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Olga Petrovskaya

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Farewell to humanism? Considerations for nursing philosophy and research in posthuman times

Olga Petrovskaya PhD, RN, Assistant Professor

School of Nursing, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Correspondence
Olga Petrovskaya, PhD, RN, Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada.
Email: olgap@uvic.ca

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that critical posthumanism is a crucial tool in nursing philosophy and scholarship. Posthumanism entails a reconsideration of what 'human' is and a rejection of the whole tradition founding Western life in the 2500 years of our civilization as *narrated in founding texts* and embodied in governments, economic formations and everyday life. Through an overview of historical periods, texts and philosophy movements, I problematize humanism, showing how it centres white, heterosexual, able-bodied Man at the top of a hierarchy of beings, and runs counter to many current aspirations in nursing and other disciplines: decolonization, antiracism, anti-sexism and Indigenous resurgence. In nursing, the term humanism is often used colloquially to mean kind and humane; yet philosophically, humanism denotes a Western philosophical tradition whose tenets underpin much of nursing scholarship. These underpinnings of Western humanism have increasingly become problematic, especially since the 1960s motivating nurse scholars to engage with antihumanist and, recently, posthumanist theory. However, even current *antihumanist* nursing arguments manifest deep embeddedness in humanistic methodologies. I show both the problematic underside of humanism and critical posthumanism's usefulness as a tool to fight injustice and examine the materiality of nursing practice. In doing so, I hope to persuade readers not to be afraid of understanding and employing this critical tool in nursing research and scholarship.

KEYWORDS
antihumanism, Continental philosophy, Foucault, humanism, materiality, posthumanism

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper arises from a keynote presentation I delivered in August 2022 at the 25th nursing philosophy conference organized by the University of California Irvine Centre of Nursing Philosophy and the International Philosophy of Nursing Society (IPONS). In this paper, I discuss humanism, theoretical antihumanism and posthumanism. Specifically, I survey philosophical and theoretical movements and ideas advocating or exemplifying these contrasting perspectives. I use the terms philosophy and theory interchangeably and mostly follow conventions for how specific thinkers or movements are classified in the literature.

My aim is neither a comprehensive overview of these movements, nor an outright rejection of humanism from a position of critical anti and posthumanities. Rather, I sketch the *typical narrative*, a story of Western humanism and how it has been told *within the Western philosophical canon*. As the reader will see, this is a problematic story of white hegemony. Why focus on the way the Western humanistic tradition has been told? Dozens of philosophers

and philosophical movements mentioned in this paper have informed nursing scholarship since the 1970s–1980s. More subterraneously and powerfully, Western humanism has *formed* many of us and our lives on a fundamental level, in good ways and problematic ways. My aim is to help us understand those Western humanistic foundations that the current posthumanist theorists find deeply problematic.

As a starting point, I will review a small sampling of selected nursing posthumanist scholarship. Then I will sketch the key historic and cultural moments and figures of the Western humanistic tradition. One of my goals is to show that the humanist legacy has a much wider reach than perhaps nurse scholars acknowledge. When I turn to a French post-structural theorist well-known in nursing, Michel Foucault, and discuss his antihumanism, my goal will be to tease out lessons for nursing philosophy and research generated from these earlier, post-structural criticisms of humanism.

2 | HUMANISM AND POSTHUMANISM

2.1 | Defining humanism

In the 1980s, Soper (1986) noted that the term humanism was synonymous with atheism, denoting the secular ethics of national Humanist Associations such as the American Humanist Association and Humanists UK (https://americanhumanist.org/; https://humanists.uk). In nursing, especially until the 2010th, the term humanism has been widely used colloquially in place of other adjectives like kind, caring, humane or person-centred. The term humanism is still often used without any sense of the history of this concept. And yet, in Continental philosophy, this concept has an interesting history including a shift from its centuries-long positive connotation to its more recent problematic status. Western humanistic philosophy has been criticized since at least the 19th century. Twentieth-century criticisms, most notably in French structural and post-structural theory in the 1960s–1970s, contrasted humanism not with theism but with theoretical antihumanism.

More recently, humanism has been criticized from a posthumanist perspective. To understand these criticisms, let us review key assumptions of humanism. In the Western humanistic tradition, the human is understood as a free autonomous individual who is the author of (typically) *his* experiences. From the stance of humanism, Man's superior faculty of Reason positions him above all other entities, at the top of the hierarchy of life, and endows him with rights that Man's Other (e.g., women and people of colour) and other-than-humans do not have. The human is a subject in a world of objects with concomitant beliefs in a separation of Culture from Nature, of the social from the material. These assumptions have been evident throughout history.

