

# On Human Equality and the Nonhuman *by Greg Lindquist*

Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 2015)

This collection of essays, which emerged from a 2012 conference of the same name at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for 21st Century Studies, assembles texts by a group of scholars who expand on numerous challenges involving engagement with the nonhuman, such as climate change, biotechnology, genocide, terrorism, and war. Most notably, the Anthropocene, the proposed new phase of geologic time in which human activity has significantly impacted Earth's systems, weighs heavily on the discussions in this volume.

Beyond philosophy, the term "nonhuman" has been broadly applied to animal rights and personhood to make arguments against human exceptionalism. Most animal-rights activists argue that nonhuman animals share similar abilities to experience pain, compassion, memory, and brain functions. In addition, the term has been applied to describe artificial intelligence in computer programs and robot-like devices that exhibit human-like traits.

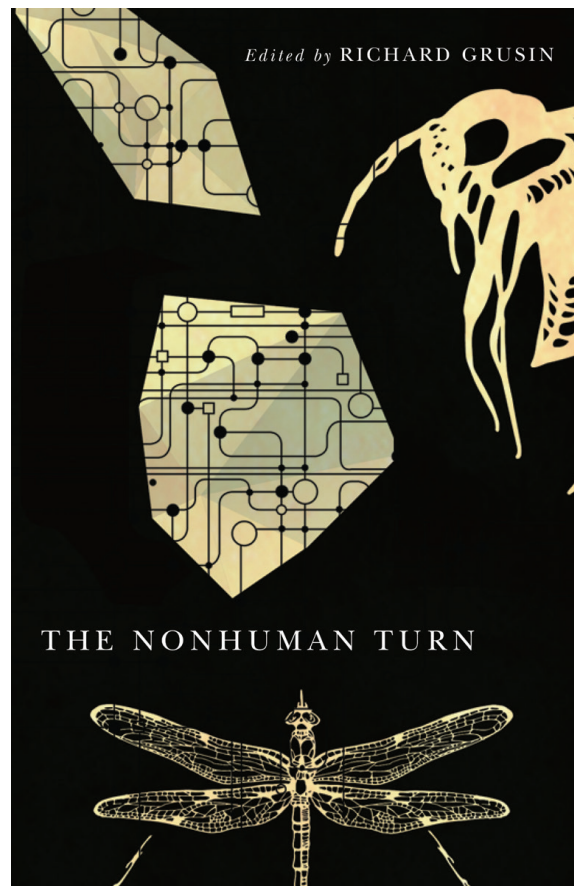
Distinguishing the idea of the nonhuman from the posthuman, Grusin adapts Bruno Latour's "we have never been modern" dictum, stating that "humans have always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman—and that the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman." Grusin contends that political and social change requires changing the way in which we relate not only to other humans but to nonhumans as well—such as animals or the environment. He says that this approach should be "politically liberatory" for the nonhuman in a similar manner that concerns from gender, race, and ethnicity were for groups of humans. It is Grusin's hope that a more inclusive human and nonhuman participation will be generated in this shift of perception and collective attention in the nonhuman.

Grusin has selected essays that are grounded in such familiar 20th-century intellectual developments and philosophies as Latour's actor-network theory of non-human agency, the assemblage theory of Gilles Deleuze, and various strains of speculative realism, including object-oriented philosophy and pan-psychism, among others. The overarching ideas expressed here revolve around perceiving the nonhuman with the same agency and importance as the human, in an effort to enact real political and environmental change through the shifting of individual perspective.

More concerned with raising indirect questions than offering direct answers, these essays also implicitly unsettle assumed ideological and institutional structures in the current social climate of the United States: Drawing on philosophies spawned within the ivory towers of academia, how can we utilize and infiltrate the social and cultural privileges associated with philosophy and art while also working to eliminate the disenfranchisement and disempowerment that is so often a sociopolitical consequence of environmental disasters for humans? The political liberation that Grusin speculates will follow for the nonhuman must still progress for humans.

Timothy Morton raises these issues in "They are Here," a brilliant and eccentric analysis of Toni Basil's video for the Talking Heads' song "Crosseyed and Painless" (1980). Morton discusses environmental racism through the choreography of dance that transforms people into robotic machinery and an iconography of what he calls "the broken tools of modernity." He traces the presence of the nonhuman through a Robert Smithsonesque macro- to micro-journey in the photons and electron stream of the video camera tube, examining the Panasonic PK-600 that gave Toni Basil the ability to manipulate color in real time as she was filming the video.

