

The CRITICAL POSTHUMANITIES; or, IS MEDIANATURES to NATURECULTURES as *ZOE* IS to *BIOS*?

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Abstract This article situates the geological turn in media theory within the critical posthumanities, defining them in both quantitative and qualitative terms. They can be assessed quantitatively by reviewing the proliferation of interdisciplinary “studies” areas—such as media and gender studies—that have transformed the modes of knowledge production within the academic humanities and beyond. They are framed qualitatively by the neomaterialist, vital philosophy proposed by Gilles Deleuze’s Spinozism, based on the concepts of monism, radical immanence, and relational ontology. They not only support the idea of a nature-culture continuum but also provide the philosophical grounding for technological mediation to be defined not as a form of representation but as the expression of “medianaturecultural” ethical relations and forces.

Keywords posthuman, critical posthumanities, monistic vital materialism, affirmation

Introduction

What happens when technological mediation becomes the founding principle for the critical practice of the humanities, in alliance with a relational ontology that does not

rest on anthropocentric premises? As the articles gathered in this special section clearly show, what happens is a shift of paradigm in thinking about both the subject of the humanities as an academic field and the human knowing subject. Where a humanist, anthropocentric humanities used to be, a materialist and ecosophical—an embodied and embedded—critical post-humanities is coming into being.

The Humanities in the Anthropocene

The academic humanities have been criticized because of two major flaws: structural anthropomorphism on the one hand and in-built Eurocentrism on the other. Feminist and postcolonial theories have argued, for instance, that humanistic Man—as the universal measure of all things—defined himself as much by what he excluded as by what he included in his rational self-representation. History shows that this humanist vision of the subject also justified violent and belligerent exclusions of the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized “others”—women and LGBT+, indigenous people, animals and earth others—that occupy the slot of devalued difference in relation to the humanist normative standard. They embody difference as pejoration, and their differences get organized on a hierarchical scale of decreasing social and symbolic worth. These others become socially marginalized at the best of times and reduced to the subhuman status of disposable bodies in worst-case scenarios (Braidotti 2002, 2006).

In the Anthropocene, Man comes under further criticism from another angle, namely as *Anthropos*, that is to say as the allegedly rational member of an exceptional species that has granted himself the right to access the bodies of all other living entities. Once the centrality and the exceptionalism of *Anthropos* are challenged, the

often unperceived boundaries between Man and the multiple others are exposed and challenged. Thus, if the multifaceted critiques and revisions of humanism empowered the sexualized and racialized human others to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of oppositional hierarchical master-slave relations, the crisis of *Anthropos* relinquishes the forces of the naturalized others, instituting a zoontological turn (Fontenay 1998; Wolfe 2003). Animals, insects, plants, cells, bacteria—in fact, the planet and the cosmos, as a whole—are called into play in a planetary political arena.

The Anthropocene also happens to coincide with an era of high technological mediation, which challenges anthropocentrism from within. The decentering of *Anthropos* challenges therefore the separation of *bios*, life, as the prerogative of humans, from *zoe*, the life of animals and nonhuman entities. What has come to the fore, instead, in the past decades is a nature-culture continuum that affects not only the perception of scientific and cultural practice but also the vision of the embodied, embedded, relational, and affective structure of the nonunitary, nomadic, and extended self (Braidotti 2011a). This shift can be seen as a sort of anthropological exodus from the dominant configurations of the human as the king of creation—a colossal hybridization of the species (Hardt and Negri 2000: 215).

The emergence of geology as a term of reference for media and cultural criticism is emblematic of this shift of paradigm. It foregrounds not just *any* form of materiality, but rather—through the emphasis on plastic, metal, and heat—the earthbound, terrestrial kind of materialism (Protevi 2013).

As I have argued elsewhere (Braidotti 2016), over the last thirty years the core of

theoretical innovation in the humanities has emerged around a cluster of new, often radical, and always interdisciplinary fields of inquiry that have called themselves “studies.” Gender, feminist, queer, race, postcolonial, and subaltern studies, alongside cultural studies and film, television, and media studies, are the prototypes of the radical epistemologies that have voiced the situated knowledges of the structural others of humanist Man and *Anthropos*. Situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) have resulted in the production of theoretical cartographies and discourse analysis as diagrams of power, combining philosophical critiques with political reconstructions of both knowledge and social relations (Braidotti 2015).

