

## Posthuman Folklore



Peter Cullen Bryan

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TOK Thompson's *Posthuman Folklore* endeavors to locate the future of folklore within the realms of speculative fiction and animal studies, offering an overview of paths forward for the discipline. The book is divided into two major sections: one focused on animal studies and one discussing the larger trends of folklore, with an eye towards how folklore studies might evolve to better engage with new media. *Posthuman Folklore* functions more as a broad review of the current literature than deeply-focused monograph, and should be broadly accessible to anyone with an interest in the future of the humanities. Thompson avoids getting lost in the weeds of scholarly debate, creating a text that offers a useful primer of the current field, as well as potential paths forward.

The first portion of *Posthuman Folklore* focuses on the application of animal studies to the question of artificial intelligence. Speculative fiction and folklore can help to bridge this divide, in Thompson's estimation, and Thompson makes the case for the humanities within the larger discussion: "postcolonial science opens itself up to the inclusion of considerations of other schools of thought, other epistemologies, and offers possible avenues of thought out of the dead-end of anthropocentrism" (55). By locating concepts within Native American approaches to human-animal relationships, for instance, Thompson views the solution to the problem as being more open to alternative modes of thought. He uses animal studies as a framework for deconstructing Western thought on sexuality: "sharing sexuality between humans and other species seems to similarly engage this same taboo of troubling human-animal binary division" (70). Thompson posits that the arrival of non-human relationships is likely inevitable with advances in artificial intelligence, and developing a framework for how to handle this will soon be necessary, a framework that can be found (in part, at least) within animal studies.

The second section of *Posthuman Folklore* explores the role of folklore in a digital (and perhaps post-digital) culture. In Thompson's argument, Western philosophy

is ill-equipped to respond to the arrival of non-human (artificial) intelligences, contending that there are approaches in folklore and transnational perspectives: “given that we have long studied ways that cultures perceive and predict future events, folklorists should not shy away from taking on the new role of futurists, bringing our insights to predict, plan for, and shape the swiftly oncoming future” (118). In this respect, this echoes the fears of figures like Francis Fukuyama (*Our Posthuman Future*) but offers an optimistic counterpoint and locates a place for humanities in a future of science and technology. Thompson echoes as well Marshall McLuhan, stating, “the digital realm is not only a place for communication, but is also, and increasingly, a contributor to the communication that takes place” (146). Thompson positions the humanities as especially well-equipped to respond to the needs of present-day citizens, arguing that the tools developed for comprehending the history of human civilization are just as applicable to new technology as rural folkways.

There is a lot of value in *Posthuman Folklore*, both as an overview of the current state of affairs in animal studies and folklore, as well as a potential roadmap for future research in those fields. Thompson’s approach is often theoretical, more concerned with *possible* directions of future research than fully engaging with specific concepts, but that does also make this a more accessible text. He further makes the case for a more muscular humanities taking a more proactive approach with the broader public. Thompson poses questions for this approach, such as, “will culture’s everyday artistic communication be increasingly free, or increasingly owned?” (108). In this respect, Thompson emphasizes the role of folkloric approaches in discussions of copyright or animal rights, for instance, locating a useful framework for engaging not only with future issues, but also with those faced in the modern digital world. Thompson does not offer specific remedies to the problems of the moment (the humanities in itself is not the solution to the effects of globalization and cultural hegemony), instead positing folklore as a piece of the solution that belongs within the deeper public conversation. Thompson concludes with a keen point about generational shifts: “[Alexa] is putting kids to bed with bedtime stories. Children very often believe she is a real person [...] we are increasingly raising our children as natively cyborg” (151). There is an inevitability to this conversation: technology will continue to evolve just as surely as its users will. Better engagement with folkloric traditions and approaches (particular non-Western traditions) allow for the more flexible thinking required for this historic moment, and Thompson presents an entry point to a conversation that will continue beyond the foreseeable future.