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**DE-ANTHROPOLOGISING THE HUMAN AND ITS IMPACT ON RACISM: A THIRD
WORLD PERSPECTIVE**

ABSTRACT

My paper explores how contemporary disanthropocentric accounts of human and non-human agency question the ways racialized bodies are seen and interpreted, as well as their implications in a post-ecological world, particularly through their depictions in literature. In the era of the posthuman, material ecocriticism is destabilizing binaries between the human and the non-human; both are seen as co-extensive enmeshments in a state of radical immanence. The world is thus a non-hierarchical collective where humans and non-humans interact as material-discursive entanglements across tenuous boundaries. Human bodies thus function as processual assemblages, as human embodiment undergoes a radical prosthetic enhancement. Racism is thus held up to a revisionary scrutiny. Therefore, in engaging in an onto-epistemological account of how racialized bodies are to be re-read, the theoretical notions of Bruno Latour, Karen Barad, Val Plumwood, Jane Bennett and Arthur Bradley are pivotal to this exploration, despite their divergent trajectories. The deconstruction of a holistic Anthropos opens up unique possibilities for questioning how racialized bodies are socially constructed and known. The pivotal idea is that if the human is de-anthropologised and humans and non-humans are seen as equal citizens, then race-based boundaries become equally unstable. The epistemological disbanding of anthropocentrism in turn leads to the subversion of the White/non-White binary, so that the possibility of a new world view may be explored which could lead to the proposition of an altered ethics of race. Using Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* to illustrate the possible alterations in this world view, my paper explores how such a disanthropocentric approach initiates an onto-epistemological revision of race-based embodiment and its scope in the contemporary world.

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As a third world citizen, for me the possibilities generated by the advancements in bio-genetic engineering and technology are of a particular interest. This is because all human bodies, as depicted in various socio-cultural and scientific discourses, are seen as assemblages. These assemblages are composed of multiple intra-acting (Barad 33) nonhuman “actants” (*Politics of Nature* 75) or intervening agents operant in specific, pre-programmed coded mechanisms within a “biological skin-bag” (Clark 77). However according to Arthur Bradley the human body has always-already been techné, or an “autopoietic self-organising technology” as well as a site that manifests a “more profound identity between the living and the non-living, nature and technology, the gene and the machine” (Bradley 5-10). It is this idea of techné that opens up the space for developing the implications and scope of de-anthropologising the human. For this reason, my current paper focuses on the theoretical and socio-political complexities implicit within this idea and their impact on the racial and gender hierarchies operant within the world. In order to address these complexities, which are of pivotal concern for colored people, I have taken on board the notion of literary narratives functioning as a socio-political lens which exceed the “superego” of science (Guattari 36) and are an alternative means for reading and re-knowing racialized human embodiment.

My main argument is that narrative-making functions as a means of developing a disanthropocentric approach in providing alternative possibilities for understanding racialized bodies. The rationale behind selecting narratives for this exploration stems from Bruno Latour’s idea that that “semiotics or the various narrative sciences” (*Reassembling the Social* 54) can be used as a means to challenge uncritically accepted epistemological frameworks. In order to explore these alternative possibilities for re-reading racialized bodies, I have taken Gerald Vizenor’s *The*

