

“Mackerel and Porpoise / Was This the Last of Us”: The Posthuman in Susan Howe’s “Periscope”

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This article reads Susan Howe’s poem “Periscope” (2017) to examine how it challenges liberal humanist strands of thinking about the supposed centrality and privileged position of humans while opening up new ways of representing humans vis-a-vis the non-human. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s concepts of “nomadic subjectivity,” “figuration,” and “transversality,” Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory,” and Pieter Vermeulen’s “Posthuman Affect,” the study looks into how the poet’s preoccupation with the agency of the other-than-human species depicted in the poem leads to a posthumanist interpretation. It also examines how the narrator questions the boundaries between human and non-human, animate and inanimate in order to evoke uncanny effects that are best realized in the form of post-human defiant challenges to liberal humanist models of subjectivity. The poet, it is argued, creates a suggestive visionary engagement and encounter with the natural world and “anthropomorphized things” in an attempt to awaken historical consciousness to give voice to the non-articulated Other.

Keywords: American poetry / Howe, Susan / nomadic subjectivity / posthumanism / otherness

Introduction

The contemporary American experimental poet Susan Howe (1937–) originally garnered literary attention and critical acclaim during the 1970s without being faded into obscurity ever since. She is closely associated with the American avant-garde Language Poetry movement which commenced in the 1970s. As a representative, influential figure of Language Poetry, Howe “uses language in ways that maximize ambiguity and mystery, often by introducing arbitrary rules or

stressing acoustic or visual elements in the text” (Axelrod, Roman, and Travisano 299). Her poetry has thus always produced a sense of bafflement and uncertainty amongst scholars and readers alike and has notably opposed, and continues to oppose the hegemony and dominance of a well-defined, stable, and established meaning. It defies and destabilizes “the concept of the natural presence of a speaker behind a poem” (Koirala 179). In particular, as a really tangible, thoughtful and meaningful alternative, in her poetry, “the speaking subject is problematized or dispersed, and the poem’s ‘I’ exists merely as a textual construct, a grammatical convenience, or an object of verbal play” (Axelrod, Roman, and Travisano 299). The speaking subject, highly uncertain and insecure of his/her knowledge of the facts, reveals the collapse of human understanding and cognition in the contemporary age, thus giving rise to a posthumanist interpretation. While it could be argued that posthumanism figures significantly in Language Poetry movement, there have been surprisingly few attempts to explore the sway of posthumanist theories and philosophies on the movement’s poetic compositions as a whole.

Howe’s poetry is also adjudged and labeled as “an important irritant in its unwillingness to let us deny the myriad mysteries embedded in the very fabric of the poem,” hence providing a space for a cognitive adventure (Bartlett 750). These mysteries in the very fabric of her poem perfectly demonstrate that human beings are no longer thoroughly capable of knowing everything and are no longer at the center of the universe, hence they should not be enthralled and seduced by the idea of humanity’s boundless possibilities for enlightenment. These enigmatic mysteries seem reasonable enough, *per se*, to undermine humanity’s superiority, preeminence, and exceptionalism in the posthuman era and prompt a rethinking of human agency and autonomy over nonhuman agency. The inscrutabilities clearly reveal how human beings’ ways of knowing appear to have been increasingly inadequate and inefficient in order to understand the complexities of life in a global context. The indeterminacies and ambiguities in Howe’s poetry reveal that the poet does not intend any more to valorize man and his intellectual capital the same as liberal humanists have done. Therefore, the purported human capacity to dominate knowledge is largely contested. Moreover, Howe’s poetry drives the reader to “acknowledge the otherness of language” (Axelrod, Roman, and Travisano 301). Because of experimental syntax techniques and new lexical coinages, in Howe’s poetry, language is treated like the other whose nature cannot be entirely explored.

Howe's writing, as William Montgomery in *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* has argued, makes "the resistance of interpretive endeavor almost a condition of its existence" (xiii). This resistance can severely stultify and debilitate the human being's endeavour for a comprehensive understanding of the entire universe and furnishes a sense of the inadequacy of human knowledge to encounter new and unfamiliar experiences. Like most of Howe's poetry collections, her International Griffin Poetry Prize-winning collection *Debths*, figuring "Periscope," is "a hybrid animal, a composite of autobiographical prose, minimalist verse, collaged (and mainly illegible) clippings of old texts, and lots of white space" (Chiasson). The appearance of her poetry collections thus attempts to force on human perception and understanding a new reading of everything in the world, including human beings. To respond to the recent innovations in technology, Howe presents her 2017 poetry collection in an electronic format. In the poem under consideration, she even utilizes the new technology of optical instrument (i.e., periscope) to see things not directly in her line of sight. So, she introduces elements of technological wonder to evoke uncanny impressions.