A note is warranted here about my capitalization of the word *man/Man*. As much as possible, I use the inclusive word, *human*. I capitalize *Man* in two overlapping but non-identical instances: (1) when denoting a generic being at the top of the hierarchy of life, a white, able-bodied, heteronormative, middle-class male standing for 'the human' and in relation to whom others were positioned as inferior; and (2) when denoting the collective Anthropos or humankind (mostly in the sections Humanism in Continental Philosophy and Foucault's Antihumanism). Finally, I occasionally use *man* or *(hu)man* with a small *m* when this more accurately represents historical periods when 'the human' meant—explicitly or implicitly—free males. I am acutely aware that any capitalization of 'man' and of 'Western' and using 'Man/man' as short for all of humankind remains problematic, even when unpacked.

2.2 | Posthumanism in nursing literature

In the 21st century, global challenges are overwhelming: Climate change. Extraction capitalism leading to the extermination of the planet. Ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples. Corporate greed. Profit-driven health systems where people are handled as numbers or as disposable resources. Breathtaking technological advances in healthcare hand in hand with widening and appalling health inequities. Police and State brutality borne disproportionately by people of colour and other marginalized communities.

This list is generated not from dystopian apocalyptic movies or even the news headlines but from publications in *Nursing Philosophy* journal. Nurses' concern about these injustices is often expressed with the concurrent realization that familiar conceptual tools and philosophical perspectives (both nursing and non-nursing) thus far grounding the nursing discipline and the profession is inadequate to comprehend and change these—ours—frightening and unjust realities. Increasingly, in the context of these discussions, nurse authors turn to philosophical and theoretical perspectives contrasting, and severing ties with, traditional humanist beliefs. Preparing for this presentation, I reviewed a small sample of (mostly) *Nursing Philosophy* articles published since 2020 and discussing or citing posthumanism (Adam et al., 2021; Dillard-Wright, 2022; Foth & Leibing, 2021; Kalogirou et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022; Tanioka et al., 2021). This selection by no means represents all posthumanist nursing discourse; however, as the reader will glean from these publications, posthumanism is not a single or unified perspective but rather a constellation of theoretical positions with variations and subtleties specific to the sources cited in nursing articles. It must be noted that here I am focusing on nursing articles exemplifying the so-called *critical* posthumanities. While in the broader literature posthumanisms span from an acritical position on AI-enabled futures and enhancement of human species via biotechnologies (e.g., transhumanism) to a cautionary note about the 'vanishing' human body and its implications for nursing practice at the era of human genome projects and virtual care (Sandelowski, 2002), my focus here is on nursing literature that critically examines and *recalls* (i.e., remembers to argue against, to use Latour's word, 1999) the assumptions of Western humanism.

An important posthumanities scholar cited in nursing literature is Rosi Braidotti (e.g., Braidotti, 2019), a feminist neo-materialist philosopher from Utrecht University. She is widely known for advocating posthumanism as a radical criticism of white, patriarchal, cis-gendered capitalism. Both Braidotti and nurse authors cite the

20th-century French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Two concepts from Deleuze and Guattari that influenced nursing scholarship starting as early as 2002 are *rhizomes* (Drummond, 2002; Holmes & Gastaldo, 2004) and more recently *assemblages*. These words conjure up the image of networks, entanglements, tentacles, and formations without starting points or endpoints. Assemblages and rhizomes are said to offer a potential for reimagining life where humans (however, who are humans in the age of cyborgs?; Petrovskaya, 2023), nonhumans, and more-than-human species can thrive on Earth reimagined away from the corporate extractive economy. In relation to nursing, more specifically, these posthuman potentialities help envision and enact equitable nursing practice (Adam et al., 2021; Dillard-Wright, 2022; Smith et al., 2022) where humans/more-than-humans, be those nurses or patients, of all genders and sexualities, abilities, races, and ethnicities, are afforded livable lives, to use Judith Butler's phrase.

Above, I mentioned cyborgs, cybernetic organisms. This is a famous notion from 'A Cyborg Manifesto' written in 1985 by the American feminist philosopher Donna Haraway (1991) prominently cited in nursing writings on posthumanism. Haraway's (2016) recent work continues to develop the notion of companion species and forming kinships in the ecosystem she calls the Chthulucene. This ecosystem is in contrast to, and a criticism of, the Anthropocene dominated by human action, or what Haraway prefers to call the Capitalocene. Besides Deleuze, Braidotti, and Haraway, the nursing posthumanist literature also cites Bruno Latour and Annemarie Mol—two of the principal scholars within the actor–network theory (ANT) and its offshoot known as 'after ANT'. While Latour and Mol do not use the term posthumanism, one of the key ANT notions is *flat ontology* that puts humans and non-humans on equal footing. Further, Mol's (e.g. Mol, 2002) project of *ontological politics* helps unpack the supposedly single 'reality', a view that accepts multiple inequities and injustices as given in the nature of things.

