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Introduction: Posthumanist Gender Theory—A Very Rough Account

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This special collection, edited by Anna Babka, Hildegard Kernmayer, Julia Lingl, and Marietta Schmutz cuts across current positions and developments within the frame of what can be called posthuman gender theory, thereby questioning humanist-epistemological categories that continue to shape Western societies and their systems of knowledge production. Posthuman gender theory inscribes itself into the discussion about a "conditio posthumana." Thereby, the traditional essentialism of a biologically based two-gender system is questioned anew. At the same time, the "humanistic" idea of the superiority of man (as a male subject of domination) gives way to a post-anthropocentric conception of reality, according to which binary hierarchical oppositions such as man/animal or man/machine dissolve.

This collection among others comprises transdisciplinary examinations of novels, comics, and other cultural or social phenomena and aims to participate in the ongoing development of posthumanist thinking in relation to gender and queer theory formation.



1. Lead-in Or: The Importance of "Staying with the Trouble"

In the past two decades, there has been a shift regarding the emphasis in the humanities and cultural studies from discourse analytic and deconstructive models to neo-materialist theories. Associated with names such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, or Karen Barad, the discussion of materiality and materialism first took place in science and technology studies, however, political theory, art theory, media theory, human geography and, finally, gender theory have since also experienced their 'material turn'.¹ What most approaches of New Materialism have in common is that they conceptualize the agency of matter, thus, conceiving matter not as an essence or property of things, but rather as an agent that is itself involved in processes of materialization.² This new status of materiality not only leads to any naturally or even culturally set division of nature and culture becoming obsolete, it also changes the conditions of being human. The 'humanistic' concept of man as *homo sapiens sapiens*, as a subject that, in the process of civilization, attempts to emancipate itself from corporeality and nature—thereby defining the animal, plant and thing world as a separated 'other'—is replaced by the concept of a 'posthuman,' rhizomatically-conceived subjectivity, a collective entity encompassing not only humans but also non-human agents such as technology, animals or plants.³

Though New Materialism and Critical Posthumanism consider discourse analytic and deconstructive approaches as insufficient to grasp the entanglement of meaning-symbolic processes and material orders,⁴ their central assumptions are nevertheless grounded in the findings of these very predecessors. Like these approaches, new materialist accounts reject any form of identity logic and expose the dualisms that characterize Western thought as language-generated constructs. This is reflected not least in Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) itself, the text to which virtually all neo-materialist gender media studies refer. For Haraway, "[c]hief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man."⁵ Furthermore, the recent work of

¹ See a.o. Christine Löw et. al., eds., *Material turn: Feministische Perspektiven auf Materialität und Materialismus* (Opladen, Berlin, Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2017).

² See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 150.

³ See Rosi Braidotti, *Posthumanismus. Leben jenseits des Menschen* (Frankfurt, New York: Campus, 2014), 54–55 and 172–76.

⁴ See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 132.

⁵ Donna Jeanne Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–83, 177.

the physicist and gender researcher Karen Barad, who in her transdisciplinary research combines quantum physics with queer-feminist theory,⁶ testifies to the confrontation between New Materialism and Critical Posthumanism on the one hand and the findings of poststructuralism on the other. Here, the last remaining 'difference,' that between the human and the non-human, is 'deconstructed' when, according to Barad's agential realism, discourse practices are no longer read as "human-based activities but [as] specific material (re)configurations of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted."⁷

Postulating the entanglement and interrelatedness of all that exists [alles Seienden], posthumanist theory addresses and reflects on current issues such as climate change, human and non-human extinction, highlighting the relationships between all living things and a (possibly unbounded) environment. However, there is also a utopian moment inherent in posthumanist theory insofar as it imagines—in view of the anthropological crisis of Western humanities—a place beyond the human (or beyond anthropocentrism).⁸ Arguing with Clarke and Rossini, posthumanist theory raises the question: "[W]hat forms of political action, what ethical codes, and also what aesthetic principles would be needed to arrive in a posthumanist world?"⁹

Starting from earlier reflections on the question of the form of political action and the connection between aesthetic and ethical principles, a spectrum of possible answers, a multitude of approaches, ideas, and figures of thought arise within the framework of posthumanist research. Donna Haraway, for example, stresses the importance of cultivating multiple concepts of coexistence or alternative cross-species forms of kinship that connect human and non-human companions.¹⁰ Exploring different modes of trans-species togetherness and relatedness—such as cyborgs as varieties of human and machine hybridization—, these approaches attempt to theorize existence as posthuman coexistence.¹¹ Moreover, as Tsing et al. claim in referring to Haraway, "recognizing the importance of symbiotic makings (sympoiesis) is just the

⁶ See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, or Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, no. 1-2 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v0i1-2.28067>.

⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 183. See also Stacey Alaimo, "Materialisms, Old Humanisms, or, Following the Submersible," *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 19, no 4 (2011).

