

The Continuum Companion to Continental Philosophy

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Feminist Philosophy

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In spite of regular reports about the end of feminism as a social movement, at the start of the third millennium feminist philosophy is going through an astonishing period of renewal and growth. The diversification and expansion of feminist philosophies, fuelled by a brand new generation of post-postfeminists, is both supported by and productive of a significant growth of institutional practices, some of which happen outside the strict confines of academic philosophy, mostly in new trans-disciplinary areas like gender, race and postcolonial studies, social theories of globalization and migration, and philosophies of new media and biotechnology. This theoretical vitality raises a range of methodological questions about the uses and the limitations of interdisciplinarity in feminist philosophy and more specifically about the criteria of classification, the use of analytic categories and the canonization processes. As a result, the need for a systematic meta-discursive approach to the inter-disciplinary methods of feminist philosophy is among the top priorities for philosophy today (Alcoff, 2000) as well as women's, gender and feminist studies as an established discipline (Wiegman, 2002). If it is the case that what was once subversive is now mainstream, it follows that the challenge for feminist philosophers today is how to achieve more conceptual creativity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991).

In a globally connected and technologically mediated world that is marked by fast changes, structural inequalities and increased militarization, feminist scholarship has intensified theoretical and methodological efforts to come to grips with the complexities of the present, while resisting the moral and cognitive panic that marks so much of contemporary social theories of globalization (Fukuyama, 2002; Habermas, 2003). With the demise of postmodernism, which has gone down in history as a form of radical scepticism and moral and cognitive relativism, feminist philosophers tend to move beyond the linguistic mediation paradigm of deconstructive theory and to work instead towards the production of robust alternatives. Issues of embodiment and accountability, positionality and location have become both more relevant and more diverse. My main argument in this essay is that feminist philosophy is currently finding a new course between post-humanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentric theories on the other. The convergence between

these two approaches, multiplied across the many interdisciplinary lines that structure feminist theory, ends up radicalizing the very premises of feminist philosophy. It especially results in a reconsideration of the priority of sexuality and the relevance of the sex/gender distinction. I will analyze the different aspects of this convergence and attempt to work out some of its implications.

The Legacy of Feminist Post-Humanism

As starting premises, let me add a few remarks: feminist philosophy builds on the embodied and embedded brand of materialism that was pioneered in the last century by Simone de Beauvoir. It combines, in a complex and groundbreaking manner, phenomenological theory of embodiment with Marxist – and later on poststructuralist – re-elaborations of the intersection between bodies and power. This rich legacy has two long-lasting theoretical consequences. The first is that feminist philosophy goes even further than mainstream continental philosophy in rejecting dualistic partitions of minds from bodies or nature from culture. Whereas the chasm between the binary oppositions is bridged by Anglo-American gender theorists through dynamic schemes of social constructivism (Butler and Scott, 1992), continental feminist perspectives move towards either theories of sexual difference or a monistic political ontology that makes the sex/gender distinction redundant. I shall return later to this crucial aspect of my argument.

The second consequence of this specific brand of materialism is that oppositional consciousness combines critique with creativity, in a 'double-edged vision' (Kelly, 1979) that does not stop at critical deconstruction but moves on to the active production of alternatives. Thus, feminist philosophers have introduced a new brand of materialism, of the embodied and embedded kind. The cornerstone of this theoretical innovation is a specific brand of situated epistemology (Haraway, 1988), which evolves from the practice of 'the politics of locations' (Rich, 1985) and infuses standpoint feminist theory and the debates with postmodern feminism (Harding, 1991) throughout the 1990s.

As a meta-methodological innovation, the embodied and embedded brand of feminist materialist philosophy of the subject introduces a break with both universalism and dualism. As to the former, universalist claims to a subject position that allegedly transcends spatiotemporal and geopolitical specificities are criticized as being disembodied and disembedded, i.e., abstract. Universalism, best exemplified in the notion of 'abstract masculinity' (Hartsock, 1987) and triumphant whiteness (Ware, 1992) is objectionable not only on epistemological, but also on ethical grounds. Situated perspectives lay the pre-conditions for ethical accountability for one's own implications with the very structures one is analyzing and opposing politically. The key

concept in feminist materialism is the sexualized nature and the radical immanence of power relations and their effects upon the world. In this Foucauldian perspective, power is not only negative or confining (*potestas*), but also affirmative (*potentia*) or productive of alternative subject positions and social relations.

Feminist anti-humanism, also known as postmodernist feminism, critiqued from within the unitary identities indexed on phallogocentric, Eurocentric and normative standardized views of what constitutes the humanist ideal of 'Man'. Feminist anti-humanism resonates with analogous but other(wise) situated postcolonial and race perspectives, which critique humanism or its racist connotations and racialized bias, and oppose to the biased Western brand many other cultural and ethnic traditions of non-Western humanism (Hill Collins, 1991; Shiva, 1997; Gilroy, 2000). This alliance between Western post-humanist and non-Western anti-humanist positions converges on the impossibility of speaking in one unified voice about women and other marginal subjects, thus stressing issues of diversity and differences among them. The pivotal notion in poststructuralist thought is the relationship between self and other. The notion of 'otherness' functions through dualistic oppositions that confirm the dominant vision of 'sameness' by positing sub-categories of difference and distributing them along asymmetrical power relations. In other words, the dominant apparatus of subjectivity is organized along a hierarchical scale that rewards the sovereign subject as the zero-degree of difference. Deleuze calls it 'the Majority subject' or the Molar centre of being (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). Irigaray calls it 'the Same', or the hyper-inflated, falsely universal 'He' (Irigaray, 1974; 1977), whereas Hill Collins calls to account the white and Eurocentric bias of the subject of humanistic knowledge.

Furthermore, in European philosophy, this 'difference' has been predicated on relations of domination and exclusion: to be 'different from' came to mean to be 'less than'. In the dialectical scheme of thought, difference or otherness is a constitutive axis which marks off the sexualized other (woman), the racialized other (the native) and the naturalized other (animals, the environment or earth). These others, however, are constitutive in that they are expected to confirm the same in His superior position and thus they are crucial to the assertion of the power of sameness.

