

A Humanist Review of a Posthumanist Speculation

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1. Introduction

Ron Wakkary's book titled 'Things We Could Design: For More Than Human-Centered Worlds' is a posthumanist speculation of design practices, designed things, and designers. This is a Big Idea book in which Wakkary declares his "ambition to rethink design, wholly and imaginatively" (Wakkary 2021, p. 6) by moving away from humanism and towards posthumanism. Offered as a speculative response to ecological crises, Wakkary grounds his posthumanist arguments through design examples and scholarship primarily from Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Interaction Design (IxD). Wakkary launches his work arguing that "to limit design to its origins in humanist thought charts an unsustainable path forward that is not only a concern ethically but existentially" and urges us to "turn away from a humanist understanding of design and look toward a posthumanist understanding" (Wakkary 2021, p. 2). Posthumanism's desire to move beyond the concerns of humanity necessitates the question: "What and crucially *whose* conception of humanity are we moving beyond?" (Jackson 2015, italics original). My humanist review of Wakkary's book aims to stoke communal discussion by voicing contentions without resolving debates.

Wakkary proposes posthumanist design as an "option to radically speculate an alternative rather than to incrementally rebuild [that] allows for establishing different rules and principles so as not to be weighed down by past decisions and long-held assumptions" (Wakkary 2021, p. 12). Here I point to Humanistic HCI and its emancipatory impulse as "oriented toward exposing and eradicating one or more forms of bondage and oppression, including structural racism, poverty, sexual repression, colonialism, and other forces/effects of the hegemonic status quo" (Bardzell and Bardzell 2015, p. 115). If humanist HCI researchers are concerned with questioning hegemonic status quo and working towards emancipation from intersecting oppressive systems, what are the socio-political and ethical implications of adopting a posthumanist perspective premised on not being weighed down by past decisions? Despite its self-avowed turn away from humanism, I argue that posthumanism warrants critical engagement with humanist perspectives and future research must prioritize building strategic alliances. I organize and present my review of Wakkary's book in three sections. First, I provide context situating Wakkary's posthumanism in relation to epistemic shifts in HCI. Next, I build a humanist engagement with Wakkary's posthumanist arguments. I conclude by articulating critical tensions for future HCI research and practice around three posthumanist ideas: nomadic practices, vital matter, and speaking subject.

2. From Human Factors to Human Actors to Posthuman Agencies?

The field of HCI has contributed to epistemic shifts in the way we understand and theorize relationships between human and technology. The shift from human factors to human actors has led to an expansion in scope of concerns from how humans use technology for completing well-defined tasks to how humans experience using technology in contexts spanning across professional and personal lives. In the context of current ecological problems, Wakkary's posthumanist book challenges the narrative of human-centered design and is propelled by the question: "What if human-centered thinking (and

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its underlying humanism) is not the answer to these problems but rather, in its dominant role, may be part of the problem?" (Wakkary 2021, p. 1). Collapse of biodiversity and capitalist exploitation fueling unbridled consumerism are cited as ethical reasons that necessitate an epistemic move from a focus on human actors towards posthuman network of agencies.

Commenting on epistemic attitudes in HCI research, Joseph Kaye notes "there is a deliberate causality: forward-looking statements in HCI do not just predict the future, but attempt to make it happen" (Kaye 2009, p. 27). Exploring the meaning of interactivity, Lars-Erik Janlert and Erik Stolterman emphasize that "interactivity is not only about being reactive and responsive but also about *pushing reality* in a certain direction" since "each interactive situation creates a *space of possible actions* for the user" (Janlert and Stolterman 2016, italics original). Taken together, generating design theory for HCI and IxD is an act of deliberate causality that attempts to push reality towards specific vision of future and create a space of possible actions.

Wakkary legitimizes his posthumanist speculation by problematizing human-centered design as "exploitative in its relations to nonhuman species and materials that are mined for and reduced to human use" and wants us to design for more than human-centered worlds by "rethinking design from a present understanding of differentiated humans entangled in an equal fate with all that is not human and material" (Wakkary 2021, p. 2). Shedding the guise of the disinterested impartial observer *describing reality*, design theorists must make impassioned arguments by appealing to our sensibilities, ethics, and morals along with convincing empirical evidence to legitimize their agenda for *pushing reality* towards a certain direction. Wakkary's posthumanist project is guided by, pushes design thinking towards, and attempts to create a space of possible actions with an epistemic commitment to shift "the focus away from the power of self-reflexive human reasoning to situated, partial, and multiple ways of knowing" (Wakkary 2021, p. 3).