These critical studies areas have provided a range of new methods and innovative concepts that have contributed to a rigorous revision of the often implicit assumptions about humanism and Eurocentrism, as well as to the implosion of anthropocentrism. They caused both internal fractures and the dislocation of outer disciplinary boundaries in the humanities. Institutionally, they are placed in between, across, and beyond the traditional disciplines. They do not, however, merely oppose humanism but also create alternative visions of the self, the human, knowledge, and society. Their insights and the new concepts they created have lasting consequences for the academic practice of the humanities. Although popular with students, these studies areas have usually been underfunded in terms of research.

The Critical Posthumanities

The obvious question that arises is what the humanities can become in the post-human era and after the decline of the primacy of universalist Man and of supremacist *Anthropos*. My argument is that today

the critical posthumanities are emerging as transdisciplinary discursive fronts not only around the edges of the classical disciplines but also across the established studies areas, as evidenced by environmental, digital, neural, biogenetic, and medical humanities. They rest on postanthropocentric premises and a technologically mediated emphasis on life as a *zoe*-centered system of species egalitarianism (Braidotti 2006). They embrace creatively the challenge of our historicity without giving in to cognitive panic and without losing sight of the perpetuation of patterns of oppression. These new ecosophical, posthumanist, and postanthropocentric dimensions are the building blocks for what I call the critical posthumanities.

These critical posthumanities are expressed by a second generation of studies areas. Within the environmental humanities, for instance, the growth has been remarkable, notably in animal studies and ecocriticism, and so well articulated that it is impossible to summarize them.¹ Cultural studies of science and society, religion and postsecular studies, disability studies, fat studies, success studies, celebrity studies, and globalization studies are further significant examples of the exuberant state of the new humanities in the twenty-first century. New media have proliferated into a whole series of subsections and metafields: software studies, internet studies, game studies, algorithmic studies, and more. This vitality justifies certain optimism about the future of the posthumanities, driven by ecosophical perspectives, on the one hand, and digital media theories, on the other. These perspectives provide the new ontological grounds for knowledge production, while the curriculum of the traditional humanities disciplines continues to resist interdisciplinary contamination. In other words,

the switch of emphasis toward “nature-cultures” (Haraway 1997, 2003) has now evolved into millennial “medianatures” (Parikka 2015) or even into what I would call “medianaturecultures,” displacing the centrality of human life (*bios*) in favor of the nonhuman (*zoe*).

The critical posthumanities can therefore be seen as the second generation of studies areas, genealogically indebted to the first generation of the 1970s in terms of methods and political affects while pursuing the work of critique into new spaces. But they go further and shed both ideological and tactical habits in order to develop more consistently transversal forms of inquiry. They differ from their predecessors in that they address directly and creatively the question of anthropocentrism, which had been left relatively underexamined, and yet they remain committed to social justice and ethical accountability.

For instance, a growing field of posthuman research concerns the inhuman(e) aspects of our historical condition, namely the recurrence of devastations, mass migration, wars on terror, violent evictions, and technologically mediated conflicts. These questions have been taken up within a wide range of fields: conflict studies and peace research; human rights studies and humanitarian management; human-rights-oriented medicine; trauma, memory, and reconciliation studies; security studies and death studies; suicide studies; queer inhuman studies; extinction studies—and the list is still growing. They perpetuate and update the transformative impact of critical thought: compassionate posthumanities for inhuman times.

It follows, therefore, that the studies areas, which historically have been the motor of both critique and creativity—innovative and challenging in equal

measure—have an inspirational role to play, both institutionally and theoretically, in relation to the posthuman context we inhabit. If the proper study of mankind used to be Man and the proper study of the classical humanities was the human, it follows that the proper framework to study the posthuman condition is the posthumanities, based on the complex human interaction with nonhuman agents. The field rests on the vision of the subject as nomadic, embedded, embodied, and technologically mediated (Braidotti 2011b). This knowing subject is a complex assemblage of human and nonhuman, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured, which requires major readjustments in our ways of thinking. The critical posthumanities need to embrace the multiple opportunities offered by this condition, while keeping up the analyses of power formations and the social forms of exclusion and dominations perpetuated by the current world order of biopiracy (Shiva 1997), necropolitics (Mbembe 2003), and worldwide dispossession (Sassen 2014).

I have proposed a monistic philosophy adapted from contemporary Deleuzian rereadings of Baruch Spinoza (Deleuze 1988, 1990) as the most suitable ontological grounding for this new vision of the posthuman knowing subject and for the practice of the critical posthumanities. Contemporary monism rests on the rejection of transcendentalism, which is replaced by the concepts of radical immanence, relational ontology, and affirmative ethics. Monism refers to Spinoza’s central concept that matter, the world, and humans themselves are not dualistic entities structured according to principles of internal or external opposition but rather materially embedded subjects-in-process circulating nomadically within webs of relation with forces, entities, and encounters.

