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Posthuman(ist) Feminism, Feminist Posthumanities

by [Aino-Kaisa Koistinen](#) & [Sanna Karkulehto](#)



“[F]eminism is *not* a humanism”, states Rosi Braidotti in her article “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism”.^[1] The argument might seem obscure, when considering feminism’s claims for equality between differently gendered, racialised and classed people (to mention just a few variables of social division). Braidotti contends that ties between liberal and socialist feminism and Enlightenment-based humanism do appear, although she simultaneously highlights the unproblematised history and complexity of the category of “humanity”, especially in terms of women:

[T]he political case for women’s and other minorities’ emancipation has been argued along the lines of a notion of equality that assumes an unproblematic belonging to the

same category of humanity. This position tended to view the natural order as servitude, violence, and brutality: nature as the naturalization of inequalities.^[2]

This “belonging to a common idea of the human” has, however, for long been critiqued within feminism, notably during the last three decades. This has led to a rejection of the Eurocentrism of humanism, making feminism antihumanist, or, indeed, posthumanist.^[3] Indeed, according to many, this common idea of the human often excludes beings that fall outside the white, masculine, wealthy, healthy and heterosexual norm.^[4] Many fields which are indebted in some way to feminist perspectives, such as disability studies, animal studies, LGBTQI studies, poststructuralist theory, critical race studies, crip theory, and environmental activism – to name but a few – have all questioned the andro- and/or anthropocentrism of humanism.^[5] It could thus be argued that there has been a so-called posthumanist turn in many fields.

In order to understand the intersections and relativity between feminism and posthumanism one must, of course, understand the concept of “posthumanism” – or the “posthuman”. According to Cecilia Åsberg, Redi Koobak and Ericka Johnson the term posthuman designates a number of recent attempts to reconfigure the relationship between human embodiment and technological developments. Whereas some scholars use the term as a metaphor for the threat of science and the violation of the species-purity of human beings, others see it as something that complicates the very notion of pure species integrity.^[6] It is the latter understanding of the posthuman, as well as posthumanism, that connects it to feminist theory and its concerns with political and ethical questions related to, for example, difference and vulnerability.

Posthuman and Posthumanism in the Context of Feminism

In the context of feminism, the posthuman and posthumanism explicitly call into question the anthropocentric biases of humanist thought and human exceptionalism, the optimistic belief in technological progress, hierarchical categories of nature and culture, the Other and the Self, the human and the nonhuman, and the ethics of current human-nonhuman relations.^[7] In other words, feminist posthumanities can be described as a re-negotiating of “the human” in a manner that questions humanist hierarchical conceptualisations of the term, while it also brings to the fore the materiality and vulnerability of human existence and ethics in terms of nonhuman existence.^[8] In this sense, as Åsberg notes, the posthuman, or material or ontological turn in feminism, is also an ethical turn and is parallel to, for example, feminist science and technology studies, life sciences, feminist health and body studies, and new materialism, which have highlighted the role of the material in feminist thinking and practice.^[9]

The background of feminist posthumanities stems from early anti-humanist theorisation, genealogies and the critical thought of classic scholars familiar to feminist theory such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, all of whom have questioned the universality, rationality and mastery of the human subject.

Additionally, feminist posthumanities are indebted – across the many fields of feminist movement, studies and philosophy – to cultural, environmental, science and technology studies, as well as a wide range of arts, literature and film.^[10]



Feminist scholars writing within the framework of feminist posthumanism, or whose work otherwise resonates with the concept, have recently discussed, for instance, the ethics of passing for/as human in science fiction,^[11] digital hauntology,^[12] disability/crip and monsters,^[13] embodiment,^[14] animal encounters,^[15] queer,^[16] death,^[17] and bio-art,^[18] to mention a few intriguing topics that show the multiplicity of thematics being dealt with in feminist posthumanities. Both the past and the present of this field prove that posthumanism, in the feminist understanding, calls for questioning the tradition of anthropocentric and androcentric

humanism, which separates the human from all those considered nonhuman: “the colonized and the enslaved, the marginalized and the non-citizen, the woman and the animal—which all of them are made into Other than rational man”.^[19]

Reimagining the Human, the Nonhuman, and Humanity

Even if Donna Haraway is said to have “no patience” with the concept of the posthuman,^[20] she holds the reputation of being one of the most important, influential and inspirational scholars for posthumanist feminist thinking. Her work is closely intertwined with feminist posthumanities, as it is preoccupied with the ethics of complex entanglements between humans and nonhumans – be they machines, other-than-human animals, or other critters of the naturalcultural realm.^[21] In her influential ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, Haraway introduced the cyborg as a feminist figure that did not only question dualistic divisions and hierarchies between organism and machine, but also those between mind and body, nature and culture, human and animal, and male and female.^[22] Since then the cyborg has been broadly used as a boundary-breaking figure in posthuman(ist) theory for reimagining the human, the nonhuman, and humanity. In her recent work, Haraway forsakes humanism for “humus” and the posthuman for “compost”, both referring to the ways that human beings are enmeshed in tentacular processes of “becoming-with” all that is other-than-human.^[23]



