

Recensione

R. Gruisin (ed.), *Anthropocene Feminism. Between human/non-human valorization and the notion of difference*

University of Minnesota Press 2017

Mariaenrica Giannuzzi

This recent anthology *Anthropocene Feminism* commits itself to «an experiment in collective theorizing» in liaison with Anglophone feminist voices around this eco-political controversy.

The anthology consists of eight contributions, an introduction and a conversation. Its project was established in the fall 2013 with Rebekah Sheldon, Emily Clark and Dehlia Hannah (Arizona University, Synthesis Center – who is here in conversation with artist *Natalie Jeremijenko's New Experimentalism*) while designing the 2014 annual spring conference at the Center for 21st Century Studies (C21) University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee – which then Gruisin directed. The anthology displays well-known names together with names that may sound less popular, those latter being an opportunity to get to know the landscape of feminist materialism 'in America'. Most of the scholars in this collection, in fact, have variously worked on the historico-natural composition of bodies in philosophy, literature and science. So, the landscape is flourishing. And its most general continuity is challenging Foucauldian biopolitics with the urge to tell how to act differently and how the scale of difference appears.

Geologist Jill Schneiderman originally illustrates a story of the controversial epoch in the eighth essay *The Anthropocene Controversy*. Schneiderman pushes back its theoretical outset in order to connect with an analogous example, The Great Devonian Controversy in the 1830s (pp. 169-196). What was then at stake was the semantic coal-bearing layer named after Devon, England (where rocks from this economically significant time between 416 and 358 millions years ago in the Paleozoic era were first studied), after Welsh tribes, or after a toponym which belonged to the Roman Empire, i.e., the Cambrian, a classical name for Wales, or those Ordovician and Silurian, named after Welsh tribes (p. 173). Recalling Sandra Harding's empiricism and Londa Schiebinger's history of

science, Schneiderman argues how «names given to all episodes of geologic time are based on social decisions» (p. 175) hence those decisions are gendered – like Linneus' decision of naming «warm-blooded, hairy animals, Mammalia, even though *mammae* are not a pronounced unifying characteristic of this group [...]. Milk-producing *mammae* function only on half of these animals (the females), and only then for part of the time when they are lactating» (pp. 172-175).

More than accepting an order of things that would have featured a human group with hair, three ear bones or a four chambered heart in continuity with ungulates, sloths, bats, sea cows and apes, all sharing the same characteristics, this reduction of human species to female features, and the female function to motherhood, of course, «underscores eighteenth-century women's position as nurturing caretakers» (*Ibid.*). Why did Linneus not choose then 'Pilosa' (the hairy one) or 'Aurecaviga' (the hollow-eared ones)? Schneiderman uses Schiebiger's feminist study *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* to envision those cultural forces and pressing political trends, which molded Linneus' view of nature as well as the present controversy (*Ibid.*).

A conflict of names has been forecasted, in fact, in two counterfactual proposals to the category of Anthropocene: *Capitalocene*, used, among others, by Rosi Braidotti – referring to informational data of biocapital – and Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene*, which addresses a technological collective unconscious, more than a geologic epoch. The conflict of names thus reveals a set of pressing cultural and political trends that compete both for defining scientific objects and for defining universal history, after the globalist enthusiasm of the Nineties.

If in her study on *mammalia* Schiebiger proved a spontaneous ethico-political process of naming otherness, newness, unknown and hypothesis, more after difference (and sexual difference as an *icon*), then after identity, the question of gender within the Anthropocene controversy remains thus the question of feminism in relation to geologic time. How can we understand the personal (a political singularity or a social self which is 'more than one') on a geologic time scale? And which are political implications of such a move? Beyond the battlefield of names, moving from a gendered history of names to further philosophical contributions means to reexamine the complex of time and difference.

The collection presents contributors who may be already well known to a feminist European audience, because of some engagement with Spinozian feminist new-materialism – such as the matriarch of Utrecht Rosi Braidotti; or Elizabeth Povinelli, who published her reflections on abandonment as one of the main strategies in the financialization of economics and, more recently, her proposed hermeneutic tactics for *trumpism* in *e-flux* magazine (E. Povinelli, *Geontologies: The Figures and the Tactics*, in «e-flux Journal» <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/78/81514/geontologies-the-figures-and-the-tactics/>). Braidotti and Povinelli are both present here with essays in the shape of statements. The first delivers *Four Thesis on Post-Human Feminism*, the second designs *The Three Figures of Geontology* which are the desert, the animist and the terrorist.

Far from relying on conceptual characters, authors who will explicitly pose the task of difference in the anthology are Claire Colebrook in *We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual* and Lynne Huffer in *Foucault's Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy*. Colebrook's essay opens the collection, it is frequently quoted in other essays within the anthology, and she often leads the reader to exercises in counterfactual:

1. What *is* different about the era of the Anthropocene—anthropogenic climate change on a massive industrialized scale—is not that a stable nature has been disturbed but that humans have increasingly stabilized nature to a mechanized and rigid timetable of production (pp. 1-20).

