

Posthuman Spaces of Relation

Literary Responses to the Species Boundary in Primate Literature

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This article aims at showing how contemporary literary responses to human-nonhuman primate relationships can be as valid a form of thinking about the animal as the philosophical and scientific roots of movements such as the Great Ape Project. Traditionally the ape has been the source of stories that question the definition of the human. Since the beginning of the modern animal liberation movement in the 1970s and thanks to the development of scientific fields such as cognitive ethology, primatology, and trans-species psychology, some fiction writers have produced works that develop alternative ways of thinking about the non-human primate. In order to understand the transformative power of the literary imagination this article first offers a short reflection on the connections between the posthuman turn and the development of literary animal studies. Secondly, after commenting on the main narratives that have nourished our relationship with nonhuman apes since the eighteenth century, it presents an overview of the main ape motifs that populate Anglophone literatures. And finally, it argues that literature compels us to transcend the category “human” and enter into a posthuman age that philosophers such as Cary Wolfe or Rosi Braidotti acknowledge as more in tune with the reality of who we are as a species: multiply hybridized in our constant interactions with nonhuman beings.

Keywords: primate literature, literary animal studies, posthumanism, posthuman humanities, cyborg posthumanism, animot posthumanism, animal ethics, species boundary, animal liberation, ecocriticism.

The history of the animal liberation movement in the Western world reached a significant point with the foundation in 1994 of the Great Ape Project (GAP), an initiative aimed at obtaining the recognition of three basic rights for great apes: the right to life, protection of individual liberty, and prohibition of torture. Although this international movement finally led to failed

attempts in New Zealand and Spain to gain legal rights for great apes, it also stirred heated debate on the nature of human-animal relationships indicating a horizon of possibilities for bridging the distance between the human and the nonhuman animal, and so creating a posthuman space of relation.

Traditionally, in the sphere of fiction writing, the ape has been since antiquity the source of stories that played with the definition of the human in an attempt to establish the ground for a differentiation that would save face for the *homo sapiens*. Interestingly, since the beginning of the modern animal liberation movement in the 1970s and thanks to the development of scientific fields such as cognitive ethology, primatology, and trans-species psychology, some fiction writers have produced works that develop new ways of thinking about the nonhuman primate. Some of them show the potential of literature to suggest alternative forms of dealing with the species boundary.

This essay aims at showing how contemporary literary responses to human-nonhuman primate relationships can be as valid a form of thinking about the animal as the philosophical and scientific roots of movements such as the GAP. In order to do so, firstly, a short reflection on the connections between the posthuman turn and the development of literary animal studies will be given. Secondly, after commenting on the main narratives that have nourished our relationship with nonhuman apes since the eighteenth century, an overview of the main ape motifs that populate Anglophone literatures will be presented. And finally, it will be argued that literature compels us to transcend the category “human” and enter into a posthuman age that philosophers such as Cary Wolfe or Rosi Braidotti acknowledge as more in tune with the reality of who we are as a species: multiply hybridized in our constant interactions with nonhuman beings.

1. ANIMAL ETHICS AND THE POSTHUMAN TURN

The history of the modern animal rights movement begins at the University of Oxford in the early 1970s. It was there that a group of philosophy students planted the seed of what Norm Phelps denominates “the golden age of animal rights” which extends from 1975 until the early 1990s (2007, 222). Such was articulated mainly through the coinage by Richard Ryder in 1970 of the term “speciesism”, discrimination on account of species, and the publication in 1971 of a collection of articles on animal ethics titled *Animals, Men and Morals: an Enquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans*, edited by Roslind and Stanley Godlovitch, and John Harris. These two landmarks of animal activism led Peter Singer, then connected

to the seminal Oxford group, to write *Animal Liberation* (1975), the bible of the twentieth-century animal liberation movement.