⁸ See Braidotti, *Posthumanismus*, 31-35.

⁹ Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), xiv.

¹⁰ See Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016), 9-30.

¹¹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 58-98.

beginning of 'staying with the trouble.' Symbiotic relations must be constantly renewed and negotiated within life's entanglements."¹² The following paragraphs try to give a very brief account of some of the troubles, aspects, desires, and continuing theoretical conversations that have led to and could be grasped as posthumanist (gender) theory.

2. From Philosophical Anthropology to Biopolitical Thought

In the history of philosophy and, more specifically, in the history of philosophical anthropology—itself readable as a history of changing constellations of knowledge and social agreement—the category of 'being-human' is renegotiated time and again. Already in antiquity human uniqueness was proclaimed by numerous authors like Aristotle, asserting "man [being] the best of the animals when perfected," as "nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech."¹³ Newmyer noted that "the phrase itself ['man alone of animals'] became a cliché in Greek and eventually in Roman philosophical and scientific literature."¹⁴ Hence, 'man' was construed as the 'measure of all things,' endowed with reason, closer to the divine than to animals, conceived of as a "freely acting being [freihandelndes Wesen],"¹⁵ successively completing himself by way of civilization, (self-)cultivation, and moralization in the anthropology of enlightenment.

Since the first half of the 20th century, when philosophical anthropology developed as a discipline in its own right, the anthropocentric understanding according to which 'man' distinguishes himself from and elevates himself above other species through rationality, free will, individual consciousness, and agency as well as a capacity to feel empathy, grief, and happiness, has been repeatedly contested from various sides. Aside from the purported exceptional position of 'man,' the distinction itself is being challenged. While zoologically based approaches in philosophical anthropology (Plessner) destabilize the nature-culture divide—and with it the epistemic foundation of the definition of 'man'—, discourse analysis (Foucault) and poststructuralist sign theories (Derrida), with all implied performative theoretical ramifications a few decades later (Butler), expose this divide as a linguistically created construction that supports the

¹² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M5.

¹³ Aristotle, *Pol.*, 1253a.

¹⁴ Stephen T. Newmyer, *The Animal and the Human in Ancient and Modern Thought: The 'Man Alone of Animals' Concept* (Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2017), viii.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, "Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 7, ed. by Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften [=AA] (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1900ff), 117–330, 120. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k25542w/f1.item>.

'humanist' belief in the human subject as the source of all knowledge and truth. For this divide separates not just 'man' from animate 'others' (animals, plants, or microorganisms), it also marks the difference between a 'being-human' that is derived from the concept of 'culture' and those racialized and sexualized human 'others,' whose purported affinity with 'nature' excludes them from participating to the fullest extent in being human. In this line of thought Cary Wolfe raises the significant argument that this "fully 'human' condition" can only be achieved "by the killing off, transcendence, repression or overcoming of the 'animal' body."¹⁶ What can be grasped as "a very old and very familiar hallmark of humanism [is] historically speaking, a very dangerous one."¹⁷ Here Wolfe refers to recent work on biopolitics by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, or Giorgio Agamben, all of them dealing with this kind of "logical hierarchies between the 'human' and the 'animal' (and the animality of the human)."¹⁸ Moreover, as Cecilia Åsberg claims, "[h]umans today are, after all, more obviously than ever entangled in co-constitutive relationships with nature and the environment, with science and technology, with vulnerable embodiment, and with other animals by which we live and die."¹⁹

3. Establishing Posthumanism

The question of the human and consequently, regarding our main topic, terms like 'posthuman,' 'posthumanist,' or 'posthumanism' are deeply rooted in corresponding scholarship that has "a surprisingly long history."²⁰ Postmodern thinker and literary theorist Ihab Hassan—ranking among the leading researchers in the field—was one of the first to use the terms 'posthuman' and 'posthumanism.'²¹ Already in 1977, Hassan states the turn of postmodernism "toward a posthumanist culture,"²² whose salient

¹⁶ Cary Wolfe, "Posthumanism," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 356–59, 357.

¹⁷ Wolfe, "Posthumanism," 357.

¹⁸ Wolfe, "Posthumanism," 357. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004); Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Cecilia Åsberg, "Feminist Posthumanities," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 157–60, 157.

²⁰ Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), vii. Herbrechter points to publications by N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Neil Badmington and Elaine L. Graham or, not least, to Francis Fukuyama's text *Our Posthuman Future* from 1999.

²¹ See Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 25.

