

Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

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**Companion Possibilities and Problems: Techno-Viral Reconfigurations of the
Post/Human and Society in *The Companions***

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Abstract | As morbid as it may seem, exploring any literary representation of contagion during a real-world pandemic such as the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) allows for a timely consideration of the ways in which literature reflects our present and foreshadows our future. Published in 2020 and during the time of the Coronavirus pandemic, Katie M. Flynn's *The Companions*, provides an almost prophetic vision of life and livelihood determined by a pandemic. Although classified as science fiction, there is little about Flynn's vision that is far-fetched; it certainly is not far-off. The novel brings together thematic considerations of nonhumanness, biopower, and ethics under the umbrella of a contagion narrative. This paper examines these themes alongside a cultural analysis of human sensibilities that are reconfigured in response to the impact of the fictional pandemic. The reconfigured human sensibilities are posthuman insofar as they internalize the pandemic and are juxtaposed with the enhanced sensibilities of the companion robots. Drawing on theories in posthumanism and virology, this paper adds to the genre of contagion literature by examining the ways in which non-living viruses lead to an evolution in who is considered human and what humanity entails. Beginning with the theoretical interventions into contagion literature and henceforth

analysing *The Companions* as a narrative of posthuman contagion, this paper concludes by situating the novel in the ongoing debate about the viability of posthuman theory even as forces of capitalism bear upon who can be deemed human. As the Coronavirus continues to invade virtually every aspect of life; socio-cultural, political, economic, and course of geographical, the imperative to study a contagion novel such as *The Companions* becomes all the more urgent. Flynn's novel attempts to go beyond the universal category of the human but is nonetheless attuned to the larger force of capitalism that exercises far-reaching implications of biopower over these companions species that challenge the human.

Keywords | Posthumanism; Contagion; The Companions; Biopower; Coronavirus.



An airborne virus; conspiracy theories of its origins; worldwide travel bans; state-ordered quarantines; millions dead. Although this accurately describes the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and its global impact from 2019 onward, in this case it refers to the fictional virus depicted in Katie M. Flynn's novel, *The Companions* (2020). Set in an unspecified future, Flynn's novel explores what it means to be human when the human body has undergone alterations. During the novel, these alterations are necessitated by the spread of multiple virus outbreaks which prompt Metis Corp to create the companionship program – a software that uploads dying or dead people. Once infected by the virus, the now-dead hosts take different forms that still “pass for human” (110). In *The Companions*, these new humans are created both organically as well as mechanically; organic insofar as the virus enters their bodies, and mechanically insofar as they become the property of Metis Corp. Whether taken over by the virus or taken over by Metis, the novel reveals a shared process of creating new versions of existence. Although the technological alteration of human embodiment in the novel resembles the transhumanist philosophy of a centralized techno-scientific ‘way out’ of humanism (Ferrando 28), *The Companions* also directs attention to a viral alteration of human existence. Therefore, this paper theorizes the techno-viral refashioning of the human as posthuman owing to the merger of virus and human as well as technology and human.

The particular concept of posthuman formation, that is a combination of human, technological, and viral, which I explore vis-à-vis *The Companions*, follows Rosi Braidotti's claim that in posthuman theory:

The subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, *viral*) relations (...) with relational linkages of the *contaminating/viral* kind which interconnect it to a variety of others, starting from the environmental or eco-others and include the technological apparatus. (193)

In the novel, the companions act as transversal entities created out of the merger between human, virus, and technology. In theoretical terms laid out by Braidotti, *The Companions* reflects the posthuman turn towards non-human entities which decenter the human as a stable, autonomous, and exceptional organism. Given its 2020 publication, *The Companions* warrants attention for providing one of the most recent engagements with a viral outbreak which gives impetus to the formation of a transversal posthumanism.

