

METAMORPHIC OTHERS AND NOMADIC SUBJECTS

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We are not all humans, or not human to the same degree, not if by 'human' you mean to refer to the dominant vision of the Subject as white, male, heterosexual, urbanized, able-bodied, speaking a standard language and taking charge of the women and the children. Many of us belong to other, more marginalized categories or groups: non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, not urbanized, not able-bodied, not speaking a standard language, not in charge of the women and the children. The world itself is not human, but teems with organisms and life-forms parallel to but distinct from our species. Those who are other-than-human, or otherwise human, cannot claim full allegiance to the dominant vision of the human subject: their belonging is negotiable at best.

The 'others' are structured with distressing regularity along the axes of devalorized difference. They are the sexualized others: women and LGBT's; the racialized others: natives, post-colonials and non-Europeans; the naturalized or earth others: animals, insects, plants and the planet; and the technological others: machines and their interactive networks.

The dominant subject, on his part, is haunted by his structural 'others', because they are necessary to his self-representation, albeit by negation. They are the complement to that subject, who constructs himself as much through what he excludes, as through what he includes in his sense of himself, his agency and his entitlements. The devalued 'others' constitute therefore the specular counterparts of the subject: different from him, they are valued less than him. Difference in this respect is indexed negatively on that standard definition of the human subject: normality is the zero-degree of difference.

Given the structural importance of these 'others' as props that confirm the 'same' in his dominant subject-position, their sheer existence is a source of perennial anxiety because it illuminates the complex and dissymmetrical power-relations at work in the constitution of the dominant subject-position. Because this system of difference-as-pejoration fulfils a structural and constitutive function in subject formation processes, it also occupies a strategic position, as it has the power to challenge the very foundations of the self-other relationship.

Most of the liberation movements of the second half of the 20th century were marked by the 'return' of the 'others', expressing a proliferation of 'differences' which refused to

remain captive of the dialectical mode of opposition to the dominant subject in which they had been historically framed. For instance the women's movement (the sexualized 'others') left an indelible scar on the social and symbolic tissue of phallogocentric culture by challenging phallogocentric habits of social interaction, cultural representation and thought, thus exposing male-centred power structures. The insurgent and emergent subjectivities from the post-colonial world (the racialized 'others') challenged the Euro-centred world-view, denouncing material and symbolic structures of colonial domination and oppression. In the post-communist, globalized world, the social construction of 'threatening migrants and alien others' has spread to entire new sections of the world population, broadening the process of negative racialization. It has inserted a new level of fear into the social structure and has come to rely on regimes of constant surveillance and detention of illegal migrants, much of which is technologically mediated. The war on terror has forged a new image for the enemy of humanity: the home-grown terrorist who may strike the civilian population at any point: the disastrous attack is certain to occur, it is just a question of time.

To top it all off, ecological disaster has spelled the end of the anthropocentric drive towards mastery of what we used to call nature and of the naturalized others: not only animals, insects, but also plants and in fact the whole earth have emerged as political subjects in their own terms. Humans nowadays have to negotiate with planetary earth forces in the framework of the climate change and of recurring environmental disasters.

Last but not least, the global technological revolution has turned the social sphere into a network society with 24/7 Internet access. This high level of mediation has changed the terms of our interaction as humans, let alone our increasingly intimate relationship to the technological others: mobile phones, tablets and laptops and multiple social networks, which have become the repositories of our personal life, our memories as well as our professional existence. Such unprecedented degree of mediation also makes it very urgent to resolve issues of access to and participation in a democracy that can be threatened by the informatics of domination.

This indicative line-up of the constitutive others constitutes the scaffolding of subjectivity. The sexualized, racialized, naturalized and nowadays even technologically mediated others draw their creative but also disruptive force precisely from the fact that they embody and express the view of those pejorative and yet structurally necessary 'others' who constitute the boundary-markers of the dominant vision of the subject. In the subversive

mode, they constitute both the symptom of the crisis of dominant subjectivity and the expression of altogether new subject-positions. The ‘others’ may well be a fundamental resource for the dominant subject, but they are also a constant challenge.

