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environmental humanities

Voices from the Anthropocene

EDITED BY

Serpil Oppermann

AND Serenella Iovino

**ROWMAN AND LITTLEFIELD
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is at risk; for the riverine dwellers have so much knowledge, they provide us with pivotal information about the behaviour of the river through their oral narratives and memory of the last centuries'. This was said to me by Jorge Abad, an environmental scientist specializing in hydrodynamics and sediment transport for tropical rivers, as we talked last summer over a *vaso de chuchuwasi* (a treabark drink) on one of the floating bars of the Itaya River, in the Belem neighbourhood. There was lots of plastic trash surrounding the place where we were. 'There is so much research we need to do to learn about the river: much of it is still a mystery to us. To get the whole picture of what is happening right now with the river and its future behaviour our technological devices are not enough; we need to complete the information with what the indigenous and riverine people teach us about these waters and lands; there is a lot in their memories. And now we don't know what is going to happen with those plans of turning the river into a hydro via. The Amazon River, for example, has a need to form islands every 26 kilometres. What will happen if, with all the dredging required, the river were not able to have its islands? There is no scientific research on that. We are just starting'. While we sat on the floating bar, pondering the fate of the upper Amazon River and many other rivers already damaged due to oil drilling in the region, Don Pedro our friend and owner of the bar talked to other customers with concern. They chatted together about the fact that the Amazon River had been pounding with all the power of his waters on the small stretch of land that separates his main channel from the city of Iquitos. If the Amazon River does that, he will come and take away this bar and then the whole city of Iquitos. The customers continued to speculate about the possibility that the mighty *Yakumama*, the mother of the river has gotten very upset. In their rumouring they say she is mad, for all the latest overfishing of her children and especially now with the news about the dredging on the river. One of them says 'She must be telling the *Yakurunas* and other spirits to come back with the force of the water against the people of Iquitos'.

Chapter Nineteen

Can the Humanities Become Posthuman?

A Conversation

Rosi Braidotti and Cosetta Veronese

CV: Your latest book is called *The Posthuman*. In consideration of your philosophical development, which is rooted in the study of Foucault, in an interrupted dialogue with Deleuze as well as in feminism and feminist activism, could you explain how your idea of posthumanism developed? In other words, what have been your transitions on the way towards posthumanism?

RB: For me as a student of Foucault, Deleuze and Irigaray, the crisis of humanism means the rejection of all forms of universalism, including the socialist variation. 'Man' cannot claim to represent all humanity because that 'Man' is a culture-specific, gender-specific, race-specific and class-specific entity: is it a European, male, white, intellectual ideal. Moreover, that ideal posits itself as a norm that everyone else is supposed to imitate and aspire to; but all those who differ from the Eurocentric, masculinist, white, intellectual norm are classified as 'different from' it. And being 'different from' means to be 'worth less than'. This hierarchical organisation of difference as negative becomes a very politicised issue for feminists, postcolonial, and anti-racist thinkers.

In fact, if you think about it, the structural others of the humanistic subject re-emerge with a vengeance in postmodernity (Braidotti 2002). It is a historical fact that the great emancipatory movements of postmodernity are driven and fuelled by the resurgent 'others': the women's rights movement; the anti-racism and de-colonization movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements are the voices of the structural Others of modernity. They inevitably mark the crisis of the former humanist 'centre' or dominant subject-position and are not merely anti-humanist, but move beyond it to an altogether novel project. These social and political movements are simultaneously the symptom of the crisis of the subject, and for conservatives even its 'cause' and also the expression of positive, proactive alternatives.

In the language of my nomadic theory (see Nomadic Subjects and Nomadic Theory), they express both the crisis of the majority and the patterns of becoming of the minorities. The challenge for critical theory consists in being able to tell the difference between these different flows of mutation.

In other words, the posthumanist position I am defending builds on the anti-humanist legacy, more specifically on the epistemological and political foundations of the poststructuralist generation, and moves further. The alternative views about the human and the new formations of subjectivity that have emerged from the radical epistemologies of Continental philosophy in the last thirty years do not merely oppose humanism but create other visions of the self. Sexualised, racialised and naturalised differences, far from being the categorical boundary-keepers of the subject of humanism, have evolved into fully fledged alternative models of the human subject.

