

GENDER DELIGHT

SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE, AND WRITING ...

FOR NINA LYKKE

Gender Delight. Science, Knowledge, Culture, and Writing ...
For Nina Lykke

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Editors:

Cecilia Asberg, Katherine Harrison, Björn Pernrud, Malena Gustavson

InDesign and layout: Cecilia Asberg and Dennis Netzell

TABULA GRATULATORIA

Presented

to

Nina Lykke

Dr. Phil.

Founding Professor of Tema Genus

Linköping University

Director of the International Centre of Gender Excellence (GEXcel)
Director of Nordic Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies
Director of InterGender, Swedish-International Research School in
Interdisciplinary Gender Studies
Head of Department of Gender Studies

On the Occasion of her 60th Birthday

(7th February 2009)

Celebrated on the 13th of May 2009

By her

Colleagues, Friends, and Students

POST-HUMAN, ALL TOO HUMAN FEMINISM

Rosi Braidotti

Nina Lykke and I belong to a generation that has chosen the long march through the institutions as one of the forms of political engagement with the complex human and political capital that is the global women's movement. Consequently we have lived through never ending reports about the pending doom of feminism as a movement, while witnessing its astonishing vitality, resilience and self-transforming powers. The diversification of feminist theory, fuelled by recurrent generations of new, younger, post-feminist and post-postfeminists, was both supported by and productive of a significant growth of institutional practices. Most of these happened outside the strict confines of academic disciplines, mostly in new trans-disciplinary areas like gender, race and post-colonial studies, social theories of globalization and migration and philosophies of new media and bio-technologies.

The key notion for me is the specific idea of oppositional consciousness that was pioneered by feminism and which combines critique with creativity, in a "double-edged vision" (Kelly, 1979) that does not stop at critical deconstruction but moves onto the active production of alternatives. 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), that evolves from the practice of "the politics of locations" (Rich 1985)

and infuses also standpoint feminist theory and the debates with post-modernist feminism (Harding 1991) throughout the 1990s. This combination of oppositional practices and great theoretical vitality has raised a range of methodological questions about the uses and the limitations of interdisciplinarity in feminist theory and more specifically about the criteria of classification, the use of analytic categories and the canonization processes that constitute a field of knowledge that would be recognizable as feminist theory. As a result, the need for a systematic meta-discursive approach to the interdisciplinary methods, the specific styles and innovative repertoires of feminist knowledge production is among the top priorities of today.

As a meta-methodological innovation, the embodied and embedded brand of feminist materialist philosophy of the subject introduces a break from both universalism and dualism. As to the former, universalistic claims to a subject position that allegedly transcends spatio-temporal and geopolitical specificities are criticised as being dis-embodied and dis-embedded, i.e. abstract. Universalism, best exemplified in notions 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 implication within the very structures one is analyzing and opposing politically.

The pivotal notion in classical post-structuralist 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 (1991) calls to accountability the white and Euro-centric 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 also contribute to define 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.

Post-humanist feminist epistemologies proposed radical new alternative 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 but also science was abandoned in favor of renewed attention for 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, all knowledge claims being an expression of western culture and of its drive to mastery.

Moreover, in a globally connected and technologically mediated world that is marked by fast changes, structural inequalities and increased militarization, feminist scholarship has intensified the 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. With the demise of postmodernism, which has gone down in history as a form of radical skepticism 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. As a consequence, my

generation of theorists, who proudly began with the radical critique of humanism, is currently facing the overcoming of post-humanism and the rise of post-anthropocentric theories of what the human may mean in the era of bio-genetic capitalism. The convergence between these two strands of thought, multiplied across the many inter-disciplinary lines that structure feminist theory, ends up radicalizing the very premises of feminist philosophy. It especially results in a re-consideration of the materiality of sexuality and the relevance of the sex-gender distinction.

