Book Review

Posthuman Knowledge

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Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman knowledge*. Polity Press.

Posthumanism is a topic of rising interest among educators and educational researchers. The growth and high quality of this research field are evidenced in a number of recent thought-provoking collections, including *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* (Taylor & Hughes, 2016); *Decentering the Researcher in Intimate Scholarship: Critical Posthuman Methodological Perspectives in Education* (Strom et al., 2018); and *Feminist Posthumanisms, New Materialisms and Education* (Ringrose et al., 2019). Much of this work draws from the important theoretical analysis found in publications by contemporary philosopher and feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti, such as *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), and *The Posthuman* (2013). Her most recent contribution to the field is *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), which offers constructive ways of thinking through the complexities of the 21st century. In this book, Braidotti constructs a map of our posthuman times and invites us to follow multiple undulating, intersecting, serpentine pathways. As such, this book review reflects, through structure and style, the fluid, shifting, organic nature of Braidotti's posthuman theory.

Several pressing educational questions emerge from *Posthuman Knowledge*: What does it mean to educate the posthuman subject? How best to educate for a posthuman Anthropocene? Braidotti guides us toward critical, conceptual, and creative thinking so that we may begin to engage these questions. Braidotti (2019) defines the posthuman as an empirically grounded, embedded, and embodied “work in progress”—a “navigational tool” or “figuration” that serves our understanding of the subjects we are becoming in these extraordinarily precipitous times. The posthuman throws our material, embedded selves into relief. This means that selves/subjects are always raced, gendered, and otherwise multiply identified. Multiplicity is

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central to the posthuman condition. From our highly nuanced and profoundly varied positions, we generate a myriad of situated perspectives about subjectivity and knowledge.

Braidotti opens her book with a lively and tempestuous tableau of our rapidly changing world. In this world, we find ourselves deeply immersed in what Braidotti calls the “posthuman convergence,” (dis)oriented between the Fourth Industrial Revolution (the intersection of advanced technologies that blur the boundaries of the digital, physical, and biological) and the Sixth Extinction (the disappearance of species as a result of human activity). But Braidotti is quick to caution against the misleading notion that we, (post)humans, are a unitary category. The posthuman subject is “a collective subject, a ‘we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-in-the-same’ kind of subject” (p. 54). In this context, difference is immanent, affirmative, dynamic, and rejects the oversimplification of binary oppositional terms.

Braidotti designates the posthuman location as “a convergence of several contradictory speeds of transformation” (p. 3). As posthuman subjects, we live in the crosshairs of these intersections and must hold potentially conflicting ideas in our embedded, embodied, and relational minds: (post)humanism and (post)anthropocentrism, growth and extinction, acceleration and exhaustion, the non-linear and planetary collisions of technologies and bodies. These convergences form a middle ground—one that curbs the polarization of a “holistic sublime on the one hand, and an equally fallacious flat ontology on the other” (p. 52). This middle ground comprises heterogeneous multiplicities and is thus rhizomatic by nature. It is a shifting ground, merging with and emerging from a seedbed of multiple perspectives, possibilities, and persons, both human and nonhuman.

To ground the abstract idea of the posthuman convergence with a real life example, I reflect on my location through Braidotti’s lens. I was born and raised in southern Ontario. The culture, politics, and climate of this place have deeply shaped my perspectives and insights. I write my review from this location, which, despite the many transformations of wild spaces into strip malls and condominium complexes, has yet to fully transform into Rachel Carson’s dystopian songless spring. There are many birds still, though the foxes are gone. Just down the road, these birds—sparrows, robins, mourning doves—busy themselves in the untouched patches of a vast electrical field. I walk here with my dog in the first pulses of daylight where I have, more than once, confused the sound of electricity in the overhead wires with a swarm of buzzing insects. I imagine this kind of auditory jumble to anchor the posthuman convergence in a lived experience. In my mind, this strange nature-culture collision is suspended in amber. It is the task of the posthuman to cut into the sap and free the amalgam, which tangoes from one posthuman mind to another, zig-zagging across the permeable borders that separate cultures, societies, and disciplines. To create posthuman knowledge, one must track the contrails of its multi-directional journeys.

The underlying current that courses through *Posthuman Knowledge* stresses that the convergence is neither a crisis nor an especially gloomy milieu. Rather, it marks a rich and complex historical transition that gives way to new conditions for knowledge production and vibrant relational encounters. Braidotti does not overlook the many risks we must face but she does prioritize the opportunities afforded for both human and nonhuman agents, with a special emphasis on the convergence as a highly generative time for the Humanities to reinvent themselves.

Posthuman Knowledge paints a portrait of emergent posthuman subjects and the new scholarship these subjects are generating within the (Post)Humanities. Her first chapter presents the theoretical and affective dimensions of the posthuman convergence. Chapter 2 unpacks the conceptual and ethical question of what constitutes the posthuman subject. In Chapter 3, Braidotti considers the advantages of posthumanist knowledge production and surveys recurring features of recent scholarship on the posthuman: (a) research that explores the notion of the human; (b) the constellation of inventive terminology used to encapsulate nonhuman objects of study; (c) the propensity of posthuman scholarship towards interdisciplinarity; and (d) new forms of cooperation and collaboration between academic researchers, art practitioners, and activists. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the Critical PostHumanities (CPH), which work to reimagine the human in the posthuman era, who we are as humans and who or what we are becoming. In Chapter 5, Braidotti explains theoretical principles of posthuman thought and the concrete practices of affirmative posthuman knowledge production. Chapter 6 offers a more detailed picture of how affirmative ethics function within a critical posthuman perspective. Lastly, in her succinct final chapter, Braidotti revisits the affective mood of the posthuman convergence and concludes by urging posthuman resistance to the troubled aspects of advanced capitalism, such as hierarchical relations of power, and celebrating “the inexhaustible quality of life itself” (p. 5).

