

# Becoming Ahuman

## Call for Contributions

### *Journal for the Study of British Cultures (2/2023)*

**Guest Editors: Ariane de Waal & Mark Schmitt**

Everyone is talking about the future, but what if there is none for humans? As Jennifer Gidley writes, “[t]he future we face today is one that threatens our very existence as a species. It threatens the comfortable urban lifestyles that many of us hold dear and the habitability of the earth itself. The times we are in are critical, and the challenges we face as global citizens are complex, intractable and planetary. The impact of climate crisis alone is pointing to frightening futures” (Gidley 2017: 1). What does it mean to live as part of the human species in these frightening times? And more importantly, what does it mean to recognise and acknowledge the fundamental and devastating impact that the human species itself has on the potential futures of its fellow species and the entire planet? Timothy Morton has argued for a “logic of future coexistence” that is based on radically deconstructing anthropocentric modes of thinking, living and knowing the world (2016). In her provocative *Ahuman Manifesto*, Patricia MacCormack goes even further and urges her fellow humans to reject “human privilege” and actively engage in an “ahuman [...] becoming-other” (2020: 15). In practical terms, MacCormack’s project of becoming ahuman would mean to drastically reduce one’s impact on the planet and nonhuman life forms by, among others, going vegan, refusing to reproduce and embracing the prospect of passive human extinction. Her Deleuze-Guattarian approach to becoming-other entails thinking about the ahuman as an active, yet always incomplete process, a potentiality, a practice of prefiguration. Addressing a different set of questions surrounding the agency of speculative capital and algorithmic processes, J. Paul Narkunas comes to a similar conclusion in *Reified Life* (2018): against the predominant focus on posthuman futures, he argues that the contingencies of human lives and practices at the current critical junction are best captured by the category of the ahuman.

In this special issue, we want to address this notion of becoming ahuman by investigating its implications for the study of British cultures and discourses. We want to ask who and what takes part in such a becoming, and what does it take/require? How do we, to follow Eugene Thacker (2011, 2015a, 2015b), think the world-without-us rather than the world-for-us? Is a future coexistence possible or even desirable or should we succumb to a “cosmic pessimism” (Thacker 2015c)? In the wake of the frequently proclaimed posthuman turn, writing on the Anthropocene often salvages a sense of (cruel?) optimism by envisioning new cross-species constellations (Haraway 2016) or nomadic reconfigurations of the Euro- and androcentric humanities in terms of the “critical posthumanities” (Braidotti 2018). These suggestions have doubtlessly spawned imaginative (and often provocative) explorations of the radically decentred position humans might occupy once they decide to “Make Kin Not Babies!” (Haraway 2016: 102). The project of becoming ahuman does not share the same hope regarding future (post)human potentialities. The generative potential of becoming ahuman, instead, is realised in an irrevocably damaged present: acknowledging that human lives – no matter how transformed through technological or cross-species entanglements – need not necessarily be healed, prolonged or saved, ahuman becomings involve accepting “terminality” (Ensor 2016). That affirmative stances on human extinction do not inevitably lead to apolitical apathy or despair is exemplified, for instance, by the oddly consolatory descent into apocalypse in recent British plays like Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016). Light-hearted explorations of childfree lives

and futures can be found in novels such as Emma Gannon's *Olive* (2020), and there is a growing guidebook industry in the UK and beyond that addresses (in)voluntary childlessness. Gloomier responses to finitude and the present eco-political impasse are found in the lyrics of black metal bands such as Dragged Into Sunlight or of the singer Ghostpoet, especially on his latest albums *Dark Days + Canapés* (2017) and *I Grow Tired But Dare Not Fall Asleep* (2020). Looking at earlier prefigurations of the ahuman, cultural theorist Mark Fisher has explored challenges to the Anthropocene in his re-reading of the "eerie Thanatos", or "transpersonal (and transtemporal) death drive" (2016: 82), present in Nigel Kneale's BBC series *Quatermass* (1953-1959). In the British news media, MacCormack, who is based at Anglia Ruskin University, has been controversially (and reductively) discussed in the context of overpopulation (cf. Scialom 2020). A similar debate ensued in the wake of the BirthStrike movement founded by British activist and musician Blythe Pepino as a provocative response to the climate emergency, yet dissolved after only a year due to persistent misrepresentations of the movement's aims along neo-Malthusian lines (cf. Monbiot 2020). That these controversies are not merely isolated media scandals has been proven by the *Guardian*'s subsequent series on "Being Childfree", which generated heated social media discussions during the pandemic summer of 2020. Ahuman positionings challenge the predominant narrative of "heteronormative and middle-class homemaking" that has been deployed in sentimental stagings of British domestic space in epidemiological responses (Fitzgerald 2020). As these and other recent British public debates, plays, novels, nonfiction, albums, protest movements, manifestos, podcasts, poems and films evince, prefigurations of ahuman becomings can be as comforting as they are agitating, as joyful as they are provocative, as rewarding as they are challenging.

This special issue seeks to examine the swiftly expanding discursive space surrounding human extinction, non-reproductivity and futures-without-us in the UK. Challenging us to re-orient our affective energies and political investments towards a terminal present, the British cultural responses and representations that we wish to collate, discuss and problematise in this special issue resituate the human on the route(s) of becoming ahuman. We invite contributions that pick up on or extend the following questions:

- Where do ahuman aspects take shape in British culture?
- How is ahuman advocacy defended or contested in UK public discourse, and which wider cultural issues are navigated through these debates?
- What cultural prefigurations of the ahuman can we identify? Or is the notion of culture something we need to abandon altogether in order to be able to think the ahuman?
- How do recent British cultural representations interrogate the epistemological frames of the Anthropocene ("the world-for-us" vs. "the world-without-us", cf. Thacker 2011: 4-5), for instance in popular genre fiction such as horror and science fiction, in (youth) subcultures such as rap, punk ("No Future") and the thanatopoetics of British black metal?
- What kind of future can be thought once the possibility of human life on the planet is abandoned?
- What does the philosophy of becoming-other have to offer for British cultural projects that turn away from a vitalist focus on life and from hopes of prolonging human existence?
- How do queer negations of reproductive futurism (cf. Edelman 2004) resonate with an ahuman perspective?
- Could the category of the ahuman support critical discussions of human reproduction in the UK ("Being Childfree", BirthStrike), while steering clear of a simplistic focus on overpopulation or neo-Malthusian subtexts?
- To what extent can the dedication of climate activism (Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future) to an idea of saving the future be read in terms of a cruelly optimistic attachment (cf. Berlant 2011)?
- What could alternative affective, creative or imaginative relationships to an ahuman present and uncertain future look like?

We welcome proposals for contributions focusing on any of these aspects of “becoming ahuman.” Please submit **abstracts** of 400-500 words and a **short bio note** to the guest editors for this special issue, Ariane de Waal (ariane.de-waal@anglistik.uni-halle.de) and Mark Schmitt (mark.schmitt@tu-dortmund.de) by **01 November 2021**. **Finished articles** (5,000 words) will be due by **01 June 2022**.

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