The political implication of this counterfactual is to understand fear as a matter of agency, and this is a fear that may justify further massive mechanical control of human/non-human interactions. Hence, the second exercise:

2. The same technological-industrial complex developed in a way that drew on a renewable resource that did not pollute the atmosphere (*Ibid.*).

This position does not imply rejecting facts, it creates a space of emergence for those technologies competing «for the point at which differences make a difference» (p. 14). If non-polluting technologies may have existed, they will exist at turning points of current technological processes.

In support of this counterfactual Myra Hird and Alexander Zahara offer a 'very' factual field-study in *The Arctic Wastes*, claiming how before colonization Inuit would have never been a factor of anthropogenic destruction of ecosystems, because of their semi-nomadic organization. The conclusion is of great interest: claiming the inescapability of a technological-industrial complex, namely an Anthropocene, means to declare the inescapability of a colonial and settled organization as well, in other words, its naturalization.

Another field-study in the collection is *Gender Abolition and Ecotone War* by Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr. Despite the title, this study claims the abolition of the Anthropocene as *unicum* in geological history, since «we find ourselves now in what is not *similar* but the *same* crisis of accumulation that arises in the 1960s and it is often assigned to the global collapse of profitability in 1973, its underlying volatility never having been resolved» (p. 153). The actual crisis of capital is not different from its systemic crises, but what normally differs *for capital* is the gender function: «Gender functions *for capital* not as difference but as differential, as a socially arbitrated and ideologically naturalized gap in wage levels across which surplus value flows» (*Ibid.*). Scales of human/non-human valorization is where feminist materialism takes place, in its strategies of denaturalization and renaturalization. This form of materialism is a trend in a philosophy, which often does not pursue critique, but an immanent ontology of the living. According to Lynne Huffer, for instance, the trend does not pursue a symbolic revivification of matter, as it seems to happen in an opposite, but contiguous trend of feminist eco-politics, that of vital materialism, i.e., Jane

Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz (pp. 65-88). Whereby Stacy Alaimo in *Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene Dissolves* focuses on the critique of a (petrographic) technology which is hegemonic in the Anthropocene discourse (which has been described in the third issue of this journal in 2016 as well), Lynne Huffer displaces the Foucauldian question of technology in the post-Foucauldian, or, better, late-Foucauldian sense of «problematizing 'life itself' as the metaphysical ground of our ethics» (p. 67).

This theoretical move involves another level of comparison: observing what a feminist mode of existence adds to techno-normative discourses. Techno-normativism is addressed in this collection since the very beginning, since Braidotti's essay *Four Thesis on Post-Human Feminism*, which echoed Chakrabarty's writing on post-colonial history *The Climate of History: Four Thesis*. If a feminist Anthropocene will ever exist it has to be a political re-organization of our *milieu* toward immanence, more than a project of geoengineering. And if this *milieu* is made of 'studies' – queer science studies, animal studies, biomedical informational science etc. – all those analyzing embodied human flesh, than «vital materialist feminism should strike an alliance with extended mind theories and distributed cognition models inspired by Spinoza and with qualitative neurophilosophies» (p. 33). According to Braidotti, in order to combine the decline of anthropocentrism with issues of social justice, it is important not to work completely within the social constructivism method rather to «emphasize process ontologies that reconceptualize the connection to the nonhuman, vital forces, that is, *zoe*» (*Ibid.*). In the words Huffer uses for the Foucauldian dream of revitalizing the deaths in graves that are archives of intensity, *zoe* might well be defined as that pleasure drive which motivates sexual subjects to play our games of truth in biopower (p. 84).

A certain distance from the post-human predicament can be detected instead by Alaimo's *Shell on acid*. For Alaimo, as well as for Colebrook, the feminist move, more than a process of relational connections, is asking who is the subject of geological history, and why it corresponds to an imaginary of mastering death. In this turn she proposes to dis-identify from Chakrabarty's imaginary of «abstract force», or from the geological phantom of a pure earth (p. 105). The opposite of abstraction and purity, again, is defining a scale of difference, out of continuous political indifference. Consequently, identifications would be more smartly assumed with an oceanographic more than petrographic perspective, whereby the consumption of life results from a cycle of superficial sedimentation and zones of invisibility. Along this line of difference we can situate an interrupted «logic of resemblance»: Huffer's account of what fossils do adumbrates how «the mad logic of resemblance of a fossil record that proleptically tracks life's extinction ruptures the grid that make us – and life itself – intelligible» (p. 85).

The inhuman art of fossils, «a lithic conviviality», orients philosophical reflection from Colebrook's «matters of concern» to a material accountability of language, which is firstly rooted in the greatest pleasure, a «pleasure for the truth of pleasure». In Huffer's homage to *Foucault's Fossils* the 'stuff' (*matière*) of

feminist ethical thinking turns to be a work at intensification. It is not a drive from death to life what moves a desire for ethics, but «something other than human». Like an archive of pleasures.