

Life in Ruins

Thinking through the geological reformation of the human subject with Otobong Nkanga's
Remains of the Green Hill



still from *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015) by Otobong Nkanga, courtesy of the artist, Kadist Art Foundation and Lumen Travo Gallery

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01-02-2017

My sincere thanks go out to Domitilla Olivieri for providing very helpful feedback that made this thesis better, for having patience and understanding while I took a little longer to finish it, and for being a great teacher whose classes I enjoyed a lot; to Max, Elisa, Veerle and Jos for going through the struggle that is writing a thesis together; and to my parents for their emotional and financial support and patience while I'm (finally!) graduating.

Abstract

This thesis explores the posthuman and post-anthropocentric notion of the subject outlined in Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory, and looks at Nigerian visual artist and performance artist Otobong Nkanga's video *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015) as an artistic expression of this relational, embedded and embodied vision of subjectivity. The thesis starts off by exploring the construction of a human/non-human divide as it has become entrenched in the Humanist tradition. Using Braidotti's theory on subjectivity in the era of the Anthropocene, I elaborate on the complications and paradoxes of such a divide. The decline of the autonomous and transcendental subject of Man in this particular era offers opportunities to deconstruct the human/non-human divide and consolidate alternative, relational modes of subject formation. Nkanga's video artwork, when addressed from a posthumanist perspective, offers such alternatives. I read her work as a visualization of a posthuman process of subject formation, in which human and nonhuman agents congregate. I locate this quality of the artwork particularly in its depiction of the intimate and co-constitutive relationship between body and place, through which it deconstructs humanism's ontological split between the human self and the (previously) nonhuman other.

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Preface: a note on ruins

In 2014-2015 I spent ten months traveling from the Netherlands to India, largely over land. During my travels I encountered many places, and came across different ways in which people deal with their built environment and cultural heritage. When I returned to the Netherlands I started to experience my surroundings differently than I did before. I was growing more aware of (and frustrated with) the fact that Dutch cities and towns are planned out to the tiniest detail. I noticed that it forced my body into specific and predetermined programs of behavior, and I felt like this left little freedom of movement and being. I then became interested in the potential of other kinds of spaces than the homogenous and scripted city: spaces where humans are *not* in control, and that therefore are not structured to death. When I encountered the work of cultural geographer Tim Edensor I found someone who shares my discomfort with overly organised spaces. For Edensor ruins, or abandoned man-made structures, are a ‘deliciously disordered’ alternative to the single-purpose spaces of contemporary Western-European cities (Edensor 2005, 17). More importantly than a cool, eccentric or exotic alternative to the scripted city, the ruin is a lens for ontological and ethical inquiry. It is a space that helps us re-think ourselves, our own subjectivities, and our relationship to the things that surround us. As Edensor puts it:

Ruins confound the normative spacings of things, practices and people. They open up possibilities for regulated urban bodies to escape their shackles in expressive pursuits and sensual experience, foreground alternative aesthetics about where and how things should be situated, and transgress boundaries between outside and inside, and between human and non-human spaces (Edensor 2005, 18).

As ruins are spaces that challenge normative practices of being, and transgress boundaries between outside/inside and human/nonhuman, the experience of being in the ruin may trigger a posthumanist reconsideration of what it means to be human. In this thesis my interest in ruins and my interest in feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s posthumanist theory of nomadic subjectivity come together in an analysis of Otobong Nkanga’s video art-piece *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015). I read her work as an expression of a posthuman, post-anthropocentric and nomadic notion of subjectivity performed against the background of a ruined landscape. Although this thesis does not explicitly engage with Edensor’s notion of the ruin (due to its small scope), it is an active force behind it, in the sense that it triggered my interest in Nkanga’s art piece and influenced my interpretation of it.

Introduction

"We need to become the sorts of subjects who actively desire to reinvent subjectivity as a set of mutant values and to draw our pleasure from that, not from the perpetuation of familiar regimes." (Braidotti 2013, 94)

One of the most fundamental issues in philosophy is the question of subjectivity. The subject is a key term in discussions on the nature of human existence and the relationship between the self and the other. The term has a broad range of meanings and applications in philosophy in general, and in Continental Philosophy more specifically. However, philosopher François Raffoul finds a basic understanding of the term by tracing its origin: the term subject derives from the Latin word 'subjectum,' which literally means 'that which is thrown underneath'. As such, he argues, it indicates an underlying support and basis, a foundation (Raffoul 2005, 562). To examine the structure of the human subject is thus to examine the very foundation of what it means to be human. Many philosophical projects are concerned with finding an adequate interpretation of this notion. They do so by asking questions such as: What constitutes the human subject? What are its affordances and limits? Where does the (human) self end and the (human and nonhuman) other begin? In short, the question of subjectivity can be described as the philosophical enquiry that tries to establish the quality or condition of something being a subject and, by extension, of something *not* being a subject. As such it examines the nature of the self and, by extension, also that of the other.

In modern humanist traditions subjectivity is equated with will, consciousness and agency. The essence of what it means to be human is located in human being's capacity to think and act rationally and consciously (Raffoul, 564; Solomon 2005, 900; Braidotti 2013, 15). This thesis departs from the assertion that the humanist notion of subjectivity, conceptualized as the subject of Man, is ontologically false and ethically irresponsible, and furthermore still too dominant in Western society and culture. It is ontologically false, because it posits the human subject as an individual, autonomous and transcendental being and neglects to see the structural and constitutive role of human and nonhuman others in its construction of a normative self or dominant subject. This separation of the human self and the nonhuman other is ethically irresponsible, because it serves as the basis for a system that justifies the structural subjugation and exploitation of human and nonhuman others. In short, the dominant vision of the subject of Man provides a limited and exclusive notion of what it means to be human, one that does not sufficiently express the multiple and complex ways in which human and nonhuman subjectivities are tied up together.

This thesis therefore engages with two texts that explore the question of subjectivity from a different perspective.¹ The first one is feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's posthumanist theory of the nomadic subject. The second one is the video artwork *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015) by Nigerian visual artist and performance artist Otobong Nkanga. The video shows artist Nkanga standing in front of a mining crater in Green Hill, Namibia that was created through industrial mining by German colonists. Nkanga is singing to the landscape, performing yoga-like movements and balancing stones that emerge from the landscape on top of her head. In this thesis I read the second text through the first, or in other words: I make sense of Nkanga's art piece through Braidotti's posthuman nomadic theory. In reading these two texts together I will formulate a response to the following research question:

How does Otobong Nkanga's video *Remains of the Green Hill* perform a posthuman notion of subjectivity?

The aim of this thesis is to think through positive alternatives to the autonomous and anthropocentric subject of Man. Central to this thesis is the effort to deconstruct the dialectical logic of subject-formation of the modern humanist doctrine, which posits a categorial distinction or ontological split between the human self and the nonhuman 'earth other'.² I therefore examine the anthropocentric quality of modern humanism, the relation between the human self and the nonhuman other that results from it, and the post-anthropocentric posthumanist criticisms it has generated. I engage with Braidotti's nomadic theory and Nkanga's video art, because they present an alternative to the dominant and anthropocentric Humanist vision of the subject of Man. These texts complement each other in that they both use different means to do so: Braidotti uses theoretical and philosophical arguments, Nkanga uses artistic audiovisual expression. Instead of an autonomous and transcendental Humanist subject position Nkanga and Braidotti express a relational mode of subjectivity that fosters a more sustainable relation between the human subject and its environment, which is needed in the current era of the Anthropocene.

¹ To be clear, my notion of 'text' reaches beyond the written or verbal realm and also includes visual and auditorial signs.

² Braidotti divides the structural others of the dominant subject of Man into four categories: the 'sexualized others' (women and LGBTQ's); the 'racialized others' (natives, post-colonials and non-Europeans); the 'naturalized or earth others' (animals, insects, plants and the planet); and 'the technological others' (machines and their interactive networks) (Braidotti 2014, 1). The specific self-other relation I focus on in this thesis is the relation between the human self and the earth other.

Historical and theoretical framework

Before I get to the specific theoretical framework of this thesis it makes sense to outline the broader historical and geopolitical framework in which it is situated. The spatial or geopolitical framework of this thesis is that of continental Europe, meaning that I engage mainly with insights from European Continental Philosophy. The historical or temporal framework of this thesis is that of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene can be defined as the geological era marked by the significant global impact that human activity has on the earth. This term is often used to suggest that we live in a time when the global environment is shaped by humankind, and where humans have fundamentally altered the earth's land surface, oceans, rivers, atmosphere, flora and fauna (Edwards 2015). In a similar vein, Braidotti describes it as “the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” and the “age when the earth's ecological balance is directly regulated by humanity” (Braidotti 2013, 5, 79).

Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin argue that the Anthropocene is primarily a sensorial phenomenon, one that addresses “the experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world” (Davis & Turpin 2015, 3). Even though we cannot deny the fact that the environment is indeed suffering damage caused by human activity, Braidotti argues that there is also a more positive or affirmative way to approach the Anthropocene than firstly or solely in terms of environmental crises. The awareness that human activity has a geological influence, in a way, enables the collapse of the divide between human and natural histories (Braidotti 2013, 159-60). Along these lines Braidotti argues that the Anthropocene era offers possibilities for reconfiguring our relationship to “our complex habitat, which we used to call ‘nature,’” and that this change of perspective enables the creation of positive alternatives to the dominant subject of Man (Braidotti 2013, 81). In other words, The Anthropocene era calls for a new notion of what it means to be human: one that reconsiders the boundaries of subjectivity set out by the dominant Humanist subject and fosters a more sustainable relation between the human self and the earth other (Braidotti 2013).

The theoretical framework of this thesis consists of Braidotti's nomadic theory as described in her books *The Posthuman* (2013), but I also draw upon her books *Transpositions: on nomadic ethics* (2006) and *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (2011), and her article ‘Metamorphic Others and Nomadic Subjects’ (2014). I take up Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity as the theoretical framework for this thesis, because it rethinks the basic unit of reference for the human and offers a productive alternative to the

dominant Humanist subject (Braidotti 2013, 5). The nomadic subject expresses Braidotti's interpretation of what it means to be a subject in our contemporary historical condition that is rife with contradictions and paradoxes (Braidotti 2011, 3).³ Nomadic subjects are subjects that are non-unitary, non-fixed, relational, embedded and embodied (Braidotti 2006, 2011, 2014, 2014b). Braidotti herself describes them as "subjects in process, that have relinquished the dialectical mode of relation to others by giving priority to the critique of the formerly dominant model of subjectivity and thus putting on the spot the discourse of the master subject" (Braidotti 2014, 6). They are called 'nomadic,' because they are dynamic and changing entities that are always in process, always becoming, always moving on (Braidotti 2011, 5).