Ideally, designers are interested in changing the world for the better and therefore design theorists must convince others about what is worth pursuing among competing prospects for what our shared future *ought* to be. Wakkary's posthumanism advocates for humbled and shared epistemic position to explore "alternative approaches for how we better cohabit our world with species and matter that are not human" (Wakkary 2021, p. 3). In mathematics, transformations map a function in one domain to another function in a second domain to achieve specific results. Wakkary's book is a speculative attempt to conceptually transform human-centered design discourse through posthuman terminology to "move one toward a generous view of design that is to design-with" (Wakkary 2021, p. 251).

Wakkary builds upon the work of several philosophers and puts forth his posthumanist speculation based on three main philosophical concepts: mediating technologies, assembly of vital matter, and matters of concerns and care. The book is organized into three parts (Part I: Design, Part II: Things, and Part III: Designer), each focusing on a thing we could design for more than human centered worlds. Each part contains two chapters and chapter prologues provide relevant design examples. In chapters 2 and 3, Wakkary develops his idea of design as nomadic practices "so as not to be singular in attention, hierarchical in knowing, or territorial in boundary setting" (Wakkary 2021, p. 13). In chapters 4 and 5, Wakkary builds his argument describing things as interconnected, transformative, relational, and vital. In chapters 6 and 7, Wakkary explores the notion of designers as "assemblies of humans and nonhumans that share agencies that together design" (Wakkary 2021, p. 22).

3. Humanism Meets Posthumanism

Posthumanist design theory "points to an acceptance that human agency is not autonomous, perhaps even fragmentary, alongside an imperceivable number of other actors, nonhuman ones, with their own possible forms of agency" (Wakkary 2021, p. 3). The price of admission to a posthumanist world is that "in exchange for a more than human

perspective we lose the illusion of sovereign human power and the control of that power, only to gain the knowledge that in our entanglement we are more transformative than even we realized and in ways we certainly do not control" (Wakkary 2021, p. 3). Posthumanism attempts to speak on behalf of nonhuman species and matter by asking humans to give up control of sovereign power with promises of transformations in ways we certainly do not control.

As Jackson has pointed out "far too often, gestures towards the "post" or the "beyond" effectively ignore praxes of humanity and critiques produced by black people, particularly those praxes which are irreverent to the normative production of "the human" or illegible from within the terms of its logic" (Jackson 2015). The issue here is not just about the desire to renounce assumed human sovereignty but more importantly about laying claims to represent nonhuman actors. Wakkary orients his posthumanist agenda as a critical attempt "to design with humans and nonhumans in ways that are fundamentally expansive and relational" (Wakkary 2021, p. 5). It is crucial for future posthumanist scholarship in HCI to critically engage with issues of race. This is necessary for acknowledging the contributions of and exploring possible collaborations with existing praxes that are not posthuman and yet irreverent to the normative production of the human.

Arguably, the human desire to be 'more than human' is as old as humanity itself. Posthumanism discursively tugs on the interactive existential tension between *being* in the present and *becoming* comported towards the future of what might be possible through design of technology. In chapter 1, Wakkary postulates that a humanist design agenda "fosters a naïveté in which the universality of good design will eventually be accessible to all through human progress" and announces the necessity for a posthumanist design agenda since we cannot wait for "an eventual ideal state, in which "humanity" will care for that which is not human" (Wakkary 2021, p. 1-2). In chapter 8, Wakkary notes that "seriously and reflexively engaging technological mediation is the means to shaping our own mediated subject or becoming the mediated subject we desire" (Wakkary 2021, p. 243-244). Using the terminology of Jacques Derrida, posthumanism declares it *rupture* from humanism by articulating a suspicion of and distrust in the universality of good design and marks it discursive arrival by *redoubling* as reflexive shaping of desirable self through design of technological mediation. Posthumanism chides humanism as self-serving and exploitative towards nonhuman species and matter while laying claims towards an expansive and relational more than human-centered world. There are many humanisms that offer relational nonexploitative onto-epistemologies. To "appreciate both the potency and the problems of humanist imaginaries, it is critical to approach those imaginaries in their particularity and plurality" (Jakelić 2021). Portraying humanism as a monolith is a rhetorically convenient but inaccurate generalization that can be detrimental to building dialogues with posthumanism.