CV: The last chapter of your book is dedicated to the future of the human sciences. With a pinch of irony you refer to the 'proliferation of studies' that have developed in the humanities over the last couple of decades. Could you comment on the specific future of literature, or literary studies?

RB: *I have observed in Holland, Northern Europe, and the United Kingdom, that the current crises of the human sciences translates itself at the level of university politics in radical cuts to funding, structures and chairs in the humanities. At the moment, the public image of the human sciences is the worse one we have witnessed since the end of World War II. The dominant image of the humanities today is that of a totally useless university category, which does not produce anything and does not teach anything, but only feeds unemployment. The relationship between journalism, media and the human sciences is dramatically deteriorating. There are multiple reasons for this situation, and there is space for an extensive work and investigation to be conducted upon this issue. It looks like the main, if not the sole, function of the human sciences is to provide a rough cultural mixture (the so-called 'general culture') to students, mainly girls, who are waiting for a good match to marry and who are expected to hold brilliant conversations during dinner time. It is shocking to compare the current situation in the human sciences with that of the 1950s and 1960s, when Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre were treated almost as Head of States wherever they would go, because of the high intellectual prestige they enjoyed.*

We live at a time when the figure of the high intellectual is worth nothing. The very term 'intellectual' is barely used, because it sounds outmoded. In the 1980s a new formula to describe the intellectual class was actually coined, that of 'content provider': 'those individuals who provide the contents'. The advent of the Internet in the 1990s and the sudden explosion in content availability transformed intellectuals into 'idea-brokers'. From the 'intellectual' to the 'content

provider' to the 'idea broker': we have witnessed an epochal mutation, which deserves a study both from a semiotic and terminological point of view and from an institutional one. In the neo-liberal university founded on the idea of culture as (also) business the figure of the intellectual has lost its original role and place. The downgrading of this figure is a rather sad story.

Notwithstanding the fact that innovation and creativity are considered the real capital, the humanities, which are the foundation of all this, are marginalised and despised. How do we reconcile these conflicting trends? I believe that instead of withdrawing back into humanism and building a sort of neo-humanistic fortress—a nostalgic and very classic structure—the humanities should open and move towards the world, embrace with enthusiasm the new challenges that are coming up. The humanities should thus transform into posthuman sciences in the affirmative and constructive sense of the term. They should leave the notion of the crisis behind along with the rhetoric of their crises: this also means abandoning the feeling of inferiority and subjugation, which inevitably arises from the repetition of the refrain of their economic, social and financial uselessness.

We can consider posthumanism from the point of view of the humanities and that of anthropocentrism. In the former perspective, the urge to reinvent the human is the pivot of the various social movements of the 1970s (feminist, postcolonial, pacifist, anti-nuclear movements among others). The crisis of humanism provided the opportunity to respond to an epochal call for new ways of being and new forms of subjectivity. The critique of universalism triggered the development of new fields of study, which, instead of linking with traditional disciplines, concerned about their purity such as literature and philosophy, grew in-between their clefts. They gave birth to interdisciplinary groups called 'studies': women studies, gender studies, gay studies, media studies and so on. This constellation of studies reinvented and opened the human sciences after the collapse of humanism, bearing testimony of their great vitality and innovating on both themes and methods.

From the perspective of anti-anthropocentrism, Darwin stands out as one of the colossal figures of modernity. However, his name is totally absent from the humanities. To think of ourselves as of the members of one of multiple species, with an evolution and genetic structure that is one among many, is just not part of our vocabulary, it is not conceivable within the humanities. From this point of view, there seems to be a dramatic equation between the human sciences and anthropocentrism. 'To do humanities' means 'to think about the man of humanism'. If this equation is there to stay, then we have a problem, because the foundation of knowledge in today's world is no longer anthropological, let alone male-centred or Eurocentric. The old fundamental metaphysical categories of male and female have been replaced by a system based on complexity codes, cellules, the infinitesimal levels of dynamics and interaction of what constitutes

the basic foundation of life. Moreover, if, on the one hand, the human consists of a series of informative, genetic, neurological and evolutionary codes, on the other hand, anthropos has been displaced from its former central position by information technology, there is reason to speak about a systematic posthuman turn. There has been a mutation in the centrality of the subject of knowledge, and our fundamental ontology today has become mediated in biogenetic as well as informational terms. Informational networks live independently of us, as confirmed by the fact that computational and network systems are capable of self-repairing without the need of direct human intervention.

