

The Human in Humanities*

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Abstract

The talk explores the complexities of the “human” in the formation known as the Humanities and the role of literature both in general and in the context of the global pandemic: How to realize existence as a function of coexistence? How to cultivate a value-based education that transcends the poverty of instrumental reason and the seduction of a zero sum winner-takes-all model of education? How to galvanize a pedagogy of empathy and affect to overcome the reified binary of Self and Other? How is Home to be defamiliarized as the World and the World cultivated as Home? While exploring these questions, the attempt will be to suggest that the Humanities and Literary studies have a special role to play in understanding the systemic nature of crisis and bringing about a fundamental change that is both subjective and objective, from the heart as well as from the head; both as a matter of being and of knowing.

Keywords: Afro-pessimism; Anthropocene; Epistemology; Humanism; Subject.

I’m delighted and moved to be with you all. Please consider that I’m shaking hands with you individually and collectively despite the virtual distance: all my love, respect regard and affection. This is indeed a huge honour for me and I thank you with all my heart and soul and being. It was my pleasure and privilege in 2011, when I was on a Fulbright in Chennai; and there was a conference at your wonderful home, institution and department and the Conference was organized by The Forum for culture and theory. I was keynoting there and you were the host of the whole event. And I had the privilege of meeting with the illustrious charismatic, Professor Jain. He was kind, hospitable, gracious and generous. It gives me particular happiness also to know that the first talk was given by my dear friend and distinguished Professor Sachi Mohanty.

I want to thank Dr Ashok Gupta, the University’s Chancellor, the Vice

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Chancellor, Dr Raakhi Gupta, the Registrar, the Deans, the Department of English, Mithileshji, late Dr. Jain's wife, his family, and - in particular - Dr. Rimika Singhvi for initiating the conversation and being so flexible. I would also like to thank Dr. Singhvi for inviting me to submit my lecture as a text to be published in your journal. My apologies for not having had the time to truly and properly transform the lecture into a formal essay within the stipulated deadline. My heartfelt thanks to her and especially to Ms. Anuradha Dasani, a postgraduate student of the organizing Department, for taking the trouble - in response to my request - to convert my talk into a transcript. This has made my task easier: all I am doing is touching up my delivered talk here and there while I retain all the flawed contingency of the occasion of the Lecture.

So, with that, I'll start. The talk is about the human in the humanities. I want to begin with a kind of split screen scenario. One screen, shall we say that the humanities are in the state of being challenged, both from within and from without. Fair enough. And then the other screen says in spite of all of that, Humanities do have something very unique to contribute to pedagogy; to being human; to coexisting; to being and thinking. So let me begin with that. Clearly, you know, people might say, given the proliferation of so many specialists studies, you know, geo-economics, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, Actor network Theory, Genomics, Epigenetic Studies, New Materialism, Ecofeminism, Environmental Humanities, Deep Ecology, Object Oriented Ontology, animal studies and on and on and on and on, that the humanities has been superannuated, rendered redundant. I don't think so. But the challenge it seems to me, in a situation where we talk about the multiversity not the university, how should each discipline adjust itself both within itself and in relationship to the other disciplines outside. So it becomes an exercise in both auto-critique and being vulnerable to critique from the outside.

So what I'm calling for is the humanities to be non-paranoid, non-defensive, non-apologetic and continue to do to work while at the same time be prepared, be porous to influences from the outside in terms of territorial integrity, turf, methodology, the object of study. It is also important to share, to concede and be vulnerable, and we'll talk more about this in the context of what it means to coexist relationally not just exist in isolation, to realize that existence is only a subset of co-existence. I'm suggesting sure, that the humanities needs to sort of retool itself. But at the same time, there is no harm in maintaining and acknowledging, when it comes to "value," a concept that meant so much to Dr. Jain and his vision for education and pedagogy, that we are in some sense unique.

What is a value-based education? We always talk about value, you know family values, Christian values, Hindu values, value-adding, we use it in a kind of an axiomatic way, but do we really know what value is? So what I want to suggest is, let's see on the one hand is value an a priori or is value something that we create in the name of the human, in the name of the Dalit, in the name of the gay and lesbian, in the name of the Christian: the *imprimatur* question? Is value its own "always already" *imprimatur*, or does value have to be valorized as originary? So is value something that's already there in some kind of a primordial, a priori way or is it the result of an act of production; and therefore ideological? So, for the time being let me dangle the word 'value' between two epistemologies. One is representational, as if value exists already, to be found, to be recognized, to be honoured, in some kind of a mimetic way. But on the other hand, let us think of value as a function and product of interested ideological production, as intentional and agentic. There is an apparatus, a mode of production, a hegemony, an ideology. A value is never neutral, objective, non-partisan, non-didactic, or disinterested. And then suddenly it becomes beleaguered in the battle of different positions and perspectives.

