

# Retirement as going through a portal of possibilities

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**Abstract:** The essay contemplates retirement as a portal of possibilities which may open time for diving into both haunting and joyful questions that being tied up with admin work formerly prevented the pursuit of. Questions which the retired academic could engage in are piled up, e.g. the haunting ones concerning classical humanities' celebration of Universal (White) Man and human exceptionalism. Questions about portals leading from the haunted space of the Humanities to an elsewhere, and what to take with us through these portals, are also addressed. Critique and aesthetics are discussed as possibly worthwhile to carry to the other side.

**Keywords:** portal to possibilities, retirement, critique, aesthetics, (new) humanities

Like you, Rosemarie, I have struggled to build up and consolidate Feminist Studies within a Faculty of Humanities, and like you, I have an educational background in the humanities as a literary scholar. At the same time, as a feminist, I have disidentified passionately with this background. Here, too, I guess we are on the same page, sharing deep ambivalences vis-à-vis the classical humanities, and their heteropatriarchal, white, colonial, bourgeois celebration of Universal Man.

The beautiful thing about retiring is that you will get all the time you want to address important research questions, including those haunting us as feminist humanities scholars. I am sure that your job, just like mine, as a professor in the humanities and leader of a Gender Studies department for many years, required that you dedicated very much attention to troubling admin tasks. I know this is complicated, not the least in the humanities, which for years have been under threat from the neoliberal university and its utilitarian requests for commercialising scholarly knowledge building. I also guess this situation has meant that you probably have not had time to fully dive into all the research questions you wanted to pursue. So, I assume that the unanswered questions and unfinished businesses are multiple for you, as well, and that there, indeed, appears to be so much work

to do that you may fill your entire retired life with it. Believe me, I retired some years ago, so I know the feeling of new portals of possibilities opening when you are relieved from the admin burdens. You really should look forward to this.

In this brief essay on the occasion of your retirement, Rosemarie, I will therefore pile up some of the myriads of questions which a retired life can provide the perfect platform for in-depth pursuing. You might want to go for quite different questions, of course. These are just some of the ones figuring on my to-do list, and meant as inspirations for you to start concretely imagining how your life, which was earlier filled with admin work in the haunted house of the humanities, now can change for a life beyond the portal which retirement is – a life which potentially can include long-long diving and swimming trips, deep down and far out in a sea of haunting as well as joyful questions...

### **A few snapshots from the haunting archives**

Let me start in the archives with bits and pieces from a reading list which indicate just a few of the myriads of haunting ethico-political questions, which sadly are still unfinished business...

*Question 1*, emerging from reading Nishitani Osamu (2006): “Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of ‘Human Being’”:

Is it at all possible to call yourself a humanities scholar after learning about the divide which Hegel (1807) and other dead white philosophers constructed between Humanitas (“civilised humanity”, White, Western “Man”) and “Anthropos”, humankind as such, in particular the colonial others, seen from the external, objectifying vantage point of the colonising Western gaze?

*Question 2*, emerging from reading Sylvia Wynter (1994): “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues”:

Is it at all possible to call yourself a humanities scholar after having learnt about the NHI designation (No Humans Involved), which, in relation to the acquittal of police officers for murdering Rodney King in Los Angeles 1991, was dismantled as a code, used by LA judicial and police authorities to profile young Black men, considered to be engaged in criminal activities?

*Question 3*, emerging from reading Jacques Derrida (2008): *The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*:

Is it at all possible to call yourself a humanities scholar after having learnt about the abyss between Human and Animal, constructed in Western (Judeo-Christian

and Cartesian) thought to legitimise systematic, instrumentalised violence against the non-human world?

*Question 4*, emerging from reading feminist, queer, trans, crip, anti-racist, decolonial, post- and more-than-human archives:

Is it at all possible to call yourself a humanities scholar after having learnt about the overwhelming mass of violent exclusions from the category of 'Universal Man'?

### **Are there portals to an elsewhere to be found?**

The list of haunting questions proliferates endlessly. The ones foregrounded above are just a teeny-tiny fragment of the quarrels that, for years, have motivated me to disidentify with the humanities, and their classical foundations in the ontological horizons of Universal Man and – in massive epistemologies of ignorance – epistemologies which the humanities have spun around themselves and the figuration of Universal Man in a concerted effort to portray Him as beautiful, complex and heroic, as an unending line of clones of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vetruvian Man*. I guess we share these disidentifications, Rosemarie; we share them with each other and with thousands and thousands of other feminist, anti-racist, decolonial, queer, trans, crip, and critical posthumanist scholars. So can we keep reclaiming the humanities when these questions pop up all the time? But can we escape the humanities? Or should we perhaps rather confront them? Is there a portal to something else? Can we try to move through such a portal? Who are 'we'? Should we skip the 'we', because it, too, is haunted – by intersectional difference? Should we rather move through the portal to elsewhere, beyond the humanities, individually? Or can it only be done collectively, in transversal alliances? Is a renewal of the humanities at all possible? Should we go for new humanities? Critical posthumanities? Decolonial humanities? Environmental humanities? Crip/queer/trans/feminist humanities? Should we go with the Inhumanities, as Kathryn Yusoff (2018) suggests? Or should we perhaps simply recognise that the humanities is a truly haunted space and refine our skills in critical hauntology?

