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Critical Posthuman Theory

Rosi Braidotti and Emily Jones

Critical Posthuman Theory develops at the convergence between post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, seeking to dismantle hierarchies between humans, such as gender, race and class but also to dismantle the idea that the human sits in hierarchical supremacy over other subjects— including the environment and non-humans (Braidotti, 2021). This body of work thereby brings critiques of humanism as found, for example, in intersectional feminist theory, postcolonial, queer and race theory, ecofeminism and critical disability studies together and alongside critical animal and environmental studies and science and technology studies, among others. It positions itself both thematically and methodologically at the conjunction between these areas, to provide a transversal and trans-disciplinary framework to critique the exclusionary nature of the specific vision of the human subject situated at the centre of the Western social, symbolic and discursive order.

Not all posthuman theory, however, is critical. Posthumanism now has many branches and has become an ‘umbrella term’ for a diverse range of theories including transhumanism, new materialisms, anti-humanisms, ‘agential realism’ (Barad, 2004), the Anthropocene and the ‘ahuman’ (MacCormack, 2014). Braidotti (2011:38) outlines the various origins and strands of posthuman theory, describing:

...three major strands in contemporary posthuman thought: the first comes from moral philosophy and develops a reactive form of the posthuman; the second, from science and technology studies, enforces an analytic form of the posthuman; and the third, from my own tradition of anti-humanist philosophies of subjectivity, proposes a critical post-humanism.

The first type of posthumanism is actually a neo-humanism, typified by the work of scholars such as Nussbaum (2006), who defends humanism, rejects the suggestion of its historical decline and stresses its increasing relevance in relation to the disruptive changes induced by globalisation, technological advancement and environmental issues. This results in reinstating an updated form of liberalism, built on Nussbaum’s ‘capabilities’ approach (2011), namely the idea that we should all be equal and this

should be achieved through giving everyone equal capabilities and opportunities. Much as she shares the aspiration to equality, Braidotti critiques the foundational notion of moral universalism that underscores this strand of posthumanism. She opposes to it a situated and relational posthuman ethics of affirmation (Braidotti 2019; 2021).

Braidotti also critiques the second strand of posthumanism which comes from science and technology studies, noting that, while this strand engages strongly with contemporary developments in the field, it often upholds universal humanistic values, with little critical analysis of the possible perils of doing so. Transhumanism perhaps best exemplifies this mode of thought. There are multiple transhumanisms today. Some are quite radical and aim at a democratic use of technologies to enhance social justice and economic access (Ferrando, 2020). Other transhumanists, on the other hand, are compatible and even supportive of cognitive capitalism (Bostrom, 2003; 2005; 2011) and seek to move humans beyond their current physical and cerebral limitations, by drawing on a mixture of human-machine, neural and biomedical enhancements. Transhumanist human enhancement expands to practices that prevent the aging process and aim to create stronger, faster and more efficient human beings. By pursuing an ideal of human perfectibility framed by the humanist Vitruvian model, transhumanism reiterates the European and Eurocentric Enlightenment vision of the Man of Reason (Lloyd, 1984; Wynter, 2003). It thus proposes a form of “ultra-humanism,” (Ferrando 2020) that ends up reifying ‘a particular normative version of humanity that enables distinctions between more or less worthy forms of life.’ (Wilcox, 2017a:5). This approach differs from the critical posthuman stance in that, not only does it ignore inequalities between humans but also, by seeking to create a super-human form of intelligence, it actively works to strengthen these inequalities by creating two tiers of humanity, those with tech and those without (Chace, 2016). It is perhaps no coincidence that the majority of transhumanists are white, middle class high-tech men from the Global North, symbolised by Elon Musk.

Critical posthuman theories, such as new materialism and posthuman feminism (Braidotti, 2021), start from a different image of the human and from the lived experience of more marginalised kinds of humans. This approach challenges dominant understandings of humanity and subjectivity, stressing both the ‘force of

living matter' and the ways in which 'nature-culture' has already been complicated by techno-scientific discovery. The critical line here is that, in seeking to re-centre ontology, epistemology is sometimes side-lined, producing a theory of matter that ultimately, thinks about matter alone (Braidotti, 2019). For feminist critics, this neglect of epistemology results in an inadequate account of how new materialist perspectives apply in a world where inequalities between humans remain (Alaimo, 2016). This critique is also central to race theory, for instance, Zakkiiyah Jackson (2015; 2020) warns that mere appeals to move 'beyond the human', if detached from the critiques of humanism made by black and decolonial theorists, risk reinforcing racism and Eurocentric ideas of transcendentalism. All these critics raise the key question: *whose* conception of humanity are we supposed to move beyond?

The tendency to flatten out structural inequalities and systemic discrimination is manifest in moves towards the nonhuman that displace epistemology but avoid issues of social justice. Both transhumanism and object-orientated ontology (OOO - which is sometimes classed as being part of the new materialist turn, sometimes not) exemplify such a stance, as scholars such as Sheldon (2015) and Braidotti (2019) have noted. Critical posthuman thought is the antidote to this spuriously neutral kind of posthumanism. Feminist new materialism, for example, works to situate understandings of matter as a naturecultural continuum, alongside and in relation to intersectional feminist analyses of the differences between humans (Haraway, 1991; 1997; 2016). This goes beyond a merely analytic displacement of epistemology and foregrounds instead the relational ways feminist new materialism, ecofeminism (Plumwood, 1993) decolonial, race and Indigenous theory (Rose, 2004) tackle the problem of matter.

Critical posthuman theory, in bringing together critiques of both humanism and anthropocentrism, ensures that the question of matter's significance can be thought without risking the displacement of important epistemological turns that have come about through feminist, queer, critical race, postcolonial and crip theory, among others (Åsberg and Braidotti, 2018). This move requires challenging the 'Universal (Hu)man' and its 'Eurocentric construction,' this being a central tenant of the critical posthuman project (Lykke, 2018). Thus, as Rosi Braidotti notes (2021: 6), while it 'may be difficult for people who have never been considered socially and politically fully human to

adopt an affirmative relation to the posthuman predicament,' including '[w]omen, LGBTQ+ people, the colonized, Indigenous peoples, people of colour and a multitude of non-Europeans who historically have had to fight for the basic right to be considered and treated as human,' this 'exclusionary notion of the human' is 'precisely what is challenged by' critical posthuman theory, including posthuman feminism (Braidotti, 2021).