space for us to imagine ourselves as better than we are. How, then, can we best leverage the idea of the posthuman for emancipatory xenofeminist ends?

***Exceptional Response-ability: Posthuman Politics***

Beyond debates about which totemic image of the future might have greater potential to (re)educate collective political desire, I am interested in the wider implications of Haraway’s attempts to position posthumanism as a form of human exceptionalism. There is a tension in her work, I think, between situating homo sapiens as just one, non-hierarchized species among many and, *a)* her willingness to celebrate the distinctive capacities of other, non-human species (the navigational and object identificatory talents of pigeons, for example), and *b)* her acknowledgement of humanity’s genuinely exceptional role in processes of ecological devastation (Man as ‘the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty’ (2016: p. 39)). We may not be exceptional in terms of the circumstances of our creation, or in terms of our species’ intrinsic value or significance, I would argue, but we have certainly proved ourselves to be exceptional in our ability to destroy each other and the carbon- and silicon-based actors with which we share our worlds.

This is one reason why a particular attentiveness to humanity may need to be retained – as part of a process of assigning and facilitating ‘response-ability’ (Haraway, 2016: p. 2). I mean this in Haraway’s sense of ‘the capacity to respond’ (2016: p. 78) – that is, of the simultaneous obligation and facility to take action. Throughout her work, Haraway is keen to re-embed human actants within their specific contexts and within the assemblages of which they are a part. Such a (posthumanist) gesture is a necessary move against ‘the outrage of human exceptionalism’ (2007: p. 106), and a deflationary tactic in the face of the anthropo-arrogance she detects within humanism and posthumanism alike. However, attempts to envision the posthuman need not necessarily be grounded in or inextricable from speciesist hauteur. The philosopher Reza Negarestani argues that a robust and rigorous movement to revise and reconstruct the human must of necessity begin ‘by dissociating human significance from human glory’ (2014b: n.p.). It is from this point that any xenofeminist approach to productively navigating the tensions between the human and the posthuman must commence.

Can we recognize the distinctive capacities of the human, as an animal among animals, without also presuming a privileged position in relation to the interconnected network of *bios* and *zoe*? Might this provide one way into ‘rethinking our relations to each other, and to the other forms of matter […] with which we share the universe, without renouncing ethical and political responsibility or the idea of human freedom’ (Cornell and Seely, 2016: p. 121)? I am by no means alone in articulating these questions. It is perhaps to be expected that – as “the Anthropocene” becomes increasingly popular as a means by which ‘to name the time we are living in as one that identifies humans as responsible for harmful planetary transformation’ (Shotwell, 2016: p. 1) – critics are turning to ideas of response-ability as a means of interrogating agency and accountability, as well as anthropcentrism. Alexis Shotwell, for example, appears to be very much in alignment with Negarestani when she argues for an approach to naturecultures grounded in practices ‘of resisting human exceptionalism while at the same time thinking that humans have responsibilities’ (2016: p. 98). There is a similar perspective at play within María Puig de la Bellacasa’s recent work, as she explores the role of ethics in ‘the impure business of working for a difference within worlds that we would rather not endorse but to which we are not immune’ (2017: p. 133). There is an interest within such work in how best to frame, mobilize, and exercise capacities for intervention across the social fabric, without also lapsing into a human exceptionalism facilitative of resource depletion, ecological destruction, and a pernicious sense of species entitlement.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of course, whilst the wholesale rejection of the species may be a debilitating and therefore rather unpragmatic move, to project the human, unmodified, indefinitely into the future would seem to be similarly unhelpful. Such a move would also be incompatible with Laboria Cubonik’s insistence upon the (at times technologically facilitated) mutability of bodies and identities. Perhaps what we need in order to activate ethical and political agency is an understanding not so much of the human, as of the agential political subject – a subject who does not precede her constitution or formulation, but who is created by it. This is a subject who is not inert, but live – constantly being contested for, shaped and reshaped in response to collective struggle and contemporary conditions. It is not inconceivable that such a subject might eventually exceed what we now understand to be the human, or that the qualities we now associate with the human might be more equitably distributed across a wider set of actors. As such, it may be possible to retain a posthuman tendency in our politics, without occluding the agency and obligations of existing human political actants.