Howe's 145-line poem "Periscope" (2017) has not been the subject of substantial critical attention up to the present moment. The poem's exclusiveness and impenetrability make it difficult to understand and interpret in detail, but its general purpose can be rather clearly identified. A reviewer in *Goodreads* has also asserted that the poem is "difficult," and thus he does not expect to be able to find definitive answers on what the poem is all about, but he thinks that "it has rich opportunities for thinking with and through it, perhaps a touch of nonsense creates the entrance to a vision of the nonsense in our own world" (Tristan). By virtue of this difficulty, Howe implies that the complexities of such a venture into understanding the poem far outstrip the human intellect, hence requiring a posthuman knowledge. Therefore, Kant's motto of Enlightenment in his 1784 essay ("*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding!", 58) can no longer be applicable in the contemporary era. The poem thus displays its author's penchant for experimental writing, as it has also been displayed in the speaker's expression: "Choose one rugged raggedy" (Howe, line 37), and her dismissal of "quatrain its puppet pattern" (line 38). "Periscope" is also poetic representation of posthuman models of consciousness, revealing the poet's strong urge to interrogate dominant conceptions of humanity and selfhood. Howe's fictional, mythological, and historical figures inhabit a

liminal state of in-betweenness, extending beyond the rigid and hierarchical stratification of human consciousness prevalent in Western humanist traditions.

In what follows, the authors contend that the main question Howe aspires to address in her “patchwork” poem is one Rosi Braidotti puts forward in her book *The Posthuman*: “what new forms of subjectivity are supported by the posthuman?” (3) At issue here is the poet’s attempt to rewrite humanism and extend humanist epistemology and ontology to feature new forms of posthuman subjectivity deeply rooted in her unsurpassed “American aesthetic of uncertainty.” For Howe, “the discourse of species, and with it the ethical problematics of our relations to nonhuman others” can “be treated largely as if species is always already a counter or cover for some other discourse” (Wolfe, *Animal* 124). In her view, the discourse of “nonhuman others” is an ideological smokescreen for historiography in which she is fundamentally interested, “My poems always seem to be concerned with history” (Beckett 20), as she observes in an interview with Tom Beckett. History provides the possibility for humanity to confront its past, present, and future and to establish an ideal balance with the natural world on all levels. History has always demonstrated that humanity is not separated from the universe which it inhabits, and his relationship with other beings extends far beyond the imagined limits. History reveals to humanity how its existence amounts to those experiences of encounters where there is a myriad of labyrinthine interactions among all entities in nature including human beings. To examine the notion of the posthuman in Howe’s poem, we have to focus on figurations of boundaries (especially between man and animal, animate and non-animate, man and machine or technology) and the way she traces such transitions/transformations/crossings. In what follows, the authors attempt to provide a detailed reading of Howe’s poem “Periscope” to show how ample possibilities of posthuman encounters emerge within the poem. Central to our analysis is how Howe’s establishment of ontological unity between all beings facilitates the deconstruction of binary oppositions and a critical exploration of the ways in which borders between the human and the nonhuman and the animate and the inanimate are dynamically and continuously constructed, collapsed, and reconstructed.

Posthuman subjectivities

The primeval phenomenon of posthuman subjectivity actually has an extended history, even dating back before the inception of human civilization. More than forty years ago, Ihab Hassan in his landmark essay "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" observed that posthumanism currently may appear as "a dubious neologism, the latest slogan, or simply another image of man's recurrent self-hate. Yet posthumanism may also hint at a potential in our culture, hint at a tendency struggling to become more than a trend" (843). Hassan employs the term "posthumanism" to portray an era in which "the human form—including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned" (843). He "helplessly" envisages the demise of humanist ideology, declaring "five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism" (843). Introducing the Titan Prometheus as a symbol of posthumanism, Hassan testifies to the fact that posthumanity has existed even long before the advent of human consciousness. He thinks of Prometheus as "a vague metaphor of a mind struggling with the One and the Many" (835). Prometheus' mind, as Hassan announces, is where "Imagination and Science, Myth and Technology, Language and Number sometimes meet. [...] Prometheus presages the marriage of Earth and Sky" (835). Only through this contradictory alliance "perhaps, will posthumanism see the dubious light of a new day" (835).

Nevertheless, concepts such as "posthuman" and "posthumanism" have only recently been a matter of constant concern and a focus of critical debates. They have generated a new way of thinking, theorizing, and discussing the paradigm of human-nonhuman interaction, humanity's potential collapse, and its past, present, and future prospects. From the last decades of the twentieth century to the present, a range of philosophers and theorists have endeavoured to define and conceptualize the posthuman subjectivity in a great number of distinct ways and with a broad variety of outcomes, as the subject still continues to fascinate humanity. Much of the current reflections and arguments on posthuman theory is informed by critical and philosophical accounts advanced by theorists such as Donna J. Haraway, Neil Badmington, Nancy Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Stefan Herbrechter, Rosi Braidotti, Pramod K. Nayar, Robert Pepperell, Francis Fukuyama, and Karen Barad, among many other scholars. They have fervently sought to reassess the human's relation to the universe, raising serious

objections to the alleged centrality, self-sufficiency, and dignity of humanity as a glorified species in liberal humanistic discourses. In their views, the idea of the human agency has emerged as highly contingent and uncertain, depending on transitory set of circumstances. What lies at the heart of posthumanist philosophical thought is basically the idea that the human now engages in an array of relations with other entities as part of cosmological entanglements. Thus, the self is no longer perceived as an autonomous entity.