Braidotti embraces the proliferation of new terms that help to encapsulate the posthuman condition. The term “Anthropocene,” for example, has inspired a torrent of spin-offs including Haraway’s “Chthulucene” (2016), Moore’s “Capitalocene” (2013), and Tsing’s “Plantationocene” (2015). This collection of terms, Braidotti suggests, not only aptly reflects the exuberant speed of our times but also “expresses both the excitement and exasperation involved in accounting for the posthuman predicament within the Anthropocenic frame” (p. 82). Posthuman critical thinking demands creativity, as demonstrated by the flurry of new expressions emerging from the field. Braidotti considers this inventiveness as a positive sign, one that expresses the “relational capacity to take in the world and to take on” (p. 84). In addition to this explosion of neologisms, Braidotti advocates for an intensive critical approach to knowledge production that embraces social-political analyses of technological advances as well as the economic and social injustices they create.

Creativity, paired with conceptual thinking, is essential to posthuman knowledge production. For this, Braidotti draws on Spinoza and Deleuze by enlisting a vital neo-materialist approach, which entails a “zoe-centered” outlook. Zoe refers to the life of all living beings. A vital neo-materialist approach emphasizes the material, relational aspects of zoe, but also the geological and technological aspects of transformation that embrace the places where we connect as well as the places where we differ. This is the kind of shift in focus that characterizes the burgeoning field of CPH.

In Chapter 4, Braidotti explains the two primary assumptions from which CPH pivots. The first acknowledges the knowing subject as a complex “zoe/geo/techno” ensemble that includes humans. By way of example, Braidotti offers the Digital Humanities and the Environmental Humanities—the two leading fields that comprise CPH. The Digital Humanities enlist an AI-mediated subject and the Environmental Humanities select geo/hydro-centred entities as a foundation from which to work. The second assumption rests in a positive relationship to the diversity of zoe which eschews hierarchical thinking and recognizes the agency, intelligence, and creativity of all living organisms. In other words, CPH considers nonhuman entities as coproducers of posthuman knowledge. When applied to pedagogy, Braidotti envisages collaborative, non-hierarchical teaching practices that open the gate “for nonhuman elements to intervene as heterogeneous forces that connect the educational practice to the wider world” (p. 142).

The Critical PostHumanities are “supra-disciplinary” in character, which is what makes them critical. Debates over disciplinary purity are of no concern for Critical PostHumanists. Instead, knowledge production arises from the forces of cross-pollination between discourses. In this way, knowledge ebbs and flows in and out of the frames intent on capturing them. Many traditional disciplinary categories have tunneled their roots in place as an attempt to defend their epistemic credibility. However, movement is inherent to the kind of knowledge produced in CPH. Like shapeshifters, Critical PostHumanists must oscillate between ways of thinking—intuitive and empirical—and also between disciplines and objects of study. These passages are intellectually taxing, but they are shared among human and nonhuman entities, thus both the exhaustion and the breakthroughs are circulated among the participants.

According to Braidotti, CPH comprises two central characteristics. The first is a spirited and positively charged energy that gains momentum by traversing the porous boundaries of both neighbouring and disparate disciplines as well as lived experiences outside of the university. Second, they emphasize minor science, which, in comparison to major science, is “more autonomous, radical, and potentially subversive” (p. 115) and develops through non-institutionalized practices and discourses. Though CPH engages both major and minor science, as is characteristic of the posthuman convergence, minor science concerns itself with the flows

of becoming and is thus integral to posthuman knowledge production. Considering the unprecedented times we are living through, and the fact that our research should strive to both reflect and shape the world we live in, it seems that supra-disciplinarity is necessary now more than ever.

In sum, *Posthuman Knowledge* offers a detailed picture of what it means to be (post)human and how we might go about creating posthuman scholarship. Throughout the book, Braidotti champions affirmative, hopeful, and collective approaches to life in the 21st century and addresses the “complex” and often “contradictory” emotions that define the posthuman convergence (p.174). Her position builds its foundations on a middle ground that avoids the trappings of techno-optimism and hopeless defeatism. But this middle ground is not a safe space. It is risky yet rewarding and in a constant state of motion, catapulting multiple perspectives in multiple directions. To keep up with the posthuman convergence, we must stay agile and afloat. My suggestion is that we consider this middle ground as fluid—a deep, [troubled yet majestic lake](#). After all, visionary marine biologist Rachel Carson (1951/2003) forecast that humans were bound to return to our hydrous origins both “mentally and imaginatively” (p. 19). And the posthuman convergence calls our mental faculties to critical and imaginative attention. It may be exhausting to keep up the paddling but we’re all there together, buoying each other’s energy. If we work collectively, as Braidotti suggests, to expand “the capacity to take in the intensity of the world and take on its objectionable aspects” (p. 79) perhaps our shared imaginings will engender affirmative and empowering alternatives to the unbalanced and polluted waters we currently tread.

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