

From Human to Posthuman: A Study of Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* and *The Drowned Cities*.

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ABSTRACT

The infusion of technology into the daily lives of regular individuals bears resemblance to a cultural transformation. It has reshaped our perspectives on the world and human existence. The concept of self and identity has become a realm of exploration. Posthumanism is a philosophical and cultural movement that challenges traditional humanist perspectives by examining the evolving relationship between humans and technology. It explores the impact of technological advancements on our understanding of identity, consciousness, and ethical considerations. Emphasizing the blurring of boundaries between the natural and the artificial, posthumanism envisions a future where humans may enhance their capabilities through technology, giving rise to questions about the nature of embodiment and the ethical implications of such enhancements. This multidisciplinary field engages in speculative thinking, deconstructing anthropocentrism and encouraging a reevaluation of humanity's place in a technologically evolving world. Technological advancements have created a shift in the cultural paradigm from the human to the posthuman. The primary objective of this research article is to comprehensively analyze the significant contributions of Bacigalupi to posthumanist discourse, with a focus on his science fiction works, specifically *Ship Breaker* and *The Drowned Cities*. Bacigalupi's narratives serve as a lens through which dystopian futures are examined, intricately shaped by environmental crises, biotechnology, and corporate power. His works vividly illustrate the potential consequences of humanity's relationship with its environment. Notably, his exploration of the intersection between ecology and posthumanism becomes a central theme, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between humans and the environment in discussions about the future.

Keywords: Posthumanism, self, technology, transformation, ethical dimensions.

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Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.

-Haraway

The concept of humanness challenges the notion that it can never be defined by fixed criteria such as normalcy, authenticity, and legitimacy. It is a complex and multifaceted concept that cannot be reduced to a set of predetermined standards. The diversity in race, gender, and ethnicity within the world complicates the process of defining humanness, particularly when certain societal sections attempt to categorize and define it based on their own norms and ideals.

The infusion of technology into the daily lives of regular individuals bears resemblance to a cultural transformation. It has reshaped our perspectives on the world and human existence. The concept of self and identity has become a realm of exploration. In this cybernetic society, the self is no longer a singular and fundamental idea. Defining the self and identity becomes challenging due to the continuous effort to surpass the limitations of the physical body and immerse oneself in the alternative reality crafted by cyberspace.

The primary objective of this research article is to comprehensively analyze the significant contributions of Bacigalupi to posthumanist discourse, with a focus on his science fiction works, specifically *Ship Breaker* and *The Drowned Cities*. Bacigalupi's narratives serve as a lens through which dystopian futures are examined, intricately shaped by environmental crises, biotechnology, and corporate power. By delving into the repercussions of unchecked technological advancements, his works vividly illustrate the potential consequences of humanity's relationship with its environment. Notably, his exploration of the intersection between ecology and posthumanism becomes a central theme, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between humans and the environment in discussions about the future. In this view, Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, says that "technology has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject" (xiii).

The seemingly boundless capabilities of machines allure humans towards the mechanization of the body. The ascendancy of humans as the dominant species, allowing the unapologetic exploitation of nature, did not solely stem from sheer physical prowess. Instead, the complexity of the human brain and the capacity to manipulate the environment rendered them formidable. In the contemporary era, the argument that humans are 'deskilling' themselves gains validity considering the swift technological innovations and the excessive reliance on them. However, this progression is distinctly 'human' in every aspect because human evolution into dominance was historically intertwined with the tools and machines that aided them. This highlights the inadequacy of the traditional definition of 'human' and humanness, as it failed to encapsulate the reality of human existence. The humanist shift away from the God-centric worldview led to an overestimation of what it means to be human. The rejection of the God-centric perspective resulted in the creation of a 'man-centered' worldview, wherein humans sought to establish themselves as the image of God.

Bacigalupi is one of the most outspoken voices on issues of environmentalism and post humanism. His novels serve as a stark cautionary message addressing concerns like genetic

engineering, gene patenting, invasive species, and the harmful human interference in the processes defining our present geological era, the anthropocene. Both his novels *Ship Breaker* and *The Drowned Cities* offer valuable insights into post humanism, featuring plots that revolve around characters adeptly navigating cybernetic societies. In these narratives, individuals adeptly navigate corrupt systems, seeking political and economic advantage, and resorting to any means necessary to manipulate their world further.