Spotlighting Flynn's novel through posthuman theory is made all the more significant due to the real-world effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. Both fiction and reality have created 'new' conceptions of life and living. My analysis of the novel's portrayal of posthuman existence and posthuman futurity which occurs alongside repeated viral outbreaks directs attention to the cultural implications of disease narratives as argued by Craig A. Gordon. Following Gordon's theory that tuberculosis "functions as a crucial cultural relay (...) of a wide spectrum of residual and emergent understanding of the body and its relation to society" (36-37), I argue that the unspecified virus in *The Companions* is used to reflect the ontological, cultural, scientific, and political implications of existing in the twenty-first century. Thus, the biological and technological moderations described in the novel create new forms of life much in the same way that the coronavirus has created a 'new normal'. The posthuman versions of existence in the novel become a kind of futuristic 'new normal' for the characters. In this sense, the formulation of a posthuman future through viruses and technology in *The Companions* is similar to the claim by Laura Seiler that "humankind faces a post-human future" (271). This future, she goes on to specify, will be owed to the use of "genetic engineering and other technologies to become what we have never been before" which will "alter us as we create new living organisms, machines with human intelligence, and humans with machine parts and genetically enhanced bodies" (271). *The Companions* dissolves the boundaries separating human

organism and nonhuman virus and technology. As such, different types of beings in *The Companions* are theorized as now-normal beings owing to the changes in society brought on by the virus. This framing of posthuman normalcy follows other disciplinary interrogations of the ‘new normal’, from curriculum design (Goodson & Schostak 2021), socio-spatial implications (Salama 2020), macroeconomics (Peña 2020), and of course technology (Evans 2020). I add to studies of the ‘new normal’ by proposing a new posthuman normal as envisioned by Flynn. Through a Cultural Studies approach to investigating representations of social interactions, corporate strategies, and technological advancements – all influenced by the persistence of a virus – I direct attention to reconfigurations of humanness, consciousness, and embodiment that contribute to being posthuman. Where the Coronavirus has created a “new normal”, *The Companions* portrays a society that has been irrevocably altered by a similar degree of ‘new normalcy’ brought on by the virus.

The virus, which remains unnamed throughout the novel, bears upon the argument made by Henry E. Sigerist concerning the usage of illness as a literary subject. “It is not the disease itself” he writes, “but the effect it has on an individual’s life that interests the writer” (182). I follow Sigerist’s claim about illness narratives to the extent where *The Companions* depicts new forms of life and livelihoods that are created by a virus. However, insofar as Sigerist underestimates the centrality of disease to the creation of such forms of life, this paper asserts, through the granular focus on the virus, that the disease is its own form of “life” which in turn creates new lifeforms. As part of my claim to different modes of existence referred to as being posthuman, it incorporates viruses into its challenge to the human exceptionalism that has grounded liberal humanism. Flynn’s posthuman vision, in which the virus gives rise to multiple ways of being, is made more significant due to the submicroscopic size of the virus. Although a fraction smaller than the smallest bacteria, the “power of viral formations has become manifest in the pandemic, stressing the agency of non-human forces and the overall importance of Gaia as a living, symbiotic planet” (Braidotti 466). Flynn’s novel draws attention to the enormous impact of the nonhuman and diminutive status of the virus in destabilizing human exceptionalism. What is at stake by exploring representations of posthumanity in *The Companions* is encapsulated by my central question of who and what gets to be included in the historically exclusive category of “human”. To

circumvent the problematic concept of “the human”, this paper refers to the characters of the novel as representing ways of being and existing.

The significance of the virus to both being posthuman and creating posthumans in *The Companions* extends Katherine Hayles’s argument that “the novel coronavirus is posthuman in at least two senses” (68). According to Hayles, viruses are posthuman because they are “oblivious to human intentions” and evolves “toward simplicity”, unlike humans who evolve toward complexity (68). Rather than distinguishing humans from the posthuman virus, I converge the two in its conceptualization of humans who have become posthumanized because of a virus. This conception of the posthuman does not only look to physical changes to the human body but the psychological, social, ecological, and technological futures that follow the viral invasion of the self and society. The eight perspectives that converge during the novel explore “ways for being different in the future” (Badmington 23) that are co-constituted by the virus and technology. The companions of the novel therefore are those humanoids who either willingly or not, have their consciousness uploaded to a robot shell.