The question of the animal was hence reaching the realm of applied ethics in the Anglo-American tradition and leading as well to an interesting response in society towards the acknowledgement of a species continuum, which implied the blurring of the species boundary. This is one of the main ideas that lie at the root of the GAP, a project led by Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer in an attempt at claiming the granting of basic rights to great apes. Interestingly, soon after its formulation, some authors like animal ethologist Marc Bekoff, after noticing GAP's primatecentrism, began formulating alternatives that seemed more inclusive of the species diversity there is on the planet. Hence, for instance, Bekoff, in *Deep Ethology, Animal Rights, and the Great Ape/Animal Project: Resisting Speciesism and Expanding the Community of Equals* (1998), defended an all species "project" that does not privilege those closer to the *homo sapiens*.

Either way, what is highly interesting is that from the 1970s onwards the questioning of the species boundary has led to attempts to formulate a new space of interspecies relationship. Such shift towards redefining human-nonhuman interactions acquires a stronger potential if situated in the context of the posthuman turn that according to Wolfe and Braidotti is affecting the humanities today (Wolfe 2009, 572; Braidotti 2013a, 1). This is why in this article it will be argued that animal literature is a necessary step in the evolution of the humanities into a new paradigm that can be described as the posthuman humanities promoted by a movement from language to matter, from words to bodies. Actually, in order to survive, the humanities need to become posthuman in the sense of taking into consideration the more-than-human world (Braidotti 2013b, 149).

Several are the schools of thought that have approached animal studies, and more specifically literary animal studies, since its origin in the 1980s. One of the most relevant ones has been posthumanism. Cary Wolfe, for example, has connected the issue of the posthuman to the study of literature in works such as *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and the Posthumanist Theory* (2003), *Zoontologies: the Question of the Animal* (2003), or *Human, All Too Human: "Animal Studies" and the Humanities* (2009). He warns the reader about the dangers of anthropocentrism in practices with *provocative* names such as animal studies since, even though the *animal* is there literally as the subject of study, it is difficult, as literary critics, to use a lens capable of seeing the nonhuman animal free from the layers of anthropocentric thinking in which it has remained captive throughout centuries of looking at it from a position of ontological superiority built around the figure of Man. But since Man, according to Michel Foucault,

is already dead, thinkers like Wolfe, with a sustained interest in literary studies and the animal question, have started wondering about the ways in which the field of literary studies should change in order to approach the animal from a nonanthropocentric point of view. In fact, when in 2005 Kenneth J. Shapiro and Marion W. Copeland established the issues on which the zoocritic should concentrate nothing was said really about adopting a nonanthropocentric lens. A different approach seemed to emerge later on thanks to the development of postcolonial ecocriticism which actually made the practice of zoocriticism one of its core tenets. This should not provoke any surprise given the fact that the animal, as Tiffin declares, had already been declared the ultimate *other* and the connection between the postcolonial subject and the animal was made evident frequently in many literary texts (2001, 33). Furthermore, on hindsight, even before zoocriticism was made central to the ecocritical practice from a postcolonial point of view, feminist ecocriticism had already explored the subject of the nonhuman animal. Given the traditional identification between women and nature, Patrick D. Murphy became in the 1995 the first to highlight the power of fiction to unearth the voice of naturalized beings. In his work he turned Bakhtin's dialogics into a nonanthropocentric tool. It is in this direction that Louise Westling's article *Literature, the Environment, and the Question of the Posthuman* (2006) moves, too. Westling connects the work of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his call to reawaken the world around us with the literary opus of Virginia Woolf. At the beginning of her article she ponders on the possibilities offered by posthumanism to debunk the myth of the superiority of *anthropos* and sees it ontologically divided in two branches: techno or cyborg posthumanism and *animot* posthumanism (2006, 29). The first one, whose flagships have been works such as Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, concentrates on "[suggesting] a cyborg vision of the posthuman, opening the prospect of escape from bodily limitations and environmental constraint through computerized virtual reality, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and biotic mechanization" (2006, 29). This leaves Westling somehow disenchanted with the many possibilities she foresees in the movement:

Such a posthuman vision does nothing to address the dilemmas posed by a threatened environment, but instead implies that we can escape involvement in the rhythms of growth and decay in the biosphere. The techno posthuman does not seem to offer much to ecocriticism. (2006, 29-30)

However, a different thing happens when she reflects on the second type of posthumanism she describes, *animot* posthumanism, which she thinks

“[can help] to define human place within the ecosystem by interrogating or erasing the boundary that has been assumed to set our species apart from the rest of the living community” (2006, 30).