The fact that the dominant axes of definition of the humanistic subject of knowledge contribute to defining the axes of difference or of otherness has another important implication. They engender simultaneously the processes of sexualization, racialization and naturalization of those who are marginalized or excluded but also the active production of half-truths or forms of partial knowledge about these others. Dialectical and pejorative otherness induces structural ignorance about the others who, by being others, are posited as the outside of major categorical divides in the attribution of subjectivity.

Power produces through exclusion: the others are included in this script as the necessary outside of the dominant vision of what it means to be human. Their reduction to sub-human status is a constitutive source of ignorance and falsity and bad consciousness for the dominant subject who is responsible for their de-humanization.

Post-humanist feminist epistemologies proposed radical new ways to look at the 'human' from a more inclusive and diverse angle. As a result, the dominant vision of the subject in politics, law and science is abandoned in favour of renewed attention to complexities and inner contradictions. Feminist anti-humanist philosophies are committed both to a radical politics of resistance and to the critique of the simultaneity of potentially contradictory social and textual effects (Braidotti, 1994). This simultaneity is not to be confused with easy parallels or arguments by analogy. That gender, race, class and sexual choice may be equally effective power variables does not amount to flattening out any differences between them (Crenshaw, 1995). By extension, the claim to universality by scientific rationality is challenged on both epistemological and political grounds (Spivak, 1988), all knowledge claims being expressions of Western culture and of its drive to mastery.

Throughout the 1990s, the recognition of the normative structure of science and of the partiality of scientific statements, as well as the rejection of universalism and the recognition of the necessarily contingent nature of all utterances, involved two polemics which retrospectively appear symptomatic of great anxiety. One concerned essentialism and the other, relativism. One of the worst lasting effects of the politically conservative backlash of that period was that the affirmative and progressive potential of feminist critiques of the dominant subject position were reduced to and dismissed as being merely relativistic. What I value in those radical feminist positions is precisely the extent to which they allow for a productive critique of falsely universal pretensions. As a consequence, they enact the desire to pluralize the options, paradigms and practices of subjectivity within Western philosophical reason. The recognition of the necessarily situated and hence partial and contingent nature of our utterances and discursive practices has nothing to do with relativism and all to do with accountability, or situated perspectives.

For example, whereas the deconstruction of masculinity and whiteness is an end in itself, the non-essentialist reconstruction of black perspectives, as well as the feminist reconstruction of multiple ways of being women, also has new alternatives to offer. In other words, some notions need to be deconstructed so as to be laid to rest once and for all: masculinity, whiteness, heterosexism, classism, ageism. Others need to be deconstructed only as a prelude to offering positive new values and effective ways of asserting the political presence of newly empowered subjects: feminism, diversity, multiculturalism, environmentalism. All claims to authenticity need to be

subjected to serious critical enquiry, but not left hanging in some sort of theoretical undecidability, as Butler would have it (Butler, 2004b). The affirmation of robust alternatives is what feminist philosophies of the subject are all about.

Matter-Realist Feminism

The legacy of this classical but neglected philosophical tradition of high post-structuralist anti-humanism sets the backdrop for the shifts currently taking place in the work of a new generation of feminist scholars (Fraser, 2002). A range of positions has emerged that bridge the gap between the classical opposition 'materialism/idealism' and move towards a non-essentialist brand of contemporary vitalism or thought on 'life itself' (Rose, 2001).

This movement of thought gathers the remains of poststructuralist anti-humanism and joins them with feminist reappraisals of contemporary technoculture in a non-deterministic frame (Haraway, 1997; 2003; Hayles, 1999). They converge on discourses about 'life' and living matter/bodies: be it under the guise of political reflections on 'bio-power', or in the form of analyses of science and technology, they bring us back to the organic reality of 'real bodies'. After so much emphasis on the linguistic and cultural turn, an ontology of presence replaces textual deconstruction. This return of a neo-realist practice of bodily materialism is also known as: 'matter-realism', radical neo-materialism or post-human feminism. One of the main reasons to explain these shifts concerns the changing conceptual structure of materialism itself, under the impact of contemporary bio-genetics and information technologies. Feminist scholarship here falls neatly in two interconnected areas: new feminist science studies and epistemology on the one hand and political critiques of globalization and its economic and military violence on the other. They converge on the notion that what matters about materialism today is the concept of 'matter' itself (Delanda, 2002). The switch to a monistic political ontology stresses processes, vital politics and non-deterministic evolutionary theories (Grosz, 2004; Irigaray, 1992).

For instance, Karen Barad's work on 'agential realism' (Barad, 2003; 2007) stresses the onto-epistemological aspect of feminist knowledge claims today. Barad's agential realism not only builds on but also radically expands the redefinitions of objectivity and embodiment that took place in high feminist poststructuralism and thus also reshapes the forms of ethical and political accountability that rest upon them. By choosing to privilege neither the material nor the cultural, agential realism focuses instead on the process of their interaction. It accordingly redefines the apparatus of bodily production as material-cultural in order to foster the interrogation of the boundaries between them. This results in specifically feminist formulations of critical

reflexivity and a renewed call for the necessity of an ethics of knowing that reflects and respects complexity.

One of Karen Barad's most astute commentators, Iris van der Tuin (2008), claims that this materialistic reconfiguration of the process of interaction between the material and the semiotic, also known as the onto-epistemological shift, constitutes a new paradigm that ends up displacing both its poles of reference. What gets redefined in the process is the process-oriented, relational and fundamentally affective structure of subjectivity and knowledge production. According to van der Tuin, this approach encourages the constitution of a transdisciplinary perspective that combines feminist science studies, postcolonial studies and Deleuzian feminism in a new brand of third-wave feminist materialism.

Luciana Parisi emphasizes (Parisi, 2004) that the great advantage of Spinozist monism is that it defines nature/culture as a continuum that evolves through variations or differentiations. Deleuze and Guattari theorize them in terms of transversal assemblages or transversal lines of interconnection. At the core of the 'chaosmosis' proposed by Guattari lies a mixed semiotics that combines the virtual (indeterminate) and the actual domains. The non-semiotic codes (the DNA or all genetic material) intersect with complex assemblages of affects, embodied practices and other performances that include but are not confined to the linguistic realm. Parisi strengthens this case by cross-referring to the new epistemology of Margulis and Sagan (1995), through the concept of endosymbiosis, which, like autopoiesis, indicates a creative form of evolution. It defines the vitality of matter as an ecology of differentiation, which means that the genetic material is exposed to processes of becoming. This questions any ontological foundation for difference while avoiding social constructivism.