The obvious target of criticism here is René Descartes's famous mind-body distinction, but for Spinoza the concept goes even further: matter is one, driven by the ontological desire for self-expression of its innermost freedom (*conatus*).

The rejection of dualistic schemes in favor of a complex process of differing within a common matter is framed by both internal and external forces. It is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others, both human and nonhuman. Monistic neomaterialism proposes a classification of all entities—things, objects, and human organisms included—in terms of their forces and impact on other entities in the world. An ethology of forces, in other words, produces a displacement of anthropocentric value systems, promoting a relational ethics of becoming, based on the pursuit of affirmation (Braidotti 2006).

Furthermore, an updated version of Spinozism as a democratic move toward radically immanent forms of immanence promotes micropolitical interventions of a very grounded and situated kind. One has to start from microinstances of embodied and embedded self and the complex web of social relations that compose the self. Within a vital monistic frame, this self is not an atomized entity but a non-unitary relational subject, nomadic and outward-bound.

This vision of the subject, which does not rely on classical humanism and carefully avoids anthropocentrism, is moreover marked by the structural presence of practices and *apparati* of mediation that inscribe technology as "second nature." The techno-ecosophical "milieu" is our living habitat, which Félix Guattari (1995, 2000) reformulated in terms of the multiple ecologies of "machinic autopoiesis." Contemporary monism supports this notion of technology as vital and self-organizing

matter, as well as a nonhuman definition of life as *zoe*, or dynamic and generative force.

Monistic vital materialism bypasses the binary between the material, the technological, and the cultural and focuses on their interaction, the better to interrogate the boundaries between them. A techno-ecological (Hörl 2013), posthuman turn is at work, which means that the vital self-organizing powers that were once reserved for organic entities have now become an integral part of our technologically mediated universe. A media-ecological continuum (Fuller 2005, 2008; Hansen 2006; Parikka 2010) also affects "humanimals" and their multiple activities, including the production of knowledge. Posthumanists of many dispositions agree that there is no "originary humanicity" (Kirby 2011: 233) but only "originary technicity" (MacKenzie 2002).

Because the human and social sciences have historically been the main beneficiaries of the transcendental anthropology that posits anthropocentrism, rationality, and transcendence as the basic units of reference for the human, they stand to gain the most by being recast today in the Spinozist mode of radical immanence and monistic materialism, enhanced by the high-technological mediation and technology (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

The monistic, ecosophical, and geo-centered turn (Bonta and Protevi 2004) that sustains the critical posthumanities, therefore, does not only take the form of a quantitative proliferation of knowledge-practices but also entails qualitative shifts and methodological innovations. These also affect the critical studies areas that may have perfected the critique of humanism but not necessarily relinquished anthropocentrism. Take, for instance, the

continuing reliance of so many studies areas on the social constructivist methodology, which rests on the oppositional logic of the nature vs. culture mode and on uncritical anthropocentrism. The inner tensions of this conventional method have been taken to task by many critical discourses and writers, including, in the mid-1980s, Donna Haraway, the most prominent contemporary postanthropocentric thinker. Through the figuration of the cyborg, Haraway (1985, 1990) foregrounds a dialogue between science and technology studies, race theory, socialist feminist politics, and feminist neomaterialism. This high degree of theoretical hybridity is supported by notions of interrelationality, mobility, receptivity, and global communication that deliberately blur categorical distinctions (human/nonhuman, nature/culture, male/female, Oedipal/non-Oedipal, European/non-European). Haraway's focus on human/nonhuman relations is not merely thematic; rather, she raises serious epistemological and ethical questions about the historical construction of these categories (Haraway 1997). Putting it in polemical terms, Haraway (2006) asks: "When we have never been human, what is to be done?" This approach intersects with the project of the critical posthumanities and the formation of a posthuman political subject that combines competence in contemporary biosciences and information technologies with a firm program of feminist social justice and critique of capitalist abuses.