Some of the possibilities for literary studies to survive in the current post-human context are to embrace technology (digital humanities), to include environmental studies (ecocriticism), and to reappraise the established tradition of science fiction writing. On the theoretical level, both the emphasis on materiality and on affect are also pointing in a new direction, which is less confined by the conventions of the linguistic turn.

CV: Among the tenets of posthuman theory you mention 'transdisciplinarity'. In what does it differ from the more traditional notion of 'interdisciplinarity'? What are your suggestions for the new vocabulary that the humanities have to build in order to face the challenges of posthumanism?

RB: Posthuman critical theory needs to apply a new vision of subjectivity to both the practice and the public perception of the scientist, which is still caught in the classical and outmoded model of the humanistic 'Man of reason' (Lloyd 1984) as the quintessential European citizen. We need to overcome this model and move towards an intensive form of interdisciplinarity, transversality, and boundary-crossings among a range of discourses. This transdisciplinary approach affects the very structure of thought and enacts a rhizomatic embrace of conceptual diversity in scholarship. The posthuman method amounts to higher degrees of disciplinary hybridization and relies on intense de-familiarization of our habits of thought through encounters that shatter the flat repetition of the protocols of institutional reason.

In order to come to terms with complex multiplicities, differential entities, rhizomatic transversal connections we need to inject into the system viable alternatives, we need to have something to propose, we need to offer counter-codes, counter-projects, and make counter-proposals. An additional problem in relation to this is that of language. Our language still rails our roads back into linearity and into processes of single focus, when in fact we need a spectrum, we need to be able to keep in our heads multiple utterances, potentially contradictory ones to even begin to make sense of the world that we are in. This is why Deleuze and Guattari write in such a complicated

manner: because the linearity of language is a real big problem. How can we account for a zigzagging, complex, eternally contradictory world in a linear language? I sometimes think that the humanities are really lost and doomed unless we experience with multiple languages.

This emphasis on renewed conceptual and terminological creativity requires more institutional support than the humanities are receiving at present. We need to set up fundamental humanities' labs in order to conduct these experiments in a rigorous manner. We need more theory, more creativity.

CV: If posthumanism means demolishing dualism, breaking disciplinary boundaries (as well as nationalistic and political boundaries), in essence: getting rid of the humanistic western paradigm (as well as of any other auxiliary paradigm, which would only bring us back to humanism), which alternatives do we have to make us accountable for the world we live in?

RB: The first step requires consciousness-raising. The social theory literature on shared anxiety about the future of both our species and of our humanist legacy is very rich and varied. Important liberal thinkers like Habermas (2003) and influential ones like Fukuyama (2002) are very alert on this issue, as are social critics like Sloterdijk (2009) and Borradori (2003). In different ways, they express deep concern for the status of the human, and seem particularly struck by moral and cognitive panic at the prospect of the posthuman turn, blaming our advanced technologies for it. I share their concern, but as a posthuman thinker with distinct anti-humanist feelings, I am less prone to panic at the prospect of a displacement of the centrality of the human and can also see the advantages of such an evolution.

I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity is nomadic and it expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building.

My position is in favour of complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on the ethics of becoming. The focus is shifted accordingly from unitary to nomadic subjectivity, this running against the grain of high humanism and its contemporary variations. This view rejects individualism, but also asserts an equally strong distance from relativism or nihilistic defeatism. It promotes an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interests of an individual subject, as defined along the canonical lines of classical humanism. A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the

nonhuman or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism. Contemporary biogenetic capitalism generates a global form of reactive mutual interdependence of all living organisms, including nonhumans. This sort of unity tends to be of the negative kind, as a shared form of vulnerability, that is to say a global sense of interconnection between the human and the nonhuman environment in the face of common threats. The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others.