Matter-realist feminism

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; Fraser 2002; Braidotti 2002, 2006). This movement of thought gathers the remains of post-structuralist anti-humanism and joins them with feminist re-appraisals of contemporary techno-culture in a non-deterministic frame (Bryld and Lykke 1999; Haraway 1992, 1997, 2003; Hayles 1999). These reappraisals 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 has replaced textual deconstruction. After many misunderstandings about nomadic subjectivity – which was mistaken for a metaphor of undecidability, a materially grounded understanding of the process-ontology of becoming has come to the fore. 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 scholars converge on the notion that what matters about materialism today is the shifting concept of "matter" itself (Delanda 2002). The switch to a monistic political ontology stresses processes, vital politics and non-deterministic evolutionary theories that re-instate sexuality as an ontological force of differentiation (Grosz 2004; Irigaray 1992).

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. This can also be described as a sort of “anthropological exodus” from the dominant configurations of the human (Hardt and Negri 2000: 215) – a colossal hybridisation 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. Haraway puts this very lucidly: “[t]his is Man the taxonomic type become Man the brand” (1997: 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: 235), but also ruthlessly and structurally unjust. Deleuze and Guattari (1972) analysed this in terms of capitalism as schizophrenia as a conflict between, on the one hand, the rising demands for subjective singularities and, on the other hand, the conservative re-territorialisation 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 has argued, some grand narratives have come back into fashion through “the dynamics of contemporary hyper-colonialist capitalism” (Pearson 1997: 303). These narratives 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” (Pearson 1997: 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, technologically mediated quest for immortality and

for disciplined and acquiescent subjects has gained widespread currency, which betrays the nomadic potential of contemporary science (Stengers 1999). 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.

Examples of the ontological shift are manifold. For instance, Karen Barad's work on "agential realism" (Barad 2003, 2007) stresses the onto-epistemological aspect of feminist knowledge claims today. By choosing to privilege neither the material nor the cultural, agential realism focuses instead on the process of their interaction. Also of note is Luciana Parisi's work which 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. Parisi strengthens the case made by Deleuze and Guattari for transversal assemblages by cross-referring to the new epistemology of Margulis (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 genetic material is exposed to processes of becoming. This questions any ontological foundation for difference while avoiding social constructivism.

The epistemological analysis intersects with the political one: the self-replicating vitality of living matter is targeted for consumption and biogenetic culture is commercially exploited. This intersection has been aptly noted and critiqued by Haraway in her discussion of *onco-mouse* (Haraway 1997) and also arises in Vandana Shiva's (1997) argument that the bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others) have become the disposable bodies of the global economy.

Sexuality beyond gender

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.

This matter-realist turn has therefore 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 previously argued (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 to it 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.

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.

As a consequence, matter-realist or vitalist feminism, resting on a dynamic monistic political ontology, shifts the focus away from the sexgender distinction, bringing sexuality as process into full focus. The redundancy of the sex-gender distinction for feminist philosophies of the subject had been noted by English-speaking feminists working in Continental philosophy 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 (2004) 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 phallo-logocentrism, 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, de-territorializing all identities on its line of flight. This means by extension that sexuality is a force, or constitutive element, that is capable of de-territorializing gender identity and institutions.

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.

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 crucial is the effort to undertake serious experimentations with alternative modes of relation that are not mediated via sex and therefore escape both the 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. Neo-asceticism (Braidotti 2006) emerges as a resource, with renewed emphasis on a political spirituality that labors to free the subject from constituted identities and experiment with new modes of relation.

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. Nomadic relationality and affirmative experimentations with other modes of ethical interaction are the rule. They imply that sexual difference is the starting point for the 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. They tend to argue 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": 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. 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. 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.

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 post structuralism. Colebrook (2000a) 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 by-pass 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 1977).

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 a 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 2000a: 112). Following Deleuze's empiricism, Colebrook stresses the need to create new concepts as a way of responding to the given, to experience, and is thus linked to the notion of the event. 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. 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 2000b: 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 2000b: 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

The important question that emerges from this discussion 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? (McCormack, 2008). What happens is vitalist erotics, which includes intensive de-territorializations, unhealthy alliances, hybrid cross-fertilizations, productive anomalies and generative encounters. The disappearance of firm boundaries between self and other, in the nomadic vision of the subject as dynamic and inter-relational 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.