The novel begins with the people of California in forced quarantine following the outbreak of a deadly virus. At first, the origins of the virus are unknown. As it continues to spread, the novel describes different types of people referred to as companions. Beginning with one of the characters, Lilac, the novel interweaves personal experiences of the virus as part of a larger portrayal of a collective society grappling with the physical, psychological, and socio-cultural changes brought on by the outbreak. Although the novel’s outset appears to be little more than another variation of a dystopic story where humans and robots co-exist, the narrative swiftly moves into a deep introspection focalized through Lilac, one of the humanoid companions to Dahlia. Lilac interweaves a sympathetic account of her life before her consciousness was uploaded with her present difficulty in being a servile companion to Dahlia and her family. The novel begins with Dahlia asking Lilac to tell her about her teenage life and friendship with Nikki. As Dahlia helps Lilac fill in the gaps before her consciousness was uploaded to the companionship program, Lilac realizes that she did not commit suicide but was knocked unconscious and left for dead on the beach by Red – another teenager. Lilac also remembers Nikki, who was with her that night but could not be found at the beach. The events leading up that moment involved Red blaming Lilac for being humiliated at her house party. When Lilac and Nikki leave the house to

visit the beach with their boyfriends, Red follows them. The last thing Lilac remembers is that while looking for Nikki, she unexpectedly finds Red who hits her with a shovel. Dahlia explains that Lilac did not die but was converted into a companion. Upon learning this, Lilac sets off to find Nikki.

Following Lilac's focalized narrative, the novel floats through the perspectives of Cam, a human employee at an Elderly Care facility; Gabe, a child messenger; Jakob, an actor who becomes a companion; Ms Espera, an elderly woman debating whether to be converted into a companion; Rolly, a teenager who runs a disposal center for discarded companion shells; Kit, a companion who is also Gabe's guardian; and Rachel, a companion on the search for Lilac. The web of perspectives coalesces around Lilac and her nonhuman companion programming. During the novel, each character crosses paths with Lilac. Through the interlinked focalizations, the novel channels some of its most salient musings on the nature of existence, who gets access to being considered human, and what a posthuman future looks like. Along with the different narrative focalizations which channel unique ideas about humanness and being, the characters also have overlapping experiences of repeated viral outbreaks which together with the technology recalibrate their lives. I theorize new configurations of human sensibilities and ideas of embodiment that are co-constituted by the ontological impact of viruses.

Lilac's introspection and subtextual framing of posthuman existence deserves attention for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is her actions that set the novel in motion. Secondly, she is the nucleus around which the other characters revolve. Through her personal experience of being converted into a companion robot, the novel draws attention to the coding of posthuman self-awareness in the companionship program. This self-awareness is exemplified by Lilac's ability to remember her past life as a human. Her capacity for nostalgia challenges the humanist tradition which classified humans as ontologically distinct owed in large part to their ability to reason and have consciousness. The destabilizing impact on the human-nonhuman binary effected by Lilac's posthuman awareness highlights Kay Anderson's point of a thinking human subject that is decentred through materialist engagements with nature, science, and technology. Anderson's approach to decentering the thinking human subject utilizes a Cultural Geography approach which in examining "the microbes that make up our own more-than-human bodies" (5), resists the claim of "rational consciousness directing all else" (5). Lilac's desperate attempt to remember how she became a companion reveals

a certain degree of consciousness previously thought to have existed only in humans. Neither completely human nor completely robot, she processes information along both ‘networks’ of existence. When asked by Dahlia to recount her life as a teenager, Lilac says: “I call up the memories, feel them supercharge my system, and begin the telling” (6). The neural exchange between both cognitive networks – the brain and the companionship storage program – are bound together in feedback loop. Through the shared transmission of information processed by the brain and filtered through the program, Flynn establishes a form of posthuman subjectivity that “powers” the human memory through technology. Lilac becomes increasingly humanized as the narrative moves between her past and present to the point where she eventually runs away from Dahlia, an act of autonomy previously unseen in companion robots who exist to serve their human owners. Lilac’s perception of her past therefore humanizes her despite having the appearance of something non-human.