All this theoretical baggage kindles a necessary curiosity about the literary implications of the posthuman turn for the analysis of animal literature. As will be shown, primate literature has become an ideal site for exploring the possibilities offered by literature to posthumanism as a way of redefining the role of *homo sapiens*. Biotechnology, which Braidotti defines as one of “the four horsemen of the posthuman apocalypse” (2013b, 59), features significantly in much of recent primate literature dealing with human-animal bodily exchanges. Such context serves to create a new space of relation between the human and nonhuman primate thanks to the rediscovered “vibrancy” of matter by new materialist thinking.

2. PRIMATE LITERATURE AND THE NEW POSTHUMAN SPACE OF RELATION

In *The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal-Human Boundary* (2005) Raymond Corbey distinguishes three main “master narratives” affecting the relationship between human and nonhuman primates since the eighteenth century (88). The first one situates humans as a privileged category by God’s design. Such vision was typical of the eighteenth century and informed Linnaeus’s classification of species in his tenth edition of *Systema naturae* (1735). Due, among other things, to their similarities with humans, nonhuman apes were seen as closer to a primitive state of harmony with nature. The second one, which presided the entire nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, defends the progression of humans from a state of bestiality to one of civilization and reason. This narrative describes nonhuman apes as monsters, otherized beings from which separation was necessary, and compares them with the indigenous people of colonized lands. Lastly, the third narrative explains human evolution “in terms of strictly contingent blind variation and selective retention” (Corbey 2005, 88). This means that the destiny of humans is determined by their genes. This vision ruled a great part of the twentieth century until attention was paid to the relationships between humans and nonhumans in the framework of the new primatology developed in the 1970s. This led to a return to a more eighteenth-century vision of apes which gave way in the twenty-first century to attempts at including all nonhuman primates in the community of moral beings.

Literature in its different expressions has also served as testimony of these changes. In the process, a series of recurrent themes or ape motifs have been shaped which sometimes function on their own and sometimes are permeated by one another. The first theme can be described as “encounters with the *other*”. Such encounters happen, for example, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) where Caliban, the native of the island where Prospero and Miranda have been stranded for twelve years, is described as a “monster”, a creature of indeterminate nature difficult to define. Caliban has indeed come to epitomize the *other* as slave, noble savage, primitive man, and, tellingly, as missing link between humans and apes in the nineteenth century (Rundle 2007, 52). In the 1950s such visions of Caliban were substituted by a widely accepted postcolonial interpretation of the play where Caliban is the “cannibal”, the colonized that questions and threatens the colonizer. However, since the 1990s a new turn has led Shakespeare’s character to become the metaphor for the situation of liminality where great apes live in our world. To this effect, in *Visions of Caliban* (1993), Dale Peterson and Jane Goodall use the metaphor of Caliban to tackle serious issues that affect the lives of chimpanzees today: being consumed as bushmeat, used in sign language experiments and in the entertainment industry are just but a few. This identification is so apt that a few years later trans-species psychologist Gay A. Bradshaw referred to the species boundary as “Caliban’s Line” (2011, n.p.).

A second common standard of representation of great apes takes the form of the “ape as mirror of humans”, more specifically of its flaws and absurdities as it happens in the eighteenth-century ape-land stories where authors use an ape civilization in some remote area to satirize European society. There is a hint of this satiric ape in Book IV of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1735) where the protagonist finds two civilizations in stark contrast: the Houynhnms and the Yahoos. While the Houynhnms, in appearance similar to horses, are presented as civilized and capable of exercising virtues that distinguish them as admirable creatures, the Yahoos, who resemble apes, are described in beastly terms. Interestingly, Gulliver struggles to define himself against the humanoid brutes and in the attempt he redefines himself becoming a fool in the eyes of his neighbors. More contemporary examples are the film *Planet of the Apes* (1968), based on Pierre Boulle’s *La planète des singes* (1963), which has generated a series of sequels, each adapted to its own times, dealing with the substitution of humans by nonhuman apes as the dominating species on Earth.