As such, posthumanism “isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended—but is only post-humanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (Wolfe, *What Is* xv). Posthumanism identifies a historical moment in which the human and non-human subjectivities have been severely transformed as a result of “the embeddedness and entanglement of the ‘human’ in all that it is not, in all that used to be thought of as its opposites or its others” (Wolfe, *Animal* 193). The “human” is lowered in status by its inability to transcend the restrictions of the physical body and reasoning mind and the “nonhuman” is elevated in status to construct its own environment. Hayles perceives in posthumanism not the possibility of anti-humanism or the apocalypse but the possibility of a perfect and harmonious symbiosis “that will be conducive to the long-range survival of humans and of the other life-forms, biological and artificial, with whom we share the planet and ourselves” (291).

A specific set of political, historical, ideological, and environmental circumstances has contributed to the creation of the posthuman subject and led to reconceptualization of the relationship between humans and non-human species. The much-acclaimed humanist Tony Davies’ reformulation of the concept of humanity and his introduction of the notion of “becoming human” exactly demonstrates the interdependency of the human and other nonhuman creatures. Davies insists: “Humanity is neither an essence nor an end, but a continuous and precarious process of becoming human, a process that entails the inescapable recognition that our humanity is on loan from others, to precisely the extent that we acknowledge it in them” (Davies 132). Through commitment to the rhetoric of becoming, posthumanism envisions a fluid boundary between humans and nonhumans, and does not draw definite distinctions between them. Claire Colebrook, a leading Deleuzian scholar, in *Gilles Deleuze*, too, attends to the ontology of becoming: “The human becomes more than itself, or expands to its highest power, not by affirming its humanity,

nor by returning to animal state, but by becoming-hybrid with what is not itself." (129) To open up innumerable possibilities for possible becomings, human beings should establish hybrid relations with other beings, which "creates 'lines of flight'; from life itself we imagine all the becomings of life, using the human power of imagination to overcome the human" (129).

The posthuman entity is thus always in a state of flux, challenging absolute constructs and embracing "a becoming ontology," or in Rosi Braidotti's stipulation, "the ethics of becoming." Braidotti uses the concept of figuration to account for the process of becoming. "A figuration," Braidotti asserts in *The Posthuman*, "is the expression of alternative representations of the subject as a dynamic non-unitary entity; it is the dramatization of processes of becoming. These processes assume that subject formation takes place in-between nature/technology; male/female; black/white; local/global; present/past—in the spaces that flow and connect the binaries" (164). These in-between, interstitial states challenge the established modes of the subject's representation, as they erase binary oppositions and place the humanistic hierarchies of beings into question. The in-between states seek to undercut a unitary image of human beings in the cosmos, as they explore to establish hybrid relations with animals, machines, monsters, mythical creatures, and ethereal and celestial beings. "As a brand of vital materialism," Braidotti thus contends, posthumanism "contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the 'exceptionalism' of the Human as a transcendental category. It strikes instead an alliance with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or life in its nonhuman aspects" (66). Braidotti thus privileges *zoe* "the non-human, vital force of Life" over *bios*, or life as "that has traditionally been reserved for *anthropos*" (60). In the ensuing section, the authors attempt to consider how Howe as a postmodern poet might approach posthuman representations in her experimental poem, in order to contest the alleged centrality of humanity, mostly drawing on Braidotti's notion of posthuman subjectivities but also resorting to Brown's "Thing Theory," and Vermeulen's "Posthuman Affect."

Howe's "Periscope"

"Periscope" is the third of *Debths*' four sequences which drives its title from one of "late 'picture-light' paintings" by the renowned American artist Paul Thek (1933–1988) as Howe informs us in the "foreword" to her poetry collection. In Thek's painting "a periscope

peers out of the water, which Howe links to the ‘Castaway’ chapter of *Moby-Dick*, in which the cabin boy Pip is abandoned in the open sea, sinks into the depths, and has a vision of ‘God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom’” (Hammer). The title of the poem is a telling one. The poet seems to take the deployment of the then extraordinary technology of periscope to convey “some amount of reflection on the idea of perspective” (Tristan). The title indicates the desire to communicate a new perspective of humanity and its place in the universe. Periscope-like, the poem offers the desire for exploring the possibility of withdrawing from any anthropocentric or human-centered worldview. Instead, the poem privileges engagement with and immersion in the natural world to expand the possibilities of vision and to evoke “imagined” imageries rather than to capture only real images. The poet seems to deal with “the mechanics of verse as a technology for wonder” (Chiasson). The poem’s title implies that the speaker is below the surface of water, possibly in a submariner navigating the alien sea or ocean. In this way, Howe provides a natural space to observe “cognition in the wild” and not in laboratory experiments. The ethnographer and cognitive scientist Edwin Hutchins’ metaphor of “cognition in the wild” evokes “a sense of an ecology of thinking in which human cognition interacts with an environment rich in organizing resources” (Hutchins xiv). Drawing on Hutchins’ meticulous study of the navigational systems of oceangoing ships, Hayles claims that “the cognitive system responsible for locating the ship in space and navigating it successfully resides not in humans alone but in the complex interactions within an environment that includes both human and nonhuman actors” (Hayles 288). As such, the setting Howe chooses for her poem provides her with the opportunity to explore, nurture, and cultivate her special aims and to situate her poem in a posthumanist context, which makes thorough and direct interactions with the natural world possible.