So far, I have been circling around posthumanism's most obvious meaning captured in the word itself: *post-humanism*. *Post* can be certainly read as coming after, as temporally succeeding humanism. But this is not the most important sense of the term—at least in nurses' or critical theorists' usage. What is most important is a robust, and often radical, criticism of the Western philosophical *humanist* tradition. Perhaps this is not even criticism understood as close engagement with, examination of, or a soft version of interrogation. Rather, posthumanism entails a rejection of the whole tradition founding Western life in the 2500 years of our civilization as *narrated in founding texts* and embodied in governments, economic formations, and everyday life.

Nursing articles discussing the advantages of posthumanism and/or challenges arising from anthropocentrism vary in the degree of their 'radicality'. There is a range, from critiquing humanist American nursing theory for its narrow conception of environment (Kalogirou et al., 2020), to a radical disruption of the concept of human. For example, Foth and Leibing (2021) dispute nurses' most basic assumptions about what it means to be human when they theorize dementia as a queer way of life:

> dementia can be conceptualised as a radical break not only with gendered roles and embodiments, but with many of the norms that make us recognisable subjects. Conceptualising dementia in this way turns it into … an 'emancipatory space' and not merely a pathology. (p. 1)

Foth and Leibing's (2021) view of cognitive impairment as something with emancipatory potential is an example of how unfamiliar, radical, and even frightening (as one conference attendee described her reaction when Foth presented similar ideas at the 2021 IPONS conference) nursing posthumanist discourse can be. I have reviewed a few examples from a growing body of nursing posthumanist scholarship as a starting point. Below, I turn to sketching the key historic and cultural points in the Western humanistic tradition to show a much wider reach of the humanist legacy than is often recognized.

3 | THE WESTERN HUMANISTIC TRADITION FROM CICERO TO KANT

In this part of the paper, I initially follow an accepted historical periodization from Antiquity to the Enlightenment and Romanticism in Europe. Once the figure of Kant is introduced, I discuss the Western tradition focusing on the best-known Continental philosophical movements. For the most part, this presentation intentionally foregrounds the *Western-centric story how it has been told for many decades, in many places, and through many authoritative texts*. This approach helps make visible 'the negative spaces', that is, the many omissions, silences, oppressions, and prohibitions in the Western humanistic tradition. This approach, I believe, can help nurse readers unfamiliar with critical posthumanism to appreciate and situate this relatively new and radical field of nursing scholarship. Over the last decade or so, strong counter-stories to the Western-centric humanist narrative have been growing in nursing with the goal of decolonization, antiracism, anti-sexism, and Indigenous resurgence.

I recognize that peoples who have been positioned on the margins, inhabit those silenced locations, do not need to be reminded about these injustices (see also Smith et al., 2022, p. 9)—the precarity of their lives attests to humanism's oppression and 'negative spaces'. And yet, how can the calls for radical transformation be responded to in the larger nursing community, if the problematic assumptions of Western humanism persist unbeknownst to many? In other words, humanism, based on a predominant model of the white male, has erased the lives of women and people of colour, and posthumanism—seen in this light—is actually a positive tool for people who have been marginalized because it dismantles this marginalization. People might be scared of the idea of posthumanism because they only know about the positive side of humanism and do not realize that humanism holds many problematic assumptions. However, if one was never admitted into the category of 'human', can posthumanism

still be of use? Smith et al. (2022) ask this question and respond with an affirmation.

And what do we do about this philosophical humanism—throw away the canon of 'dead white men' as some conference attendees suggested or stay in critical tension with it as other conference attendees suggested? Can centring the margins and writing alternative histories (e.g., drawing on the work of scholars historically excluded from the canon) proceed in partial connection (to use Marilyn Strathern's phrase) to the canon or is a full break with 'the old world' required? This paper, which uses the tools of philosophical analysis (and not all agree with the use of the 'master's tools' to dismantle the 'master's discourse'—so there is another tension here), is the attempt to surface less recognized and much entrenched humanistic ideas. This, then, can help interested nurses make sense of the much-feared prefix 'post' threatening the comfort of 'humanism'.

3.1 | The Roman Republic: Cicero (106–43 BCE)

The concept of humanism, or a view of life that has the individual as its central focus, is attributed to Cicero, a statesman and orator of the late Roman Republic and one of the earliest humanists (Gaarder, 2007). He was convinced that philosophy can make society better. His main works in political philosophy discuss the preferred state (i.e., the traditional structures of the Roman Republic) and laws that will best maintain such a state. In Cicero's work, the influence of Stoics is manifest in the idea that 'humans share with gods dominion not just of the place in which they happen to live, but of the Earth and indeed the whole universe' (Woolf, 2022, 5.2, para 1).