Linked to this satirical technique where animals feature as superior morally to humans is also the ape fable where apes are characterized as having a wiser understanding of what constitutes living in a morally sane

way. Such is the case of Franz Kafka's *A Report to an Academy* (1917) where Red Peter narrates to an academy his process of transformation into a human and the fact that he can no longer reverse to his state as ape. This story serves to reflect on the human/animal boundary and has a talking ape at its center. Much in the same way Daniel Quinn uses a telepathic gorilla as teacher in his book *Ishmael: an Adventure of the Mind and the Spirit* (1992).

A fourth trope, "the feral ape", has to do with the impact Darwin's theory of evolution had on European society in the nineteenth century. Already in 1817 Thomas L. Peacock published *Melincourt or Sir Oran Haut-Ton*, a satire directed against Lord Monboddo's theories concerning the human status of the orangutan. This book announced the critical reception Darwin's revolutionary ideas would have later on. Precisely, in order to establish a wider separation between humans and apes, some nineteenth-century narratives tended to accentuate traits that defined apes as ferocious and brutish creatures. Such was the case of Edgar Allan Poe's orangutan murderer in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). However, early twentieth-century narratives were not exempt of a certain ambiguity when it came to dealing with the human-ape boundary. In this sense Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) can actually be read as an experiment in boundary crossing and homage to the ideals of prelapsarian life. The protagonist, Lord Greystoke, becomes an ape by adoption after the death of his parents in the jungle, and although he ends up returning to civilization, his appreciation of the purity of life amongst apes will make him opt for this kind of life in the end. The association of apes with indigenous peoples, then conceptualized as primitive, became also part of stories that portrayed maladapted working class protagonists. The American playwright Eugene O'Neill used this image of ape as primitive but noble brute in *The Hairy Ape* (1922) where the male protagonist, Yank, is a worker who finds peace in the connection he establishes with a captive gorilla he visits at the zoo after being rejected by the woman he loves. He frees the animal and commits suicide in what can be read as a play that deals with working class identification with animals.

A fifth theme is that of "ape as lover". Such motif comes from different traditions. European fairy tales are one, as well as seventeenth-century travel literature. Regarding the former, in his work *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976) Bruno Bettelheim classifies fairy tales into different cycles. One of the most prominent is that where the groom or bride is an animal. He signals the myth of "Cupid and Psyche" as the first of this kind in the Western tradition. Although the topic of repressed sex is present in both the "animal groom" and the "animal

bride” stories, Bettelheim establishes a distinction between the two. The cycles dominated by the figure of the lover as male animal characterize sex as animal-like, instinctual and repulsive, while those where the animal is female usually opt for animal forms that are delicate against more aggressive types (Bettelheim [1975] 1976, Loc. 5881). Some of these elements were also fused into a kind of literature that had nothing to do with the children’s world. Seventeenth-century travel literature became a frequent site for stories that portrayed male apes kidnapping African women to satisfy their desires (Brown 2003, 236). Following Horst W. Janson, Laura Brown mentions the story told in Francesco Maria Guazzo’s *Compendium Maleficarum* ([1608] 2003, 238-9). In this story a woman is abducted and left on a desert island where an ape, the leader of his tribe, keeps her as his wife and has two children with her. The story ends in a tragic way when, after the woman is rescued from the ape and taken away by ship, the ape throws the children and then himself into the sea.

When a female ape is the protagonist the story turns satirical. This is the case of *Gulliver’s Travels* where Swift reverses the traditional “ape-rape” story (Janson 1952, 208) to come full circle in his satire of humans and travel books. Thus, in Book IV, a female Yahoo assaults Gulliver because she cannot repress her desire at the sight of his naked body. Equally interesting is John Collier’s *His Monkey Wife or Married to a Chimpanzee* (1930) where a schoolmaster in Africa, Alfred, befriends a female chimpanzee, Emily, who by constantly listening to him talking learns to speak and also falls madly in love with him. However, he is already engaged and his return to England poses a hard dilemma because circumstances lead him to having to choose between his fiancée, Amy, or his chimpanzee companion. The novel, as David B.D. Asker explains, serves to criticize the modern woman who is not capable of loving Alfred as unconditionally as the chimpanzee does (1996, 177). In the end the chimpanzee Emily rescues her beloved from a life of hypocrisy and returns with him to Africa where they finally consummate their love.

