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Environmental Humanists Respond to the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity



“We” May Be in *This* Together, but We Are Not All Human and We Are Not One and the Same

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by Rosi Braidotti



Abstract

There has never been a more urgent time to engage with the Environmental Humanities and the other Posthumanities. This engagement is creative as well as critical and it touches upon some fundamental issues within what I have called the posthuman convergence. That is the intersection of two concurrent but contradictory phenomena: the unprecedented technological developments that have also become known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the acceleration of the climate change emergency, also known as the Sixth Extinction. This complex intersection of events triggers multiple fractures, ethical dilemmas, affective perturbations, political concerns, and critical lines of inquiry. I have summarized them as the convergent critiques of Humanism on the one hand and the rejection of anthropocentrism on the other. This is neither a simple nor a harmonious intersection of critical lines, but rather an encounter fraught with painful contradictions and challenging problems.

Keywords: posthuman convergence, the posthumanities, the environmental humanities, humanism, anthropocentrism



About the Author

Rosi Braidotti is a Philosopher and Distinguished University Professor at Utrecht University as well as the founding director of the Centre for the Humanities in Utrecht. Braidotti's publications have consistently been placed in continental and feminist philosophy, at the intersection with social and political theory, cultural politics, gender, and postcolonial studies. Throughout her work, Braidotti asserts and demonstrates the importance of combining theoretical concerns with a serious commitment to producing socially and politically relevant scholarship that contributes to making a difference in the world. Braidotti's output also includes several edited volumes. Her work has been translated in more than 20 languages and all her main books in at least three languages other than English.

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There has never been a more urgent time to engage with the Environmental Humanities and the other Posthumanities. This engagement is creative as well as critical and it touches upon some fundamental issues within what I have called the posthuman convergence. That is the intersection of two concurrent but contradictory phenomena: the unprecedented technological developments that have also become known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the acceleration of the climate change emergency, also known as the Sixth Extinction. This complex intersection of events triggers multiple fractures, ethical dilemmas, affective perturbations, political concerns, and critical lines of inquiry. I have summarized them as the convergent critiques of Humanism on the one hand and the rejection of anthropocentrism on the other. This is neither a simple nor a harmonious intersection of critical lines, but rather an encounter fraught with painful contradictions and challenging problems.

They require and deserve all our institutional, social, and individual commitment and critical attention, because they challenge established conventions of thought and set mental habits. For instance, whereas it is quite possible—and for some even desirable—to be critical of humanistic principles in the very name of humanism, displacing anthropocentrism calls for an extra effort. This is both a critical and a creative effort, which embraces the presence and the importance of non-humans as active co-creators of new subject assemblages or alliances. But taking in both organic or elemental (soil, water, wind, atmosphere, organic waste, etc.) and technological (codes, wires, infrastructure, algorithms, etc.) non-human entities as co-creators of knowledge, requires a qualitative shift of perspective. The Environmental Humanities in their long

institutional journey from eco-activism through to transnational environmental justice and beyond, exemplify the complexity of such trans-disciplinary efforts. Thus, they are almost the prototype of the Posthumanities—as crucial vectors in the composition of these transversal agendas.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a human-made disaster, caused by ruthless interference in the ecological balance and lives of many species in the furtherance of a political economy of systemic exploitation of both human and non-human entities, downgraded to the status of “natural” (as in naturalized for the purpose of exploitation) resources. The pandemic combines almost the worst of all possible worlds: ecological disaster, a public health emergency, an economic crisis, indicators of social inequalities, and much more. COVID-19, an anthropogenic virus born of instrumental abuse of animals and environmental entities, is as discriminatory as most humans. It has proved a powerful catalyst in revealing often concealed or hidden degrees of social inequality, which the dominant neo-liberal ideology has long been bent on denying. The persistence of patterns of discrimination based on class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality, able-bodiedness and access to universal health care are revealed with incisive cruelty. In the European region, as in other parts of the world, the pandemic has revealed the devastation visited by the imposition of austerity policies on social services, public health, nutrition, and education. It is therefore undeniable that the “capitalocene”—the unbridled greed of capitalist societies—which is the root cause of the climate change emergency, is also responsible for the abuse of animal life that produced the infections in bats and generated COVID-19 as a zoonotic disease. The same socio-economic system has also produced a neoliberal mode of governance and exacerbated systemic inequalities, thereby facilitating the spread of the contagion. To anybody working in and well-versed on the Environmental Humanities, it would seem a clear-cut case of transnational environmental injustice and abuse of the posthuman legal rights of non-human entities.