The implications of this argument are twofold: the first point is that difference emerges as pure production of becoming-molecular and that the transitions or stratifications are internal to the single process of formation or of assemblage. They are intensive or affective variations that produce semiotic and a-semiotic practices. This is not just about dismissing semiotics or the linguistic turn, but rather an attempt at using it more rigorously, within the domains of its strict application (Massumi, 2002). It is also important to connect it transversally to other discourses. The second key point is that primacy is given to the relation over the terms. Parisi expresses this in Guattari's language as 'schizogenesis' – or the affective being of the middle, the interconnection, the relation. This is the space-time where the differentiation occurs and with it the modifications. The emphasis falls accordingly on the micropolitics of relations, as a post-humanist ethics that traces transversal connections among material and symbolic, concrete and discursive, lines or forces. Transversality actualizes an ethics based on the primacy of the relation,

of interdependence, which values non-human or a-personal life. This is what I call Zoe itself (Braidotti, 2006).

Feminist theory looks carefully at the dislocation of the dialectical relationships between the traditional axes of difference: sexualization/racialization/naturalization and attempts to come to terms with this challenge. It can also be described as a sort of 'anthropological exodus' from the dominant configurations of the human (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 215) – a colossal hybridization of the species which topples the anthropocentric Human from the sovereign position it has enjoyed for so long. This standard is posited in a universal mode as Man, but this pseudo-universal has been widely criticized (Lloyd, 1985) precisely because of its partiality. Universal Man, in fact, 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. Massumi refers to this phenomenon as 'Ex-Man', 'a genetic matrix embedded in the materiality of the human' and as such undergoing significant mutations: 'species integrity is lost in a bio-chemical mode expressing the mutability of human matter' (Massumi, 1998, p. 60). Haraway puts it most lucidly: 'This is Man the taxonomic type become Man the brand' (1997, p. 74). Post-human times force us to confront the challenges of the post-anthropocentric turn and the different degrees of inhumanity it encompasses. What emerges from the post-humanist convergence with post-anthropocentrism is the vital politics of life, which in turn raises the question of the possible modes of critique of advanced, globalized capitalism.

The bio-genetic structure of advanced capitalism is such that it is not only geno-centric (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 235), but also ruthlessly and structurally unjust. Deleuze and Guattari (1992) analyzed this in terms of capitalism as a conflict between, on the one hand, the rising demands for subjective singularities and, on the other hand, the conservative re-territorialization of desires for the purpose of commercial profit. This achieves the doubly disastrous effect of re-asserting liberal individualism as the unquestionable standard for subject formation, while reducing it to consumerism. Furthermore, as Keith Ansell Pearson argued, some grand narratives have come back into fashion through 'the dynamics of contemporary hyper-colonialist capitalism' (Ansell Pearson, 1997, p. 303). They tend to be deterministic and evolutionary in a naïve and oddly old-fashioned way: 'A new mythology of the machine is emerging and finds expression in current claims that technology is simply the pursuit of life by means other than life' (Ansell Pearson, 1997, p. 202). This simplistic and reductive reading of the transformations currently at work in our global system reveal a conceptual poverty that most critical thinkers have complained about. A hierarchical fantasy of vertical perfectibility, a technologically mediated quest for immortality and for disciplined and acquiescent subjects, has gained widespread currency, which betrays the nomadic potential of

contemporary science (Stengers, 1997). In opposition to this master narrative, which corresponds to what Donna Haraway calls 'the informatics of domination', feminist matter-realist philosophers stress the relevance of materialist, vital and complex philosophies of becoming, as an alternative conceptual framework, in the service of a sustainable future.

The epistemological analysis intersects with the political one: because the self-replicating vitality of living matter is targeted for consumption and commercial exploitation of bio-genetic culture, environmentally-based political struggles have evolved into a new global alliance for sustainable futures. Haraway recognizes this trend and pays tribute to the martyred body of onco-mouse (Haraway, 1997) as the farming ground for the new genetic revolution and manufacturer of spare parts for other species.

Vandana Shiva (1997) stresses the extent to which the bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others) have become the disposable bodies of the global economy. Contemporary capitalism is 'bio-political' in that it aims at controlling all that lives: it has already turned into a form of bio-piracy in that it aims at exploiting the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes and cells. This means that human and anthropomorphic others are relocated in a continuum with non-anthropomorphic or 'earth' others. The categorical distinction that separated the Human from his naturalized others has shifted, as a result of the enormous advances introduced by our own scientific and technological developments.

A further methodological issue arises as a result: the advanced, bio-genetic structure of capitalism as a schizophrenic global economy does not function in a linear manner, but is web-like, scattered and poly-centred. It is not monolithic, but an internally contradictory process, the effects of which are differentiated geopolitically and along gender and ethnicity lines, to name only the main ones. This creates a few methodological difficulties for the social critic, because it translates into a heteroglossia of data which makes both classical and modernist social theories inadequate to cope with the complexities. We need to adopt non-linearity as a major principle and to develop cartographies of power that account for the paradoxes and contradictions of the era of globalization, and which do not take shortcuts through its complexities. This call for new 'figurations' of the subjects we are in the process of becoming, and resonates positively with the radical feminist call for the elaboration of empowering alternatives to the dominant vision of the subject.

Feminist politics, as outlined in the previous section, is pragmatic: we need schemes of thought and figurations that enable us to account in empowering and positive terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way. We already live in emancipated (post-feminist), multi-ethnic societies with high degrees of technological intervention. These are neither simple nor linear events, but rather multi-layered and internally contradictory phenomena.

They combine elements of ultra-modernity with splinters of neo-archaism: high tech advances and neo-primitivism, which defy the logic of the excluded middle. Contemporary culture and institutional philosophy are unable to represent these realities adequately. The unitary vision of the subject cannot provide an effective antidote to the processes of fragmentation, flows and mutations which mark our era. As Deleuze predicted, we need to learn to think differently about ourselves, starting with adequate cartographies of our embedded and embodied positions.

