My Octopus Teacher, Posthumanism, and Posthuman Education
A Pedagogical Conceptualization

NICOLE ROSS
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

T HE INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCH OF THIS KIND—the kind concerned with anthropocentrism, the kind working towards ecojustice, the kind that sees education as a place for a paradigmatic change in decentering the human from the inexhaustible world of beings—is usually the space where the author presents readers with evidence of the precarity of our planet. It might take the form of a list, giving lip service to disasters occurring here and there, in seas and on land, both *to* and *by* humans. Beneath the evidentiary destruction of our ecosystem is a deeply sedimented notion of human separatism and exceptionalism. Pointing to natural disasters as emblematic of the pitfalls of anthropocentrism may draw readers and skeptics into discussions that follow, but the reality of the destruction lies in the very formulation of the human condition and our relation to other forms of life. It emanates from the ways in which we have conceptualized humans as the "pinnacle of evolution," both distinct from and superior to all other life forms (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 45). In this way, our humanist philosophy becomes the emblem of anthropocentric genocide—specifically the ways in which we construct knowledge and being.

Knowledge, as we have come to know it, is the "result of inserting a bodied perspective into the world in order to generate a system consistent with the position of that body in the world" (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 50). If we accept this explanation of knowledge and consider what it does to our personal conceptions of knowledge (what a theoretical framework essentially asks of us), it follows that everything we have come to know has been in accordance with and in service of human dominion. This humanist approach to knowledge informs every aspect of our being. For a second, even, consider the limitations of knowledge and of being as we have come to know it given this take, and imagine the possibilities that a posthumanist philosophy could offer. It's marvelous.

If everything we have come to know is grounded in assumptions of human separatism and exceptionalism, then it is reasonable to understand schools as purveyors of humanist logic and anthropocentric tendencies. Maybe this isn't something shameful, but instead opportunistic. The "crisis," as Braidotti (2016) so elegantly proposed, "is not necessarily negative, but rather the coming into focus of new conditions for relational encounters, understanding and knowledge production" (p. 28). How limiting the bounds of our knowledge and being are when only

considered from a human perspective—how boundless the possibilities of knowledge and existence become when we move beyond a siloed understanding.

Stemming from a surge in critical studies that swelled alongside the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism around the 1970s, and further galvanized with the posthuman turn of the new millennium, posthumanist discourse has radiated into an impressive multiplicity of disciplines (Braidotti, 2019). Currently, posthumanism exists in a dialectic with various discourses including that of feminism (Ringrose et al., 2020), queer theory (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1993; MacCormack, 2016), anti/de/post/colonialism, (Escobar, 2019; Snaza & Singh, 2021; Tsing, 2015; Wynter, 2003), quantum mechanics (Barad, 2007), new materialism (Ringrose et al., 2020), multispecies worldbuilding (Haraway, 2013, 2016), and eco/justice/centrism/apocalyptic discourses (Parikka, 2014; Washington et al., 2018) to illustrate a very limited cross section of the field. This work does not claim to capture the breadth of thinking that has been generated with regard to posthumanism throughout this manifold constituency. Instead, I take up the work of a few scholars and propose a way to engage students with their conceptualizations of posthumanism through a documentary film, *My Octopus Teacher*. I have chosen to focus this piece specifically on the work of Braidotti (2016, 2019) and Snaza (Snaza et al., 2014, 2016) and these pieces in particular because of their specific attention to how education is implicated in humanism and anthropocentrism, the potential of posthumanism for education, and also because of their resonance with the film and their readability, as I envisioned this pedagogical conceptualization as taking place with an undergraduate audience.

I developed this pedagogical endeavor as part of a course titled *Representations of Education in Popular Culture.* "Popular culture" in this context refers to school films, school documentaries, and movies that present education (teachers, students, principals, educators, and the everyday processes of schooling) in a particular way. The course is structured around critical theory texts and film studies (here represented by Nichols's 2019 book, *Engaging Cinema*)—for each seminar, students engage with a few critical texts as well as a documentary or film that fits the texts. Each week students explore how the critical texts are in conversation with the documentary or film and the implications that critical concepts and representations of education pose for education broadly. Accordingly, the pedagogical conceptualization presented here would function as the content and substance for one unit. Following the analysis of each text (*My Octopus Teacher*, Nichols's, Braidotti's, and Snaza et al.'s) are discussion questions that could be used to guide student inquiry.