The articulation of and engagement with a nomadic vision of the subject has been an ongoing effort in Braidotti's work since the 1980s up to the present.⁴ In the period of 1994-2011 she published a trilogy of interconnected yet self-contained books on the topic: *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002) and *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (2006). A revised second edition of *Nomadic Subjects* was published in 2011. This thesis however engages with Braidotti's nomadic vision of subjectivity through her most recent book *The Posthuman* (2013), which she describes as marking "the apotheosis of nomadic subjectivity" (Braidotti 2014b, 243).⁵ I chose to engage with *The Posthuman* in particular, because in this book Braidotti articulates her nomadic theory in terms of a posthumanist and post-anthropocentric theory of the subject. This book demonstrates the great value of the nomadic subject in our contemporary era of the Anthropocene, as this relational, non-unitary and embodied subject constitutes a positive alternative to the anthropocentric subject of Man.

³ Braidotti's nomadic theory is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of capitalism as a 'schizophrenic' system that produces internally contradictory differences (Deleuze & Guattari 1972, 1980) and examines what it means to be a subject in such a context (Braidotti 2011, 110).

⁴ In *The Subject of Rosi Braidotti: Politics and Concepts* (2014) Braidotti mentions that she started her project of nomadic subjectivity almost 30 years ago (Braidotti 2014b, 239).

⁵ Braidotti states that: "*The Posthuman* accomplishes two inter-related goals. On the one hand, it marks the apotheosis of nomadic subjectivity by deploying it as a plane of realization of affirmative ethics. On the other hand, it unfolds this transversal and relational vision of the subject outward, to a cartography of the ongoing transformations of the human" (Braidotti 2014b, 243).

Braidotti's nomadic theory recomposes the boundaries of the dominant and normative Humanist subject within the context of contemporary ecological and technological developments.⁶ Throughout her work she argues that the human and the nonhuman — and the natural and the cultural, the given and the constructed — are intimately related, rather than dialectically opposed (Braidotti 2006, 2011, 2013, 2014). As a theory of the subject that deconstructs the categorical distinctions human/nonhuman, natural/cultural and given/constructed in light of contemporary ecological and technological developments, Braidotti's nomadic theory is part of the theoretical tradition of critical posthumanism. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter define critical posthumanism as a discourse that aims at:

[R]eflection on how the effects on and of contemporary technoculture and biotechnology force through a rethinking of the integrities and identities of the human: not forgetting, either, those of its non-human others, many of them of humanity's own making and remaking – gods, monsters, animals, machines, systems (Callus and Herbrechter 2012, 241).

Though I agree with Callus and Herbrechter that the main task of critical posthumanism consists of re-thinking the boundaries of (human) subjectivity, my problem with their description of this kind of theoretical intervention is its focus on *contemporary* technologies.⁷ I think that doing the critical posthumanist work of rethinking the integrities and identities of the human can also be done by considering the effects of (relatively) old technologies on the construction of the category of the (non)human. I agree with Donna Haraway and Zeynep Tufekci when they state that “we have never been human” (Haraway 2008, 165), or, put differently, that “we were always posthuman” (Tufekci 2012, 34). People have always existed within constellations of various technologies. Man-machine

⁶ The ecological developments I am referring to here are, for example, phenomena like climate change and environmental damage caused by humans. As discussed before, these phenomena ask for a re-evaluation of the relation between the human subject and the earth, which can serve as the grounds for a recomposition of human subjectivity. The technological developments I am referring to are, most notably, the advancements of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science (Braidotti 2014b, 243). These scientific advancements cause a displacement and blurring of the boundaries between the categories of the natural and the cultural (Braidotti 2013, 3). Biotechnologies such as cloning and IVF, for example, produce human subjects. The technologically mediated subjects that they produce indicate that the natural and the cultural, or the given and the constructed, do not exist separately. Such technologically mediated subjects are then used as a basis to conceive of alternative visions of subjectivity and ways of life. See, for example, Donna Haraway's engagement with OncoMouse (Haraway 1997) and Dolly the sheep (Haraway 2008, p. 44-68).

⁷ For a description of the kind of contemporary technologies that play a role in posthumanist theories, including the ones that Callus and Herbrechter reflect on, see footnote 7.

hybrids did not just come into existence with the invention of contemporary digital- or biotechnologies. This is why I enter into the discussions on posthuman subjectivity through human's interaction with the older, non-digital technology of built space.⁸ In my opinion this helps to stress the fact that the hybrid character of the (human) subject is fundamental — or, in Haraway's words, “ontic” and “antic” (Haraway 2008, 165) — and not just a recent development.⁹

Methodology

For my formal analysis of Otobong Nkanga's video *Remains of the Green Hill* I use the method of ‘compositional analysis’ as outlined by Gillian Rose in her book *Visual Methodologies* (2001). I elaborate on this method and its use in my project in chapter two. For my engagement with the question of posthuman subjectivity in the era of the Anthropocene I employ a method that Braidotti defines as the ‘cartographic approach’. A cartography, Braidotti argues, is “a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present” (Braidotti 2011, 4). A cartography maps out the quality or condition of being of a particular subject by tracing, dis-entangling and laying bare the *concrete actions and discourses* through which this subject took shape and continues to take shape. The cartographic method serves to analyze and interpret subject positions and the power relations in which they exist, with the aim of finding possible sites and strategies of resistance from which to construct positive alternative conceptions of subjectivity (Braidotti 2011, 4, 10). As such, the

⁸ Nkanga's video *Remains of the Green Hill* depicts a human subject performing in front of and for a crater in the landscape of Green Hill in Tsumeb, Namibia. This crater was created and subsequently abandoned by German colonists who mined the area for export purposes. Human labour efforts changed the structure of this landscape to such an extent that makes it virtually impossible to conceive of this landscape as ‘natural’ anymore. As such I read the environment of Green Hill as a man-made structure, or as built space.

⁹ By arguing that human's relations to others are ‘ontic’ and ‘antic,’ Haraway emphasizes that they constitute our fundamental ontological structure (they are ‘ontic’) and that they have done so from the very beginning of human kind (they are ‘antic,’ ancient, very old. These notions derive from a sentence in *When Species Meet* (2008), which goes: “Because we have never been the philosopher's human, we are bodies in braided, ontic, and antic relatings” (Baraway 2008, 165). In this book Haraway challenges the notion of human exceptionalism: the belief that humans are categorically distinct or essentially different from all other forms of organic and inorganic life. By stating that “we have never been the philosopher's human,” she rejects Descartes' notion of the human as a transcendental category. She argues that humans “do not preexist their relating” (Haraway 2008, 165), but are relational to their very core and from the very start. This human, then, is not a transcendental subject, but comes about through relations with other subjects, both human and nonhuman. In an analysis of this same sentence, Karijn van den Berg also considers what Haraway refers to when speaking about “bodies in braided, ontic and antic relations” and similarly concludes: “Perhaps [it indicates] that “we” interpreted as the human species, are not a unified “we” that is separated from others as “we” like to think, and as such does not exist; instead “we” are all intertwined, and become with others through the acts of encountering and relating” (van den Berg 2016, 51).

cartographic method will be useful in my project of thinking through an alternative, posthuman notion of subjectivity that takes a distance from the dominant Humanist subject.

The cartographic method follows a new materialist methodology. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin describe new materialism as a cultural theory that does not privilege matter over meaning or culture over nature (Dolpijn and van der Tuin 2012, 93). New materialism forms a reaction to, and takes a distance from both the Cartesian notion of the split subject and the methodologies of the linguistic turn such as structuralism, poststructuralism and social constructivism. It rejects both modern Cartesian thought and postmodern linguistic thought, because they produce dualisms between nature and culture, human and nonhuman and matter and mind (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 93).¹⁰ Instead of taking these categorical distinctions for a fact and using them as a starting point for social intervention new materialist research “always starts its analysis from how these oppositions . . . are *produced in action itself*” (Dolpijn and van der Tuin 2012, 93, emphasis added). As such new-materialist research always starts with a cartography that shows how dualisms between nature and culture, human and nonhuman or matter and mind are constructed. In order not to reproduce these dualisms that have been so central to (post-)modern thought the new materialist approach does not privilege the side of either nature or culture. It rejects both naturalistic foundationalism and the dialectical logic of social constructivism, and focuses instead on the complex ways in which nature and culture interact and co-construct each other in a complex nature-culture continuum (Braidotti 2013, 2).

Thesis structure

This thesis starts with a theoretical exposition on the posthuman subject and then moves on to a concrete example of how this subject position might be envisioned with an analysis of Otobong Nkanga’s *Remains of the Green Hill*. In chapter one I outline my theoretical framework and engage with Braidotti’s theory of posthuman subjectivity. I trace the decline of the humanist subject of Man via poststructuralist anti-humanist critiques of humanism’s unitary vision of the subject. Following Braidotti’s affirmative politics, I read the decline of the unitary vision of the subject as an opportunity for a more relational notion of subjectivity to take hold. Central to this chapter is the

¹⁰ René Descartes posed a categorial distinction between mind (thought, reason) and matter (body, the ‘external’ material world) by arguing that they are two separate substances that inhabit two separate realms (Descartes 1641, 1644). The linguistically framed (post)structural and social constructivist methods posit a categorial distinction between nature (the given) and culture (the constructed) by privileging language as the primary medium of social analysis (Braidotti 2013, 2; Breu 2016, 10-11).

idea that overcoming an ethic of difference as pejoration and working towards an affirmative approach to difference — an effort that Braidotti refers to as the process of ‘becoming-nomadic subjects’ (Braidotti 2014, 6) — is a necessary step in the process of positively re-composing the limited and autonomous notion of the subject of Man. I therefore make a plea for the (previously) devalued other using Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic theory and argue that we need to start approaching others positively as keepers of virtual possibilities that point to positive developments and alternatives (Braidotti 2014, 6).

Chapters two and three exemplify the theoretical work done in chapter with a specific case: Nkanga’s video art piece *Remains of the Green Hill*. In chapter two I conduct an analysis of the video with Gillian Rose’s method of the ‘compositional interpretation’ in order to examine how it works to disrupt familiar expressions of human subjectivity and the relation between the human subject and the earth other. In chapter three I engage with the video as a specific expression of a posthuman, *relational* mode of subject formation. Building further upon the analysis conducted in chapter two, chapter three examines how *Remains of the Green Hill* repairs the ontological cut between the human subject and the earth other. I argue how the video expresses an enlarged sense of inter-connection between the two, and consider the consequences that this has for the notion of the human. Together these chapters construct a reading of Nkanga’s artwork as an expression of a posthuman and post-anthropocentric reconsideration of the boundaries of the dominant subject of Man.

1. The subject of Man and his structural others

"It matters which categories you use to think other categories with." (Strathern in Haraway 2004, 355)

In this first chapter I map out a number of conceptualizations of the subject in modern Western philosophy: from the Humanist 'subject of Man' to posthuman nomadic subject. I will argue why the former approach to subjectivity is insufficient in dealing with the complexity and multiplicity of subject positions, and discuss how Braidotti's notion of nomadic subjectivity does manage to do so. The following question will guide me through this cartographic project: what is nomadic subjectivity and how does it understand the relationship between the human self and the nonhuman (earth) other? In her article 'Metamorphic Others and Nomadic Subjects' Braidotti provides a definition of the nomadic subject. It reads: "The nomadic subject expresses the figuration of a situated, posthuman, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject released from the burden of dialectics" (Braidotti 2014, 8). This chapter elaborates on the notion of nomadic subjectivity by unpacking this definition and mapping out the two different theoretical traditions that are mentioned in it: humanism's dialectical approach to subjectivity and the posthuman approach to subjectivity that is explicitly non-dialectical. Putting these opposing traditions in conversation will help me gain a better understanding of Braidotti's notion of the nomadic subject, and examine how it works to challenge a limited Humanist conception of what it means to be human.