So I want to suggest that value partakes of both structures. On the one hand we produce it, but also intend the production as an act of ecomimesis. On the one hand *a la* Martin Heidegger and the principle of *Gelassenheit*, let things be, and perhaps Negative Capability by way of John Keats; and on the other hand, as Marx would have it, to know something is to change it. So how do you combine these two perspectives: the let be, and to change? And change in the name of what? And is letting be itself an act of hubris? Who are we to let anything be? Is this self a custodial self? What kind of self are we? So, the whole notion of value is in a situation of a double-conscious straddle, the straddle of the human or, to be more precise, the balance and doubleness of the humanimal, to acknowledge the brilliant work of my good friend and colleague and former student, Kalpana Rahita Seshadri. And I think the humanities also have a way of suggesting that value is not monetization, that value is not currency, that value is not commodification, even though it may partake of that mode.

The challenge is to recover value in a deeper way, but without perpetrating, let's say some kind of an essentialism, without having to resort to some kind of a grand standing notion of primordiality. The task is also against commodification and against alienation and to nurture value as something that we share with other people not something that we hoard for ourselves. Then value isn't a kind of game that we play, the kind of shoring up of the dollar, the Euro, the rupee etc where somebody wins and somebody loses. One of the hallmarks of the Humanities is to kind

of acknowledge the legitimacy of what people call instrumental reason but also to question instrumentality as such. Instrumental thinking tells you to think with a certain, you know, objective in mind and we reach over there and it's done. But often instrumentality itself is the problem. But after a point the instrument gets you, you become the instrument. For example, to acknowledge Gayatri-di's important theoretical work, there is the example of strategic essentialism: strategic one thing or another. So what is a strategy? When do you become the strategy unwittingly and you're not able to think beyond the confines of or the regime of the instrument itself, whatever the instrument might be.

And I'm thinking of this incredible moment in one of my favourite writers Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* where he actually says, "two plus two does not mean four to me". You may say it is four and if you remember Dostoevsky's critiquing, railing against, you know, the Crystal Palace, the exhibition in London, Peter the Great. Instrumentality making people fit into specific moulds, social engineering, the loss of individuality. Or think of the narrator's description of Saint Petersburg formerly Petrograd to be renamed as Leningrad and back again as Saint Petersburg, as "the most intentional and abstract of cities." So he's saying, so my point here is that humanities is a kind of raising the flag of subjectivity in revolt against any kind of instrumentalist totalization or governmental biopolitics. Maybe two plus two is four in a mathematical way, but my truth does not quite acknowledge that. Or, you cannot explain away the irreducible agony of my toothache. He doesn't mean two plus two is not four but there is another kind of a truth, which is also in play and I'm thinking in the western tradition of someone like a Nietzsche or Soren Kierkegaard. We can talk about things like trembling, fear, nothingness, boredom, angst, all of those things which are considered to be the soft stuff, which the other kinds of Sciences condemn to a nothingness, literally nothing, but we say, haha, the nothing is there, the nothing is real, we need to talk about it and this nothing is much more than and different from the nullification meted out to it by positivist thought. I am referring to that soul making and deep existential aspect of honouring subjectivity, so the human in the humanities. We never say the human physics or the human whatever, so just highlighting the term human is a way of saying we are not naturalizing it, we are not rendering it invisible, but implicating it in a double modality. We are marking it in all honesty. On the one hand, you know, the search for objective truth and methodology, all of that. But in the know thy self, the self itself is deeply subjective and in the world: this constant tension between the need for objective truth in a contrapuntal dance with the murkiness, with the tenebrous nature of the subjective.

