Feminist Posthumanism, Environment and “Response-Able Memory”

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Abstract

This article explores the entangled relationship between memory and environment through a feminist posthumanist framework while it takes seriously an ecological and response-able perspective in shaping the traumatic past and the troubled climatic present. In so doing, it introduces the concept of “response-able memory” which encourages us to reimagine the established humanist underpinnings in cultural memory studies. In order to discuss how “response-able memory” surfaces as a mode of enquiry and highly productive new strategy to accommodate nonanthropogenic and entangled ways of remembrance in the twenty-first century, this article examines Zarina Muhammad’s (b.1982, Singapore) contemporary art which is deeply entwined with a critical re-examination of local histories and silenced (female) accounts in Southeast Asia.

Keywords

memory – environment – response-ability – entanglement – Zarina Muhammad – South Asia

The time that is “out of joint” in Hamlet might not just be a sense of a broken polity, but also a sense that the time of the polity – the time of human interaction and management – occurs within a time of perpetual cosmic displacement in which human intentionality and sense is but one force among others in the layering of history and memory. Second, and...
finally, we might then imagine our own present, our own self-archiving as if it were already being read by non-humans, beyond our own existence.


[W]e need to create a space for emergent pedagogical possibilities that are open to the flows and intensities of encounters and pedagogical moments each of which “has its own particular spatial, temporal and affective modalities and performances” and each of which gives rise to its own ‘ethics of’ encounter and responsibility nd response-abilities.

– SUSANNE GANON, Difference as Ethical Encounter, 2011

1 Introduction: Intersections Between Feminist Posthumanism and Memory

In the introduction to their edited volume on feminist posthumanism, feminist scholars of posthumanism and gender Studies, Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti, argue that the monolithic perception of the human of the humanities has legitimised exclusionary and derogatory social practices, cultural imperialism, and ecological exploitation in the time of the current anthropogenic climate change and crisis afflicting the world (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018, p. 3). As a counter-measure, they suggest that feminist posthumanism ethically operates otherwise and seeks to find an answer to a moral philosophical question: “how to live well with multiple others on this planet” (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018, p. 4).

Within the context of living well with multiple human and nonhuman others in the planet, feminist posthumanism critically questions the anthropocentric and masculinist biases of humanist thought and foregrounds non-anthropocentric (biocentric and ecocentric) epistemology. While the discipline interrogates human exceptionalism, especially the hierarchical categories of nature and culture, mind, and the body, the Other and the Self, the human, and the nonhuman, it rethinks the multiple forms of materiality and vulnerability of human existence and the way it maps onto nonhuman existence and nonhuman vulnerability. In this sense, as Åsberg and Braidotti suggest, the posthuman, or material or ontological turn in feminism, can be understood as an eco-ethical turn and is parallel to, for example, feminist science and technology studies, life sciences, feminist health and body studies, and new materialism, which have strongly addressed the role of the material and affect in feminist thinking and practice (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018, pp. 4–5).

Today, it would be fair to argue that the many fields and disciplines such as new materialism, disability studies, animal studies, LGBTQI studies, critical
race studies, crip theory, environmental humanities, and climate activism – all draw from and build on feminist posthumanism in their critique of the anthropocentrism of humanism.

Åsberg’s and Braidotti’s emphasis on living with multiple others also strives for a radical thinking in terms of a fully inclusive ethics of belonging in the world, the indivisibility of nature and culture, or what Donna Haraway terms “naturecultures”¹ (Haraway, 2003, p. 108). As it signals a continuum between natural and human environments, naturecultures addresses more-than-human and requires a genuine change of living and thinking, of ethics and methods and of the apparatuses of research across disciplines. At the same time, however, Åsberg and Braidotti underscore the risk involved in the naturecultures as a concept due to the prevalent signifying practices and deeply entrenched knowledge systems: “The force of naturecultures [sic] frequently becomes dubious and damaging, such as when we regard “Culture” as an external force of God-like artificiality, when we still debate if women should get human rights, or when we regard less than strictly hetero-normative practices as unnatural, or when all kinds of socio-historical inequalities get legitimised by scientific authorities” (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018, p. 2, emphasis in original). Åsberg and Braidotti warn us here against the pitfalls of an exclusive social construction of language, which inadvertently reproduces a nature/culture divide and the inevitable theorisation of nature as a blank and homogeneous space for humanist and masculinist projections of meaning-making. This divide, often produced by masculinist scientific knowledge, situates women, non-normative and nonhuman others within passivity and primordialism, and thereby consolidates the notion of belonging to a common idea of the human.