²² Ihab Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthuman Culture? A University Masque in Five Scenes," *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 4 (1977): 830.

characteristic is not the overcoming of man, but rather the overcoming of 'humanistic' concepts of being human and thus "the dissolution of the 'subject,' the annihilation of that hard Cartesian ego or consciousness which distinguished itself from the world by turning the world into an 'object.'"²³ Hassan identifies as central to posthumanism what could be called the deconstruction of the human, an openness through the possibilities of the 'post,' and thus a post-dualist approach. In this respect, Francesca Ferrando argues that

[b]oth the notion of the "human" and the historical occurrence of "humanism" have been sustained by reiterative formulations of symbolic "others," which have functioned as markers of the shifting borders of who and what would be considered "human": non-Europeans, non-whites, women, queers, freaks, animals, and automata, among others, have historically represented such oppositional terms.²⁴

Also, postmodern literary scholar Katherine Hayles prominently refers to Hassan in her seminal book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), dwelling on Hassan's prediction that humanism might come to an end "as humanism transforms itself into something we must helplessly call posthumanism."²⁵ However, as Stefan Herbrechter points out with regard to the historical development of posthumanist thought, "[these terms and questions] have only really started to receive attention in contemporary theory and philosophy in the last two decades where they have produced an entirely new way of thinking and theorizing"²⁶ and where the discipline "has established itself—mainly in the Anglo-American sphere—as an autonomous field of study with its own theoretical approach."²⁷ He furthermore claims that posthumanism can now be said to be "a paradigm of thought and a form of 'knowledge'" that is influencing "virtually all traditional disciplines, sciences, and 'studies' formations (from cultural studies to women's studies, posthuman studies or extinction studies), all the while transforming them into new interdisciplinary formations grouped under the label 'posthumanities.'"²⁸

²³ Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer," 845.

²⁴ Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 24.

²⁵ Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer," 843.

²⁶ Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, vii. The definitions of the terms also vary widely within the discourse between positions away from technophilia or technophobia and, for example, the rather conservative readable position of Francis Fukuyama, for whom posthumans stand basically as a metaphor for science out of control, biotechnological attacks on fundamentally pure, untouchable human nature, as Cecilia Åsberg points out in *The Timely Ethics of Posthumanist Gender Studies* (Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius, 2013).

²⁷ Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, vii.

²⁸ Stefan Herbrechter et al., eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 7.

Francesca Ferrando further differentiates Herbrechter's assertions by arguing that the "different takes" on posthumanism—termed as "Critical, Cultural, and Philosophical Posthumanism"—need to be grasped as "inherently related"; moreover, she claims that "the notion of the posthuman per se has developed in profoundly different ways, within the frame of not only Posthumanism [...], but also Transhumanism and Antihumanism (in all of their variants); Metahumanism, Posthumanities, and Metahumanities; Object-Oriented Ontology and the nonhuman turn; among other currents."²⁹

Related to the approaches outlined above, but also distinct from them in terms of its themes and goals, is so-called Transhumanism, which is deeply rooted in the reassessment of the question of 'what it means to be human,' not least considering fundamental environmental issues and the impact of the Anthropocene, as well as in light of expanding bio- and information technologies.³⁰ Genetic engineering, nanotechnology, AI-research, or the human-machine interaction prevailing through the digitalization of everyday life aim at the 'improvement of man,' which is supposed to bring about the overcoming of the biological limitations of man. Since the 18th century at the latest, these technologies of overcoming have been measured against a dominant notion of the 'conditio humana' as self-formation and self-perfection.

Popular exponents of Transhumanism, which sets itself the target of modifying and optimizing the unspecialized biological "deficient being [Mängelwesen]"³¹ man, foresee a not all-too-distant future in which artificial superintelligence machines shape and 'unburden' the everyday lives of humans, freeing them from objectifying processes of production and reproduction, a future in which the functions of the human body will be progressively optimized and technologies such as 'mind-uploading' will eventually make 'immortality' possible. The dualist (Cartesian) conceptualization of 'humanism,' which posits the body as the animalistic, uncivilized counterpart of mind—that is, the very dualism posthumanism strives to overcome—, seems to reach its pinnacle in these transhumanist utopias.³²

²⁹ Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 26.

³⁰ Transhumanism and posthumanism should not be assimilated since they "contemplate distinct currents within themselves, such as Critical, Cultural and Philosophical Posthumanism and New Materialism, in the case of Posthumanism; and Libertarian Transhumanism, Democratic Transhumanism, Extropianism and Singularitarianism, in the case of Transhumanism." Francesca Ferrando, "Transhumanism/Posthumanism," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 438–39.

³¹ The definition of man as a deficient being at the center of an anthropological interpretation comes from the philosopher Arnold Gehlen in his work *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940).

³² See Janina Loh, *Trans- und Posthumanismus zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2018), 11.