Heirs of Columbus under consideration for the development of this point. The reason behind this selection is that through this narrative, Vizenor does not only offer a mythico-historical counter-narrative to Columbus' colonization of the Americas by presenting ideas such as bio-semiosis and digi-semiosis, the novel also suggests the fluctuant nature of human bodies as they intra-act with each other to articulate nonhuman narratives that have been silenced within the dominant Western discourses. As the bones of Columbus, stones, algorithms and genetic materials are presented as articulate agents, the novel extracts these actants out of alterity making them speak in a language that exceeds logocentric boundaries. In doing so, all humans in the novel are de-anthropologised as the actants both within and without their bodies articulate and materially shape a new world-view. According to this world view, all bodies, despite differences in skin color, are able to undergo alterations through prosthetic extensions and modifications in the "biogrammar of genes" (Haraway 74). All embodied collectives or assemblages are therefore, processual points of exchange wherein the "linguistic wax" of existence is co-constitutively transformed (Serres 86). It is this transformation that Vizenor's *Heirs of Columbus* depicts to reflect how the Anthropos is no longer ontologically fixed but is in a state of co-constitutive, radical immanence and "transit" (Alaimo 2) with the "non-anthropomorphic" (Braidotti 60) elements. The human is constantly the "emergent" (Alaimo 2), embedded within a multi-layered ontology and epistemology. It is the novel's depiction of this emergent human, or the prosthetically and genetically enhanced posthuman, which is of key interest to me as a brown woman living in an age when racialized ways of seeing, reading, and interacting with human bodies frame the global socio-cultural mechanics. With the optics of color decoding skin color according to a hierarchal socio-political paradigm, viewing the Anthropos as a malleable assemblage offers a space for one to revisit not only the optics of color, but also to investigate what may be termed as the 'humanness of the human'. In this paper, humanness is distinct from the moral and ethical dimensions that the term 'humanity' entails and implies the material features or specifications of being human, which include the

pigmentation of the skin. This idea of humanness permits an analysis of how we see, know and respond to the entire material spectrum of racialized bodies in the contemporary socio-political canvas. Humanness thus provides a means not only of analyzing how bio-power has been used to colonize and exploit certain bodies, but also of addressing how one can challenge repetitive “raciology” (Gilroy 33) as it biologically equates all bodies, instead of using socio-political discourses to discriminate among them. Paul Gilroy argues in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* that “to engage racism seriously involves moving simultaneously onto historical and political ground” (33). With this in mind, the humanness of the human does not think of the human outside history; rather it extends the idea of history to enclose the material history of the planet and its entanglement with the human. In doing so, it allows one to think of human bodies from within a vaster geological temporal framework that precedes human civilization and its subsequent hierarchal and exclusionary practices. The human and the nonhuman, thus, become co-constitutive and equal participants within this vast geological history in which the nonhuman enunciates the human and vice versa.

On the theoretical front, the argument that the Anthropos is a concatenation of a series of material forms of enunciations in which multiple actants participate does provide a way out of the optical conundrum defining the racialized hierarchy of human bodies. In being read and seen in this way, the Anthropos is de-anthropologised since it disbands the material exclusivity of the human. Vizenor’s narrative attests to this point as the healing genes of Columbus and his mythical Mayan consort Samana are transmitted to heal people of all races, so that all humans become equal in their enmeshment with the nonhuman. Conceptually, this might emerge as a reason for celebration since it implies that all bodies, regardless of pigment, are merely complexes of diverse nonhuman phenomena whose agency does not always lie within human control. However, at this point, I do concede that the de-anthropologising of the human is fraught with its own socio-political dilemmas. This is because it does not totally disband the central eminence of the human as a result

of which the threat of the anthropocentric exclusion continues to loom over the entire enterprise. Yet, one must acknowledge that this notion does suggest the creation of a non-hierarchical human-plus-nonhuman collective which is contoured by fluctuant relations (Serres 4) that are both internal and external to the constituent assemblages within the collective. Skin-color is simply one of the unique specifications of every assemblage, and every assemblage has “fuzzy” edges (Serres 132). However, this fuzzy enmeshment of the human and the nonhuman further problematizes the sanguine concept of de-anthropologising the human (Bradley 16) as it generate more complicated questions. For instance, is the human within the phrase ‘de-anthropologising the human’ a construct that lies outside the socio-political syntax of the contemporary global discourses? More importantly, does the concept of the human embrace collective humanity, regardless of regional, ethnic and linguistic differences? In a world where embodiment is regulated by a global, patriarchal Capitalist economic system, can we afford to read the impact of this notion outside the ubiquitous influence of such a system? When does de-anthropologising the human become collaborative with de-humanizing the human? Apart from these questions, as a colored woman, I cannot help thinking whether this de-anthropologising would further enhance racial differences because, while it inaugurates an era where all bodies are democratically seen, read and known as equals, it could also be used to further widen the breach among colored bodies. It is for this reason that I chose *The Heirs of Columbus* for analysis as it focuses on the humanness of the human presenting an alternative account of how human bodies are first to be known on material grounds and then to be incorporated within geopolitical discourses.

