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Transhumanism and/as Whiteness [†]

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Abstract: Transhumanism is interrogated from critical race theoretical and decolonial perspectives with a view to establishing its ‘algorithmic’ relationship to historical processes of race formation (or racialization) within Euro-American historical experience. Although the Transhumanist project is overdetermined vis-à-vis its *raison-d’être*, it is argued that a useful way of thinking about this project is in terms of its relationship to the shifting phenomenon of ‘whiteness’. It is suggested that Transhumanism constitutes a techno-scientific response to the phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’ at least partly prompted by ‘critical’ posthumanist contestation of Eurocentrically-universal humanism.

Keywords: transhumanism; posthumanism; whiteness; ‘White Crisis’; racism; racialization; algorithmics; critical race theory; decolonial thought

1. Introduction

In a widely cited poststructuralist/anti-humanist critique of European humanism, Badmington [1] argues that “there is nothing more terrifying than a posthumanism that claims to be terminating ‘Man’ while actually extending ‘his’ term in office.” (p. 16) In this prescient statement, attention is drawn to the very real possibility of a posthumanist orientation that, while claiming to be ‘critical’, ends up re-inscribing precisely that very humanism—focused on the figure of ‘Man’ as white, male, European and anthropocentric—that it sets out to challenge (‘post-’ *as* dialectical-engagement) and overcome (‘post-’ *as* temporal/historical transcendence to a new ontological condition). In this paper, I want to explore Badmington’s statement in terms of a possible ‘entangled’ relationship between Transhumanism and posthumanism, with the latter considered in *both* its ‘critical’ and ‘techno-scientific’ or ‘popular’ manifestations, against the background of what is, ostensibly, a contemporary resurfacing—or *re*-iteration—of the historical phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’ with the aim of mounting a decolonial critique of the Transhumanist/posthumanist project.

Badmington argues that “apocalyptic accounts of the end of ‘Man,’ it seems to me, ignore humanism’s capacity for regeneration and, quite literally, recapitulation.” (p. 11) Against this, I want to suggest that it is the very ‘apocalyptic’ nature of the phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’—that is, perceived threat to white supremacy under mounting contestation from the non-white ‘other’—that contributes to engendering what I refer to as the ‘algorithmic’ transformation of humanism into posthumanism via Transhumanism as an ‘iterative shift’ within the historically-sedimented onto-logic of Eurocentric racialization. My point of departure turns on the ‘between-ness’ of the Transhuman vis-à-vis the posthuman, such that the former is engaged against the background provided by the latter as *telos*, irrespective of how this is ultimately realized in techno-scientific form, viz. augmented biological form, uploaded mind or synthetic, artificial intelligence—that is, ‘Mind Children’. Engaging Transhumanism as an ‘iteration’ within the ‘algorithmic logic(s)’ of race/racism/racialization associated with colonial modernity, I explore how ‘critical’ posthumanism lends itself to co-option into techno-scientific posthumanism, and the implications of this in terms of its contributing to deferral of the ‘decolonial moment’—that is, decolonization of the world system.

Crucially, I maintain that the emergence of the techno-scientific posthuman points to a transformation in the nature of humanism that maintains structurally-asymmetric power relations between ‘the (formerly) human’ (as white, Western, male etc.) and the subaltern ‘other’ even as the latter contests the Eurocentric terrain of ‘the human’.

2. Methodological Precedents

In the context of exploring race ‘and/as’ technology, Chun [2] maintains that race *as* technology “shifts the focus from the *what* of race to the *how* of race, from *knowing* race to *doing* race by emphasizing the similarities between race and technology”; further, that “*race as technology* is a simile that posits a comparative equality or substitutability—but not identity—between the two terms.” (p. 8) I am interested in exploring the implications of positing a similar ‘comparative equality or substitutability’ between two terms, however, one in which the ordering of terms is inverted somewhat in relation to that presented by Chun, viz. Transhumanism and/as whiteness, thereby engaging the issue of how Transhumanism might be thought about in relation to processes of racialization—specifically, those associated with the largely tacit ‘background’ phenomenon of a hegemonic whiteness. Chun maintains that “by framing questions of race *and* technology, as well as by reframing race *as* technology, in relation to modes of media naturalization [we can] theoretically and historically better understand the force of race and technology and their relation to racism.” (p. 8) Similarly, I want to argue that framing questions of Transhumanism *and* whiteness, as well as reframing Transhumanism *as* whiteness, in relation to historical processes of re-articulation of the latter (i.e., whiteness) enables us to theoretically and better understand how Transhumanism can—and arguably *does*—function as a techno-scientific articulation of whiteness during a period arguably marked by increasing contestation of other forms of this racial phenomenon.