In the realm of feminist posthumanism, where interdependence and care among species are central, the traditional distinctions of culture/nature, human/nonhuman, and animate/inanimate are progressively fading, particularly in the Anthropocene – a newly proposed geological epoch marked by humanity’s profound impact on the planet. The positioning of the subject and, more crucially, of memory necessitates negotiation within the co-agency of the nonhuman across epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic processes. Given this context, a pressing question arises: how can we establish connections between feminist posthuman philosophy and memory studies? What lends significance

¹ This is a conceptual innovation to describe entangled multispecies histories and to illuminate new ways of thinking about agency and power, difference and sociality, ontology, and epistemology. For a detailed account of “naturecultures”, see Haraway’s The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness (2003).
to feminist posthumanism and its research at the intersection of environmental and memory scholarship? Through a discussion of these inquiries, this article contends that merging these two domains is a valuable endeavour. Feminist posthumanism has the potential to offer insightful perspectives to current memory scholarship, particularly in the analysis of the impacts of oppressive structures on women, natural entities, and elements beyond the human realm. I posit that Memory Studies stands to gain from a thorough exploration of feminist posthumanism. Simultaneously, this exploration can broaden its insights beyond a confined worldview of the natural world by incorporating dynamic conceptualisations of the human, matter, environment, and nonhuman forms of memory work. This synthesis points towards what I term “response-able memory” in twenty-first-century memory studies. Elsewhere, I have proposed that “response-able memory” facilitates a transformation in our comprehension of the interconnectedness of memory, agency, and care – emphasising being-with and responding to the ecological other’s needs (Gündoğan İbrişim, 2022). This article is a critical expansion of my previous discussions on “response-able memory” which intricately crafts narratives rooted in relational modes that surpass the dichotomy between nature and culture within the realm of memory work. In what follows, I will begin by investigating how feminist posthumanism and memory studies intersect and impact each other. Afterward, I will introduce my conceptual framework called “response-able memory” and explore Zarina Muhammad’s artistic approach to demonstrate the integration of feminist posthuman understanding and the utilisation of “response-able memory”. This analysis seeks to create a space that recognises the interconnected relationships between humans and nonhumans within the realm of memory work. In particular, I will argue in favour of Muhammad’s contemporary art, which challenges the notion of placing humans and culture above the natural world and other species in memory work. Her captivating art creates a continuous process of disruption and rearrangement, affecting both the individual and the environment. I argue that Muhammad’s work is closely linked to feminist posthumanities because it explores the ethical complexities of the relationships between humans and nonhumans in local environments. I contend that her work provides a feminist posthuman perspective, encouraging a way of living, engaging, and remembering in an eco-ethical manner within a multiplicity of otherness and the otherness of multiplicity on the changing planet Earth.
In the field of posthumanism, Braidotti positions feminist theory as the central framework, offering a profound analysis of the prevailing concept of the human as an intricate and embedded heterogeneous assemblage (2021, p. 6). This perspective acknowledges the kaleidoscopic nature of feminisms and incorporates diverse standpoints such as ecofeminism, feminist studies of technoscience, LGBTQ+ theories, black feminisms, decolonial feminisms, and indigenous feminisms. These standpoints, in turn, bring attention to the nuanced and complex socio-economic dynamics and environmental challenges that shape the subject, extending beyond the consequences of speciesism – often intertwined with patriarchal, capitalist, colonial, and anthropocentric patterns of abuse.