The epigraph to the poem, “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom,” alludes to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), which is itself an example of a posthumanistic novel. Ishmael, the narrator, and a junior member of the crew of the *Pequod* imagines that in the sea Pip had firsthand witnessed the wonders of “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” and had “glimpsed the very origins of the cosmos” (Horton 237). Afterwards, Pip appears to the crew members “to be an idiot who speaks nonsense; to Ahab, though, Pip has the wisdom of heaven” (237). For his shipmates, “this madness is manifested foremost in the way in which the ocean has inflected Pip’s voice” (Packham 567). Pip’s

encounter with the utterly alien and nonhuman world of the ocean primarily affects his human language, thus conveying the attributes of other-than-human species' communication systems. Initiating the poem with the image of Pip who speaks gibberish, Howe implies that her poem is going to be a tale of nonsense. Ahab too "sees Pip as evidence of the plight his own special vision has revealed" (Corner 56). For him, Pip is an "orphaned and 'abandoned' child of the 'frozen heavens,' 'the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man'" (56). He is thus rejected by the heavens and the crew and thrown into a state of otherness; he is transformed into a nonhuman other. Powerless and inarticulate in the face of the overwhelming power of the alien ocean, he stands somehow symbolically for all those inarticulate figures of history. In fact, Howe's history-conscious poetry is, in a sense, supposed to give voice to those powerless figures of history. The poet attempts to present those figures who pass through the processes of "becomings" between human and nonhuman states. The poem thus begins with "the very origins of the cosmos," hence conjuring a prehuman state of being. The poem, then, attempts to reconstruct the universe from scratch by the agency of a posthuman god, endowed with human characteristics. Moreover, this time the poet gives priority to the harmonious relationship between human and nonhuman beings, rather than privileging the self as an autonomous, self-sufficient agency.

From the outset, the speaker of Howe's poem attempts to efface the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate. "Closed book who stole / who away do brackets / signify emptiness was / it a rift in experience" (Howe, lines 1–4) cannot be defined as either inanimate or not inanimate, and necessarily needs to be labelled as posthuman. However, brackets do not "necessarily signify emptiness, but enclose parenthetical information about something—not directly related, perhaps out of context, but certainly something, not a void" ("Notes on the Poem"). In this way, it seems that meaning is no longer accentuated as an attribute of life in the posthuman era. This is the perspective Wolfe attempts to formulate while considering the question of posthumanism, "to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with *greater* specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection" (Wolfe, *What Is* xxv). Thus, posthumanism manages to accomplish its undertaking, in case it disrupts or takes away meaning from humanity's realm of consciousness to force it to see things anew in a fresh light.

The speaker, in “Mackerel and porpoise / was this the last of us” (Howe, lines 5–6), intends to disrupt previously assumed clear distinctions between humans and animals. In order to furnish ideal possibilities for establishing seamless continuities which unite all entities together, she here affirms that human beings should form hybrid relationships with all sentient beings. As such, the discourse of the Great Chain of Being can no longer rank all beings from the highest degrees of perfection down to the lowest ones. Raising the status of nonhuman animals, Fukuyama also confirms: “Many of the attributes that were once held to be unique to human beings—including language, culture, reason, consciousness, and the like—are now seen as characteristic of a wide variety of nonhuman animals.” (Fukuyama 144) The speaker thus blurs the human-animal boundary, so that her posthuman model upsets and displaces the established centrality of human beings and considers the human beings as just one part of a larger whole. Therefore, the duty of man on earth as a crowned creature of God is relegated to other creatures and man’s dominion on earth is questioned. Humanity’s removal from an alleged privileged position, authority, and power vis-à-vis non-human species could be understood in terms of biological, technological, philosophical, social, cognitive and also ethical demotion of the human subject in the posthuman era. Howe here predominately thinks of human identity, consciousness, and body as elusive, ever-changing, fluid, and mutable realities, subjective and difficult to describe and capture rather than clearly defined and stable constructs. She perceives identity as a dynamic, transitional, and hybrid construct, not ever frozen in a determined place and time. In the posthuman era, even the speaker sees herself as a hybrid figure, considering her characterizations as “‘sightseer,’ a pure voyeur, or ‘ghost,’ a felt but invisible presence. Or [...] a transitional figure, monitoring the boundary between private and public, past and present: a ‘poet-caretaker’” (Chiasson).

