The recent remake of the television series *Battlestar Galactica* presents us with something like a proof-of-concept for contemporary posthumanist thought and criticism. In it, a handful of surviving civilians and soldiers are called upon to deal with beings that have apparently tried to enact genocide upon the “human race.” Somewhat inconveniently, these machines have inexplicably turned on their makers and look, feel, and act just like human beings. Some of them even appear to have a conscience and to be capable of love. No matter. Once it is determined that one of these “skin jobs” is actually a “toaster,” it (she?) is treated accordingly: torture, rape, and summary execution. Yet again, the proof of our humanity comes in the form of a presumed licence to enact forms of inhuman cruelty upon others. Humanity is thus defined by its essential inhumanity. As the song that resonates in the walls of the Galactica herself says, “There must be some kind of way out of here.”

Sheryl Hamilton’s excellent and timely book *Impersonation: Troubling the Person in Law and Culture* suggests a way out of here, a way that begins by critically unravelling the normative and legal category of the person, a category in which the various conceits and contradictions of humanism come home to roost. As Hamilton points out, collectively we have made a “deep investment in the notion of the person,” as one of the “fictions by which we order our social relations.” Her book seeks to take this category of the person, this fiction, and “worry its easy claims … poke at its complacency … challenge its naturalization” (p. 7). From the outset, the category of personality is coded as social, cultural, and historical, in a manner that exceeds the essentialism that stills haunts most discussions conducted using the language of the human, including those posthumanist conversations ostensibly aimed at disrupting this essentialism and the binaries it engenders. As a fiction, the person is social all the way down.

The book commences by outlining a set of premises that frame the troublesome category of the person: that even as it appears stabilized in ethical and legal systems, the status of personality remains perennially contested; that this instability is particularly pronounced and exposed in relation to liminal beings who inhabit the uneasy and blurry margins of personhood; that personality does not precede, but rather is produced by, a range of technologies, techniques, and discourses that together comprise the “socially-sanctioned mechanisms to ascribe mark and verify personhood” (p. 8); that while legalization and juridification are crucial processes by which various technologies of personification are combined, ordered, and rendered authoritative in particular settings, they accomplish this only imperfectly and in lieu of the actual diversity and complexity of locations and practices in which personhood is continually in play; and, finally, that narrative is the most productive modality for thinking and talking about personhood.

These premises suggest both the scope of Hamilton’s inquiry and its method. The core of the book comprises a series of five stories about the troubled and troublesome
The first is the story of the corporation as a person at law, a legal fiction into whose moral status Hamilton inquires by way of a series of questions about the rights and responsibilities attributed to these persons not only in law but also in political and cultural discourse. The second retells the story of the notorious Persons Case, in which the “Famous Five” successfully challenged provisions of the British North America Act, 1867 whereby women were denied eligibility for appointment to the Canadian Senate on the grounds that they were not persons. Here, rather than simply rehearsing the legal arguments at issue in the case, Hamilton examines subsequent contests over the meaning of the case and its protagonists in Canadian material and popular culture as a way of demonstrating how personhood remains a deeply gendered attribution even after its gender-neutrality has apparently been fixed in law.

Third is the story of how invented life-forms, in this case clones, trouble the category of personhood by challenging two of the key distinctions upon which that status is purportedly based: the distinction between human beings and property, and between human beings and animals. The analysis combines close attention to the legal career of the notorious Harvard Mouse with cultural readings of recent renderings of the personality of invented life forms as presented in recent science fiction films. Next, Hamilton unpacks the potential personality of computers, in the form of thinking machines ranging from IBM’s game-playing Deep Blue to the various software bots that now act on our, and sometimes their own, behalf in digital networks. Here, the question of personhood is raised as a quality of the mind, in particular the capacities for reason, performance, and deception, capacities that are increasingly delegated to machines that can pass for, or impersonate, us in various settings, but which we are nevertheless anxious about personifying. The book’s final story is that of the celebrity, a type of abstract person whose commodity form—that of the persona—moves through the circuits and cycles of consumption and entertainment as a property only tenuously connected to the person that ostensibly grounds it.

In each of these stories, Hamilton’s aim is to demonstrate the trouble with persons, personality, and impersonation by highlighting complex and sometimes contradictory subplots that run below or alongside the dominant legal narratives through which these stories (crucially, not “cases”) and the questions they raise are typically presented. What makes this approach so successful is that Hamilton’s nuanced readings of the complex and controversial culture of personality, and its stakes, never come at the expense of a thoroughgoing and expert rendering of the legal and jurisprudential technicalities her treatment nevertheless seeks to exceed and augment. Hamilton walks the walk when it comes to both legal and cultural studies and, quite aside from the thought-provoking insights that appear consistently throughout the text, the book represents a model for the sort of high-calibre scholarship that becomes possible when an author takes the wager of interdisciplinarity seriously.

The book’s primary theoretical contribution is Hamilton’s development of the concept of the persona as a necessary cultural adjunct to overly juridical discourses of the person. If personhood is a status bestowed or occupied by objects, then persona is
the “lived articulation of that person” as performed in the context of cultures that co-
construct the meaning of that performance. Hamilton's stories teach us that juridical
discourses of the person cannot tell us much about the stakes of personality absent a
simultaneous and equivalent reckoning with narratives of persona, a reckoning that
arguably exceeds the juridical in its complexity, if only because such performances are
enacted and circulate across the multiplicity of shifting registers. Hamilton's implicit
counsel is that we resist the temptation to objectify the person and instead treat per-
sonality as the emerging and relational thing that it really is. As she puts it, “Personality,
rather than an outcome, is revealed as a process, as something we do, rather than
something we are” (p. 221). The weary humans on Galactica ask whether their captives
are human and, certain that they are not, act accordingly. Perhaps they would have
done better to ask what sort of persons the Cylons in their custody might be, and what
sort of persons they themselves were becoming in casting them out of the airlock.

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