Review of Rosi Braidotti (2019). *Posthuman Knowledge*
Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 210 pp. ISBN 9781509535255
(Hardcover)

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Published online: 3 June 2020
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Introduction

Why would a non-philosopher read *Posthuman Knowledge* (Braidotti 2019)? My interest in posthumanism is connected to my work as an educator in instructional design and educational technology; a field in which there are lingering arguments about the disembodiment effects of information and communication technologies. I regularly encounter colleagues eagerly investigating artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, 3D printing, and digitization, all of which facilitate the transformation of material to digital and back again. As such, it is increasingly apparent how human activity, materiality, and digital spaces are entangled. Regardless of whether learning takes place as blended or online, our human-material situatedness presents itself and leaves traces in our virtual interactions—albeit in different ways than in face-to-face conversations.

Posthuman Knowledge is a challenging read partially because it is written more so for a philosophy audience. While this book might feel overwhelming for the uninitiated, it offers some very timely ‘affirmative’ messages that are much needed in society generally as we cope with current complexities—not the least of which includes the current Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has emerged through the interaction of humans and animals; it has spread rapidly around the world due to global travel; and news of its impact invades our awareness through television, radio, news apps, and social media. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed numerous social issues that have been quietly converging for decades. It has brought to light wealth disparities in which the ability to work from home via technology is available only to the wealthy; the poor are forced to continue working in unsafe conditions potentially exposing them to the virus. Furthermore, wealthy and powerful entities are actively using social media to discredit scientific evidence supporting social

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distancing and self-isolation practices. These examples attest to the complex and dynamic convergence of socio-cultural, political, environmental, technological, and capitalist practices that are continuously reshaping and legitimizing certain kinds of power and knowledge. Braidotti's posthumanist approach, however, 'foreground[s] the critical potential of the PostHumanities' (Braidotti 2019: 104). Her materialist affirmative ethics offers the posthuman subject a way to move towards empowerment and creativity rather than despair and nihilism.

Posthuman Knowledge comprises seven chapters: (1) The Posthuman Condition, (2) Posthuman Subjects, (3) Posthuman Knowledge Production, (4) The Critical PostHumanities, (5) How to Do Posthuman Thinking, (6) On Affirmative Ethics, and (7) The Inexhaustible. This book can be read as an introduction to posthumanism. Or, as I found helpful, it can be read more easily after reading Braidotti's earlier work which lead to this work. My goal for this review is to summarize the content of the book—albeit simplified and hopefully accessible to the less philosophically inclined—beginning with the origins of posthumanist thought. This is followed by commentary on current social issues (the posthuman convergence) and, hence, the need for the field of Critical PostHumanism. Finally, I conclude with thoughts on how this work may positively impact my own work in field of education.

Emergence of Posthuman Thought

Braidotti's background is in continental philosophy as well as radical feminism, radical anti-fascism and anti-racism. Indeed, we see in her work notions of process ontology (Braidotti 2006), *zoe* (vital, self-organizing matter) (2013), as well as elements of inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Foucault (1970) and Irigaray (1993). Posthumanism emerged from the so-called radical epistemologies over the past thirty years as a reaction to European Humanist thought which placed the human (to wit: male European perspectives) at the center of concern along with specific historically situated, socio-cultural structures and inequalities. The radical and critical studies began questioning this underlying assumption of the humanities. Feminism, for example, raises awareness of the 'embodied, embedded and sexed roots of subjectivity and their unexplored resources' (Braidotti 2019: 48). Braidotti claims "'we" are situated, feminist-minded, anti-racist, post- and de-colonial thinkers and practitioners, who are trying to come to terms with the challenges of the posthuman convergence, while avoiding a universal posture or undue generalization' (86–87).

Centers of research for posthuman studies have emerged in countries such as the UK, Denmark, Canada, Sweden, the USA, and South Korea. There are varieties such as theoretical, insurgent, speculative, cultural, literary, trans-humanist, meta-humanist, a-humanist, and no doubt others. There is even a posthumanist manifesto (Pepperell 2005) and book series published through Minnesota University Press (Wolfe 2010). The proliferation of posthumanist research is potentially related to perceived acceleration of social issues such as climate change, the erosion of democracy, and increased disparity between the rich and the poor.

The Need for Critical PostHumanism

Braidotti highlights the challenges the world is currently facing such as the Sixth Extinction, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and advanced capitalism. It is almost prescient that she wrote this book before the Covid-19 pandemic. As evidenced by the rise in populism, militarism, anxiety, and ecological disaster, she argues that these factors weigh heavily upon us psychologically and politically. ‘The current technological revolution not only intensifies these fears, but also spreads them to a new dimension, that is both planetary [global] and very intimate [local]’ (96). The ‘posthuman convergence’ is complex and multilayered. At first, these challenges appear negative and insurmountable; however, Braidotti argues that posthumanist critique can provide us with ways to reconceptualize our existence and, thereby, enhance our capacity to move forward in a positive manner.