4. Towards a Critical Posthumanism

Thus, posthumanism cannot be grasped as "a simple replacement and overcoming of humanism," rather it is a "kind of 're-reading' or an ongoing deconstruction of humanism, which thwarts a causal and temporal relationship between humanism and posthumanism, human and posthuman, humanity and 'posthumanity.'"³³ Moreover, it tries to reveal, critique, and challenge power structures, thereby focusing on traditional categorizations based on dominant dichotomies such as human/animal, man/woman, nature/culture, man/machine, etc., that underpin the understanding of 'the human.' Thus, posthumanism is, among other things, developing hybrid entities (e.g. Brain-computer-interface), in which the previously distinct entities are finding themselves entangled. Phenomena of entanglement, of interaction, and "intra-action" (Barad)—which form the basis of the 'conditio posthumana'—are also the object of theoretical reflection. In the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as in the early writings of Donna Haraway, different figures of thought are developed. Here, the human being appears as machine *désirante*³⁴ or as a cyborg,³⁵ and therefore as an information processing system that intersects with other systems. In recourse to Haraway's later concept of companion species, Rosi Braidotti develops an egalitarian idea of subjectivity and agency that includes non-human agents, coining the term "vitalist materialism."³⁶ The "spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart"³⁷ fades with the dissolution of boundaries between mind and matter, human and nature, human and object.³⁸ These radical approaches, this breaking with all conventional categories as fundamental critique of a humanist image

³³ Stefan Herbrechter, "Kritischer Posthumanismus," *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 7, no. 1 (2016): 62.

³⁴ In *Anti Oedipus* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop the neologism of the desiring machine, which describes the unconscious, considered schizophrenic and machine-like that permeates not only one's own psyche, but rather the whole of society. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. 1, L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Éds. de Minuit, 1972).

³⁵ In her major essay on cyberfeminism and posthumanist theory, Donna Haraway states that her manifesto is neither meant to be "technophobic nor technophilic," instead it is "trying to inquire critically into the worldliness of technoscience." Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto." See also Randi Markussen, Finn Olesen, and Nina Lykke, "Cyborgs, Coyotes and Dogs. A Kinship of Feminist Figurations—Interview med Donna Haraway," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 2 (2000): 326.

³⁶ In her work *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti writes: "As a vitalist and self-organizing notion of 'matter' comes to the fore, the Humanities need to mutate and become posthuman, or to accept suffering increasing irrelevance." Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 147. With reference to Spinoza, Foucault and Deleuze, Braidotti further argues for a *vitalist materialism*: "The 'Spinozist legacy' [...] consists in a very active concept of monism, which allowed these modern French philosophers to define matter as vital and self-organizing, thereby producing the staggering combination of 'vitalist materialism.' Because this approach rejects all forms of transcendentalism, it is also known as 'radical immanence.'" Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 56.

³⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 136.

³⁸ See Loh, *Trans- und Posthumanismus zur Einführung*, 12.

of humanity can be subsumed under the term Critical Posthumanism following Stefan Herbrechter.³⁹ Significant theoretical strands that fuel antihumanist critique—focusing thereby on the "andro- and/or anthropocentrism of humanism"⁴⁰—are gender- and queer theoretical ones.

5. The Various Theoretical Contours and Facets of a Posthuman Gender Theory

Together with Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and Postcolonial Studies, Critical Posthumanism takes the various axes of identity and difference into account and states the entanglement and mutual influence of varied structures of difference and inequality or privilege with the aim of generating possible emancipatory strategies. Consequently, as mentioned above, the deconstruction of traditional oppositions represents an important epistemological perspective of power critique for posthumanist gender theory research. Amidst a wide range of different approaches, this access counters traditional notions of what it means to be human, and the hegemonic position of humans within the diversity of species is challenged.

Though not universally regarded as leading figures of posthumanist thought due to their specific understanding of materiality and performativity—concepts that have been contoured differently within new materialist approaches⁴¹—, scholars such as Judith Butler nonetheless stand for specific orientations in the field. For posthumanist endeavors are rooted in poststructuralist theory that deals profoundly with the question of the human. Butler, by theorizing gender as performative or as an effect of discourse or interpellation, decidedly claims that the category of gender plays a constitutive role regarding the conceptualization of humanness. Thus, becoming a gender occurs in what Butler describes as a field of discourse and power that at the same time determines what may be considered human and what is excluded from it. Along the example of "abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered," she explains that "it is their very humanness that comes into question."⁴² Butler further argues that "the construction of gender operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures,

³⁹ See Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanismus: Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 2009), 7.

⁴⁰ Megan de Bruin-Molé, "Feminism," *Critical Posthumanism*, August 24, 2018, <https://criticalposthumanism.net/feminism/>.

⁴¹ Regarding this very question, see Katharina Hoppe und Thomas Lemke, *Neue Materialismen zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2021), or Lars Gertenbach, "Von performativen Äußerungen zum Performative Turn. Performativitätstheorien zwischen Sprach- und Medienparadigma," *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 30, no. 2 (2020), or Vicki Kirby, *Judith Butler: Live Theory* (London, New York: Continuum, 2006).