Howe’s version of posthumanism, as the influential posthuman scholar Robert Pepperell proclaims, “is the posthumanism of *embodiment*, which recognises hitherto concealed continuities between realms that were once held as distinct and bounded, such as mind and body, or human and machine” (Pepperell 28). This includes, as Pepperell points out, “the continuity between humans and everything else in the world, with a consequent loss of the human supremacy implicit in more extreme tendencies of humanism” (28). Howe also affirms this transition in humanity’s understanding of the universe, formerly acknowledging only the materiality of the real world: “Once when the real world / was our world in its nature.” (Howe, lines 17–18)

However, the narrator now gives credence to the idea of threshold and liminality which induces a sense of bewilderment: "to mind our would world / Threshold word little hinge / hope of bewilderment its / parchment memory sign." (lines 19–22) It should be further noted that when the speaker talks about what it means to be the last human in the interrogative form, her words do not exude certainty, security, and mastery, since reason, the ability to determine the truth that convinces the human of its humanness is no longer at the foreground: *cogito, ergo sum*, the basic tenet of René Descartes' philosophy can no longer provide a sense of comforting solace and safe haven for mankind in this era. The speaker later confirms the idea once more that in the posthuman era intelligence does not play a significant role in man's life and progress as "intelligence sealed from us / Days and hours are blinds" (line 136–137).

The speaker soon conjures a border space: "These tallied scraps float / like glass skiffs quietly for / love or pity and all that" (Howe, lines 7–9). Certainly, the image of floating scraps "evokes the surface of water, which we've just learned periscopes can help to transcend and navigate" ("Notes on the Poem"). The water surface scene opens up ideal possibilities of interpretation in terms of a posthuman space of encounter between man and nature. The periscope carefully positions itself at the surface of water, at the liminal threshold of the border space between the exterior and the interior to establish a unique niche of understanding new posthuman subjectivities. The objects depicted through the poem and seen through the periscope become impregnated with meaning and agency in such a way that they transcend the materiality of "objects." They signify and embody a plethora of hidden meanings and states of interdependence not through human meaning-making but through their relation to other creatures. Thus, objects are not really inanimate and fixed entities in space and time and they intrinsically possess a sense of momentum and dynamism, which can erode established hierarchical, binary oppositions.

Differentiating "objects" from "things," Bill Brown in his seminal essay "Thing Theory" acknowledges the powerful agency of "things" as "what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems" (Brown 5). As such, "things" transcend the materiality of "objects." "The story of objects asserting themselves as things," as Brown contends, "is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the

thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). "Things" in this formulation signify human beings' interconnections with history, technology, and the natural world to develop a sense of unity, harmony, and connection with all sentient beings. Likewise, each "thing" in this poem cultivates a sense of integration, continuity, and interconnectedness with human beings and with the world. However, as Brown also affirms, the reality of the "thing" cannot be truly apprehended: "On the one hand, then, the thing baldly encountered. On the other, some thing not quite apprehended." (5) The speaker also points to this fact when proclaiming: "If I knew what it is / I'd show it—but no." (Howe, lines 52–53)

The speaker then displays her close affinity with mythology to bring to consciousness alternative models of the human-nonhuman relationship: "Cross counterclockwise via / cobbled childhood juvenalia / to hobbled monosandalism" (Howe, lines 34–36). The speaker of Howe's poem here makes use of the myth of monosandalism from Greek antiquity, which relates the story of mono-sandaled Jason's ascension to the throne of Pelias who had formerly been warned of a prophecy to beware of a man with only one sandal (Daly 73). So, the sandal is likewise saturated with meaning, and can signify freedom from a despotic monarchy. The sandal also helps Jason to experience a hybrid identity to become the king of Iolcos in Thessaly after he was sent away to the care of the Centaur Chiron (Daly 73). Comparably, the motif of monosandalism helps the speaker to liberate oneself from absolute constructs of reality. Furthermore, in Howe's poetry "empty spaces" also carry meaning: "Each word may be six six / razzle rungs it may be two / places at once in the old / secret escapades a vault" (lines 23–26). It is as if, as LaBarge argues, the speaker "has learned to climb ladders using the spaces between the steps. There is magic in the margins; the empty spaces around objects and words are filled with equivalent meaning".

