Hello. My name is Doug Davis and I teach English at Gordon College in Barnesville, GA, a little rural town that is about one hour’s drive west of O’Connor’s home town of Milledgeville, Georgia. The title of my paper is “Technological Distances: Science, Technology, and Flannery O’Connor,” although I would like to amend that and call the subtitle, “Science, Technology, and the Posthuman Flannery O’Connor,” and that’s kind of a weird title for a paper about Flannery O’Connor.

Today I want to read Flannery O’Connor in the future by close-reading one of her cold war stories, “The Displaced Person,” through the lens of Donna Haraway’s cold-war era essay about the promise and perils of a state of contemporary being known as posthumanism, “The Cyborg Manifesto.” O’Connor’s tale of the Displaced Person becomes a science fictional parable of two apocalyptic futures in which the American south is destroyed in good and bad ways. The south does not stay the same in O’Connor’s tale. It can become a postindustrial factory farm blind to the
divisions of race, or it can revert to the segregated agrarianism of life before the civil war.

In the two novels and nearly twenty stories she published over the two decades following the Second World War, O’Connor frequently makes reference to the technological things and scientific ideas that fill Americans with personal and even spiritual meaning. In a way, O’Connor saw our future. Her fiction consistently represents the blurring of boundaries—between human, animal, and machine; between science, technology, and culture; between the sacred and the profane—that mark the critical conversations of the dawning postmodern era and the 21st century.

O’Connor once wrote in a letter to a close friend, “I owe my existence and cheerful countenance to the pituitary glands of thousands of pigs butchered daily in Chicago, Illinois at the Armour packing plant. If pigs wore garments I wouldn’t be worthy to kiss the hems of them.” The subject of experimental lupus treatments, O’Connor had personal experience with the scientifically enhanced blurring of the boundary between humans and animals that contemporary critics identify as one of the aspects of posthumanity. O’Connor often presents people who are bodily joined to technological things and animals and who thus become new kinds of physical and political entities. Stories such as “The Life You Save May be
Your Own,” “Greenleaf,” “Good Country People,” and “The Displaced Person,” along with the novels Wise Blood and The Violent Bear it Away, all feature characters who can profitably be analyzed as posthuman.

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Posthumanism is both a way of representing humans in terms drawn from contemporary sciences and technologies that are not traditionally associated with the human being and a way of understanding society and political action based on one’s personal relationship to not only other people but also different technologies and systems. O’Connor literalizes both of these aspects of posthuman analysis through her many prosthetically augmented, technologically adroit, animal husbanding characters. O’Connor’s posthumans, as we see in “The Displaced Person,” represent new political economies produced not only by the south’s shifting demographics, but also by industrial farming, by American consumer culture, and by the cold war.

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“The Displaced Person” is a southern-gothic pre-telling of Donna Haraway’s science-fictional “Cyborg Manifesto,” the famous essay about posthumanism that Haraway published in her book, Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. **Summarize the story here**
**extemporaneously.** However, read through Haraway’s essay, “The Displaced Person” becomes a science fiction about two possible posthuman futures that are right around the corner—and it is also about the people (including, perhaps, O’Connor herself) who want no part of either of them.

Within its harsh tale of crime and punishment, “The Displaced Person” engages a posthuman myth central to imperialism, to global capitalism, to technoculture, and to national defense in the nuclear age alike: what Donna Haraway calls in her manifesto, quote, “the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet…the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence, the final appropriation of…bodies in a[n] orgy of war” (154). That’s some fiery rhetoric, but it pretty accurately describes both who Mr. Guizac the Displaced Person is and the situation he and his family have fled from. Mr. Guizac is a fugitive from both the Nazi and Soviet war machines.

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Indeed, thinking of the world the Displaced Person came from prompts Mrs. Shortly, the farmhand, to recall the literal orgy of war. I quote:

Mrs. Shortley recalled a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a
foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a
hand raised clutching nothing. Before you could realize that it was
real and take it into your head, the picture changed and a hollow-
sounding voice was saying, “Time marches on!” (287)

As far as farmowner Mrs. McIntyre is concerned, Mr. Guizac is merely an
extremely handy animal driven by pure instrumental reason.

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Not knowing Polish, she is unable to communicate with him, but that hardly
matters, for, I quote, “All of Mr. Guizac’s motions were quick and accurate.
He jumped on the tractor like a monkey and maneuvered the big orange
cutter into the cane; in a second the silage was spurting in a green jet out of
the pipe into the wagon. He went jolting down the row until he disappeared
from sight and the noise became remote. / Mrs. McIntyre sighed with
pleasure” (293).

