Book review

Knox, J. 2016. *Posthumanism and the Massive Open Online Course: Contaminating the Subject of Global Education.* New York: Routledge.

Jeremy Knox's book analyses the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) through the lens of critical posthumanism. Faithful to the posthumanist cartographic methodology expounded on most notably by Rosi Braidotti, Knox acknowledges that this is not an authoritative account of the development of the MOOC, but rather traces some of the dominant accounts and myths of its development. He also does not aim to give a detailed overview of what the MOOC is, but rather focuses on those aspects that relate to the subjectivity of the MOOC user. As an analytical tool or 'genealogical and a navigational tool' as Braidotti (2013: 5) puts it, posthumanism does not steer away from complexity, rather, it is a philosophy that eschews the bite-sized or absolute descriptions of phenomena that are so prevalent in the media today. The task of the critical theorist, according to Braidotti (2013) is to firstly account for the present. Once this is achieved, the critique can then be transformed into affirmative creation. Knox's book provides a substantial critique of the MOOC, and he does provide food for thought towards affirmative transformation.

In Chapter one, there is an explanation of the central concepts of humanism and critical posthumanism, and how they relate to education. Writing in a posthumanist style risks obliqueness (think of the rhizomatic plateau-style of Deleuze and Guattari that some authors attempt to emulate). However, this chapter provides a lucid link between humanism and massive open online education, which is the thread that runs through this book. Knox suggests critical posthumanism and new materialist thought as a way to transverse the humanism/anti-humanism binary and other dualisms within education. He also makes the connection between humanist education's emphasis on the cognitive and how this constrains knowledge as representation. As an alternative to the representational mode, immanent thought is suggested as a way to rethink human knowledge. In this way, thought and knowledge are seen as part of the matter of the world, not transcendent of it.

Chapter two contains an analysis of some of the corporate tactics that MOOC companies and partnering educational institutions employ to promote the apparent global appeal and reach of the MOOC. There is an inherent contradiction in the corporatist promotion of the MOOC. It attempts to provide universal access to education, yet actually serves to reinforce colonial logic and European hegemony. The colonialist imperatives of promotion of elite, western institutions and the acquisition of data are demonstrated within the promotion of the MOOCS and the methods of data collection. Of particular interest are the maps that are used to illustrate the reach of MOOCs. The expansionist imperative is clearly evident in such representations of data that are acquired through what Knox calls 'data

colonialism'. The humanist notion of a single, rational, self-regulatory individual is assumed within the assessment strategy of the MOOC, and is critiqued.

In Chapter three, Knox undertakes an analysis of MOOC participation and shows some interesting contradictions within the so-called 'connectivist-informed' MOOCs. The analysis does not employ so-called 'diffractive methods' which have come to be associated with posthumanist research made popular by theorists such as Karen Barad (2007). Rather, he approaches the analysis more in the vein of traditional qualitative research, drawing out themes. These themes are useful in bringing to the surface some of the complexities and contradictions inherent in humanist logic, but a post-qualitative or diffractive approach in this chapter could have done justice to a posthumanist flattened ontology which takes the thematic analysis a step further.

Chapter four draws on spatial and mobilities theory to show how space and spatiality is handled, assumed and created within the MOOC framework. In a change of scale (it is perhaps apt to employ a spatial metaphor here), Knox examines the particulars of a single course entitled 'Modern and Contemporary American Poetry' (ModPo), one of the first MOOCs in the Humanities offered by the University of Pennsylvania. The data that is analysed is a video tour of a building within the university, and an online forum thread associated with the video tour. The analysis is detailed and brings out the complexities of space (real and virtual) that emerge within an online learning environment. The focus on the materiality contained within the phenomenon under investigation, and on movement within and across various spaces makes it very useful.

Chapter five extends on the spatial analysis, this time analysing a MOOC from the University of Edinburgh called 'E-learning and Digital Cultures' (EDCMOOC). Notions of hybridity and contamination contained within the EDCMOOC are used to obtain a better understanding of an online course within a globalising world. Knox achieves a subtle, nuanced and close analysis of the phenomenon of the MOOC. Indeed, he makes explicit his critique of the hybrid spaces of the MOOC, which is just as much about inequality and imbalance as it is about emancipation and social justice. An interesting part of this chapter is an analysis of selected participant images that were produced as responses to their participation in the EDCMOOC. It is a moment of affirmation within the critique of the anthropocentric nature of the MOOC. Knox's analytical approach are reminiscent of post-qualitative methodologies (see for example Jackson and Mazzei, 2012; St. Pierre and Jackson, 2014), looking beyond themes, identifying movement, material flows, speeds and intensities. These methodologies are, however, not explicitly referred to.

Recently, there has been a convergence between methodologies from post-qualitative research, non-representational theory (see Vannini, 2015) and new materialism (see Barad, 2010; van der Tuin, 2014). In future, a project such as this book could benefit methodologically from a more robust engagement with these areas. However, this book is useful to those wishing to obtain an accessible entry-point into critical posthumanism and its application to an aspect of contemporary society. It shows how, despite its claims to global, open and equal access to education, the MOOC tends to promote the Eurocentric humanist subject.

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