

*Machines as Animals, Animals as Machines: In Search of More-than-Human*

*Consciousness*

*Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey*

In our evolving technology-focused society, in which machines are no longer inert but endowed with messy kinds of consciousness, the boundaries of human, animal, and mechanical creation within humanist thinking become increasingly blurry. Through this blurring, space is created for new paradigms of relationality, new narratives of kinship between humankind, and the beings with which we share the world. My current project strives to fill in some small part of this space, to expand thinking around culturally constructed ontological divides between human and nonhuman.

During my time at the Rachel Carson Center, I will be drafting a novel told from the perspective of a beta test rider for a self-driving car. At first distrustful of the vehicle that drives itself to his door every morning, he quickly becomes desensitized to the dystopian nature of his work, leaning instead into an increasingly complex emotional relationship with the self-driving car. He comes to understand the car's autonomy simultaneously through the lens of animality—here is a thinking creature of another species—and technology—here is a man-made object with a mind of its own. Through his interactions with the car, the protagonist's understanding of his own humanity is wholly altered. Increasingly he comes to think of himself as a biotechnological product, an undeniable cyborg, a logical side effect of humanity's inattention to its interconnectedness with the rest of reality.

The questions raised by this narrative feel exceptionally relevant to studies of environmental humanities at the present moment. The rapid rise of artificial intelligence represents a crisis for humanist thought. As a species which has historically defined itself by its capacity for reason, in opposition to most of “unthinking” life, what collapse occurs within the concept of “the human” when our defining trait is outsourced to the technological realm? What alternative perspectives might serve us better in this new age, and where do these alternatives already exist?