What Cicero means is that human nature determines that humans are 'born for justice':

> We all belong to the same species, and to that extent are all alike…, in particular in our possession of reason, which distinguishes us from other creatures…. This explains the sense of mutual fellowship and union between human beings … and means that we are formed by nature to share justice and impart it to all (Cicero, cited in Woolf, 2022, 5.3, para 4)

Cicero's view of human beings as citizens of the world, who possess reason and whose common nature is to 'share justice', illustrates Cicero's philosophical humanism. This version of humanism and citizenship excluded women and slaves. Slaves were considered property and had no legal personhood. Citizenship was only possible for free men, not women (Chatelard & Stevens, 2016.)

3.2 | The Middle Ages (400 CE to circa mid-15th century)

By 313, during the rule of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity was an accepted religion in the Roman Empire, and from the year 380, it was the official religion throughout the entire Roman Empire (Gaarder, 2007). In the fourth century, the Roman Empire crumbled, and in 395, it was divided into the Western and Eastern Empires. The Western Empire had Rome as its centre and existed for a mere 80 years. The Eastern Empire, or Byzantium, had Constantinople as its capital (currently Istanbul) and existed up to the mid-15th century when it was conquered by the Turks.

The 1000-year-long period known as Middle Ages was characterized by Christian theism rather than humanism. In 529, 'the Christian church put the lid on Greek philosophy' (Gaarder, 2007, p. 168), and all philosophy was effectively limited to theology. God rather than the human was at the centre of reflection. Every aspect of man's nature and life was seen through divine light. During the Renaissance, the Middle Ages were referred to as the Dark Ages to convey the inflexibility and gloom of Europe at the time (Gaarder, 2007). However, during the Middle Ages, the school system, the first universities, and nation-states were established.

3.3 | The Renaissance (mid-14th to mid-17th centuries)

Although in the early Middle Ages, Greco-Roman culture was divided, it survived through three cultures—Roman Catholic in the west, Byzantine in the east, and Arabic in the south—which all influenced the rebirth of antique culture at the end of the Middle Ages.

The Renaissance, the rebirth of the art and culture of antiquity, started in the late 14th century in Northern Italy. Once again, cultural developments revolved around man, the turn known as Renaissance humanism (Gaarder, 2007). In the 15th and 16th centuries, philosophy and science split off from the theology of the Church. The Renaissance was a time of unrivalled development of art, architecture, literature, music, philosophy, and science. One manifestation was an interest in human anatomy. An iconic drawing from this period is Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (da Vinci, 1490)—the study of the proportions of the (hu)man body. Thus, the 'human' was epitomized in a male figure, visibly fair-skinned and able-bodied.

The Renaissance was also characterized by a new form of religiosity, the development known as the Reformation. The individual's personal relationship with God was now more important than his relationship with the church as an organization. The Bible was translated from Hebrew and Greek into national languages (Gaarder, 2007).

Renaissance humanism viewed mankind in a new way. In contrast to the medieval period, when God was seen as the apex and humankind was seen as sinful, the Renaissance infused new beliefs about man's worth. 'Man was now considered great and valuable' (Gaarder, 2007, p. 196). Even paintings of religious scenes, like Michelangelo's Creation of Adam from a fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican (Michelangelo, 1512), prominently featured a man, often nude, with the focus on anatomical details.

Italian Renaissance humanist scholars delighted in learning Greek. They discovered the work of Aristotle and other ancient

Greeks through Arabic translations from Africa and Spain (Mann, 1996). For example, a famous fresco, The School of Athens in the Stanza della Segnatura, Apostolic Palace, in the Vatican by the Italian painter Rafael (Sanzio, 1510–11) illustrates the rebirth of interest in ancient Greek philosophy, science, and art. Renaissance humanism was characterized by individualism, a belief that humans are unique individuals. Mankind (and these indeed were mostly men), feeling reawakened, was free to develop in all spheres of life, without limitations. This approach to life was different from the humanists of antiquity, who 'emphasized the importance of tranquillity, moderation, and restraint' (Gaarder, 2007, p. 197).

The invention of the printing press around 1436 (or rather Gutenberg's adaptation of the older techniques and a groundbreaking use of a screw-type press; Roos, 2023, March 27) facilitated the spread of humanist ideas and further undermined the Church's authority as the sole disseminator of knowledge (Gaarder, 2007). Importantly, already in the 15th century, the study of humanistic subjects was identified as serving a pedagogical goal (Monfasani, 2020): One becomes human by reading humanistic texts (Gaarder, 2007; Sherratt, 2005). This study of texts of antiquity, it was claimed, separates the human from the beast and a civilized human from a barbarian. The importance of classical education, of reading the Western philosophical canon starting from ancient Greeks, has been believed (up to very recently and arguably still important according to some commentators) to develop human qualities, *humanitas* (Sloterdijk, 2009). Classical literature, humanists claimed, provides intellectual discipline, moral values, and a civilized taste (Kristeller, 2008).