The protagonists' of Bacigalupi reveals that unfolds within a dystopian society shaped by explicit self-preservation and ruthless capitalism. The previously mentioned crises contribute to the societal framework characterized by intense individualism, compelling adolescents to grapple with their morals and values at an early stage, thus bringing these issues to the forefront in the novels. Influenced by societal expectations and a profound genetic determinism, both Nailer in *Ship Breaker* and Mahlia in *The Drowned Cities* strive to transcend being merely products of their genes or upbringing. They face decisions about their actions towards others, whom to trust, whom to assist, and whether to uphold or break promises and alliances. At the core of these choices lie concerns of identity, community, and otherness that Bacigalupi places within contemporary discussions of posthumanism. He introduces 'Tool' as a central character in these novels. It is a posthuman being, embodying the traits of a mercenary and warrior, created through a genetic fusion of humans, tigers, and dogs.

Tool, assumes the role of the ultimate Other, simultaneously serving as a crucial counterpart for both Nailer and Mahlia to challenge their values. Through his composition as a posthuman creature, a "genetic blend of humanity, tigers, and dogs" (22). Tool provides an alternative perspective on the world. Positioned at the periphery of society, Tool becomes a reflective lens for inquiries into human identity. Despised and distrusted by conventional human society due to his distinctiveness, Tool observes and assesses from his unique vantage point outside the societal norms.

At the outset of the narrative, both the protagonists' Nailer and Mahlia grapple with predefined notions of identity imposed by their surroundings, primarily rooted in their genetic lineage. In the initial stages of the story, Nailer is a member of a crew of juvenile laborers tasked with disassembling decaying shipwrecks for reusable components. His specific role involves navigating the challenging spaces within the ships' ducts to extract valuable materials like wiring. Given his petite stature, Nailer's responsibility is to crawl through these ducts and loosen the wiring for his team to retrieve. Outside of his laborious endeavors, he resides with his father, Richard Lopez, a volatile and inebriated individual, in a beachside shed. Due to the unpredictable nature of his father's temperament, Nailer seeks solace in the friendship of his closest companion, Pima, and her mother, Sadna, who becomes a reliable surrogate mother and the sole consistent adult presence in his life. Even within the context of a post-human era, there exists a profound longing for care, love, and compassion.

From the novel *Ship Breaker's* inception, Nailer is resolute in avoiding any association with his father. He even hates the physical resemblance with his father. "And then there was Nailer. Some people, like Pearly, knew who they were and where they came from ... Nailer was

nothing like that” (9). He panicked that his father’s cruel impulses and violence, he will also inherit. “He had no idea what he was. Half of something, a quarter of something else, brown skin and black hair like his dead mother, but with weird pale blue eyes like his father” (9). His identity seems to be a question in the dystopian society. Bacigalupi describes as “Pearly had taken one look at Nailer’s pale eyes and claimed he was spawned by demons. ... Even so, the truth was that Nailer shared his father’s eyes and his father’s wiry build, and Richard Lopez was a demon for sure” (9-10). The similarity does not stop with physique, though; as Nailer fears he may share his father’s violence and ruthlessness. When Nailer is forced to kill another mercenary, Tool compliments him by comparing Nailer to his father, which prompts Nailer to answer emphatically, “I’m not my father,” inwardly nonetheless afraid “at the thought of mirroring his father” (175).

While exploring a stranded luxury yacht, Pima and Nailer aspire to salvage it and potentially amass wealth. However, their plans take an unexpected turn when they discover Nita, the sole survivor and owner of the wreck. Despite the opportunity to claim the salvage rights, Pima and Nailer choose not to harm her. Nita, a privileged heiress of a corporate empire, is being pursued by a rival faction within her father's company who intends to use her as a hostage. A conflict over Nita and the salvage rights ensues with Richard Lopez, but Nailer and Nita manage to escape to Orleans to seek assistance from Nita's family.

In the novel, the characters, especially Nailer, grapple with the idea of genetic determinism, which suggests that our identity is solely determined by our DNA. This perspective suggests that our lives are predetermined by our genetic code, akin to a computer program. However, the author, Bacigalupi, complicates this view in the story. Nailer is not portrayed as a mere product of his genetic programming, but rather as a unique individual shaped by a specific environment. He emphasizes that genetic traits, like the ability to kill, are not inherently good or bad. Nailer's choices and actions are influenced by his genes but are also shaped by his upbringing on the beach and his caring relationship with Sadna.

The novel challenges the idea that genes determine destiny by showing Nailer's deviation from his father's genetic program. Nailer's decision to side with Nita and his escape demonstrates that personal choices and environmental factors play a crucial role in shaping one's identity. Tool, a character in the story, highlights this complexity, pointing out that if genes were solely destiny, Nailer would have behaved differently. This challenges the simplistic notion that our genetic makeup determines our actions and emphasizes the importance of individual choices and environmental influences in shaping who we are.

