

THE WHITE REVIEW

No.19



THE WHITE REVIEW

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INTERVIEW

WITH

ROSI BRAIDOTTI

'WHO IS ROSI BRAIDOTTI?' one of my students asks when I remind the class that she is visiting as this year's Hope Street writer in residence – an initiative run by the University of Liverpool's Centre for New and International Writing in collaboration with *THE WHITE REVIEW*. I'm searching for an answer (an important contemporary philosopher? a pioneer in European Women's Studies? perhaps the only person with a knighthood, awarded by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, to share a stage with Pussy Riot?) when another student chips in: 'She's just one of those people you should know about.' The original questioner looks to me for confirmation; I nod.

It is hard to pin Braidotti's writing down. Influenced by figures such as Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze and Baruch Spinoza, her work sits at the intersection of continental philosophy, political theory, feminism, posthumanism and ethnicity studies. Her first book – *PATTERNS OF DISSONANCE: AN ESSAY ON WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH PHILOSOPHY* (1991) – focused on how to think positively about the concept of difference. This critique of binary thinking developed over a trilogy of publications that made her one of the key figures of contemporary theory: *NOMADIC SUBJECTS: EMBODIMENT AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEORY* (1994), *METAMORPHOSES: TOWARDS A MATERIALIST THEORY OF BECOMING* (2002) and *TRANSPOSITIONS: ON NOMADIC ETHICS* (2006). Over the trilogy Braidotti's focus extends beyond gender to encompass questions of race, nationalism, species, environment and technology.

During Braidotti's visit in October 2016 I keep bumping into starry-eyed colleagues and students who have been charmed and disarmed by her willingness to talk about anything from New Weird SF ('I love the weirdos') to Trump ('Antonin Artaud meets the Ku Klux Klan') to – as I discover when she thrusts a glass of gin under my nose and tells me to smell it – the bouquet of Liverpool Gin. (Braidotti, it transpires, is a gin connoisseur.)

Her recent work has, particularly since *THE POSTHUMAN* (2013), interrogated the fate of the human (and the humanities) in the face of new developments in digital technology, genetic engineering, environmental crises and seismic socio-political shifts. As we're setting up she enthuses about her morning visiting the Liverpool Biennial, which took her to Toxteth, where she learned about the 1981 riots. It's changed her perspective on Liverpool, she says, particularly the impact of Thatcherism on the north. I'm struck by how swiftly she oscillates between enthusiasm and outrage and wonder if it will set the tone for the interview: it does.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The posthuman has become a key figure in your work. As not everyone will be familiar with the term, could you tell us a little bit about what posthumanism means for you?

A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — I came to the posthuman while I was looking for something else. I was looking for what is happening to the

production of knowledge and how it affects processes of subject formation. In the past it would have been called the history of ideas, but in fact it is a genealogy of the present and more specifically of contemporary subjectivity. As a student of Michel Foucault, and as a feminist, I do that type of work in the mode of cartographies. Cartographies are mappings

of discourses and practices, monuments and documents, bibliographies and also readings of real events. Contemporary knowledge production is very much part of the world, and not just of the university. Thinking – and the people whose paid job is to think, read and teach – is accountable to the demands and pressures of the present, not only to the authority of the past. This is why one chapter of *THE POSTHUMAN* is about the university. What are universities for when so much knowledge is being produced outside them? If you're a media student, would you rather do an internship at a media research institute or go to the Google, Netflix, or Microsoft labs – those are the effective research centres. Cancer research, stem cell research – these are not only core areas of university work, but also very much part of the corporate world. While conducting my discursive excursions into contemporary knowledge production I came across what was then – because we're talking about a few years ago – quite a sizeable body of scholarship dealing with the question of the posthuman.

If you see what has happened in this scholarly field in the past two years, it's almost an explosion. There are so many relevant and often intriguing publications on the human, nonhuman, inhuman, posthuman, posthumanism that I ended up editing a glossary of the new terms and concepts emerging in this area ledited with Maria Hlavajova, *POSTHUMAN GLOSSARY* is forthcoming with Bloomsbury Academic. My first book emerged because I saw a discursive meta-pattern emerging from the main lines of research, namely a concern about the human. In my reading the posthuman has two different branches – the critique of humanism and a critique of anthropocentrism. On the one hand the critique of humanism. Man as the man of reason – the

humanist ideal of the European eighteenth century. On the other hand the critique of anthropos as a supremacist species that has entitled itself to access the body of anything that lives, and the resources of anything on earth. The encounter of those two lines of enquiry triggers the posthuman turn.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — How do those two critiques come together in your version of the posthuman?

