



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Manifesto for the Humanities

Smith, Sidonie Ann

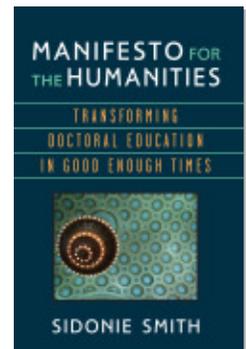
Published by University of Michigan Press

Smith, Sidonie Ann.

Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times.

University of Michigan Press, 2015.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/43633](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/43633).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/43633>

---

Access provided at 18 Oct 2019 12:27 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## The Possibly Posthuman Humanities Scholar

My final observation about the shifting environment in which humanists will go about their everyday lives in the next decades is a brief one, offered in a speculative mode. It has to do with the agent of knowing, the scholar-teacher. What kind of scholarly subjects will humanists be? How might they think of themselves productively as “posthuman” scholar/teachers? In what sense and to what end? It is not the place here to parse the several strands of contemporary theorizing of the posthuman. That can be found elsewhere. But what I can do here is to offer an impressionistic portrait of the possibly posthuman humanities scholar.

For one take on the possibly posthuman humanist let me go to William J. Mitchell and his 2003 *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*. I read Mitchell’s *Me++* as a kind of autobiographical manifesto of “the electronomadic cyborg,” and a riff on Donna Haraway’s cyborg politics.<sup>1</sup> He writes: “I am plugged into other objects and subjects in such a way that I become myself in and through them, even as they become themselves in and through me.”<sup>2</sup> No isolated singularity he; no autonomous individuality of the Enlightenment subject or humanist “Man.” His maxim and motto for the *Me++* is counter-Cartesian: “I link, therefore I am.”<sup>3</sup> Mitchell’s *Me++* subject is at once custom-designed via enhanced embodied capabilities and radically extended via technological devices and digital networks. Or to put it in other words, that subject is a prosthetically extended conjunction of carbon and silicon.<sup>4</sup>

This is the technologized concept of the posthuman, outfitted in a kind of feminist ethic of relationality. I’m not quite going there with what I am trying to convey about the importance of attending to the kind of subjects academic humanists are becoming in this knowledge ecology. Riffing on Mitchell’s subject as a composite of fleshware, hardware, and software strung along the electric currents of networks, I want to propose the new scholar subject as a performative of passionate singularity, hybrid materiality, and networked re-

lationality. This is one sense in which the humanities scholar to be is possibly posthuman, and a posthumanist scholar.

But there is more to consider of this scholar subject presumed to be the locus of thinking. What, exactly, is doing thinking now? As successive generations of computer devices and their algorithmic codes are built, those devices come, as Daniel Atkins observes, to seem “natural.” Some are integrated physically into human bodies. This hybrid materiality involves not only device and human; but device, human, and networked cyberinfrastructure. If Atkins writes on the sanguine side of technologized subjectivity, Siva Vaidhyanathan is less sanguine about the human-device interface that is becoming the embodied self. Writing on the occasion of the death of Steve Jobs, he observed: “We now view computers as prostheses to our bodies, albeit prostheses as dazzling as amulets. . . . We touch devices directly with our oily skin. We manipulate data and images as if there were no lens between them and us. We are embedded in a lattice of devices and digital radio signals. And those devices and signals are embedded in us.”<sup>5</sup> Whether one is sanguine or not in assessing the naturalized, technologically hybrid subject, the implications of this state of being human for the humanist scholar whose coin is reading, interpretation, critique, and storytelling are profound.

The locus of thinking, for the prosthetically extendable scholar joined along the currents of networked relationality, is an ensemble affair. It involves the scholar, the device, the algorithm, the code. It involves the design architecture of platform and tool, the experiential architecture of networks, and the economy of energy. It involves the cloud, the crowd, and the “rooms,” bricks and mortar and virtual, in which scholarly thinking moves forward. David Weinberger’s witty title for his book on the emergent knowledge ecology captures the complexities and perplexities of the scholar’s life that is becoming: *Too Big to Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren’t the Facts, Experts Are Everywhere, and the Smartest Person in the Room is the Room*.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, thinking is a collaborative affair of multiple actors, human and nonhuman, virtual and material, elegantly orderly and unruly. Jane Bennett, in her project to “g[i]ve the force of things more due,” would call this “distributive, composite notion of agency” an “agency of assemblages.”<sup>7</sup> This concept of agency is posthuman in the sense that it dislodges the human subject as the entire site of rationality, autonomy, intentionality, and effectivity and joins the human subject to the “material agency of non- or not-quite things.”<sup>8</sup>

Through this discussion of the possibly posthuman humanist, I am making the point that it’s critical to complicate the understanding of how humanists do the work of the humanities. Yes, the mode of doing humanities scholarship in the academy has commonly been described as that of the isolated scholar producing a long-form argument in the shape of the book; and

faculty needs have commonly been described as individual study, computer screen, archive, and time. In this time, however, possibly posthuman humanities scholars will accumulate new skills, including that of algorithmic literacy, “not only learning how to interpret results but to understand the whole ‘cooking’ process of algorithm development,” as Dean Rehberger observes.<sup>9</sup> They will be at once multimediated self-presenters; self-archivers; bricoleurs of intellectual inquiry, individual and collective; anonymized databases; networked nodes of a knowledge collaboratory involving scholars, students, laypeople, smart objects, robots. Networked scholars will not only be connected to knowledge communities close at hand—in the room, so to speak—but also connected across the globe in an interlinked ecology of scholarly practices and knowledge economies.