A new scientific method with systematic experiments was gaining popularity. It was believed that (hu)mankind has started to break away from his natural condition and to intervene in and control nature (Gaarder, 2007). New inventions—the compass and firearms—enabled navigation, European expeditions, and discovery of new lands including the brutal conquest of America (Gaarder, 2007). As we are now acutely aware, Europe's establishment of colonies in other countries launched the era of colonialism and imperialism.

3.4 | French rationalism of Descartes (1596–1650)

Rene Descartes was a mathematician, natural philosopher (i.e., scientist), and metaphysician (Hatfield, 2018). He is also classified as a French rationalist whose systematic philosophy influenced the subsequent history of ideas. The conception of man as a thinking subject is encapsulated in Descartes' famous expression, *Cogito, ergo sum; I think, therefore I am*. He formulated a dualistic view of the human being as consisting of two separate and radically divided although interacting substances: the material mechanistic body and the immaterial soul or mind (Gaarder, 2007). For Descartes, the thinking mind, cogito, takes precedence over the material body (Mol, 2022). Similarly, the subject is radically different from the object. These dichotomies implicitly or explicitly inform our understanding of a human being to this day. However, for critical posthumanists and others, Descartes' conception of the human is highly problematic. The pairings of mind/body, spirit/matter and subject/object are not neutral but rather represent sites of power and injustice. One pervasive example is the outsourcing of low-wage physical labour (especially care of the ailing bodies in long-term care facilities) to (immigrant) women of colour in Western countries.

Descartes' work (e.g., his view of the mind–body relation), while being hugely influential in philosophy, has been criticized. What has been taken as Descartes' view of the human being as a rational subject standing over and above the world has been rejected in much of subsequent philosophy and in nursing literature (in particular nursing phenomenology). Whether this criticism of the 'over-rational' Cartesian subject represents a misinterpretation of Descartes (e.g., Hatfield, 2018), this criticism has a prominent place in the 19th to 20th century Continental philosophy.

3.5 | The Enlightenment (18th century)

The core of the Enlightenment period was 'the aspiration for intellectual progress and the belief in the power of such progress to improve human society and individual lives' (Bristow, 2017, para 2). The 18th-century French philosophers (e.g., de Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot) were inspired by a more liberal political system in England and its progress in empirical philosophy and science (especially Newton's physics). One manifestation of the French Enlightenment was discontent with the authority of the clergy and the king (Bristow, 2017). This discontent later gave rise to the French Revolution of 1789 that had a motto *Liberte, egalite, fraternite* and led to the formulation of the Declaration of Human Rights (Gaarder, 2007). As too often happened in the history of humanity, what was meant by 'human' had only man as a point of reference. When French woman activist and playwright Olympe de Gouges wrote a declaration on the rights of women, she was beheaded (Gaarder, 2007).

The Enlightenment is called the Age of Reason because of the great hopes and optimism attached to man's rationality and his proclaimed ability to acquire knowledge of the world and to use this knowledge for the advancement of mankind. Enlightenment philosophers sought to establish rational foundations for ethics, morality, and religion (Gaarder, 2007). The science of pedagogy was founded during the Enlightenment. Education of people was considered important to lift humankind from poverty and oppression by fighting ignorance and superstition. It was optimistically believed that once reason and knowledge were widespread, humanity would make great progress (Gaarder, 2007).

The 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is known for his systematic works in epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics. In his essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' Kant defines enlightenment as humankind's liberation from its immaturity, that is, from 'the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another' (Kant, 1784, as cited in Bristow, 2017). Every person has to think for

oneself, to rely on one's intellect when deciding what to believe and how to act. Humanity is able to build systematic knowledge of nature. On the other hand, Enlightenment rejects other forms of authority (e.g., tradition, superstition, prejudice or myth) and is in tension with religion. Enlightenment's belief is that the process of 'becoming progressively self-directed in thought and action through the awakening of one's intellectual powers [as opposed to obedience to God] leads ultimately to a better, more fulfilled human existence' (Bristow, 2017, para 4).

Several of the threads outlined above—the emphasis on reading the Greeks and classics as well as education as an emancipatory tool—reach into our contemporary era. Many of us brought up in the latter half of the 20th century are heirs to these ideas. Yet, as wonderful as these ideas seem, most of us are oblivious to 'humanistic' education's entanglement with the problematic concept of human exceptionalism and instrumentalism that posthumanists reject. At the same time, education is a powerful tool, and there will continue to be tension between calls to throw out traditional canons (including Greek and classical literature and Western philosophy) and calls to critically engage with those canons.

