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Cavarero, Braidotti, and the Feminist Foundations of the Posthuman

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the philosophical ramifications for posthumanist thought at the intersection of Cavarero's recuperation of the maternal symbolic and Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic thinking. Specifically, I argue that the glossing over of sexual difference in posthumanist thought in its most common current formulations means that it is blind to the flaunting of one of its own theoretical tenets and thus conceals its dependence on humanist primacy of embrainment over embodiment, rather than contesting it. Cavarero, Braidotti, and materialist feminism bring to posthumanism a very necessary corrective, that is, their philosophies countenance both the sexed body and the body in multiple, not singular, temporalities.

Keywords: sexual difference, nomadic thinking, posthumanism, maternal symbolic

Introduction

Sexual difference continues to be conspicuously absent from many of the theories of the posthuman currently in circulation, including the most convincing. To take two prominent examples, neither Roberto Marchesini nor Giorgio Agamben has any real truck with gender; instead, their posthumanist engagements are founded on the same assumptions about a neutral universal masculine as are those humanist perspectives in which existence is not embodied but rather discursive. Consequently, theirs are arguably

as much humanist theories as they are posthumanist. In his enormously influential *Posthuman. Verso nuovi modelli di esistenza* (2009), for example, Roberto Marchesini makes reference to the identification of woman with nature as a motive, along with speciesism (the idea that animals and humans are totally separate entities), to get at his concern with the separation of nature and culture that lies at the heart of the incompleteness theory of the humanists. He is acutely aware of the humanist tendency to relegate women to the subordinate realm of the animal/natural world. And his critique is clear: masculinism and speciesism are the lynchpins of humanist culture. But he maintains the focus resolutely on the question of nature versus culture to get at this bigger point about incompleteness [or in Agamben's words, «The humanist discovery of man is the discovery that he lacks himself» (2004, 30)] and, in doing so, reveals the major blind spot in his vision, namely, the support afforded to his posthumanism by an understanding of the value of alterity that can countenance gender. This particular version of posthumanism is thus self-contradictory when it does not take the next step and recuperate from that equation (making the necessary changes) the centrality of feminist thought to posthumanism.

My point is not that there are better, more convincing versions of the posthuman in circulation today, but rather that posthumanist thought needs more fully to reckon with those humanist assumptions upon which it continues, to greater and lesser extent, to depend and in particular, to resolve its ambivalence toward sexual difference through rigorous dialogue with feminist thought. In the limited space that follows, I will suggest that the obfuscation of sexed bodies in conceptualizations of the posthuman constitutes a critical blind spot, and indeed is antinomic to the posthuman project in most any form. In support of my argument I will consider 1) alterity, and 2) multiple temporalities of posthuman existence. I focus on alterity insofar as it is one of the key concepts in the highly influential and closely argued posthuman philosophy of Marchesini. I consider temporality within the broader conceptual thresholds constituted by the passages from a prehumanist to a humanist perspective, and from a humanist to a posthumanist one. I will focus in particular on the contributions of two major feminist philosophers – Adriana

Cavarero and Rosi Braidotti¹ – as they illuminate possible paths for a rethinking of gender and the posthuman. Fully cognizant of the risk of invoking Cavarero, whose work emerges from a position firmly squared within a humanist gender binary model, I nonetheless posit that her and Braidotti's work serve as complementary correctives to one of posthumanism's self-contradictions.

Alterity

One key component to Marchesini's posthumanism is alterity. Consider his critique of the humanist attitude of disdain for the other [«L'alterità sarà interpretata quindi dall'umanesimo in qualità di fonte di pericolo e di degrado proprio a causa del fattore/rischio di contaminazione con il diverso, che in qualche modo mette a repentaglio l'ideale di purezza» (Marchesini, 2009a, 82)], a disdain aimed at domination rather than participation. This is a strong and useful argument in favor of posthumanist inclusion (conjugation and creativity are two of the terms he uses) over humanist exceptionalism. But the object of Marchesini's interest throughout the volume is the false dichotomy of nature versus culture, and the ancillary assumption that culture is the response to human incompleteness, to a lack or absence that distinguishes humans from animals but is overcome through the development of (a by definition non- or even anti-natural) culture. He makes that argument, in part, by enumerating the negative qualities of alterity (as a source of danger, contamination, degradation, loss of purity and so on) implied in the humanist position, but the terms of the dyad self-other are decidedly gender-unmarked (i.e. masculine neutral). This is not to say that he is unaware of the connection between the nature/culture question and the masculinist foundations of humanist thought. On the contrary, he is acute in his critique of the expulsion of the feminine as a prerequisite for entry into the assembly of men («consesso degli uomini», 2009a, 79), and in his elencation of the various declensions of the identification of woman with nature:

¹ I also call special attention to the work on corporeal feminism of Elizabeth Grosz (1994) in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nella cultura occidentale la donna viene considerata tellurica, ctonia, lunare ovvero legata a doppio filo alle leggi della fisicalità, vincolata dalla ciclicità nictemerale, mensile, stagionale, mentre l'uomo viene considerato libero da questi bioritmi e quindi esterno al dominio della natura [2009a, 79].

He continues:

Questa visione androcentrica ha contribuito in modo rilevante al radicamento della dicotomia natura/cultura, perché era funzionale a giustificare il predominio maschile all'interno della società umana. Solo controllando la donna l'uomo poteva non lasciarsi soggiogare dalla natura [2009a, 80].

And yet the contestation of motives behind this identification fails to convert into a recuperation of its potentially transformative power. Can the association of the feminine and the non-human (*tellurica, stagionale*, and so on) not be reclaimed in a positive key? Need it provide a model for masculinist domination when, in contrast, it can stand for re-integration of the non-human other in the service of the creative/participatory engagement to which the posthuman aspires? If alterity is to be embraced as Marchesini argues, then a radical re-evaluation of its existing modalities is in order.

The tension between exclusionary and conjugative modalities is crucial. In *Il tramonto dell'uomo. La prospettiva post-umanista* (2009b), he observes that the resemblance between post-humanism and pre-humanism can be found in the way neither perspective requires recourse to a discourse of total liberation, of full independent sovereignty from or over the non-animal world on the part of the human. While for Humanism,

È esplicito l'intento emancipativo – liberare dai rimandi al divino e realizzare una visione fattivamente antropocentrica, ossia non più inquinata dal teocentrismo, con il risultato di assegnare all'uomo piena potestà sulla dimensione umana – il post-umanismo rifiuta proprio questa corrispondenza, che si fonda sulla pretesa di autosufficienza ontologica. Questo è il punto di passaggio e questo è il motivo per cui, per certi versi, il post-umanismo ricorda alcune impostazioni pre-umanistiche [2009b, 34].

Both pre- and post-humanism refuse the insistence on that autonomy (dignity of man) that is so fallacious and yet so crucial to the humanist position. But autonomy, pushed out

the front door, sneaks back through the window of a posthumanism that persists in the perpetuation of the fantasy of bodiless embodiment.

Braidotti's deleuzian conceptualization of becoming-animal² offers a possible pathway out of the constitutive contradiction of Marchesini's gender-unmarked posthumanism by re-asserting the primacy of embodiment and thereby re-dimensioning the nature-woman identification – not in contradistinction to culture-man, as before, but rather as the decoupling of the dyads in favor of a more fluid reticular arrangement. In this economy, relations to non-human others are not pre-determined by sex and are neither the privileged nor the disparaged domain of any group but rather part and parcel of the human experience; the fullest form of the conjugative relations of which Marchesini speaks:

Becoming-animal consequently is a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared works, a territorial space. It expresses multiple ecologies of belonging, while it enacts the transformation of one's sensorial and perceptual coordinates in order to acknowledge the collective nature and outward-bound direction of what we call the self. This is in fact a moveable assemblage within a common life-space that the subject never masters or possesses, but merely inhabits, crosses, always in a community, a pack, a group, or a cluster. Becoming-animal marks the frame of an embodied subject, which is by no means suspended in an essential distance from the habitat/environment/territory, but is rather radically immanent to it. For philosophical nomadism, the subject is fully immersed in and immanent to a network of nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral) relations. The zoe-centered embodied subject is shot through with relational linkages of the symbiotic contaminating/viral kind that interconnect it to a variety of others, starting with environmental or eco-others [Braidotti, 2011, 94-95].