Objects also establish a network of affective relationships. The tallied scraps' exploration for the feeling of "love or pity and all that" (Howe, line 9) aims to bring about "*a shift from human emotion to posthuman affect*" in Pieter Vermeulen's sense of the term in his essay "Posthuman Affect" (121). Bringing the resources of the "turn to affect," Vermeulen argues, "the passage of the human to the posthuman [...] can be fruitfully described as a minimal emotive scenario" (123). Vermeulen notes how "the posthuman can be plotted as a necessarily affective experience of the demise of the strictly codified, subjective feelings that are associated with traditional notions of human

subjectivity" (123). Liberal humanist subjectivity is thus dictated by recognizable and codified emotions. However, Vermeulen argues, "the *demise* of feeling that posthumanist thought seeks to enact generates second-order feelings that are less easily captured, defined, understood or reterritorialised onto the subject" (123). These "second-order feelings" can act as an antidote to inertia and stasis of codified emotions, enabling all beings to achieve a new quality of existence, spreading the love and respect for all of the creatures that exist.

It is furthermore hinted several times in the poem that nothing is determinate or predictable: "Mystical accidentalism for / sound-hemmed naught in / night's botanical glossary" (Howe, lines 12–14); or "You sit in our tent of belief / and ask what to do with it / Faithful first then frivolous / Half scientific but good at / guessing by sensation you / look at a flame is it orange / within you or without you" (lines 60–66). In the second instance, the narrator admits that everything is in the process of becoming, particularly sensations and feelings. The speaker even points to the metafictionality of her work: "In another poem I'm in a / perfectly black room with / my eyes directed on this / sheet of paper to make a / long story short I will tell / Baba Yaga in her tinsel hut / to heal your hobble foot" (lines 67–73). The poem's metafictional elements characteristically demonstrate a defiant interrogation and refutation of the Cartesian mind/body dualism. The narrator also seeks remedy for the addressee's "hobble foot" from Baba Yaga, a posthuman hybrid figure.

Overall, in "Periscope," the speaker makes use of supernatural elements and figures such as "Pleiads" (Howe, line 11), "monosandalism" (line 36), "Baba Yaga" (line 72), "Achilles" (line 75), "Peter Rugg" (line 90), "the Galoshes of Fortune" (line 94), "Lethe" (line 123), and "Helios" (line 124). The transformations in these myths manifestly debunk the boundary between human and nonhuman and throw into high relief hybrid constructs. In an attempt to deconstruct the myth of humanity's centrality anchored in the philosophy of liberal humanism and to help readers feel a sense of awareness of humanity's relatedness to the whole of the creatures, the poem also retells the Slavic myth of Baba Yaga, a supernatural being in Slavic folklore who appears as a deformed witch. "Baba Yaga" along with her hut standing on chicken legs provides an image of the grotesque. In her essay "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others: De-oedipalizing the Animal Other," Braidotti maintains that some modes of embodiment are illustrative of "dialectical otherness (nonwhite, nonmasculine, nonnormal, nonyoung, nonhealthy)" and of "categorical otherness

(zoomorphic, disabled, or malformed)” and thus “cast on the other side of normality—that is, viewed as anomalous, deviant, and monstrous” (526). The speaker’s allusion to visitors’ request of Baba Yaga’s hut to turn around and face them, “Hut, hut! Stand with your back to the forest, your front to me” (qtd. in Johns 2) transparently reveals that inanimate things can be granted life and sentience as well. Verifying nonhuman life, the narrator thus inquires the addressee not to stand in the way of the hut’s turn: “To stagger and fall to the / nether side of the hut never / to stand with your back to / the forest because the hut / when it wants to allegedly / rushes this way then that” (Howe, lines 101–106).

Drawing on the story of Achilles, the son of King Peleus and the sea goddess Thetis, Howe implies how the greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War became seemingly invulnerable through his immersion and engagement with other-than-human agency. In order to thwart his son’s destiny and grant him the boon of immortality, his mother plunged her infant’s whole body into the sacred river of Styx, which separates the world of mortality from the underworld of immortality. This act of immersion rendered every part of his body invulnerable except for the heel, held by his mother. Achilles’ transformation to an invulnerable state obviously manipulates the boundaries between different classes of beings and elevates him to the status of gods. However, as the speaker reminds us, “Achilles has his heel what’s / left to a thirdhand sightseer” (Howe, lines 75–76). Implied here is that his identity is still hybrid, part human and part god. Thus, even a posthuman creature is doomed to extinction, as the speaker elsewhere in the poem “makes it clear that we cannot truly escape either our destinies or fatalities” (Messerli); observing “I sold your shadow for you too / Let’s let bygones be bygones / Dust to dust we barely reach” (Howe, lines 57–59).