A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — Although they interact, these two lines – the posthuman of posthumanism, and the posthuman of post-anthropocentrism – are distinct, and discrete, and separate. There was already, I think, a constituted history of the philosophical critique of humanism, certainly since Foucault announced the death of man in 1966. This meant the death of European Man, the crisis of a certain self-representation of Europe that was explicitly lost in the Second World War. There is the feminist critique of the man of reason, the postcolonial, decolonial, anti-racist critique of white men's claim to the exclusive right to reason. Voices that at different points of time have yelled out, 'Am I human too? Am I that category?' From Olympe de Gouges, who writes the *DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND THE FEMALE CITIZEN* (1791) and is immediately guillotined for her contribution to universalism, to Sojourner Truth in the nineteenth century saying 'Am I not a woman too? Am I not a member of the human species?'

So that is one line. But there is also a critique of anthropocentrism. Humans – all other differences notwithstanding – abuse the planet to different degrees, and here you can see where the discussion is going to go. It's quite separate. It is part of the environmental and alternative globalisation movements.

Let's face it, the European left has a dreadful record in terms of its relationship to environmentalism. Green and red politics do not mix. There is more devastation of the environment in the former Soviet Bloc, let alone China, than in the whole of the so-called 'free world' put together. So there's a long history here of conflicting worldviews. So I think you get a very different tradition, and in the scholarship an early example of this comes up in, say, Donna Haraway's *PRIMATE VISIONS* (1989). That's cultural studies going nonhuman. It's a different genealogy. In this moment, as the Anthropocene acquires scientific consensus as a description of our geological era, we are seeing the resonance between the two lines of critique.

The posthuman happens at the convergence of those two lines: the critique of humanism and an environmentally aware anti-anthropocentrism. But that convergence defines our moment, our present. Otherwise, it's two very distinct traditions that might not have met if all of a sudden we weren't all worried about what we and our technologies are doing to our immediate habitat. I am also concerned about the impact of this upon our scientific research practices and our self-understanding as scholars.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think that our moment, defined by a series of technological and ecological shifts, necessitates a different form of critique, particularly perhaps in relation to the ever-expanding discourse around the Anthropocene? Do you find the Anthropocene itself a useful concept?

^A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — There is an extreme concern over what we should do about the current situation. But we disagree about what the current situation is. Or rather, there are multiple cartographies and often divergent

readings of it.

The Anthropocene has already been superseded by what Donna Haraway and others call the Capitalocene — where it's not just human action that shapes geology and ecology, it's capitalism — by the Plantationocene discussed by Anna Tsing, by the Anthroscene discussed by Jussi Parikka. It's become a 'meme' and gone viral. So the Anthropocene is useful, because it focuses on a specific discursive and political moment, but also confusing because it covers a wide range of issues. We may have come to a consensus, therefore the notion will gather momentum and concentrate discursive, albeit contradictory, forces. All the more so as climate change denial is likely to see a resurgence in the new brutal world order inaugurated by Trump & co.

Discourse is the crucial term and it is co-extensive with the social field, not restricted to specialised realms. People in all areas of society are writing, producing films, and making artwork about the human and the non-human in the Anthropocene. It is a major concern. Now, the question is, what kind of concern? In my work I approach these issues from the angle of the critique of humanism. And one aspect that immediately emerges is that this particular crisis of the human is hitting the First World. Over the years of watching endless crises go past, I have developed a simple equation: a crisis becomes a crisis when the white male body is affected. Forgive me — it's a shortcut to a long, complicated, radical feminist theory tradition. So now an environmental crisis is hitting 'us', even though this has been denied by certain political forces. But most corporations now admit that it's going really badly, in terms of the extinction of species. So, there is an anxiety about human survival and a kneejerk reaction of fear and concern in the mainstream. In Spinoza's terms, this is a

'negative or reactive passion', which is not the most adequate way to go about it. Now some people have been warning us about environmental crisis for three decades. Not only the environmentalists and eco-feminists, but land rights people, Indigenous populations, First Nation people. The Indigenous epistemologies are incredibly rich and interesting. Decolonial theory, much of it coming from Latin America, brings up a different set of premises, even with assessing the Anthropocene. It critiques the colonial mindset that sees everything as a resource geared to profit.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — How does decolonial theory contribute to the discourse around the environmental crisis?

^A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — It brings a sharper reading of the political economy of advanced capitalism. It contributes to critiques of imperialism by claiming alternative epistemologies and a different set of spiritual values, such as a notion of not only caring for the world but being part of the world. This is where my nomadic monism, the vital materialism of neo-Spinozist thought, encounters decolonial discourse. As Genevieve Lloyd says in *PART OF NATURE* (1994), her beautiful book on Spinoza, we are part of nature, what we used to call nature. That being-in, the radical immanence of that, gives me a means to assess the issues.