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The feminist criticism of anthropocentric humanism is especially topical today, when scholars are debating, whether we are now living a new age of human domination, and if so, what that age should be called. The name Anthropocene is, perhaps, most commonly offered to describe this epoch, but Haraway, for example, has criticised the concept as human-centred, and offered the term Chthulucene instead to describe our time as a messy compost pile of connections between humans and nonhumans.^[24] When writing on feminism in the time of the Anthropocene, Stacy Alaimo also asks: “Who is the ‘anthro’ of the ‘Anthropocene’? In its ostensible universality, does the prefix suggest a subject position that anyone could inhabit?”^[25] Alaimo highlights the problematics of assuming a common, unified humanity as the cause of the so-called Anthropocene, as the standards of humanitarian and human ethics are not practiced or met equally, and “the Human itself has become an untenable, delusional, and certainly destructive concept”.^[26] There indeed is a need for new perspectives and approaches that enable living and engaging ethically with a multiplicity of otherness and the otherness of multiplicity on the changing planet

Earth. Feminist posthumanities can offer openings and opportunities for these approaches.^[27]

– University of Jyväskylä, Finland, July 2018

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^[1]Rosi Braidotti, ‘Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism’, in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 21–48, p. 21.

^[2]Braidotti, ‘Four Theses’, p. 21.

^[3]Braidotti, ‘Four Theses’, pp. 21–31.

^[4]See further, e.g. Braidotti, ‘Four Theses’, p. 23; Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 6–8.

^[5]See further Cecilia Åsberg, Redi Koobak and Ericka Johnson, ‘Beyond the Humanist Imagination’, *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 19/4 (2011), pp. 218–230; Braidotti, ‘Four Theses’, pp. 21–48; Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, *The Human Question in Science Fiction Television: (Re)Imagining Humanity in Battlestar Galactica, Bionic Woman and V* (University of Jyväskylä, 2015), p. 59.

[6]Åsberg, Koobak & Johnson, 'Beyond', pp. 218–230(pp. 226–227); see also Koistinen, *The Human Question*, p. 43.

[7]See, e.g. Cecilia Åsberg& Rosi Braidotti, 'Feminist Posthumanities: An Introduction', in *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, ed. by Cecilia Åsberg& Rosi Braidotti (Cham: Springer, 2018), pp. 1–22; Cecilia Åsberg, 'The Timely Ethics of Posthumanist Gender Studies', *Feministische Studien*31/1 (2013), pp. 7–12; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Cary Wolfe. *What is Posthumanism?*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 17.

[8]Aino-Kaisa Koistinen,*The Human Question*, p. 43; see also Åsberg, Koobak and Johnson, 'Beyond', pp. 218–230; Åsberg, 'The timely ethics', pp. 7–12.

[9]Åsberg 2013, 'The Timely Ethics', p. 7; see also Koistinen, *The Human Question*, p. 14. For more on posthuman ethics, see Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics. Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[10]Åsberg& Braidotti, 'Feminist Posthumanities: An Introduction', pp. 1–22 (pp. 2–7).

[11]Ingvil Hellstrand, *Passing as Human: Posthuman Worldings At Stake in Contemporary Science Fiction*(University of Stavanger, 2015); Koistinen, *The Human Question*.

[12]Line Henriksen, *In the Company of Ghosts: Hauntology, Ethics, Digital Monsters* (Linköping University, 2016).

[13]Donna McCormack, 'Queer Disability: Postcolonial Feminism and the Monsters of Evolution', in *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, ed. by Cecilia Åsberg & Rosi Braidotti (Cham: Springer, 2018), pp. 153–164.

[14]See Margrit Schildrick *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (Sage: London, 2002); Schildrick, Re/membering the Body, in *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, ed. by Cecilia Åsberg & Rosi Braidotti (Cham: Springer, 2018), pp. 165–174.

[15]Lynda Birke & Tora Holmberg, 'Intersections: The Animal Question Meets Feminist Theory', in *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, ed. by Cecilia Åsberg & Rosi Braidotti (Cham: Springer, 2018), pp. 117–128.

[16]Patricia MacCormack, 'Queer Posthumanism: Cyborgs, Animals, Monsters, Perverts', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. by Noreen Giffney & Michael O'Rourke (London: Routledge, 2009).

[17]Tara Mehrabi, *Making Death Matter: A Feminist Technoscience Study of Alzheimer's Sciences in the Laboratory* (Linköping University, 2016).

[18]Marietta Radomska, *Uncontainable Life: A Biophilosophy of Bioart* (Linköping University, 2016).

[19]Cecilia Åsberg, 'A Feminist Companion to Post-humanities', *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 16/4, (2008), pp. 264–269; see also Koistinen, *The Human Question*, p. 14; Åsberg, Koobak & Johnson. 'Beyond', pp. 218–230 (pp. 224–227); Åsberg 'The Timely Ethics', pp. 7–12; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; Braidotti, 'Four Theses', pp. 21–48.

[20] Åsberg & Braidotti, 'Feminist Posthumanities: An Introduction', p. 11; see also Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 13, 97.

[21] See further Koistinen, *The Human Question*, pp. 43–45.

[22] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149–181, (e.g. pp. 149–152, 177); see also Koistinen, *The Human Question*, pp. 44–45. The manifesto was originally published as 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', *Socialist Review* 80 (1985), pp. 65–108.

[23] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, pp. 1–8, 11–12, 30–55, 97.

[24] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, e.g. pp. 1–8, 11, 30–55, 97.

[25] Stacy Alaimo, 'Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene Dissolves', in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 89–120 (p. 89).

[26] Stacy Alaimo, 'Material Feminism in the Anthropocene', in *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, ed. by Cecilia Åsberg & Rosi Braidotti (Cham: Springer, 2018), pp. 45–54 (p. 52).

[27] Åsberg & Braidotti, 'Feminist Posthumanities: An Introduction', p. 11; see also Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 4.