From the place of a concerned citizen, the work of this paper stems from a beyond-urgent need to address mass ecocide and planetary collapse. As a perpetual student, the development of this project stems from a desire to engage with posthumanist philosophy myself. But most ardently from a teaching standpoint, this piece is part of an endeavor to effectively engage others pedagogically with posthumanist philosophy. It has been my experience in efforts to generate discussions among peers and professors that theories of posthumanism present as extraordinarily nebulous and are often met with recoil. On the rare occasion when another will wade into the waters of posthumanism, so to speak, it has been with defenses or critiques with regard to practices of sub- or de-humanizing. The conversation almost always recenters the human. In the few moments where it felt as if participants genuinely entertained posthumanist concepts—remaining in stasis with the undoing and redoing of knowing and being that posthumanism engenders—it has consistently been when the literature was complemented with a film, image, or hands-on experience.

The guiding questions of this exploration are: How does posthumanism complicate the ways in which we have come to understand knowledge and existence, and how can pedagogues engage others with conceptualizations of posthumanism? I work to better understand a pedagogy that incorporates posthumanism because I think it is both enlightening and necessary. The need to reconceptualize who and what matters in education is urgent (Snaza et al., 2016). The following conceptualization hopefully provides a pedagogical entrance into thinking beyond human-centric constructions of knowledge and being and into engaging others in posthuman potentiality.

The Film: *My Octopus Teacher*

This 2020 documentary film sensation directed by Ehrlick and Reed was produced by filmmaker Craig Foster, founder of the Sea Change Project, and follows his year-long forging of a relationship with an octopus. I find this film especially generative for the pedagogical project I take on in this space, as it not only challenges humanist assumptions of teacher, student, and knowledge, but also provides a look into the theoretical expanse that a posthumanist lens offers and speculates on a posthuman education. The viewer is invited into the film with the diegetic sound and accompanying pan of the gentle swell of the sea. The filming takes places in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of the Western Cape in South Africa. Humanist constructions of knowledge are breached almost immediately as the film opens with the voiceover of Foster: "a lot of people say that an octopus is like an alien" (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). Moments later, Foster reflects on his formative experiences growing up: "my childhood memories are completely dominated by the rocky shores, the intertidal, and the kelp forest" (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). In these inaugural moments, Foster sets up the possibility for other-than-human and entangled ways of knowing and being and challenges "longstanding (Western) humanist presumptions about what a human being is and how it relates to the world" (Snaza et al., 2016, p. xvi). The viewer is gently persuaded to concede their human-centric ontological and epistemological assumptions and entertain the possibility of otherwise ways of knowing and being. Ultimately, the film urges a collective ecological response-ability, appealing to viewers through the emergent understandings that unfold as Foster and the octopus co- and re-construct knowledge and experience.

Cinematic Mode

Nichols's (2010) *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies* is a comprehensive review of approaches, techniques, and structures of documentary filmmaking. It is a seminal text in documentary analysis and instrumental for analyzing documentaries as texts for novice and seasoned critics alike. Nichols likens cinematic modes to tendencies of filmmakers that "help define the shape and feel of the documentary film" (p. 148). He presents six major cinematic modes including poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative and is keen on explaining the fluidity of cinematic modes, as documentaries often employ more than one. Understanding the modes helps us to "identify the different ways in which the voice of documentary manifests itself in cinematic terms" and to understand the intentions of the film (p. 143). Cinematic modes encompass elements such as the nature of visuals and audio, the character of dialogue, and the relationship between filmmaker, subject, and audience, to name a few.

The fluidity of cinematic modes is present in *My Octopus Teacher.* In my own reading of the film, I can trace the use of poetic, participatory, and performative modes. Poetic mode elements are evident in the vivid and intimate filming of the octopus in all its complexity, the atmospheric scans of the expanse above and beneath the sea, the diegetic, oceanic, and non-diegetic orchestral sounds accompanying footage, and in the overall visual, tonal, and rhythmic quality. The participatory mode can be traced through the intra-action between Foster and the octopus. *My Octopus Teacher* stresses the "situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter" between Foster and the octopus (p. 187). The audience is very much presented with an articulation of the world "as represented by someone who actively engages with others" (p. 182). A claim for the employment of the performative mode could be made in the emphasis on expressiveness and subjectivity of Foster's involvement with the octopus—"emphasiz[ing] the expressive quality of the filmmaker's engagement with the film's subject … in a vivid way" (p. 152). A performative mode is also evident in the way the film brings embodied experience and knowledge, emotional intensity, and subjectivity to the fore through the use of "evocative tones and expressive shading that constantly remind us [viewers] that the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it" (p. 206). The employment of each of these three modes contributes to our understanding of the film, and understanding the use of cinematic techniques deepens the viewer's conceptualization of the film. I will expand upon my reading of the film through these cinematic modes in the following text, which also serves as an example response to the discussion questions presented below it.