1.1 Humanism's dialectical approach to subjectivity

I start my cartography of the various conceptualizations of subjectivity in modern Western philosophy with the still dominant notion of subjectivity that has been identified by feminist and postcolonial thinkers as 'the subject of Man': a male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, rational, autonomous and sovereign being. It is important to have an understanding of this specific subject position when thinking through posthuman and post-anthropocentric notions of subjectivity because, as Braidotti argues: "Humanism's restricted notion of what counts as the human is one of the keys to understand how we got to a post-human turn at all" (Braidotti 2013, 16). In her book *The Posthuman* (2013) Braidotti reads the origin of this dominant vision of the subject back as far as Protagoras, who understood Man as the measure of all things. Ever since its conception the classical ideal of Man as a universal model has never completely vanished, and was in fact re-born many times. Pointing to the many times this ideal has been recycled over time, Braidotti locates its contemporary form as "essentially predicated on

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century renditions of classical Antiquity and Italian Renaissance ideals” (Braidotti 2013, 13). We can thus roughly state that the subject of Man has traveled from Antiquity to our contemporary time, via Italian Renaissance and eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment ideologies. However, Braidotti most firmly locates the emergence of the Humanist subject within the eighteenth- and nineteenth century Enlightenment period.

In her cartography of humanist thought Braidotti follows Michel Foucault. Foucault also dates the birth of the humanist movement within the 19th century — because, he argues, the cultures of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were too “preoccupied with God, the world and the resemblance of things” to focus on man (Foucault 1994, 540 in Han-Pile 2010, 122). The modern or (post) nineteenth century brand of humanism that I focus on in this thesis differs from the Renaissance and classical humanisms in its (supposedly) secular, scientific approach.¹¹ Unlike the earlier variations of humanism, modern humanism is inherently secular (Braidotti 2013, 31). It understands religion and spirituality as a subjective and unsound basis for knowledge claims and moral judgement, whereas Renaissance and classical humanisms combined religion and reason. It believes in scientific purity, objectivity, autonomy and in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason, and produces a notion of human subjectivity based on these qualities (Braidotti 2013, 13, 32). With the rise of the Humanist doctrine, Braidotti argues, subjectivity came to be equated with “consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart” (Braidotti 2013, 15).

The Humanist doctrine poses its subject of Man as a universally true and general standard of what it means to be human. It posits the subject of Man as the normal and ideal form of the human, and constructs any entity that deviates from it as dialectically opposed to it and therefore as essentially not-human (Braidotti 2014, 1). The subject of Man, then, acquires a transcendental and universal value as *the* human (Braidotti 2015, 26). What the humanist doctrine neglects to acknowledge, however, is that it expresses a very specific mode of subjectivity. The subject of Man emerged from a partial (Western, European, secular)

¹¹ From now on I will use the term modern humanism or Humanism in short to refer to this specific modern, secular and scientific brand of humanism that is posited on nineteenth century Enlightenment ideals.

perspective and thus cannot represent human nature in general.¹² It expresses a notion of human subjectivity that is incomplete and partial on many levels, of which I will name three.

The first one pertains to the secular and rational quality of the doctrine of Humanism. As I have just mentioned the humanist doctrine and its notion of subjectivity are inherently secular and rational. Modern humanism understands religion and spirituality as a subjective and unsound basis for knowledge claims and moral judgement, and prefers secularism through rational governance (Braidotti 2013, 31). As a consequence, it excludes or ignores all religious and spiritual expressions of agency and (political) subjectivity, since they are not only or primarily based on scientific reason (Braidotti 2013, 31-7). The second way in which the subject of Man expresses a limited notion of subjectivity pertains to his unitary identity. Many feminist and postcolonial scholars have pointed out that the Humanist subject is implicitly assumed to be “masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognized polity” (Braidotti 2013, 65). The Humanist notion of Man is inherently gendered and racialized because it upholds aesthetic and moral ideals based on white, masculine, heterosexual European civilization (Braidotti 2013, 68). In its unitary vision of subjectivity the Humanist doctrine excludes all those subjects that are not-male, not-white, not-heterosexual, not-urbanized and not-speaking a standard language (Braidotti 2014, 1). Finally, the subject of Man does not only represent one specific gender and race, it also only represents one specific species: the human species. In other words, the Humanist doctrine is inherently anthropocentric. As a consequence, it excludes all subjects that do not belong to the human species, and obscures their agency and subjectivity (Braidotti 2013, 68; Braidotti 2014, 1). In this thesis I focus specifically on the latter quality of the Humanist subject.

In the dialectical logic of Humanism an entity is only granted full (human) subjectivity, or acknowledged as subject with consciousness and agency, when it fits within the specific and partial position of the rational, secular, white, Western, European, heterosexual and anthropomorphic subject. If an entity deviates from this norm to any degree it is constructed as an other and excluded from subjectivity and normality. Different subjects are posited as binary

¹² The cartography above shows that the dualist notion of subjectivity emerged from a Western, European perspective. It therefore (implicitly) presupposes a white and Western subject in its approach to the question of subjectivity, but the partial and limited quality of this perspective is often not acknowledged. As a consequence, the Western, European perspective and the notion of subjectivity that emerges from it is constructed as a universal model. This logical fallacy is also known as Eurocentric transcendentalism (see Jackson 2015).

oppositions to the standard mode of humanity expressed by the subject of Man, and constructed as non-normative and nonhuman others. Braidotti divides the structural others of the dominant subject of Man into four categories: the ‘sexualized others’ (women and LGBTQ’s); the ‘racialized others’ (natives, post-colonials and non-Europeans); the ‘naturalized or earth others’ (animals, insects, plants and the planet); and ‘the technological others’ (machines and their interactive networks) (Braidotti 2014, 1). Humanism’s unitary notion of the subject is posited on a structural exclusion of all differences, which are cast aside to the category of ‘other’ (Braidotti 2014, 1). Central to the universalistic posture and the binary logic of the Humanist doctrine, Braidotti argues, is the notion of ‘difference as pejoration’ (Braidotti 2013, 15). This means that difference is indexed negatively on the standard definition of the subject. In other words: if an entity is different from the dominant subject, it is valued less than the dominant subject (Braidotti 2013, 15; Braidotti 2014, 1). The structural others of Man are thus not only constructed as essentially not-human, they are also downgraded to a less valuable subject position and “reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (Braidotti 2013, 15).¹³

1.2 From anti-humanism to post-humanism: the affirmative politics of nomadic theory

The unacknowledged partial perspective of the Humanist doctrine, its binary logic of self and other, and its notion of difference as pejoration have generated much criticism due to the unequal distribution of power and the structural exclusion of non-normative subjects that they sustain. For Braidotti, the anti-humanist deconstruction of Man is the starting point for the historical decline of

¹³ There are many real life instances that prove that the structural others of the dominant subject of Man are not (fully) acknowledged as (human) subjects. A recent example is Donald Trump’s reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule, which prohibits international health organizations that receive U.S. funding from including abortion as a family planning option and thus effectively denies women (a sexualized other) self-determination over their own lives and bodies. Other examples are structural phenomena like racial profiling and (police) brutality against people of color and trans people, which show a direct link between the racialized and sexualized otherness of subjects and their inferior treatment.

Humanism.¹⁴ Anti-humanism questions the very core of the Humanist doctrine, namely its basic concept of ‘the human,’ his centrality in this ideology’s conception and appropriation of the world, and the dialectical scheme of thought through which this subject is constructed (Braidotti 2013, 23). Anti-humanism rejects Humanism’s dialectical construction of the self and the other, which is posited on a structural exclusion and subjugation of difference. It rather argues that the structural others of the dominant subject of Man are necessary to his self-representation. Along these lines, Braidotti argues: “They are the complement to that subject, who constructs himself as much through what he excludes, as through what he includes in his sense of himself, his agency and his entitlements” (Braidotti 2014, 1). Others, then, play a fundamental role in the construction of the self. They are the necessary outside to that subject, which serves to confirm the unitary identity and dominant position of the self (Braidotti 2013, 26-8; Braidotti 2009, 169).

The deconstruction of the dialectical opposition between the self and the other produced a significant power shift in the dominant self-other relation, to the benefit of the (previously) devalued other. With this shift of perspective the structural others of the dominant subject came to inhabit a strategic position. Since they play a constitutive role in the construction of the dominant subject, their very existence is an indication of the complex and dissymmetrical power relations at work in the construction of the dominant subject. The subject position of the other, then, can be used to deconstruct the dominant subject position (Braidotti 2014, 1). As such anti-humanism’s fundamental criticisms on Humanism’s logic of subject formation forged the way to a radical de-centering and de-construction of the dominant subject of Man. They produced the significant insight that:

¹⁴ Braidotti locates the rise of anti-humanism in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. New political and philosophical movements (such as feminism, de-colonization, anti-racism, and anti-nuclear and pacifist movements) reacted to their social context of the Cold War, the aftermath of WW2 and the legacy of Fascism and Communism in Europe. They produced new political and social theories and epistemologies that re-think some of the basic tenets of European Humanism, such as Western democracy and liberal individualism, which had been betrayed violently by Fascism and Communism (Braidotti 2013, 16-7). The philosophical movement of anti-humanism that Braidotti speaks of emerged from a re-reading of the texts of Karl Marx by the poststructuralist generation of 1968 that challenged the implicit anthropocentrism of Marxism (Braidotti 2013, 23). She mentions Michel Foucault’s critique of Humanism and his exclamation of the ‘Death of Man’ in *The Order of Things* (1970) as one of the main texts that instigated a widespread reconsideration of the basic notion of ‘the human’ in European academia (Braidotti 2013, 23). A deconstructive brand of social constructivism, most famously employed by Jaques Derrida (2001), also contributed important anti-humanist critiques by deconstructing the idea of ‘human nature’. Feminists, like Luce Irigaray (1985), pointed out that the Humanist subject is inherently male, white, European, heterosexual and able-bodied, and therefore only represents a very limited view of the human. Post-colonial thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak (1999) and Edward Said (2004) attacked limited Eurocentric nature of Humanism and its notion of the subject (Braidotti 2013, 23-5).

The human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability — of Sameness — by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location (Braidotti 2013, 26).