Let's take the three ecologies of Felix Guattari — psychic, social, and environmental. At those levels we have to rethink how we belong, and how we are part of the problem we are trying to solve. Spinoza and monism offer an antidote to the social constructivist reading of the nature/culture divide, and also an antidote to a liberal individualism that would solve the problems by giving, for instance, animals and plants 'rights' like those afforded to

humans. It also encompasses non-human actors, be it the naturalised earth 'others', or the technological artefact.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — And, more broadly, how have these shifts in how we think about anthropocentrism and humanism affected work across the humanities?

^A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — The creative core of the Humanities over the past 30 years has been in areas that call themselves 'studies': starting in the 1980s with Women's, Gender and Postcolonial Studies, then classical Environmental Studies, Earth Studies and Sustainability Studies. Now we have the phenomenon of the Environmental Humanities. That's new. Eight years ago we didn't have them. We also have the Digital Humanities. One of the most extraordinary areas is the crossover between Postcolonial and Digital, Decolonial and Digital Studies. The new alliances coming up online between land rights and algorithms, security, the earth and war. I am old enough to remember Media Studies; I even remember Theatre and Television Studies, for that matter. Then, new media takes over and mutates: it soon becomes Cyber Studies, and Cyber becomes Software Studies, which begets Cybersecurity Studies, which begets Algorithmic Studies, and they continue to proliferate. That endless rhizomatic growth of discourses intrigues me, because I see it as waves of energy generated within the university, but moving outwards. They move towards the world.

So, new frontiers of academic knowledge seem to be moving outwards. This is one of the factors that makes our system a cognitive form of capitalism. But the co-extensivity of knowledge production and socio-economic concerns does not always favour the Humanities. Whether this is a new

phase for the Humanities, or whether it's the last mutation of a field that cannot survive in the current institutional format, remains to be seen. But I'm a pathological optimist so I hope that this is a renewal. Certainly the Environmental Humanities seem to be having an impact in English and Philosophy departments. But the anthropocentrism of a great deal of critical theory, even certain forms of feminism, and certain forms of postcolonial theory, has to be called out, and that's going to hurt.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Despite articulating concerns with some new technologies, particularly the application of biomedical technologies, you have described yourself as a technophile. What technologies excite you for the future?

A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — I am totally excited by all of them. It may seem paradoxical, but as a researcher I am fascinated by the new frontiers of knowledge, while as a critical theorist I cannot simplify the complexities and contradictions of my times.

But there is another aspect of this. As a student of Foucault and Deleuze I come from anti-humanism, the critique of man. Part of anti-humanism is a total absence of nostalgia for the decline of man. You know, what has that humanism ever done for my gender? We had to fight for centuries to be considered human. Fight for education and citizenship rights. Look at how, even today, the white male candidate in the American elections — utterly untrained and underqualified for the job — treats the white female, let alone how he deals with brown or black women. The sense of entitlement. The violence of that gesture. Just the ruthless violence of that. And I am supposed to feel down because this category of white masculinity is allegedly in crisis, triggering

a massive scapegoating exercise in terms of xenophobia, sexism and racism? Give me a break. Life is short. No.

Hence the alliance with the other-than and non-humans, which is very much part of my political culture. If you look at feminist science fiction it's quite manifest: since the 1970s you have women, lesbians, trans (hermaphrodites as we called them then), pets, animals, machines, migrants, blacks, extra-terrestrials, all united against white man. That extra/intergalactic alliance is rampant today in Queer Studies, which is fantastic. Jack Halberstam and all the trans people I adore; it's a terrific assemblage of generative others. The politics of immanence creates these transversal alliances, which turn technology into a means of getting us out of a world which is not defined in our terms and in which we have not been entitled to much.

This critical detachment from our culture and our species plays a big role in my deep personal and theoretical relationship with Donna Haraway. She has been theorising a nature-culture continuum and the positive power of monsters for decades. And I see it also in the younger generation, the xenofeminists. Xenofeminists are brilliant. They focus on the problem of nature in social constructivist thinking. The problem of nature in social constructivist thinking is we don't know how to think about nature in its own — by now Anthropogenic — terms, because nature is a social construction! End of story. It is not just any social construction. Read it with Simone de Beauvoir, read it with Frantz Fanon, read it with Edward Said, with Paul Gilroy — nature is a term that indexes oppression. 'Nature' is the naturalisation of inequalities.