Morton also argues that the lineage of slavery and racism created an anthropocentric boundary between the



human and the nonhuman. In Basil's video, African-American dancers gyrate as robotic-like machines, are titillated by knives, money, and basketballs, and way-find among banks and emblems of urban blight; these factories with their billowing smokestacks and the polluted wastelands of the city comprise the urban space that sociologist Robert Bullard calls "human sacrifice zones." In the video, dancers are turned into colorful silhouettes on blank white backgrounds, and in the closing shot a sheet-covered car is modulated by a strange shifting rainbow of colors, which Morton argues is a metaphoric mockery of "racist metaphysics." This analysis of race and environment, with not much concrete grounding beyond the iconography of urban blight, takes a clear turn for an esoteric and poetic philosophical conclusion, yet it is with striking risk that Morton undertakes this analysis in this volume.

In "Systems and Things," Jane Bennett evaluates Morton's recent hyperobject project, in which he develops new ways of seeing entities with both nonhuman time and physical scale that dissolve notions of "entity." From climate change to radioactive plutonium, these hyperobjects are also often invisible and yet bear great ecological impact. Bennett pushes against the rejection of relationalism that Morton shares with object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman, arguing that working assemblages and systems in fact "enact real change." Rejecting the classification of object, Bennett also asserts that the perspective of "thing" or "body" can encourage a greater ecological awareness and evade the political power that "active (manly, American) subjects and passive objects" engender.

While Bennett challenges the lingual politics of gender, Morton's essay opens the possibilities of social justice, and the greater discussion of race and class in the nonhuman turn. Two years after Basil's music video, events in Warren County, North Carolina, catalyzed the national environmental justice movement and, in the protests and demonstrations that followed, the coining of the term "environmental racism." This rural and largely African-American county, the poorest in North Carolina, was chosen as the site of a PCB toxic-waste landfill, a choice predicated largely on the powerlessness of its inhabitants. But when more than 500 protesters connected these actions with institutional racism, they forged an environmental movement distinct from the largely white wilderness and wildlife conservation

efforts of the 1890s, drawing instead on the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and more contemporary forms of grassroots organizing.

Perhaps one of the most palpable policy changes on the matter came in 1994, when President Bill Clinton signed the environmental justice executive order addressing the wide adverse health and environmental effects on minority and low-income populations. In his groundbreaking book *Dumping in Dixie*, Bullard, regarded by many as the father of environmental justice, details the impact environmental quality has had on oppressed races and classes through case studies of five African-American communities. In the introduction to *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, activist Benjamin Chavis, Jr. stresses that these issues are more than just about an equality among Americans—that the equal access to environmental resources is a basic human right often unfulfilled, from the United States to the third world.

What can we do with these challenged perspectives—how can human and nonhuman be regarded, especially humans among humans? Morton's essay in particular raises questions about the underlying class and race structures of philosophy, whereas many object-oriented philosophies make an assumption of equality among humans in discussions of the nonhuman. But we must also contend with the racial, gender, and class inequalities among humans. How does the lens of the nonhuman help resolve this?

Furthermore, how can we make art that provides an aesthetic, emotional, and beautiful experience that empowers direct action and policy change? How can beauty please, infiltrate, and influence public opinion? Art ought to be taken into a public space by direct human action, organization, and creation. Is there work that can be explicit enough to convey a message without being didactic and limiting in that circumscribed message?

We are in a national moment with multiple discussions of equality, entwined with such issues as transracial and transgender identities, gun control, and racial discrimination by police violence. The Confederate flag hanging over South Carolina's state capitol is finally being called for removal because of the inescapable signification of its racist history. Pope Francis has recently argued in his ambitious encyclical *Laudato Si* that climate change is a moral problem that disproportionately impacts the poor. Sin ruined humans, and humans have ruined the earth, he has declared.

How can we tolerate this malaise, which is global in scale and 24/7 in duration? Anxieties are common and unifying through feeling, connecting us with a common experience—"a certain structure of feeling in which all humans are implicated," as Morton writes. If we can unite in the solidarity of our shared disquietude, what then is the responsibility of philosophy toward social justice and direct environmental action? Philosophy and theory certainly can reroute, challenge, and reimagine our sedentary assumptions, but our actions shouldn't stop with speculation or merely acting out a feel good idea of the future. We should systemically debate, organize, and enact change at local, policy and global levels. Starting with the choices we make in the ways we treat ourselves and each other, we should strive for an all-encompassing equality, both human and nonhuman alike. ☺

GREG LINDQUIST is an artist, writer, and human, whose recent work has focused on the water quality issue of coal ash in his home state of North Carolina. He has collaborated with numerous environmental organizations and partnered with Working Films. He is currently developing several collaborative projects that focus on the Newtown Creek, the polluted three-and-a-half mile estuary that forms the undisputed border between Brooklyn and Queens. His "Smoke and Water" paintings will be the subject of the two-person exhibition "Altered Land" with Damian Stammer, curated by Jennifer Dasal, at the North Carolina Museum of Art in April 2016.