However, in the contemporary world, it can be argued that de-anthropologising a colored or a white body might yield widely different results, since this could be used as an excuse to downplay any violations of bodies with specific color specifications, and could also be used as a rationale for the augmentation of certain privileged bodies through advancements in biogenetic and information technologies. Therefore, the issue that needs to be focused on at this stage is whether

the idea of de-anthropologising the human does, in practice, diffract the ontico-optical perceptions of racialized bodies in a pronouncedly xenophobic world, particularly in its depictions through literary narratives.

While addressing all these loaded questions does not fall within the canvas of this paper, the concept of de-anthropologising the human as depicted in literary texts invites ways of re-configuring not only how bodies are thought and seen, but also the socio-political lens through which they are seen. While it is true that literary texts are themselves ideological tools and products, nevertheless, they invariably suggest new ways of reading and interpreting the world. Interacting with other meaning-making regimes, texts mediate multiple realities as they offer new ways of decoding the world around us. Therefore, as mediating actants themselves, narratives offer alternative ways of interpreting the global syntax and its inherent politics. Thus, human societies revolve around “the implicit and explicit logic of stories” (Haraway 106) which have remained anthropocentric. These narratives value what Plumwood has termed as “a common cultural narrative” that is based upon a naturalized “hyper-separation” (4) between a vocal culture and a mute nature. In challenging this hyper-separation, Vizenor’s narrative recognizes the agency of matter as it creates its own material textual syntax which exceeds a logocentric enclosure. As a literary text, it is interwoven with the material phenomena around us, re-asking questions in its “search for new stories” (Haraway 82) as it decodes non-human agency. Nonhuman matter is agentive because it inscribes in a material-discursive language of its own, governed by a rationale which exceeds human reason and language. This requires new narratives, albeit, as Val Plumwood has suggested, by no means completely discarding the old narratives that have determined human and nonhuman intra-actions. *The Heirs of Columbus* performs this role as it bridges the gap between nature and non-nature or reason and nonreason. Refuting the passivity of nature, this novel delves into non-Western cosmology as well as Western epistemological paradigms to

1. deconstruct the idea of the human and by extension to question the optics governing racialized bodies.
2. To highlight the role of the nonhuman as the “intimate augmenter” (Sloterdijk 467) in a state of intra-active agency both within and without the human

As the novel presents the idea of “storied bodies” (Phillips & Sullivan 5) and material and discursive agencies in unison, it neutralizes the moral and ethical “*boomerang*” (Plumwood 10; italics in original) that has been generated by the exclusion of the nonhuman by anthropocentric doctrines. In engaging Native American history, myths and contemporary scientific developments, the text does not only displace the generally accepted historical accounts, it presents all narratives, both material and discursive, as processual enunciations that constantly resist being confined within any hermeneutical enclosure. The world is thus a space of “*difference itself*” (Zizek 938, italics in original) where material and discursive phenomena continue to interfere with each other, producing alternative lines of sight. For instance, in *The Heirs of Columbus*, the phenomenal world defies ontological fixity as humans transform into quanta or animals through therianthropy, while animals claim to be wearing human masks. The material reality is entangled with the digital reality as Native American shamans blend the anamnestic world of human memory with the hypomnetic world of computers, as the scene of a theft is recast through digital shamanism in the courtroom scene. In doing so, the novel challenges the supposed irrefutability of empiricism as well as the muteness of nonhuman phenomena as a character called Chaine vehemently argues “Stone and the heirs nurture the view that stories are in bones, stones, trees, water, bears, air, everywhere, and stories have natural rights to be heard and liberated.” (Vizenor 78). All human and nonhuman phenomena, and by extension, and their attending epistemological enclosures, remain malleable enunciations, thus exposing the tenuousness of the classifications inherent within Western epistemology. The novel reflects the multi-tiered onto-epistemological nature of reality which remains processual.