This is why a long tradition of the left says, of course, 'get rid of nature'. Simone de Beauvoir says that emancipation is emancipation from

need, from biology, from the natural order. Emancipation is an emancipation from nature. So there is that long tradition of aporetic thinking about nature. The xenofeminists, on the other hand, are the techno-kids of today. Pardon the terms, but I am much older. And they say that if nature is unjust, we must change nature through technological intervention. We're not stuck with it anymore. Look at advances in synthetic biology — synthetic meat is ready to go! It has everything except that we can't taste it. So we'll have to tune in our neural stuff.

The horizon of knowledge opened by the Human Genome Project has also led to a human 3.0 project. It's based on gene editing (the insertion, deletion or replacement of DNA at a specific site in the genome). And on the basis of the human genome our medical and biosciences can prepare a human prototype free of diseases. It is fantastic that we live in an era where this is possible. Progressive aspects of this are clear. We have the three-parent family law. We have edited out classical patriarchy, because if we have a three-parent family, Sigmund Freud can only turn in his grave. In terms of neural and perceptive capacities, I disagree with the 'superintelligence project' of the Oxford trans-humanists, but I'm not against enhancement. I'm not against what is going to be obviously an evolutionary leap. I'm rather worried about who is going to be accessing its benefits — how democratic, and open, and diversified this will be. The posthuman cannot be reduced to a one-way road to a single model of enhancement.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The flipside of the biotechnologies that you are describing is that they provide new opportunities to control and commodify, whether through patented seeds or genetic engineering for disease control.

How do we stop this posthuman period becoming inhumane?

A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — It's a big question. The question here is who is 'we'? How do 'we' university staff deal with it? Institutionally, what is the university to do? Not just any branch of the university, but a particular branch of the university that we happen to be sitting in today: the Humanities, culture departments, literary departments. And here we open a very painful chapter. I don't think there's anybody in the world that would not react to the sad, sad, sorry state of the Humanities in the contemporary university. Japan alone closed down twenty-something faculties of the Humanities last year. China is opening them up, but of course, there is a demographic as well as an ideological difference. What is happening to 'us' is that we're being shut down, underfunded, and edited out of the contemporary research university. Reduced to a very niche education, either for elites or for lost souls, and not consulted on any of the policy issues that matter.

At the level of funding, the UK was the leading force in the neoliberal revolution by merging Humanities and Social Sciences. The Social Sciences and Humanities template is now being implemented in the EU. If you are going out for research grants, the unification with the social sciences is always a catastrophe for the humanities, because our methodologies are not empirical enough for the funding bodies. So, who is the 'we'? 'We' are the endangered critical elements within a university. Most universities are not only major players in life sciences and data but they are also very much moving towards mixed research funding with the corporate world. This is a fact. Life sciences and information technology generate patents and income. They make millions. We in the humanities do not. Cognitive capitalism

does not need the academic humanities.

The 'we' at play here is the academic subject of knowledge today in an institutional system that profits from research on life – in biogenetics as well as informatics – but within that research we are the discursive proletariat. So we need to come down from our cultural high horses. The problem is that whilst this is going on at the institutional level, there is a rise of populism and nationalism and proto-fascism in the general culture. Paradoxically, the public debates – for instance the never-ending one about what constitutes 'essential British values', as if we care – revive both the notion of culture and cultural studies at a time when they are being phased out of university curricula. But they do so in a reactionary, racist manner that requires sharp cultural analysis and criticism.

'We' in the critical humanities are agents of cognitive capitalism, albeit marginalised, despised agents. But maybe we can generate alliances across universities on the question of the voices of the critical humanities on these issues. We need to foreground the painful contradictions of our times and stress that the great technological advance does not resolve power differentials and patterns of discrimination. In many cases, it exacerbates them. Moreover, the persistence of war and violence adds a necro-political dimension to contemporary geo-political relations. The inhumane aspects of our times need to be taken into account in posthuman cartographies. So the constitution of an alternative 'we', a critical subject of alternative knowledge defending the cognitive capital of the humanities, whilst at the same time bringing in other perspectives, might be one way of helping to prevent the posthuman becoming inhumane.

There is another, more conceptual, way of resisting inhumanity: rethinking radical limits

through monism. Alain Badiou is wrong on this. And pro-Trump Slavoj Žižek is a joke. His book on Deleuze is as shallow as it is offensive. Read Deleuze's *SPINOZA: PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY* (1970) and judge for yourself. The chapter 'Spinoza and Us' is three pages that will change your view of things! We're part of this Anthropocene world. Deeply, physically, physiologically, genetically. This is our planet. This is our system. To continue with some mind/body divide here is simply scientifically wrong, as well as political suicide.