One of the areas in which contemporary feminist philosophy is attempting to actualize this political project is social theory and globalization studies. The consensual discursive strategy attempts to account for the speed and simultaneity of the contradictory social effects induced by advanced capitalism, including the structural inequalities that emerge in the age of globalization – also known as ‘scattered hegemonies’ (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994) – and stresses the need to safeguard women’s interests, dignity and well-being amidst the dissemination of hybrid and fast-changing ethnic, racial, national and religious identities. Others follow on from classical deconstructivist methodologies in attempting to map out processes of knowledge transfer and by adopting dynamic and non-linear methods of analysis. The field known as ‘travelling theories’ is significant (Hemmings, 2006). Feminist social theory tries to do justice to both complexity and processes of change as operational concepts in the constitution of social subjects. It stresses the productive aspects of the dislocation and recasting of identities under advanced capitalism, in either a conservative mode of rational and moral universalism (Nussbaum, 2006; MacKinnon, 2006) or in more innovative ways.

The theoretical advantage of this monistic and vital approach is the ability to account for the fluid workings of power in advanced capitalism by grounding them in immanent relations, and hence to resist them by the same means. This philosophical position is exemplified by the notion of non-hierarchical or horizontal transcendence (Irigaray, 1984) and by the idea of radical immanence in Deleuzian feminism (Braidotti, 1991; Colebrook, 2000, 2004; Grosz, 2004).

Third-wave feminism (Henry, 2004; Tuin, 2008) has embraced non-linearity by voicing anti-Oedipal philosophical and methodological claims about feminist time-lines that redesign possible futures in affirmative ways. This transversal convergence between philosophical anti-foundationalism and feminist epistemology results in a post-human wave that radicalizes the premises of science studies beyond anything envisaged by classical postmodernist feminism (Wilson, 1998; Bryld and Lykke, 1999; Franklin et al., 2000). Interest in Darwin and evolutionary theory has grown considerably (Grosz, 2004), as have feminist interests in non-teleological and anti-deterministic evolutionary

theory. Feminist cultural studies of science attempt to disengage biology from the structural functionalism of DNA-driven linearity and to move it towards more creative patterns of evolutionary development (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995). The result is a non-essentialist brand of vital neo-holistic thought that points explicitly to a spiritual evolutionary dimension, best exemplified by the growing number of references to Bergson (Fraser et al., 2005; Grosz, 2004).

Post-human Feminism

This position stresses the extent to which the management of life in a post-human mode has taken centre stage in the political economy of advanced capitalism. This includes the proliferation of practices, both scientific and social, which go beyond human life. Contemporary genetics and biotechnologies are central to this shift towards post-human ideas of 'Life' or 'Zoe', the non-human. The mutual interdependence of bodies and technologies creates a new symbiotic relationship between them. This inaugurates an eco-philosophical approach to subjectivity and hence also new ecologies of belonging. It also marks a radical critique of anthropocentrism in favour of the recognition of the entanglement of material, bio-cultural and symbolic forces in the making of the subject.

In other words, what 'returns' with the return of life and of 'real bodies' at the end of postmodernism, under the impact of advanced technologies, is not only the others of the classical subject of modernity: woman/native/nature. What returns now is the 'other' of the living body in its humanistic definition: the other face of *bios*, that is to say *Zoe*, the generative vitality of non-or pre-human or animal life (Braidotti, 2006).

Zoe stands for the mindless vitality of life carrying on independently, regardless of rational control. This is the dubious privilege attributed to non-humans and to all the 'others' of Man, whereas *bios* refers to the specific social nexus of humans. That these two competing notions of 'life' coincide on the human body turns the issue of embodiment into a contested space and a political arena. Mind-body dualism has historically functioned as a shortcut through the complexities of this question by introducing a criterion of hierarchical distinction which is sexualized, racialized and naturalized. Given that this concept of 'the human' was colonized by phallogocentrism, it has come to be identified with male, white, heterosexual, Christian, property-owning, standard language speaking citizens. *Zoe* marks the outside of this vision of the subject, in spite of the efforts of evolutionary theory to strike a new relationship to the non-human. Contemporary scientific practices have forced us to touch the bottom of some inhumanity that connects to the human precisely in the immanence of its bodily materialism. With the genetic

revolution, we can speak of a generalized 'becoming inhuman' of *bios*. The category of 'Life' has accordingly cracked under the strain.

The emergence of vitalist politics causes a considerable amount of epistemological disarray. This is due to the redistribution of the self-other relation along a rhizomatic or multi-layered axis, in contrast to a binary or dualistic axis of opposition. As a result of the eruption of complexity at the heart of what used to be dialectics, the Other has lost its metaphysical substantial presence and the magical aura that surrounded it. By extension, it has ceased to be one of the privileged terms that index the European subject's relationship to subjectivity. The classical dialectics of otherness in fact displayed varying degrees of familiarity between the centre and the margins, that is to say an intimate and inner-looking relationship, which was framed nonetheless by the dominant human masculine habit of taking for granted free access to and the consumption of the bodies of others. This mode of relation is currently being restructured. A bio-egalitarian turn is taking place that encourages us to engage in a radically other relationship with others. I want to argue that the challenge today is how to deterritorialize or nomadize the human-other interaction, so as to bypass the metaphysics of substance and its corollary, the dialectics of otherness, secularizing accordingly the concept of human nature and the life which animates it.

The three dialectical axes of constitution of otherness according to the unitary subject of classical humanism – sexualization/racialization/naturalization – and the hierarchical scale of pejorative differences which they uphold, have shifted. They no longer correspond to a dialectical model of opposition, but rather follow a more dynamic, non-linear and hence less predictable pattern, that composes a zigzagging line of internally contradictory options. The 'others' are not merely the markers of exclusion or marginality, but also the sites of powerful and alternative subject-positions. Thus, the bodies of others become simultaneously disposable commodities and also decisive agents for political and ethical transformation (Braidotti, 2002). This relocation of otherness along a rhizomatic web, however, seems to leave miraculously unscathed the centuries-old forms of sexism, racism and anthropocentric arrogance that have marked our culture. The transformation of the axes of sexualized, racialized and naturalized difference form intersecting patterns of becoming. They compose a new political economy of otherness and are therefore of great ethical and political relevance.