3.6 | Romanticism (end of 18th to mid-19th centuries)

Romanticism is a European cultural epoch comprising poetry, philosophy, art, science and music (Gaarder, 2007). It started in Germany as a reaction to the Enlightenment's rigid emphasis on reason and a mechanistic view of universe. In contrast, Romantics praised the individual's feelings, imagination, and experience, which sometimes amounted to 'unrestrained "ego-worship"' (Gaarder, 2007, p. 342). Typically, Romantics were young urban men, often university students with a relaxed approach to their studies who expressed anti-middle-class sentiment. The works of art produced during Romanticism, for example, Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by Friedrich (1818), convey the yearning for something distant, for 'Night, … Twilight, … old ruins and the supernatural' (Gaarder, 2007, p. 343).

Romantics posited the values of human autonomy, *Buildung* (or self-formation), and free expression of unique personalities (Gorodeisky, 2016). The work of art and aesthetic judgement were seen as paradigmatic expressions of autonomy and, as such, as splendid models for the cultivation of individual human autonomy. Romantics believed that art and beauty, and our engagement with them, should shape human life (Gorodeisky, 2016).

Let me revisit the discussion thus far. I started tracing Western humanism from ancient Rome. A shift occurred during the Middle Ages, which were characterized by theism rather than humanism. Next, the 15th and 16th centuries saw a rebirth of the culture of antiquity. Renaissance humanism boldly praised (hu)man as an individual with unlimited possibilities. The sciences and philosophy developed rapidly during that time, with notable examples of French rationalism (Descartes) and British empiricism (not discussed). During this period, (hu)mankind asserted its independence from, and control over, nature. The 18th century was the optimistic time of the Enlightenment. However, its sole emphasis on reason was challenged by the Romantics, who instead praised the individual's feelings and experiences. My story has reached the 19th century. Kant died at the dawn on the 19th century. His contemporary, another famous German philosopher critical of the Romantic movement, Hegel, lived until 1831.

Woven into the grand story of Western humanism are problematic assumptions about the 'human' implicated in colonization, devastation of the planet, the oppression of women, people of colour, and other groups contrasted—whether explicitly or implicitly—with the normative image of Man. Critical posthumanism is a fight against these injustices.

4 | KEY DIRECTIONS IN CONTINENTAL THOUGHT

Kant's work marks the beginning of the Continental philosophical movement (Critchley, 2001). Publication of Kant's critical philosophy in the 1780s set in motion debates on the relationship between the subject and object (or the human being and the world), the extent of human autonomy, the role of the human in history, and the nature of history. These debates continue today.

Below is a snapshot of the key schools and figures of Continental philosophy represented in many textbooks read across academic disciplines in the last decades of the 20th century and into the 2000s.

- German dialectical idealism (Hegel 1770–1831)
- Dialectical materialism (Marx 1818–1883)
- German phenomenology (Husserl 1859–1938, Heidegger 1889–1976)
- French phenomenology (Sartre 1905–1980, Simone de Beauvoir 1908–1986, Levinas 1906–1995, Merleau-Ponty 1908–1961)
- Hermeneutics (Gadamer 1900–2002, Ricoeur 1913–2005)
- The Frankfurt School (Horkheimer 1895–1973, Adorno 1903–1969, Habermas 1929–)

Not all of the work produced by these philosophers is considered humanistic in the sense described in the following section—as placing human subjectivity and essentialized human characteristics at the centre. For example, Marx's late work, Heidegger's oeuvre, as well as Nietzsche and Bergson (not listed above) are not considered humanist philosophers. However, a critical glance at this dominant philosophical canon of (overwhelmingly) 'dead white men' provided urgency to feminist, posthumanist, and others' insistence on the decentring of this very canon of men claiming to speak on behalf of the 'human' for much of Western history.

From the 1960s, much of Continental philosophy (e.g., French structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, postcolonial scholarship, and post-structural, new-material, and Black feminisms) notably departed from, and critiqued, the assumptions of Western humanism.

5 | HUMANISM IN CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

In this section, I rely on an excellent book to discuss humanism in Continental philosophy: *Humanism and Antihumanism* by a contemporary British scholar and activist, Kate Soper (1986). It might be important to acknowledge Soper's leanings: She is sympathetic to Marxism and Sartre's and Simon de Beauvoir's existentialism. In contrast, Soper is highly critical of post-structuralism. While Soper and I do not see eye to eye on post-structural theory, her analysis is very interesting and helps us understand Western humanism. Humanist thought is commonly described as anthropocentric: It places 'Man' at the centre. But, according to Soper (1986), there are different ways of doing so.

One form of anthropocentrism views Man as standing outside the objective reality given to him in consciousness. A problem with this conception of the human–world relation is its instrumentalism: Man dominates Nature by acquiring objective knowledge about it and making it serve human ends (Soper, 1986).

