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# [Introduction to] Animate Literacies: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Humanism

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# Animate Literacies

Nathan Snaza

## THE HUMAN(ITIES) IN CRISIS

As any reader of this book will know, we are living through a long mo-
ment now when the humanities in general, and perhaps literary studies
in particular, are said to be in crisis. This so-called "crisis of the humani-
ties" seems thoroughly entrenched in a polarized debate between sides
offering what seem to me to be boring platitudes. On the one side, some
claim that the humanities are inefficient, requiring more energies than
are justified in the contemporary moment of neoliberal market capital-
ism. This position seeks to close, consolidate, and de-emphasize humani-
ties programs at the university, leading to some very high-profile closures
(and near closures) of literature and language programs. Those on the
other side claim that the humanities are the core of the university, trans-
mitting skills that are indispensable for any worker or even citizen in to-
day's world. Although I don't want to give specific enunciations in this
debate any more interpretive energy than they claim in the opinion pages
of newspapers and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I thought it noteworthy
that Michael Bérubé could tell CNN that humanities skills even make for
good military and corporate leadership.[1] To put this most schematically,
one side sees the humanities as a waste of energy (intellectual, instruc-
tional, and especially institutional) while the other side expends enor-
mous amounts of energy legitimating their existence in terms that are
almost always entirely friendly to neoliberal capitalism. Reframing this
in terms of energy and its circulation allows me to pose two questions
that I'll dwell upon in this book. One, what would happen if we redirected
energy from this tiresome treading in place (one that could not be more

stuck in a rut)? And two, what possibilities might open for us if this reframing of the humanities in terms of energy allows us to see how the humanities is an assemblage that articulates energies across a wide variety of actants, many (or most) of whom are not human? What I am ultimately interested in here is pursuing a nonhumanist reconceptualization of the practices formerly called "humanist."[2]

As an initial shock to our presentist sense of this crisis, I want to note that almost thirty years ago Terry Eagleton wrote that the crisis of the humanities is permanent, resulting from their structural "marginalization."[3] He speculates that the role of the humanities is to produce the commonsense understanding of the human that allows for the relatively smooth functioning of social and economic life under capitalism. At times when this concept is in crisis, the humanities have to step in to clarify, critique, and shore up the human, but at moments of relative calm this crisis management role is less necessary. I'm not going to spend too much time on Eagleton, and I want to take his assessment with more than one grain of salt. Still, his speculations prompt an interesting question: Is it possible that in our time, the receding of support for and interest in the humanities stems, counterintuitively, from the taken-for-grantedness of the human today?

In one sense, this is an almost absurd, Pollyannaish question. Given the completely unworked-through grappling with evolution and climate change, the ongoing insufficiency of human rights law as a global political framework, the clusterfuck of genetic technologies and myriad other forms of biopolitics, and the increasingly well-known critique of the very notion of the human issuing from the so-called "posthumanism" in the academy, it seems like nothing today is less certain than the human.[4] And yet—and this is a big "yet"—there is something sublime about how little these erosions at the edges of the human seem to disrupt the daily march of neoliberal capitalist empire articulated around a certain version of the human, one Sylvia Wynter calls "Man."[5] Coursing through the entire complex of global relations in the wake of 1492, Man functions as a diagram: "a non-unifying immanent cause that is coextensive with the whole social field: the abstract machine is like the cause of the concrete assemblages that execute its relations; and these relations between forces take place 'not above' but within the very tissue of the assemblages they produce" (Deleuze 1988, 37).

This version of the human—Man—is the object of critique in the linked but divergent discourses of postcolonial and decolonial studies, critical studies of race, posthumanism, queer inhumanism, new materialisms, critical animal studies, non-anthropocentric ecologies, and biopolitics. And yet as long as they operate in the mode of critique alone, they don't seem to offer anything substantially different in relation to the operative model of Man. That is, they, like the antihumanist discourses they inherit and metabolize, end up being able to flourish in the neoliberal university of excellence.[6] But, and here's where I begin to wildly speculate, I think the most interesting thing about these discourses and the ways that they can potentially coalesce is their capacity not for critique but for spurring experimental forms of thinking and being (or, still better, becoming, moving) together. It is not only possible but necessary—and indeed I put a great deal of energy into this in the first chapters of this book—to offer posthumanist critiques of educational institutions and the ways they produce Man as the only permissible mode of being human. What would be far more exciting, though, is to redirect this critical energy to articulating new, nonhumanist ways of thinking about how we learn, together, remembering that this "we" will not be coincident with humanity as a collective, or—and especially not—with some subset of this humanity (Man) pretending to represent the whole.

I have been disciplined to think about the labor of reading, writing, and teaching as a humanist. Without downplaying this, I will argue that we need a significantly enlarged sense of affective participation in the events of literacy if we are to track how literacy gets articulated in relation to a particular conception of the human (Man), and in relation to imperialist states during the period of modernity. Humanists have long claimed that unlike the natural and social sciences that strive for parsimony, they reveal the importance of complexity and overdetermination. And yet, humanism itself—as the disciplined restriction of attention to properly human concerns—disavows most of the material conditions for the emergence of its objects (human societies, practices, cultures) and its own functioning. To play with Paul de Man's phrase, all the insights of humanism are predicated on an unquestioned blindness to virtually the entirety of what matters. That doesn't mean those insights haven't been important—in a wide variety of ways—but it does mean that the whole affair has been restricted and restrictive (this is what "discipline" means, after all).