     Alone atop his many machines, the Displaced Person is a monkey in a
space capsule, a man-machine lost in space, always receding from view in
O’Connor’s story. As far as Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley are concerned,
the DP neither has nor needs a home. As Mrs. Shortley tells the farmhands
Astor and Sulk, “they ain’t where they were born at and there’s nowhere for
them to go” (290). As far Mrs. Shortley and McIntyre are concerned, the
Displaced Person possesses no true language other than the motions he expertly uses to interface with all of the machines on the farm, machines that O’Connor describes in long lists like technological litanies, as I quote: “the new silage cutter...a tractor...the rotary hay-baler, the combine, the letz mill, or any other machine on the place...[including] the milking machines” (292), a “drag harrow” and a “power-lift” (298). Nor does the Displaced Person have any human vices; he is impossibly thrifty and doesn’t even smoke cigarettes.

Mrs. Shortly sees Mr. Guizac as part of the history of technology, a threatening historical progression that is turning farms into industrial sites. As she warns the black farmhands Astor and Sulk, “‘All you colored people better look out... Before it was a tractor...it could be a mule. And before it was a Displaced Person, it could be a nigger. The time is going to come,’ she prophesied, ‘when it won’t be no more occasion to speak of a nigger’” (297).

These are ironic words that point to a far different future world than the segregated pastoral the Shortleys wish to live in. And Mrs. Shortley is correct, we soon learn, because if the Displaced Person has his way the races themselves will blend beyond recognition...but I am getting ahead of myself....

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“[T]he cyborg is the awful apocalyptic telos of the West’s escalating dominations of abstract individuation,” Haraway writes, “an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space” (150-151). That is the cyborg produced by the 20th century’s capitalist war machines, the cyborg that Mrs. McIntyre finds so useful because all it has to do is work for her and efficiently mow down all the plants in the path of his machines (294). “She didn’t know anything about him except that he did the work” (310), O’Connor writes of Mrs. McIntyre. The Displaced Person doesn’t even have to be physically present—he is merely abstract individuated labor. “[A]t last I’m saved!’ Mrs. McIntyre [tells Mrs. Shortley]…. ‘That man there,’ and she pointed to where the Displaced Person had disappeared, “—he has to work! He wants to work!... That man is my salvation!” (294).

Yet Mrs. Shortley’s personal little war-against-nature grain cutting machine is only one perspective of the myth of the cyborg—a totalitarian perspective, a grid of control and death.

The global high-tech nature of the cyborg can also be the foundation for a new progressive and liberatory myth of political identity, Haraway observes. “From another perspective,” Haraway writes, “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of
permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (154). In place of the regional and cultural identities that are so crucial to O’Connor’s set-in-their-ways southerners, the cyborg has no identity—rather, it is a product of sundry affinities, a creature whose home is all of global technoculture, and its politics are also those of affinity, not identity.

While one the one hand the cyborg is a man in space, it is also a global hybrid, an extension of all the systems and peoples and things that got it into space and keep it living there. Recognizing those systems as part of oneself, posthumanists argue, is a new way of thinking that opens to the imagination new forms of political alliance and new forms of human being that blur distinctions between all absolute categories and abstract identities including, in the present case, White. Southern. American. Human.

As a creature of the global cold war machine, The Displaced Person has this so-called posthuman hybridizing potential within his cyborg being too. This potential is realized once Mr. Guizac tries to arrange a transatlantic marriage between his very white cousin who is still in a refugee camp and Sulk the farmhand. If Mr. Guizac has his way, to paraphrase Mrs. Shortley, there truly will not be a need to talk about black and white races anymore.

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O’Connor’s lyric prose style is a hybridizing force in her story as well, a kind of cyborg writing in its own right. Her characters might not like Mr. Guizac’s future, but O’Connor herself is already writing within it. As far as O’Connor’s Southern characters are concerned white is white, black is black, man is man, machine is machine, cow is cow, American is American, and so on. But in the poetry of O’Connor’s fiction—and this applies to all of her fiction—things are never what they are, especially human beings. People are already animals. People are already machines. People are even rocks and mountains and ice and light and fossils.

Some of O’Connor’s posthuman imagery is familiar, such as the recurring sight of cows hooked to milking machines being drained for countless hungry human tummies. Yet much of her posthuman imagery is startling and estranging. Here is our first sight of Mrs. Shortly in the first paragraph of “The Displaced Person”: “She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy points of light that pierced forward” (285). Where Mrs. Shortley is elemental, the farmhand Sulk is animalistic, quote, “with a short woodchuck-like head” (289). Her husband Mr. Shortly is a predator made of darkness, quote, “a long beak-nosed shadow glid[ing] like a snake halfway up [a] sunlit open door” (323). The judge, Mrs. McIntyre’s first
husband, is a dinosaur: “His teeth and hair were tobacco-colored and his face a clay pink pitted and tracked with mysterious prehistoric-looking marks as if he had been unearthed among fossils” (309). And Mr. Guizac is a monkey, of course, but throughout the story he is also viewed and treated as a part of the machines he operates without question or fail.