By displaying therianthropic shamanism that is operant both within the material world and the digital world through digi-shamanism, *The Heirs of Columbus* disbands spatial and temporal boundaries along with the gulf between nature and culture, as well as the boundary between the human and nonhuman. As miscegenated mongrels like Caliban speak in a human form and animals and humans morph into each other, the tenuous and limitrophic nature of the edge between the animal and human is brought into focus. Samana, the handtalker was a “crossblood black bear and lonesome handtalker ... a shaman, as her mother was a bear, and her touch would heal the heir with stories in the blood” (Vizenor 12). Caliban, the namesake of his colonized counterpart in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, does not only challenge the White man’s narrative of history by claiming to be the creators of humans (Vizenor 70), he also extracts the body of the colonizer out its infrahuman marginality that supposedly lies outside politics and history (Gilroy 34). He does this through embodying the complex physical entanglements of the colonizers and the colonized that do not only contest racialized hierarchies but also the existing onto-epistemological enclaves within which all bodies are placed.

The text depicts the human body as a processual assemblage which, regardless of its pigment, is constantly crossing onto-epistemological boundaries as it develops an interface with the animal. The animal becomes human and the human becomes animal, both embodied forms engaged in ongoing “becomings” (Deleuze and Guattari 272) that undermine all knowledge regarding human embodiment. Samana is a case in point. She is a human-animal, a “becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, becoming-animal . . . a human hyperconcentration” (Deleuze and Guattari 34). So is Memphis the panther who states: ““Yes, and the shaman heals the animals with stories in our blood, not the masks we hear as humans, the mask dies, the stories endure,” said the panther (Vizenor 70). The human and the nonhuman are a conglomerate of assemblages which are rhizomatically intra-acting with each other. Samana, Caliban and Memphis are all multiplicities, disbanding any onto-epistemological fixity, sharing various features of humanness. Humanness is

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thus taken in terms of the human body's material construction in all its processual modifications. It allows one to exceed the ontological fixity and exclusivity which is inherent within the idea of the human. Thus, if the human is no longer narrated as a fixed construct, human embodiment which establishes the substratum of this construct, does not only lose its ontological fixity but also destabilizes the hierarchal arrangement of racialized bodies.

The idea that a body is not a fixity leads to one more consequence: a shift in the perception of race and the hierarchal arrangement of bodies that ensues from it. This is because once the nonhuman is brought within the realm of the human, the binary between reason and nonreason is destabilised. With the nonhuman having been equated with nonreason and the human with reason, their coming together in the human body problematizes the boundary between reason and nonreason. Nonhumans are imbricated within the human according to a reason-based functional syntax of their own which has been silenced through various forms of anthropocentric suppression. If the nonhuman constituents of all human bodies are active phenomena imbued with a reasoning capacity of their own, not only does the superiority of the human over the nonhuman become debatable, the superiority of one class of bodies over another also becomes debatable. This is because all are endowed with one form of reason or another. Humanity, thus, needs to define a new ethics on the basis of the common denominator of humanness and also to re-define reason in a manner that exceeds restricted West-centric definitions. In displaying how humans, animals, bones and stones equally participate in the construction of trans-temporal narratives that embrace collective humanity, the hierarchal and hegemonic ways of reading all bodies undergoes a diffraction.

Vizenor's novel highlights this diffraction by taking on board the agentic mechanisms of nonhuman phenomena such as human genes. As intimate augmenters (Sloterdijk 467), genes function as intervening agents that initiate a shift in the optics governing race as the genetic syntax of the human body is shown to be alterable within the novel. Instilling what the Native Americans