The co-opting of technology to extend human capability is a defining feature of posthuman theory argued by the likes of Donna J. Haraway (1991), Katherine Hayles (2005), and Nick Bostrom (2008), to name a few. Functioning as a prosthetic attachment as well as enabling a multisensory awareness of the environment, the companionship program and virus represent the kind of biotechnological enhancement discussed by Andy Miah, particularly as it relates to the “symbiosis of the organic and machinic” which “takes place in its most extreme form through the merging of humans with medical technology, allowing the transplantation of limbs, and the re-constructing of life, which utilizes technology and biology” (83). In *The Companions*, Jakob’s agent explains that the companion biotechnology is a project that extends life “indefinitely” (111). The extension of life through cybernetic enhancement aligns with Haraway’s concept of the technology as prosthesis. Denying a “fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism” (178), Haraway urges that “in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves” (178). *The Companions* highlights such an intimacy between not just the machine and the organic human, but also the inorganic virus. The robot hardware and companionship software become prosthetic devices for human consciousness in a similar way to the viral outbreak becoming an evolutionary prosthetic to the human organism. Lilac’s system which “registers the presence of airborne toxins” (20) functions similar to Hayles’s argument that robotic sensors “may

open new evolutionary pathways for both humans and intelligent machines” (“Computing” 137). These pathways, Hayles goes on to argue, challenge “our current conceptions of what it means to be human” (137). Both viral toxins and technology permeate the human body in *The Companions* to create posthuman sensory and survivability enhancements.

The companionship program’s ability to improve human limitations is made all the more significant when juxtaposed by the human characters who succumb to the effects of such limitations. We are told by Cam that one of the elderly women, Mrs Cozier, suffered from dementia which, added to her depression, was “taking her as it had so many others, time morphing past into present, whole memories cleaved, lost, sometimes for the better” (58). Mrs Cozier’s eventual death makes clear the limitations of a human lifespan. Although the less-advanced companions, such as Lilac before her upgrade, are subject to wear and tear and eventual disposal, they still outlive their human counterparts. The humans of the novel are caught between two inorganic forms of life, viruses which predate humans, and companions which outlive humans. *The Companions* draws attention to the augmentation of human life with the inorganic virus and companion software to produce posthuman life that is not vulnerable to the limitations on remembering and mortality. The novel’s iteration, therefore, of posthuman futurity establishes inorganic agents as crucial to the extension of human limitations.

In addition to the extension of life, the form of biotechnological enhancement enabled through the companionship program challenges the ontological exceptionalism of humanness. Lilac’s cognition, even as a robot companion, is emphasized as the novel’s main challenge to a ‘human essence’ which Francis Fukuyama claims will be lost due to biotechnological enhancements: “biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity – that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we are and where we are going” (101). In the novel, anti-companion characters such as Dahlia’s mother, Cam, Rolly, and initially Ms Espera exemplify the ideals of a human essence as argued by Fukuyama. Dahlia’s mother and Cam refer to companions as a “thing” (35, 55), Rolly and his Pa take delight in feeding obsolete companions through the metal clamps (275), and Ms Espera is afraid of being a companion because she does not want to be someone’s “property” (219). *The Companions*, however, envisions a biotechnological posthuman future that humanizes

the companions even as it does away with vague, anthropocentric notions of a single human essence. When Ms Espera eventually decides to become a companion, she later learns that “companions do have an olfactory sense” which then triggers some of her memories (286). Similar to Lilac, Ms Espera’s ability to recall her memories reveals a posthuman ability to co-exist with the techno-viral development of cognition. Clara Mucci’s psychoanalytic argument that “what makes us human is the persistence of memory” (185) ironically serves to highlight the nonhuman companion robots as ostensibly *humanized* because of their capacity for remembering. *The Companions*, therefore, allows us to reconsider the posthuman condition as not a departure from humanness but a convergence of human cognition and cybernetics.