However, Braidotti also argues: “Anti-humanism criticizes the implicit assumptions about the human subject that are upheld by the humanist image of Man, but this does not amount to a complete rejection.” (Braidotti 2013, 30). She suggests that neither Humanism nor anti-humanism suffice in dealing with the complexities of subject positions and formulating positive alternatives to the subject of Man. She therefore takes up a *critical posthumanist* approach that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism (Braidotti 2013, 37). Braidotti’s critical posthumanism, which she coined ‘nomadism,’ builds upon an anti-humanist legacy, but moves further than that. It is informed by anti-humanist efforts in the sense that it too abandons Humanism’s dialectical logic of difference and sameness, its notion of difference as pejoration, and its unitary vision of the subject. However, it moves further than the deconstructivist anti-humanist efforts, towards a creative and *affirmative* posthuman position.

“Affirmative politics,” Braidotti explains, “combines critique with creativity in the pursuit of alternative visions and projects” (Braidotti 2013, 54). Braidotti’s nomadic theory combines anti-Humanism, or the critique on the Humanist unitary vision of the subject, with an active search for creative alternatives. It is a practice of de-construction followed up by re-construction, or critique combined with creativity (Braidotti 2013, 37-8). Along these lines, Braidotti proposes: “[T]he challenge of the posthuman condition consists in grabbing the opportunities offered by the decline of the unitary subject position upheld by Humanism” (Braidotti 2013, 54). As we have seen, the dialectical logic of Humanism constructs a unitary vision of the subject by structurally excluding non-normative other subjectivities. Anti-humanists revealed the constitutive role of the structural others of the subject of Man and thus invested these previously devalued others with agency. The Posthuman challenge consequently consists of working with this power shift produced by anti-humanist theory and taking it further. More specifically, it consists of taking the decline of the dominant vision of the subject as an opportunity to create positive alternatives to this limited and exclusive notion, and to work towards a more sustainable relationship between the self and the other (Braidotti 2013, 54).

Critical posthuman feminism aims to de-construct Humanism's dialectical approach to otherness and argues that self-other relationships are far more complex, interrelated and multiple than this approach asserts. In Braidotti's words:

[P]ost-humanist feminist philosophers do not unquestionably rely on the notion of "difference," as the dialectical motor of social change. They rather add more complexity to this debate by analyzing the ways in which "otherness" and "sameness" interact in an asymmetrical set of power relations (Braidotti in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 22-23).

In rejecting a dialectical notion of difference the critical posthumanist approach to subjectivity is both more ontologically accurate and more ethically responsible than a Humanist one: it more adequately describes the complexity and multiplicity of human subjectivities, and it works to empower previously subjugated others. Braidotti argues that the 'post-humanistic acceptance of hybridization,' or the intermingling of the self and the other, is an attempt to disengage the notion of difference from its hegemonic and negative implications (Braidotti 2006, 170). Rather than the negative inversion of the self, the other is seen as a positive, creative and productive force. As such the deconstruction of Humanism's dialectical self-other relation and its consequent decline of the dominant vision of the subject means that "the structural others of the modern humanistic subject re-emerge with a vengeance in postmodernity" (Braidotti 2013, 37).

1.3 Post-humanism via post-anthropocentrism: deconstructing individualism

One crucial aspect of what it means to be human, according to the Humanist doctrine, is the quality of autonomy. Braidotti argues that the Humanist doctrine constituted "the core of a liberal individualistic view of the subject, which defined perfectibility in terms of autonomy and self-determination" (Braidotti 2013, 23). If perfectibility is defined in terms of autonomy and self-determination, then the progress of the human species depends on the effort to make them more autonomous and self-sufficient. This notion of progress produces an individualistic view of the subject, because it consist of cutting the human self off from its structural others. As such the autonomous subject of Man posits an *ontological split* between the human self and his structural others, including the naturalized or earth others. Rather than exploring the ways in which the human body is entangled with its environment and the entities in it, the Humanist doctrine constructs a human subject by categorically separating it from these supposedly external entities, which are excluded from subjectivity and devalued as nonhuman others.

The notion that the human subject is an autonomous being constructs a categorial distinction and a fundamental power difference between the realms of nature and culture and human and nonhuman, in the sense that the human subject is posed as the central actor in the universe, whose “manifest destiny is to dominate and control nature” (Hayles 1999, 288 in Braidotti 2013, 101). As such, I understand anthropocentrism to be one of the major ‘effects’ of the Humanist notion of the subject of Man.¹⁵ The term ‘anthropocentrism’ refers to both the belief that human beings are the most central or most significant entities in the universe, and the act of interpreting or regarding the world only in terms of human values and experiences (Mirriam-Webster 2016). Braidotti argues that the key to undoing the logic of anthropocentrism and creating a more complex and interrelational notion of the human self and the earth other is to remove ‘the obstacle of self-centered individualism’ (Braidotti 2015, 49-50). In chapter 3 I will argue how the video *Remains of the Green Hill* expresses a complex and interrelational notion of the human self and the earth other by rejecting self-centered individualism. I will argue how this video closely situates its human subject within her environment, and as such expresses an enlarged sense of inter-connection between the human self and the earth other.

I mentioned before that Braidotti outlines four categories of devalued others that come back with a vengeance after the anti-humanist deconstruction of the subject of Man. Two of them consist of de-humanized human others, or subjects that are part of the human species but are marginalized in this category: the sexualized and racialized others. Two of them consist of nonhuman others, or subjects that do not belong to the human species: naturalized and technological others. The resurgence of this latter group of others that are distinctly nonhuman (such as animals, insects, plants, the planet and machines) produced an important shift from anti-humanist critiques to post-humanist and *post-anthropocentric* criticisms. A newfound focus on previously neglected human subjects such as women, non-white and non-heterosexual subjects showed that human subjectivity includes more than only the male, white, heterosexual subject. This produced an expansion of the notion of the human, but did not challenge the ontological split between human subject and its nonhuman (organic and inorganic) environment. A focus on distinctly nonhuman subjects such as animals, machines and the planet, and their role in the construction of human subjectivity, produced an important power shift in deconstructing the power of the ‘anthropos’ and re-distributing agency more equally among human and nonhuman subjects. Or, as Braidotti put it: “[I]f the crisis of

¹⁵ It is hard to establish whether the ideology of anthropocentrism is an effect or a cause of the humanist notion of the subject of Man. I believe that there is no point in trying to find a starting point or causal logic in this, as that would be ontologically reducing a complex and multiple process to a linear logic.

Humanism inaugurates the posthuman by empowering the sexualized and racialized human ‘others’ to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master–slave relations, the crisis of *anthropos* relinquishes the demonic forces of the naturalized others” (Braidotti 2013, 66).

1.4 Conclusion

I started this chapter with a quote by Marilyn Strathern stating that it matters which categories you use to think other categories with. In this chapter I took the time and space to elaborate on Braidotti’s notion of the nomadic subject, because that is the category I use in this thesis to think through the category of the human subject. It is my theoretical lens, the perspective from which I enter into the discussion on subjectivity. This chapter mapped out the dialectic approach to subjectivity of the humanist Enlightenment doctrine and the deconstruction of this logic through anti-humanist and posthumanist critiques of the dominant vision of the subject. With the deconstruction of the dialectical self-other relation, the previously devalued other came to inhabit a strategic position and turned out to be a powerful tool with which to re-compose the exclusive Humanist notion of the subject of Man towards a more inclusive, complex and nomadic posthuman subject. Braidotti refers to this change of perspective that constitutes a positive re-appraisal of the previously devalued other as the process of ‘becoming-nomadic,’ and it works to re-compose the coordinates of subjectivity in an affirmative way (Braidotti 2014, 6).

Braidotti’s nomadic subject expresses a posthuman understanding of the subject that is “released from the burden of dialectics” (Braidotti 2014, 8). It is telling that Braidotti uses these exact words. In this chapter I explained how the dialectical approach to subjectivity arbitrarily constructs an other based on a partial and limited notion of what makes a subject human (i.e. the qualities of being rational, secular, autonomous and implicitly male, white, Western) and how this logic perpetually locks the other into an inferior and outside position. To the others that it constructs as non-human and less-than-human, a dialectical logic then indeed is a major burden. And, as the notion of humanity articulated by this approach is extremely limited, this category of dehumanized others covers the vast majority of (human and nonhuman) subjects on this earth. My logical conclusion, then, is that we need a change of perspective. As I have argued throughout this chapter, Braidotti’s nomadic posthuman theory offers this much needed other perspective.

2. Strangely effective: *Remains of the Green Hill* as a thinking tool

“But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human.” (Braidotti 2013, 100)

In this chapter I perform a close analysis of Otobong Nkanga’s video *Remains of the Green Hill* using the method of compositional interpretation outlined by Gillian Rose in her book *Visual Methodologies* (2001). This analysis forms the basis for my engagement with Nkanga’s artwork as a tool with which to think towards a posthuman, nomadic notion of the subject. I start with a short introduction to the video and the method of analysis I employ to describe its content. My compositional interpretation consists of two parts: a formal analysis that carefully describes what the video looks like based on its subject matter, spatial organization and use of color; and an expressive content analysis that describes the combined effects of the video’s subject matter and mode of representation. My expressive content analysis starts towards the end of this chapter and continues in chapter three. The video’s atypical appropriation of the ‘earth other’ — which appears in the form of the exhausted and abandoned mining site of Green Hill — and the human figure’s way of positioning her body within this space will be the main focus of my analysis. I read Nkanga’s unusual representation of the relationship between body and place as an active effort to ‘de-familiarize’ (Braidotti 2013, 88) the dominant vision of both the human subject and the earth other.

2.1 An introduction to *Remains of the Green Hill*

This summer I saw *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015) in an exhibition space in Rotterdam called ‘Garage’. It featured in an exhibition called ‘Territorial Drift’ along with two of Nkanga’s other works and the works of five other artists. The exhibition was themed around the relationship between place, memory and history, and the works featured in it examined personal and political narratives disclosed in various landscapes (Garage Rotterdam 2015). *Remains of the Green Hill* depicts the ruined landscape of Green Hill in Tsumeb, Namibia. This area once had a high concentration of minerals, crystals and copper, and was looked after by the Ovambo, the largest population group of Namibia that mainly lives in the north of the country (Garage Rotterdam 2015; Wikipedia 2016a). The Ovambo had hand-mined at Green Hill for generations, taking only what they needed. However, after German colonists claimed the land we now call Namibia and re-named it German South West Africa, they began to mine at Green Hill industrially — for their own export

purposes — and quickly exhausted the natural resources once abundant in the area (Kadist Art Foundation 2015). What is left of the Green Hill landscape today is a fenced off crater, which figures as the setting of *Remains of the Green Hill*.¹⁶ The video shows Nkganga standing in front of this crater, singing to it, performing yoga-like movements and balancing stones that emerge from the landscape on top of her head. This imagery of Nkganga performing for the landscape is overlaid with an interview that she conducted with the last Managing Director of the Tsumeb Mine, Andre Neethling (Kadist Art Foundation 2015).