3.1. *Is posthumanism old wine in a new bottle?*

Neil Badmington incisively expounds "how humanism is forever rewriting itself as posthumanism" and underscores that such "repetition can be a form of questioning: to restate is not always to reinstate" (Badmington 2003). Wakkary divulges that "posthumanism is a refiguring of humanism" and aims "to look at things to refigure design rather than prefigure a future of design" (Wakkary 2021, p. 6-7). Posthumanism's attempt to become more than human is not a prefigured future destination but requires working through humanist quagmires of the present that it avows to break free from. On the one hand, posthumanism works to convince us about the transformative possibilities for our shared futures by moving away from humanist thinking. On the other hand, the possibilities for posthumanist futures are predicated on critical engagement with humanist discourses in the present. Irrespective of self-declared discursive distancing from humanist agendas, identifying capitalist exploitation as the culprit does not preclude posthumanism from its clutches.

Critiquing unjust systems while working our way through such systems towards better future is necessary, valid, difficult, and dare I claim, human. Walking away from exploitation without being weighed down by past decisions is not a viable option for many. “If the human is no longer at the centre what happens to the marginalised and dispossessed who have never even occupied that central position in the first place: are they now on the margin of margins?” (Quinn 2021). Wakkary wants to “deemphasize the role humans play to shed light on and to assert the role that things play and could play in design” (Wakkary 2021, p. 9). Given the vastly disproportionate contribution of Western consumerist societies to current ecological crises, who stands to benefit from adopting a posthumanist perspective that deemphasizes the role humans play while poorer nations continue to be dumping grounds for electronic waste? Wakkary discloses his positionality as largely white middle class. How might Wakkary’s white middle class posthumanist speculation design-with, for example, Kirsten Reynolds’ afrofuturistic black speculation in relational and expansive ways so that “all people who are subjected to the dehumanizing gaze of white epistemologies and surveillance technologies find opportunities for realizing alternative ways of being” (Reynolds 2021)?

4. From Acknowledging Injustices Towards Solidarity in Action

For the past four decades, HCI researchers have explored ontologies for sharing power and cultivated design-with epistemes in varying degrees through discourses on action research, adversarial design, assistive technology, citizen science, civic hackathons, co-design with marginalized groups, critical technical practice, HCI for development, feminist HCI, grassroots-based technology innovation, participatory design, postcolonial HCI, and queer HCI, to name a few. HCI discourses have been predominantly human-centered, critically engaged with social justice issues, and demonstrably contributed to life-affirming socio-technical advancements. It is necessary and can be beneficial for future posthumanist scholarship to build fruitful alliances with existing design-with HCI discourses in HCI instead of a puritanical wholesale dismissal of humanist scholarship.

Despite its contentions with humanist agendas, posthumanism is massively appealing. Why? Posthumanism effectively taps into our existential angst about climate change, emotionally invokes a sense of cosmic belongingness in becoming a family with nonhumans, winks with the allure of vibrant matter inseparable from thought, and seductively outlines the posthuman subject as a futuristic human-technology-network-of-agencies that promises to be generous, humble, caring, innovative, benign, forthcoming about its own fallibility, and toil to radically and responsibly transform our ecological crises. With slashed budgets for humanities, posthumanism might become a theoretical mutation conducive for critical scholarship to survive in technology discourses by claiming the territory of more than human. Posthumanism obligates designers to think about design and the world in new ways. In turn, it is designers who get to design the world in new ways on behalf of the nonhuman. The primacy accorded to designing and the designer is perhaps the core strength of Wakkary’s posthumanist agenda that is of exciting relevance to HCI.

Critiquing modernist attitudes in Sustainable HCI research, Hrönn Brynjarsdóttir and colleagues identify a tendency to propose technical solutions to social problems (Brynjarsdóttir et al 2012). This critique requires acknowledging that we cannot always design our way out of complex issues, which is a debilitating admission for a field like HCI premised and funded on advancing technological solutions. Wakkary’s posthumanism refuses to distinguish between human and technology thereby making it possible to discursively recast the issue of ‘technical solutions to social problems’ into posthumanist “inquiry of design and technology on what is materially present alongside constructions of what might be possible” (Wakkary 2021, p. 7). Posthumanism’s search for what might be possible is exciting, imaginative, generative, and curiosity inducing. Wakkary’s posthumanism can provide a conceptual fulcrum for HCI researchers to reinstate the primacy of designers and design.