So, a lot of transformative work, and a lot of mobilisation of resources in the critical humanities. The way ahead is through the critical posthumanities, which includes massive doses of literature and culture

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — When I was reading *THE POSTHUMAN* I was struck by your love of that great Victorian translator of Spinoza, George Eliot. Which other novelists or poets are important to you?

A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — Maybe I don't come out with this often, but I have a double BA in English and Philosophy from the Australian National University. I'm a pure product of Commonwealth education, and English Literature has been one of my great loves. Then of course comes French philosophy and everything gets overturned. I have a never-ending passion for Virginia Woolf. I read an enormous amount of feminist science fiction, especially Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler. I envy my friend Donna Haraway because she always read the latest science fiction, a genre that has mutated into post-anthropocentric writing. And of late, I've been looking at the new genres. What is happening with genres like graphic novels is incredible. Alison Bechdel's *FUN HOME* (2006) is fantastic. As are the lyrics of feminist song-writers and

bands – oh, Bikini Kill! – beginning with the one and only Kathy Acker.

I think that in the posthuman moment genres are changing, partly because of the internet, and that diversification of the genres is really interesting. That has happened before, it's not unique to this moment, but it's very strong right now. It's as if there is a sense of letting go. We get the reactionary part of that where anything can be said: all taboos are broken, all censorship goes, and nasty, horrendous statements are made. But that's the negative side.

The positive side is a sense of great freedom of experimentation with writing, with different formats and different speeds. There is a mutation and I'm fascinated by that. Writing is fighting back with extreme power. My girls: the xenofeminists, Pussy Riot. How you write, perform, do, visualise – it is media culture meets the word, meets the body, meets despotism, meets celebrity culture, meets courage. Pussy Riot spent two years in jail. Now what is that? Self-styling as political praxis, is that not a work of art? Is not the art at stake here the art of political resistance? We can know better, we can do better, and you know that.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — What next for posthumans in the thing that we may or may not call the Anthropocene?

A ROSI BRAIDOTTI — I see a lot of interesting stuff happening. I've already mentioned the range of responses: Oxford, with the Future of Humanity Institute, is sending out a very powerful message: 'There is an evolution – it is enhancement. We have to keep it under control, and the way to keep it under control is to frame it with classical morality.' They have an Enlightenment vision of what this new human will be. But there are other types of institutional answers. If you

go to the University of Linköping in Sweden you'll find the Posthumanities Hub, funded by the Swedish government for almost five years now. It's a very different story, driven by feminist, postcolonial, intersectional theories and methodologies. Because of companies like Ericsson, Linköping is the Silicon Valley of Sweden, so the university works alongside industry, looking at the intersection of techno-human-anthropos.

I see several trends emerging. One is, in a sense, a revival of postmodernism. You get very deconstructive approaches. Cary Wolfe and other Derrideans are deconstructing the human and the anthropos, but feeding it back into a practice that is compatible with contemporary English departments. Now my trajectory starts from the studies areas. And if you start from Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Decolonial Studies, Conflict Studies, Black Studies, and you follow their trajectories and the dialogues, you see quite different dynamics.

Maybe what we are seeing is the emergence of the critical posthumanities. These are in dialogue with the new, big institutional structures: Digital Humanities, Environmental Humanities, Medical Humanities. If you look at the Ivy Leagues, the Digital Humanities are often almost a faculty within a faculty. I think the critical posthumanities will be in dialogue with those sorts of people, and arguing that, say, the Digital Humanities cannot do without the postcolonial, the feminist, and so on. Of course, this means talking to the engineers, talking to the corporations, talking to people who have no interest at all in the humanities. So it's much easier to stay back in English departments and do cultural heritage, which is the role that they are reserving for us.

The battle lines are drawn there. We need

to prevent the digital and the environmental from becoming a branch of corporate knowledge inside the old humanities, because that's corporate money. We have to make them our own. Embrace them. Bring in our methodologies. The critical humanities would exist without nostalgia for humanism; without a humanist blueprint. They would be genuinely open to what we are capable of becoming. And I think we are capable of becoming a number of things.

We need the room to experiment with prototypes of what being human might be. We need fundamental humanities labs about what we are in the process of becoming. That requires a bit of funding, a bit of respect for our knowledge, and a bit of time for our researchers not to be killed by teaching endlessly without any research breaks in which to conduct the experiment. Respect our culture. And on the basis of mutual respect, it could be a fabulous new frontier for the humanities as well.

You see, a pathological optimist to the very end!

SAM SOLNICK, OCTOBER 2016

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