No matter where I try to go with these questions, I keep ending up in concerns about the both physical and symbolic violences which have been committed under the banner of 'The Human' – violences which make it ethically impossible to establish other than very ambivalent relationships to the humanities which claim to speak for and about this 'Human', the classical humanist constructions of 'the Human proper', Universal Man. Like you, Rosemarie, I have spent many years doing academic and activist work to establish Feminist and Intersectional Studies *within*, but also as a critical-affirmative *alternative to* classical humanities. But is

in-depth and radical rethinking of canons, conceptual frameworks, methodologies, epistemologies, ontologies, ethics, aesthetics, aesthesis, and empirical approaches really possible? Are there portals to an elsewhere to be found?

I do, indeed, see rethinking and recalibration processes happening and proliferating in multiple intersectional and transversal dialogues with and in between the so-called 'studies' – Feminist Studies, Queer Studies, Transgender Studies, Critical Race Studies, Decolonial Studies, Environmental Studies, Critical Disability Studies, Critical Human-Animal Studies, Critical Plant Studies, Queer Death Studies, Extinction Studies, etc. I think classical humanities have somehow been changing in recent decades as a consequence of and in dialogue with these emerging 'studies', and their fundamental critiques of classical humanities' celebrations of Universal Man. You and I have both participated in and, indeed, spent our academic careers contributing as best we could to these processes of change and renewal. So let me in remembrance of this work once more ask: are there portals to renewal to be found?

If I look back at the hard work of many feminist master's and doctoral students who wrote amazing critical and beautiful theses in the Gender Studies departments, to the building of which we contributed, I would articulate a cautious 'yes' to the question about possibilities for renewal of the humanities. But if I do this, I must also ask: what does renewal mean? What kinds of recalibrations have been, are and should be going on? Should we take Donna Haraway's (2016) suggestion to "stay with the trouble", but instead replace the 'human' of Universal Man with 'humus' and put more-than-human relationalities as well as planetary companionships central? Should we opt for 'humusities' instead of 'humanities' (ibid.)?

### **What to bring through the portal?**

In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemics Arundhati Roy (2020) published an essay about using the terrible disruptions brought about by the pandemic to go through a portal in order to start thinking about and practising processes of worlding in fundamentally different ways from the current ultimately destructive ones. In so doing, however, Roy also reminded us that going through a portal to an elsewhere requires that we leave heavy luggage behind. We need to travel light to avoid the burdens of old destructive thinking habits and practices from sticking to us, and start working again beyond the portal. We need to think carefully about what we really need to bring with us, and what not, Roy says. Following her advice, I will therefore reflect a bit on the question: which tools do we really need to bring with us when leaving classical humanities for an elsewhere? Epistemologies and ethics have often been foregrounded as areas where feminist theory has contributed with important tools to recalibrate the humanities. Here, I will focus on two other ones, which I think perhaps

we can bring with us through the portal – two humanities tools, which research, among which yours, Rosemarie, has called attention to: critique, and aesthetics.

## Critique

To use critique as a tool was and is a core value of classical humanist philosophy. Since Kant, critique has appeared, in various ways, as one of the epitomes of rational Enlightenment thought. Critique emerged as a category from the Enlightenment celebration of the ‘free’ individual’s rebellion against authoritarian modes of thinking in terms of, for example, the sovereign king, feudal lords, and the church. Critique was the intellectual tool of the Enlightenment revolution. Re-theorised in the 20th century, from the Frankfurt School to Foucault (1997), the humanist tool of critique became specifically associated with the figure of the critical leftist intellectual, rebelling against oppressive societal powers. What is shared between the 18th and 19th-century Enlightenment and 20th-century socialist and broader anti-authoritarian leftist movements is, however, that critique is a political tool to call forward social change. Critique is a tool to dismantle oppressive power through intellectual means; but in addition to dismantling power, critique also includes an element of affirmation, envisioning change for a better and more just social structuration to come.

In his essay “What is Critique?” (1997), Foucault locates critique within the framework of modern governmentalization, and more particularly in resistance to governmentality. Critique is a form of practice of those who do not want to be governed. Here it is possible to draw a line to the aforementioned ‘studies’, which, as suggested by Rosi Braidotti (2018), must be seen as outcomes of both intellectual and activist efforts, which have paved the way for critical new humanities. Like earlier critical tendencies (from the Enlightenment to 20th-century socialism and leftist anti-authoritarianism), the critical approaches of these studies are also motivated by links to activist social movements for change towards social and environmental justice-to-come.