The second form of anthropocentrism, idealist humanism, assumes that the world exists only because it is reflected upon in thought, that is, conceptualized by Man. Speaking about Man, various thinkers (e.g., Kant and Hegel) attributed the world's existence either to the thought of particular individuals or to a collective 'transcendent' mind. Besides, Kant and Hegel exemplify humanistic philosophy because their concern is with the 'truth' or 'end' of Man: It is human purpose and self-realization that is fulfilled in the realization of the Absolute Idea (Soper, 1986).

A third form of anthropocentrism, dialectical humanism (e.g., notably Hegel, and also Marx, Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre), views the human–world relationship as totality: 'The world is what it is as a result of its being lived in and transformed by humanity, while humanity in turn acquires its character through its existence and situation in the world' (Soper, 1986, p. 25). While the world exists independently, humans play an active role in its making. The creativity of human subjects is seen through production and labour (i.e., early Marx) or through the meaning (and thus Being, e.g., in Heidegger) that 'human beings bring to their world and reveal it to contain' (Soper, 1986, p. 25). This totality of subject–object is a historical product, and knowledge of it can only be historical and relative. Although dialectical thought does not presuppose an essentialized, ahistoric, transcendental humanity, Soper (1986) argues that it is still concerned with the 'truly human' (e.g., responsibility that derives from total human freedom in Sartre).

Further, according to Soper (1986), humanism presupposes a core humanity or common essential features in humans. For different thinkers, these features include consciousness, agency, choice, responsibility, or human value. Perversion of the human core (e.g., alienation, reification and inauthenticity) is a negative and dangerous process. Another key idea of humanism is that history is a product of human thought and action and can only be understood in terms of the categories of essential human features (as opposed to being the result of God's will, nonhuman forces, or pure chance).

Other characteristics of humanism became apparent throughout my discussion: Throughout much of history, the category of human was reserved for men. All humanistic thought is based on the human/nature, subject/object dichotomies whereby the human is radically different from the nonhuman and superior to it. Soper (1986) comments on the imperialism of much classical humanism which sees Man's other and nature as aliens in need of civilization.

6 | CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM: RE-ENVISIONING THE HUMAN

Critical posthumanism takes issue with the humanist ideal of 'Man' and re-envisions the human. I refer the reader to a forthcoming (2023 or 202) special issue of *Nursing Inquiry* that elaborates on this topic. Very briefly, critical posthumanism denounces anthropocentrism as the species hierarchy that culminates in human exceptionalism. However, human responsibility for addressing damages arising from human activity is upheld.

Two central thinkers in the field of critical posthumanism, Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, offer complex descriptions of the posthuman. Braidotti (e.g., Yale University, 2017, March 2) describes the posthuman as our historical condition; as a materially embedded, multi-layered, nomadic entity; as relating to human and nonhuman agents; and a technological mediation. Haraway (2016) conceives of the (post)human as one of companion species. From Latin, companion, *com panis*, means together with, sharing bread. A (post)human then is becoming-with other-than-humans and more-than-humans (Haraway, 2016). Notably, posthumanism draws attention to the materiality of existence and practices. The human is not in the world but of the world (Haraway, 2016). Experiences of 'being human' are not universal, and attention to specific materialities is necessary (Bignall & Braidotti, 2019).

7 | THEORETICAL ANTIHUMANISM OF FOUCAULT: LESSONS FOR NURSING POSTHUMANIST SCHOLARSHIP

In this section, I shift gears and turn to the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault. Although some scholars (e.g., Sherratt, 2005) consider Genealogy, the method of historiography used by Nietzsche and Foucault, as continuing the Western humanistic tradition based on these authors' ongoing engagement with the Ancient Greeks, others squarely position Foucault's work as *theoretical antihumanism*. By revisiting Foucault's antihumanism and nursing scholarship that claimed to 'decentre the Man' (not dissimilar to critical posthumanism's agenda), I draw attention to the unacknowledged pitfalls in these attempts. I argue that nursing scholarship's deep embeddedness in humanistic methodologies manifests in ways that are not readily overcome even in the current posthumanist nursing arguments.

Foucault's theoretical antihumanism is demonstrated through his conceptions of history, knowledge, and subjectivity. Following Nietzsche, Foucault believed that history unfolds without human agency (Downing, 2008). The individual does not possess discourse or make discursive meaning. Rather, discursive formations create subject positions that must be occupied by speaking individuals. Foucault's view of the subject and subjectivity is that one only becomes a subject (i.e., subjectivation) by virtue of subjection: a double-edged sword. There is no true 'Self' we can appeal to, only individuals occupying subject positions (Downing, 2008).

