

Theorizing the Future of Rhetoric and Posthumanism: Perspectives on Bodies that Learn Language and Objects that Have Agency

Amanda K. Booher and Julie Jung (Eds.), **Feminist Rhetorical Science Studies: Human Bodies, Posthumanist Worlds**, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018, 276 pp., \$45.00 (paperback).

Chris Mays, Nathaniel A. Rivers, and Kellie Sharp-Hoskins (Eds.), **Kenneth Burke + The Posthuman**, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017, 248 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

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One of the defining characteristics of humanity is that we seem to be the only animal dedicated to asking what makes us distinct and different from other animals. Many scholars have provided definitions of humanity. For example, we could turn to Isocrates, who noted that humans are only separated from animals by our use of *logos*, words, and reason, or to Kenneth Burke, who argued that humans are symbol-using animals and, later, bodies that learn language. We might also turn to posthumanist thinkers who blur lines not only between humans and animals, but between humans and objects/technology, and thus are hesitant to create such stark definitions. While we were once obsessed with defining what makes us human, it seems that we are now exploring the limits of boundaries and labels to ask not what makes us *human*, but how we should move, act, and interact in and with the world as the entity called humans.

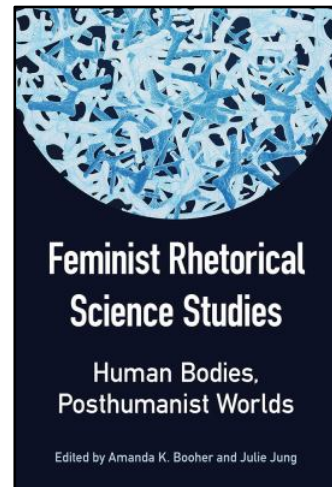
These theoretical moves cluster around the terms “new materialism,” “feminist science studies,” and “object-oriented ontology” (OOO), which all work to question the nature of relationships between humans and nonhumans. These theoretical perspectives seek to elevate objects in the eyes of scholars so that we might consider them as having agency, intentionality, and innate value. For example, Donna Haraway viewed the erasure of human/nonhuman borders as a move toward cyborg utopia, where our interactions with objects supersedes gender, race, and class differences. Bruno Latour theorized that all participants and entities in interactions are equally important, thus leveling relationships between humans, objects, technology, and other forms. Karen Barad argued that the dominance of the symbolic has undermined the examination of materiality, limiting our consideration of what matters in the world.

These authors figure prominently in the volume *Feminist Rhetorical Science Studies: Human Bodies, Posthumanist Worlds* (FRSS), edited by Amanda K. Booher and Julie Jung. This collection seeks to challenge the hierarchy of humans over objects and of the linguistic over the material and to prompt scholars to reflect on their own practices as challenging or reifying this hierarchy. The editors make clear that the collection does not mean to compromise the unique status of humans, but to question how we use and value objects (or people we consider to be objects) and the resulting consequences and perceived naturalness of those choices.

In viewing objects and nonhuman entities as intertwined and inextricable from human experiences, FRSS engenders new perspectives on how we perform criticism and on the consequences of interactions in our everyday lives. The introductory chapter works to position the rest of the text among these varied and expansive theoretical influences. One of the greatest strengths of the text is this introduction, which seamlessly unpacks OOO, new materialism, feminist theory, and science and technology studies to show their interconnections and productive tensions. In this opening chapter, Booher and Jung prepare readers for the enactment of what they call “feminist rhetoric science studies,” as opposed to the rhetoric of science or feminist science studies alone. The chapter contributors then take up case studies to show the innerworkings of materiality, bodies, and objects in a variety of contexts in order “to couple ways of knowing with ways of being and acting in the world” (p. 27).