A posthuman political subject of this kind would combine the possibility of individual and collective ethico-political accountability and decision making with an understanding of specific communities of humans as particularly situated stakeholders within a complex assemblage of actors. That is to say, she would combine response-ability with a commitment to confronting her own embeddedness in and reliance upon interdependent humans, technological artefacts, and non-human organisms. My understanding of xenofeminism’s humanist posthumanism thus points again to the various conceptual knots within the project, indicating a very clear set of limits to this idea in the here and now, without assuming these limits to be insurmountable in the longer term. To say that “the human” enables particular forms of political agency and facilitates still-useful kinds of collective project is not to say that the “the human” must be retained as it stands. Our framing of the species, I think, should ideally recognise its current strategic usefulness (and the ongoing necessity of ensuring the maximal inclusiveness of this category) whilst also laying the groundwork for and clearing the critical space required to enable its elimination via transformation. Indeed, we might view any pathway to the posthuman as travelling via a kind of expanded humanism – something that mobilizes a set of nascent (if dormant) potentials within the species in order to reengineer the forms it might take in the future.

As an anti-naturalism which sees the body as a platform, and which insists that nothing in the world (‘natural’ or otherwise) should be considered an un-remakable given, xenofeminism clearly views the human and its futures as up for grabs. The manifesto does in fact state that:

Our lot is cast with technoscience, where nothing is so sacred that it cannot be reengineered and transformed so as to widen our aperture of freedom, extending to gender and the human. To say that nothing is sacred, that nothing is transcendent or protected from the will to know, to tinker and to hack, is to say that nothing is supernatural. (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015: n.p.)

We must affirm a posthumanism that (like postmodernism) never loses sight of its dependence on the term it allegedly surpasses. Around what, then, might posthuman agency be built? What qualities might we wish to retain from current understandings of the human, as we search for vectors for more emancipatory futures? My suggestion is that one possible model might be characterized by the idea of ‘sapience + care’ – a formulation that references our status as alienated beings with the ability to reason, in conjunction with the unique response-ability that such alienation bestows upon us.

***Sapience + Care***

To so strongly emphasize sapience (and, therefore, the role of reason and rationality) within a critical reframing of posthumanity may seem unduly narrow, not least because this kind of exceptionalism has a history of nudging many actually existing humans beyond the perceived threshold of the species, and into the realm of the subhuman. However, I would argue that such qualities, broadly understood, have the potential to provide a highly inclusive basis for understanding an emancipatory form of political agency to come. As Lawrence C. Becker remarks, a capacity for practical reasoning ‘of a sort that involves conditional inferences, generalization, and error-correction routines’ is understood to be common across members of the species as it stands (1998: p. 54): ‘Absent catastrophic limitations in our human endowments or circumstances […] – limitations of a sort that diminish or eliminate agency itself – we come equipped with, and use, logic circuits at a subconscious level’ (1998: p. 54 – 55). Typically, these will develop an element of reflexivity that enables reason to recognize and revise its own principles and processes on an ongoing basis. The underpinnings of sapience are positioned here as broad capacities already extensively distributed across the entirety of the human population, rather than as elite knowledges jealously guarded by white patriarchal philosopher-experts.

If to *be* an agent requires a minimal ability to make decisions about appropriate courses of action, then reason and rationality will inevitably be central to the conceptualization of the posthuman we are developing here – indeed, they must undergird any conception of ethico-political community. What else can sapience add to our discussion of xenofeminist futurity? What elevates it from an inevitable condition or baseline for political agency to a central principle in attempts to hyperstitionally engineer a transition from human to posthuman? My position here is inspired by the work of my friend and Laboria Cuboniks colleague, Diann Bauer. Bauer argues that as soon as our species could reason beyond its biological needs, it could be positioned as alienated (2016: n.p.). Reason granted us some (albeit limited) critical distance from the vicissitudes of instinct and affect, which facilitated a certain capacity for self-reflection – indeed, which developed into a potential basis for self-sovereignty, understood as the quest for heightened collective understanding as an integral part of the democratic project. As Williams and Srnicek put it, ‘it is only through harnessing our ability to understand ourselves and our world better (our social, technical, economic, psychological world) that we can come to rule ourselves’ (Williams and Srnicek, 2014: p. 358.). With this in mind, we can see that (partial and contingent) alienation from our biology via reason demands to be considered as a productive force.