The challenge post-human vital thought throws to feminism is that whereas the dislocation of sexualized and racialized differences can be accommodated into the critique of advanced capitalism, as they are integral to it, the transposition of nature poses a number of conceptual, methodological and practical complications linked to the critique of anthropocentrism. This is due to the pragmatic fact that, as embodied and embedded entities, we are all part of

nature, even though philosophy continues to claim transcendental grounds for human consciousness. As a brand of 'enchanted materialism', philosophical nomadism contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and strikes an alliance with the productive force of *Zoe* – or life in its inhuman aspects.

Thus, affinity for *Zoe* is a good starting point for what may constitute the last act of the critique of dominant subject positions, namely the return of animal or earth life in all its potency. The breakdown of species distinction (human/non-human) and the explosion of *Zoe* power, therefore, shifts the grounds of the problem of the breakdown of categories of individuation (gender and sexuality; ethnicity and race). This introduces the issue of becoming into a planetary or worldwide dimension, the earth being not one element among others, but rather that which brings them all together.

Social theory since poststructuralism has emphasized the materially grounded transformative processes of becoming, re-appraised the relevance of complexity in network societies, and shifted political analyses from bio-power to vital politics. Classical vitalism is a problematic notion, considering its dramatic history of holism and complicity with fascism. Contemporary neo-vitalism as a philosophy of flows of complex information systems and flux of data in the continuum of 'timeless time' (Castells, 1996), however, presupposes and benefits from the philosophical monism that is central to a materialist and non-unitary vision of subjectivity.

The Post-Secular Turn

Vitalist philosophies of matter-realism include a re-appraisal of spirituality. Such a claim needs to be qualified critically, considering the popularity of neo-eschatological visions of catastrophe and redemption that circulate nowadays. The call is emerging for a post-secular approach to feminism, in keeping with or as an answer to the acknowledgment of the return of the different facets of a religiously-driven vision of female agency (Mahmood, 2005). The new agenda includes straightforward religious matters; questions of neo-vital politics; environmental holism and deep ecology; the bio-political management of life and the quest for suitable resistance in the era of bio-genetic capitalism or what ethical values best suit the respect for ethnic and cultural diversity. A neo-vitalist notion of radical immanence also expresses the residual spiritual values of great intimacy and a sense of belonging to the world as process of perpetual becoming (Bataille, 1988). The resurgence of 'new age' spiritual practices is also a salient feature of the contemporary landscape. Because of these social phenomena, the issue of spirituality needs to be rethought from within the post-Enlightenment tradition of secularity. This is not the residual mysticism of a notion of life as pure becoming, empty of meaning, but rather

a concrete plan for embedding and embodying new formations of living subjects. Not an evolutionary tale, but a qualitative leap of values.

The need for a new cosmopolitan or pan-human ethical project that would integrate a renewed interest in corporeality or bodily materialism with a serious critique of the limitations of the linguistic turn within postmodernism has been voiced by several feminist philosophers. Bio-ethics as an area has grown in importance of late (Diprose, 1994). Some humanistic philosophers like Martha Nussbaum (2006) point to the need for a return to Aristotelian principles of moral virtue; others like Benhabib (2002) argue for the unavoidable confrontation with Kantian morality. In a more creative vein, Gatens and Lloyd (1999) revisit Spinozist ethics with Gilles Deleuze so as to provide a robust new ethical standpoint. Noteworthy in this context is the interest in the philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze (Buchanan and Colebrook, 2000) and its applications to feminist philosophy (Braidotti, 2002; 2006).

An important reason for needing a new grounded, embodied and embedded subject has to do with the second half of that crucial sentence: 'we' are in *this* together. What *this* refers to is the cluster of interconnected problems that touches the structure of subjectivity and the very possibility of the future as a sustainable option. 'We' are in *this* together, in fact, enlarges the sense of collectively bound subjectivity to non-human agents, from our genetic neighbours the animals, to the earth as the biosphere as a whole. 'We', therefore, is a non-anthropocentric construct, which refers to a commonly shared territory or habitat (*this*). How to do justice to this relatively simple yet highly problematic reality requires a shift of perspective. As Haraway suggests, we need to work towards 'a new techno-scientific democracy' (1997, p. 95). *This* is indeed a totality, finite and confined.

Central to the fast convergence between post-humanist and post-anthropocentric positions are the new forms of cosmopolitan or pan-human interconnections devised by race theory. Edward Said, in his influential work on orientalism (1978), first alerted critical theorists in the West to the need to develop a reasoned and secular account of Enlightenment-based humanism by taking into account the 'postcolonial' condition. Postcolonial theory argued for and documented the extent to which the Enlightenment ideals of reason, secular tolerance, equality under the law and democratic rule, need not be and indeed historically have not been mutually exclusive with European practices of violent domination, exclusion and the systematic and instrumental use of terror. This has a number of significant implications: one concerns the theoretical priority granted to sexuality and the other concerns the sex/gender distinction.

Sexuality Beyond Gender

The matter-realist turn has important implications for the discussion of sexuality and gender, which has been central to feminist philosophy since the change of paradigm towards queer theory, introduced by de Lauretis (1990) and developed by Butler in the 1990s. As I have argued elsewhere (Braidotti, 2002), Butler's claim to undo gender (2004) is flatly contradicted by the binary structure of queer thinking, which locates the heterosexual matrix at the core of its analyses and opposes it to queer melancholia. The related criticism is that queer theory has avoided the main lesson of psychoanalysis about the polymorphous and perverse structure of human sexuality. It has accordingly narrowed down the scope of the original loss of unity of the subject, placing all the emphasis on the loss of the homosexual component. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari broaden the scope of the discussion by stressing the theft of the complexity, polymorphousness and perversity of sexuality and its reduction through the capture of a majoritarian scheme of sexuality that privileges heterosexual reproductive sex.