⁴² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), 8.

radical erasures."⁴³ Moreover, following Butler again, "[i]t is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less 'human,' the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable."⁴⁴

Since in *Critical Posthumanism* the active capacity for action of (human and non-human) matter is posited next to the power of discourse, *Critical Posthumanism* not only puts into question 'humanist' knowledge practices and progress like human enhancement or visions of artificial superintelligence. Rather it insists on reformulating the spatial, ontological, and epistemological status of humans. Hence, as Jane Osgood et al. referring to Donna Haraway argue, "we see a symbolic relocation of bodies, matter, senses, human, non-human into a non-hierarchic value system."⁴⁵ With regard to the intertwinement of the critical approaches that shape what could be called a posthumanist gender theory—fundamentally considered as a feminist critique of knowledge production—questions of the body, embodiment, bodily figurations become crucial. Moreover, as Donna Haraway claims, intrinsically relating this focus to a specific ethics, "the point is to reconfigure what counts as knowledge in the interests of reconstituting the generative forces of embodiment. I am calling this practice *materialized refiguration*; both words matter. The point is, in short, to make a difference, however modestly, however partially, however much without either narrative or scientific guarantees."⁴⁶

6. Introducing 'Posthuman Bodies'—Making a Difference

Crucially, the above outlined characteristics both encompass and lead back to a variety of approaches and their theoretical foundations that have been developed during the last decades. In the mid-1990s, for example, Judith/Jack* Halberstam and Ira Livingston addressed new interfaces between humans and technology, reading the body through postmodern metaphors of technology as "a technology, a screen, a projected image" and conceptualizing it as "a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body; [...] a queer body,"⁴⁷ thereby thwarting the prevailing

⁴³ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 8.

⁴⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 8.

⁴⁵ Jayne Osgood, Scarlet Red Ruby, and Miriam Giugni, "Putting posthumanist theory to work to reconfigure gender in early childhood: When theory becomes method becomes art," *Global studies of childhood* 5, no. 3 (2015): 223, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610615597160>.

⁴⁶ Donna Jeanne Haraway, "A game of cat's cradle: Science studies, feminist theory, cultural studies," *Configurations* 2, no. 1 (2013): 61, <https://doi.org/10.3138/j.ctt5hjxjs.6>.

⁴⁷ Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, "Introduction: Posthuman Bodies," in *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1–19, 3.

mechanisms of dichotomous hierarchical orders of thinking and latent processes of othering that entail mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination, and sometimes even erasure. Halberstam/Livingston's figurations suggest the genuine incompleteness and uncertain ways of being; thus, their 'posthuman being' fundamentally questions occidental thinking insofar as it undermines even the possibility of being fixed in a meaning.⁴⁸ Since posthuman bodies are ambiguous and instable, they suggest that

[p]osthuman bodies are not slaves to masterdiscourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourse of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context. Posthuman embodiment, like Haraway's "feminist embodiment," then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations.⁴⁹

When the body 'reappears' here (embodiment), then only as a 'posthuman body' since it can no longer be objectified and concretized.⁵⁰ Katherine Hayles, for her part, offers another conception of embodiment by distinguishing it from the notion of the body itself: "In contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment."⁵¹

The prevailing figurations of such posthuman bodies/embodiments at the time are the alien, the mutant, or the cyborg, all of them appearing as tropes of bodily ambiguity.⁵² Hence, what figures here as in/human or post-human happens to be mostly unfamiliar and strange, bodily indistinct and highly obscure, even monstrous, or hybrid, like the cyborg: The cyborg's identity is unfettered by attributions that characterize and constitute the 'western subject' — "embodying both nature and 'other', [it] belongs neither wholly to nature nor to culture and subverts all certainties."⁵³ What figures as a cyborg is in itself contradictory and paradoxical, because he*she is presented mutilated, that is, not identically human; perhaps he*she can be understood as "the dear

⁴⁸ See Anna Babka, *Unterbrochen: Gender und die Tropen der Autobiographie* (Vienna, Passagen 2002), 104–5.

⁴⁹ Halberstam and Livingston, "Introduction: Posthuman Bodies," 2.

⁵⁰ See Babka, *Unterbrochen*, 104.

⁵¹ Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 196.

⁵² See also Kelly Hurley, "Reading Like an Alien: Posthuman Identity in Ridley Scott's *Alien* and David Cronenberg's *Rabid*," in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 203–24, 205.

