

Ambitious Beginnings for Posthuman Folklore**Taija Kaarlenkaski, Jyrki Pöysä & Tiina Seppä**

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In recent decades, posthumanism as a philosophy and theory has increasingly influenced research in the humanities and the social sciences. However, in folkloristics and ethnology, this approach has only started to gain wider attention. In the context of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR), for example, posthumanist approaches were discussed for the first time as a special topic at a conference arranged in Ragusa, Sicily, in 2018. A pioneer in this area, American folklorist Tok Thompson has paid attention to this gap in his extremely interesting book *Posthuman Folklore*, the first overview combining materials and ideas from folklore studies and the central ideas of posthumanism.

As Thompson points out, posthumanist theoretization often covers two separate branches: first, the “animal turn” generated by latest research in ethology and animal studies, and second, the introduction of digital technologies, ranging from computer-mediated communication to artificial intelligences and cyborgs. The second branch of posthumanism is also called transhumanism, referring to cyborg studies, which were made famous by Donna Haraway and her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1987). When considering the critique of human enhancement through biological means, the name of Francis Fukuyama should also be remembered (*Our Posthuman Future*, 2002).

Thompson’s book follows this twofold division, with roads leading to the past and the future. It is important to deal with both: “The two ends of posthumanism are, at the end, tied back together in evolving notions of what it means to be human: what *are we?*” (p. xvi). In the first part, he explores recent findings in animal studies that question the binary between humans and animals, which has often been the starting point in humanistic research. Thompson argues that “folklore (and, indeed, culture in general) can no longer be considered the sole domain of *Homo Sapiens*, but rather must be viewed as shared inheritances with much of life on Earth” (p. 1). In the second part, he looks at the effects of digitalization on folklore, and especially discusses “cyborg identities” that are enabled by digital networks and different forms of artificial intelligence. Most of the chapters have been previously published as articles, but they have been slightly revised for the book.

Thompson begins the first part of the book by considering the possibilities of trans-speciality in understanding culture, communication, and aesthetics. Taking into account the significant roles that animals play in folklore such as fairy tales, myths, and poetry in many cultures, it is rather surprising that “folklorists, for the most part, have continued as if nothing has changed,” as Thompson puts it. (p. 14). However, folkloristics has much to offer to human-animal studies. For example, besides a long tradition of using collections and archival materials as data, folklorists have a comprehensive understanding of how vernacular traditions work.

In addition, folklorists have been accustomed to regarding the views and cultures of their informants with respect, and this attitude may be broadened to the nonhuman world as well. Finally, the importance of cultural performances in social relations may be applicable to nonhuman species. Thompson presents several examples of aesthetic activity by animals and suggests that folklorists should seek to understand and explore the role of aesthetic performances “in life on Earth” (p. 15). While this task sounds somewhat overwhelming, it is important that Thompson brings forward these focal points of folkloristics and their potential to posthumanist research.

Narratives are seen as an elementary form of folklore, a mode of expression or a genre in itself. It is therefore interesting to read about Thompson’s views about animals as narrators. Do nonhuman animals tell stories as we do? If so, what kinds of stories do they tell? Following the posthumanist interest in animals as language users, Thompson introduces interesting cases where animals are documented as distributing important knowledge between members of a group. However, storytelling – not language use or play (or emotions) – seems to be something that differentiates us from the other animals, at least so far, based on our present knowledge about other animals. “We are just at the bare beginnings, for example, of understanding dolphin, or whale, communications. Might these also contain storytelling episodes?” (p. 38).

In addition, Thompson takes a comparative look at two distinct mythological traditions in their understanding of animals: the Abrahamic faiths and Native American culture. He especially pays attention to the concept of soul and its connection to personhood. His main point is that in Western thought, posthumanist ideas of more-than-human entities as active agents and subjects may sound new and revolutionary, while for Native Americans and many other indigenous people, recognizing animals and trees as persons that are able to communicate with humans has been a prevalent line of thought. Thompson seems to suggest that indigenous mythology could be understood as “posthumanism before posthumanism” and emphasizes that Western science might

have a lot to learn from other traditions. In this way, postcolonial philosophy and posthumanism could be brought together in a fruitful way.

In the context of posthuman folklore, nonhuman animals are also used to describe human sexuality, as Thompson notes. There are separate categories for the wild and the domestic, but the idea of separating humans from non-humans also goes far back, from Freud via Cartesian dualism to the Christian church and Abrahamic mythology (p. 63). This is of course nothing new, but it reveals the enormous role of Christianity in shaping Western thought, not to mention the taboos surrounding sexuality.

In the second part of the book, Thompson discusses the digital realm and cyborgs of different kinds. One clearly posthuman or more strictly *transhuman* phenomenon is already part of our everyday life: Artificial Intelligence, or AI, in the form of algorithms, chatbots, and personalized AIs, such as Siri and Alexa, the digital assistants from iPhone and Google. In the first place, they are named, which of course implies personification, but these algorithms recognize and also represent folklore forms such as fairy tales. We tested this with Siri, which at our first try managed to tell a proper, though quite short, fairy tale to children who addressed it by saying, "Tell me a story." To us adults, Siri gave a different answer: "Sorry, but I can't find a podcast for you right now." As Thompson suggests, these algorithms are already actors in transforming and representing folklore: by connecting, mixing, or even producing "new" material, in the same way that the Grimm brothers acted as "authors" of fairy tales (p. 151).

AI is already an actor and has its own agency, and we are constantly connected with it. The most important and interesting question is the one that Thompson presents on page 152: "Who created this bot?" And further: "Who is paying the piper?" There are a lot of interests behind the algorithms, not least commercial, but also political, and the learning algorithms are also gathering information about us, the humans, for other humans. In this sense, the idea of AI as "folk" is not that simple, as Thompson also notes.

Posthuman Folklore is no doubt an ambitious project, but it brings the traditional folkloristic questions and materials into a new context and challenges scholars to take the posthuman seriously. If we are not able to separate human agents or actors from nonhuman ones, what does it mean to us, to our materials, to our research questions? Folklore scholars have traditionally studied human communication, but especially the most traditional, premodern oral traditions such as folk poetry present a worldview that includes equal non-human actors as well. Forests, plants, nonhuman animals, artifacts, spirits – all the other-than-humans – are constantly connected with humans. Maybe it is time to think vice versa – how *the nonhuman* see *us* (Kohn 2013, 1) – in

folklore studies, too, even though the animal turn is already a vivid trend in contemporary folklore research.

As a conclusion, Thompson asks if the posthuman philosophical outlook could “provide a means of survival” (p. 156) in the current situation on planet Earth. This is a weighty question, but *if* there is some solution, it could be post-human, offering a fair view on the life on Earth. In this regard, Tok Thompson’s important contribution to folklore theory could be seen as an optimistic project we would all like to join as folklorists, researchers, and human-like animals.

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