Such an alienation is closely bound to sapience, and provides my first coordinate for a vision of the posthuman based upon existing (but as yet largely unrealized) capabilities within the human as it stands – capabilities which are worthy of being extended and incorporated into the ‘post’. Sapience, it should be stressed, should by no means be understood as an exclusively human capacity, even if it is one of the features that has been used to characterize our species so far. One must imagine sapience bleeding out at the edges of homo sapiens, thereby unpicking centuries of careful boundary work, as it increasingly finds expression within both silicon- and carbon-based actors (from apes to AI and beyond). It is perhaps more productive to view sapience as something one *does* rather than something one *has* or *is*, as this works to minimize any friction that might emerge in relation to recognizing or appreciating the existence of non-human sapience, and holds a conceptual space open for the emergence of unforeseen sapient behaviours in the future. Despite not being exclusively human, however, sapience can still be productively leveraged as part of any attempt to think the posthuman as a political agent. Without foregrounding sapience in this context, action ‘is reduced to meaning “just do something,” collectivity can never be methodological or expressed in terms of a synthesis of different abilities to envision and achieve a common task, and making commitment through linking action and understanding is untenable’ (Negarestani, 2014a: n.p.).

It may seem that I am reaching into quite another sphere of values when I seek to bring care into conversation with sapience. Indeed, “sapience + care” might at first glance suggest two opposed modalities, being dragged into an unlikely synthesis – cold hard rationality alongside warm soft affect, alienating cognition with alienated embodiment. Such a position depends upon obviously insupportable binaries, however, and downplays the complexity of (and demands associated with) both the key terms in this formulation. Negarestani suggests that sapience must be understood as ‘a normative designation which is specified by entitlements and the responsibilities they bring about’ (Negarestani, 2014a: n.p.). As such, sapience and care are fundamentally entangled from the get-go – a site of mutually constitutive abilities and liabilities, in which the *capacity* to respond is also an ethical *obligation* to respond. In other words, having the ability to engage in complex forms of abstract reasoning brings with it a particular kind of response-ability – one which reaches beyond the immediate realm of the same and into the xeno. In my view, posthuman agency should be conceived of as going beyond a duty to other sapient beings – including a duty to recognize and respect sapience in/of the Other – and must include accountability to non-sapient forms of life, as well as to the various ecologies that sustain them (and/or us).

Here, my emphasis upon the intimate relationship between sapience and care becomes instructive, in part because of manner in which it reinserts us into discussions of interdependencies and assemblages. Sapience implies being possessed of the capacity to take meaningful action via deliberative choice and ongoing reflexive reasoning – pre-requisites for reciprocity in an ethico-political community. The possibility of such reciprocity, when combined with the sometimes ruthless application of reason in the name of human exceptionalism,[[6]](#footnote-6) may create the conditions for an ethics of parochial self-interest. Such a so-called ethics would hardly warrant the label ‘posthuman’. Care, on the other hand, implies a concern for actors who are *not* necessarily in a position to reciprocate – including, for example, those of us experiencing the kind of ‘catastrophic limitations in our human endowments or circumstances’ that restrict the possibility of agential reasoning (Becker, 1998: p. 54).[[7]](#footnote-7)

As Puig de la Bellacasa notes,

the living web of care is not one where every giving involves taking, nor every taking will involve giving. The care that touches me today and sustains me might never be given back (by me or others) to those who generated it, who might not even need or want my care. In turn, the care I give will touch beings who will never give me (back) this care. (2017: pp. 120 – 121)

The insistence on thinking sapience with care – as an act of foregrounding too-often neglected responsibilities over too-often inflated entitlements – may help us to displace the ‘human-exceptionalist, business-as-usual commitments of so much Anthropocene discourse’ (Haraway, 2016: p. 50). Indeed, this explicit combination is precisely a tool for theorizing ‘the ethical necessity for response that […] attends human complicity in the damage done to the critters and biota with which we share damaged ecosystems’ (Shotwell, 2016: p. 100). Putting sapience at the heart of our conceptions of political agency, then, is not about devaluing non-sapient Others or instrumentalizing the other-than-human, but is instead intended to foster the proliferation and widespread distribution of response-ability. Crucially, it is also about acknowledging that many of the abilities such response-ability implies are, at present, distinctively tied to the potentials of our species.