But the pandemic is multi-faceted, and it displays more-than-human, inhuman, and non-human dimensions, both in its genesis and its infectious planetary deployment. It has affected the trans-individual structures of subject-formation; it has disrupted the heterogeneous patterns of socio-cultural belonging; and it has mobilized the multiple ecologies that sustain “us.” The individual and collective reliance on environmental or terrestrial elements is exposed with a vengeance. But who are “we”? “We”—the inhabitants of this planet—are not only human, nor are we one and the same. The Earth we inhabit is not an optional element, among others, but rather the primary location on which all others depend: we, Earth-entities, have this location in common.

Acknowledging it, however, even in the face of such adversities, seems to evoke dismay and disbelief and often meets with massive resistance.

Paradoxes do abound in the posthuman convergence. The coronavirus contagion and subsequent lockdowns have also resulted in an exponential increase in the global use of technological mediation. The digital dimension has permeated our lives, as many are forced to work remotely from home, thereby building up the cybernetic, energy-consuming, virtual dimension of our social and economic lives. Moreover, the urgent quest for a vaccine against COVID-19 has revived collective hopes for miracle cures, which play into the hands of the bio-medical sector and boost the importance of the Medical Humanities and Public Health Humanities. Regrettably, these newly configured knowledge domains and their increased social relevance have also resulted at this point in time in a relative side-lining of the Environmental Humanities and the ecological foundations of all knowledge production practices, especially the digitally mediated ones. The pandemic has thereby intensified humans' reliance on the very high-tech economy of cognitive capitalism that caused the problems in the first place. This specific combination of ambivalent and contradictory elements at the intersection of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Extinction is the trademark of the posthuman condition. This is a useful cartographic tool that can help us make sense of—and hence find angles of intervention upon—the current situation.

Considering the scale of the planetary suffering we are experiencing, however, it would be unethical to offer only theoretical tools: this is rather a time for solidarity, collective mourning, and regeneration. We need to pause to meditate on the multiple losses of both human and non-human lives, as well as deploy intellectual tools for further understanding and criticism. But over and above all else, an affirmative relational ethics is needed, driven by environmental principles, which combine more inclusive ways of caring, across a transversal, multi-species spectrum that encompasses the entire planet and its majority of non-human inhabitants.

Let me simply foreground just a couple of principles I am hoping we may apply to a public appeal on behalf of the Environmental Humanities. Let it be stated loud and clear that appeals to a common humanity are misleading except as aspirational goals: the human is not at all a neutral category. Humanity is rather a selective and exclusionary category that polices access to rights and entitlements. The “human” is defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes in the golden circle of its privileges and in the structural distinctions that support them. The dominant idea of the human modelled on the European “Man of Reason” distributes differences according to a hierarchical scale centered on both humanistic and anthropocentric values. To assume that such a vision is universal simply adds insult to injury: this is in

fact a very parochial, culture-specific vision. It assumes the superiority of humans that conform to the following format: masculine, white, Eurocentric, practicing compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction, able-bodied, urbanized, and speaking a standard language. This is the European Man of Reason that feminists, anti-racists, black, indigenous, postcolonial, environmental and ecological activists have been criticizing for decades.

Those who are excluded from this dominant vision, or classified as hierarchically inferior within it, are the devalored, less-than-human “others” dehumanized or excluded from full humanity. These qualitatively minoritarian, or marginalized subjects—who often actually are quantitative majorities—are the sexualized others (women, LGBTQ+); the racialized others (non-Europeans, indigenous people); and the naturalized others (animals, plants, the Earth). Their voices, experiences, perspectives, and knowledge constitute powerful but as yet untapped alternatives. They are of the greatest relevance in the collective endeavor to learn to assess critically and to think differently about our current predicament, namely what kind of humans we are becoming within the posthuman convergence of contradictory social, planetary, and cosmic forces.