Chapter 1, by Vealey and Layne, details how academic scholarship “makes an impact and that impact ripples outward” to influence future scholarship as interconnected object relationships (p. 70). Vealey and Layne posit that objects relate to one another without human influence and the recognition of that dynamism should structure our citation and referencing practices. Chapter 2, by Talbot, engages the concept of fetal personhood and makes a compelling case that agents and subjects are markedly different entities, whereby “a subject—a human person with a distinct identity who is capable of intentional action” differs from “an agent, an entity that influences its environment” (p. 99). Such a distinction highlights the agent status and agency features of the fetus without compromising the subject status of the mother and places the burden on government agencies that may place “the agential cut” differently (p. 106). Gouge’s chapter 3 explores “complex ecologies of care” to analyze how patient noncompliance with medical professionals does not indicate a failure of will, but of complicated interactions between patient, privilege, medical norms, and behaviors (p. 116). Equating compliance with privilege, Gouge calls us to reflect on compliance as the “unmarked normal,” which inscribes the “ideal patient” over actual, lived experiences of patients (p. 123).

Chapters 4 and 5 reflect on how practices of teaching and researching relate to objects and materiality. In chapter 4, Bay discusses women in STEM fields and how much scholarly attention is paid to their presence and performance. Reflecting on her own experiences as a teacher, mentor, and researcher, Bay concludes by noting that the questions and lenses scholars use to probe issues make certain features, such as embodied experiences of women, “invisible,” and thus, unexamined (p. 150). Jack’s chapter 5 further reflects on inherent biases in research practices by exploring the decision-making and symbolic processes behind conducting brain



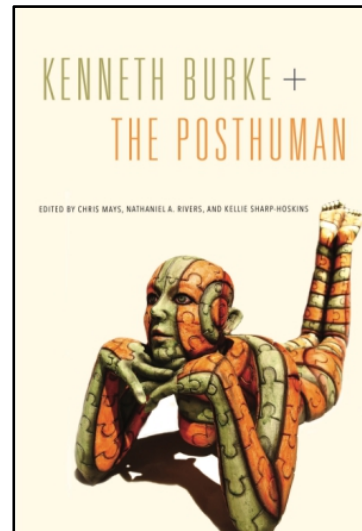
sex research. Jack challenges the supposed neutrality of brain sex research, which often starts from an assumption that experiments will show differences between the sexes. Jack thus reflects on the rhetorical work being done in the sciences: "indeed, the research questions asked, the experimental protocols designed, and the apparatus used (including everything from psychometric questionnaires to measurement tools such as fMRI) involve rhetorical decisions" (p. 167), which can influence the study's findings and conclusions.

Chapter 6, by Card, Kessler, and Graham, works to separate who is speaking from what is being talked about at a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) hearing that used a patient representative program. This chapter draws on empirical data and puts forth claims based on the types of speakers at the event and what "disease ontologies" they address in their speeches (p. 199). The authors conclude that these FDA patient representative programs fail to achieve their objective of patient inclusion by erasing the voices of the public, which they conclude based on categorizing and coding spoken utterances. Absent from this chapter is attention to the symbolic practices and specific language used by hearing participants, which would have provided an analytical component of quality instead of solely quantity. As an answer to this chapter, Barr's chapter 7 also addresses FDA hearings, but critiques the language used from a critical, feminist perspective. Barr concludes that public representatives used their bodies as "inventional resources" and sought to locate the drug Truvada and its effects through personal embodiment, whereas technical and medical experts erased bodies to focus on "objective data" and aggregate results (pp. 208, 212). Barr concludes, "By attempting to reframe the terms of the Truvada debate through the body's knowledge, the community testimony enacted a feminist and rhetorical challenge to the norms of scientific discourse" (p. 207). Barr's chapter thus expands on the previous chapter's conclusion of mere presence/absence to delve deeper into the hearing's rhetorical and material performance. Chapter 8 is a summary chapter from Booher and Jung, who seek to encircle the previous 7 toward a unified goal of calling for more engaged, feminist scholarship that addresses both language and bodies.