When I first saw this piece it initially caught my attention because it actively engages with a place that is generally deemed useless: an exhausted mining landscape that can no longer fulfill its former (social and economic) function. The fact that Nkanga chose to engage with such an often overlooked or disregarded place made me think of the piece in terms of Braidotti's nomadic theory: as an empowering act that expresses the positive subjectivity of a devalued other and therefore actively encourages the qualitative shift of perspective that she calls 'becoming-nomadic subjects' (Braidotti 2014, 6). Against popular belief Nkanga constructs this place as an object of interest and thus actively reinvests it with power. The fact that Nkanga focuses on a previously devalued other is in itself significant, but the way in which she does so further adds to this piece's expression of a posthumanist notion of subjectivity. The video depicts an atypical relationship between the ruined environment of Green Hill and the human subject in it. A human being singing and performing in and for a ruined landscape is something I had never seen before. In my experience these unusual or strange features of the video most severely impact its capacity to affect

¹⁶ The ruined landscape of Green Hill is a product of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The crater that serves as the setting for *Remains of the Green Hill* was created by Western countries mining in Namibia for decades. The Tsumeb mine was first taken over by the South West Africa Company (a joint venture of British and German shareholders) in 1892. In 1906 the German mining company 'Otavi Minen und Eisenbahn Gesellschaft (OMEG) was founded and it operated until 1940. After that the Tsumeb mine has been controlled by various foreign mining corporations. It only came back under Namibian control in 1998, after the landscape had been largely depleted. The Namibian company Ongopolo Mining and Processing Ltd. bought the mine back from South-African mining giant Goldfields Namibia Ltd. However, Ongopolo Mining went bankrupt in 2006 — strikingly, at a time when copper was enjoying an all time high price of US\$ 7,147 per ton — because it was unable to repay its bank loans. In 2006 the London based company Weatherly International Plc. bought the company out. They however suspended their mining activities in 2008 because copper prices had fallen too low (namibia-1on1.com, S.D.). A lot could be said about the colonial context of the Green Hill area, and the critique on the (neo)colonial exploitation of Green Hill by Western forces that Nkanga's work might communicate. However, since I engage with this video as an expression of a posthumanist relational and embedded subject, and concentrate on its co-constitution of the previously separated human subject and earth other, this is not the focus of my analysis.

me as a viewer.¹⁷ Therefore these will be the main focus of the expressive content analysis that follows later on in this chapter.

In her book *Visual Methodologies* (2001) British geographer Gillian Rose states that there are three sites at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences (Rose 2001, 16). In other words: “[H]ow an image is made, what it looks like, and how it is seen are the three crucial ways in which a visual image becomes culturally meaningful” (Rose 2001, 188). My analysis of *Remains of the Green Hill* focuses on the production of meaning in the image itself. I understand Nkanga’s video as a text to be read, understood or made sense of by an audience and will therefore focus on the process of meaning making that takes place in relation between artwork and audience (myself). I have chosen this approach, first of all, for the practical reason that there is not much information available online about the sites where this piece was displayed, or about the way in which it was made.¹⁸ The most substantial objects of research I have access to are my memory of the piece as it was exhibited at Garage Rotterdam, a still of the video from the exhibition catalogue, and a transcript of the interview with Andre Neethling. Second, and more importantly, I have chosen this approach because I am not so much interested in this video as a piece of art that was made and exhibited in a particular way, but more so as an artistic expression that asks its viewer to think *with* it rather than about it. In other words: a focus on the production of meaning at the site of the image itself best serves my interest in the video as a thinking tool. By first paying close attention to the video’s specific content and mode of representation I can later go on to make sense of how its particular way of locating the body within ruined space urges the viewer to re-think former boundaries between human self and earth other. As such my formal analysis of *Remains of the Green Hill* will be the first step in disclosing how the video manages to enact a posthuman, nomadic notion of the subject.

2.2 A compositional interpretation of *Remains of the Green Hill*

For my formal analysis of *Remains of the Green Hill* I use the method of compositional interpretation as outlined by Rose. I have chosen this particular method because the compositional

¹⁷ I use the term affect in the Deleuzian sense, as the ability to impact someone and cause a change, or to “produce a modification or transformation in the affected body” (Colman 2010, 11).

¹⁸ The information that I did find about the exhibition context and technical production of the piece come from the catalog of the exhibition ‘Territorial Drift’ at Garage Rotterdam and an interview with Otobong Nkanga for ‘ARTtube,’ an online channel with videos on art and design exhibited in museums and exhibition spaces in the Netherlands and Belgium.

modality of an image is generally deemed most important to the image's own effects (Rose 2001, 24). The method of compositional interpretation serves well in describing the formal aspects of an image: it offers a way of looking very carefully at the content and form of images (Rose 2001, 37). *Remains of the Green Hill* is a 5.45 minute long video that consists of one shot only and shows very little movement. As such it could be considered a moving painting or photograph that is accompanied by a sound track. Visually the video resembles the genres of (Western) landscape photography and landscape painting. Even though the specific compositional techniques of *Remains of the Green Hill* are produced through video rather than painting, it produces a similar visual effect and therefore puts this contemporary video in relation to this the traditional medium of landscape painting. In my analysis I therefore compare the compositionality of the video to that of iconic works from these genres. This helps me to better interpret the video, because, as Rose states: "It helps to make sense of the significance of elements of an individual image if you know that some of them recur repeatedly in other images" (Rose 2001, 19).¹⁹ My compositional analysis discusses the following aspects of the video's compositionality: first, its subject matter, or content (What is actually shown in the image? What figures or objects do I see? What objects or incidents are represented?); second, its use of colors (What are the dominant hues used? Are they low or high in saturation and value?); and finally its spatial organization (How are the objects in the image arranged in relation to each other? What kind of lines do I see and how do they direct the eye? What system of perspective is used?) (Rose 2001, 38-45).

Remains of the Green Hill shows a landscape consisting of rock and bushes, in hues of grey and green. There is a huge crater in the rocks. On the front edge of this crater is a woman. Her back is facing the camera. From the gallery catalogue I know that this landscape is the Green Hill area in Tsumeb, Namibia and that the woman in it is artist Otobong Nkanga. The frame of the camera shows the entire crater, as a circular hole looming in front of her. Behind the crater, centrally located at the horizon, is an industrial building. On the right side is a big green bush that covers almost the entire height of the frame. Nkanga's body stands out as the main focus point in the composition because it is centrally located, and because she is the only human figure in an otherwise nonhuman landscape. She is wearing a short, dark purple dress, wide black bracelets on both of her wrists, a watch on her right wrist, and no shoes. The color of her dress is low in value (it is a dark shade of purple), but

¹⁹ The fact that Nkanga is standing with her back towards the audience and is surrounded by a natural landscape, I argue, most firmly places this video within the romantic tradition of landscape painting. I read this compositional choice as a direct reference to Caspar David Friedrich's iconic romantic landscape painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). I will discuss the significance of this intertextual reference in chapter three of this thesis.

high in saturation (the color is rich and intense).²⁰ The color of Nkanga's purple dress and of her brown skin and black hair stand in contrast to the grey and green hues of the landscape: this contrasting use of color also contributes to Nkanga's body standing out within her environment. The video remains relatively static throughout its entire duration. The camera position and angle remains fixed, and the depicted objects also show little movement. The only movements the video shows are the slow movements of Nkanga's body and some stones that emerge from the landscape and land on top of her head.

The video shows Nkanga's entire body and a significant part of the environment. This means that the video was shot from a long distance, or with a long shot. The technique of the long shot positions the viewer at a distance from the scene, and gives them an overview of it. It also puts an emphasis on the environment and places the main object in relation to it. The use of the long distance shot, with the figure prominently located in it, thus suggests that this piece is not about the landscape or about the figure, but about the *relationship between* the two. There are a number of significant lines at work in the image, which function to position the viewer and direct their gaze. In my experience the most prominent lines in the piece are embedded within the landscape. The first line that catches my attention is the straight horizontal line of the horizon. It creates a divide between air and land and forms the ground on which the factory building is located. Another line that catches my attention is the left edge of the crater. It starts out in the foreground of the image, and guides the eye with a circular movement towards the factory in the background (see image 2). In following this line my gaze is directed from Nkanga's body to the rock landscape to the industrial site in the back — connecting body, environment and machine in one swooping glance.

The frame of *Remains of the Green Hill* is organised according to the classical composition of the rule of thirds (see image 1). The rule of thirds is one of the most often used compositional guidelines in the process of making visual images, and it is considered a rule of thumb in landscape photography. It proposes that an image should be imagined as divided into nine equal parts by two equally spaced horizontal lines and two equally spaced vertical lines, and that important compositional elements should be placed along these lines or their intersections (Wikipedia 2016b). In image 1 I overlapped a still of *Remains of the Green Hill* with a rule of thirds grid. It shows how the image is divided horizontally into three layers: a foreground, a middle part and a background. The background consists of the sky and is demarcated by the horizon of the landscape, the middle

²⁰ Rose defines the notion of 'saturation' in visual images, in particularly paintings, as follows: "Saturation refers to the purity of a colour in relation to its appearance in the colour spectrum. Thus saturation is high if a colour is used in a vivid form of its hue, and low if it is nearly neutral" (Rose 2001, 39).

part consists of the crater, and the foreground is the piece of ground in front of the crater that Nkanga is standing on. Nkanga's body is located along the intersection of the lower horizontal line and the right vertical line of the composition and thus emerges as an important element in this image (see image 1).

The frame of the video resembles another classic compositional technique in (Western) landscape painting and photography: the aerial perspective. Rose describes perspective in general as “the method used in Western art to make a two-dimensional image look as if it shows three-dimensional space” (Rose 2001, 40). Like any other system of perspective the aerial perspective is a technique that creates a sense of depth and distance in an image. This technique figures differently in landscape painting and landscape photography, but *Remains of the Green Hill* resembles aspects of this technique as used in both media. In photography an aerial perspective simply means that the picture was taken from above. This can be done from various distances: close up, middle distance, or long distance (Yamashita 2016). *Remains of the Green Hill* was indeed shot from above: I can see the top of Nkganga's head, which means that I am looking down upon her from a slightly elevated angle. In the medium of painting a sense of depth is created through use of color and depiction of detail. When using the aerial perspective painters use less saturated colors, show less details in individual objects, and reduce the contrast between objects and their environment as a means to suggest that the landscape is receding (Rose 2001, 40; Wikipedia 2016c). This use of detail and color is at work in Nkanga's piece. In the foreground I can see little pieces of rock lying on the ground, and I can distinguish individual leaves, flowers and twigs of plants. The colors of the landscape in the foreground and middle ground are high in saturation. The background (the air, the mining factory at the horizon and its surrounding greenery) shows little detail compared to the rest of the image. Its hues of grey (of the air), brown (of the building) and green (of the bushes) are low in saturation compared to the hues of grey (of the rocks), brown (of the earth) and green (of the bushes) in the foreground.