⁵³ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practice," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 3–56, 40.

cyborg, the hermaphrodite [...] the crippled and over-equipped as a system,"⁵⁴ as Chris Hables-Grey figuratively formulates. Along with these early figurations and their inherent deconstructions, the question of gender is prominently foregrounded. And so, in the line of these ways of thinking, significant figures of thought are developed time and again—often in the form of subject assemblages, such as the *techno-gender*⁵⁵ by Paul Preciado, the *trans-corporeal subject*⁵⁶ by Stacey Alaimo, or, not least, *the posthuman subject* by Rosi Braidotti. The idea of a conjoint being-in-the-world, as well as of the fundamental interrelation between the self and the other leads to a conceptualization of subjectivity, that "is thus both post-personal and pre-individual, relational and hence in constant negotiation with multiple others and immersed in the condition that is trying to understand and modify, if not overturn."⁵⁷ Consequently, as Braidotti further argues, posthuman subjectivity could be grasped as an "ensemble composed by zoe-logical, geological and technological organisms," as a "zoe/geo/techno assemblage."⁵⁸ Hence, what is described here as a kind of "vitalist ethics of interspecies interdependence"⁵⁹ entails, following Karen Barad, the overcoming of both the separation between putative entities and the distinction that segregates humans.⁶⁰

7. Gender, Posthumanism, and Ethics

The above outlined suggests that posthumanism—not least in a feminist, gender- and queer theoretical understanding—is characterized by a strong ethical dimension, predominantly because of its fundamental critique of the prevalence of the 'human' in and of itself. Posthuman ethics contradicts "the humanist assumption of a proper boundary between ethics and politics, agency and subjectivation, autonomy and dependence."⁶¹ This unravelling of differentiations leads to an understanding of posthumanist ethics that, regarding its matters of interest or objects of scrutiny, is based on what has been cast by Haraway as 'ethics of entanglement' in which entities are conceptualized as

⁵⁴ Chris Hables Gray, "Die Cyborgs sind unter uns," in *Wunschmaschine. Welterfindung. Eine Geschichte der Technikvisionen seit dem 18. Jahrhundert. Ein Katalog zur gleichnamigen Ausstellung*, ed. Brigitte Felderer (Wien: Springer, 1996), 398–410, 400.

⁵⁵ See Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie* (Berlin: b-books, 2016).

⁵⁶ See Stacey Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeality," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 434–38.

⁵⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 47.

⁵⁸ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 47.

⁵⁹ Åsberg, *The Timely Ethics of Posthumanist Gender Studies*, 10.

⁶⁰ See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 134.

⁶¹ Åsberg, *The Timely Ethics of Posthumanist Gender Studies*, 8.

mutually implicated and inseparable.⁶² Moreover, to put it with Barad, "[e]ntanglements are relations of obligation"⁶³ and this ethical commitment to the 'Other' can be understood as woven into the very fabric of the world itself.⁶⁴

This way of being interwoven, entangled, obligated, or touched affects and permeates everything that exists, including all corporeal figurations. Indeed, it is the body that forms the basis of Patricia MacCormack's argument on posthuman ethics; and she outlines the core of what might be understood as a "posthuman encounter," namely the intrinsic intertwining of reflection, matter, and aesthetics in addition to the relationship of bodies to one another: "The body, reconfiguring relation and ethical emergences of bodies beyond being received through representation, external and within consciousness negotiating reality through representative perception, *is the foundation and the site of the event of the posthuman encounter.*"⁶⁵ Arguing from a different angle with reference to Spinoza and Deleuze, Braidotti outlines a posthumanist ethics that seeks to do justice to the complexity of conditions in our contemporary world by conceiving of subjectivity as "nomadic, distributed, relational, and process-oriented,"⁶⁶ emphasizing the relevance of relationships and collective action. It is through collective actions that a change in our interactions can take place; and for this, according to Braidotti, an affirmative ethics is needed, which she calls "Ethics of Joy."

Nomadic ethics are to be understood as an interplay of forces, desires, and values. Thus, also in ethics the focus shifts from a unified, rational, conscious subject to a processual one, to a subject in a process of becoming in all its relationality: "It is about a process of becoming: becoming-ethical."⁶⁷ Braidotti elaborates on posthuman subjectivity that it is meant to be "nomadic, distributed, relational and process-oriented. This process ontology, inspired by feminist theory [...] and contemporary re-readings of Spinoza in French philosophy [...], asserts a trustful relationship with the world and allows for greater interaction between humans and non-humans."⁶⁸ Donna Haraway argues along the same lines when she addresses onto-epistemological processes of

⁶² See Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto."

⁶³ See Karen Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1)," in *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality*, ed. Susanne Witzgall and Kerstin Stakemeier (Zürich, Berlin: Diaphanes 2014), 153–64, 163.

⁶⁴ See Karen Barad, "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance. Dis/continuities, Spacetime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-come," *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010): 265. <https://doi.org/10.3366/drt.2010.0206>.

⁶⁵ Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 1, our emphasis.

⁶⁶ Rosi Braidotti, "Nomadic Ethics," *Deleuze Studies* 7, no. 3 (2013): 221, <https://doi.org/10.3366/dls.2013.0116>.

⁶⁷ Braidotti, "Ethics of Joy," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 221–24, 222.

⁶⁸ Braidotti, "Ethics of Joy," 221.