In particular, Braidotti questions the notion of belonging to a common idea of the human often associated with the white masculine European subject who resides in his wealthy, healthy, and heterosexual norm and configures others (including the colonised, the minoritised, women, LGBTQ, animals, plants, matter and so forth) as naturalised and inferior; hence the dualist thinking. She calls for the urgent review of humanism, a scholarship that, until recently, argued for an undifferentiated paradigm of the “Man” based on Vitruvian Eurocentric masculine parameters (2013, p. 23). Feminist posthumanism assails this undifferentiated paradigm that has fostered divisions between body and mind, female and male, self and environment, nature and culture, human and animal precisely because women and nonhuman others, historically and discursively, have been tied to the dualist thought and private realm: “Body, emotion, and nature: [...] the colonised and the enslaved, the marginalised and the non-citizen, the woman and the animal – which all of them are made into Other than the enlightened rational man” (2013, p. 24). Feminist posthumanism thus has been instrumental in critiquing the positioned specific visions of the male human subject as lively and agentic and other humans and nonhuman bodies as unagentic, dull, and stable.\(^2\) The field prompts an interrogation of the conventional anthropocentric humanism, challenging the established

\(^2\) In chapter three, in particular, Braidotti discusses the relevance of new-materialist feminism and how it highlights the complex multiplicity of embodiment. New materialist feminism introduces innovative ways of recognising matter and materialisation as active and vibrant processes where matter itself is structurally independent of human representation beyond the dualistic thinking. New materialism acknowledges a sense of interdependence and care between species, considering materiality and matter as the common denominator across all species. For further details, see Tuana (2021, pp. 385–494).
separation of the human from all entities categorised as nonhuman, as defined by Braidotti.

In the ongoing discourse surrounding feminist posthumanism in the twenty-first century, there is a heightened awareness of environmental issues, driven by profound concerns about global climate change and planetary devastation. This has sparked complex enquiries into the role of memory³ in addressing environmental challenges. Additionally, the reimagining of human and nonhuman modes of remembrance as intricately connected has gained significant attention in memory studies. This shift aims to envision memory work in nonanthropogenic terms that is both environmentally just and transformative. In the 2017 Special issue of Parallax focusing on “Memory after Humanism”, editors Susanne C. Knittel and Kári Driscoll state as follows:

Posthumanism, as we conceive of it, has little to do with transcending or leaving “the human” behind – it is not something that comes “after the human” but rather “after humanism”. Nor is it a matter of rejecting humanism as such and replacing it with something else. Rather, “posthumanism” concerns the critical engagement with the limitations, blind spots, and unacknowledged exclusions at the heart of humanism”.

Knittel & Driscoll, 2017, p. 382

As proposed by Knittel and Driscoll, posthumanism aims to address questions related to the embodied and environmentally situated subjectivity (personhood) and its social interactions. It critically examines the current status of the human subject and human memory in light of evolving relationships among

³ Recent scholarship in cultural memory studies in the Anthropocene has begun to acknowledge that slower, incremental, and invisible environmental changes caused by the imperceptible processes of accelerated industrialisation, ecological devastation, mass extinction, and climate crisis demand new memory politics that could inform and contribute to this most urgent and topical of challenges. In this context, memory scholars have in the last decade produced a number of new studies and conceptualisations of how human memory moves or is communicated beyond anthropocentric orientations. The discourse on the Anthropocene brings about different objects of study: memory and mourning in ecologically oriented conceptualizations (Albrecht, 2005, p. 44; Craps, 2022, pp. 1–7); memory in relation to the Anthropocene archive (Colebrook, 2014a, pp. 21–43); memory in relation to environmental justice; memory, speculation, and the Anthropocene (Crownshaw, 2017, pp. 127–146). Each of these conceptualisations contains within it the question of addressing the spatio-temporal magnitudes of the Anthropocene and introduces a significant shift in memory studies from the global to the planetary; from recorded to deep history; from the human to the nonhuman. In fact, Stef Craps argues that what we are witnessing at present is the advent of a new, fourth phase in memory studies (Craps et al., 2018, p. 500).
technology, institutions, and society. This special issue emphasises the crucial and timely exploration of memory through remediation and plurimedial posthuman networks. In doing so, it engages with feminist posthumanism and new materialism, challenging the traditional Enlightenment dichotomy of subject/object and the prioritisation of mind over body/matter. Instead, feminist new materialism asserts the significance of matter, including nature, as an active and influential participant in shaping the world. Within this framework, nature, like all matter, is dynamic, adaptive, and alive, defying fixed definitions and demonstrating the capacity to respond autonomously to external influences. In essence, feminist new materialist thinking posits that nature is not merely shaped by human intervention but is inherently self-organising and capable of responsive interactions with the other.