2.3 An expressive content analysis of *Remains of the Green Hill*

An image's expressive content is the combined effect of *what* is shown and *how* it is shown, or “the combined effect of subject matter and visual form” (Taylor 1957, 51-2). An analysis of an image's expressive content tries to evoke the ‘feel’ or affective characteristics of an image (Rose 2001, 46). Interpreting and describing such effects is a highly subjective endeavor. Rose describes it as “a more elusive aspect” of the analysis of the production of meaning in the image itself, which has a “rather uncertain methodological status” but is nonetheless “crucial to this mode of interpretation

and to many others” (Rose 2001, 46). Where my formal compositional analysis served to look carefully at what is depicted in *Remains of the Green Hill* and how it is depicted, my expressive content analysis examines how the combination of that produces a particularly alienating effect. It thus builds upon my compositional interpretation, and adds a more qualitative or interpretative layer to it. My expressive content analysis of *Remains of the Green Hill* starts here and continues in chapter three.

At first instance *Remains of the Green Hill* seems to portray a commonsense world of discrete forms: it is a figurative video that shows a human figure, a natural landscape and a factory building. These objects are arranged together according to familiar and traditional compositional techniques, such as the rule of thirds and the aerial perspective. Initially the objects that are depicted seem recognizable. They are common figures that we know from everyday reality and they appear in their usual form: they are not abstracted or tampered with in any significant measure. However, a significant element of ‘de-familiarization’ is introduced into the scenario as soon as Nkanga starts her performance for the Green Hill crater. In my compositional analysis, I mentioned that the way in which the figure of Nkanga positions herself within her environment is quite strange. She is performing yoga-like movements in front of the crater, singing to it and balancing stones that emerged from the landscape on top of her head. This is not the kind of behavior one would expect in this place. In other words, Nkanga does not follow a conventional script or program of action in her approach to the Green Hill crater. Instead, she takes a critical distance from normative modes of behavior. In depicting such an unfamiliar relationship between body and place, I argue, Nkanga effectively uses the method of ‘de-familiarization’ or ‘dis-identification,’ which Braidotti describes as the best method for deconstructing the dominant subject of Man. Braidotti states:

The post-anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations that had privileged ‘Man’ requires a form of estrangement and a radical repositioning on the part of the subject. The best method to accomplish this is through the strategy of de-familiarization or critical distance from the dominant vision of the subject. Dis-identification involves the loss of familiar habits of thought and representation in order to pave the way for creative alternatives (Braidotti 2013, 88-9).

With *Remains of the Green Hill* Nkanga does not abide to familiar habits of thought and representation when it comes to the way in which she presents the relationship between body and place. The figure of Nkanga does not use her body in a way that is to be expected in the

environment that she is standing in, and as such takes a critical distance from the dominant understanding of how she is supposed to behave as a subject. By experimenting with a different mode of being-in-space, and using her body in a non-normative manner, Nkanga actively de-familiarizes her own body, and by extension also that of the environment that she engages with and the relationship that exists between the two. My argument is that the unusual way in which the figure of Nkanga and the Green Hill crater are represented and put in relation to each other in *Remains of the Green Hill* constructs a scenario in which the two lose their original meaning and are no longer clearly defined as particular objects. In the unusual encounter between body and space, both subjects transform into something else. Chapter three will discuss the new vision of subjectivity, and the new relation between the human subject and earth other that arises with this deconstruction of the dominant vision of the subject.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out to describe the particular mode of representation employed in *Remains of the Green Hill*. My compositional analysis of the video concluded that it has three main objects: the figure of Nkanga, the crater in the rocks and the factory building in the background. In terms of Braidotti's nomadic theory I can signify these objects as a 'human subject' (Nkanga's body), an 'earth other' (the ruined landscape) and a 'technological other' (the factory building). I argued that the video's use of a long shot and its central placement of the human figure of Nkanga suggests that this piece is not about the landscape, nor about the figure, but about the relationship between the two. The line work of the imagery also seems to suggest this: one of the main lines in the image directs the viewer's gaze from Nkanga's body to the rock landscape to the factory building in the background, connecting the human self (Nkanga's body), the earth other (the Green Hill crater) and the technological other (the factory building) in one singular glance. Out of these three objects, Nkanga's body is the object that stands out most within the scene because of the video's use of color (the brown, black and purple color of her figure as contrasted to the grey and green hues of the landscape); because she is prominently located within the image according to the rule of thirds composition; and because she is the only human figure in an otherwise nonhuman landscape.

My expressive content analysis of *Remains of the Green Hill* so far has demonstrated that the video relates to traditional, classical modes of representation on the one hand, while it actively de-familiarizes these on the other hand. The video is figurative, yet abstract. It uses compositional techniques that are conventional within the media of Western landscape painting and photography (the rule of thirds, the aerial perspective) and depicts recognizable objects, but puts them in an

unfamiliar relation to each other. As such, it actively de-familiarizes these objects and creates a weird scenario out of things we (thought we) knew, urging us to reflect upon them. The unusual way in which the figure of Nkanga and the Green Hill crater are represented and put in relation to each other in *Remains of the Green Hill* constructs a scenario in which the two lose their original meaning, and are therefore no longer clearly defined as particular objects. In the next chapter I will engage with the relational, posthuman subject that is reconstructed in their absence.

3. Creative entanglements of body and place in *Remains of the Green Hill*²¹

“What would a geo-centred subject look like?” (Braidotti 2013, 81)

According to Braidotti the challenge of the posthuman condition is to approach the decline of the unitary subject of Man as an opportunity to construct positive alternatives to this limited and exclusive notion of human subjectivity (Braidotti 2013, 54). This chapter marks that moment of reconstruction that, according to Braidotti’s affirmative politics, should follow after the process of deconstruction. I build upon the last chapter in which I introduced the video *Remains of the Green Hill* and discussed the effect of de-familiarization that results from its particular mode of representation. I argued that the strange relationship between body and place in *Remains of the Green Hill* constructs a scenario in which both the figure of Nkanga and the environment of Green Hill lose their familiar meaning and are no longer clearly defined as fixed objects. In this chapter I return to the method of de-familiarization as theorized upon by Braidotti and practiced by Nkanga. Drawing upon Ronald Bogue’s and Claire Colebrook’s accounts of Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the virtual, I read it as a means of activating the virtual or unfulfilled potentialities that are neglected in normative thought and representation, and that are needed in order to produce truly transformative differences. Along these lines, this chapter reads Nkanga’s act of de-familiarization as a productive and affirmative move. I will demonstrate how its deconstruction of meaning is at the same time a construction of alternative meaning. My argument is that video’s particular representation of the human subject and the earth other blurs conventional boundaries of human subjectivity towards a more complex and relational notion of both human and nonhuman subjects. Through a deconstruction of the categorical distinction between human subject and earth other this video produces a ‘human/non-human continuum’ where both construct each other in an open ended, divergent and multiple process of becoming (Braidotti 2013, 79-80).

²¹ In using the notion of creative entanglements I take after Tim Ingold’s paper ‘Bringing Things Back to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials’ (2010). In this paper Ingold conceives of the entities that constitute the world as ‘things’ rather than ‘objects’. This means that he, much like Rosi Braidotti, reads entities as ongoing and relational processes of growth and movement rather than as forms in a fixed state of being. The notion of creative entanglements refers to what he calls the ‘meshwork’ of interwoven lines of growth and movement, along which things come into being and remain in flux through mutually effective encounters (Ingold 2010, 2). The way in which Nkanga tangles two bodies together (her own physical body and the ‘body’ of her environment), indeed brings these two things ‘back to life,’ in the sense that it allows a transformation of both.

3.1 Actualizing virtual differences through de-familiarization

In the previous chapter I have examined the method of de-familiarization at work in the video *Remains of the Green Hill*. I have established that the effect of estrangement that the video produces results from the strange relationship between body and place it depicts. I have discussed how two formerly familiar objects — the figure of Nkanga and the landscape of Green Hill — transform into something other than they were before as they enter into a new and unfamiliar relation to each other. As the relation between these objects changes, the objects themselves also change. They lose their original meaning and no longer appear as fixed objects with a clear function and signification. In this particular interaction *Remains of the Green Hill* demonstrates a productive interplay between the realms of the virtual and the actual. Following Deleuze, Ronald Bogue defines these notions as follows:

The actual consists of the commonsense world of discrete forms, Newtonian space and chronological time. The virtual is a dimension of self-differentiating differences, one that is real without being actual, immanent within the actual without being reducible to it (Bogue 2007, 8).

The actual and the virtual are both real. The difference between the two is that the actual consists of forces that have been realized, while the virtual consists of forces that have not (yet) been realized. Deleuzian feminist Claire Colebrook explains that according to Deleuze ‘life’ as we know it, or the actual world, emanates from the realm of the virtual (Colebrook 2002, 58). Along these lines she describes the virtual as “the univocal plane of past, present and future; the totality of all that is, was and will be” (Colebrook 2002, 1). One could thus think of the virtual as an immense reservoir of potentialities from which the actual world unfolds. As I have argued in the previous chapter, at first instance *Remains of the Green Hill* seems to portray an actual world of commonsense and discrete forms: it is a figurative video that shows a human figure, a natural landscape and a factory building. However, these familiar objects become strange, unfamiliar, unusual, and hard to make sense of as they enter into an unusual interaction. Nkanga actively transforms the actual subjects by disclosing previously unknown, virtual possibilities of interaction.

Despite being everywhere, always immanent within the actual, the virtual is easy to miss. It pops up at unexpected times, in strange or confusing ways. Bogue states that “[t]he virtual eludes our commonsense understanding, but it impinges on us in moments of vertigo when rational

spatiotemporal coordinates are scrambled and a pure “event” emerges” (Bogue 2007, 8). Or: “[O]nly in moments of disequilibrium and disorientation do we sense the virtual in its passage to the actual” (Bogue 2007, 9). In chapter two I discussed how the figure of Nkanga does not follow a conventional or normative mode of behavior in her approach to the Green Hill crater, and as such actively de-familiarizes her own subjectivity, and by consequence also that of her earth other. The effect of confusion this has upon the viewer, and the suspension of meaning or moment of indeterminateness that results from it, can be thought of as such a ‘moment of vertigo’ that results from rational spatiotemporal coordinates being ‘scrambled’. I have only discussed the spatial coordinates that are being disturbed in this video: the weird bodily movements through which Nkanga positions herself within the space of the ruined landscape. There is indeed also a strange and non-linear temporality at work in this piece that produces an alienating effect, but the scope of this thesis does not allow me to go into detail about this.²² I have argued that Nkanga actively and purposefully de-familiarizes two previously known objects by putting them in an unfamiliar relation to each other and as such shows how these objects can become something other than what they currently are. As such, I read Nkanga’s use of the method of de-familiarization as an “experimental activation of the disruptive potential of the virtual” (Bogue 2007, 10). By disrupting normative representations of the body-space relation and creating a moment of disorientation *Remains of the Green Hill* forces the virtual to move towards the surface. As such, I argue, Nkanga’s particular mode of representation expresses what Ronald Bogue refers to as an ‘ethics of willing the virtual’.