Subjectivity

At the outset, Braidotti asks the reader to consider the nature of humanity and what constitutes a subject. In fact, *subjectivity* is a central concept in *Posthuman Knowledge*. The posthuman subject is a convergence of *zoe* (‘the life of all living things’), *bios* (‘the life of humans organized in society’), and technology (10). Although the posthuman subject is a reaction to the notion of *human*, the intent is not to reject the human but to put the human in balance with the rest of the world of which it is an immanent (inherent/integrated) part. A major goal is to avoid binaries such as human/non-human but, instead, adopt a position of relationship. Braidotti’s conception of posthumanism is not *inhuman*, but a convergence of *zoe-bios-techno* through material immanence. Consciousness is distributed. Ontologically, the world is ‘contiguous and co-constructed’ (127). In this way, all matter, creatures, and people are of equal importance. Since all entities matter, posthumanism exposes power hierarchies that have traditionally excluded and dehumanized *others* (76). This posthumanist perspective acknowledges multiplicity, but avoids moving into relativism because it takes into consideration situatedness: ‘The proper subject of the posthuman convergence is not “Man”, but a new collective subject, a “we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same” kind of subject’ (54).

Affirmative Ethics

Within a posthuman framework, the subject’s ethical core should not be defined in terms of intentionality, but as its forces and affects. Ethics is defined as the pursuit of affirmative values and relations, and politics as the pragmatic practice of implementing them. Ethical power can only be understood in terms of *potentia*, the empowerment. (Braidotti 2019: 136).

A significant feature of posthuman cartography is to map both the positive and empowering features of phenomena as well as the negative ones such as ‘inequality, discrimination and exclusion’ (154). In rejecting universalism and transcendental (‘normative’) consciousness, Braidotti recommends adoption of transversal subjectivity

‘grounded in immanent interconnections and generative difference’ (165). Terms such as *human* and *normal* connote a universal conception of what it means to be a valued subject ascribed certain powers, privileges, and legitimacy. In a transversal approach, on the other hand, different entities can ‘relate to multiple others, in a productive and mutually enforcing manner, and creating a community that actualizes this ethical propensity’ (166). In this way, posthuman subjects are both empowered and empowering. In enacting affirmative ethics, we acknowledge our relationality within larger assemblages. Engaging in posthuman thought means creating new ways of thinking and increases our ability to locate positive, alternative, non-hierarchical, respectful ways of interacting within such assemblages.

Methodology

Posthumanist thinking and research require researchers to step outside of the anthropocentric mindset (i.e., that only human qualities matter), to defamiliarize the taken-for-granted (i.e., to bring to the surface the invisible or forgotten), to dislodge universalist thinking (i.e., that we are all the same), and to reject power hierarchies (i.e., that only some are deemed valuable). It requires researchers to consider posthuman subjects as constantly becoming (i.e., motion us towards what could be; the *virtual*) instead of having already crystalized identities. Materialist cartographic methodology is highly interdisciplinary and uses methods that already exist in social sciences research and critical studies.

Cartography is a means of situating knowledge claims and examining power structures by mapping differences as well as similarities. Cartographic accounts share ‘immanent perspectives that honour the materiality of discursive production and the relational structure of subjectivity’ (103). Cartographies should be empirically verifiable, faithful to experiential accounts, and avoid reductionist summaries and categorization. Braidotti argues that posthumanist methodology must ‘resist grand theories while staying grounded through embodied and embedded perspectives’ (136). In this way, the figurations or maps retain their local, situated perspectives and avoid universalistic claims. Accounts are often non-linear and reflect non-hierarchical complexities and multiplicities. Cartographic accounts should help defamiliarize taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. The point is to understand the actual and hypothesize the virtual—or what could be.

Although the main purpose of *Posthumanist Knowledge* is not necessarily to provide a step-by-step how-to guide on conducting materialist cartographies, Braidotti provides some examples of studies that qualify as posthumanist such as Gabrys (2011) study of digital rubbish and Parikka’s (2015) work in geological materialism. Yet it remains unclear what such a cartography would look like and how it would be different from other research in critical studies.

Education

Braidotti offers two avenues in which posthumanism can positively shape our education system: (1) embedding posthumanist thinking into curriculum and (2) embedding

posthumanist values into the structure of our educational institutions. As part of teaching practice, posthumanist teaching and learning hypothetically becomes collaborative space in which participants are encouraged to think beyond the human and make space for non-human others. Critical thinking incorporates defamiliarization, awareness-raising, and the unlearning of privilege. ‘The emphasis on mixity, hybridity and difference makes for a practically oriented and relational style of teaching’ (142). The posthuman university would be *postdisciplinary* and question traditional power structures and knowledge claims. Corporatization of universities and fierce competition for research dollars would be replaced by collaborative, non-competitive, non-exclusionary strategies. Universities, embedded and embodied within local communities, would be acknowledged as hubs of communal sharing and learning.

Conclusion

Can posthumanism help us move towards a more just and sustainable way of life on a planet with finite resources and, possibly, finite vitality? Throughout this book, Braidotti offers a certain positive outlook in which she is critical of the blind optimism of the transhumanists of the Silicon Valley type and equally critical of dystopian views of the death of humanity. Rather, in this book and in her other work, she envisions great accomplishment and hope for the world—posthumanity conceptualized in terms of a *nature-culture-techno* continuum characterized by affirmative relations. As the current Covid-19 pandemic has spread throughout the world, I write this review from isolation. The Covid-19 pandemic raises awareness, in a startling fashion, of the complexities and interdependence of humans and non-humans not to mention the interplay of power, politics, and capitalism. A posthumanist affirmative ethics might help us to reconceptualize a more just post-pandemic world. For this reason, Braidotti’s book is timelier than ever.

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