In the novel explores how our genes influence who we are and the choices we make. The characters in the story grapple with the effects of genetics on their identity, highlighting the complexities of posthumanism. traditional emphasis on genetics as the sole determinant of identity. Instead of adhering strictly to a deterministic view where genes dictate destiny, the novel portrays characters like Nailer as unique individuals shaped by a combination of genetic factors, environment, and personal choices. This complexity goes beyond a simplistic human-

centric perspective, aligning with posthumanist ideas that emphasize the intricate interplay of various factors in shaping identity.

Nailer faces a challenging confrontation with his father, Richard, acknowledging Richard's formidable combat skills and even entertaining the notion that he might be like a mythical, invincible being. Richard “was horrifyingly fast ... The man was born to fight” (305). Nailer is even afraid that his father might not be able to die, echoing the superstition of Richard as a demon. Nailer kills him, later pondering if there is part of his father in him, “I felt strong. Really strong ... [Now] I don't feel a thing. Not a damn thing. I was glad when I did it. And now I don't feel anything at all. I'm empty” (319). Upon returning to the beach, Sadna his lover becomes a supportive guide for Nailer, reassuring him and emphasizing that one's identity is shaped not by genetics but by one's actions. According to her, Nailer should be grateful for his own strengths and intelligence, and he should focus on making positive contributions to the world rather than dwelling on guilt or doubts about his lineage.

In the novel, *The Drowned Cities*, the protagonist Mahlia also faces a struggle of identity after having been abandoned by her father and losing her mother to the conflict of the Drowned Cities. She was saved from a perilous situation by Mouse, another orphan, and together they struggle to survive. Eventually, they find refuge with Doctor Mahfouz in Banyan town. Despite Mahlia having lost a hand, Mahfouz takes her under his wing, teaching her to be his assistant and grooming her to succeed him as a physician.

Mahlia is fighting a war against her perceived racial heritage, both her father's Chinese and her mother's Drowned Cities origins. Mahlia is not concerned with character traits inherited from either parent but rather struggles as being perceived as a ‘castoff’, a child born of mixed-racial heritage to a Chinese ‘peacekeeper’ and a citizen of the Drowned Cities (i.e. an American), left behind when the peacekeepers left their post: a “throwaway” (38). Both parts of her heritage bring with them positive as well as negative associations. In her memories and desires, she connects the Chinese with wealth, civility, and order, effectively constructing a fantasy she has never been part of:

In exchange for Mahlia's promising to speak Chinese like a civilized person and keeping herself polite, her father had given her ice cream ... [a] fairy-tale luxury from a fairy-tale land. According to her father, China had ... cities with towers a thousand feet high, all because they were civilized. Chinese people didn't war amongst themselves. They planned and built ... China had culture. It was civilized. Chinese people knew how to *hezuo*—“cooperate.” Work together. (61)

However, her Chinese heritage serves as a constant reminder of a personal betrayal, marked by the abandonment by her father. “Her father had abandoned her” (218) and the negative perception she associates with his departure. It is described as “Her father had run away with his tail between his legs” (63). Additionally, it symbolizes the intrusion of Chinese troops into the Drowned Cities, imposing their aid with military force, an act Mahlia views as meddling where it's not warranted, “All of them rich enough to meddle where they didn't belong” (30). Mahlia's mixed heritage is visibly apparent to everyone, leading to hostile reactions due to the

ongoing conflict and occupation by the Chinese, “‘Half,’ he said. ‘For sure, you’re half. And you’re the right age, all right. Some peacekeeper nailed your old lady, left you behind.’ He cocked his head. ‘Don’t got much use for collaborators’” (89).

In *The Drowned Cities*, Mahlia's journey of identity encapsulates the complex interplay between her Chinese and Drowned cities heritage, symbolizing the broader struggles of posthumanism. Her experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of identity, influenced not only by genetic backgrounds but also by the societal and political contexts in which individuals find themselves. Mahlia's internal conflict reflects the posthumanist theme of transcending traditional notions of identity and grappling with the consequences of external influences.

The tension between Mahlia's idealized fantasy of her Chinese heritage and the harsh realities of abandonment and military intervention highlights the complexities inherent in navigating a posthuman world. The narrative prompts reflection on the impact of war, displacement, and racial identity on individual subjectivities. Mahlia's mixed heritage becomes a focal point, triggering societal prejudices and hostility, further emphasizing the dehumanizing effects of conflict.

In conclusion, Mahlia's struggle in *The Drowned Cities* and Nailer's struggle in *Ship Breaker* offers a poignant exploration of posthumanism, urging readers to contemplate the evolving nature of identity in a world shaped by war, racial tensions, and the fusion of diverse backgrounds. The novels invite us to reconsider conventional notions of humanity, emphasizing the importance of empathy and understanding in a posthumanist context where identity is not just inherited but actively shaped by the tumultuous environment.

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