I consider *My Octopus Teacher* as a challenge to our humanist constructions of being and conceptions of teacher, student, and knowledge and our anthropocentric relationship to non-human others. The poetic, participatory, and performative elements employed in the film contribute to my understanding of its meaning. A poetic mode is "particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information" (p. 162), which is complementary to both intentions of challenging humanist assumptions of exceptionality and of teaching and learning. The visual and audio tones entice viewers into a world outside of the familiar with majestic footage of the vast and intricate ocean world, accompanied by the diegetic sonority of both sudden and swift movements, and the non-diegetic undulation of the delicate, ethereal, and reflective orchestral soundtrack. The audience is ineluctably captivated by this otherwise way of knowing and being, priming the ecological mindfulness that the film ultimately urges. A participatory mode "gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result" (p. 181). Foster retraces his experience with the octopus as they co-constructed the spaces they inhabit, their knowledge of each other, and their understandings of existence. The film emphasizes negotiations of power, response/ability, and agency (Nichols, 2010), which speaks to the emphasis on the intra-action between Foster and the octopus but, more broadly—between humans and other life forms. A performative mode rejects objectivity and instead promotes evocation and affect, which is in accordance with the film's disavowal of a purely humanist ontology and anthropocentric epistemology for a more subjective, embodied, and multitudinous understanding of being and knowing. The illustration of Foster and the octopus's forging of a relationship speaks to this quality and enhances the audience's responsiveness to this multi-species involvement. This sort of cinematic mode raises questions about "what knowledge actually amounts … what counts as understanding and comprehension … [and] what besides factual information goes into our understanding of the world" as it "sets out to demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society" (Nichols, 2010, pp. 199 & p. 201) The subversion of humanist

assumptions regarding who can occupy positions of teacher and student as well as what knowledge is and how it is constructed is illustrated in the situating of octopus as teacher, human as student, and the construction of knowledge as entangled.

Evidently, the use of each of these cinematic modes is strategic and contributes to the intention and overall substance of the documentary. While I have outlined how I understand the use of poetic, participatory, and performative modes in *My Octopus Teacher*, other modes could be viably argued as well (and I imagine they would be). The fluidity of cinematic modes encourages students to cross-examine the nature of each mode and articulate the film through these lenses. In conceptualizing the approaches of filmmakers, viewers become attuned to the filmic decisions and how they contribute to the overall substance. In doing so, students reckon with how they make meaning of the documentary and deepen their understanding of both documentary structures and techniques in general and the meaning they make of *My Octopus Teacher* specifically.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your understanding of the cinematic mode(s) employed in *My Octopus Teacher* [expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative]? Use evidence from the documentary as support.
2. How does this contribute to your understanding of the film?

Posthuman Critical Theory

Rosi Braidotti is a contemporary philosopher of both posthumanism and feminist-theory. Her work is derivative of predecessors Deleuze, Guattari, Spinoza, Foucault, and Haraway, to name a few. Her entrance into the field of posthumanism is a mélange of anti-humanist and anti-anthropocentric literature. I analyze two of Braidotti's pieces: "Posthuman Critical Theory," which is a chapter in the book *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures* (2016), and *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), her latest book. These texts offer reflective and insightful cartographic examinations of the theories that ground her own posthuman critical theory framework. Both are useful texts for readers who are just entering the conversation as well as academics well-read in the field of posthumanism. She outlines concepts essential to critical posthuman theory including anti-humanism, anti-anthropocentrism, critical thinking, ontological relationality, and posthuman knowledge production. These concepts correspond with concepts explored in *My Octopus Teacher* and present a generative opportunity for students to articulate her posthuman philosophy with the unfolding of the narrative. The following will provide a synopsis of concepts in these two texts and then provide an example articulation of the texts with the film.