Through the techno-viral configuration of posthuman states of existence, the novel moves away from species-specific definitions of the human. Flynn’s portrayal of the companions as unique in their consciousness and cognition departs from the historically exclusive category of ‘the human’ which has been characterized by such traits as civility, emotional responsiveness, rationality, agency, and individuality. During the novel, Lilac visits Mrs Cozier twice in a repeated attempt at filling the gaps in the companion’s memory. It comes as a shock to Cam, therefore, when Lilac’s responsiveness appears more human than the companion program would seem to typify. Lilac’s ability to “develop a relationship” (55) comes as much as a surprise to Cam as her capacity for remorse and hope, which he finds “so human” (101). Lilac’s emotional responsiveness makes her more human than the human character, Ms Cozier. The novel therefore dispels the notion that only human beings are capable of human responses. Lilac’s posthuman sensibility – a combination of technological enhancement, emotional sensitivity, and interpersonal awareness – bears testament to Bostrom’s argument that “enhancements may make us, or our descendants, ‘posthuman’, beings” who have “entirely new sensibilities or modalities – as well as the ability to control their own emotions” (203). The enhanced emotional responsiveness displayed by Lilac defies the humanist logic that classified nonhumans as inferior species. Her enhancement allows for what Bostrom calls a dignified, not a dehumanized, posthuman existence (213). *The Companions* invites us to recognise how alternative humanities are configured and presented as a challenge to normative, species-specific notions of the human.

Existing alongside the nonhuman companions is the nonhuman virus. Although relegated to the background, the virus is a significant co-constituting evolutionary agent for the characters of the novel. The urgent threat posed by the new virus, “airborne virus number whatever letter tag” (65), encourages the development of new technology in the form of companionship software. This technology leads to new formations of beings called the companions. The triangulation of machine, organism, and virus in co-constituting posthuman existence informs the novel’s title of technology and viruses as “companion species”.¹ Carl Zimmer gives an indication of this companionship in his description of viruses as constituting a web of relations with humans. Alluding to a process of human-organic and nonhuman-inorganic co-evolution, Zimmer argues that “Scientists have found that all living things have mosaics of genomes, with hundreds or thousands of genes imported by viruses” (51). Flynn’s portrayal of a virus that co-exists with the people reflects the interventions in virology by the likes of Zimmer as well as molecular geneticist Karin Moelling who goes one step further in describing viruses as “a major factor in evolution” which “might have preceded and enabled the emergence of cells and thus provide us with a glimpse into our evolutionary past” (1033). While *The Companions* is focused more on the evolutionary future of the posthuman, not the past, Moelling’s point that “viruses might not only be the doom but at the same time the hope of humanity” (1033) resounds with Flynn’s exploration of viruses as co-evolving the human category.

The existence of the virus in *The Companions*, as much as it challenges the exceptional existence of the humans, is unable to challenge the deeper capitalist workings at play. In fact, the same virus that channels ideas about nonhuman ontology is also revealed to be manipulated by biotechnology to regulate the human population. With the novel’s focus placed largely on portraying the humanity of non-human beings, the posthuman narrative inadequately addresses the conspicuous, yet unstoppable criminal enterprise of genetic engineering. In the novel, Metis Corp is the company responsible for creating and distributing companions. In the absence of any governmental agencies, Metis Corp, described as a “medfirm” by Kit (306), stands as the only organization that has authority to supply companions and thereby shape the

¹ I incorporate viruses into what Haraway (2003) calls the “queer family of companion species” (11). Where Haraway focuses on the “significant otherness” between the companion species of humans and dogs, this paper examines on “viral otherness” as its own form of companion to the human.

future. As a “medfirm”, Metis Corp uses humans as disposable capital to increase their profits through companionship. Their corporate power is consolidated by scientists involved in genetic engineering of viruses. The capitalistic overtones of the novel – in which new bodies are created and commodified by a virus that is itself created by the corporation – present a challenge to the humane associations of the companionship program. As much as the companions represent a potential for moving beyond the exceptional human category, the program’s means to an end raises concerns around ethics, capitalism, and technological saturation. Each of these concerns undermine the possibilities offered by human enhancement. Therefore, the kind of posthuman and posthuman futures envisioned by *The Companions*, although escaping the confines of humanist ideology, remain problematic due to their entanglement with global economic systems and biotechnological control of the nonhuman.