"becoming-with," which are strongly ethically informed insofar as they foreground relationships that involve nonhuman and a-personal life. As a result, Haraway develops the concept of *naturecultures* as a key term that appears in many of her examples and discussions of what she calls *companion species*.⁶⁹ *Natureculture* can be understood as a "synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed."⁷⁰

In line with this ethical orientation and in the footsteps of Barad, posthumanist gender theory can be considered an "ethico-onto-epistemological"⁷¹ project. Barad coins the term within the framework of what she calls *agential realism*.⁷² Based on the assumption of a fundamentally queer constitution of the world that she refers to as "nature's queer performativity,"⁷³ comprising not only identity but also fundamentally "causality, matter, space, and time,"⁷⁴ she aims at the inseparability of ethics, ontology and epistemology when dealing with (scientific) knowledge production, with scientific practices, with the world itself, and its inhabitants—human and non-human actors who intra-actively co-constitute or iteratively materialize the world⁷⁵—'trouble,' alluding to Haraway, comprised, even welcomed.

8. Gender, Posthumanism, and Aesthetics

As outlined above, Critical Posthumanism confronts 'humanistic' ideas both in terms of epistemology, introducing a post-anthropocentric perspective, and ontology, regarding the 'posthuman subject' as constitutively interconnected. This concept owes its increasingly important role in cultural studies to the relativization of the nature-culture boundary on the one hand, to its timeliness on the other hand. The basic assumption of the relationality and intra-activity of all beings finds its confirmation in the 'posthuman' world, in which not only biological and information technologies have long been intertwined, but also where, especially in view of the great ecological catastrophes, the separation of man and world is no longer tenable. The end of the anthropocentric narrative gives way to an ecological one, understanding ecology in its true

⁶⁹ See Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*. Haraway's figuration of companion species reflects on the historical relationships between dogs and humans.

⁷⁰ Nicolas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden, "Natureculture," in *The International Encyclopedia of Primatology*, ed. Agustín Fuentes (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1-2, 1.

⁷¹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

⁷² See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 132.

⁷³ See Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity."

⁷⁴ See Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," 25.

⁷⁵ See Anna Babka, "'Ethico-Onto-Epistemologie' und/als queer-posthumanistische Leseweise(n) von Barbara Frischmuths Roman *Die Mystifikationen der Sophie Silber*," *Genealogy+Critique* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.16995/gc.9175>.

literal sense, namely as a system of interrelations not merely between all living things, but between the organic and the inorganic as well. The epistemological, ontological, and ethical questions that inevitably arise therefrom are dealt with in numerous works concerning New Materialism and Critical Posthumanism.

The aesthetic implications of the posthumanist and neomaterialist view of the lifeworld [Lebenswelt], however, have garnered little attention in academic discourse thus far.⁷⁶ This is all the more noteworthy as not only concepts and figurations of the 'posthuman,' but also the assumption of the world as an interwoven one has been negotiated in art long before New Materialism and Critical Posthumanism formulated their theoretical models. Aesthetic Modernism has posited itself as a critical counter-voice to the 'project of modernity' since its beginnings in the 19th century. The aesthetic strives towards subverting dichotomization, principles of the modern *episteme* (Foucault). Modernist, and later postmodernist art and literature principally challenge the construction of 'reality' as a system of binary oppositions. They subvert the fundamental Cartesian dichotomies of mind and matter, culture and nature, subject and object,⁷⁷ and not least expose gender difference as the result of a patriarchal imaginary. It is the aesthetic that seeks access to a subjugated or repressed 'other'—to the 'feminine,' to the body, to the sensual, to matter, to the non-human, be it animate or inanimate—and shows these phenomena as 'entangled.'

Already in 1971, Hassan notices modern literature moving toward a state in which it would eventually have to fall silent. In this 'literature of silence,' as Hassan calls postmodern literature, the texts themselves do not fall silent, but the question of meaning posed in literature does. Rather, the silence concerns extra-literary concepts of meaning. Postmodern knowledge recognizes their illusory character. It is this very silence that Hassan regards an epoch-structuring principle of literary postmodernism. Hassan ties the 'silencing of literature' to the experience of "perhaps [...] a mutation in Western humanism"⁷⁸ or a "sudden mutation of the times,"⁷⁹ where the conjunction of "Imagination and Science, Myth and Technology, Language and Number"⁸⁰ has already started. Therefrom, Hassan deduces "the advent of a posthumanist era."⁸¹ Five

⁷⁶ In art history, the studies of Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett are noteworthy. See Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, eds., *Carnal Knowledge. Towards a 'New Materialism' in the Arts* (London: Tauris, 2013).

⁷⁷ See René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, ed. Christian Wohlers (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2008), 25.

⁷⁸ Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 88.

⁷⁹ Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer," 835.

⁸⁰ Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer," 835.