The speaker also makes use of American author and lawyer William Austin’s 1824 tale, *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man*, which later influenced Nathaniel Hawthorne and made Austin known as a “Precursor of Hawthorne.” Peter Rugg is arguably the most challenging figure in Howe’s poem, yielding two alternative interpretations. In one interpretation he is probably the flattest character of Howe’s poem. His identity is fixed and unchangeable and he cannot escape his ill-fated destiny. He is responsible for his own ruin, but the punishment may be unjustifiable without any knowledge of the nature and seriousness of his offense. The speaker is “Telling the story of a man / who is responsible for his / own ruin and is inexplicably / condemned to wander in /

a one-horse chair eternally / around Boston from which / historical song he himself / cannot free himself with a / wave of his hand whither—" (Howe, lines 80–88). The choice of the term "man" rather than "ghost" intimates that Peter Rugg does not possess a fluid body. That is, he is not a posthuman figure or has not accommodated himself to the posthuman condition yet. But another plausible insight that Howe tries to throw into high relief is Peter Rugg's nomadic subjectivity, one which, to use Braidotti's terms, "requires dis-identification from established, nation-bound identities" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 54). The development of this nomadic subjectivity, as Braidotti suggests, "is political at heart, but it has a strong affective core made of convictions, vision and active desire for change" (54). Peter Rugg's nomadic way of life can also destabilize Cartesian dualisms of mind/body in which mind and body are essentially two distinct substances.

The narrator is even infected and inflected by animal otherness: "In the old days I used to sit / up late till an owl appeared / Negative infinity melodrama / I shall never forget you half- / way owl shadow marauder / How you flew over and over" (Howe, lines 95–100). And then "shadow" seems to cast a spectral quality over the materials of the poem: "Come lie down on my shadow / Being infinitely self-conscious / I sold your shadow for you too" (lines 55–57). A shadow can be a posthuman figure, as it does not possess a body; it cannot be embodied. Moreover, a shadow does not show any "markers of bodily difference" (Hayles 4–5); its very presence subverts and transgresses fixed identities and bodies. In the Haylesian discourse, "the liberal subject *possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body [...] the body is understood as an object for control and mastery rather than as an intrinsic part of the self," whereas posthumanism assumes that "embodiment is not essential to human being" (4–5). Also figuring several times in the poem are "ghosts" ("A nearest faint ghost alias—", line 116, or "our ghosts appear in mirrors," line 128), blurring the distinction between the living and the dead, conjuring a sense of terror. In his essay "*État Présent*: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms," Colin Davis observes: "Attending to the ghost is an ethical injunction insofar as it occupies the place of the Levinasian Other: a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving." (53) Furthermore, the shadow's or the ghost's posthuman body, as Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston suggest, is only "a screen, a projected image" (Halberstam and Livingston 3). The narrator's spectral, uncanny encounters with shadows and ghosts are a

posthuman agenda of the need for establishing a new relationship with other-than-human species and beings in order to develop an empathy with the rest of the creatures.

However, at one part in the poem, the speaker observes “Let’s be human we can’t carry / the Galoshes of Fortune home” (Howe, lines 93–94). With the allusion to Hans Christian Andersen’s 1938 fairy tale of “the Galoshes of Fortune,” telling the story of a magic pair of time-travelling boots (line 94), and the parrot’s witty saying “Let’s be human” (line 93; Andersen 147), the speaker intimates that one’s aim is not going to travel to another historical period to fulfill one’s post-humanistic wishes. Despite one’s lofty aspiration to manipulate time miraculously, the speaker does not, however, intend to return to the past which is “all darkness and dirt” (de Mylius 175). But, in order to manipulate time and in turn the world of the living, the speaker stops time at one point in the poem to return to that point later: “Do you hear the clock lock / Just wait till I turn back—” (Howe, lines 107–108). Even infinitesimal particles are of significance in the post-human era in developing alternative identities: “When stars are not so faint / and new astronomers assign / numbers one may count one / other and each secretly jot / down in units and tenths for / photometrics other instant / infinitesimal arc predicates” (line 109–115). As such, photometry as “the science of light measurement” can bring into foreground even the most remote heavenly bodies, seemingly out of reach of human beings.

Later on, the speaker endeavors to portray a new form of community which transcends human subjectivity both in time and place: “Unseen in canoe or cut glass / skiff scudding past centuries / on another map kept secret” (Howe, lines 117–119). To navigate the boundaries between the realm of the living and that of the dead, the speaker even summons the images of the chthonic underworld: “Setting sun then Lethe where / ever fabled swan-white Helios / in our own time underground” (lines 123–125). The reference to the myth of “Lethe” signifies that her posthuman figures are conferred the blessing of drinking the water of the underworld river of oblivion to forget their mortal lives on earth. They are allowed to surpass the “dark” past and look to the “bright” future. Furthermore, the Titan God of the Sun, Helios, who once presided over the heavenly and earthly bodies and observed everything from above, is positioned “in our own time underground” (line 125). So, Howe through her speaker violates the hierarchy of the universe once more to thoughtfully and thoroughly prepare the ground for a new posthuman state of the world.

The speaker of Howe's poem also challenges the human thought: "In this second place we think / we only think we think though" (Howe, lines 126–127). This nicely epitomizes the so-called posthuman condition. Howe seems to confirm that "I do not think, I am thought. You do not speak, you are spoken. Thought and speech, which for the humanist had been the central substance of identity, are located elsewhere, and the self is a vacancy" (Davies 60). The narrator of Howe's poem also reiterates the same proposition, testifying "What I lack is myself" (Howe, line 54), which clearly portrays "the post-human predicament" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 1). More precisely, to live in the posthuman era, the nature of thought should be changed, as Wolfe informs: "we must take yet another step, another post-, and realize that the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist" (Wolfe, *What Is* xvi).

