

Book review

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Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 1st edn, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2022; 294 pp.: 978-1-5095-1807-4; 978-1-5095-1808-1 (pbk) £ 15.99, € 18.10

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In the last two decades, the idea of a radical shift in the humanist perspective has found its way into the philosophical debate in favour of a 'posthuman' vision over every aspect of life. Rosi Braidotti is among the promoters of such a transformation, as attested by her trilogy composed of *The Posthuman* (2013), *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), and the most recent *Posthuman Feminism* (2022). In these volumes, her discussion takes a leap from her previous stances about nomadic subjectivity. Here, her attention towards contemporaneity includes a radical reconfiguration of the ideas of subjectivity, perception, and experience.

Posthuman subjectivity finds its base within the 'affirmative perspective' of new materialism, as it was developed within feminist philosophy in the 2000s. As reconstructed by Braidotti herself, new materialism starts where the limitations of the linguistic turn emerge. According to Braidotti, the complete reliance upon 'language, representation and the power of the phallic master signifier and the process of subject-formation' (p. 109) does erase 'the thick and painful materiality of the current environmental crisis on the one hand and the divisive social implications of the new technologies on the other' (p. 110). The volume is dedicated to exploring the possibilities for a specific feminist declination of the posthuman perspective. However, it relies upon (and partially takes for granted) the fierce debate that developed in the late 2000s around the relationship between new materialism and feminist theories that Braidotti had addressed in previous writings.

Part of the discussion was held within the pages of this same Journal in 2008 and 2009, when Sara Ahmed (15:1), Iris van der Tuin (15:4), and Noela Davis (16:1) engaged in an open discussion about the relationship between feminism and new materialism, primarily concentrating on the different perspectives covered by anti-essentialism and biophobia. During those years, the main concern was which idea of 'body' was actually included in feminist theories, influenced mainly by post-structuralism. What appeared as a nearly irreconcilable fracture in those writings has become more and more a stimulus in interrogating anti-essentialist positions. In particular, feminist new materialism needs to take into consideration the bodies according to a theoretical frame averted from traditional anthropocentrism and humanism, which created the power asymmetries and hierarchies that made feminist theories essential in the first place.

In the essay that Braidotti published in the collection *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Duke University Press

2010), the philosopher described her version of *matter-ialism*, or the idea of considering the new practices of 'life' that intertwine bodies and technologies in unpredictable and unprecedented ways. Her materialism is a vitalist one, a materialism that rebels against universal humanism in favour of a posthuman embodiment of the fragmented subjectivities involved in this idea of 'life'. Braidotti, therefore, continues her retrieving of Spinoza's monistic definition of nature and culture as a continuum, already stated in her discussion of nomadic theory in the late 1990s and early 2000s and later recurring in her trilogy about posthumanism.

Posthuman Feminism proposes a specific recognition of feminist theories' role in the radical reimagination of life, bodies, and the human experience depicted by such a philosophical scenario. One of the names recurring as the principal reference for this version of new materialism is that of Donna Haraway, discussing the *natureculture* paradigm for investigating the interrelations among all elements at play. In this perspective, the complex relations among all life forms (human, inhuman, and posthuman) can be read through the lens of affirmative ethics, introducing alternative ecologies based on the idea of kinship.

Braidotti convincingly recuperates Haraway's vision of the interconnected world, which goes beyond any dialectic between life and technology, or nature and culture, in favour of a broader understanding of the relational structures combining the ecosystems generated by the forces at stake. This, however, is only one of the theories that create a cartography of the posthuman feminist perspective. With her vivid and compelling writing, Braidotti addresses many other feminist theories contributing to the broad criticism against Anthropocene. The starting point of the book is the idea that 'feminism is not just an egalitarian movement for the mainstream, but also a transformative decolonial and radical struggle to affirm positively the differences among marginalized people(s)' (p. 3). Hence, the first convergence between feminism and posthumanism is their common struggle against any essentialism in the idea of 'human' and the power relations organizing the hegemonic experience of life. As stated in the Introduction, 'A posthuman feminist framework encourages a different notion of political subjectivity as a heterogeneous assemblage of embodied and embedded humans' (p. 6).