Early in the story Mrs. McIntyre herself is described with clichés as being a cherub and having a doll’s mouth. Yet when learning from Sulk about his plans to marry one of Mr. Guizac’s white cousins, Mrs. McIntyre’s eyes become as elemental as Mrs. Shortley’s legs, quote “the color of blue granite when the glare falls on it” (311). Mr. Guizac the global cyborg comes from a world at total war that, while motivated by intense racial hatred, has developed weapons of mass destruction whose powers transcend all racial distinctions. The apocalyptic global affinity between the holocaust survivor Guizac and the diasporic farmhand Sulk (who Mr. Shortley at one point even reminds as having ancestors who were forcibly taken from Africa)—this affinity trumps any regional racial identities they may have.

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In the only conversation that Mrs. McIntyre has with Mr. Guizac in the entire story, he tells her in broken English: “She no care black….She in camp three year” (314).
Mrs. McIntyre suddenly has a name for this horrible cyborg force that will remake her farm in its own apocalyptic image of post-racial high-tech workers astride machines: “Monster!” (313) she calls him.

Mrs. Shortley for her part had early on recognized the Displaced Person’s almost atomic capacity to forever destroy the traditional Southern culture she cherished and reproduce Europe’s wastelands and it’s monstrous hybrids in the heart of Georgia. She alone immediately recognized that the Guizacs were extensions of apocalyptic world war bringing what she calls, quote, “all those murderous ways over the water with them” (287). “She began to imagine a war of words,” O’Connor writes, “to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel” (300). With her death, Mrs. Shortly is the first casualty in this war.

Upon learning of the Displaced Person’s miscegenistic plans, Mrs. McIntyre’s industrial dreams for her farm become cyborg nightmares in
which categories get confused as well, I quote: “One night she dreamed that
Mr. Guizac and his family were moving into her house and that she was
moving in with Mr. Shortley. This was too much for her and she woke up
and didn’t sleep again for several nights” (322).

Both she and Mr. Shortley resolve to rid their farm of the disruptive
cyborg once his radical political potential is realized. They do so by trying to
turn this post-racial, hybridizing cyborg back into the abstract individuated
little war machine he once was. Through both their spoken words and
O’Connor’s figurative language, they push Mr. Guizac from one cyborg
discourse, the post-racial discourse of transgressive global affinities, back
into the cyborg discourse of total war from whence it came. If they can get
Mr. Guizac rhetorically back into the war machine, they can defuse his
disruptive political agency, contain him in a cold war fashion, and purge him
from their ranks.

Resolving to fire Mr. Guizac, Mrs. McIntyre, quote, “narrowed her
gaze until it closed entirely around the diminishing figure on the tractor as if
she were watching him through a gunsight,” O’Connor writes (315).

“Monster!” (313)

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Mr. Shortley, for his part, suddenly remembers that he is a veteran of the first world war, and drawing a clear difference between Us and Them he starts to talk about Mr. Guizac as a part of the war machine he fought against. “Mr. Shortley said he never had cared for foreigners since he had been in the first world’s war and seen what they were like,” O’Connor writes.

He said he had seen all kinds but that none of them were like us. He said he recalled the face of one man who had thrown a hand-grenade at him and that the man had had little round eye-glasses like Mr. Guizac’s.

“But Mr. Guizac is a Pole, he’s not a German,” Mrs. McIntyre had explained.

“It ain’t a great deal of difference in them two kinds,” Mr. Shortley had explained. (319-320)

Adopting his own cyborg discourse of technological affinity, Mr. Shortley continues to describe all people who wear glasses as the enemy: “Gone over there and fought and bled and died and come back on over here and find out who’s got my job—just exactly who I been fighting. It was a hand-grenade come that near to killing me and I seen who throwed it—little man with eye
glasses just like his. Might have bought them at the same store. Small 
world…” (323).

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It is fitting that Mr. Shortley kills Mr. Guizac with a runaway tractor at 
story’s end, a machine death for a man who Mrs. McIntyre only valued so 
long as he could operate her machines. Mr. Guizac isn’t even fully present as 
a contiguous human being at his own death; his torso is submerged beneath a 
tractor, invisible to the readers. He never sees the other tractor that kills him. 
Nor does anyone present warn him it’s coming.

I think it is telling that O’Connor kills her cyborg, a bearer of her 
region’s future, be it a future of racial integration, industrial farming, or 
nuclear holocaust. Both Mr. Shortly and Sulk, each of whom are implicated 
in Mr. Guizac’s death along with Mrs. McIntyre, flee the farm, never to be 
seen again. Mrs. McIntyre loses her farm and retires to her bedroom to have 
the doctrines of the Church explained to her by the same Priest who brought 
her the Displaced Person. When Mr. Shortley, Sulk and Mrs. McIntyre killed 
Mr. Guizac, they killed their future.

O’Connor writes a lot of stories about people who afraid to confront 
the future. And she writes a lot of stories about people who are too eager to 
embrace that very same future. But throughout her fiction, O’Connor
recognized, pretty early on in the history of American literature and with a surprising clarity and consistency, the posthuman future that we all increasingly inhabit.