Beyond metaphors

The bodies and lives of ‘others’ have historically been made available to the dominant subject and hence become disposable, mainly in terms of physical and social exploitation. Just think of the oppression of women and LGBT’s, of colonial domination and the depletion of the earth resources. Their disposable status, however, also contains more symbolic dimension: the others are a site of preferred fantasy and imaginary projection and as such they are easily metaphorized as the objects of the dominant subject’s desire, or wishes. Familiarity with these others is a relationship uncomfortably ridden with hierarchical power relations: women and LGBT’s, natives and animals and mechanic or technological devices can become objects of both fascination and aberration. In other words, they function as metamorphic others, reflecting the dominant subject’s own concerns and anxieties. We humans identify with them, out of fear or fascination.

The sexualized, racialized, naturalized and technological others, while being socially marginalized, are also living metaphors, referents for alternative symbolic values and meanings, highly iconic emblems within language and culture. Being feminized, racialized or animalized are patterns of pejoration of the human subjects that tend to be coded negatively both morally and emotionally: they express decreasing degrees of being-human. They signify respectively: loss of mastery in terms of virility (sexualized others), civilizational superiority (racialized others) and species hierarchy (both naturalized and technological others). These same negative qualities, however, exert a strange and fatal attraction and can be reversed into fantasy landscapes and desirable experiences, especially if they are contained in space and time. Feminist theory describes these metaphorical habits as a sort of ‘metaphysical cannibalism’, (Braidotti, 1991) that feeds upon its structurally excluded others in both social and symbolic, or semiotic and material terms. Metaphorization of the devalorized others expresses the ontological violence of the dominant subject.

The reason why the ‘others’ play such a role in the social imaginary is that they offer sites of formation of negative counter-subjectivities; they provide privileged negative mirror-images, often expressed in terms of monstrous and alien others. A kind of ‘Gothic’ imagery is

associated with the metaphorized, devalued others, expressing again that structural ambivalence of repulsion and attraction. In the eyes of the dominant subject, the boundaries of the others are porous and fluid, not fixed socio-symbolically into robust structures of selfhood. Thus, by blurring the boundaries of differentiation, the devalorized or 'monstrous' others signify the difficulty in keeping manageable margins of differentiation of the boundaries between self and other. In this respect the devalued others are objects of horror, in Kristeva's sense of the term, by blurring boundaries and instantiating the cultural fascination with the amorphous, the shapeless and the obscene.

As a result, the axes of sexualization, racialization, naturalization and technological mediations very often cross into and merge with each other, producing representations of women and natives as animals, or robots and technological apparati as living organisms. In other words, the metamorphic other provide a repertoire of fantastic representations that combine the metaphysical cannibalism of the metaphorization processes with fantasmatic transformation of self and other into recombined figures and images. From Ovid's classical *Metamorphoses* text to contemporary graphic novels, the white, male human melts and devolves into sexualized, racialized, naturalized and technologically mediated others with ease and panache, as this kind of access to a number of 'body doubles' were perfectly normal. A sense of great ontological entitlement is needed to support such imaginary consumption of other bodies.

Metamorphic creatures are uncomfortable 'body-doubles' or simulacra that simultaneously attract and repel, comfort and unsettle: they are objects of adoration and aberration that play upon the deeper structures of our sense of identity. One is reminded of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath who saw in their mirrors monsters emerging from the depth of their inner selves. Difference is often experienced as negative by women and LGBT's themselves and represented in their cultural production in terms of aberration or monstrosity.

The metamorphic dimension fulfills another function, in that the monstrous triggers the recognition of a sense of multiplicity contained within the same self. It is an entity whose multiple parts are neither totally merged nor totally separate from the human observer. Freaky or monstrous representation of other bodies fulfil therefore a paradoxically reassuring function in the anxiety-ridden contemporary imagination. As the photographer Diane Arbus suggested: freaks have already been through their accident or catastrophic event, they live with their trauma and have come out at the other end. If not quite survivors, they are at least resilient in their capacity to metamorphose and thus survive and cope. Many early twenty-first century humans,

on the other hand, may have serious doubt about their capacity to cope, let alone survive in the complexities of the contemporary globalized world. Monstrous others can afford us a welcome emotional relief and a break from the generalized political economy of fear, precisely by incarnating fully its destructive potential. Monstrous others are 'metamorphic' creatures who fulfil a kaleidoscopic mirror function and make us aware of the risks we are taking and living through in these post-nuclear/ industrial/ modern/ human days. The metamorphic power of monstrous others serves the function of illuminating the thresholds of 'otherness' while displacing their boundaries. Their effect is cathartic, as if the monster was within our embodied self, ready to unfold.