Anti-Humanism

Indebted to generations of progressive and critical studies since the 1970's, posthumanism most directly emerged out of two fields of research—anti-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism (Braidotti, 2019). Anti-humanism is a critique of the idealist and separatist image of "man" as

representative of the human species, the "center of world history," and, more specifically, the implicit assumption that "the distinctively human prerogative is 'reason'" (Braidotti, 2016, p. 14). Braidotti (2019) confronts these claims and instead proffers that "thinking and knowing are *not* the prerogative of humans alone, but take place in the world" (p. 101). The ideal and separate notion of human experience that humanism hinges upon dismisses the complexity of human existence as embedded with other forms of existence. Anti-humanist thinking works against this assumption and is instead grounded in a notion of complexity and the endless process of subject-formation—a "hybridization of the species" (2019, p. 85). The posthuman subject is marked by mutual imbrication, a resulting ensemble of human, nonhuman, organic, and non-organic experience. Anti-humanism proposes the necessity to "acknowledge the multiple and internally contradictory aspects of our own knowledge practices by adopting a diversified materialist approach" (2019, p. 90). This understanding of knowledge-as-collective-praxis invites the possibility of other-than-humanly ways of knowing and reasoning, which is the vital substance of *My Octopus Teacher*. Watchfully attending to the octopus's engagement with her surroundings, Foster recognizes that "her entire being is thinking, feeling, and exploring" (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020).

Anti-Anthropocentrism

Also elemental in the genesis of Braidotti's critical posthumanism is the work of anti-anthropocentrism. This field of research critiques notions of human supremacy and exceptionality embedded in anthropocentric ways of knowing and being. An anthropocentric onto-epistemology positions *homo sapiens* as the pinnacle of evolution—the most complex, adept, and agentic form of life, granting *Anthropos* the right and access to all other entities. Strategic notions of the supreme and exceptional human species led to the "organizing [of] differences on a hierarchical scale of decreasing worth," thus, "justif[ying] violent and belligerent exclusions" (2019, p. 105). Braidotti (2019) roots anthropocentrism in capitalism and the resulting market-valuation of all matter. The global economy that is representative of our current reality, then, engenders a "global nature as well as global culture," which, in turn, "produces differences for the sake of commodification and consumption" (2016, p. 20). In other words, the hierarchy of which humans are supreme and distinct from all other life forms is the result of constructed (and negative) differences for the purposes of profit and consumption. Writ large, a utilitarian understanding of nonhuman matter is symptomatic of anthropocentrism. Nonhuman species, earth forms, and inorganic matter are perceived as resources for human consumption and allocated value, agency, and respect accordingly. The work of anti-anthropocentrism dethrones the human from this hierarchical understanding of our relation to nonhuman others, rejects possessive individualism, and instead proposes an affirmative and "collaborate ethics" in opposition to "the axiom of profit and maximization" (2019, p. 90). Utilitarianism is replaced with multi-species alliance and egalitarianism. This affirmative, collaborative, egalitarian allyship is forged throughout *My Octopus Teacher* not only between the octopus and Foster, but also between the octopus and her surroundings. In reflecting on the relationality between himself and the octopus, Foster recollects: "she'd come out and be very curious … very interested, very curious … and then it just happens, I put my hand out just a tiny bit … something happens when that animal makes contact" (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020).

Critical Thinking

Both anti-humanist and anti-anthropocentric theories engage in the critical thinking that is emblematic of Braidotti's posthuman critical theory. Braidotti (2016) conceptualizes critical thinking as a rejection of closed system thought coupled with "taking critical distance from familiar habits of thought" (p. 16). The critical thinking that Braidotti envisions pushes the boundaries of human-demarcated understandings of knowing and being towards ontological and epistemological (hitherto) unknowns. Posthuman critical theory indicates that a "disidentification from established patterns of thought is crucial for an ethics and politics of inquiry that demands respect for the complexities of the real-life world we are living in" (2016, p. 17). Braidotti's framework asks readers to reject sedimented assumptions of humanism and anthropocentrism and experiment with thinking in the liminal space that this posthuman critical theory engenders. "Thinking in posthuman times," she suggests, "is about increasing the capacity to take in the intensity of the world and take on its objectionable aspects" (2019, p. 79). In theorizing the embodied, entangled, and subjective possibilities of posthuman ways of knowing and being, readers complicate their ontological and epistemological assumption and push their understanding of the human and nonhuman condition. Foster exemplifies this critical thinking especially in reckoning with the historicity and "reductive vision of the subject based on brain-network-interface" (2016, p. 17). This can be traced throughout a plethora of moments in the film, including his reckoning with the failure of scientific knowledge to illustrate the complexity of the octopus's faculties.