Of course Kant comes to mind for two reasons: the third critique on aesthetic judgment and the category of "purposiveness without purpose," not quite synonymous with *nishkamya karma*, and the ethical idealism of never making anything a means to an instrumental end. And of course there is the principle of *ahimsa* in Buddhism and Jainism. It is a sin, it is unethical to make anything means to an end. Everything is an end in itself. Now, how do you combine that seemingly otherworldly, utopian kind of a way of thinking with, you know, the local aspect of doing and, I think, that is where, it seems to me, Humanities become a kind of a troublemaker that resists, you know, normalization. And I'm thinking of several schools of thought and I'm thinking, of course, of someone like in phenomenology, like Husserl, or you know, the moment where you really say my god, let's go back to things themselves, the moment where you say the map isn't working. A huge gap has opened up between where we live and where we think, between life-world and thought-world. And now, an attempt at epistemological humor. It's a joke, please laugh, if you don't laugh, I'll feel hurt. It is supposed to be an erudite, epistemological joke. The joke goes something like this: a group of archaeologists and anthropologists, you know, they are exploring new territory, terra incognita and they keep exploring and looking and they've been there for a week and a half or two weeks and they are completely lost. They don't know where the heck they are. Then the leader says: "This is horrendous. We are utterly lost: time to take control and take stock of the situation. Let's get our compass out, make all these calculations and let's see, where we are". And after much deliberation and calculation, he says Eureka and points to a hill over there and says: "You see that hill over there? We are on top of that Hill." Which means that the map has failed. The math tells you you're over there, but you are not over there, you are here. So this anxiety with the map itself, and we know cartography has always been instrumentalized by the colonizer. To map always means to find somebody out. But on the other hand, we do need a map. What does it mean, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty would have it, to return to see the world before even the map was made, back to things themselves. So that idea, that phenomenological idea of wonder. But it doesn't become mysticism either but that's another way of reading a map. Looking at a map and then always wondering, well what might it have been like if the map was not there, what Husserl called "the bracketing of the natural attitude", the reduction and then bringing it back to the present, to perception

Humanities has a way of tapping into and if you will, of epistemologizing doubleness, ambivalence, contradiction, the very things that are anathema to formal and academic philosophy: for example, Aristotle and the law of

non-contradiction. Whereas precisely there, Humanities, I think, has the courage to enter into fields which are by definition murky and ambivalent and defy easy taxonomizing, easy categorization. In other words, the Humanities can talk audaciously and precariously about the nothing and stare into the abyss, rather than disavow the reality of the abyss in the name of practicality and convenience. Remember the so-called nihilist Nietzsche who turned tables on official philosophy and indicted philosophy of nihilism, of the sin or the crime of negating existence in the name of the complacency of thought. Humanities is nothing if not perennially existential.

I think an interesting concept here is that of mimesis, you know, we always talk about mimesis, you know, the original and what comes after and the fidelity of representation. So here again the Humanities has something provocative to say about the Real and representation, about the original and the mimetic repetition of the original. We in the Humanities have created a term called verisimilitude, and all that verisimilitude tells you is that even for reality to be itself, it has to be like itself. My example would be to say whenever somebody says, "The daughter resembles the mother", we should say the mother resembles daughter? If they were not that figuration of doubleness, then there is nothing called likeness. How do you know the real is real? It has to look like itself. Chronological precedence is just a fact. It is in the repetition of the same that the original begins to resemble itself and in resembling itself, it also initiates the play of difference. Verisimilitude as the gateway to reality is the gift of literary theory to the world at large. The given-ness of the real has to be simultaneously acknowledge and transcended: mimesis not as reflection but as the doubleness of figuration, and the transgressive excess thereof: possibly the dangerous supplement, *a la Derrida*. Furthermore, in the Age of the Anthropocene when, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the distinction between natural history and human history has been erased, mimesis and ecomimesis have taken on an implosive significance.

So what does it mean to honour the human in the human? Is "the human" just a point of entry or does it become a kind of a centrism, you know, resulting in humanism, anthropocentrism, logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and forms of sovereign exceptionalism that arrogate to themselves the unilateral right to "settle Being" in the name of the human, and politically speaking, initiate the regime of "Settler Colonialism" and wipe out all indigenous and native histories? So again the notion of settling, as a way of looking at giving meaning to life, as if it needs to be settled and that means bringing a calculus into it at the level of thinking itself, making 'being' conform to the rules of grammar: subject, predicate, object and making

sense of it. So, how do you deal with this- the human? And I'm thinking of, I mean there are several moments and again from different traditions, you know, Western and non-Western, religious, secular, monastic, spiritual, etc. Since I am speaking in the context of Western Epistemology, I'm thinking of the moment, when Foucault talks about the "Erasure of Man". And the point that he's making is: we say 'know thyself', but we are the people who are the least known. We do not know what the human is and yet we have the hubris to want to know the world and bring it under our command.