***Taking Ownership: Negotiating Agency and Interdependency***

Whilst it is certainly important not to neglect our place within a wider system of interconnected actants, it is also crucial that we do not imply an ecology of equivalencies. Simply (re)inserting homo sapiens (and its imagined descendants) into a network of *zoe* is insufficient, given that it risks sacrificing a sense of response-ability to inflexible anti-exceptionalism.After a certain point, an insistence upon multispecies, cross-actor interdependency makes the process of conceiving of agency, be it individual or collective, increasingly difficult. Haraway’s work centres ‘symbiotic assemblages, at whatever scale of space or time, which are more like knots of diverse intra-active relatings in dynamic complex systems, than like the entities of a biology made up of pre-existing bounded units (genes, cells, organisms, etc.) in interactions that can only be conceived as competitive or cooperative’ (2016: p. 60). Such a framework is obviously compelling, and has enabled Haraway to articulate a complex, thorny, and deeply involving feminism oriented toward a more-than-human world. However, the danger of thinking primarily in these terms is that response-ability may come to be understood as so dispersed amongst networks that taking ownership (in the sense not only of arrogant possession but of the assertion and acceptance of obligation) becomes impossible.

How can we cultivate collective political agency of a kind proportionate to our current conditions with or through this framework? Can it be somehow repositioned to ensure that *inter*action does not necessarily spell *in*action? As Alexis Shotwell’s work suggests, there may be ways of framing the accountability of the posthuman agent in such a manner as to establish caring and noticing as a process of ‘placing oneself in community with the objects of care’ (2016: p. 98), against any legacy of aggrandizing custodianship. She points to the practice of amateur naturalism – learning to recognize particular forms of bird song or to navigate the identifying features of trees – as one possible model here, commenting upon its utility as a ‘method of training people to be attentive to their environment in a way they weren’t before’ (2016: p. 98). For Shotwell, these processes sharpen our capacity to ‘attend to things, on the level of actually being able to perceive previously imperceptible critters and flora’ (2016: p. 99) – a process that need not be inhospitable to other forms of scientific endeavour. These forms of naturalism speak to distinctively human affinities, histories, and capacities, and as such are not unproblematic.

As Shotwell herself remarks, there is a sense in which noticing and naming might be seen as ‘simply part of Man’s God-given right to name the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air […], exercising dominion over the natural world – the ultimate in holding the rational, classifying, mode as mastery and use’ (2016: p. 98). Against this narrative of chauvinistic stewardship, however, she suggests that this ‘form of attunement’ might be read as a tactic for ‘resisting human exceptionalism while at the same time thinking that humans have responsibilities’ (2016: p. 98). Such arguments have obvious resonances with the agentic posthuman imaginary I am trying to develop here. There is nothing to stop us from realising that, despite having little entitlement to mastery or stewardship over anything except ourselves, our sapience lends us particular possibilities for action. As a result of a capacity for complex and distributed cognition, those emerging from within our species are likely to be best placed to mitigate the manifold negative effects wrought by homo sapiens. As Haraway puts it, ‘We are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible histories, but not in the same ways. The differences matter – in ecologies, economies, species, lives’ (2016: p. 116). I could not agree more. It strikes me that one of the most significant differences at play is the exceptional capacity of humans to interpret, understand, and act.

I should stress, of course, that whilst this vision is dependent upon qualities theoretically already present within the species, we are talking about a new mode of being that is yet-to-come: namely, the posthuman, as a political orientation built from identifiable but largely dormant productive qualities in the human. We are exploring something, then, that ‘is inhuman in its break with human history as much as it is human in its enactment of our current possibilities’ (Pirici and Voinea, 2015: n.p.). In the case of modern Homo, any capacity for care has tended to lapse into custodianship, chauvinistic entitlement, a desperation to force the burdens of caring onto raced and gendered others, and the quest for surplus value, whilst we have refused to collectively absorb the knowledge that we as a species have obtained with regards to impending climate crisis. I am not trying to suggest that, against all evidence, a productive form of sapience + care is already a dominant characteristic of humanity, and nor am I implying that it is an inevitable direction for the species that will remain exclusive to us. It is a vector through which to channel an emancipatory vision of the human to be made post – that is, a model for re-conceiving of the political subject beyond current understandings of the human, which partially accounts for the centrality of a persistent, residual humanism throughout the xenofeminist manifesto.