The scholarly environment is thus an assemblage of human and nonhuman agents, ever mobile, forming and reforming, expanding in number and complexity and contracting, traveling along one itinerary and then another, purposeful and unpredictable. And the work of the humanities scholar becomes, perhaps, that of Haraway’s “witness”—“an interpretative, engaged, contingent, fallible engagement . . . never a disengaged account.”<sup>10</sup> Or it perhaps becomes that of Rosi Braidotti’s “process ontology”—“a role for the intellectual which consists not in leading the opinions (doxa), legislating the truth (dogma) or administering the protocols of intellectual life, but rather in creating and disseminating new concepts and ideas.”<sup>11</sup> The stakes here remain high, for, as Leela Fernandes cautions, “Knowledge does not simply represent reality, it also makes reality; in other words knowledge literally matters.”<sup>12</sup>

But even as the ethics of scholarly inquiry are rethought along these posthumanist lines, it is necessary to recognize the less salutary aspects of the algorithmic transformation of the humanities scholar. For that is another dimension of the possibly posthumanist scholar/subject. That subject is already captured in the Big Quantification Engine of higher education. This data-ization of the humanities scholar is at once a given and troubling to contemplate, just as current trends in self-quantification are sometimes amusing and oftentimes disquieting. North American institutions have embraced the mantra of assessment and quality outcomes, a mantra extending across all the domains of higher education. Humanists are enjoined to use models of quantitative assessment of scholarly productivity, as colleagues in the sciences and social sciences have long done with their citation indexes.

Google Scholar has already become a kind of vanity mirror of citations for humanists, if, that is, the name is sufficiently unique and one has few googlegängers. But the mirror on the virtual wall is not just for vanity; it is for professional survival and advancement. The “quantified” scholar/subject is

constantly asked to produce data on scholarly impact and to produce running commentary, or metadata, on how that data should be interpreted by colleagues and external evaluators. Just as the quantified self movement awaits the next device for self-monitoring, soon humanists might see a citation device embedded in the wrist of the humanities scholars with its own scrolling readout of real-time citations; a printout of intellectual passions distributed through reading publics. Indeed, technology might be found at fingertips—in the apps for smartphones, such as Evernote, Officedrop, Notebooks, Scrivener, and so on.

And now the scholar/subject is assuming another task: producing oneself as data on annual activities forms. These data-driven forms are the online forms colleges and universities are using to track faculty activities for the purposes of mining data regarding teaching, research, and service. Such data-driven forms are overwriting faculty and departmental understandings of value. They are turning faculty into form-fillers, with often frustrating results with regard to time and energy. And they are extensions of efficiency measures that allocate staff to shared services centers and transform scholar/subjects into accountants of activity. And for this, faculty have to once again critique that accountancy, and pressure administrators to ensure ease of use and flexibility.

Whether humanities faculty think of themselves as posthuman scholars, in utopian or dystopian mode, or as some kind of hybrid witness, avidly going about the work of the humanities in the world, or whether they understand themselves as humanists in a transition of uncertainties, they face daunting questions:

- What will their scholarly and teaching projects look like?
- How will they do their work?
- What energizing infrastructures will they depend on?
- What set of skills will they need to do work?
- How will their work be communicated?
- Who will their audiences be?
- How will it be funded?
- Who will own their work?
- What will its impact be?
- How will it be evaluated?
- How will ecologies and networks of knowledge be organized?
- How will they imagine a career in and/or outside the academy?
- What will their relations be to others in the humanities workforce, inside and outside the academy?
- How will they work for institutional change in this environment?

- How will they advocate for what they do to a larger public?
- How will they meet the needs of students they teach and mentor?
- What will be their ethical obligations—to students, colleagues, and the publics of which they are a part?
- How will they maintain their integrity and values in the midst of an increasingly bureaucratized, efficiency-chasing, corporate-speak sociality, economy, and academy?

To be sure, old habits of doing scholarship and old scholarly subjectivities will certainly persist. But new habits are now mobilized, and new scholarly subjectivities emergent. How those habits and subjectivities will evolve in the midst of future technologies and cultures of sociality can only be dimly glimpsed. That is the distinctive work of the humanities in the world. That is the lens scholars must turn on themselves—doctoral students, faculty, and administrators alike.