⁸¹ Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," 86.

decades later, the 'posthumanist era' is considered an established concept, not only in theory but above all in art. The 2022 Venice Biennale, titled *The Milk of Dreams*, presented a striking look into the concept as it relates to the visual arts, artistically addressing many themes and issues negotiated in this special collection, foregrounding alternative conceptualizations of the body wherein "the boundaries between bodies and objects have been utterly transformed, bringing about profound mutations that remap subjectivities, hierarchies, and anatomies," or even a "postgender future."⁸²

To ignore the role of art in the design of phantasmatic and always already gendered concepts of the human (as separated) or of the 'posthuman' (as entangled) however, would go against the findings of postmodern aesthetic theory, which contrasts logocentric scientific thinking with an 'aesthetic thinking.' The latter is, as Wolfgang Iser points out, suitable to comprehend a 'reality' which, in recent decades, has finally been aestheticized with the progressive fusion and cross-fading of the 'real' with the 'virtual,' and the material with the digital. What we now call 'real' has increasingly been reconstituted aesthetically, realized through perceptual processes, responsive production, and ongoing re-production.⁸³ Aesthetic has a place and plays a role beyond the realm of art. In abandoning the encoded reality of the sciences as the referential medium for thought, it can embrace an increasingly medially constituted and aesthetically reshaped reality. In contrast to logocentric thinking, where matter and nature are regarded as the 'other' in relation to the logos and thus excluded, art can develop new forms of perception and explanatory models, not only illuminating the heterogeneous, plural, and interwoven state of the world, but also—and above all—generating "linkages between the different"⁸⁴ transitional points in a range of divergent discourses and forms of life. Art, in transgressing the boundaries of scientific rationality, thus becomes a medium for comprehending 'reality.' Extending the "ethico-onto-epistemological" project of Critical Posthumanism to include the aesthetic would not only recognize it as a particular form of cognition but would also make the ontology of entanglement expressible in its multidimensionality.

9. Contributions to this Collection

A whole range of different dimensions of readings and analyses along the lines of posthuman gender theory form our Special Collection, including contributions dealing with (literary) texts and visual art, with various cultural or social phenomena, with

⁸² Cecilia Alemani, "The Milk of Dreams," in *The Milk of Dreams. Biennale Arte 2022. Short Guide* (Treviso: Grafiche Antiga Spa, 2022), 43–51, 44, 49.

⁸³ See Wolfgang Iser, "Zur Aktualität ästhetischen Denkens," in *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1993), 41–78.

⁸⁴ Iser, "Zur Aktualität ästhetischen Denkens," 72.

technology and biology and with theory formation itself. The possibilities of aesthetic form are explored, for example, when it comes to expressing innovative perspectives or unexpected relationships between humans and non-humans. Lisa Keil examines the intersections between technologies of the self, posthumanism, and gender in her literary analysis of Olga Flor's 2015 novel *Ich in Gelb*. In employing posthumanist ideas, the novel dissolves the illusion of a fixed self. Through the lens of Haraway's concept of sympoiesis, Keil argues that there is a correspondence between the 'forming' of the self and the literary form of the novel, concluding that literature has an epistemological function in understanding posthuman technologies of the self. Applying a posthumanist reading strategy, Anna Babka explores Barbara Frischmuth's novel *Die Mystifikationen der Sophie Silber*, in which non-human beings, such as fairies and mythical creatures, occupy privileged positions, while also flattening or inverting hierarchies and ontologies. Babka interprets the novel using concepts by posthumanist theoreticians like Barad, whose decisive approaches question anthropocentric humanist categories and dichotomous as well as hierarchically structured models of order. Marina Rauchenbacher's article presents a posthuman-queer reading of comics, drawing on theoretical discussions of comic books and broadening their perspective using Barad's "Nature's Queer Performativity." The author traces re_dis-arranging readings of bodies in comics like *Monsters* by Ken Dahl or *Das Haus* by Anke Feuchtenberger.

Striving for interdisciplinarity and approaching the posthuman paradigm from multiple fields, Constanze Erhard, in the very spirit of our collection, connects sociological and cultural ideas in exploring the structural position of AI-equipped sexbots, which are framed as 'perfect companions,' and the concepts of sexuality, intimacy, and care connected to them. She argues that sexbots are providers of sexualised care work, a convergence that needs to be understood in the broader context of sexuality and care in post-industrial theories of sexuality. In the final contribution of this volume (thus far), Birgit Stammberger reflects on the relevance of the biological from the perspective of cultural studies. Considering current attempts to cement the two-gender order in public discourse, the paper pleads for more consideration of biological theories concerning bodily difference, showing that sex is by no means as unambiguous and binary as often assumed. Drawing on materialist accounts of deconstruction and posthumanism, Stammberger elaborates a fresh perspective on feminist epistemologies of gender, nature, and the body.

To be continued ...

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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