Although the term 'monster' must be reserved for animate or organic entities, I would argue for a structural analogy between the organic monster and the technological other, especially if it is represented in anthropomorphic images. Body-doubles, robots or automates have in fact the same metamorphic effect on the human observers as the monstrous devalorized organic others. They are objects of wonder and terror, loathing and desire. As body-doubles, they represent a re-assembly of organic parts, often arranged in a new order: organs are metamorphically redesigned by excess, lack or displacements from their 'natural' locations. Quite often, the re-arrangement of organic parts in the mechanical body-double expresses a fantastic and playful array of alternative body-shapes, bodily functions, morphologies and sexualities. As such, the technological anthropomorphic machine is an object of imaginary projections and fantasy. It can be a mixture of human and non-human parts, half insect and half metal, as in the worst science fiction horror movie.

The automaton lends itself to such fantasmatic usages and it therefore plays a paradoxical role within scientific and cultural practice. On the one hand it exemplifies the potency of scientific rationality to master life and the living, on the other hand it defies rational understanding. While being very much itself, the technological body-double is also irrevocably other. It is consequently positioned in ways that are analogous to the classical 'others' of modernity: the sexual, the ethnic and the natural others. As such it embodies the paradox of an irreducible singularity that serves as the model of expression for the innermost human faculties, while it renders them as external functions autonomous from the subject. Like the Frankensteinian body-double, the automaton is a mixture, a mix of detachable parts and organs, a collage or montage of pieces. As such it is marked by ambiguity and polyvalence and it is linked to the monstrous through the mixture of fascination and horror,

which it provokes by being such a liminal borderline figure. The technological other is monstrous because it blurs the boundaries, it mixes the genres, it displaces the points of reference between the normal—in the double sense of normality and normativity—and its ‘others’. It sticks to us, it settles in the recesses of our psyche and works from within.

Nomadic becomings

The work of Oliver Laric expresses and explores in the contemporary global context, the challenge that the hybrid, the anomalous, the monstrous metamorphic others throw in the direction of dominant subject positions and their century-old metaphorization habits. Laric expresses a new cultural and political sensibility that calls for active dissociation from those bad old habits which pathologized and criminalized metamorphic others and encourages us to think again and think harder about our relationship to otherness.

In my own reflexion on this subject (Braidotti 2002; 2006; 2013) I have argued that we have to approach the devalued and monstrously different others not as signs of pejoration, but in the positivity of their difference. The others embody the unfolding of virtual possibilities that point to positive developments and alternatives and they do so in their own terms—each one of them a complex singularity that resists both metaphorization and metaphysical cannibalism. Re-formulated in the language of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 1994; 2011a; 2011b), this would mean that the contemporary metamorphic imaginary, expresses simultaneously two contradictory tendencies. As a reactive or negative reaction, it expresses on the one hand the fear and the anxieties of the dominant subject-position of the male, white, heterosexual, urbanised property-owning speaker of a standard language, at a historical time when his social and symbolic entitlements are crumbling. As an active, or affirmative and empowering act, on the other hand, it expresses the specificity of the ‘others’ and their own positive subjectivity. This qualitative shift of perspective is what I call the processes of becoming-nomadic subjects.

The point and the cultural challenge is to break the bad old metamorphic habits and the dialectics that underscore them so as to develop modes of inter-relation and representation of the ‘others’ in an affirmative and empowering manner, rather than in an exploitative and consumeristic manner. Nomadic subjects are subjects in process, that have relinquished the dialectical mode of relation to others by giving priority to the critique of the formerly dominant model of subjectivity and thus putting on the spot the discourse of the master subject. Rather

than putting the burden of truth on the constitutive, but also disposable others, nomadic subjects attack Master's discourse and expose his structural weakness and dependency on the very others it oppresses and consumes. This is what is at stake in the nomadic theory of becoming.