Foucault in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" is reading Nietzsche in a certain way. It's almost like a *jugalbandi* that's happening between Nietzsche and Foucault. And he's saying that the question that has been posed by Nietzsche which has not been answered is: Does the human have the courage to allow the dissolution of the knowing Subject in the processes of knowing? How do you know who you are? You don't and cannot know yourself in a numinous way; there are processes of knowing and what do the process do to you? Do they conserve you? Do the processes dissolve you? And what happens is that in the act of knowing you become strange to yourself, subjected to a chronic and fundamental alienation. I want to raise these questions in the context of to the posthuman, the anti-human, critical humanism, non-humanistic humanism, exilic humanism, animal studies, object oriented ontology, speculative realism, ecofeminism, environmental humanities, deep ecology, epigenetics, actor network theory, a whole range of disciplines complicating and problematizing 'the human.' Are you still a humanist, a kind of an unreconstructed humanist or are you a humanist despite your awareness humanism's highly dubious and culpable record? Humanism has been complicit with patriarchy, misogyny, racism, colonialism, anti-black bias, casteism. Do you want to say that there is a usable humanism or do you want to say let's kind of get rid of humanism all together, *tout court*? Is it worthwhile being self critical in the name of humanism; or is that a doomed venture? Even when we talk about things like, you know sustainability, even when you talk about things like, saving the trees, it's still in the name of the human. How do you get beyond that, the unfortunate human double-bind? And I think that's the question that Amitav Ghosh raises wonderfully *The Great Derangement* when he talks about the Uncanny, and envisions his ancestors displaced by natural disasters as "ecological refugees." The distinction he makes, in the context of the Uncanny between knowledge and recognition is quite generative even as it is problematic.

The human is both there as witness and culprit, but the human is also *de trop*, in the way. The challenge that Ghosh poses, a challenge that he ad-

dresses in his most recent fiction, *Gun Island*, is this: how to write a fiction and in the very act of writing absent the human from the scene? So, how can we talk about anything as if we are not even there and the challenge to fiction writers is how do you write about these, you know, tsunamis, floods? These happenings have nothing to do with the human. They are not crises and catastrophes in themselves, but only to the human and from a human perspective, a perspective that has no warrant or significance in the overall planetary scheme of things. It is only when we valorize and legitimate a world picture, and here I am relying on Heidegger, with the human subject as the resident or custodial subject, that we can consider ourselves as ecological refugees. But who said, that the world was intended as a human settler home?

A good example is Murasaki, the Street where I live. When I moved in here, they were constructing a house at a time, things were being built and as I would drive, any time I drive in, there would be multitudes of rabbits getting displaced and un-homed. So you could literally predict my house was going to be exactly where the rabbits used to be and they were getting un-homed. And California, by definition, maybe, I don't think it even was a place meant for human habitation. Every now and then, Nature, kind of gives this jolt, a tsunami here, an earthquake there, a forest fire, slide, and you think what the heck are we doing? So the question is: how do we employ the human in the Humanities with an awareness that we are, to use a phrase from Sartre in the novel *Nausea*, he called it, we are *de trop*, are in the way, and we need to get out of the way. Here is something I want to suggest in the context of where we are, climate change, the anthropocene, the COVID virus and the question of the Dalits in India, correspondingly Black Lives Matter in the United States where every day another Black body gets bumped off just because the body is black. Let us not forget that both Blacks and Dalits are natally alienated and dishonoured, excluded from the family of the human, constituencies to whom the very concept human makes no sense. So the crisis is both at the level of the human and the political but also at the level of the human and the beyond. It is an onto-political issue. How should fiction be imagined and performed? Is it even a narrative? Can there be a subject? Can there be an agent of action? Can there be teleology? Can there be a denouement? Are we writing as witnesses? In what capacity are we writing? Are we protagonists, antagonists, minor characters, supernumeraries, the backdrop, the figure or the ground? What is to be made of this mismatch, this ludicrous but consequential incommensurability? We are no bodies and yet we have taken on the role of geological agents, capable of having interfered with Nature itself.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness, as T.S. Eliot would have it? We know not what we have done. Are we to be trusted at all? Something has to be done, but by whom, and in the name of what principle: human, animal, divine, physical, metaphysical? Are we powerful, or are we hapless? Should we have agency or should we surrender it, and if so, to whom? Dante would say, In His Will lies our Peace. The Tamizh spiritual mystic would seek to pray to God, but only with divine permission. Should action be active, passive, or should we find a middle voice? Should we submit ourselves rather than submit a plan of action? What have we known, and how should a proper praxis be derived from what has been known? How should agency formation be aligned, in thought, word, and deed, (*mano, vak, kaya*) with subject formation? Is this new knowledge a break from humanism; or is to be understood critically and transformatively within the *longue duree* of humanism?