Posthumanism's sense of hope and tempting invitation to leave behind long-held assumptions is however fraught with ethical issues that warrant further critical engagement with heterogeneous epistemic perspectives in HCI. Wakkary acknowledges "the much-needed calling out of racial injustices and calls for change from Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter, which make it painfully obvious that to do and say nothing is complicity" (Wakkary 2021, p. xv). How can future HCI research and practice proactively move from acknowledging injustices towards solidarity in action addressing such injustices? Stoking further communal engagement, I conclude by articulating critical tensions around three posthumanist ideas: nomadic practices, vital matter, and the speaking subject.

4.1. Colonial contentions to posthumanist nomadic practices

Wakkary theorizes design discipline as nomadic practices with multiplicity of intentionalities and situated knowledges. According to Wakkary, "design as a multitude of nomadic practices can traverse the landscape, territorializing and deterritorializing" wherein "the main goal in developing nomadic practices is to find a structure with posthuman commitments over humanist ones in order to create the speculative room to investigate a nomadic practice of *designing things*" (Wakkary 2021, p. 14-15, *italics original*). An Yountae argues that the posthumanist formulation of nomadic practices is Eurocentric and therefore "fails to catch the unfathomable dimension of trauma and loss ingrained in the fabric of colonialism" (Yountae 2013). Assumptions of free traversing posthumanist nomadic practices to create speculative room do not reflect lived realities of the colonized world. Posthumanism's desire to not be weighed down by past decisions becomes a serious political and ethical issue when we acknowledge that the "jovial stroke of transposition espoused by philosophical nomadism erases or underrates the overwhelming intensity that history bears in the colonised world" (Yountae 2013). What does design as posthumanist nomadic practices entail for HCI for development, postcolonial computing, and decolonizing design discourses?

4.2. Colligating indigenous relationality with posthumanist vital matter

Several Indigenous people continue to be guardians of and care for natural resources through community-based relational ways of living. It is vital for HCI researchers to acknowledge the contributions of, design with, and learn from indigenous relational onto-epistemic approaches towards caring for our planet. For example, exploring Hawaiian and Lakota relational ontologies of non-human in the context of Artificial Intelligence, Suvradip Maitra notes that "indigenous epistemologies provide a pre-existing value system requiring mutual respect amongst humans and machines" (Maitra 2020). Wakkary approaches designed things as assemblies of vital matter that "have agentic qualities and intentionalities that contribute to their own making and the making of other things" (Wakkary 2021, p. 12). More work is required critically colligating indigenous relational onto-epistemologies with posthumanist assemblies of vital matter with respect to HCI. Such efforts can be beneficial for posthumanist agendas since "difference is not after the fact, a matter of post hoc comparison, but rather an affirmative force that produces the world" (Crelin and Harris 2021).

4.3. Crippling interactions with posthuman speaking subject

Wakkary proposes the idea of designer as biography to understand the designer of things as both human and nonhuman. Acknowledging language as a unique human contribution, the posthumanist speaking subject "speaks on behalf of its nonhuman collaborators, explaining their agentic capacities, meaning, value, and overall participation as the designers" (Wakkary 2021, p. 23). But there have been contentions that "posthumanism shows signs of structural exclusion dependent on having the right sort of informational body: malleable and flexible" (St. Pierre 2015). Since "informational stability underwrites

and secures the fluidity” of the posthuman subject, “the dyslexic and stutterer portend stress, and the communicatively disabled body, is seemingly dis severed by and within informational flows” (St. Pierre 2015). Wakkary acknowledges that “our ability to transform the imbalance between “speaking subjects” and “mute objects” is more theoretical than actual” (Wakkary 2021, p. 25). This imbalance is of crucial importance while working with people who experience intersectional marginalization and systemic exclusion. Collectively forging a crip HCI practice, Rua M. Williams highlights that disabled people are “always already entangled and articulated within sociotechnical hybridities and thus have unique onto-epistemic expertise and insight into the consequences of HCI work” (Williams et al 2021). Discursive crippling of interactions between posthumanist speaking subject and communicatively disabled bodies are necessary for responsibly furthering HCI research and practice.

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