Irigaray shifts the emphasis on the original and foundational act that is the theft of the little girl's sexuality – according to the sacrificial ontology of a phallogocentric system that requires the exchange of women to fuel its socio-symbolic structures. The emphasis thus falls on the specificity of women's own sexual economy. It is in this spirit that Irigaray praises the specific instance of feminine homosexuality as a moment of high symbolic significance in confirming a woman's sense of self-worth. This primary narcissism, this love of oneself as reflected in the eyes of another who is morphologically 'the same,' is, according to the early Irigaray, a necessary pre-condition of the affirmation of a positive difference that repairs the symbolic damage suffered by women in a phallogocentric system. This is no essentialism but rather a molecular, transversal space of formation of collectively sustained micro-singularities.

Both Irigaray and Deleuze challenge queer theory's reductive rendition of the original foreclosure of the first love object – the mother – and of the sexual complexity that marks the polymorphous and perverse structure of human sexuality. Both engage, in different but powerful ways, with the unconscious or trans-historical and trans-personal carnal elements that are involved in the process of capture or theft of the primordial sexual body. What is emerging more clearly in current discussions about sexuality is that, whereas queer theory is solidly ensconced in social constructivist methods and political strategies, matter-realist thinkers affirm and explore the ontological aspects of sexuality and sexual difference and not only its constructed elements.

As a consequence, matter-realist or vitalist feminism, resting on a dynamic monistic political ontology, shifts the focus away from the sex/gender

distinction, bringing sexuality as process into full focus. The first concerns the irrelevance of the category 'same sex' to account for the complex and multiple affects generated in the relation between two beings. The redundancy of the sex/gender distinction for feminist philosophies of the subject had been noted by English-speaking feminists working in continental philosophy, like Gatens (1991), Grosz (1999) and Braidotti (1991; 1994), before it was recast in a new paradigm by Butler's performative turn (1991). Contemporary feminist philosophers argue the same case on different grounds. For instance, Patricia MacCormack (2008) draws attention to the need to return to sexuality as a polymorphous and complex force and to disengage it from both identity issues and all dualistic oppositions. She looks for subversion not in counter-identity formations, but rather in pure dislocations of identities via perversion of standardized patterns of interaction.

MacCormack's emphasis on visceral subjects rests on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of radical empiricism and on Irigaray's emphasis on the sensible transcendental, to stress that becomings or transformations are open-ended and not necessarily contained by socio-symbolic forms, such as phallogocentrism or categories, such as the anthropocentric idea of the human. The ethics of becoming is rather an ethology of the forces that propel the subject to overcome both forms and categories, deterritorializing all identities on its line of flight. This means by extension that sexuality is a force or constitutive element, that is capable of deterritorializing gender identity and institutions.

A renewed emphasis on sexuality, as opposed to classical or queer theories of sex and gender, emerges from the shift of perspective introduced by matter-realist feminism. In a recent contribution to this debate, Benjamin Noys (2008) argues forcefully for the need to reconsider the by now canonical reception of Foucault's theses on sexuality. Emphasizing Foucault's earlier work, Noys re-appraises the radical critique Foucault developed of the over-emphasis our culture places on sex-gender as an indicator of identities and inner truths about ourselves. As an operator of power, a conveyor of major social regulations and a tool for consumerism, sex is a trap from which we need to liberate ourselves. Foucault's notorious criticism of feminist theories of sexual liberation, in the first volume of his history of sexuality, reiterates the point that there is no possible liberation through but only from sex-gender. By extension, the idea that sexual liberation is central to a political project of liberation or emancipation – which is constitutive of Western feminism and central to its secular bias – paradoxically reiterates the Christian notion that desire is central to the constitution of subjectivity.

Foucault's project challenges this bias by proclaiming the 'end of the monarchy of sex', as being in congruence with the deregulation of sexual repression and the commercial exploitation of marginal or dissident sexualities. The

only credible subversive move, according to Foucault, is the refusal of all identities based on sex-gender and not only of a dominant heterosexual model or of its binary homosexual counterpart. Even more crucial is the effort to undertake serious experimentation with alternative modes of relation that are not mediated via sex and therefore escape both commercial commodification and the social normativity that accompanies it. This experimental sexual pragmatics also accomplishes the creative task of returning sexuality to its original complexity as a force of intensity, intimacy and relationality. The centrality of desire is accordingly displaced by experimenting with modes of ethical subjectivity (for the later Foucault) and transversal collective assemblages (for Deleuze and Guattari), that free the subject from the dictatorship of sex as a term that indexes access to identity formations and their respective power entitlements. Neo-asceticism (Braidotti, 2006) emerges as a resource, with renewed emphasis on a political spirituality that labours to free the subject from constituted identities and experiment with new modes of relation.

This element is crucial to the post-secular turn I mentioned above. Both Irigaray and Deleuze embody and embed the universal, according to the principle of carnal materialism. They also conceptualize the space of the relation, the interconnection among forces and entities. The universal therefore is located transversally, in the specific singularity of immanent interrelations among subjects collectively engaged in the expression and actualization of *potentia*. The inter-subjective space is a laboratory of becoming. Deleuze's anti-essentialist, high-tech vitalism echoes the ideas of Irigaray about the subject as a bodily human entity, sensitive flesh framed by the skin. Irigaray turns to non-Christian religions, notably Judaism and Buddhism, and the philosophy of Levinas. The model of alternative ethics proposed by philosophies of nomadism implies a non-hierarchical idea of transcendence and a non-binary model of interrelation. They propose immanent concepts of the subject as dynamic becoming, where the bodily self is analyzed according to the concrete forces or material variables that compose it and sustain it.

Sexual Difference Revisited

The ontological status of sexuality in contemporary matter-realist discussions combines realism about essences with vitalism in ethical interrelations. Relationality and affirmative experimentations with other modes of ethical interaction are the rule. They imply that sexual difference is the starting point for transformative practice: a robust and essential starting point, not a burden to be cast away at the earliest opportunity.

All the Deleuzian radical empiricists share this point and stress the ontological dimension of both sexuality and sexual difference. Other voices,

however, are emerging in the discussion, arguing that sexual difference is simply not a problem at all. This statement can be construed in several different ways and the lines of differentiation are quite significant. For instance, in what could be described as a classical exposition of Deleuzian feminism, Gatens and Lloyd (1999) argue that the political ontology of monism, which Deleuze adapts from Spinoza, offers some relevant opportunities for feminist theory. Mind-body parallelism, as opposed to Cartesian dualism, can be rendered in terms of simultaneous effects. These entail the embodiment of mind as much as the 'embrainment of matter', to use an expression coined by John Marks. There is only one substance: an intelligent flesh-mind-matter compound. This implies that bodily differences are both a banality and a cornerstone in the process of differentiation of variation. The resonances between this feminist project and Deleuze's nomadism are many and many-fold.