This theme of “ape as lover” has been reworked after the 1960s into stories more in accordance with animal rights concerns and with the blurring of the human/animal boundary. In general these new versions of the theme follow a traditional tale of the animal groom cycle, that of the Beauty and the Beast. The essence of this story, in the eighteenth-century version gathered by Madame Leprince de Beaumont, is the transformative power of love (Bettelheim [1975] 1976, Loc. 6271). A series of terrible circumstances make Beauty live with Beast. This character is not given any specific description that can help identify him with any particular animal, he just has an animal-like appearance. With time and without any imposition on his part,

Beauty realizes she is in love with Beast who, thanks to the force of Beauty's love, is transformed into a magnificent prince. In the modern renderings of this story where nonhuman apes play the role of Beast and humans – either male or female – that of Beauty, the animal stays the same and it is the human who experiences a moral transformation that pushes him or her to confront the taboo of interspecies sex and consummate her or his love for the ape. Such consummation is the physical expression of the blurring of the species boundary. In texts such as Peter Goldsworthy's *Wish* (1995), the humans come to the realization of the ape's moral superiority while, at the same time, embrace their own animality both literally and figuratively by acknowledging the power of the *other* in their lives. Finally, these retellings of the Beauty and the Beast story fulfill also another function, that of redeeming apes from their traditional representation as lustful creatures since often it is the human the one to take the first step in the seduction process.

Another possible theme is that of “apes as a cause”. In these narratives apes are portrayed as endangered species or as victims of human practices such as medical experiments or their use in entertainment. A good example is Sara Gruen's novel *Ape House* (2010) inspired by the author's own experiences watching lexigram speaking bonobos at the Great Ape Trust in Des Moines, Iowa. It tells the story of scientist Isabel Duncan and the lengths she has to go to rescue the group of bonobos she used to work with from a TV channel that produces a 24-hours live show about the daily lives of the apes in a house.

Also in connection with the different uses to which apes are subject in today's society is a seventh theme that has been generated in recent decades due to biomedical techniques that make possible to think of using animal organs to replace those no longer functioning in humans. This can be referred to as the “xenotransplantation theme” and it always involves the bodily interdependence of animal and human by means of a surgical procedure that makes possible this codependency. Such corporeal connections or fusions happen in Peter Dickinson's *Eva* (1988) and Brenda Peterson's *Animal Heart* (2004) and, although they either belong or verge on the speculative, they offer an occasion to reflect on the artificiality of the human/animal boundary given the double standard science uses when dealing with the ethical consideration of primates for research.

A last theme can be described as that of the “ecological ape”. In the 1990s the risks of environmental catastrophe, especially once the perils of climate change were assessed at the 1992 Rio Conference, led to renewed interest in stories that focus on human-ape relationships. Here apes are described in a Rousseauesque style as moral creatures who can be singled out as individuals with their own unique characteristics. Often such stories

are titled after the name of the ape protagonist, but told from the point of view of the humans so as to avoid the risk of anthropocentrism. They can be described as memoirs of transformation where humans, once affected by their relationships with apes, become aware of the artificiality of the human/animal distinction. They also serve as a denunciation of human practices that are described as cruel and unfair to the animal. Besides, the animal is often portrayed as a spokesperson for his kin and for planet Earth responding to the ecological anxieties of today's world. The 1990s trend has also worked its way in popular culture in the 2000s. The classic of ape literature and filmography, *Planet of the Apes*, was revisited in 2011 with the release of Rupertt Wyatt's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, a prequel to the 1968's classic. The film was a critical and commercial success that questioned anthropocentrism and animal experimentation.