Contesting Humanities

The driving force of the posthumanities is the crossover between the digital and the environmental humanities, sustained by a posthuman ethical passion.² Thus, the fields of digital media studies and media geology as study of planetary

infrastructures have emerged as one version of the digital humanities, while neomaterialist ecosophical studies are the fastest-growing area of the "green"—or environmental—humanities. These interdisciplinary fields of study spell the end of the idea of a social order disconnected from its environmental and organic foundations and call for more complex schemes of understanding the multilayered form of interdependence between contemporary nature and culture. They combine theories of historical subjectivity with "species thinking," proposing a postanthropocentric configuration of knowledge, which grants the earth the same role and agency as the human subjects that inhabit it. They demonstrate the extent to which the field will prosper if it shows the ability and willingness to undergo a process of transformation in the direction of the posthuman.

But this cannot be the full picture, of course. A specific feature of the critical posthumanities is the attention they pay to the missing links and the omissions in the new distribution of knowledge. These missing links are mostly the result of the high degrees of specialization required by the second generation of transdisciplinary studies areas I described above. In order to account for them, we need to make a cartographic account of the missing links in the emerging posthumanities (see Braidotti 2013). More specifically: Where do they leave feminist, queer, postcolonial, antiracist, class-conscious analyses? Are we not witnessing a resegregation of these discourses in the new posthuman landscape? Or, to translate this question into my main concern: What is the underlying notion of the human in the posthumanities? It is urgent to create border-crossings between the new postanthropocentric discourses and the multiple critiques of humanism emerging from the studies

areas, notably the feminist and postcolonial perspectives, which have historically functioned as laboratories for the creation of new concepts and methods, pioneering critiques of the human in all its complexity.

For instance, on the postcolonial front, since Rob Nixon's (2011) seminal work on slow violence, the missing links between postcolonial theories, the environmental humanities, and indigenous epistemologies have been exposed and analyzed, resulting in a growing convergence between them. Nixon is critical of the parochialism of some environmental humanities that focus only on conservation and urban recycling. Arguing that the status of environmental activism among the poor in the global South has shifted in recent years toward the transnational environmental justice movement and the assessment of damages caused by warfare, Nixon proposes to develop new crossover dialogues between these movements, producing a transnational ethics of place. At the level of the political economy of the posthumanities, this results in the production of new areas of studies that cross over the complex postanthropocentric axes of enquiry: postcolonial environmental humanities come to the fore, and transnational environmental literature emerges as a crossover between Native American studies and other indigenous studies areas and the classical environmental humanities.

Similar developments are on the way to fill in other missing links, including in digital culture and humanities, as the articles gathered here clearly demonstrate. For instance, Sandra Ponzanesi and Koen Leurs (2014), relying on the work of pioneers such as Lisa Nakamura (2002), claim that postcolonial digital humanities is now a fully constituted field, with digital media providing the most comprehensive platform to rethink transnational spaces and

contexts.³ The projects of setting up postcolonial digital humanities and decolonizing new media are timely, considering that the fields are highly popular with corporate and institutional sponsors who see them as an indispensable economic tool and an essential element of the war on terror. These transversal projects pursue the critical analysis of power formation of the "high" postcolonial studies era into the complex cultural analysis of the posthuman era.

Walter D. Mignolo and the decolonial movement propose a similar focus but with a different approach. Defining coloniality as the matrix of European power and its quintessential logic, Mignolo (2011) calls for a radical break from this tradition, so as to de-Westernize the ideals of humanity. The decolonial movement targets epistemic as well as material manifestations of Eurocentric power, namely coloniality and modernity, and calls for "epistemic disobedience" (2011: 122–23) as a way of delinking from this disastrous legacy. Indigenous ways of knowing and non-Western epistemologies can provide inspirational material in this quest. This results in new alliances between environmentalists, First Nation peoples, new media activists, and antiglobalization forces, which constitute a significant example of new political assemblages.⁴ Mignolo concurs with Nixon about the importance of the transnational environmental justice movement and of taking indigenous epistemologies seriously not as a relic of the past but as a blueprint for the future. Another recent key example is the Hastac Scholars Forum that, explicitly inspired by Mignolo's work, focuses on colonial legacies, postcolonial realities, and decolonial futures of digital media.⁵ The forum starts from the assumption that Eurocentrism and the devastation of indigenous ways of knowing can be exacerbated by the adoption of digital technologies. The

intersection of digital technologies with the humanities is especially targeted, as is research on alternative technologies that may work against colonization and postcolonial legacies that maintain social injustice. These theoretically sophisticated transversal discursive developments constitute a vital contribution to the emerging field of the critical posthumanities. They combine attention to the earth, the geological dimension, with enduring care for the people who live closest to the earth, the indigenous populations, thus raising the ethical and political stakes. They position the task of posthuman critical thinkers close to the dispossessed and the disempowered, adding that many of those are neither human nor anthropomorphic.