In order for this new conception to emerge, the first part of the volume is dedicated to the critique of contemporary versions of humanism and anthropocentrism according to the specific lens of feminism. Braidotti divides recent feminist theories into four main branches: liberal, socialist, black, and queer and trans feminism; according to her, each one is deeply rooted in humanism (or in-humanism, when trans feminism reclaims its escape from the discriminatory practices against queer and trans people that came with humanist theories). Such a systematization is fascinating but can also be problematic, as it does not always account for the presence of both 'humanist' and 'posthumanist' stances, especially in some accounts of queer and trans feminism. However, Braidotti insists that all feminist theories have been essential for the recognition of the marginalized, the excluded, and the oppressed and to organize the struggle for emancipation in advanced democracies. Therefore, she suggests that we should not easily dismiss them, even when we rethink at the ideas of 'life' and 'body' from a different perspective.

To bring forward the discussion against the humanist vision, Braidotti reconsiders ecofeminism as a starting point for the assertion of the nature-culture continuum and the

technologization of the environment and how reciprocally the environment is grounded and ecologized. This conceptual bridge brings feminism towards posthumanism because it remarks the intimate, rhizomatic connections between all life forms from a global perspective. From here, Braidotti proceeds to the second part of her volume (‘Posthuman Feminism as Creation’), in which the philosopher collects and discusses some of the central feminist theories from the latest years and creates a constellation of possible ways of considering ‘life’ and its consequences on our planet. The ‘affirmative gesture’ implied by feminisms brings Braidotti to consider different declinations for this new embodied form of life, which changes the meaning of the expression ‘body politics’ as ‘it redefined the body as a materially embedded heterogeneous assembly and not only as a socially constructed entity’ (p. 141). The posthuman body produces new genealogies that involve cyberfeminism, radical bio-techno bodies, feminist and queer technoscience studies, and disability studies. Moreover, it positions itself in the emerging tradition of queer kinship that overlooks the traditional organization of societies according to hierarchical families based on the metaphor of the tree, and proposes complex, overlapping, rhizomatic networks among multiple life forms instead.

Such critical de-naturalization of the body produces a new perspective that steers the reasoning towards the conceptualization of sexuality as a driving, productive, creative force; a radical and transgressive form, discarding the binary gender system and celebrating ‘molecular’ pleasures and sensibilities. Beyond sexuality, the same creative and transgressive force also informs artistic productions and media forms, giving birth to feminist utopias, fantastic narratives, speculative fictions, and so on. Such a force is also the basis for a prolific and ongoing contamination among the more creative stances of feminist narratives, academic writing, philosophical perspectives, and technologies. Braidotti highlights the continuum between all these different texts and visions, becoming a network for transmitting ‘the politics of hope and ethics of affirmation through posthuman feminist activism and knowledge production practices’ (p. 236).

The recognition of such a creative force, also thanks to powerful and carefully selected case studies, is never acritical or carelessly celebratory: Braidotti always reminds the reader of the intertwining of vital aspects with feral ones (such as climate change or the recent pandemic crisis), with all the cruel imbalance in the sufferance they cause globally. The rupture of traumatic genealogies through utopic narratives and empowering practices, hence, does not cause the loss of memories of discrimination and destruction but ‘expresses deep trust in the collective ability [of the minoritized subjects] to constitute alternative human subjects and communities’ (p. 236).

According to Braidotti’s enthralling perspective, posthuman feminism finally has a double task: first, to produce a critical cartography against the dominant definition of ‘human’ at the root of contemporary disasters and, second, to point affirmative alternatives and activate generative modes of collaborative interconnectedness through all the (empowered, multiply sexualized) life forms. *Posthuman Feminism* puts together a constellation of feminist theories, recognizing the importance of creating genealogies while claiming for an anti-hierarchical structure. At the same time, the volume becomes an essential step towards an ongoing radical change of perspective in philosophy, as it stimulates an ethical and hopeful way to interpret the globalized world as full of a new idea of life.