Ontological Relationality

The critical thinking that transpires from anti-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism (ideally) provokes an ontological relationality characteristic of Braidotti's posthuman critical theory. An ontological relationality emphasizes the "inter-connection between self and others," involves "an act of unfolding the self onto the world, while enfolding the world within," and "empowerment and affirmation of one's interconnections to others in their multiplicity" (2016, pp. 25–26). Humanist and anthropocentric assumptions shelved, alternative ways of knowing and being emerge, specifically a knowing-*with* and being-*with*. The entangled reality of knowledge construction and our human existence comes to the fore, described as an ontological relationality. This multi-layered practice of knowing- and being-with "expresses a grounded form of accountability, based on a sense of collectivity and relationality, which results in a renewed claim to community and belonging" (2016, p. 26). Knowing-with and being-with do not dissolve the visceral differences of matter, but rather position difference as positive and potential in the construction of "visions that have been left untapped," an "increasing [of] our relational capacity" (2016, p. 27; 2019, p. 79). The impact is affective and obliges a new language of ontological relationality. In *My Octopus Teacher*, Foster and the octopus are suspended in this ontological relationality as they mutually construct their ways of knowing and being. Reflecting on the octopus's healing from a shark wound, Foster describes,

> the most amazing thing to see … this tiny little miniature, perfect miniature arm starting to grow back. And it gave me a strange sort of confidence that she can get past this incredible difficulty. And I felt in my life, I was getting past the difficulties I had. In this strange way,

our lives were mirroring each other. My relationship with humans—with people—was changing. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Posthuman Knowledge Production

Posthuman knowledge production stimulates new methods of thinking, new ways of being-*with* in the world, and new social imaginaries (Braidotti, 2019). Complex, dialectic, and critical understandings of knowledge and being—of ontological relationality—invite the prospect for emancipatory, creative, and multi-layered knowledge production. Posthuman knowledge production, as Braidotti (2019) explains, requires "repositioning terrestrial, planetary, cosmic concerns, the naturalized others like animals and plants, and the technological apparatus, as serious agents and co-constructors of transversal thinking and knowing" (p. 111). As Foster details his fascination with the octopus, he begins to ask the questions of posthuman knowledge: "What goes through her mind? What is she thinking? Does she dream? If she does, what does she dream about?" and speculates that "there's something to learn from her." Foster's whole endeavor to be and to learn and to grow *with* the octopus can be articulated as a pursuit in Braidotti's (2019) posthuman knowledge production.

Articulation with the Film

Braidotti's (2016, 2019) theorizing in "Posthuman Critical Theory" and *Posthuman Knowledge* can be connected with *My Octopus Teacher* in many generative ways. I find Braidotti's conception of anti-humanism especially resonant with a number of moments in the film. There is a particular semblance in the critique of "the implicit assumption that the distinctively human prerogative is 'reason,'" as well as the "reductive vision of the subject based on brain-network-interface" analysis (2016, p. 14; 2016, p. 17). In one example, this is illustrated in Foster's reckoning with the failure of scientific knowledge to illustrate the complexity of the octopus's faculties. Returning from hours spent with the octopus, Foster describes mining academic research to further understand phenomena: "So many times I'd go and search through the scientific papers looking for the strange thing I'd seen. And then you'd just come up absolutely blank" (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). The humanism that much of our knowledge of other species is grounded in does not account for posthuman ways of knowing or being. It is, thus, indoctrinated by an ornery, human-centric vision and an extremely limited examination. The failure of a strictly humanist epistemology is illustrated again in a playful interaction between the octopus and a school of fish. Foster describes the moment,

Suddenly, she's reaching up for the surface like that [arm gesture: reaching out]. Initially, I thought "She's hunting the fish." But then I was like, "Hold on. When she hunts, she's strategic, and she's focused." … It took a long time to actually process it. But I couldn't help thinking, "She's playing with the fish." Here's a *highly antisocial* animal playing with fish. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Foster is challenging the anti-social qualification of the species, with evidence of a playful being-with of the octopus and a shoal of dream fish. The *social* that characterizes a *social being* is

indubitably measured given the human-as-model. *Social behaviors* are, thus, observed only insofar as they resemble human social behavior. Foster suggests that the designation of *highly antisocial* is manifestly misguided, as I imagine, by reason of a humanist tunnel vision. Braidotti's explication of anti-humanism situates my understanding of humanism and contaminates the fixed ways of knowing and being that have rooted in my being. Given Braidotti's overview of anti-humanist research, I can better understand the unfolding of relationship between Foster and the octopus—the pretext, context, the potentiality of their knowing- and becoming-*with* and the magnitude of this sort of ontological relationality. Braidotti articulates a captivating world of knowing and being, further illustrated in *My Octopus Teacher*. In experiencing the text and film in conversation with one another, I am synesthetically engaged with Braidotti's posthuman philosophy and the substance of the documentary.