In the contemporary world, the claims of agency for non-human forces and for Gaia as a living, symbiotic planet are echoed by a global revolt against endemic—and indeed viral—racism. Led by the “Black Lives Matter” movement, this social emergency expresses another layer of the crisis politics of the sexualized, racialized, naturalized others that have pushed *Anthropos* off-center. Moreover, it is worth remembering that the binary distinctions between nature and culture, humans and non-humans, which have been central to European thought since the Enlightenment, simply do not feature in most of the other cultures on Earth. This is the lesson of indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies, postcolonial and decolonial thought, Asian and African philosophies. They tend to posit a continuum of nature and culture, which historically was dismissed with colonial arrogance as “animism,” whereas it simply establishes the ecologically sound principle of the equal worth of all living entities and the inextricable bond that connects them. When it comes to human/non-human relations, it is time to start learning from the South.

A pandemic on the scale of COVID-19 brings home to us all a truth that is also constitutive of the Environmental Humanities: that “we” are all in this planetary condition together. This collective “we” is a heterogeneous assemblage that connects “us,” whether we are anthropomorphic humans (as opposed to uncritically anthropocentric ones) or zoomorphic ones (as in other animals). In other words, it is time to accept multi-species inter-dependence not as a wound, or a form of exposed

vulnerability, but rather as a strength and a mutually enforcing form of solidarity. Sameness must not be a pre-requisite for equity, respect, and solidarity. Differences need not generate dialectical oppositions and hierarchies—they can be a measure of virtual possibilities for interdependence and shared ways of becoming-world together.

The human needs to be recast in the direction of a heterogeneous and collective assemblage—“we”—who have exited the Eurocentric humanistic representational habits that used to define humanity; we, the posthuman, all-too-human practitioners of a different form of empathy, who have dislodged philosophical Eurocentrism, and the unthinking anthropocentrism that such a vision of the human used to entail.

This shift of perspective is both critical and creative. It is not a crisis in the negative sense of the term, though it marks a turning point and at times even spells an emergency. It is not motivated only reactively, by the fear of extinction, but rather points affirmatively in a different direction, toward some other middle-ground, another *milieu*.

Yes, we are connected, that is to say, ecologically interlinked through the multiple connections we share with all other living entities—starting from the same planetary milieu. But we also differ tremendously in terms of our respective locations and access to social and legal entitlements, technologies, safety, prosperity, and good health services. The posthuman subjects of today’s world may be internally fractured, but they are also closer than ever, being technologically mediated and linked. It is important to acknowledge both the proximity and the distance that separate us, and to study attentively the materially embedded differences in location that contribute to that separation. But equally important to a posthuman affirmative ethics is the shared intimacy with the world and our common care for it.

Last but not least, some humility is now necessary. The fear of death and extinction is overwhelming in the developed world, which seems to be discovering its fragility in the Anthropocene, in the midst of the pandemics, and through the current anti-racist insurrection. But learning to live with the threat of extinction is an integral part of colonized cultures. For many indigenous people on earth, widespread epidemics, systemic dispossession and environmental devastations were the mark of the Europeans’ colonial appropriation and destruction of First Nations cultures. Catastrophes on this scale are for many people on earth an everyday reality, and because so many of them survived it, there is a great deal that Europeans can learn from them, as we all learn to do better in terms of anti-racism and anti-colonialism. Here again, the Environmental Humanities have shown the way, by working hard to construct intersections with postcolonial green perspectives and non-Western Earth-knowledge systems.

We have to start by questioning who “we” might be, to begin with, and whose anxiety is taking center-stage in public debates about the crisis. Accepting our shared exposure to environmental and anthropogenic public health risks is the starting point for a process of assessing these risks critically and dealing with them collectively. An adequate response to a crisis on the scale of the climate emergency, or the COVID-19 pandemic, calls for community-based experiments to see how—and how fast—we can transform the way we live. This is a process of consciousness-raising that takes in the negative conditions, the social and environmental inequalities and the collective responsibility “we” hold toward exposed or vulnerable populations, toward multiple other species, and toward the planet as a whole. This critical practice of creating workable solutions through the confrontation of uncomfortable truths is central to the ethics of affirmation. It requires critical self-knowledge, but also vision and the courage to work through negativity and pain. This pro-active activism is the heart of affirmative, relational, environmental ethics. “We” can only intervene in *this* by acting collectively: ~~“We”—who-are-not-one-and-the-same-but-are-in-this-convergence-together.~~