Maria Zirra draws from memory scholars in her examination of dynamic memory theories. Zirra explores the examination of the role of objects that predominantly emerge from branches closely linked to testimonial material. She traces how Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer advocate for a broader approach to remembrance, encompassing the diverse perspectives conveyed by testimonial objects. For Zirra, both Hirsch and Spitzer highlight the importance of inherited personal belongings in influencing the creative expressions of “Third-generation” family members of Holocaust survivors. When verbal testimony is unavailable, Hirsch and Spitzer argue that material remnants, exemplified by two handmade books originating from Holocaust camps in Czechoslovakia and Romania, embody the transmission function, conveying a challenging past across generations (2017, pp. 460–461). Concurrently, these objects undertake incomplete archival reconstructions of collective histories and gendered production. Hirsch and Spitzer’s contemplation of the changing roles of archival objects contributes to a memory studies perspective that is sensitive to materiality.

With an emphasis on materiality, Zirra then proposes the concept of “New Materialist Memory” within the framework of posthumanist philosophy, using Seamus Heaney’s Station Island as her focal point. Zirra illustrates how a stone, functioning as a vibrant memory object, transcends and reinterprets Heaney’s poetry by exerting a distributed agency, highlighting that humans are not the sole active agents. Through her analysis, Zirra advocates for a new materialist perspective and a posthumanist shift away from the conventional subject/object relationship. By drawing on Seamus Heaney’s poems, particularly those reflecting on the lived experience of bogs – controversial sources of energy – Zirra underscores the significance of understanding how the social world is shaped by a multitude of human and nonhuman influences. This approach

Building on Zirra’s discussion, Ann Rigney further advocates for an extensive ecological approach within posthumanist materialism. This approach redirects attention from individual artifacts to ongoing interactions between humans and non-humans, mediations, and materialities within specific social and physical contexts. Rigney underscores that this ecological perspective requires both theoretical and methodological innovation, emphasising the dynamic interplay of various elements as the research focus, rather than privileging a single site (2017, p. 475). Both Zirra and Rigney assert that posthumanism transforms the subject of memory studies by integrating natural history and human history into an expanded and interconnected framework. Simultaneously, it shifts the hierarchical emphasis from the human realm and human suffering to encompass other species and all aspects of the physical environment, including the historical interactions between humans and nonhumans through economic exploitation (Rigney, 2017, p. 467). In Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory (2005), Rigney also suggests that objects are intricately linked to human memory practices, serving as “accidental archives” that preserve layered information about the past. These material objects have the potential to “thicken time” by generating temporality through their inherent nonhuman qualities, capturing both past and present constellations (Rigney, 2017, p. 14).

Having briefly discussed the recent materialist inclinations in the field, I will now present the feminist posthumanist discussions on response-ability by Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. This discourse significantly sheds light on my proposed concept of “response-able memory”. Subsequently, I will demonstrate how “response-able memory” aligns with Zarina Muhammad’s feminist posthuman art practice, creating a fresh framework for situating her work in the context of reconstructing marginalised and silenced historical narratives. An assessment of Muhammad’s feminist posthuman art practice – characterised by vibrancy, response-ability, and distinctive features of agency beyond human influence – offers an interventionist platform for critically examining the existing scholarship in memory studies, particularly in interpreting the complexities of the troubled past and present.

3 “Response-Able Memory” Through Feminist Posthumanism

Rethinking and decontextualising memory studies through a posthumanist lens reveals the dynamic interaction between humans and nature-matter,
highlighting their continuous changes and mutual responsiveness. This reframing disrupts the problematic hierarchical dichotomy where humans, often viewed as a universal force, are privileged over the nonhuman. Proposing an extension of the posthumanist perspective in memory studies, I suggest that a more comprehensive critique within the framework of feminist posthumanism is further needed. Feminists have previously exposed the specific characteristics attributed to the supposedly universal human being across various disciplines, revealing gendered, racial, imperial, heteronormative, privileged, autonomous, and ableist assumptions embedded in the concept of the universal western male subject. Departing from this critique, feminist posthumanism operates on two crucial principles: posthumanism and postanthropocentrism. By converging these principles, feminist posthumanism not only underscores how a particular human subject has become dominant in western thought but also aims to displace the entrenched image of the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class Man prevalent in liberal thought. Consequently, the hierarchy that privileges the human subject over other life forms, including nature, matter, and nonhuman animals, is destabilised. Building on these insights, I argue that feminist posthumanism holds the potential to cultivate response-able forms of memory, reshaping how essential interdependence is practiced in the everyday rituals of living and remembering within our more-than-human world. The feminist ethics of response-ability shifts the focus from mere responsibility to learning how to respond, thereby opening up possibilities for diverse and meaningful responses in the world.