Articulating Braidotti's posthumanism with moments in the film is a productive practice that enhances understandings of both her theory and the film. Braidotti's "Posthuman Critical Theory" offers a number of entrances and opportunities for articulating posthumanism with *My Octopus Teacher* and presents students a way of verbalizing their idiosyncratic readings of the text and film. Other angles from which students might articulate concepts of Braidotti's theoretical framework with the film could include instances of anti-anthropocentrism, illustrations of embodied, embedded, and entangled ways of knowing and being, ontological relationality, negotiations of power structures and binaries, or the production of posthuman knowledge.

Discussion Question

3. Articulate a passage from Braidotti's (2016) "Posthuman Critical Theory" or (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge* with Ehrlick and Reed's (2020) *My Octopus Teacher*. In other words, how do you understand a component of the text as embedded in the film? How does this contribute to your understanding of the film and your understanding of Braidotti's thinking?

Posthumanism and Education

As aforementioned, I conceptualized this pedagogical endeavor as part of a course titled *Representations of Education in Popular Culture*. In discussions each week throughout the course, students explore how critical texts are in conversation with a documentary/film, as well as the implications that critical concepts and representations of education in the media pose for education in general. Accordingly, the following discussions are centered around how posthuman critical theory implicates education, both as suggested in *My Octopus Teacher*, as well as Snaza et al.'s (2014) "Toward a Posthuman Education" and Snaza et al.'s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. It is important to note the evolution of language used to denote the thinking embedded in these two texts: posthumanism versus new materialism. New materialisms can be described as a thread within the web of the critical posthumanities (Braidotti, 2019), most closely interwoven with posthumanist, feminist, and queer theories (Snaza et al., 2016). I understand new materialist thinking as a branch within the ever-expanding field of posthumanism, so I use them interchangeably in this forum. I will first present an overview of concepts explored in the Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) texts and how they could be read through the

film and then follow-up with a representation of my own thoughts in response to the proposed discussion questions: Reflect on your experience reading Snaza et al.'s (2014) "Toward a Posthuman Education" and Snaza et al.'s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. What were your immediate reactions? Are there passages/arguments that have stuck with you? Are there places where you agree or disagree and why? And, how do you envision a posthuman education? Reference possibilities from the film and in the text and explain how they contribute to your vision.

Anthropocentrism

The recently coined geologic era of the *Anthropocene* foregrounds studies in anthropocentrism, which Snaza et al. (2014) describe as the logic that "puts us [humans] at the center of the universe and the center of the conversation" and conceives of the human as the metric of all knowledge and being, so "carefully distinguished from the animal and the machine" (pp. 40 & 42). Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) and Braidotti (2016, 2019) echo each other in their understanding of the humanist and anthropocentric logic of separatism and exceptionality. Snaza et al. (2014) also locate anthropocentric logic within correlationism, or the notion that the world only exists insofar as it exists for humans. This exclusionary conception of existence "keeps us from opening up to unpredictable and indeterminate materializations, to the growing uncertainties of our physical, biological, geopolitical, and socioeconomic structures" (Snaza et al., 2016, p. xvi). In *My Octopus Teacher*, viewers witness Foster reconcile with his anthropocentric instincts as he is presented with ways of knowing- and being-*with* that challenge human-centrism. His experiences of knowing- and being-*with* the octopus complicate human-centric knowledge of this life form and of human existence at large. Foster reflects,

> You slowly start to care about all the animals, even the tiniest little animals. You realize that everyone is very important. … My relationship with the sea forest and its creatures deepens week after month after year after year. You're in touch with this wild place and it's speaking to you. Its language is visible … what she taught me was to feel that you're a part of this place, not a visitor. That's a huge difference. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Shattering the one-dimensionality of anthropocentric ways of thinking and knowing, Foster begins to engage with unpredictable, indeterminate, ever-expanding, and multi-dimensional ways of thinking and knowing.

Posthumanism

Snaza et al. (2014) describe posthumanism as a rejection of human-centric ontology and epistemology—a philosophy that decries anthropocentric positioning of *homo sapiens* with regard to nonhuman others. Instead, Snaza et al. (2016) emphasize the agency of all matter and the "continuities between the human and the non-human" in both knowing and being (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 42). Snaza et al. (2014) also conceive of posthumanism as opposing notions of dominion and utilitarianism, "which allow humans to view animals and the environment as objects given by God for humans to do with as they wish" (p. 46). Given the authors' expanded understanding of

