



## Editorial

# Posthumanism and Multispecies Ethnology

## Taija Kaarlenkaski & Tytti Steel

This thematic issue of *Ethnologia Fennica* discusses the intersections of ethnology and posthumanist theories and approaches. The central idea of posthumanist theoretization is to displace the human being from the central position in the universe and highlight that more-than-human entities have strongly affected the formation of humanity (Smart & Smart 2017; Braidotti 2013). Posthumanist thought rejects the classic humanist divisions of self and other, mind and body, society and nature, human and animal, organic and technological, and it encourages to think relationally and direct research interests to the non-human realm (Wolfe 2010; Ferrando 2013, 30).

Although the debate on posthumanism has been going on in the humanities and social sciences for a couple of decades, in ethnology and related fields such as anthropology and folklore studies, the discussion on posthumanist approaches has started less than ten years ago (Smart & Smart 2017, 10; Thompson 2019, 14). While human-animal and human-nature relationships have been objects of research in these fields for a long time, traditionally these aspects have been studied in order to find out something about human societies and modes of thought. Posthumanist enquiry, on the other hand, aims to highlight the significance and agency of more-than-human entities. In the articles of this issue, the authors mostly discuss domesticated animals such as reindeer, cows, ducks, and rabbits, but there is also a discussion on a polluted lake and the surrounding environment.

Posthumanist theoretization has focused on two separate branches: first, our relationships to other organic entities such as non-human animals, plants, and nature; and second, inorganic objects such as machines and digital technologies. In the current issue, the realms of technology and human-animal relationships are brought together in two articles. First, Kaisa Kuoljok discusses the effects of monitoring reindeer through GPS technology in a Sámi reindeer herding community. Through a story about a reindeer that wandered off from its grazing area, she analyzes the emotional

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implications generated by digital technology. Using actor-network theory, she suggests that the influences technology has on the herders may be both positive and negative: GPS creates an experience of control when everything works well, but in case of technical or other disruptions, it might lead to an experience of loss of control.

Second, Taija Kaarlenkaski and Annika Lonkila investigate in their article the requirements the technologization of contemporary dairy husbandry sets on both humans and animals. During the past decade, the notion of “invisible cows” has become popular in Finnish dairy production. Invisible cows are hoped for because they are healthy, corporally compliant, collaborative, and require minimal care from farmers. Focusing on the entangled agencies of humans, cows, and technologies, Kaarlenkaski and Lonkila examine the notions of collaboration, resistance, and human-animal affection in dairy husbandry. Their discussion problematizes the possibility of invisibility and argues that collaborative and resistant practices are always intertwined in the context of dairy farming.

The next article, written by Andreas Backa, looks at farming from a completely different perspective. Backa examines views on meat, slaughter, and human-animal relations in the contemporary self-sufficiency trend. In contrast to industrialized animal production, people striving for self-sufficiency prefer consuming animals they have raised themselves and slaughtering them on the farm. Using ethnographic fieldwork material generated among the Swedish-speaking people in Osthrobothnia, Finland, he focuses on the role of affect and body in the killing of animals for human consumption. Backa’s analysis shows that small-scale animal husbandry is characterized by affective relationships between bodies, and this may be seen as a counterforce to the processes of post-domestic modernity that generate disconnectedness between animal and human, food and origin, producer and consumer.

The last article of the issue takes the readers to a remote polluted lake in Poland. In her article, Oliwia Murawska combines posthumanist thought with theories and concepts derived from Martin Heidegger, through which she analyzes how the people living near the lake perceive and understand the expressions of the lake and surrounding nature. While discussing these issues, she highlights that posthuman phenomena need to be explored in the field and not only in abstract terms, and that they relate to concrete socio-political or environmental changes that can be seen and experienced.

An important question raised in the articles of this issue is the significance of methodology when conducting research from posthuman premises. Methods typical for ethnology and other cultural studies have traditionally been

human-centered. A textbook example of this is ethnography, which literally refers to “people writing.” The question is: how to include non-human beings in the production of research materials, and how to interpret these materials in order to do justice to these beings? One solution suggested to this question is multispecies studies or multispecies ethnography, which aim to understand other species not merely as materials or objects but as important social agents (Hamilton & Taylor 2017, 69). Although the terms used to describe the methods in the articles of this thematic issue vary, it may be argued that all of them share a starting point similar to that of multispecies studies: to examine “the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations” (van Dooren et al. 2016, 3). The discussion on methodology is taken even further in the commentary written by Lindsay Hamilton, Astrid Huopalaainen, and Linda Tallberg. In conversation with each other, the authors consider the ethics of research methods in multispecies settings and suggest some novel approaches such as arts-based participatory techniques. They emphasize the importance of bringing forward voices that are usually silenced in the form of experimental writing, for example. And, as they point out, during the current times of the pandemic, more inclusive research and methods are probably needed more urgently than ever.

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The year 2020 has been an exceptional one due to the global Covid-19 outbreak. The pandemic is going to change our everyday life permanently, and it is important that ethnologists will be part of mapping and reinforcing social changes based on research. In 2021, we hope to see more commentaries on topical issues in *Ethnologia Fennica* alongside with peer-reviewed articles. The deadline for submitting an article, a review article, or a commentary for our next issue is January 15, 2021, and the issue will be published in the fall. The theme is “Rethinking Culture – Making Change.” In 2021, we will join the community of ethnologists in Finland to welcome everyone to the SIEF conference in Helsinki in June. The theme of the conference is “Breaking the Rules,” and the conference will be fully virtual.

We would like to thank all the authors, reviewers, and editors of this year’s issues of *Ethnologia Fennica*. Somewhat surprisingly, even in the middle of the pandemic, it has been very easy to find peer reviewers for the theme of posthumanism. We would like to see this as a positive indication of a deep interest towards a more sustainable and harmonious multispecies future and an expansion of scholarly networks and exchange between ethnology and its related fields.

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