As was argued in a blog post in Memory – Migration – Relationality (MeMiRe), the emergence of the concept of response-ability can be traced back to feminist new materialist Karen Barad’s influential re-examination of Niels Bohr’s quantum epistemology (Gündoğan İbrişim, 2022). In Meeting the Universe Halfway (2007), Barad investigates posthuman, feminist new-materialist, and indigenous relational scholarship, bringing together three significant strands. First, for Barad, humans do not stand outside or apart from what comes to “Matter” because one can consider ontology as epistemology. This means that, in “response-able research”, the researcher is always already part of the phenomena being investigated, and, thereby how one comes to know is inseparable from all research events (Barad, 2007, p. 178). Second, what matters is an ongoing and dynamic process of differentiation in which agency is not something solely possessed and activated by humans. Mattering here refers to the process by which natural, social, cultural, and technological phenomena “intra-act” to realise life’s becomings. For Barad, in these processes of agency, what happens or what comes to matter is not causal or sequential but involves “response-able” researchers who make an “agential cut” (Barad, 2007, p. 179).
In other words, the agential cut happens between subject/object, the vibrant field at which “boundaries don’t hold; times, places, beings bleed through one another” (2007, p. 180), which then leads to the third strand. Barad’s onto-epistemology, or how matter comes to attention through an “agential cut” always involves ethical issues of (in)justice and (in)equity, where matters of concern and matters of care are marbled with power relations. Response-ability, as Barad cautions, is “not about the right response, but rather a matter of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the response of the Other” (2007, p. 81).

Barad’s model specifically relies on the capacity to perceive the physical world through the affordances presented by the body, encompassing both human and nonhuman entities, matter, tools, and various technologies. I argue that this groundbreaking perspective challenges the anthropocentric outlook and the traditional construction of social and scientific research. Simultaneously, it offers opportunities for observing and interpreting the world within an ethics of response-ability, departing from a human-centric emphasis on agency, values, perspectives, and experiences. The concept of response-ability thus directs attention to concrete situated practices, culturally influenced material configurations, and how these elements can enrich eco-ethical ways of existing and inhabiting the world. This stands in contrast to a singular focus on universal, humanist, masculinist, and individual profit-oriented perspectives.

Similar to Barad’s approach, Donna Haraway promotes the concept of response-ability as a significant means of disrupting the anthropocentric understanding of the political and the ethical, challenging the notion of human masculinist exceptionality as the ultimate authority. Haraway defines response-ability as the cultivation of collective knowing and doing (2016, p. 34) and sympoiesis or making-wit (2016, p. 58). These terms highlight the collaborative processes of becoming-with and enabling each other, surpassing the universalist notion of “Man” as the measure of all things. Haraway underscores the entanglements between humans and animals, emphasising how these relationships have transformative effects on both parties. According to Haraway, understanding the world necessitates recognising the foundational aspects of relation and sympoiesis, as nothing exists in isolation from its connections with other life forms. Consequently, any ethical framework must commence with relationality as its starting point. Response-ability emerges from these relationships, involving both human and more-than-human subjects whose ability to respond to one another holds significance. Haraway importantly argues that response-ability is not confined to science labs or multi-species encounters but extends to the specific ways we choose to narrate our stories to one another. In her famous article “Awash in Urine”,

[Note: The original text continues with further elaboration and discussion.]
Haraway intertwines personal and political histories of Diethylstilbestrol (DES) and Premarin, connecting diverse human and nonhuman actors across geographical and historical contexts. The actors in her story include:

- Fetal calves stripped of amniotic fluid, urinating pregnant Canadian women, pregnant mares and their foals and consorts in Manitoba and beyond, activists in horse rescue and women’s health, economically strapped contract farmers, a California menopausal woman worried about familial heart disease in the company of a lucrative market-ready crowd of other menopausal Americans, and German zebras in zoos in the 1930s.