Let me take the research in the Gender Studies departments, of which we have been part in Utrecht and Linköping, as an example. This research has overall been grounded in affirmative social and environmental critique, in convergence points between Feminist Studies, Queer and Trans Studies, Cripqueer, Anti-Racist, Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies as well as Critical Posthumanities and Environmental Humanities. In these studies, it is common to foreground a link between political activism and theorising. The ‘studies’ theorise against the background of activist practices. The Foucauldian definition of critique as a practice to resist being governed resonates well here. Critique and theory are part of resistant practices. Concepts such as gender, queer, race, class, trans, crip, more-than-human etc. – all the critical concepts which, in so many different ways, have guided the

research carried out in the departments we were part of – have become critical tools to analyse governmentalizing powers and their intersections. They have been developed as tools to better understand the intertwinement of power differentials and power structurations of racialised, heteropatriarchal, post/colonial extractive capitalism. They have been elaborated as tools to analyse these intersecting power structurations in order to resist and overcome them, and replace them by different, egalitarian and caring ways of organising society and ecology. Critique in these ‘studies’ is, indeed, not merely criticism in a negative sense, but linked closely with ethico-political visions and ambitions to foster social and environmental justice.

What I want to emphasise in this brief account of the history of critique from the Enlightenment until today is, first of all, that critique was born, and all the way through has unfurled, as an important tool for intellectual resistance to shifting kinds of power. Secondly, I will underline that critique in recent decades, through the ‘studies’, has been recalibrated for a new kind of humanities, which we, with Haraway, perhaps should call ‘Humusities’, underlining their way of ‘composting’ decolonising, posthumanising and queering moves.

## **Aesthetics**

Next to critique, aesthetics is also a notion which was used as a forceful tool of classical humanities, but which is becoming recalibrated today. By contrast to the notion of critique, which was born out of Enlightenment rebellion against kings, feudal lords, and church, the concept of aesthetics has genealogies going back to Aristotle and ancient Greece. However, even though aesthetics, in this sense, is not specifically tied to modern European Humanism – and the classical humanities – aesthetics has, nevertheless, been one of the central foci of classical humanities. Aesthetics (contemplations of artistic/literary values) and aesthesis (subjective archives of sensibilities) have been core areas of humanist studies of art and literature. Art and literature have been scrutinised as privileged arenas for reflections on aesthesis and for humanist claims about universalist aesthetic values. But – and this is my main point here – recalibrations are also taking place today, and your work, Rosemarie, has made important contributions to these recalibrations.

There are currently strong trends towards recalibrations in the area of both creating and analysing art and literature – trends which I consider to be somehow aligned with efforts towards posthumanising, decolonising and queering aesthetics and aesthesis. Of course, these trends go in multiple directions, and I certainly do not mean to collapse or homogenise them. However, a common denominator in a diversity of efforts is, I think, a radical disruption of humanist claims to universalism and a rethinking of aesthesis and aesthetics as embedded in specific spatio-temporal and bodily situatednesses.

In decolonising moves, the disruption of humanist universalist claims is theorised as emerging from specific geo- and corpo-political embeddedness, while environmental humanities focus on posthuman phenomenology and aesthetic explorations of what we as humans share with the more-than-human world. Finally, queering aesthetics are theorised against the background of queer sensibilities, spanning from subject and objectless queer to queer eroticizations beyond the heterosexual matrix. In addition to the disruption of humanist universality claims, composted through decolonising, posthumanising and queering moves, one more shared characteristic across differences between the new trends in aesthetics is perhaps an outspoken focus on relationships between aesthetics, ethics, politics, onto-epistemologies, and aesthesis. This is ethico-political art, artistic-political arts-activism.

## Travelling light?

Going through the portal?

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to 'normality', trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Arundhati Roy: "The Pandemic is a Portal" (*Financial Times*, 3 April 2020)

The humanities have been part of the 'death machine' Arundhati Roy speaks about in the above quote, insofar as they have cultivated the figuration of Universal Man and contributed to uphold epistemologies of ignorance, concerning the violence and dehumanisations on which the concept of 'The Human' was built – as I indicated it with my snapshots from the archives in the first part of this essay. Disruption of the work of the death machine is urgently needed, but as far as the humanities are concerned, perhaps also ongoing insofar as the current 'crisis' of the humanities does work as a rupture for good and for bad. This is a rupture which has led to neoliberal commercialization as well as to a growing precariat of humanities scholars being exploited on short-term project contracts. But it is also a rupture which has

prompted an unfurling and proliferation of the critical ‘studies’ – in alliance with activist movements for social and environmental justice-to-come.

None of these ruptures provides any easy way out, though. Portals do not open just like that. We must recognise them as hard and often painful work. However, the good thing that I, still, want to communicate with these reflections on the occasion of your retirement, Rosemarie, is that, as a retired person, you have soooooo much time to contribute to this work. Retirement is perhaps in itself to be understood as a kind of rupture – a going through an individual and very personal portal of possibilities! I am sure that the online *Museum of Equality and Difference* (moed.online/about-moed/), in which I know you participate as a curator, and many other amazing new and old projects, will come to benefit immensely from the fact that you do not have to do admin work at a Faculty of Humanities anymore. Welcome to ‘retired’ life beyond the portal!

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