The question is what is to be done, by whom, and for what? Is it for sustainability? Is it so that we may continue for our granddaughters and grandsons? But that becomes a deeply sustainable definition of sustainability from the point of view of human survivability. But then if it were not there, then how do you absent yourself and still commit to a *zimedari* of something to be done, but without the hubris of exceptionalist agency? Custodial perhaps, but who appointed us as custodians or as shepherds of Being? The classic situation is to be able to say there was a revolution, Feminist Revolution, Proletarian Revolution, Dalit Revolution, out of which came a new subject matter a new subjectivity which is to be harnessed toward an agency, the moment where theory and practice come together and new knowledge and you know how to employ it. But here there is a disconnect between what has been known and what is to be done? What is all this knowledge *about*? Is it even representative and representational? What have you secured and in what direction are we going to be going and towards what? Will deconstructive, autocritical self-reflexivity suffice?

I'm thinking in terms of Adrienne Rich's *Notes Towards a Politics of Location*. What better can we do? How trustworthy is self reflexivity? I mean when is self reflexivity truly transformative and when is it an act of navel-gazing? When is it purely narcissistic, and when is it radical? Can it be radical without a principle of alterity, of the outside, the Open that is against all enclosure? The Tamil Siddha poets came to mind, as do Mahmoud Darwish, Heidegger, and Giorgio Agamben? Ate these different traditions of the Open saying the same thing? I think in one of the many stories of the Buddha, a particular disciple of Buddha, perhaps Sariputta, thinks he has learned everything that there is to be known and announces

his plenary achievement to Buddha: "Oh Buddha. I know the answers to life, you know, I have studied the mind" And Buddha asks calmly: "Oh what have you studied the mind with?" "I've studied the mind with the mind." Buddha laughs, "Oh! The futility of it all. Don't you get it? How foolish can you be? How can studying the mind with the mind be an act of emancipation?" Perhaps, just the performance of placing the questioner within the question does not go far enough. So, how do you make a qualitative distinction between a kind of self reflexivity which truly brings about change and another which is purely procedural and formal and not substantive? How should the humanimal think and act in the Age of the Anthropocene: as human, as post-human?

So, I think then the question becomes what does it mean to be a post-humanist? And I am speaking as, you know, when I was doing my dissertation a long time ago '78 to '83, we were the generation mesmerized by the temporality of postality. The big theme we were really excited by was the epistemological break. We were drunk with that notion; we wanted to touch the break, feel the break, smell it, it was so important, the break, to be post something, post patriarchy, post-colonial, post. The idea was to say, can we make an absolutely radical break from all of that? The passion and the urgency had to do with the need for an *e nihilo* start. Anything less would only amount to a craven and unconscionable recrudescence. The idea was to announce a break "in theory," and in epistemology in the hope that the change in history will happen subsequently. Rather than wait for things to change radically in history, history is so sluggish and resistant to change, the impulse was to clear the ground, clear the terrain by way of a second order, meta- revolution to change the direction of history. Always theorize was to precede always historicize. If certain ways and forms of being and thinking could be rendered epistemologically and theoretically erroneous and indefensible, then surely enough conviction would have been created, enough epistemological capital generated to enable a different mode of historicity. So the big debate was: should theory lead the way for history to follow? Or should history decide the pace and the order of change? There is that splendid moment in Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire* when he talks about in some cases the content goes before the phrase in other cases the phrase goes before the content. What should come after a crisis that has sparked off a revolution? It's not going back to the way things were. But you need a change which is absolutely systemic, change which is paradigmatic. So part of the need for the Post was this fear that after some point the faith that history is usable would inevitably takes you back into the old fashioned way, the status quo with a few superficial reforms.

But the situation, it turns out, is not all that straightforward for the simple reason that humanism and post-humanism get played out within an onto-political continuum that as a continuum is constituted by slippages, asymmetries, and incommensurabilities. The various constituencies and crises that comprise the onto-political plane: each of them has its own aetiology as well as genealogy. There are multifarious relationships: the intra- and the inter-human, the political and the ontological, the human and nature, nationalism-humanism-anthropocentrism, the human as being and the human as citizen, the nation as home and the world as home. The continuum is also riven with contradictions and misalignments with the result that the meaning of the post takes on a different valence and salience depending on the ideological semantics of the substantive that follows the post. Thus posthumanism and post nationalism are not necessarily concentric or mutually coextensive.

