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QUEER INHUMANISMS

Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen

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There are no new ideas, just new ways of giving those ideas we cherish breath and power in our own living.
—Audre Lorde, "Learning from the Sixties" (1982)

When we began work on our special issue, we were convinced that the phrase "queer inhumanisms" named not a new development but a longer history—perhaps several long histories—of thought, as yet unconsolidated under that particular sign. For this reason, we sought to move away from the progressive-temporal and oppositional frames encoded in such terms as *posthuman* or *antihumanist*. These frames, we believed, relied on the fantasy of a singular chronology of "human," asserting the solidity of a concept that has never, in truth, been stable. Even the more familiar *nonhuman*, we thought, focused too closely on the distinction between "human" and its others, risking its reconsolidation as an opposition. Instead, we wanted to emphasize the processual aspects of queer inhumanness, the way it invoked becoming, rather than dividing the world into two static and antagonistic camps; we meant to highlight the dynamic and diffuse encounters through which those two categories were continually re/constituted.

In avoiding both the anti- and the post-, we also wanted to move away from the pattern of consolidating a past in order to break with it and declare a new future for queer/nonhuman thought. This pattern has been much in evidence in recent years, both within queer theory more generally—witness the debates over antinormativity, anti-antinormativity, anti-anti-antinormativity, and so on—and within the nonhuman turn, especially among those thinkers who dismiss all poststructuralist thought as "correlationist" and therefore impossibly anthropocentric.

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We wanted, instead, to remain alive to the way histories are consistently remade to meet the needs of the present, to approach "queer theory" not as a singular, progressive history that the time has come to redirect, but as a flexible, ever-shifting collection of thought. This vitalizing approach to queer critical traditions is embraced explicitly in José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications* (1997) and Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black* (2004), two books that were enormously influential for us. So we looked for antecedents for queer inhumanism in earlier writing, even in places that one wouldn't necessarily expect to find it. Audre Lorde, for instance, might not have located herself under the sign of inhumanism (or, for that matter, of "queer"). Yet alongside her emphasis on the active reconstruction of intrahuman relations, we find compelling accounts, in "Uses of the Erotic," of meaningful, not coincidental, intimacy with objects: the quasi-orgasmic pleasure of building a bookshelf, the subtler satisfactions of kneading a pellet of color into a block of margarine: "taking it carefully between our fingers . . . knead[ing] it gently back and forth, over and over" (Lorde [1984] 2007: 57). More than an analogy, the erotic, from a queer-inhumanist perspective, is also an effect of such contact, a component of transmaterial intimacy. If, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins (forthcoming) proposes, "Uses of the Erotic" constructs a theory of nonalienated labor, that theory encompasses economies of matter as well.

Our intent, in looking back at such influential texts, was not simply to locate moments that might speak to an inhumanist approach *avant la lettre*—to play a game of "spot the nonhuman" with texts of the past. Looking back was intended to help us come to a better understanding of what "queer" had meant, how it continued to unfold across time, backward as well as forward. We were concerned about a tendency within the nonhuman turn to use "queer" as a stand-in for the desire to defamiliarize—which meant that the turn to the nonhuman was always already queer, insofar as it unsettled long-standing (and shortsighted) intellectual habits. It wasn't the unsettling that concerned us; it was the potential narrowing of the meanings that "queer" might index, and of the archive that constituted "queer theory" to a handful of texts said to manifest its guiding tenets. In contrast, we wanted queer inhumanism to sprawl—to exemplify the range of methods, locations, sources, and commitments that live within and through queer thought. No single principle or critical gesture constrains the eighteen vibrant thinkers—Neel Ahuja, Karen Barad, Jayna Brown, Jack Halberstam, Jinthana Haritaworn, Myra Hird, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Eileen Joy, Eunjung Kim, Uri McMillan, José Esteban Muñoz, Tavia Nyong'o, Jasbir K. Puar, Susan Stryker, Kim TallBear, Jeanne Vaccaro, Harlan Weaver, Jami Weinstein—we had the privilege of including in the issue. Queerness, for them, necessarily emerged from multiple locations, moved in

multiple directions. The collision between the "nonhuman turn" and queer thought was already—always already—spinning outward, difficult to pin down, impossible to contain. This was a good thing.