If it is the case, therefore, that these fast-moving developments in knowledge production across the field of the critical posthumanities introduce qualitative shifts of scale and method, they also raise more urgently than ever the question of relational ethics: How can we rethink our interconnection in the era of the Anthropocene, while rethinking our new ecologies of belonging? The connection to the natural environment and to the technosphere of new media recasts the issue of alterity in human and nonhuman terms that call for new conceptual and ethical schemes of thought.

There is a problematic tendency in the Anthropocene to hastily recompose a new endangered humanity after the demise of anthropocentrism. "Humanity" is often posited in corporate and institutional discourses as a new generic "we"—a unitary category—just as it emerges as a threatened or endangered entity (Chakrabarty 2009). A panhuman bond of vulnerability engenders a negative or reactive sort of cosmopolitan interconnection, expressing intense anxiety about the future of our

species (Habermas 2003; Fukuyama 2002; Sloterdijk 2009; Borradori 2003). I would respond to these anxious reactions with intense doses of monistic ethics of affirmation (Braidotti 2006).

There is no question that the generic figure of the human—"we"—is in trouble and that this is a serious matter. Such a sense of urgency, however, does not warrant generic reconstructions of humanity and a tacit new consensus about something we may call "the human." I would argue, instead, for the need to keep tracking the changing perceptions and multiple new formations of the human in the globalized, technologically mediated, and ethnically diverse world we inhabit. The differential politics of location affect the production of both knowledge and self-representation of subjects within the critical posthumanities.

We—the dwellers of this planet at this point in time—are confronted by a number of painful contradictions: we are interconnected but also internally fractured by structural injustices and discrepancies in access to resources. Instead of new generalizations, we need sharper focus on the complex singularities that constitute our respective locations. We need careful negotiations in order to constitute new subject positions as transversal alliances between human and nonhuman agents, which account for the ubiquity of technological mediation and the complexity of interspecies alliances.

Becoming posthuman consequently redefines one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space—urban, social, psychic, ecological, technological, planetary, as it may be. It expresses multiple ecologies of belonging, while it enacts the transformation of what we still call the self. This self is, in fact, a moveable and outward-bound assemblage

within a common life-space, which the subject never masters nor possesses but merely inhabits and crosses nomadically, always in a community, a pack, a group, or a cluster. For posthuman theory, the subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations. The *zoe*-centered embodied subject is shot through with relational linkages of the contaminating/viral/techno kind, which interconnect it to a variety of others, starting from the environmental or eco-others, and include the technological apparatus.

The critical posthumanities require productive and affirmative forms of defamiliarization or disidentification from century-old habits of anthropocentric thought and humanist arrogance, which tests the boundaries of what exactly is human about them (MacCormack 2014). Defamiliarization involves shedding cherished habits of thought and representation, even at the risk of producing fear and nostalgia. It is a sobering process by which the knowing subjects evolve from the vision of the self they had become accustomed to. Instead of seeking identity-bound recognition, the ethical emphasis falls on the need to learn new modes of expression and affirmative modes of relations to multiple others. The frame of reference, therefore, becomes the world, in all its open-ended, interrelational, transnational, multisexed, and transspecies flows of becoming: a native form of cosmopolitanism (Braidotti 2006, 2013). I want to plead, therefore, for monistic affirmative politics grounded on immanent interconnections; what we need is embedded and embodied, relational and affective cartographies of the new power relations that are emerging from the current geopolitical, postanthropocentric, and “medianaturecultural” world order.

Notes

1. Donna Haraway (1990, 2003) is a pioneer of human-animal studies. A companion to animal studies has just been published (Gross and Valley 2012), whereas a complete ecocriticism reader has been available for a while (Glottfelty and Fromm 1996). The *Journal of Ecocriticism* is quite established, while a recent issue of the *PMLA* (2009) was dedicated to the question of the animal. For a younger generation of scholars (Rossini and Tyler 2009), the animal is the posthuman question par excellence. See Braidotti and Roets 2012; Davis 1997; and Goodley, Lawthorn, and Cole 2014.
2. For a more detailed discussion, see Braidotti and Gilroy 2016.
3. See also the *Postcolonial Digital Humanities* (2016) blog.
4. See, for instance, the land/media/indigenous project based in British Columbia (Bleck, Dodds, and Williams 2013).
5. The Hastac Scholars Forum (2015) is coordinated by micha cárdenas, Noha F. Beydoun, and Alainya Kavaloski. With thanks to Matthew Fuller.

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