FRSS makes many important contributions to communication studies and the text will likely be useful for advanced courses tackling these topics or as case studies in undergraduate rhetoric of science, feminist theory, or communication and culture classes. The text will also be integral for scholars in feminist science studies interested in models for case study analysis. Despite the many strengths of *FRSS*, the greatest weakness of the text is how a focus on feminist science studies largely overshadows its rhetorical content. Throughout the collection, there are nods to rhetoricians and material rhetoricians, but almost none are directly incorporated into the framing of or analysis performed in the chapters. The few times rhetorical theory and influences emerge beyond the introduction, it sometimes appears as a strawman to reduce rhetoric to only the analysis of persuasive strategies, from which *FRSS* will recover and reinstate rhetoric as a material practice. For example, the editors make this claim in the concluding chapter: "In a conventional rhetorical analysis, a rhetorician would proceed by analyzing specific strategies [a rhetor] used to appeal to its target audience in order to accomplish its purpose," revealing an approach to rhetoric that is solely neo-Aristotelian and thus 100 years out of date (p. 237). In this sense, the book's highlighting of scholars such as Phaedra Pezzullo, J. David Cisneros, Ronald Walter Greene, Lisa Flores, and others in the introduction come across as direct attempts to insert rhetoric into the text because it would otherwise not appear prominently in the chapters themselves. If we take a page from Vealey and Layne's chapter, we may reflect on the citation practices of *FRSS* itself and question how well its chapters truly explore feminist *rhetorical* science studies as opposed to providing us with a fascinating and integrative approach to feminist new materialism in the realms of science, technology, and the body.

Pairing *FRSS* with a complementary rhetorical text expands the contributions of the former and integrates feminist new materialism and the rhetoric of science, which was taken up, but not fully explored, in *FRSS*. As rhetoric takes its material turn and explores how bodies, minds, symbols, and materialities function and have affect, we can directly consider the impact of those ideas on our increasingly technological and posthuman world. Instead of jumping headlong into a definition-less, boundary-less morass of entities and objects, rhetorical theory tempers such moves with critical reflection on our representations of reality and the forces, both symbolic and material, that shape them.

Kenneth Burke + The Posthuman (*KB+TP*) responds to the call to integrate rhetorical theory in our posthuman world by expanding upon the many ambiguities in Kenneth Burke's work that open space for critical questioning. While Burke and posthumanism may appear at first blush to be more foe than friend, *KB+TP* delightfully points out these incongruences, especially in terms of definitions, motives, and boundaries, and plays with them. Editors Chris Mays, Nathaniel A. Rivers, and Kellie Sharp-Hoskins introduce the intersection of Burke and posthumanism through the concept of a "rhizome," showing compatibility with the blurred boundaries and interactions common throughout *FRSS* (p. 3). The editors note that the book "imagines the contradictions among Burke's body of work and posthumanism as generative" instead of contradictory, providing a launching point for new integrations and perspectives (p. 6). Similar to *FRSS*, the introductory chapter of *KB+TP* is a highlight of the text because of its clear and engaging description of orienting terms and ideas and also its productive questions and explored ambiguities. The introduction draws on familiar names such as Barad and also incorporates Debra Hawhee's work on Burke and bodies, N. Katherine Hayles's work on theoretical boundaries, and Rosi Braidotti's work on collapsing individual agency into collective, posthuman forces as primary theorists.



KB+TP is split into two sections, "Boundaries" and "Futures." "Boundaries," which contains chapters 1 through 5, explores the theoretical strands that Burke rubs up against and how those boundaries are oftentimes fluid and not as they first appear. "Futures," which contains chapters 6 through 10, addresses the future of humanity in a posthuman, technological world and explores "terministic resources for negotiating" that future (p. 16). Chapter 1, by Fleckenstein, addresses the boundaries between individual rhetors and the networked practice of rhetoric itself by comparing Burke's work to that of Gregory Bateson. Fleckenstein concludes that both theorists call rhetors to accountability for "what happens tomorrow, when the circular causality of an act wends its way throughout interlocking ecosystems, leaving in its path consequences both intended and unintended" (p. 38). Chapter 2, by Pruchnic, cleverly titled the "Cyburke Manifesto," similarly addresses boundaries, but those of the theoretical tradition from which posthumanism emerges. Pruchnic concludes that Burke can shed light on the nature of both "the rhetoric and ethics of posthumanism," because his work cuts across the humanist tradition (p. 45). Mays's chapter 3 draws on Burke's ideas of piety to critique the writing and revision process of producing scholarship and to argue that texts themselves have agency (p. 61). Chapter 4, by Wess, connects Burke's ideas to the Anthropocene, questioning how language and technology both construct and deconstruct human relationships with nature and the environment. Wess concludes by noting how the Anthropocene has not changed material reality,

but has prompted a reflection on "human-centered assumptions that helped to cause it" and what restoration, or purification, might look like (p. 92). Chapter 5, by Rickert, circles back to questions of theoretical boundaries and addresses how the human and the posthuman are not sequential nor oppositional, but coconstitutive. Using the thoughts of Parmenides, Nietzsche, and Burke, Rickert explores the "meshwork" of human-nonhuman relationships and proposes "a different relation to the technic that nevertheless resides within it" (p. 119).