Moreover, there are political repercussions to the expulsion of the feminine, non-human other from the human assembly. Consider Agamben: «In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin Western politics is also biopolitics»

² Braidotti synthesizes the feminist appeal of becoming-animal in the following way: it «speaks to [her] feminist self, partly because [her] sex, historically speaking, never quite made it into full humanity, so [her] allegiance to that category is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted» (2011, 96).

(2004, 80). Far from man's subjugation of woman as an act of resistance against nature, the integration of nature opposes the restriction of the political to that which is proper to man. Open ethical relations with alterity are only possible in an economy of sexual difference that recognizes «a pre-discursive structure of the "self", of necessary loss of that which is always already there – an affective, interactive entity endowed with intelligent flesh and an embodied mind» (Braidotti, 2011, 53), as the posthumanist iterations of constitutive hybridity currently in circulation do not. Put differently, Agamben declares that man becomes animal at the end of history and thus the end of history is the end of man. Here (though these are not his terms), Agamben could also be read to say: the end of history is the end of the fantasy of universal neutral man.

Birth and death

The other object of interest here has to do with posthuman temporalities. Thus my second set of observations addresses Adriana Cavarero's takes, in *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Re-writing of Ancient Philosophy* (translated by Aine O'Healy and Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 1995), on maternity, on the one hand, and on weaving, on the other, for the ways they offer insight into any posthuman thought that seeks to sidestep the question of gender, because feminist perspectives on birth allow for the emergence of multiple posthumanist temporalities that resist the singular (and consequently reproductive, heteronormative) humanist one for which existence is scanned only in the order birth-maturity-reproduction-death³.

The work, now familiar, of Adriana Cavarero on the figures of Demeter and Penelope are instructive in this regard. In her examination of the figure of Demeter, Cavarero re-introduces death outside the conventional symmetrical pairing (since Plato, Cavarero avers) of birth and death, the feminine and masculine kingdoms [...] as oppositional categories (Cavarero, 1995, 58). And in doing so, she illuminates the path to

³ Marchesini, for example, rehearses the Western humanist position on maternity as the passive result of active insemination (*Posthumanism*, 80) and examines the politics of reproductive technologies (417-428) but does not address a sexed, embodied posthumanist maternity.

MATERIALS

an alternative posthumanist feminist temporality that resists the standard (and standardizing) heteronormative, univocal humanist temporality upon which sexless posthumanisms are constructed. For Cavarero's Demeter is not inscribed in a cyclical, seasonal temporal logic by which warm and cold seasons – fertile and sterile, respectively – alternate in accordance with the presence or absence of Demeter's daughter Kore from her mother's sight. Rather, when Kore is not visible to Demeter, the recognition of female generative subjectivity – that is, the fact that we are born from sexed bodies, and the sex of those bodies is female – is cancelled out, and «birth itself, *phyein*, ceases to happen» (1995, 64). Thus it is not that the power not to generate emerges and becomes operative at specific intervals, as a singular humanist temporality suggests; rather, it is in a different temporal register – the erasure of the sexed body –that reveals the concomitant power of generation and its cessation, of birth and birth-no-more:

To put it in more modern terms, the myth of Demeter reveals a sovereign figure of female subjectivity who decides, in the concrete singularity of every woman, whether or not to generate. For this sovereign figure, the act of generating is a prerogative rooted in her power –and therefore in her choice –to carry it out. It is not a duty imposed by a socially prescribed, external ethics supposedly inscribed in the law of nature. Quite to the contrary, far from being a force that prescribes an act of generation in which the mother is supposed to be an instrument, *physis* shows itself to be at one with the mother and to be rooted in her choice. The mother either assists or vetoes the birth that constitutes *physis*, not vice versa. [...] Thus the choice that belongs constitutively to maternal power carries within it, like all secrets, something truly dreadful: the possibility of nothingness, the annihilation of humankind, the desolation of the earth [1995, 64-65].

This temporal register aligns Cavarero's thought with that of evolutionary biologist François Jacob, who claims that, in Claudia Baracchi's words,

along with sexual reproduction death would provide the necessary condition for life, most notably in the perspective of evolution: «Not death coming from the outside as the consequence of some accident», he elucidates, «but rather death coming from within as a necessity prescribed, already in the egg, by the genetic program» [Baracchi, 2008, 319-332].