Haraway describes her storytelling practice as “conjugating” or “yoking”, joining together what had otherwise been taken apart by the Enlightenment discourse that positions the European, rational white male subject as the apex of knowledge-making and history. By bringing the aforementioned surprising vibrant actors together beyond the masculinist principles of the Enlightenment project, Haraway develops a relational and response-able ethics that recognises non-anthropocentric ways of conceiving of and acting in the world.

My proposed concept of “response-able memory” draws inspiration from both Barad’s and Haraway’s relational and response-able ethics, aligning itself with the fourth phase in memory studies as briefly discussed earlier. I argue that “response-able memory” places emphasis on the vitality and dynamism of matter and the more-than-human world, surpassing the notion of historicity solely attributed to human agency, language, or culture. This concept challenges the monolithic formulations of remembrance, seeking to redefine our understanding of accountability and responsibility. Instead of a singular focus on the idealised and static image of the Anthropos (meaning human, deriving from the Greek, “Aner”, which is used for male or man as in mankind) representing humanity, “response-able memory” advocates for a material and entangled form of living and remembering. It offers fresh approaches to address anthropogenic changes while persistently questioning who bears the consequences – suffering, prosperity, or demise – within deeply ingrained systems of power, inclusion, and exclusion (Gündoğan İbrişim, 2012, p. 312).

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4 One should also highlight a tension here. Although Haraway recognises that the agency is relational and disturbed among species, one can argue that it does not act symmetrical precisely because for Haraway humanism possess the disproportionate power over the lives (and deaths) of nonhuman beings, especially animals.
This concept thus underscores the interconnected and response-able nature of memory, linking the painful memories of humans to the silenced, ignored, or dismissed memories of the more-than-human world. It fosters a more nuanced and inclusive approach to understanding, remembering, and addressing diverse cultural, social, environmental, and historical factors.

4 Zarina Muhammad's Imagination of “Response-Able Memory”: A New Sense of Accountability

Over the past century, St. John's Island, located approximately seven kilometers off the southern coast of Singapore in the Straits of Singapore, has functioned as a multifaceted centre housing what was considered “the undesirable other”. It underwent various transformations, serving as a colonised quarantine station for cholera and leprosy victims in the late nineteenth century under British colonial rule. It later became an internment camp, a detention center for political prisoners during both World War I and World War II, an opium-addict rehabilitation facility, and a temporary settlement for refugees. In the 1970s, the island underwent complete redevelopment, transforming into a recreational hub with lively holiday camps and captivating wildlife.

Today, however, the island's intricate and troubled history, along with its ecocultural and ecological narrative, is often overlooked or deliberately erased. Nature enthusiasts flock to the area primarily to experience the manicured coastal forests, coral reefs, native birds, and marine animals. Amidst this trend of memory erasure, Zarina Muhammad's mixed-media installation, initially showcased in the Singapore Biennale 2022, confronts this forgotten history within the broader contexts of ecological narratives, myth-making, and haunted historiographies.

Zarina Muhammad, an artist based in Singapore and of Malay-Muslim descent, identifies herself as a feminist and a queer magical realist. Louis Ho suggests that her artistic endeavors revolve around the exploration of “interstitial spaces that exist between the living and the otherworldly in Southeast Asian...”

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5 I highlight here that it is crucial to be mindful that “response-able memory” has the potential to introduce new forms of inequalities and might inadvertently hide uneven experiences and accountability concerning human-caused environmental threats and climate change. It can also be deeply embedded in the neoliberal and extractivist logic of corporate responsibility that greenwashes banal, quotidian, and overlooked acts of violence. Thus, one should critically observe here the complexity and implication of these actions, which in an uncanny way negotiates between individual actions and institutional or state-corporate greenwashing claims.
traditions, incorporating elements of ritual, magic, and the supernatural” (Ho, 2023, p. 107). Muhammad's artwork delves into themes rooted in traditional Southeast Asian mythology, folklore, liminal spaces, otherworldly concepts, as well as natural elements and the supernatural. Through the combination of mythmaking, spirituality, and nonhuman assemblage, she specifically engages with the rewriting and retelling of the history and memory of St. John's Island. Drawing inspiration from overlooked epistemologies of the region, Muhammad prompts her audience to contemplate whose voices have been marginalised and whose memories have been overshadowed in the dominance of coloniser masculinist ideals and Eurocentric humanitarian ideologies.