3. LITERARY STUDIES IN THE POSTHUMAN AGE

The definition of these motifs of primate literature show a progression from a stage where the truths of Darwinism derived into a phase of denial or zoophobia to one where the bodies of human and nonhuman primates become interchangeable, as it happens in the abovementioned stories of zoophilic love and those of xenotransplantation. These are by far the types of narratives that situate primate literature in a posthuman age thanks to their exploration of the kind of issues that constitute the marrow of this day and age. Hence, for instance, the protagonist of Goldsworthy's *Wish* (1995) is a female gorilla whose intelligence is biotechnologically enhanced thus engrossing the list of the thousands of animals that yearly are the victims of biotechnology. A very similar thing happens with the two protagonists of Dickinson's *Eva* (1988). In this novel a teenage girl, whose body has been seriously injured in a car accident, becomes the subject of an experimental procedure in which her "neuron memory" is transferred to the body of a female chimpanzee who is sacrificed to secure the life of the human. Furthermore, both novels interrogate the borders of the human and the nonhuman bodies and so enter into dialogue with the new understanding of matter as intentional. This is clearly seen in another novel of xenotransplantation, Peterson's *Animal Heart* (2004), where a human is saved thanks to the transplant of a baboon heart that establishes a transformative form of communication with its human recipient.

In all these novels, the body becomes the site of realization of the posthuman subject and reason, the traditional defining attribute of Man,

is questioned together with the empire of logos. The female protagonist in *Wish* is a female gorilla who learns how to use Sign to communicate in effective and creative manners, the hybrid *girl-chimp* in *Eva* finds dreams and sensory experience a better form of communication than the voice box she carries with her, and in *Animal Heart* a death baboon manages to communicate through his transplanted heart.

In her article *Posthumanist Performativity: toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter* (2003) Karen Barad develops the idea of performativity. Being critical of the excessive power attributed to words to define reality, she opposes performativity with its focus on practices/doing/actions to representationalism and its emphasis in the correspondences between descriptions and reality (Barad 2003, Loc. 2195). She proposes a posthumanist notion of performativity where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are called into question and the important thing is to analyze the practices through which the species boundary is stabilized and destabilized (Barad 2003, Loc. 2283-309). After bringing to mind Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* (1989) as an example of such "posthumanist account", she emphasizes the importance discourse has on the materialization of bodies. Discourse is understood by Barad not as a synonym for language, but as "specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted" (2003, Loc. 2505). As part of her theory of agential realism, Barad further explains these discursive practices as:

[...] ongoing agential intra-actions of the world through which local determinacy is enacted within the phenomena produced. [...] Meaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility. In its causal intra-activity, "part" of the world becomes determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another "part" of the world. (2003, Loc. 2505-31)

The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming, Barad concludes. Hence it is necessary to pay attention to phenomena for they constitute reality. "The world", according to Barad, "is an ongoing open process of mattering through which 'mattering' itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities" (2003, Loc. 2451-74). This perspective when applied to human-animal relationships can shed some light on the human-animal encounters described in some of the novels abovementioned.

In order to see this contention more clearly, Lynda Birke, Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke's approach might be also useful. They apply Barad's notion of performativity to clarify how human-animal relationships are co-constructed generating a "choreography" of meaning (Birke, Bryld, and Lykke

2004, 170). What the animal does determines the behavior of the human and vice versa. Nothing is predetermined but it is created the moment the human and the nonhuman initiate the process of intra-action, “specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve ‘humans’” and through which “the differential boundaries between ‘humans’ and ‘nonhumans’, ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, the ‘social’ and the ‘scientific’ are constituted” (Barad 2003, Loc. 2451). Consequently, it could be said that the literature that deals with animals is partially their creation since from the moment of its inception they, with their material being, affect the lives of the writer who literally types the story the animal cannot put on paper. Through Barad’s destabilizing lens the real animals behind those stories become co-creators in the literary process of imagining. They enact a transition from the creature written upon to the writing creature and, in doing so, contribute to the creation of a posthuman space of relation between the human and the nonhuman that responds creatively to the kind of configuration of the humanities that is needed in a time of both environmental crisis and questioning of the field that traditionally has been the realm of the Human.

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