We are reaching here for an account of the imperative implicit within the posthuman vector of ‘sapience + care’. So, for example, as a species capable of achieving an abstract understanding of ecologies, and with an unsurpassed insight into complex and intersecting global systems (including environmental, economic, infrastructural, and sociopolitical networks) humans have a seemingly matchless capacity to attend to the environment beyond our local situations. This is one of the distinctive potentials of the species at present. We have capacities that might enable us to understand and act upon the world beyond the sites that we can immediately perceive through our sense organs, which may help constitute what Bernard Stiegler calls ‘a new social rationality, productive of motivation, of reasons for living together, that is, of taking care of the world and of those living there’ (2012: p. 115). Of course, we are already implicated in inescapable networks of interdependency – in the entanglement of people, places, and things – which Puig de la Bellacasa provocatively reframes as part of an expanded understanding of care. And yet, there is more to be said regarding this key term in our formulation of posthuman agency. As we have seen, recognizing our own embeddedness in assemblages of loose, mutual reliance is simply insufficient for creating the conditions for collective response-ability. Surely practices of care must go beyond the coincidence of coexistence in order to be politically meaningful?

***The Trouble with Care***

On a personal note, I find it curious that I have been driven to hang my understanding of posthuman agency upon the concept of care – a vision of the future that I have vigorously rejected in other contexts. My less philosophically-inflected work is specifically anchored in problematizing care as the basis for a new and better society, given the ways in which it allows the work ethic (and work itself) to reappear in unacknowledged forms, and on account of its tendency to downplay the myriad frustrations and exhaustions of this (highly gendered) labour. It is one of the strengths of Puig de la Bellacasa’s work, I would argue, that it is never tempted to venerate care even as it recognizes its utility. From the earliest pages, the author stresses that care is ‘not only ontologically but politically ambivalent’ (2017: p. 7). She remarks that there is something compelling about ‘cultivating indifference as a form of quiet revolt’ (2017: p. 5), and notes that:

Too much caring can be consuming. Women especially know how much care can devour their lives, asphyxiate other possible skills. And care can also smother the subtleties of attention to the different needs of an “other” required for careful relationality. It can be said then that it can also consume the cared for, leading to appropriating the recipients of “our” care instead of relating to them. (2017: p. 85)

Care, then, is too polysemic a concept to position as an absolute and unquestionable ethical norm or moral good, and must always be understood in terms of specific forms of situated, embodied practice.

This understanding of care is important for our purposes, in that it reminds us that “sapience + care” really means “some practical affordances of sapience plus some emancipatory forms of care.” The reduction of this issue to a sloganistic formulation demands to be seen as, in part, an invitation to fill in the blanks. How do the two terms of our equation effect each other when explicitly theorized in combination? What can reason and rationality do for us when applied to (or understood alongside) the notion of care? What specific forms of activity might we wish to understand as care, and under what conditions, as part of our thinking surrounding the posthuman? For me, the process of insisting on care as one element in a future-oriented politics based around species self-image is that it explicitly *denaturalizes* this concept. We see this in Puig de la Bellacasa’s efforts to deliberately open up the concept to new territories. As she puts it, extending the ‘sites and constituencies in which we think care contributes new modes of attention and problematics. So rather than give up on care because it is enlisted in purposes we might deplore, we need to have its meanings debated, unpicked and reenacted’ (2017: p. 10). Implicated in conceptions of political agency, care can become contestable in new ways. To channel it in the name of xenofeminism, then, must be a move to deepen ambivalences and strengthen challenges to care as it stands, rather than to project existing cultures of care into the future as a kind of welcome inevitability.

To even include care within a speculative philosophical and political project of this kind is to render it alien – to no longer assume its dynamics or operations to be self-evident (that is to say, apolitical). “Sapience + care” seeks to hyperstitiously enfold response-ability within our conception of what the species might (and should) become and, in the process, to put the reinterpretation and redistribution of care at the centre of emerging political agendas. Following Puig de la Bellacasa, XF must seek to acknowledge ‘the necessity of care in more than human relations, not as all that there is in a relation […] but as something that traverses, that is passed on through entities and agencies’ (2017: p. 163). More than merely intensifying ‘awareness of how beings depend on each other’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: p. 163), it serves as the fabric for an unpicking and resewing of obligations and opportunities, freedoms and restrictions. For our model of posthuman political agency to have any xenofeminist potential, it must refuse care as an unremakeable given (particularly one associated with the naturalized gendered personality) and insist upon rendering it maximally contestable. It is only in this way that we can imagine an emancipatory future for care.