Howe, through her speaker, also uncannily portrays a miniature microcosm of cosmological entanglements through punctuation marks of comma and semicolon: "This side I will show miniature / network entanglements comma" (Howe, lines 129–130); and "half-hesitation semi-colon semi- / colon" (lines 132–133). Furthermore, the speaker identifies "full stop" as "Blessings," as it can, in a sense, liberate man out of a web of labyrinthine relationships existing between humans and non-humans (line 131). Reiterated in the poem is also the idea of the insignificant position of humans in the universe and its interconnectedness and interdependence with nature: "yes the sea lies about us / Our tiniest on earth as such" (lines 133–134). As Jean-François Lyotard also observes: "The human species is not the hero of the fable. It is a complex form of organizing energy. Like the other forms, it is undoubtedly transitory. Other, more complex forms may appear that will win out over it. Perhaps one of these forms is preparing itself through techno-scientific development right from the time when the fable is being recounted" (Lyotard 93). So, the once deep faith in humanity has been diminished and it is no longer able to reign in the posthuman world as more intricate forms of life with complex designs have taken its place. On the other hand, the speaker believes "each new extreme outvies" (Howe, line 139), signifying extreme forms of life are more vigorous and competitive compared to the ordinary forms of life.

In the last part of the poem, the speaker directs the readers' attention to the fact that she is part of a posthuman world in which no logic dominates: "Humming octaves with wild / trills of magic and symbolic / logic a not-being-in-the-no" (Howe, lines 143–145).

The speaker's humming octaves with the wild nature in the last three lines of the poem authenticate Braidotti's "transversality of relations" which "traces transversal connections among material and symbolic, concrete and discursive lines of relation or forces" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 95). Braidotti's transversality "actualizes *zoe*-centred egalitarianism as an ethics and also as a method to account for forms of alternative, posthuman subjectivity" (95). This concept reifies an ethics "based on the primacy of the relation, of interdependence, values *zoe* in itself" (95). In sum, Howe's poem valorizes *zoe*-saturated forms of posthuman subjectivity rather than *bio*-saturated forms of liberal humanist subjectivity.

Conclusion

In "Periscope," Howe uncannily enacts posthumanist perspectives, putting at the center of her poem nonhuman entities in an attempt to deconstruct the myths of humanity's superiority and authority over the natural world. Howe employs experimental syntax techniques and new lexical coinages to challenge the human's assumption of unlimited knowledge and cognitive powers. On the other hand, Howe's posthuman entities interconnected in multiple transversal relations are endowed with the productive life-force of *zoe*, which provides a space of hybrid configuration and dynamic reconfiguration of identity. Howe's "posthumanism of embodiment" traces post/humanity's trajectory from the moment of existence up to the present moment, to construct a more comprehensive picture of history in which different forms of life are interconnected and inseparable. As such, Howe's poem does not create rigid unitary binaries and hierarchies, but captures the vibrancy of "in-between states" through the depiction of mythological, historical, and literary figures whose very transformations destabilize the boundary between human and nonhuman, and animate and inanimate. The poem's commitment to the becoming ontology gives rise to the depiction of characters who prefer to remove their "Galoshes of Fortune," to drink the water of Lethe, to forget their mortal lives and look to a bright and promising future.

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»Skuša in pliskavka / Je bil to zadnji od nas?«: postčloveško v *Periskopu* Susan Howe

Ključne besede: ameriška poezija / Howe, Susan / nomadska subjektivnost / posthumanizem / drugost

Razprava se osredotoča na branje pesmi Susan Howe »Periscope« (2017), v kateri pesnica izpodbija vprašanja liberalnih humanističnih smeri razmišljanja o domnevno osrednjem in privilegiranem položaju človeka, hkrati pa odpira nove načine za reprezentacijo ljudi v odnosu do tistega, kar ni človeško. Študija, ki temelji na konceptih »nomadske subjektivnosti«, »upodabljanja« in »transverzalnosti« Rosi Braidotti, »teorije stvari« Billa Browna in »postčloveškega vpliva« Pietra Vermeulena, preučuje, kako pesničina preokupacija z delovanjem vsega ne-človeškega, ki je upodobljeno v pesmi, vodi v posthumanistično interpretacijo. Preučuje tudi, kako pripovedovalec prevprašuje meje med človeškim in ne-človeškim, živim in neživim, da bi priklical nenavadne učinke, ki se najbolje uresničijo v obliki postčloveškega kljubovanja liberalnim humanističnim modelom subjektivnosti. Izkaže se, da pesnica vzpostavlja sugestivno vizionarsko angažiranost ter srečanje z naravnim svetom in »antropomorfiziranimi stvarmi«, da bi prebudila zgodovinsko zavest, ki bi dala glas neartikuliranemu Drugemu.

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