agency, the inextricable contamination of human existence with nonhuman others, and ultimately the rejection of human supremacy, Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) call for new ontological and epistemological articulations. Snaza et al. (2016) propose that "if agency cannot be restricted to humans but must be seen as an attribute of all matter, then 'politics' undergoes a dramatic, even vertiginous expansion" (p. xviii). In these new articulations, resituating humans as co-constructors of existence and, thus, the decentering of humans in the hierarchy of matter is necessary. Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) envision ways of living-*with*, and becoming-*with*. Snaza et al. (2016) find innovation in the blurring of boundaries between human/nonhuman, nature/culture, and organic/inorganic. Incrementally throughout *My Octopus Teacher*, viewers are made explicitly aware of the porosity of these supposed binaries. Physically, intellectually, and emotionally attached, Foster expresses how "the boundaries between her [the octopus] and I seemed to dissolve" (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). In the closing scenes of the documentary, Foster speculates on his becoming-with the octopus: "I slept—dreamt—this animal. I was in my mind thinking like an octopus" (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020).

Knowledge, Humanism, and Education

As Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) indicate, knowledge is overwhelmingly defined in humanist terms. Finding genesis in the enlightenment period, humans and human pursuits have been conceived of as rational, logical, *correct*. Snaza et al. (2014) argue that this assumption—fundamental to all knowledge construction therein—is erroneous, and thus, "the human has been misconceived by nearly every thinker in the Western tradition" (p. 42). Knowledge, in this sense, is framed as "a partisan commitment to humanity and its cultural achievements" (p. 41). Knowledge in humanist terms neglects how nonhumans are "always participating in and shaping 'human' learning" and consequently ignores how other-than-human entities are engaged in educational encounters (Snaza et al., 2016, p. xxii). It then follows that knowledge production in the field of education, is steeped in human-centric knowing and being. As Snaza et al. (2016) assert, "most pedagogies have taken it for granted that only human beings can learn or can teach" (p. xxi). Consequently, our assumptions of teacher, student, and knowledge are bound. Posthumanism, as conceptualized in the terms of Snaza et al. (2014, 2016), undoes the ways we have traditionally come to know and to be and proposes alternatives to this fixedness. This conception of posthumanism "forces us to reckon with how resolutely humanist almost all educational philosophy and research is" (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 40). The very title, *My Octopus Teacher*, interrogates these assumptions, as Foster plays the role of student, learning the knowledge of a nonhuman other. His role is fluid, as is the octopus's, as they co-construct knowledge and experience, not only subverting the roles of teacher, student, and knowledge but also blurring these boundaries and "fabricated borders of the animal, the machine, and the thing" (p. 42). The classic space of education—the school—is also replaced. Knowledge construction in *My Octopus Teacher* largely takes place in wild spaces, where movement is unpredictable, community is ever-changing, and learning is emergent, relational, and marked by uncertainty.

Schools as Civilizing Machines

Snaza et al. (2016) propose that schools are "the spaces in which we learn what it is to be human and what we have to accept without attention in order to secure our identities as human" (p. xix). Not only are students physically contained apart from nonhuman others in spaces designated for "learning," we are taught that knowledge is constructed by humans and that learning is done by humans, for humans. As Snaza et al. (2016) explain,

> existing theories of curriculum tend to presume both the humanness of education—that is, that education concerns humans learning with other humans what it means to be human— and the prevailing disciplinary or subject divisions that have been constructed entirely around a particular conception of the human being. (p. xx)

Ergo, students are indoctrinated at a very early age by "the humanist concepts through which virtually all educational thought has been articulated" (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 40). In this way, Snaza et al. (2014) propose that schooling, as we have come to know it, functions as a method of civilizing:

> civilization (which has often been little but a cover for imperialist domination) has sought to erase and tame the human's animality; the humanist project places civilization at the pinnacle of evolution and thus sees civilization as inherently better than wildness or animality. (p. 45)

Realistically, "schools are connected with the nonhuman world in so many explicit and implicit ways" in both K-12 and higher education (2014, p. 39). A quick *Latour Litany* (Bogost, 2012, as cited in Snaza et al., 2014) exercise reveals an extensive collection of human, nonhuman, organic, and inorganic matter involved in encounters in schools, yet our consciousness often remains at the human-centric level of experience. If, as the authors suppose, knowledge itself is a construct, backed by information that has been claimed by a body and their idiosyncratic analysis of data, then it follows that there are always and already various forms of knowing that subsist in every encounter. In *My Octopus Teacher*, we see Foster transcending into these liminal spaces, enamored of the possibilities for knowledge and existence in a world unconstrained by human embargos on knowledge and existence that do not operate exclusively in service of humans. We also see a glimpse into the possibility of a more posthuman education and the potential it holds as Foster imparts,

> One of the most exciting things ever in my life, taking my son, walking along the shore, and just showing him the … the wonder of nature, and the details, and the intricacies. I was getting so much from the wild that I could actually now give. I had so much energy to give back. He's like a little marine biologist now; he knows so much. … To see that develop, a strong sense of himself, an incredible confidence, but the most important thing, a gentleness. And I think that's the thing that thousands of hours in nature can teach a child. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Ultimately, humanist and anthropocentric assumptions have restricted education—strained the limits of our imagination and our capacity to learn and exist in collaboration with nonhuman others.