Lloyd argues that the parallelism between mind and body and the intrinsically affective or conatus-driven vision of the subject implies that different bodies have different degrees and levels of power and force of understanding. This has clear implications for sexual difference. Given that, on a Spinozist account, the mind is nothing more than the actual idea of the body, sexual difference can reach into the mind as the mind is not independent of the body in which it is situated. If bodies are differently sexed, so are minds. Lloyd emphasizes the extent to which Spinoza recognizes that there are distinctive powers and pleasures associated with different kinds of bodies, which then are enacted in different minds. Thus, a female body cannot fail to affect a female mind. Spinoza's mind is not neutral and this, according to Lloyd, has great potential for a feminist theory of female subjectivity that aims at avoiding the essentialist trap of a genuine female nature, while rejecting the idea of the neutrality of the mind. Although Spinoza gives in to the traditionally subordinate vision of women of his times, and thus excludes women from the polity, Lloyd is careful in pointing out the liberatory potential of Spinoza's monistic vision of the embodied nature of the mind. Its worth can be measured most effectively in comparison with the Cartesian dualistic vision of the mind-body dichotomy, which historically proved more damaging for women than his idea of the sex-neutrality of the mind. What a female nature is, must consequently be determined in each case and cannot be spelled out *a priori*, because each embodied compound has its own specificity. This is due to the fact that, in a neo-Spinozist perspective, embodied subjects are constituted by encounters with other forces in patterns of affinity or dissonance that gives them very clear configurations which cannot be known in advance.

In a monistic perspective, difference need not be rendered in essentialist terms, be it biological, psychic or any other type. The fact that for Spinoza the body is intelligent matter and the mind is embodied sensibility has the advantage of bypassing the pitfalls of essentialism altogether. This offers a way out

of the essentialism-constructivism impasse. Accordingly, Lloyd, even more than Gatens, contemplates a non-psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference which rests on Spinoza's monism and reaches out for what I have called the 'enchanted materialism' of immanence.

Lloyd (1994) stresses the continuing relevance of sexual difference, against the theoretical illusions of an infinitely malleable, free-floating gender. Grounded and situated, sexual difference as a mode of embodied and embedded actualization of difference shapes the space-time continuum of nomadic subjectivity. Lloyd and Gatens explicitly take aim at the dualism of the sex-gender distinction, which posits a transcendent gender as the matrix that formats sex. By extension, they also expose the absurdity of any political project that would aim at 'undoing gender' (Butler, 2004). To undo gender would mean to unmake bodies and much as this aspiration fits in with the consumerist logic of advanced bio-capitalism, it makes very little sense politically.

Thus, Lloyd argues that sexually differentiated bodies mark sexually differentiated spatio-temporal segments of subjectivity. In other words, sexual difference speaks through or is expressed in every cognitive, moral, political or other activity of the subject. Whereas Irigaray and the feminism of sexual difference attribute a (positive) normative value to this statement, Lloyd keeps it neutral. It is a factual statement: it is just the way things are. What does become important for both Lloyd and Gatens, however, is the extent to which this monistic vision of the subject, and its in-built assertion of sexual difference, allows for an enlargement of both the notion of moral agency and that of political subjectivity and more particularly of citizenship. Insofar as all subjects partake of the same essence, and are therefore part of nature, their common features can be located precisely in this shared capacity for affecting and being affected. This transversality lays the grounds for a post-individualistic understanding of the subject and a radical redefinition of common humanity. The latter is an embedded and embodied collection of singularities that are endowed with common features: qualitative complexities, not quantitative pluralities.

If for Lloyd and Gatens sexual difference is not a problematic issue, in that it remains of great relevance, for Claire Colebrook it is no longer a problem, because the political and theoretical terms of the feminist debate have shifted since the days of high, or early, feminist poststructuralism. Colebrook (2000) suggests that a younger feminist wave is looking at the question of sexual difference as not only or primarily a question that concerns the subject or the subject's body. She is very vocal in wanting to move beyond the phenomenological legacy of feminist theory and enlists Deleuze's philosophy in the attempt to bypass the quasi-transcendentalist mode of feminist theory. Colebrook stresses that for Irigaray sexual difference is clearly a metaphysical

question, but in the foundational sense that it determines metaphysics as such. Sexual difference poses the question of the conditions of possibility for thought as a self-originating system of representation of itself as the ultimate presence. Thus, sexual difference produces subjectivity in general. The conceptual tool by which Irigaray shows up this peculiar logic is the notion of 'the sensible transcendental'. By showing that what is erased in the process of erection of the transcendental subject are the maternal grounds of origin, Irigaray simultaneously demystifies the vertical transcendence of the subject and calls for an alternative metaphysics. Irigaray's transcendental is sensible and grounded in the very particular fact that all human life is, for the time being, still 'of woman born' (Rich, 1976).

According to Colebrook, Deleuze's emphasis on the productive and positive force of difference is troublesome for feminist theory in so far as it challenges the foundational value of sexual difference. For Irigaray, the metaphysical question of sexual difference is the horizon of feminist theory; for Grosz (1994) it is its pre-condition; for Butler (1993) it is the limit of the discourse of embodiment; for Braidotti (1994) it is a negotiable, transversal, affective space. The advantage of a Deleuzian approach is that the emphasis shifts from the metaphysics to the ethics of sexual difference. Deleuze's brand of philosophical pragmatism questions whether sexual difference demands metaphysics at all. This for Colebrook translates into a crucial question: 'is feminism a critical inhabitation of metaphysical closure, or the task of thinking a new metaphysics?' (Colebrook, 2000, p. 112). Following Deleuze's empiricism, Colebrook wants to shift the grounds of the debate away from metaphysical foundations to a philosophy of immanence that stresses the need to create new concepts. This creative gesture is a way of responding to the given, to experience, and is thus linked to the notion of the event. The creation of concepts is itself experience or experimentation. There is a double implication here: firstly that philosophy need not be seen as the master discourse or the unavoidable horizon of thought: artistic and scientific practices have their role to play as well. Secondly, given that ethical questions do not require metaphysics, the feminist engagement with concepts need not be critical but can be inventive and creative. In other words, experimenting with thinking is what we all need to learn.