Labouring towards a non-unitary posthuman subject, 'we need to acknowledge that there may well be multiple and potentially contradictory projects at stake in the complex recompositions of 'the human' right now: many complex and contested ways of becoming-world together.

CV: In the keynote speech you gave at the University of Zurich on 24 May 2014, on the occasion of the annual conference of the American Association for Italian Studies, you mentioned 'two areas of studies that are the making of post-anthropocentric humanities: namely animal studies and ecocriticism'. How do you explain their importance in relation to what you suggest are the fundamental requirements of posthumanism, namely the necessity for it to be situated, i.e., 'embodied and embedded', 'affirmative', i.e., constructive, and for it to call for our accountability?

RB: *Animal Studies, ecocriticism and the Environmental humanities as a whole are pointing in the right direction. It is absolutely true that, once the centrality of anthropos is challenged, a number of boundaries between 'Man' and his others go tumbling down, in a cascade effect that opens up unexpected perspectives. Thus, if the crisis of humanism inaugurates the posthuman by empowering the sexualised and racialised human 'others' to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master/slave relations, the crisis of anthropos relinquishes the demonic forces of the naturalised others. Animals, insects, plants and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos as a whole, are called into play. This places a different burden of responsibility on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess. The fact that our geological era is known as the 'Anthropocene' stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by anthropos and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else.*

The crisis is especially strong in the Human and Social sciences, because they are the most anthropocentric fields of scholarly research. How can a historian or a philosopher think of humans as being 'part of nature', considering that academic discourse continues to claim transcendental grounds for human consciousness? How to reconcile this materialist awareness with the

task of critical thought? As a brand of vital materialism, posthuman theory contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the 'exceptionalism' of the Human as a transcendental category. It strikes instead an alliance with the productive and immanent force of zoe, or life in its nonhuman aspects. This requires a mutation of our shared understanding of what it means to think at all, let alone think critically. In *The Posthuman* I argue that the return to Spinozist monism as opposed to Hegelian dialectics, which occurred back in the 1970s with the generation of my teachers, is now finally becoming visible. Monism gives us conceptual tools and a terminology to address humans as being part of a continuum with all living matter. It is a great advantage.

The question is consequently what the humanities can become, in the post-human era and after the decline of the primacy of 'Man' and of anthropos. My argument is that, far from being a terminal crisis, these challenges open up new global, eco-sophical, posthumanist and post-anthropocentric dimensions for the humanities. They are expressed by a second generation of 'studies' areas. This animal studies and ecocriticism have grown into such rich and well-articulated fields, that it is impossible to even attempt to summarise them. Cultural studies of science and society; religion studies; disability studies; fat studies; success studies; celebrity studies; globalization studies are further significant examples of the exuberant state of the new humanities in the twenty-first century. New media has proliferated into a whole series of sub-sections and meta-fields: software studies, internet studies, game studies and more. This vitality justifies optimism about the future of the humanities, with media theory and media philosophy providing the new ontological grounds for knowledge production, while the curriculum of the traditional humanities disciplines—notably philosophy—revisits any interdisciplinary contamination. In this fast moving landscape, literary analysis and critical enquiry are fundamental navigational tools to chart a path across the disciplinary fractures and contradictions of the contemporary humanities.

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'If you read only one book in the new field of environmental humanities, you cannot choose better than this one. It provides a great chorus of voices, a wide panorama of concepts and discourses and a fascinating, at times troubling, exploration of the situation of humanity on an endangered planet.'
— **Christof Mauch**,

Director, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität

'Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino have assembled a creative, diverse essay collection, international in scope, often speculative and passionate, and committed to being interdisciplinary. If the Anthropocene usually signifies boosterish techno-optimism or dire eco-apocalypse, this book offers the hope, at least, of keener intelligence about what the humanities can be as we enter an era of profound, geologic uncertainty.'
— **Stephanie LeMenager**,

Moore Professor of English and Environmental Studies, University of Oregon

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This important volume brings together scientific, cultural, literary, historical and philosophical perspectives to offer new understandings of the critical issues of our ecological present and new models for the creation of alternative ecological futures. Drawing on cutting-edge studies in all the major fields of the eco-cultural debate, *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* builds a creative critical discourse that explores, challenges and enhances the field of environmental humanities.

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