In her renowned and multifaceted installation titled, *Moving Earth, Crossing Water, Eating Soil* (2022), Zarina Muhammad not only reclaims the intricate and troubled history of St. John’s Island but also challenges foundational notions of bounded individualism and enduring divisions between subject/object, self/other, nature/culture, female/male, and environment/individual prevalent in dominant Western thought and research. As seen in Figure 1, within the main administrative building of St. John’s, the artist places painted cutouts depicting eight animals – cat, tiger, dog, bird, mouse, deer, crocodile, fish – onto the pillars of the central installation. These creatures correspond

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**FIGURE 1** Moving Earth, Crossing Water, Eating Soil, 2022, mixed-media installation, Singapore Biennale 2022. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
to the eight animals positioned around the cardinal points of a compass in traditional Bugis (an ethnic group of South Sulawesi) divination diagrams. They also evoke the untold and often irretrievable stories and subjects of the past, such as rehabilitated opium addicts or colonial subjects and immigrants from the late nineteenth century who underwent quarantine, marked by health crises, grief, and mourning.

*Moving Earth, Crossing Water, Eating Soil* occupies a critical position where feminist posthumanism intersects with memory in two significant ways. First, the work weaves together elements from the past and present, human and nonhuman communities, and the immaterial and material realms. The artwork indexes a diverse array of bodies, materialities, spaces, and subjectivities, operating on multiple registers to redefine the island’s memory by establishing connections with the more-than-human. Significantly, I propose that the artist’s work here represents a cross-pollination between traditionally separated disciplines such as the humanities, philosophy, sciences, and arts. Incorporating animistic and folk-religious beliefs, along with polycosmologies prevalent across Southeast Asia, and utilising organic materials, archival and found objects, flowers, textiles, as well as scent and sound-producing instruments (including mirrors, amulets, paper tigers, batik, bamboo, incense, rocks, seashells, herbs, spices, books, picture cards, and more), the artist transcends genres, fostering innovative ways of thinking, doing, and remembering beyond the confines of rational and masculinist modes of production. Thus, Muhammad’s art practice is positioned to decentre the human, particularly the human as envisioned in the Eurocentric, Enlightenment paradigm of the rational, secular, and unitary subject.

Second, Zarina Muhammad defies conventional categorisation, refusing to neatly fit into predefined boundaries of separation or distinct categories like art, theory, materiality, or discourse, human or nonhuman. Instead, her work exemplifies a fluidity that transcends genres, spaces, disciplines, and perspectives, embracing a multiplicity of possibilities and response-abilities. Within this framework, I argue that her art serves as a vivid and compelling illustration of feminist posthumanist practice, situated at the intersection of environment and memory. It reconsiders the configuration of bodies, materials, spaces, and subjectivities in a responsive manner, challenging the historical and discursive dominance of masculinist modes of knowledge production and recollection through decentralisation.

In another artwork titled *Not Terra Nullius* (*Land Belonging to No One*) (2018), Muhammad utilises 37 Emerald Hill, an old building reputedly used as a station for comfort women during the Japanese Occupation in Singapore. While Muhammad honours the folk spirits of the past and the ghosts of these
women, she prompts her audience to recall a Balinese concept of “sekala” (the seen) and “niskala” (the unseen) by merging visible and hidden aspects of violent histories. In Balinese culture, the seen, or “sekala”, represents the colourful and lively world of ceremony, ritual, dance, and drama, while the unseen, or “niskala”, encompasses the wisdom underlying these rituals, the magic inherent in dance and drama, or the supernatural forces behind the visible world. For the Balinese, the seen and the unseen are inseparable, deeply embedded in their daily lives. As seen in Figure 2, via the interplay between the