A lot has happened in the three years since the issue appeared. (As we wrote that sentence, we laughed until we cried.) The "nonhuman turn" has ceased to feel like a novelty—perhaps because so much fine scholarship on the topic has appeared; perhaps because increasing attention to the ongoing mass extinction event has underscored the need for interspecies thinking, emphasizing the ecological danger of anthropocentrism; or perhaps because the rhetoric of dehumanization has come to dominate the US political scene, manifesting as government policy. But whatever the reason, critical declarations of the need to "decenter the human" have come to feel almost axiomatic.

This too is a good thing. As we noted in the issue's introduction, queer inhumanism, as we understood it, would evolve of necessity. Queer inhumanism could never only be utopic, since it also indexed habits and histories of dehumanization. At the same time, we resist the dystopic mood that seems to have taken hold since the events of late 2016. We don't mean to dismiss the high stakes of the present—things *are* bad, and getting worse. But we are unpersuaded by calls to departicularize, to pursue universals, to simplify stakes, to abandon critique. Such arguments, we think, tend to assume the universality of the radically changed conditions to which they demand a response—an assumption we don't think is warranted.

"Queer Inhumanisms" embraces less familiar conjunctions—interconstitutions of race and environment, politics and microcosm—as an extension of intersectional analysis. In this sense, it too falls athwart of those self-nominated "public intellectuals" who maintain that November 2016 must sound the death-knell of "identity politics" (by which they inevitably mean political thinking that focuses elsewhere than cis-het whiteness) and its associated methods. The simplified version of crisis analysis that these naysayers exhort deplores any mode of thought which delineates paths to justice that seem, from their perspective, implausible. How, they object, can something like "thinking like a forest"—or worse, *feeling* like one—be integrated into extant environmental initiatives? The demand for "applicable" forms manifests beyond the realm of policymaking, insinuating intellectual and political crisis-reductionism even within fields of inquiry (science studies, ecocriticism, etc.) that might be deemed friendly to the "nonhuman turn." In the shadow of the current presidential administration, we are admonished to narrow our fields of inquiry and action in order to produce the unambiguous "yeses" said to be needed for political advocacy—yeses that often cluster unreflectively

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around the desire to return to an unmarked, unruffled whiteness. What does it mean, for instance, for scholars to proclaim that climate-change denial and other antiscience postures on the right must prompt antiracist or decolonial scholars to defer or abandon the critique of science?

"Politics," in many of these invocations, seems primarily to index legislative and/or electoral procedures. In this sense, the "crisis" response in critical thought perpetuates civic forms that rely, for their continued existence, on the denial of pervasive structural injustice and settler colonial logics. Yet even thinkers who do not demand immediate political legibility along these lines often produce articulations of the "nonhuman turn" that, in their reliance on the "new," reproduce colonial patterns by alternately appropriating and ignoring non-Western thinking. Pointing to long-standing theorizations of nonhuman sentience in indigenous thought, Métis scholar Zoe Todd suggests not only that there is little "new" about the new materialisms but also that there is nothing "new" about the conditions that the ontological turn is helping to sustain:

> The colonial moment has not passed. The conditions that fostered it have not suddenly disappeared. We talk of neo-colonialism, neo-Imperialism, but it is as if these are far away things. . . . The reality is that we are just an invasion or economic policy away from re-colonizing at any moment. So it is so important to think, deeply, about how the Ontological Turn—with its breathless "realisations" that animals, the climate, water, "atmospheres" and non-human presences like ancestors and spirits are *sentient* and *possess agency*, that "nature" and "culture," "human" and "animal" may not be so separate after all—is itself perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. (Todd 2016: 16)

Todd's reflection on the partiality of the ontological turn's "*aha* moment"—its sudden realization, from a place of privileged unknowing, of "what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia"—also, we think, applies to the pattern of responses to November 2016. For some of us, indeed, things took a sudden, desperate turn; for others, things went from bad to worse; while for many, many others, things remained pretty much as *worse* as they already were. Demanding a radical alteration of the terms on which intellectual inquiry can be conducted in response to the current political crisis would, in effect, mean weaponizing such histories of privileged unknowing against precisely the kinds of knowledge they have long, and comfortably, ignored.

A lot has happened, indeed; but things are not as different as they some-

times feel. Queer inhumanism, with its manifold, weaving intellectual histories, was always meant to exist with many companion thinkers. Our task, looking backward and forward, is to seek an intensified alignment with the burgeoning adjacencies of the present, in resonance and appreciation with the work done outside its name.

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