Becoming nomadic works on a time sequence that is neither linear nor sequential, because they are not predicated upon a stable, centralized Self who supervises their unfolding. They rather rest on a non-unitary, multi-layered, dynamic vision of the subject. For instance, becoming woman/animal/insect is a process, a sensibility and an affect that flow in and from each, becoming actualized in new modes of ethical and aesthetic relation. It is not about metaphors, but about experientially undoing the boundaries of otherness by allowing the others to express their singularity and specificity outside of any dialectical scheme of reduction and metaphysical consumption. Becomings are itineraries without fixed targets or destinations, but are punctuated by constant encounters with otherness as a multi-layered and multi-directional landscape. Nomadic subjects push themselves to the limit in a constant encounter with external, different others. The nomadic subject as a non-unitary entity is simultaneously self-propelling and outward-bound. All becomings are minoritarian, that is to say they inevitably and necessarily move in the direction of the "others" of classical dialectics but not in order to consume them. It rather dis-places them and engages with his/her external others in a constructive, "symbiotic" block of becoming, which bypasses dialectical interaction. 'Becoming' is a persistent challenge and an opposition to dominant unitary identities and outside dialectical oppositions and teleological models.

These patterns of nomadic becoming can be visualized alternatively as sequential modes of affirmative deconstruction of the dominant Subject-position (masculine/white/heterosexual/speaking a standard language/property-owning/urbanized etc.). Or else, as the expression of the specificity of those who until now had been reduced to devalued otherness. Nomadic becoming asserts the potency of expressing virtual possibilities of interaction with others and the different stages or levels of becoming trace an itinerary that consists in erasing and recomposing the former boundaries between self and others. Becoming:woman/insect/imperceptible/molecular are deconstructive steps across the boundaries that used to separate dialectically the dominant subject from others. Therefore, it is impossible to separate out the becoming-woman/animal/insect/earth from the other multiple becomings: they form a zig-zagging itinerary across many thresholds of 'becoming-nomadic. They are qualitative transitions that cross through the others and keep on moving into the 'becoming-imperceptible'

and ‘becoming earth’. They are not systematic, linear or teleological stages or phases of becoming, each plateau marking instead a framed and sustainable block or moment of immanently actualized transformations.

The nomadic subject expresses the figuration of a situated, posthuman, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject released from the burden of dialectics. This figuration translates our shared desire to explore and legitimate political agency, while taking as historical evidence the decline of metaphysically fixed, steady identities. Critique and creativity need to join forces to fill in the imaginary deficit and design new forms of interaction with otherness . Critical theory is both the quest for and the creation of new ways of thinking. We need systems of thought, as well as cultural and aesthetic paradigms that can help us think about change, transformation, living transitions in an affirmative manner. I value a creative, non-reactive project, emancipated from the oppressive force of the traditional dialectical approach.

Implicit in the nomadic subject is the belief in the political relevance of the aesthetic practice of the imagination, as a way to step out of those bad old habits of thought that harped on metamorphic devalued others. Art practices may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems. The nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior. The central issue at stake is the inter-connectedness between identity, otherness, subjectivity and power. The nomadic subject combines coherence with mobility. It aims to rethink the subject-other relationship without reference to humanistic beliefs, without dualistic oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new set of intensive and often intransitive transitions. The political challenge is how to respect cultural diversity without falling into relativism or political despair. Relativism is a pitfall in that it erodes the grounds for possible inter-alliances or political coalitions. Because the nomadic subject is culturally driven, it is a form of subjectivity that cannot be dissociated from the cultural or the aesthetic, simply because it involves the creation of sustainable alternatives and social horizons of hope for contemporary subjects. Conceptual and perceptual creativity is the key issue in redefining contemporary subjects-in-process as accountable entities capable of meta-stability and peaceful cohabitation with human and non-human others in the contemporary globalized world.

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