One could be a post-human philosophically speaking and still unabashedly enjoy the privileges of citizenship sovereignty. The conviction of post-humanity at a higher level of theoretical or general rarefaction does not automatically speak for a similar break at a less general or historico-politically specific register. And I think for someone like a Said, who was a great friend and mentor of mine, I still miss him, this was a real problem; and hence his commitment to a non-humanist humanism, rather than to a *tout court* theoretical dismissal of humanism. Given the abject nation-less condition of the Palestinians, how could Said opt for a facile post-humanism? To him, claims of post-humanism were a form of false consciousness propped up by an ahistorical and philosophical mode of thinking. And yet, theoretically and epistemologically Said was a thorough going critic of nationalism: he rather preferred an exilic mode of dwelling in the nation. To Said, second order theory is incapable of resolving a problem is exclusively historical. Or take the example of Rabindranath Tagore who had nothing but disdain for the provincialism of the nation, and the pettifogging poverty of politics as such. What Tagore desired was the break of the spiritual and the ethical and the poetic from the calculative rationale of politics and its culmination in the nation state.

A couple of examples now then to demonstrate the doubleness of epistemology and of the human as cogito. Climate change has resulted in a situation where each discipline has to learn some humility. It's almost like the famous story attributed to Rumi. The story is of an elephant in the room and people who are visually challenged. Each one touches a certain body part of the elephant and describes the totality of the animal in terms of the isolated part. Each one of them has a different description. So as you read people writing about the anthropocene, you find somebody

saying I'm writing about this as a historian, writing about it as a palaeontologist, I'm writing about it as a policy person. But this question of the need to kind of foreground, so something is happening out there. "I'm speaking in my capacity as" is a way of acknowledging and marking the perspectival finitude of where one is coming from in the face of a reality that transcends, confounds, and beggars the very arrangement of human knowledges. The doubleness here is epistemological: the obligation to think both within the "thought" of one's discipline and yet be open to the Unthought, a horizon to be conceived both as the Unthought in general as well as that determinate "unthought" that pertains to one's so called "home discipline." Home and the unhomey in the same pulsation, so to speak.

What does my field mandate for itself as its proper subject, and in so doing, what does it forbid as alien, unhomey, as other? What will happen if I establish anomalous articulations between what I am allowed to think normatively and forms of thinking that constitute a threat to the integrity of my academic or disciplinary formation? The other doubleness is ontological. Climate change on the one hand warrants human action only because the only way we human understand climate change is because it is crisis. It is a crisis based epistemology. It is a crisis to us: once we remove our perspective, there is no crisis. It is just a state of becoming that has nothing to do with anthropocentric ways of knowing or human needs. COVID is a virus that threatens human health. That it is a threat to human health is not part of, if you will, "The In Itself," the *En Soi* of the virus on a pre- and non-human scale. Again what is warranted is a split screen as a continuum wherein one screen depicts human action and thought as relevant, and the other where the human element is entirely redundant and inconsequential. Of course, the fact that climate change itself has been the consequence of human action, makes this doubleness even ore complicated, layered.

The second set of ontopolitical issues I have been thinking in the context of humanism and posthumanism have to do with the Dalits and Blacks in the USA and the world at large, the rationale of Afropessimism, in particular. Two of Afropessimism's most fiery exponents are Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton, dear colleagues of mine here at UCI. If as a Dalit or as a slave you are natally black or dalit and because of that you are not even human or less than human, then the term humanism has nothing to say to you. Humanism in these instances is nothing but anti-Black, anti-Dalit humanism. In other words, the anti-Black or anti-Dalit bias in humanism is not epiphenomenal or an adventitious characteristic. Humanism is fundamentally, paradigmatically, constitutively anti_black and anti-Dal-

it. The philosophico-political-historical exclusion of the Dalit Lives and Black lives from the pious formulation, "All Lives Matter" is originary and fundamental. The syllogism does not work here for the simple reason that the ALL has no place for Black and Dalit, and *ergo*, the major premise minor premise structure of the syllogism is rendered dysfunctional and irrelevant: hence the utter uselessness of humanism in these instances. Furthermore, the strategy of invoking a prior or primordial ontology to critique and rectify the horrors that are *merely historical*, has no bearing here, since, as Sylvia Wynter has argued memorably in the context of blackness, what we are confronting in these instances is the *coloniality of all Being*. There is no prior temporality or a safe hinterland to resort to.