Further, he disagreed with the Enlightenment philosophers that knowledge is progressive. The knowledge/power nexus is an important concept within Foucault's work. When he talks about knowledge, he refers not to the structures of human consciousness or to reason, but to what he calls regimes of truth (or what each society makes function as true), to the conditions of possibility that govern what is possible to say and think in each moment in history (Downing, 2008). Similarly, operations of power are detached from human intent; power is not possessed by individuals. Foucault is interested not in human intentions or decision-making but in the effects of their actions. To paraphrase his famous expression, People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they do not know is what their doing does.

Is it easy to grasp the theoretical and methodological precepts of Foucault's antihumanism and currently, of posthumanism? Are nurses ready to decentre humanism? To address these questions, I wish to refer to a case study of nursing Foucauldian scholarship in the first two decades of its existence, from the late1980s to approximately 2010 (Petrovskaya, 2022). In my book, *Nursing Theory, Post-modernism, Post-Structuralism, and Foucault*, I observe the tendency in nursing research to interpret Foucault in a humanistic vein, presupposing the essentialized human subject as the author of its experiences and discourse. Typically, a related feature of this human-centredness is the inattention to the materiality of practices, specifically to the empirical particularities of nurses' materially embedded (embodied, technology- and artefact-rich) work. Yet, as we have seen above, materiality is one of the important tenets of critical posthumanism. (In my book, I provide examples of Foucauldian nursing scholarship that in my view offer interesting socio-material analyses of nursing practice.)

How can we cultivate nurse philosophers' and researchers' ability to attend to *the socio-materiality of healthcare practice (the situated activity in its empirical richness)* as constitutive of nurses' and patients' subjectivities and as specific sites of power where the version of 'the human' admissible in those spaces is being formed and contested? One of my personal strategies to understand the non-humanist methodological approaches (e.g., ANT-informed) is to study published research that has been successful in shifting attention from human subjectivity toward connections among human and nonhuman elements within practices. Although Braidotti (2019, p. 42) is critical of ANT's dismissal of the need to theorize subjectivity, which, she says, undermines political projects, this scholarship is not apolitical despite the absence of explicit political slogans. This research, in synergy with critical posthumanism, surfaces and critiques inequalities and helps create the worlds-in-becoming. Below is the beginning list of social science texts offering robust theoretical analyses of empirical material:

- Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Mol, 2002) and *Eating in Theory* (Mol, 2022)
- Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Tsing, 2015)
- Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Ahmed, 2019)
- Tess Lea, *Wild Policy: Indigeneity and the Unruly Logics of Intervention* (Lea, 2020)

I turn to you, the reader, to continue building this list, enhancing it with diverse authors not yet represented. It is my hope that our lists can be shared at the nursing philosophy conferences and that these books will help the nursing audiences make posthumanism and related perspectives that do not essentialize 'the human' less threatening.

8 | CONCLUSION

This paper opens up a contested and not well-understood field of critical posthumanism's rejection of Western humanist tradition. In this tradition, Man's superior faculty of Reason is said to position him above other entities and endow him with special rights. This anthropocentrism and a universalist conception of Man have been exposed for their colonial, racist, sexist, and other oppressive tendencies and for environmental degradation. On the other hand, posthumanism posits an unfamiliar (and perhaps frightening) version of the human and invites novel methodologies to study the assemblages. It decentres human subjectivity and turns to material practices comprised of human and nonhuman elements to examine their effects including production of subjectivities.

This paper invites reflections: In what way do you feel we are living in posthuman times? How does posthumanism manifest in nursing practice? How can we notice and analyse it? What theoretical tools will help nurse researchers? How are we going to engage with Indigenous and ecological perspectives not predicated on humanism when nursing is commonly positioned as a humanistic endeavour in the sense described throughout the paper? (cf Petrovskaya, 2022, pp. 131–132).

In this paper, I have shown that nursing benefits from a philosophical posthumanist scholarship focused on political agendas, for example, Dillard-Wright (2022) and Smith et al. (2022). As has been correctly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript, much of alternative philosophy generated by women and people of colour had little chance of entering the volumes of Western philosophy. Nurse scholars may do well to engage with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, an 18th-century British advocate for women's rights; Olympe de Gouges, an 18th-century French political activist; Zera Yacob, a 17th-century Ethiopian philosopher; and Anton Amo,

an 18th-century African philosopher. Additionally, Baruch Spinoza, one of the seminal thinkers of Dutch Enlightenment rarely cited in nursing, might generate interest nowadays considering the centrality of his work for Braidotti's and others' writings on critical posthumanism.

We can also envision posthumanism's potential for empirically analysing nursing practice as material assemblages of humans and non-humans. We can view the effects of nursing practice through the lens of posthumanism, seeing practice as not predetermined, but as sites where various versions of the human are formed and contested, as worlds in the making.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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