Like Stanley Harrison, as described in his “Our Cyberbodies, Ourselves: Conceptual Grounds for Teaching Commodities to Write,” I find myself struck by “feelings ranging from vertigo to exhilaration” when I look into my “computer classroom these days” (37). But what I see seems much different from what Harrison sees, and in this response I’d like to detail some of the differences, bringing Harrison’s and my perspectives into conversation. In particular, I invite readers to reconsider the human—its complexity, its multifaceted nature—because I worry about what overemphasizing the posthuman, either literally or conceptually, may mean for the compelling human issues we face, like access to computer technologies and diversity online. I seemingly possess what Harrison terms “a nostalgia for the bygone,” but I see extensive emphasis of the human as far from “unproductive” (40).

I’d like to begin this response by introducing one of my own students: Beta student, who is a middle-aged Latino man who has come back to
school to earn a degree in middle school education, pursuing his lifelong dream to be a teacher and make a difference for today's youth. An automobile salesman for many years, Beta has a knack for interacting with a diverse range of individuals and coming to understand them and their values, a talent that will serve him well indeed in his chosen career. He does not, however, have extensive computer experience; he has operated a sales database at work and browsed the World Wide Web on occasion, but he is not a regular Internet user, and he certainly isn’t proficient with specialized technologies like those of students who seem almost to be “from a distant planet” (37). To put it simply, Beta is no Alpha, Gamma, Omega, or Theta, as Harrison describes them: Beta would not “abandon . . . humanity for the privilege and burden of having powers and pressures beyond those of mere mortals” (39). It’s my experience, then, that Harrison’s Alpha, Gamma, Omega, and Theta are not at all typical students in the contemporary writing classroom. Arguably, Beta may not be a typical student either—I don’t want to make that problematic claim—but he is the sort of student who enters classrooms more often today. After all, scholars like James Duderstadt, in his A University for the 21st Century, have shown that the demographic of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions is rapidly changing from the full-time eighteen-year-old residential student to the part-time middle-aged commuter student. Beta is every bit as smart as Harrison’s students, and he has every bit as much potential; he just simply hasn’t had the same degree of experience with various contemporary technologies. Likewise, Harrison’s Alpha, Gamma, Omega, and Theta students have just as much potential to be outstanding teachers and communicators as Beta; they just haven’t had his degree of experience yet.

I’ll not belabor the comparisons between Beta and Alpha, Gamma, Omega, and Theta further, but what I want to note is how they demonstrate the complexities and multifaceted nature of humanity. “Human” is indeed not simple, standard, or otherwise easy to define. Consider the difference in Harrison’s representations of Alpha, Gamma, Omega, and Theta and the scholars he cites, such as Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Jeffrey Grabill, Cynthia Selfe, and Todd Taylor. For the students in his computer classrooms, Harrison chooses the Spivak pronoun sequence, associating that choice with their “posthuman” identity, but the scholars whose work he cites do not use the Spivak pronoun sequence. And I’m fascinated by this implied distinction and what it means about the possible differences between Harrison’s students, the cited scholars, and other important
individuals like *Beta*. Are we to assume that Johnson-Eilola, Grabill, Selfe, and Taylor are not “wired” in the way *Alpha, Gamma, Omega,* and *Theta* are because they are not of the same generation? Correspondingly, would *Beta* be more like Harrison’s students or the cited scholars? The implied distinction becomes even more interesting when we look more closely at the generations involved: Johnson-Eilola, Grabill, and Taylor are junior faculty members, building scholarly reputations, but Selfe is a senior scholar, widely known for her scholarship exploring computers, literacy, and pedagogy. Should we see Selfe as somehow different from Johnson-Eilola, Grabill, and Taylor, who are correspondingly somehow different from *Alpha, Gamma, Omega,* and *Theta,* themselves different from students like *Beta*? How do we know? My point is simple: any definition of the human must account for its complexity and multifaceted nature.

My emphasis on the human leads to one of the most compelling questions I see in light of the differences in Harrison’s and my perspectives on the students in our computer classrooms: if we can agree that all students—indeed, all persons—are not equal as humans, then how can they all be fairly represented under the moniker of “posthuman”? The term “posthuman” necessarily assumes a static or consistent use of “human,” if any specific meaning is to be derived from “posthuman.” In the larger context, my resistance to “posthuman” here is a resistance to “post” anything. An example of where this resistance can lead is Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern,* in which he argues that the perception we have today of the modern era is not accurate or reasonable and thus that we have never ourselves been modern. Latour’s project proves so important because we’re in an era that is generally regarded as “postmodern,” another use of the term “post” to distinguish a contemporary system of values and practices from an earlier system. At the same time that I identify what might be termed “the problem with ‘post,’” I do want to note that some scholars have demonstrated how “posthuman” can be a useful term in various contexts. I don’t agree that it’s often a realistic or applicable term, but articles like Harrison’s and books like Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* do challenge our understanding of who we are, a necessary challenge for us today as we consider and inhabit both real and virtual environments. I possess many identities across such environments—for instance, from university faculty member and writing center director, to jinman@english.cas.usf.edu and the MOO characters James and BillyBob—and I often wonder how to make sense of them all,
who I am in individual environments, as well as across environments. At this conceptual level, the posthuman is useful because it brings into specific relief the nature of human identity. That is, it can be a theoretical concept against which we can come to understand more about the nature of humanity; it just cannot be separate or distinct from the human, in my mind, if it is to have value.