The challenge to the rest of humanity goes like this: how can you, in all good conscience, avail of humanism when you are aware that the ism that you befriend is the same ism that denies humanity to your Dalit and Black fellow being. The only conscionable option is a total boycott. A new vocabulary and language are necessitated. As Dipesh Chakrabarty would argue, from a different but related angle, may be the time has come to junk "ontology" as a viable category, and with it the "human." Or there is the vibrant example of Jacques Derrida who wants to fall in unconditional love with the animal, but cannot, since he is a philosopher and his tradition of philosophy has always excluded the animal from its Cogito, its jurisdiction. Should Derrida then resign from philosophy to love the animal, or should he transform his discipline, or haunt his discipline with what it lacks? Is this a case of two incommensurable loves and loyalties? How should this doubleness be managed?

I am here thinking of the debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar, and why did Ambedkar move from Hinduism to Buddhism? The question then becomes a political problem as well as a philosophico-ontological problem. But the political problem is in a larger context, the ontological problem. It's like saying if this is a problem, in which historiography should we be resolving it, should that be in the historiography of the nation state, or a reformed Hinduism, or Buddhism, or spirituality, or agnosticism? If the deep symptamatology of the problem is post-humanist, then there is something disingenuous and regressive about resolving that symptom within the aegis of Humanism. To Ambedkar, the violence of casteism was constitutive of and essential to Hinduism, and so he had to open up a different disjunctive epistemic space for the destruction of casteism. Reform within casteism would be an instance of *petitio principii*, of begging the question. So the question that Afro-pessimism poses is as follows: "You talk about the human. Hey, I'm not even in the human." even now when a when a body dies, shot at by the police it is a Black body and why

did the Black body die? Because it is Black. Slavery has still on, despite all the superficial policy changes, voting rights, and civil rights and liberties .

And Afro-pessimism says if you call yourself a Humanist, and you also concede the fact that humanism and the anti-Blackness are mutually constitutive, then how can you want the Human for yourself? Moreover, the Afropessimist will also differentiate her constituency of say someone like Martin Heidegger who responds to Sartre's valorization of Existentialism as Humanism with the stinging response that humanism is not worthy of redemption, and indeed that humanism as such is the guilty and erroneous discourse. He would insist that any attempt at redeeming humanism in the name of humanism is utterly unworthy. This philosophical grandstanding of Heidegger leaves the Afropessimist cold and untouched precisely because tge grandstanding is philosophical and not corporeal.

The Afropessimist's stinging repartee is that her inhumam flesh is already that abject nothing that has no access to the comforts of a negative ontology. Whereas the Heideggerian project of *deconstruction* takes place within the philosophy of the western cogito, the nay saying of the Afropessimist functions as a meta-rejection of the very applicability of humanism as such. The black body is already outside of and not accessible or communicable to the western *logos*. And this came up, for example, in the big debate four years ago between Black Lives Matter and Hillary Clinton where Hillary Clinton says, "Yeah. I'm going to change policy." and Black Lives Matter said "No dear sister, it ain't good enough. We want a change of heart. A policy doesn't go deep enough." So that's if you are thinking at that level of the paradigmatic and the systemic. But then on the other hand, Marx will tell you that any change is always heteronomous; whatever you want to change things with, the tool with which the revolution has to happen, it's never born *ex nihilo*, unless it happens in a mythic *purana* story, where out of the fire comes, a creature, or a shining sword which is equal to the task and that fire belongs to no time at all. Here is "the hole in the flag of Žižek"; it is the moment in Fanon, the flickering moment of the flame, that negotiates perennially between political resolution and onto-epistemological openendedness.

If we have time to move into literature, so we'll go into a story where a young person at a family party confesses to being a Literature Major. Some one asks the parent, "I hear you have a bright son, he must be doing IIT, you know, is he doing engineering?" "No." "Physics, Chemistry?" "No." By then, the voice is plummeting into a weak and quavering diminuendo.. And the parent says, "Oh, he loves poetry, writes poetry, philosophy". By then, the guests are in a state of explicit commiseration. They are like

“Oh no! What will you do?” What a pity that you have an offspring who is going to waste her life in the Humanities, in the study of Literature. Literature has, you know, that kind of a “no value”. Or people say stuff like we need Literature for a well-rounded education, as if, well-rounded is a kind of a last-minute *tadka*, as if it’s a kind of a last-minute cosmetic touch up. Or, if at a get together, you were to say, “I’m a professor of English”, somebody would say, “Oh my God! We should be careful of grammar and syntax in her presence.” Or somebody would say “Oh, yeah, literature, you know, everything goes, everything is subjective.” That’s when you see me at my angriest. How dare you! That’s when I shout out, “. We are the people who have the courage to study subjectivity. You run away from it. We study the nothing, we study angst, we study anguish. So don’t tell me that there is no method or rigor in the study of literature.”