Colebrook struggles with the idea of what kind of problem sexual difference could be, if it were not defined as a question of truth, recognition, self-representation or radical anteriority. She does not come to a convincing conclusion, but this does not detract from the relevance of her project. In order to answer the question of sexual difference, one would simply have to redefine the function or status of philosophy altogether. This is a classical radical feminist statement, which situates Colebrook's third-wave feminism in a continuum with previous generations. Feminist theory does indeed

challenge what we have come to recognize as thinking. Calling for an embodied philosophy of radical immanence marks the start of a bodily philosophy of relations. The body is for Colebrook an incorporeal complex assemblage of virtualities:

The body is a relation to what is not itself, a movement or an activity from a point of difference to other points of difference. And so difference is neither an imposed scheme, nor an otherwise uniform substance, nor is difference the relation between already differentiated self-identical entities. What something is, is given through the activity of differentiation. (Colebrook, 2000, p. 87)

This is the basic meaning of the positivity of difference and it is linked to corporeality through the notion of virtual becomings. Loyal to her Deleuzian premises, Colebrook defines the ethics of sexual difference 'not as the telos of some universal law, but as the responsibility and recognition of the self-formation of the body' (Colebrook, 2000, p. 88). In other words, as the becoming of bodies occurs within a single substance, the question is no longer, 'how are the sexes differentiated?' but rather: 'how are different modalities of sexual differentiation due to the specificity of different bodies?' (Colebrook, 2000, p. 90). Once this question is raised, the whole issue of essentialism simply collapses.

The point of consensus among these different positions is that sexual difference is not a problem that needs to be explained in relation to an epistemological paradigm that assumes *a priori* sameness and a dialectical frame of pejorative difference. It is rather the case that sexual difference is just an embodied and embedded point of departure that signals simultaneously the ontological priority of difference and its self-organizing and self-transforming force. The ontology of becoming allows difference to emerge as radical immanence, i.e. as creative evolution. Chrysanthi Nigianni (2008) argues that this position moves political thought beyond both emancipationist historicism and liberal progressivism, allowing instead for a politics of becomings that posits transversal subjectivity as machinic assemblages that embrace the openness but also the materiality of the virtual (Massumi, 2002).

Conclusion

I have argued in the previous section that, in a feminist matter-realist perspective, sexuality deterritorializes the actual gender of the people it involves in the process of becoming. An important question that can be raised here is: what happens to gender if sexuality is not based on oppositional terms? What happens when there is sexuality without the possibility of heterosexual or

homosexual union? (MacCormack, 2008). What happens is vitalist erotics, which includes intensive deterritorializations, unhealthy alliances, hybrid cross-fertilizations, productive anomalies and generative encounters.

Let me pursue this discussion with an example taken from the legendary relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West – as a complex, multi-layered and highly sexualized encounter that produces effects, relations and texts of all sorts. Virginia and Vita propose an ethical model where the play of sameness-difference is not modelled on the dialectics of masculinity and femininity; it is rather an active space of becoming that is productive of new meanings and definitions. In other words: here is sexuality beyond gender (Braidotti, 2008).

This cuts two ways: firstly, the homophobic assumption that same-sex relationships cause fusion and confusion, in so far as they fail to establish sufficiently strong boundaries of alterity is flatly rejected by the experience of high-singularity and intense definition, which emerges from the encounter of Virginia with Vita. The fact that Virginia and Vita meet within this category of sexual 'sameness' encourages them to look beyond the delusional aspects of the identity ('women'), which they supposedly share. This proliferation of differences between women and within each one of them is evident in the outcomes and the products of their relationship, be it in the literature which Virginia and Vita produced, or in the many social, cultural and political projects they were engaged in. These included marriages, motherhood and child-rearing, political activism, socializing, campaigning, publishing and working as a publisher, gardening and the pursuit of friendships, pleasures and hard work.

Secondly, the assemblage composed by Virginia & Vita as blocks of becoming is post-gender but not beyond sex – it is actually deeply embedded in sexuality and can be best understood in relation to non-unitary subjectivity and neo-vital politics. The disappearance of firm boundaries between self and other, in the love encounter, in intense friendship, in the spiritual experience and in more everyday interpersonal connections, is the necessary premise to the enlargement of one's fields of perception and capacity to experience. In pleasure as in pain, in a secular, spiritual, erotic mode that combines at once elements from all these, the decentring and opening-up of the individual ego coincides not only with communication with other fellow human beings, but also with a heightening of the intensity of such communication. This shows the advantages of a non-unitary vision of the subject. A depersonalization of the self, in a gesture of everyday transcendence of the ego, is a connecting force, a binding force that links the self to larger internal and external relations. An isolated vision of the individual is a hindrance to such a process.

It is also important to stress the extent to which sets of interconnections or encounters constitute a project, which requires active involvement and work.

Desire is never a given. Rather, like a long shadow projected from the past, it is a forward-moving horizon that lies ahead and towards which one moves. Between the no longer and the not yet, desire traces the possible patterns of becoming. These intersect with and mobilize sexuality, but never stop there as they construct space and time and thus design possible worlds by allowing the unfolding of ever intensified affects. Desire sketches the conditions for the future by bringing into focus the present, through the unavoidable accident of an encounter, a flush (Woolf, 1993), a sudden acceleration that marks a point of no return. Call it falling in love, if you wish, but only if you can rescue the notion from the sentimental banality into which it has sunk in commercial culture. Moreover, if falling in love it is, it is disengaged from the human subject that is wrongly held responsible for the event. Here, love is an intensive encounter that mobilizes the sheer quality of the light and the shape of the landscape. Deleuze's remark on the grasshoppers flying in at 5:00 p.m. on the back of the evening wind also evokes non-human cosmic elements in the creation of a space of becoming. This indicates that desire designs a whole territory and thus it cannot be restricted to the mere human *persona* that enacts it. We need a post-anthropocentric theory of both desire and love in order to do justice to the complexity of subjects of becoming.