Where a critical difference might be established is in separating the terms “posthuman” and “cyborg,” rather than conflating them. I believe that the term “cyborg” always already includes human features, rather than excluding them or somehow transforming them into new features that are distinct from those innately human. To gain a clearer sense of how cyborg identity interfaces with humanity, consider the following extended description of Steven Hawking, authored by Allucquère Stone as she attended a lecture by him:

And there is Hawking. Sitting, as he always does, in his wheelchair, utterly motionless, except for his fingers on the joystick of the laptop. . . . Exactly where, I say to myself, is Hawking? . . . In an important sense, Hawking doesn’t stop being Hawking at the edge of his visible body. There is the obvious physical Hawking, vividly outlined by the way our social conditioning teaches us to see a person as a person. But a serious part of Hawking extends into the box in his lap. In mirror image, a serious part of that silicon and plastic assemblage in his lap extends into him as well . . . not to mention the invisible ways, displaced in time and space, in which discourses of medical technology and their physical accretions already permeate him and us. . . . The issues his person and his communication prostheses raise are boundary debates, borderland/frontera questions. (5)

While Hawking may be a cyborg, he is not posthuman; as Stone puts it above, our “conditioning teaches us to see a person as a person.” That is, because we have lived as humans, the human will always be a part of our lives, always a part of how we make sense of ourselves and others. Another important reason the term “cyborg” cannot reasonably be interchanged with “posthuman” is that the cyborg did not emerge from human evolution alone. I was pleased to see that Harrison cites Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in his article, as these NASA pioneers are who actually coined the term “cyborg.” At the time, they were studying how to engineer humans for extended space travel, but their groundbreaking experiments involved adding appendages to mice, rather than humans; it follows, then, that the first cyborgs were mice, not humans. I don’t think
we need to associate “cyborg” with the “post-rat” any more than we need to associate it with the posthuman. I just want to see cyborgs as cyborgs, rather than as post-anything.

History shows that humans and technologies have always interacted, with the interactions producing changed identity, new modes and genres of communication, and more. So another key question grounded in an understanding that human identity is complex and multifaceted is the following: why should computers somehow be the one technology in the history of the world that doesn’t interface with humans such that they retain human characteristics? Even the most enthusiastic scholar of computers and writing would likely not agree that computers are so profoundly different from all previous technologies as to not interact with humans. Harrison’s treatment of this question is interesting in that he is careful at times not to associate Alpha, Gamma, Omega, and Theta only with computers; he describes them with headsets, cellular phones, and other wearable technologies. At the same time, though, Harrison is talking about the computer classroom as a site of pedagogy, and he does emphasize only computer software in his tables of “minimal cyborg writer competence”; plus, he associates phrases like “being-prior-to-interface” with the human, assuming that the computer is the first technology to influence humanity via its interface (51, 53, 44). It’s only in the rarest of circumstances that such classrooms do have additional technologies today, meaning that most JAC readers will only know to associate Harrison’s ideas with the sorts of desktop computers they will find in their own classrooms. He does help us see a possible future: he cites work by Steve Mann, for instance, whose reputation is most prominent for his work with WearComp, a wearable computer, and WearCam, a wearable camera, but these are not the sorts of computers we see in our classrooms today. Mann introduced the world’s first wearable computer in 1995, in fact, when he assembled a camera and a display screen in the frame of a pair of sunglasses, but these are not the sunglasses our students wear—at least not yet. Given this implicit conflict between future possibilities and contemporary classroom realities, it’s also important to note that the cyborg is not typically associated exclusively or even primarily with computers as we know them. One of the richest areas in contemporary cyborg theory is the influence of technology on sex, birthing, and childhood. In the book Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots, for instance, the authors address a range of interesting issues, from deconstructing the dynamics of in vitro fertilization (Schmidt and Moore), to the way
ultrasound images shape the way parents first perceive their children (Mitchell and Georges), and to how contemporary simulation shapes children's identities (Turkle). My overall point is simple: we cannot locate the cyborg only in intersections between humans and computers; the scope must be broader, and it must include attention both to the full range of technologies that influence any individual's life and to the innate complexity and multifaceted nature of her or his human identity. This argument is one that Harrison and I share, but I choose to emphasize it again here because I believe that teachers and scholars much too often forget the broad influence of technologies, just as they sometimes forget the complex and multifaceted nature of the human. Readers of Harrison's article must be careful not to essentialize either technologies or humans because either judgment would be overly simplistic, and thus ill-conceived.