Bogue suggests that one does not passively have to wait for the virtual appear. It is possible to take up a pro-active stand and actively provoke the moments of disequilibrium in which the virtual manifests itself. He calls this an ethics of ‘willing the virtual’ or ‘willing the virtual event’ (Bogue 2007, 9). The ethics of willing the virtual is a disposition in which one actively tries to tap into the virtual tendencies that are immanent but elusive within the actual. Bogue describes it as an effort to “will the difference, multiplicity and chance of the virtual and thereby avoid *ressentiment* and affirm the past events that have shaped one’s present” (Bogue 2007, 9). It is a

²² In short: a clash in temporal dimensions takes place in this piece in the relation between imagery and soundtrack of the video. The interview with Andre Neethling that plays in the background is played in real time and expresses a linear and rational notion of progress. This audio is juxtaposed with imagery of Nkanga that is played backwards (we see stones rolling from the ground onto the top of her head) and expresses a radically different interpretation of the landscape than Neethling does. Where “[h]is rhetoric smooths tales of profit and exploitation into progress and discovery” (Kadist 2015), Nkanga seems more attuned to the area’s colonial history and also seems to appreciate this space for something other than its profit-generating capabilities. She actively engages with the space in its current, ‘functionless’ state, whereas the man constantly refers to its lucrative past or the economic opportunities it might offer for the future.

disposition that prefers change over habit, and opts for an active disruption of the reactive and repetitive logic of normative thought and representation. As such, it shows a certain belief in difference as an opportunity for positive transformation of the present.

Deleuze's understanding of the virtual and his understanding of difference are closely related. Following Deleuze, Colebrook argues that we can only transform the present into a truly new future if we consider the virtual or unfulfilled potentialities that are neglected in normative thought and representation (Colebrook 2002, xxx). Along these lines Colebrook argues that the virtual has a productive and *transformative* capacity, because it is the realm from which differences are produced. She states: "Difference should not be thought of as that which relates already distinct points or substances. Difference begins as the production of intensities from virtual tendencies" (Colebrook 2002, xxx). By emphasizing that Deleuze's notion of difference does not describe the relation between two already distinct points, Colebrook points to an element of the Deleuzian understanding of difference that is crucial in Braidotti's nomadic theory. She suggests that truly productive and politically relevant differences — those differences that are "capable of transforming life beyond what it actually *is* to what it might *become*" (Colebrook 2002, xxx) — exist outside the dialectical frame of opposition. This is the notion of difference that post-humanist feminists like Braidotti work with.²³

If difference or otherness emanates from virtual tendencies, then the actual differences one can perceive in the world are traces or indications of virtual potentialities, which remind us that the world could be otherwise. Differences or otherness, then, are expressions of possible, not yet actualized worlds (Bogue 2007, 13). In their capacity as reminders of the possibility of change, differences should be valued for their productive and transformative potential, rather than devalored as pejorative otherness. Along these lines, Braidotti rejects Humanism's regressive and conservative notion of difference as pejoration. Advocating a change of perspective, she constructs a positive and empowering reading of difference by arguing that "[t]he others embody the unfolding of virtual possibilities that point to positive developments and alternatives" (Braidotti 2014, 6).

3.2 New possibilities for life: reconsidering the human in a human/nonhuman continuum

As I have established, a significant empowering effect of willing virtual differences to become manifest is to affirm the possibility of creating something truly new. The ethics of willing the virtual

²³ Remember Braidotti's argument that "post-humanist feminist philosophers do not unquestionably rely on the notion of "difference," as the dialectical motor of social change" (Braidotti in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 22).

shows a belief in difference. It attests to a refusal to fall back upon familiar habits of thought and representation and reduce the world to its current form. Transposing this ethic to a posthumanist framework, I read it as a pro-active and affirmative approach in which one tries to find new possibilities for life through an exploration of the virtual differences that are immanent in the real. In *Remains of the Green Hill* Nkanga activates the transformative capacity of the virtual through her use of the method of de-familiarization. The strange relationship between body and place depicted in the video produces a disruption of meaning that renders the two objects undefined, open, unfixed. As such, I argue, Nkanga's use of the strategy of de-familiarization produces a "plane of immanence in which I and other are no longer fixed entities, but instead residual points of emergence" (Bogue 2007, 13). It creates a kind of egalitarian plane, or level playing field, where the self and the other are no longer fixed entities. If the self and the other no longer appear as fixed entities, then the limited and exclusive hierarchy of the dualist self-other relationship does not persist either. In other words: in *Remains of the Green Hill* the human self and the nonhuman earth other do not exist. This apparent absence of an autonomous human self and a separate earth other goes hand in hand with the composition of an alternative mode of subjectivity. As I will argue next, Nkanga's deconstruction of the Humanist, autonomous and individual subject means a reconstruction of a posthumanistic 'human/non-human continuum' (Braidotti 2013, 79-80).

Remains of the Green Hill produces a human/non-human continuum, or expresses an enlarged sense of inter-connection between the human self and the earth other, in the sense that its human protagonist does not appear as an individual and autonomous entity that exists separately from her environment. During the entire length of the video Nkanga is standing in front of the crater, facing towards it. I read Nkanga's choice to position her main figure with her back towards the viewer as a rather de-individual mode of depicting a human figure, because I do not see the figure's face and cannot directly make out emotions or facial expressions. I can only see that she is facing the landscape in front of her, and therefore my attention is also guided in that direction. The figure's focus is completely fixed on this place for the entire 5.45 minutes. As a result, the close

relationship between the figure of Nkanga and the ruined landscape emerges as the central theme in this video.²⁴

The fact that Nkanga is standing with her back towards the viewer is significant a second reason. Through the use of the compositional technique of the ‘Rückenfigur,’ the figure of Nkanga is constructed as a point of reference, or a kind of mediator between the audience and the landscape she is standing in. This technique is most famously employed in Caspar David Friedrich’s romantic landscape painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) (see image 4). American art historian Joseph Leo Koerner argues that by using the Rückenfigur Friedrich invites the viewer to imagine themselves in the depicted landscape and experience the ‘sublime potential of nature’ along with the main figure (Koerner 1990, 163). The Rückenfigur thus mediates the setting for the viewer. He invites the audience to identify with him and look at the depicted scene from his perspective (Palmer 2011). As such, this compositional device gives the viewer an active role in the image’s production of meaning. I argue that the use of the Rückenfigur in *Remains of the Green Hill* serves a similar goal as in Friedrich’s Romantic painting: to demand the viewer’s participation and direct their gaze towards the landscape. However, the *effect* of Nkanga’s Rückenfigur is significantly different from that of Friedrich’s. That is because *she* (rather than *he*) is framed in a different manner, and as a result seems to inhabit her environment in a significantly less dominating way than the figure of Friedrich does.

Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog depicts a lonely traveler who is gazing at a landscape before him, enchanted by the ‘sublime potential of nature,’ as Koerner argued. In his act of gazing upon the landscape, Friedrich’s figure seems quite detached from the scene he is beholding. He is standing on top of a mountain, gazing over a valley of rocks and some mountains on the horizon. He is clearly positioned in the foreground of the composition, and inhabits a different realm than the landscape he is watching. The figure takes up a central position in the foreground of the composition, and covers a large section of the image. He is positioned before the landscape and elevated above it, looking down upon it from a distance. In this scenario, there is a clear distinction between an active subject (the human figure who is looking) and a passive object (the landscape that is the object of

²⁴ Because I read the Rückenfigur of Nkanga as such a de-individual figure, and because I conceive of the intimate relation between this figure and her environment as the main theme of this video, I have left unaddressed certain issues of identity politics about Nkanga as a black person and did not engage with this piece from a postcolonial perspective, even though these are important aspects to this work as well. It was not my intention to leave issues of race and post-colonialism unaddressed necessarily, but since I engage with this work as one that expresses a posthumanist relationality between the (former) human subject and earth other, it was simply not the focus of my thesis.

the gaze). This is quite different in *Remains of the Green Hill*. Contrary to Friedrich's figure, who is comfortably leaning on his walking stick, Nkanga is standing on one leg, performing a balancing act. Unlike Friedrich's Rückenfigur, she engages with her environment in a relational manner. She does not dominate over the landscape, but is physically embedded within it. In Nkanga's work the landscape does not assume a passive role as the object of her gaze. It takes on an active role and seems to, in a way, communicate back to the figure of Nkanga, as it launches stones towards her. These stones land on top of Nkanga's head and stay there throughout the video, literally turning part of the landscape into an extension of Nkanga's body.²⁵ This is also reflected in the framing of the video. Her body takes up a significantly smaller section of the overall image, as the video is shot in a wide angle and thus shows a large part of the figure's surroundings. She is also positioned below the horizon of the landscape rather than towering above it, and she is placed further from the viewer, deeper within the landscape itself. As a result, the landscape seems to envelop her on every side. This composition places the human figure *within* the landscape, rather than in front or above it.

Nkanga herself also describes the intimate relationship between human subjects and nature as a central theme in her work. In an online interview for arts and literature magazine *The White Review* she states:

Everything we have, own or possess derives from the earth, even though it might have been transformed by artificial means. We are a species that is constantly adapting to circumstances and the places in which we live, but at the same time, we cannot disassociate ourselves from nature. We get floods, thunderstorms, heat waves, and *these forces remind us that we live in nature* (Nkanga in Elderton 2014, emphasis added).

What Nkanga says here resonates with Braidotti's posthumanist theory, which engages with the Anthropocene condition in an affirmative mode. Braidotti argues:

In the age of anthropocene, the phenomenon known as 'geo-morphism' is usually expressed in negative terms, as environmental crisis, climate change and ecological sustainability. Yet,

²⁵ Other works of Nkanga also picture the merging of bodies and landscapes, and the way in which human bodies depend on and are co-constructed through the use (or abuse) of natural resources. An example of this is her tapestry work called 'The Transformation,' which depicts two human or anthropomorphic bodies that transform into a construction of rocks and minerals (see image 5).

there is also a more positive dimension to it in the sense of *reconfiguring the relationship to our complex habitat, which we used to call 'nature'* (Braidotti 2013, 81).

The Anthropocene condition, or the “age when the earth’s ecological balance is directly regulated by humanity” is often approached in what Braidotti calls a negative or reactionary way that confirms old Humanist ideals (Braidotti 2013, 79). Deep ecology, for example, suggests that the earth or the environment deserves the same ethical and political consideration as humans, because as ‘we’ humans are part of nature, to hurt nature is to hurt ourselves. As such, this position advocates a humanization of the environment. It is a mode of re-instating normative notions of the human, only this notion is now also applied to non-human planetary agents (Braidotti 2013, 86). Braidotti’s critical posthumanism opposes this negative or reactionary mode of recomposing a bond between the human and the nonhuman, because it does not get at the root of the problem. Braidotti argues that, if we want to recompose a new human, we have to be mindful of the fact the term ‘human’ is not a neutral term, and that “declaring some categories human and others not is a way of indexing access to privileges and entitlements” (Braidotti 2015). To extend the notion of human to include the environment, then, is merely to extend the privileges and entitlements that only the anthropomorphic human subject enjoyed before to its nonhuman environmental counterpart. It does not get rid of the limited and exclusive notion of human subjectivity and the unequal distribution of power indexed on it (Braidotti 2013, 50). Rather than constructing an enlarged human community in the face of common threats, Braidotti takes the anthropocene condition as an opportunity to deconstruct the human of Humanism. What comes to the fore after this fundamental post-anthropocentric deconstruction of the normative Humanist subject is a subject that exists in a nature/culture continuum. In a similar vein Nkanga reads natural disasters like floods, thunderstorms and heat waves as an indication that ‘we’ are part of nature, thus constructing a new ‘we’ that is essentially relational and tied up with its natural environment. Like Braidotti, she approaches the anthropocene condition in an affirmative way, as an opportunity to deconstruct the Humanist nature/culture divide and reconstitute a geo-centered subject.