The second section, "Futures," starts with Nicotra's chapter on Burke's technological psychosis and how Burke can be read as "a transitional figure between humanism and posthumanism" (p. 128). Nicotra argues that the unity of bodies and technology produces new "virtual" bodies that afford "new models, new practices, new rhetorics," and new interpretations of Burke's writing in a technological age (pp. 132, 139). In chapter 7, Katz and Rivers explore Burke's concept of predestination, or how "people *and* things [shape] the emergence of what is to come" (p. 147, emphasis in original). For Katz and Rivers, predestination serves as a posthuman substitute for entelechy in that it incorporates material and symbolic forces into relationships, interactions, and motives. Chapter 8, by Jung and Sharp-Hoskins, posit that the process of mattering is rhetorical, by which "a materialized object embodies a conferral of value, and, by virtue of having value, enacts the capacity to enact change" (p. 163). The authors thus propose "emergent mattering" as a methodology that includes "not only the fact of matter's emergence but also *how* it emerges, *how* it materializes, *how* it matters" in rhetorical analysis (pp. 163, 168, emphasis in original). In chapter 9, Gale and Richardson rework the concept of terministic screens to argue that vocabularies are but one screen, among many others such as phone and watch screens, that shape our reality. In their analysis of wearable technologies, the authors conclude that it is important to understand how humans use technologies (and symbols) *and* how technologies (and symbols) use us (p. 199). The concluding chapter, by Boyle and LeMieux, reads into Burke a concern for making "visible the invisible technological and infrastructural surrounds that motivate our actions" and addresses dystopia "as a material tactic for dis/organizing bodily practice" (p. 206). These disparate goals are forged through an attention to Burke's satirical assertions that we might look at a "poisoned pond as a pesticide" and find affirmation and redemption in technology (p. 208).

The strengths of *KB+TP* lie in its many integrations of Burkean concepts (e.g., terministic screens, predestination, the master tropes, technological psychosis, and motion/action) across a variety of topics. Instead of remaining indebted and wedded to Burkean ideas, the authors use them as starting points for the exploration of how those ideas can be reworked to fit contemporary society. *KB+TP* will be useful in advanced communication and rhetoric courses covering dramatism, posthumanism, or the rhetoric of science and technology, and individual chapters would be ideal for undergraduate courses interested in delving deeper into Burkean ideas and how they apply practically to society. For scholars entering the meshwork of posthumanism and rhetoric, this will be a crucial text for departure and experimentation. A weakness of the text is that *KB+TP* does not have a concluding, encircling chapter that links these ideas back together nor that proposes future endeavors or next steps for Burkean, posthuman scholars. Such a chapter would help solidify the collection's goals for readers and highlight the text's utility for students and scholars who will undoubtedly take it up as a model for future Burkean scholarship.

Both *FRSS and KB+TP* are important contributions to rhetorical and communication theory because they break down boundaries, combine theoretical strands in interesting and complex ways, and prompt critical reflection on the discipline. More work can be done to unite rhetorical theory and posthumanism and to incorporate more varied rhetorical influences in addition to Burke. Instead of expecting either book to be complete treatises on these ideas, it seems in the spirit of both feminist science studies and Burkean theory to treat these texts as originating points in a new constellation of academic activity that explores our own symbol use and material practices, which are integral to theorizing new rhetorical futures. It is prudent not to abandon our rhetorical roots, but to refigure, integrate, and probe them for new understandings. Posthumanism prompts us to reconsider boundaries and definitions while Burke and other rhetorical theories often use them as analytical tools. Perhaps we are moving away from definitions entirely, or perhaps they are ever more important as we wend our way through the swamp/heap of human/nonhuman interactions, practices, and relationships. These are the driving questions for today's communication scholars.

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