Drawing inspiration from Chun’s engagement with race and/as technology, and building on earlier work reflexively exploring other related ‘as/and’ configurations such as race and/as information and Orientalism and/as information, informed by a critical race theory of information and decolonial computing perspective—that is, in terms of consideration of the ‘entanglement’ of race, religion, information, computing and related ICT phenomena with the body-politics and geo-politics (and theo-politics) of knowing and being—I critically interrogate Transhumanism as a techno-scientific response to the phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’ at least partly prompted by ‘critical’ posthumanist contestation of Eurocentrically-universal humanism.

3. Summary of Argument

I begin by briefly sketching the relationship of Transhumanism to Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, and to ‘critical’ and techno-scientific posthumanism, drawing on arguments presented by Jotterand, Hughes, Ranisch and Sombetzi among others.

In framing my argument for Transhumanism and/as Whiteness, I draw upon the sociological exploration of the latter due to Garner—in particular, (1) his ‘processual’ understanding of whiteness in dynamic relational-tension to other racialized identities; (2) the function of whiteness as a tacit invisible ‘background’ standard; and (3) the socio-political structural manifestation of whiteness as continued, yet contested, globally-systemic white supremacy—a position he derives from Mills. Concerns about the future of whiteness are engaged against the backdrop of a purported shift to a ‘post-racial’ reality. Anxieties about the future (or otherwise) of whiteness can be shown to be related to the late 19th and early 20th century phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’ explored by Füredi and Bonnett, the latter of whom refers to a ‘decline’ of overt discourses of whiteness and the concomitant ‘rise’ of a discourse about ‘the West’. It is suggested that the recent election of Donald Trump at President of the United States, the Brexit phenomenon in the UK, and the continued rise of Far/Alt-Right politics in the US and Europe can—and *should*—be seen as *one* response to the re-emergence of the phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’, almost fifty years on from the anti-racist struggles of the 1960s, and almost a century on from when ‘White Crisis’ was first being discussed in ‘the West’ (specifically, Britain and America).

In terms of thinking more specifically about *Transhumanism* and/as Whiteness, I want to argue that Transhumanism/posthumanism should be viewed as a somewhat *different* response to the phenomenon of 'White Crisis', one that is techno-scientific and occurs in parallel with, albeit somewhat obscured by, the more overt phenomenon of conservative 'White Backlash' vis-à-vis socio-political phenomena associated with the response described earlier. In particular I want to argue that the shift described by Füredi and Bonnett from 'white' to 'West' is usefully framed in terms of the re-inscription—or rather, 'algorithmic' *re-iteration*—of whiteness under different signifiers including the techno-scientific signifier of Transhumanism associated with the convergence of GRIN/NBICS technologies; furthermore, that this shift in 'whiteness' needs to be situated within a longer historical frame than that going back to the late 19th century, arguably one that commences with the Columbian voyages in 1492 CE and results in the emergence of a racialized world system; moreover, a history involving *other* 'paradigmatic' shifts including those from 'religious' to 'philosophical' to 'scientific' and latterly 'cultural' expressions of race/racism/racialization, such transformations constituting re-articulations—or rather, 're-iterations'—of the difference between the human (European) and the sub-human (non-European). However, I argue that the contemporary moment is marked by a shift from the distinction between sub-human (non-European, non-white) and human (European, white) to that between human (non-European, non-white) and Transhuman (European, white), such shift being prompted, at least partly, by certain kinds of 'critical' posthumanist contestation of Eurocentric conceptions of the human against the much broader background or 'horizon' of a resurfacing of the phenomenon of 'White Crisis' (Against more optimistic—and, I would aver, somewhat naïve—postmodern, post-structuralist, postcolonial and feminist readings of the cyborg as an emancipatory figure championing the destruction of borders, boundaries and binaries, and the embrace of hybridity, multiplicity and socio-political 'levelling' under a 'critical' posthumanism, I want to argue instead for viewing Cyborgism/Transhumanism as a techno-scientific response by whiteness to the perceived phenomenon of 'White Crisis' and mobilized by whiteness for purposes of maintaining Eurocentrism via refinement/adaptation and expansion under subaltern contestation. Drawing on recent mounting criticism of the so-called 'ontological turn' towards a non-anthropocentric, post-dualistic 'materialism', yet conceding that such a turn was at least partly motivated by a concern to address legacy political and ecological injustices associated with modern/colonial projects by engaging with postcolonial and other forms of critique, I maintain that 'critical' posthumanism ultimately proves to be rather 'brittle' and 'unstable' vis-à-vis its commitment to emancipation of, and reparations towards, the 'other' and that this is due to a tendency to conflate different conceptions of the posthuman, including those that upon close inspection can be shown to be Eurocentrically rationalist. I further argue that the hegemony of such Eurocentrically-rationalist conceptions of the posthuman, masked (or occluded) via their conflation with alternative variants of 'critical' posthumanism, enables the co-option and transformation of the latter into techno-scientific posthumanism, and that one means by which such transformation is facilitated is via their shared commitment to rather nebulous notions such as 'information' as ontologically basic.).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

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