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have engaged with Nkanga’s use of the method of de-familiarization as a productive and affirmative move, in the sense that it does not only constitute a deconstruction of a former self, but also a reconstruction of a new self. I have argued that the unusual way in which the figure of Nkanga and the Green Hill crater are represented and put in relation to each other in

Remains of the Green Hill constructs a scenario in which the two are no longer clearly defined as particular objects that exist in dialectical opposition to each other. In other words, Nkanga's use of the method of de-familiarization results in a scenario in which the human self and the nonhuman other no longer exist. In the intimate relation between body and place depicted in the video the categorical distinction between the human subject and the nonhuman environment is deconstructed. What comes to the fore instead is an egalitarian plane of immanence that I, after Braidotti, called a human/non-human continuum. By comparing the depiction of the subject in *Remains of the Green Hill* to the depiction of the human subject in Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, I argued that the figure of Nkanga does not seem to inhabit an autonomous subject position separately from her environment. She is a post-individualistic subject that actively aims to reconfigure her relationship to her nonhuman environment, and she does so through an intimate and experiential engagement with it.

Conclusion: on the performance of posthuman subjectivity in *Remains of the Green Hill*

"Now we are concerned, not with a relation of point to counterpoint, nor with the selection of a world, but with a symphony of Nature, the composition of a world that is increasingly wide and intense." (Deleuze 1988, 126)

I have started this thesis with an examination of the Humanist subject of Man and his structural others, highlighting a number of important characteristics of this subject position and discussing the way in which it is constructed. First of all, the subject of Man is a *transcendental* subject position. It is posed as a universally true and general standard of what it means to be human. This is problematic, because it does not account for the partial (Western, European, secular, anthropocentric, and implicitly white, male, rational, heterosexual, etc.) perspective that this subject in fact expresses. Secondly, the Humanist process of subject formation is based on a dialectical construction of the self and the other. The human self and the nonhuman other are posed as separate entities that are each other's dialectical opposites. Thirdly, this dialectical logic of self and other is structured by a notion of difference as pejoration: if an entity is different from the dominant subject of Man it is not only constructed as nonhuman, it is also valued less than the dominant subject (Braidotti 2013, 15; Braidotti 2014, 1). Humanism's unitary notion of the subject is thus posited on a structural exclusion of all differences, which are cast aside to the category of 'other'. Anti-humanist thinkers, such as Michel Foucault and Luce Irigaray, questioned the basic tenets of the Humanist doctrine. They deconstructed Humanism's dialectical logic of the self-other relation by arguing that the structural others of the dominant subject of Man are necessary to his self-representation. As such they revealed the constitutive role of the structural others in the dominant subject position and thus invested these previously devalued others with agency. Braidotti's posthumanist project builds upon an anti-humanist legacy, and moves further than that. It is informed by anti-humanist efforts in the sense that it too abandons Humanism's dialectical logic of difference and sameness, its notion of difference as pejoration, and its unitary vision of the subject. However, it moves further than that in the sense that it takes the anti-humanist deconstruction of Man as an opportunity to create positive alternatives to this dominant subject position (Braidotti 2013, 54).

Braidotti's posthuman nomadic theory proposes a reformulation of the Humanist idea of Man. Rather than conceiving of the subject as an autonomous and individual entity that exists separately from his structural others, she conceives of the subject as an entity that includes the

human and the (previously) non-human sexualized, racialized, naturalized and technological others. She argues that “we need to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole” (Braidotti 2013, 82). As such Braidotti’s nomadic subject is a posthumanist hybrid or co-construction of both human and nonhuman forces. In chapter one I have examined how Braidotti’s posthuman nomadic theory deconstructs the anthropocentric and transcendental quality of the Humanist subject of Man and its dialectical logic of subject formation, by disclosing the constitutive role that the structural others play in the construction of the normative self. Chapters two and three have discussed the performance of posthuman subjectivity in Otobong Nkanga’s video *Remains of the Green Hill*, and have located this in the intimate and codependent relation between the human subject and the nonhuman environment it depicts. I have read this work as a visualization of a posthuman hybrid subject that is composed of both human and nonhuman elements, locating this quality of the video particularly in its depiction of an intimate relationship between body and place.

My main point in discussing the Humanist process of subject formation and the anti-humanist critiques it generated has been to show how the Humanist process of subject formation artificially constructs a unitary human subject by categorically separating him from his environment and the entities in it. In other words: the autonomous subject of Man posits an ontological split between the human self and his structural others, including the naturalized or earth others. I argue that *Remains of the Green Hill* performs a posthumanist understanding of the subject in the sense that it does not reproduce Humanism’s ontological split between the human self and the earth other, and actively seems to mend it. The first step in the video’s construction of a posthuman notion of the subject that I have discussed is a deconstructive move. In chapters two and three I have argued that Nkanga effectively uses the method of ‘de-familiarization’ or ‘dis-identification’ — which Braidotti describes as the best method for deconstructing the dominant subject of Man — by depicting a radically unfamiliar or different relationship between body and place. The strange and unexpected way in which the figure of Nkanga behaves within the landscape of Green Hill disrupts a conventional interpretation of these subjects. It actively de-familiarizes both subjects and renders them undefined, unfixed. It creates a situation in which they no longer appear as fixed entities. As a consequence, the limited and exclusive hierarchy of the dualist self-other relationship ceases to exist.

In chapter three I approached Nkanga’s de-familiarization of the human subject and the earth other not in terms of a deconstructive move, but rather in terms of the reconstruction of an alternative and radically relational notion of human and nonhuman subjectivity. I have argued that

the video expresses an enlarged sense of inter-connection between the human self and the earth other, and produces a human/non-human continuum in which the human subject does not function as autonomous entity that exists separately from her environment. During the entire length of the video the figure of Nkanga is facing the crater, engaging with her environment in an intimate and relational manner by singing and performing for it. The landscape is not a mere setting or scenery: it does not assume a passive role as the object of Nkanga's gaze. It rather takes on an active role and communicates back to her, launching stones towards her body. These stones land on top of Nkanga's head and stay there throughout the video. As such, part of the landscape literally turns into an extension of Nkanga's body.

The compositional techniques with which the figure of Nkanga is framed also constitute an intimate relationship between the human subject and her environment. I have demonstrated this by comparing the Nkanga's Rückenfigur with Caspar David Friedrich's Rückenfigur in his famous painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. Friedrich's figure is positioned in the foreground of the composition, physically removed from the landscape he is beholding. This painting shows a clear distinction between an active subject (the human figure who is looking) and a passive object (the landscape that is the object of the gaze). Nkanga's body takes up a significantly smaller section of the overall image, as the video is shot in a wide angle and thus shows a large part of her surroundings. She is positioned below the horizon of the landscape rather than towering above it, and is placed further from the viewer, deeper within the landscape itself. As a result, the landscape seems to envelop her on every side. Along these lines I have argued that Nkanga's composition firmly embeds the human figure *within* her environment.

Remains of the Green Hill performs a posthumanist notion of subjectivity in the post-anthropocentric mode. It constitutes a move away from Humanist individualism, emphasizing that the human subject is not an autonomous being, but is embedded in a wider constellation of life forms that include nonhumans and the earth as a whole. Through the lens of Braidotti's posthuman nomadic theory I have examined the relationship between the anthropocentric and the liberal individualistic character of the Humanist subject of Man. I have argued that the key to undoing the logic of anthropocentrism and creating a larger sense of inter-connection between the human self and the earth other is to remove "the obstacle of self-centered individualism" (Braidotti 2013, 49-50). Through a compositional and expressive content analysis of *Remains of the Green Hill*, I have argued that the video achieves this by deconstructing the ontological split between the human subject and the earth other. It constructs an affirmative bond between these two previously segregated realms, locating the subject "in the flow of relations with multiple others" (Braidotti

2013, 50). By bringing the human subject and the earth other back together, it emphasizes that spatial environment is foundational to the constitution of subjectivity: it highlights the geological dimension of human subjectivity, and as such exceeds the boundaries of the anthropocentric and autonomous Humanist subject of Man (Braidotti 2013, 89). As such, I read this video as a posthumanist project that “actualize[s] the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature-culture continuum” (Braidotti 2013, 61).

Of course, this is not the only possible interpretation of Nkanga’s artwork. Due to issues of scope I have not been able to read her work in a postcolonial context. Further research on this artwork could explicate on its specific location’s sociopolitical history and present. Such readings would focus on the video’s setting, and its specific relationship to (neo)colonial history, possibly reading Nkanga’s performance for the ruined landscape of Green Hill as an act of ‘healing’ in the context of exploitative imperialist practices. Nkanga herself has already hinted at such an interpretation: “Once in front of the Green Hill, I just decided to sing for it — like a kind of singing process to heal the space” (Nkanga in ARTtube 2015). It has never been my intention to disregard a postcolonial approach in my examination; much rather, I have tried to examine this work outside of the sometimes constrictive notions surrounding identity politics. Instead of reading this piece as one that expresses criticism by a postcolonial subject on exploitative imperialist practices — it engages with a landscape that has been exhausted by European mining industries — I have read this piece as one that criticizes more abstract Humanist notions of subjectivity. This critical reading of European Humanism is (implicitly) in agreement with postcolonial critique, and fundamentally challenges the limited and exclusive Eurocentric Humanist notion of what it means to be human. Due to this detour I have arrived at an argument that can stand on its own as well as complement postcolonial readings of Nkanga’s work. As a result, this thesis can strengthen an understanding of the complexity of Nkanga’s art, and, with additional research, could quite possibly also bring together posthuman and postcolonial perspectives — allowing for them to positively complement each other.

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Appendix: images



IMAGE 1: RULE OF THIRDS IN REMAINS OF THE GREEN HILL (2015)



IMAGE 2: LINES IN 'REMAINS OF THE GREEN HILL' (2015)



IMAGE 3: RÜCKENFIGUR IN 'REMAINS OF THE GREEN HILL' (2015)



IMAGE 4: RÜCKENFIGUR IN CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH'S 'WANDERER ABOVE THE SEA OF FOG' (1818)



IMAGE 5: OTOBONG NKANGA - THE TRANSFORMATION (2014) 180 X 182 CM, TAPESTRY, COURTESY THE EKARD COLLECTION