In order to overcome the current gender relations associated with reproductive labour, and thereby to secure an alternative imaginary of care, we must look to the collective application of the other key term in our posthumanist formulation. That is to say, such an overcoming is dependent upon the distributed operations of sapience – the productive alienation stemming from an ability to think beyond local circumstances and raw sensory data, as part of an engagement in self-reflection and ‘reformative assessment’ (Becker, 1998: p. 50). It is important to remember that the process of clearing critical space for neglected perspectives and alternative knowledges cannot take place without the operations of a self-transcending reason able to recognize that which lies beyond the immediate conditions of specific, situated consciousnesses. As Peter Wolfendale notes, left accelerationist positions, including xenofeminism, share a ‘common commitment not only to *knowing* ourselves and the world we live in, but *actively using* this knowledge to cultivate our agency and engage with the world’s problems’ (2016: n.p.). Such comments helpfully foreground the connection between sapience and response-ability, alienation and agency, and point to one key basis for solidarity building. Indeed, we must stress once again that sapience and care are *necessarily* implicated in each other; care can be understood as ‘a (knowledge) politics of inhabiting the potentials of neglected perception’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: p. 118). The critique of care as it stands requires just such a politics, and as such, demands to be understood as an example of the application of sapience + care. We must know ourselves to change ourselves.

***Conclusion: What Will Become of Us?***

The vision of posthuman political agency that I have proposed is premised upon a normative standard by which agents are encouraged to cultivate response-ability in accordance with their own mutable, evolving, and differentially distributed capacities; this extends to entering into (inevitable) processes of being cared for in ways that are themselves care-ful – which are (as far as possible) mindful of the existence, requirements, and sometimes competing demands of other actants in these specific chains of response-ability. The model of sapience plus care – of observant tending fueled by reason and reflexivity – might be cultivated into an approach to ecology in which we collectively labour, each from our own specific coordinates and according to our own distinctive capacities, to mitigate some of the species’ negative effects upon the beings with which it coexists (and, indeed, upon itself). This vision of a revised or extended humanism would see post-humanity minimizing the impact of its own differentially distributed success in an act of other-acknowledging care.

One can be on the side of the human without neglecting the assemblages of which we are all a part, as long as one conceives of humanity in this manner – as a site of nascent potential for sapience plus care, alienated understanding of a complex world combined with the will to engage in the reparative processes of tending to it. Although we may be more capable of understanding the abstract requirements of planetary care than we are at actually delivering it, either on the environmental or the individual scale, it is this that we can position at the heart of a xenofeminist notion of posthuman feminism; the will to extend the human capacity for abstraction when applied to the demands of care for other actors and for our environments. In this sense, my call to and for the posthuman is a hyperstitional gesture of desire for what we describe in the manifesto as ‘an emancipatory and egalitarian community buttressed by new forms of unselfish solidarity and collective self-mastery’ (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015: n.p.). Such a position may, just about, allow us to be posthumanists for humanity.

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1. Such a position is closely aligned with a range of twenty-first century feminist mat(t)erialisms, several of which have proved influential to xenofeminism – not least Donna Haraway’s later work, to which we will be returning in the course of this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Colbrook, 2014: p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, see *When Species Meet*, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Think of the ways in which science fiction has taught us to desire hoverboards and heads-up displays, and extend this beyond mere consumer electronics to the broader field of technosocial reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An entitlement, incidentally, that holds only at a certain scale – namely, when held at sufficient distance to apply to an apparently encompassing “us”. When one breaks this category down to the various “us-es” it contains – “us-es” shaped by race, nation, class, and so on – it becomes apparent that species entitlement typically extends only to the most parochial kinds of false universals. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Peter Wolfendale’s apparent justification of the meat-industrial complex on the basis that non-human animals are incapable of reason. Humans are entitled to slaughter other animals (and warrant ‘ethical special treatment’) because we make beauty for ourselves in the form of art and, as persons, can be considered as self-created works of art in our own right. Whilst non-human animals can be beautiful, ‘they are not thereby works of art, either for others or for themselves. Life is cheap. Pies are art’ (2012: n.p). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I am indebted to Dominic Fox here, with whom I discussed several of these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)