The posthumanism that Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) propose proliferates the possibilities for knowledge, for learning, and also for an existence more attuned to the world around us.

Discussion Question Response

Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) put forth a fascinating and compelling argument for posthuman education. I am especially captivated by the understanding of knowledge as "a result of inserting a bodied perspective into the world in order to generate a system consistent with the position of that body in that world, in other words establishing a dichotomy of domination by that body" (2014, p. 50). This passage in particular, but also the piece in general, complicates how I conceptualize knowledge, schools, learning, and being. I am persuaded that our way of knowing and being is marked by humanist and anthropocentric assumptions and find concern in the narrow-mindedness that this way of thinking and being promotes.

Although engaging in posthuman education by spending a year in an underwater classroom with a group full of students is not practical for all schools (or any school), I do think a larger percentage of time spent "in education" could be outdoors or in intimate interaction with nonhuman others. Recess times and maybe gym classes offer students repose from the walls of the classroom, but likely don't encourage students to learn with and from nonhuman others. I imagine an element of posthuman education being consistent and inquisitive time in spaces that accentuate our very entangled existence. These spaces are as close as the woods surrounding the school, maybe the swamp down the road, or the community garden—or as omnipresent as the ground beneath our feet and the sky above our head. Yet, a posthuman education isn't just environmental education; posthuman education necessitates the complication of human-centric ways of knowing and being and experimentation in ways of knowing- and being-with nonhuman others. As illustrated in *My Octopus Teacher*, Foster consults human-derived knowledge of the octopus and mediates this with his lived knowledge as it is co-constructed with and from the octopus *in situ*. Human-centric ways of knowing and being are not lost but redefined in coordination with "cross-species, transversal alliances [and] with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or nonhuman life" (Braidotti, 2016, p. 23). I often come back to the example of the Civil War in America—in school, we are presented with the pretext, context, and aftermath of this historical contention, yet we never consider what the unfolding of the war meant for the forests, for the soil, for the flora and fauna, and for the innumerable population of others that exists in simultaneity with the human species. I imagine it was equally as contentious. Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) present a convincing case for both the need and promise of posthumanism and education, yet I am left wondering what it might look like to implement a posthuman education, as the authors in these pieces don't spend time theorizing what this might look like in praxis. This pedagogical conceptualization represents an effort to do so.

Discussion Questions

4. Reflect on your experience reading Snaza et al.'s (2014) "Toward a Posthuman Education" and Snaza et al.'s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. What were your immediate reactions? Are there

passages/arguments that have stuck with you? Are there places where you agree or disagree and why?

5. How do you envision a posthuman or new materialist education? Reference possibilities from the film and in the text and explain how they contribute to your vision.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined the content and substance of a seminar unit that breaches systemic humanism and anthropocentrism, as they are manifested in general but, more specifically, in relation to knowledge, being, and education. The seminar is centered around an analysis of Ehrlick and Reed's (2020) documentary film, *My Octopus Teacher*, and theories of posthumanism as presented by Braidotti (2016, 2019) and Snaza et al. (2014, 2016). Students orient their understanding of the film using Nichols's (2010) *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*, with a particular attention to cinematic modes. Discussions of posthumanism are framed with Braidotti's (2016) "Posthuman Critical Theory" and (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge*, as well as Snaza et al.'s (2014) "Toward a Posthuman Education" and Snaza et al.'s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. Students articulate their understandings of these critical texts with their viewing of the film and (ideally) complicate their understandings of knowledge, being, and schools using conceptualizations of posthumanism in the texts. This seminar has room for adaptation in the readings as well as the film. Further readings could include: de Oliveira and Lopes's (2016) "On the Limits of the Human in the Curriculum Field," Barad's (2003) "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," Ringrose et al.'s (2020) *Feminist Posthumanisms, New Materialisms, and Education*, Karkulehto et al.'s (2020) *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, and/or Lloro-Bidart's (2018) "A Feminist Posthumanist Multispecies Ethnography for Educational Studies" to name a few.

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