The Companions invites us to consider what is left out, as much as what is gained, through an engineered relationship between human and nonhuman agents. Gabe, the only child character of the novel with chapters focalized through his perspective, is significant to the novel’s overall commentary on Metis Corp’s unethical scientific engineering. Gabe’s raw interpretation of the kind of society being created by Metis Corp echoes criticisms of posthumanism as well as scientific debates of the biotechnological manipulation of viruses. As I have argued, the companions represent a diverse, posthuman species in the novel which itself marks a departure from the universal human species. However, the means through which the companions are created point to a forced evolution of the human. We learn from Gabe that the Metis Corp scientists “cooked up those viruses” and used human carriers to ensure a quick transmission (157). The microbial manipulation of viruses for the purposes of accumulating wealth coincides with the manipulation of human beings who are the necessary hosts. Gabe’s speculation of genetic engineering resembles one of the conspiracy theories behind COVID-19. According to Roland Imhoff and Pia Lamberty, the argument that COVID-19 was created as a bioweapon follows the claim that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was “intentionally manufactured and purposefully spread as a bioweapon for political or economic gains” (1111). Unlike SARS-CoV-2, the virus in *The Companions* is suggested as purposefully spread to control the human population for economic gain. The novel, therefore, emphasizes the impact of its conspiracy theory on creating sub-divisions among the different species. Through the portrayal of far-

reaching implications of genetic engineering of the virus, Flynn cautions against science encroaching on the manipulation of life itself.

The novelistic portrayal of genetically engineered humans to satisfy a particular market portends a bleak future for human society. As Gabe goes on to explain, the scientists involved in genetic engineering form part of the capitalization method of human bodies which ensures Metis Corp's control. Referring to the scientists, Gabe says "They were believers. In the culling, in getting the state back on track" (157). Their aim to ensure state control over the human population through the containment of the very virus they created gives impetus to the companionship program. This cyclic perpetuation of capitalism by corporate control of biotechnology is alluded to by Rolly when he laments that "Metis figured out how to upload our dead and lease them back to us" (255). The capitalist feedback loop created by Metis Corp binds human populations into an unending form of biopolitical control. As an apparatus of biotechnological state control, the companionship program turns Metis Corp into a technocracy that exercises a futuristic version of Michel Foucault's biopower. According to Foucault, "bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production" (140-41).

In the novel, the "controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production" occurs through the companionship program, which is itself created out of another form of biopolitical control – over viruses. The parallel forms of bio-power depicted in the novel converge as a controlled experiment of how to determine life. Where Foucault establishes the relation of capitalism to biopower, Flynn highlights Metis Corp as the agent of capitalism owing to their heavy investment and control over biotechnologies associated with the companionship program. Although the companions have greater cognition, ability, and more intuitive emotions, the process of their creation, through virus engineering, raises questions of unethical scientific procedures. Metis Corp's sole license to create and distribute companions forces some of its former scientists to create a black market. Kit reveals that these scientists were engaged in "shadow transactions" involving the illegal creation of companions. Directing attention to the deliberate form of viral manipulation, Kit goes on to say that the independent scientists "knew what they were doing, the call for carriers they were putting out" (302). The disposability attached to human life, while it replaces the anthropocentric

underpinnings of humanism, is nevertheless motivated by the unethical practice of forced evolution. As much as Metis Corp's genetic engineering project creates new forms of existence, it is a project created out of the need to control all forms of existence. Fukuyama's critique of posthumanism responds to this need to control aspects of human nature. With a nod to the impact of biopower, Fukuyama argues that "the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a 'posthuman' stage of history" (7).