On the contrary, here is a field where you are supposed to account for your subjectivity. To use Ranajit Guha’s phrase, here is where “where the existential tangles with the epistemological” and he’s talking about Tagore’s poetry. So I proclaim from the roof tops that literature is field where somebody writes a book called *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. We give ambiguity a valence. We make it a point to say that any and every truth comes from ambiguity. We tell you where we come from, we just don’t hide. We think of literature as being simultaneously a discipline and not a discipline; simultaneously in the world, but at the same time, requiring expertise, not one or the other. We genealogize our truth and our method in relational reciprocity. We generate thirteen ways of looking at a black-bird rather than stultify our vision with a single frame. And the question is when you can look at it in thirteen ways, why would you be stupid and look at it in just one way? So we are challenging the one and the many. The one and the many are in a perennial *pas de deux*, figuring each other out. So someone like me, I think, I’m very directionally challenged. I can lose my way quite easily. I think I’m a romantic. To go to the same place, I take five different routes, each route seems to present the destination as something different, even though the destination is the same. But that is the phenomenological truth of the truth being one and the many at the same time. So these are the kinds of issues that it seems to me that literature deals with.

And I think the other important thing it seems to me is that I began with coexistence as existence, the whole idea of empathy, the whole idea of negative capability, the whole idea of thinking of knowledge as something as a shared field. And my favourite example, which I used in my 2003 book *Theory in an Uneven World* is, if you’re a tennis fan, you’re watching a game, and then from where you are sitting, you could absolutely swear,

the ball was out. And the perspective shifts and you are like, "Oh my God, the ball was completely in". What then do you do? This is the question for phenomenology, the idea that of course, if its a game you need to call, somebody has to say, you know, parallax error etc, that the view from this particular point of view has to be the correct view. But Literature tells you it is always an ongoing negotiation between the many and the one. So the point in that example is, even though I know in another point of view, the ball was in, judging from where I am, I am condemned to see it in a certain way. But precisely because of that, I also acknowledge the reality of other perspectives. So built into perspectival phenomenology is the critical awareness that perspectives are many, that they coexist, and operate on the basis of a perennial multilateral negotiation. To be truly perspectival, one simultaneously exercises and problematizes "one's perspective." Indeed there can be nothing called "one's perspective": perspective is not intended for shoring up, rectitude or propriety. It is only a contingent point of entry into a process of multilateral becoming. The world itself is Perspective: in other words, perspective is not something equipmental to be shed once the subject arrives at the omniscience of objectivity.

Co-existence is primary; and by definition there can be no proper subject for co-existing. Co-existence is happening. You cannot say I co-exist. It's wrong. I co-exist with; you coexist with; coexistence by definition "deteritorializes" any kind of egological predication of "I." The simple preposition "with" shatters vertical notions of non-ekstatic belonging. I happen to be there, in the nexus called coexisting. My dear departed friend Jayakanthan, the magnificent Tamil writer, he would maintain that if you're a writer you're condemned to love the thief, you're condemned to love everything under the sky. Of course Walt Whitman comes to mind; and also the trenchant Tamizh aphorism, *Kalaivum Katru mara, arthaath*, "Even thieving learn it, but discard it." There is indeed nothing that is alien to life; and yet judge we must, but not by throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Literature deals ambivalently with the relationship of the real to reason. To critique, you just don't run away and deliver a judgment from an Archimedean position of pure distance. So literature immerses you in life, in the world. Solidarity and critique are caught up within the figurality of the Moebius strip. In other words, you think of solidarity and critique in the same breath. It's not like placing a jar in Tennessee, you know the poem by Wallace Stevens, and once you place the jar, you begin to dominate. So, we have come full circle. What is the human, what is the human humanism? What is Literature? I think of the great moment in Fanon "Make of me a body that questions," the Fanon who in the very urgency of seeking

an answer by way of decolonization privileges the mode of interrogation, the never-ending authority of the question. Keep the question alive beyond the formulaic seduction of the easy and superficial answer. I'm not suggesting there's something exceptionalist about Literature. I mean Literature itself can become its own source of self mystification, but what I'm proposing an endless double-session whereby the question and the answer are in a state of contrapuntal intimacy, not the intimacy of identities, but of a radical relationality. Pose the question as answer and vice versa. I'll end it with that, and with a reference to the resonant imperative, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." To that I add, contrapuntally, "Judge, lest ye be not judged." It's not one or the other, but these two paradoxical injunctions yoked together in the same formulation. I think I'll stop now. All I want to say is: with all my heart, thank you so very, very much. I look forward now to your questions, comments, and corrections of my perspective, my way of co-existing with the world.