have termed as the healing “genetic signature of survivance” (Vizenor 132) that is extracted from the heirs of Columbus, not only are disabled bodies healed, but the abuses inscribed on those bodies are also erased. A baby with missing limbs re-grows them once the genes of healing are injected in her whereas people of all races benefit when they are injected with the blue radiance of Blue Ishi, the namesake of a Mayan prophet. The novel thus highlights how changes in matter trigger new signs (Maran 143) which create new meanings and new perceptions, thus re-writing racial boundaries that evade “political reduction of identities” (Vizenor 156). Vizenor’s characters all glow with a blue radiance, which in Native American cosmology signifies peace and spirituality that neutralizes the differences in skin tones. Whites, blacks, Native Americans, etc., are all healed as Native American techniques of healing blend with Western biotechnological cures. The world that Vizenor projects is that of “bionic leaders” and “biorobots” who can be “trained to heal with humor; their memories held the best trickster stories” (Vizenor 158). It is a world where “racial distance” (Vizenor 162) has been minimized by mixing and recombining the material constituents of white and coloured bodies. The genes, technological devices and humans of all races, even the mystical mute child, all become equal actants through their participation in shaping the world. Therefore, if human embodiment is a permeable assemblage, in a state of “intimate communion” (Sloterdijk 515) with both the internal and external others, race can be re-thought in a non-hierarchical biological way, so that skin color is seen as merely one specific feature of bodies, and not the primary one. As the human is de-anthropologised and seen in terms of its intimacy with heterogeneous Others, the novel constructs a narrative which skirts the political problems inherent in this idea. As genetic healing is shared equally with all, Vizenor’s work recommends an egalitarian way of reading and decoding all human bodies. The text suggests that a material alteration within any human body could act as a counterfoil to the stringent modes of Capitalist regulation of human bodies, within which, at present, some bodies are considered privileged while others are de-humanised. This counterfoil includes the usage narratives of humour, instead of

aggressive othering, to activate “energy that heals” everyone regardless of racial specifications (Vizenor 164).

It is for this reason that the novel de-anthropologizes the human by presenting nonhuman agentive maneuvers, such as the role of genes, bones and stones as story archives, etc., as they alter the material syntax of the world. In doing so, it opens up possibilities of re-thinking skin color and its enmeshment within the global milieu. Through constructing a new narrative that epistemologically disbands anthropocentrism, the novel subverts the White/non-White binary as it suggests a new world view wherein human bodies are not seen through the optics of race alone. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, humans claim to have animal identities and white men like Columbus consort with coloured women like Samana. As a result, the ontological boundaries of both embodiment and race are crossed as the heirs of Columbus inherit a mixed heritage of Western and Native American epistemologies. This suggests that a new ethics of race may be formulated on the grounds that all human bodies are taken as biological equals, capable of equally modifying each other.

As a third world woman I find this literary text significant since it opens up possibilities to rethink racial equality in terms of humanness outside the realm of science. By thinking of human bodies as collectives with a variable embodiment, such novels re-scrutinise all those values, discourses and assumptions that are formulated in terms of my skin color (or even gender) alone. Sporting a malleable humanness, my racialized body is thus equal to a white or black body. It is this malleable humanness which actively negates the socio-economic inscription of race as the major determinant of one's placement within the global collective. Once all bodies are seen as equally malleable in their construction, one may exceed the exclusionary paradigms of race with the materiality of the human body actively framing the narratives and discourses pertaining to human embodiment and not the other way round. In presenting bodies in all their material configurations as narratives in their own right, many literary texts question the normative assumptions of racialized embodiment as they exceed west-centric paradigms of viewing the world. Stories exceed scientific enclosures

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which have been hijacked by exclusionary western paradigms that see some human bodies as less equal and, therefore, disposable. The use of bioweapons and biomedical technologies to augment or preserve some human bodies, while damaging others, could further augment the racial divide since it would enhance the bridge between the privileged One and the underprivileged Other. As counter narratives, literary texts and their representational practices suggest a more inclusive way of reading the world in which all phenomena remain mutually co-constitutive and therefore, mutually dependent for their survival. The human is no longer to be thought in terms of subjectivity alone but also in terms of an intersubjective humanness. In re-thinking the very idea of the human in its material terms, one endeavors to re-think the politics of discrimination and their divisive economic practices. Therefore, in re-weaving stories, texts like *The Heirs of Columbus* foreground the alterations that take place within the human subject as both the human and nonhuman engage in an open-ended endless intra-action, thus articulating the need to view all humans and their nonhuman across boundaries that are permeable. As the concept of de-anthropologising the human comes into play, not only do the politics and enclaves of nature and culture become disputable, it also has a far-reaching impact in re-scrutinising the hierarchal politics of race and gender.

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