In *The Companions*, the aspect of human nature under threat is human evolution. Although Fukuyama's anti-posthuman argues for a vague notion of human nature which "has provided a stable continuity to our experience as a species" (7), an essence of stability I have argued against, his caution against the effects of biotechnology takes the form of unethical genetic engineering of the virus. Flynn's posthuman companion species while destabilizing the singular category of the human are created in a way that imbues the companions with unchecked, superhuman power. The companionship program encourages the disposability of the human body by allowing companions to upgrade their hardware as much as they can as well as their computer processing software. The alterability of human body parts and cognition enabled by companionship drives the capitalist demand for more companions which increasingly moves the world of the novel towards a posthuman stage. As much as the companions represent a biotechnological evolution of the human species, they are equally shown to be disposable due to the continuous advancements in upgrading made available by Metis Corp.

Rolly refers to the impact of biotechnology in churning out companions which threaten the human population, in some cases causing death. Metis Corp's rapid production of companion robots together with its increasing technological advancements results in more sophisticated companions who develop the ability to act outside of their programming. Lilac's early realization that she is "supposed to be command-driven" (28) is later revisited in the novel with fatal consequences. As the first companion to go rogue, Lilac's running away from Dahlia foreshadows later acts of companions turning on their human counterparts. Rolly notes that the aftermath of a companion in Dallas murdering his wife has the press wondering "How had he defied his security programming, they demanded from the screen, endangered the human to whom he'd been leased, his own wife?" (343). The extent of scientific engineering is

such that people begin to speculate on robots becoming the dominant species. If the novel's challenge to anthropocentrism is to replace it with the biotechnological power then Flynn only reproduces a new form of exceptionalism whereby the posthuman companion species exercise power beyond their programming. Like the companions who act outside of their assigned limits, Metis Corp extends their biopower toward the eventual control of the human population through forced sequestering.

The analogous connection between the virus and nonhuman companions drives the novel's biotechnological vision for the future. It is a future that allows us to consider different kinds of existences that depart from a singular category of the human. Similar to the socio-cultural associations of a 'new normal' created by the Coronavirus disease, the viral outbreaks in *The Companions* creates new conceptions of humanity that diverge from the singular, unified humanist conception of 'the human'. In this way, the novelistic imagination of different ways to exist complements the real-world effects of pandemic that has taught us different ways to live. However, the kind of future imagined in the novel, as much as it dismantles a singular and superior 'human' category remains vulnerable to overarching forces of global capitalism. This future is predicated on the economic determinism of human life which during the novel becomes subsumed by advancements in technology as well as in the scientific engineering of a virus.

Flynn complicates our understanding of posthumanism as possibility by having the posthumans of the novel, the companions, be created out of a need to control the human population. While the companions have memories, sentience, and rationality, they also have the stigma of being corporate apparatuses used to ensure the state's biopower. As much as *The Companions* allows us to imagine the beginning of new ways to have humanity without being human, the novel makes it difficult to imagine the end of capitalism. This is because the technologies that improve memory, emotions, and lifespan are financed and controlled by inhumane corporations. Through the companionship program, Metis Corp assumes biopolitical control of the population which ultimately resembles an apocalyptic vision for the human and nonhuman characters. The novel reveals a posthuman future that carries potential as much as it does problems. Although Flynn is able to provide new orientations toward embodiment and re-configure humanity through the rupturing of human-nonhuman encounters, the posthuman sensibilities created out of these new orientations and reconfigurations are

still bound by forces of capitalist biopower. *The Companions* invites us to consider that, in the twenty-first century, the threat to posthuman existence is no longer the Western liberal humanist tradition but a global capitalist order that is consolidated through the unequitable access to biotechnological apparatuses. If we are already posthuman, an assemblage of human and nonhuman beings, then Flynn invites us to question what exactly constitutes the human and nonhumanness of our twenty-first century biopolitical and ontological posthuman selves.



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