Another approach to Cavarero's Demeter might be to consider it inimical to Agamben's idea, following Xavier Bichat, that birth marks the threshold between the organic and the relational: «the function of maternity is reproductive, and the function of reproduction is social» (2004, 14-15). Agamben describes the distinction between organic and animal life, and Marchesini seems to assume (though Agamben interrogates it) the position that the two can be sundered, and the former disregarded in favor of the latter. When the pre-philosophical moment (Braidotti's term) is erased, the animal is untethered from the material or embodied and becomes the social. Cavarero's Demeter, in contrast, assumes a birth that disrupts Bichat's relations between the organic and the animal when she asserts the primacy of a sexed embodiment.

It is not that, as with some postmodern philosophies, the feminine stands in as the site and threat of crisis of phallogocentrism, and consequently that a degendered posthumanist embodiment refuses to participate in the project of bolstering the crumbling edifice of masculinism. My point, rather, is that the appropriation and relocation of reproduction in a new, technologized key performs two deleterious functions from the standpoints both of feminism and of the development of a coherent theory of the posthuman. First, it effectively papers over or conceals the maternal as a pre-discursive moment, and thus facilitates the appearance of a posthumanism precisely *not* grounded on the outmoded exclusionary principles of humanist thought. And second, such a stance obstructs a clear view to the ways certain posthumanist thinkers in fact not only accept uncontested but indeed refuse to acknowledge the obfuscation of a maternal symbolic (in birth) as necessary foundational to their position.

Cavarero's Penelope, too, offers a model – this time, of multiple embodied temporalities – that opposes the unspoken instrumentalization of humanist chronology by posthumanism. The doing and undoing of her weaving resists the time of heroes, a masculinist «tempo of pressing events following one after the other» (1995, 15); Penelope's time, in contrast, dilates and expands, becoming «an absolute time removed from history's events» (1995, 14). Unweaving what she has already woven and thereby «nullifying the role that the patriarchal symbolic order has assigned to her» (1995, 16), hers is thus, for Cavarero, a feminine symbolic order that I, in turn, take not so much for the sake of an alternative to the masculine symbolic order as in order to bolster the

kinship between posthumanism and a pre-discursive or embodied moment [before the symbolic matricide that ushers in History or, in Braidotti's words, «masculine fantasy of self-birth through rational acquisition – the mind replacing the womb as site of creation» (2011, 93). Agamben, in *The Open*, remarks: «the arrival at post-history necessarily entails the reactualization of the prehistoric threshold at which that border had been defined. Paradise calls Eden back into question» (2004, 21)].

Penelope's is the time of women, embodied, active time, not the thinking time of men: «feminine time [...] impenetrable to the patriarchal order» (Cavarero 1995, 17), that is, time founded in a social role that in turn is coterminous with the material. It is her sexed embodiment – her entirety in action [«all of this feminine figure resides in her domestic work, in a sort of wholeness that does not permit a separation of body (the work of the hands) and mind (thought)» (1995, 18)] that authorizes this refractoriness to thinking time, discursive time. Sexual difference, as opposed to a conception of sexuality that is discursive, or infinitely free-floating, is crucial to the shaping of time. It does not imply the imposition of linear time but sets experiential markers that allow life to emerge, unfettered by dominant humanist eschatological narratives.

Conclusion

The qualities of posthuman body – of which Marchesini's hybrid, vulnerable iterations are noteworthy examples – are admirably apposite for the ways they open the body to regimes of potentiality and non-rationality, but the theoretical and ethical potency of that conceptualization of the body is obviated by the system in which it is embedded, in which sexual difference is occluded by a fallacious Universal Neutral.

Indeed posthumanist thought in its most common current formulations is blind to the flaunting of one of its own theoretical tenets and thus conceals its dependence on humanist primacy of a discursive subject over an embodied one, rather than contesting it. Cavarero, Braidotti and materialist feminism bring to posthumanism a very necessary corrective, that is, their philosophies (even to the extent that their humanist foundations emerge and become operative) countenance both the sexed body and the body in

multiple, not singular, temporalities – not simply as it comes into and departs from existence in birth and death but constituted simultaneously in plural chronologies (embodied and embedded, Braidotti says, though embedded for her means situated as much historically and politically as it does existentially). A more corporeally feminist posthumanism acquires a broader base for activism; without it, posthumanism abdicates its enormous visionary potential in favor of a sterile, factionalized status quo.

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MATERIALS

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