![Figure 2](image-url)
seen and the unseen, Muhammad’s Not Terra Nullius employs a participatory installation, encouraging the audience to engage with what is beyond. The audience can create offerings as part of a Javanese merti ritual, which involves caring for something or responding to the needs of others. In Muhammad’s artistic practice, these offerings consist of various objects such as flowers, scents, fruits, and colorful strings, which are essential for a critical approach to creation and responsibility, extending beyond Cartesian norms of bodily production (i.e., subjects and objects). More importantly, these objects can be decontextualised through entanglements that surpass Cartesian boundaries, shedding light on transformative interactions between humans and other humans, as well as between humans and the natural world. It would be illuminating to note Astrid Erll’s significant argument that disrupts or rejects dichotomies such as mind/body, nature/culture, local/global, and so on, complicating our comprehension of monolithic global systems and thinking. Erll asserts that the expanding research on cultural memory and trauma across various disciplines has contributed to a more extensive understanding of what she calls: “Ecologies of trauma” (Erll, 2020, p. 534). This concept underscores that traumas, ranging from individual experiences addressed by psychotherapists to collective traumas studied by sociologists, unfold within socio-cultural, spatiotemporal, and notably, human-nonhuman contexts (2020, p. 535). Based on Erll’s assertion, it can be proposed that “ecologies of trauma” then encompass traumatic experiences and memories that are inherently tied to specific locations and ecological contexts, despite efforts to obscure their implications due to their psychologically orientated and unspeakable nature. Muhammad’s Not Terra Nullius with its human and nonhuman actors is a telling example of ecologies of trauma where the rethinking of the conception of a traumatised subject that is distributed along, within, and throughout the vibrant spatiotemporal relationships through which we are co-constituted.

In Muhammad’s art practice, we are strongly encouraged to recall the experiences of marginalised women, particularly those who have been mistreated and forgotten; in other words, the ghostly or spectral manifestations of discontinuity throughout South Asian history. This also underscores the notion that memory operates within its socio-cultural, spatiotemporal, and intertwined human-nonhuman context, which creates a space for ethical responsibility, shaping our capacity to respond differently. Through its participatory nature, Not Terra Nullius makes visible the absence of “comfort stations” (both space and environment) and “comfort women” in history, allowing them to be both missed and remembered in a feminist posthumanist manner. What is at stake here is the response-able attempt to remember the unremembered and to think through injustices of sexism and racism.
Furthermore, in *Not Terra Nullius*, Muhammad engages in a direct dialogue that intertwines posthumanism and feminism through her mnemonic art, challenging a masculinist, patriarchal way of remembering. It is worth noting that the Latin phrase “terra nullius,” translating to “land belongs to no one” is powerfully countered by Muhammad, asserting that Singapore is not terra nullius. Through her work, she invokes the concept of “response-able memory”, which reshapes norms of exclusion and inclusion, reclaiming the gendered and ecologically excluded self and remembrance in the twenty-first century. Karen Barad suggests that “only in this ongoing responsibility to the entangled other, without dismissal (without “enough already!”), is there the possibility of justice-to-come” (2003, pp. 264–265). *Not Terra Nullius* serves as a compelling illustration of Barad’s concept of “justice-to-come,” aiming to dismantle the relationships of dominance that subordinate both women and all nonhuman life forms to masculine, human interests.

5 Conclusion: Reversing and Reconfiguring Memory in a Changing World

This article has discussed how Zarina Muhammad’s art, richly intertwined with feminist posthuman perspectives, Southeast Asian ritual magic, and its mythological foundations, while it introduces what I term “response-able memory”. This concept not only transforms the connection between humans and nature but also upholds a genuine commitment to social, gender, and environmental justice, along with ethical accountability. “Response-able memory” redefines the notions of inside and outside, subject and object, coloniser and colonised, underlining that what Muhammad’s art prompts us to recall is an ongoing process deeply rooted in ancestral and longstanding practices, never initially designed for responding to those who have been wronged.

Muhammad’s art confronts histories marked by violence and silence, challenging concepts of power and ownership. It introduces a vibrant perspective to redefine the human-nature relationship through the radical portrayal of memory in its response-able forms. As seen throughout her art practice, the artist consistently explores the exploitation of the environment and marginalised communities for exploitative human purposes, offering diverse imaginative pathways to delve into questions about our existence, remembrance, response-ability, and intricately entangled relationships with the nonhuman world. Such an approach will cultivate further possibilities for engaging critically what Susanne Gannon reminds us of pedagogical moments,
each of which “has its own particular spatial, temporal, and affective modalities and performances” (Gannon, 2011, pp. 72–73), creating response-able manners to remember what is muted in history. In this way, the emergence of feminist posthumanism offers a new angle for revisiting uncharted territories in memory work and infusing a responsive depth into current issues and overlooked dynamics of remembrance.

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Works Cited