All of this means that I'm not sure right now that we can turn to a pedagogy grounded in the philosophy that our students are no longer human, that they're only commodities. I do believe we could consider students increasingly cyborg, if we define the term "cyborg" as including human features rather than something/someone only "posthuman," and I correspondingly believe that an emphasis on the cyborg can inform new and important pedagogical opportunities. We have to begin, however, with the realization, first, that all humans are influenced by capitalism in different ways—unique ways that shape them, that help them become the consumers our world requires them to be—as well as by many other ideological forces and, second, that we have an obligation to design pedagogies that can make a difference for our students. The danger here is in the power we wield; it would be easy for us to impose our own views of appropriate life choices on students, once the text becomes the way they lead their lives as individuals, consumers, and, yes, humans. My own contribution has been to develop the notion of "cyborg pedagogy" for writing classes as activist pedagogy designed to alter the access dynamic that too often affords majority students advantages in computer classrooms (Inman). I require students to design "ugly" Web sites rather than polished or professional sites, and classes develop their own standards and criteria for "ugliness," which then becomes the evaluation rubric we use in both peer review and instructor grading contexts. In this effort, I strive to help develop students' human character and values as much as their ability to demonstrate proficiency with site design and multimedia applications. That is, like Harrison, I put the social, economic, cultural, political, and historical implications of computer technologies on the
table, as it were, but where we differ is that I seek to emphasize the human, where he conceptualizes the students as human-machine commodities. I do not make claims here as to which is best, if either ever could be best, but I outline my particular project to introduce the idea that cyborg identity may lead to a very different pedagogical approach from imagining students as commodities.

Even if we accept Harrison’s premise and imagine students in our classes as commodities, however, we cannot assume that it’s effective at all times. Like any means of thinking about pedagogy and its many complexities, a commodity approach may be more useful at some times than at others. Thinking about students as commodities may even sometimes draw attention away from what’s most important, in my experience. An example is Harrison’s emphasis on software or utility consumerism as the process that keeps the cyborg alive: what “animates the living cyborg—the software or public utility that fuels the cyborg’s prosthesis—comes to us in the form of a ticket item . . . if the cyborg, or the cyborg’s patron . . . agrees to pay or, alternatively, to enter into an arrangement with capitalists for deferred payment” (39). Harrison goes on to suggest that introducing students to “Usenet freeware culture and the art of freeware self-fashioning” is one way of helping them to engage their subject positions critically and with attention to the way that consumption shapes them (52). In this case, it might be useful to focus less on consumption, however, and more on production. Scholarly attention to the open source software movement, for instance, a cousin of the freeware software culture on Usenet and in other newsgroups, shows that free software initiatives are often misunderstood as only about acquiring free applications, rather than contributing openly with designers and programmers from around the world to design the best applications possible, applications that rival and sometimes surpass those of corporations like Microsoft and Apple. For students to contribute most to their own self-fashioning and that of others, it follows that they should engage software capitalism at both the production and consumption stages, rather than just at the consumption stage. A focus only on consumption creates a less-than-complete experience for students, if the pedagogical goal is indeed to “teach student cyborg writers how to intervene in their subject formation at the level of software” (41).

Harrison’s “Our Cyberbodies, Ourselves,” like all good scholarship, raises a number of important issues that should stimulate considerable professional discussion about the changing nature of student identity and associated pedagogies designed to operate in environments in which
students and computer technologies interact. This response has raised but a few questions; however I hope they are of enough significance that they too can stimulate further discussion among JAC readers.

University of South Florida  
Tampa, Florida

Notes

1. I am choosing specifically not to use the "Spivak" neuter gender pronoun sequence" that Harrison elects to use in his article (54).

2. Readers interested in learning more about Mann’s work might read the two books listed in the Works Cited. Readers may also be interested in visiting Mann’s website: http://www.eecg.toronto.edu/~mann.

Works Cited


Submissions are invited for a special issue of *JAC* on "Trauma, Writing, and Rhetoric." This special issue will examine relationships between the growing body of scholarship on trauma studies and work in rhetorical theory and writing studies, broadly conceived. Papers may address, but are not limited to, such topics as the nature of traumatic experience; cultural representations of traumatic events; trauma and the limits of knowledge; traumatic memory; the rhetorical act of "bearing witness"; the role of trauma in constructing cultural and national myths; the nature of "post-traumatic culture"; the rhetoric of trauma narratives; trauma and liberatory pedagogy; and trauma and service learning.

Papers should be between twenty and thirty pages, although the editor will consider longer articles if they are of superior quality. Follow the *MLA Handbook* (fifth edition) for citation format. Send three copies of your manuscript, stripped of all identifying information, by May 1, 2003 to Professor Lynn Worsham; Editor, *JAC*; Department of English; University of South Florida; 4202 East Fowler Ave. CPR107; Tampa, FL 33620-5550. Send inquiries to L.Worsham@chuma1.cas.usf.edu.