

POSTHUMAN GLOSSARY

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PLACENTA POLITICS

Placenta politics is a term that I coined to indicate the materialist feminist bio-politics of the relation between the maternal body, the placenta and the foetus. I transpose this maternal-placental-foetal connection into a nomadic frame so as to argue that it composes a generative assemblage. The placental assemblage raises key issues of relationality, immunity and auto-immunity, which are best served by a neo-materialist philosophy of becoming and affirmative ethics within a monistic understanding of matter. I draw on the work of French feminist biologist H el ene Rouch (1987), who was inspired by the philosopher Luce Irigaray (1985a, 1985b) and by Lacanian psychoanalysis to propose the biological entity of the placenta as a third party that redefines the relationship between the maternal body and the other

body, the foetus, in immunological terms. The placenta splits the subject from within, in a non-dialectical process of internal differentiations that predicates the primacy of the 'other within'. Yet, this highly significant configuration has remained unrepresented within phallo-logocentric logic.

Therefore, I suggest moving placenta politics centre stage, but into a different theoretical direction. Firstly, placenta politics upholds an affirmative and non-aggressive bio-politics that opposes the military terminology and concepts that are customary in scientific discussions of immunology. The immunization process is usually formulated in terms of the individual and collective bodies' struggle for homeostatic stability and protection against external aggressive forces. Secondly, this approach to immunology has been taken as an analogy for politics and governance. For instance, Esposito's work on bio-politics (2008b) explores the immunological political economy of hospitality and hostility. I find it disappointing that what was originally a politics of life – bio-politics – which also included a reappraisal of the politics of dying and letting die, has become almost exclusively focused on thanato-politics, to use Foucault's term (1977). In contemporary discussions, this issue blends with necro-politics (Mbembe 2003), that is to say extermination and extinction. Bio-politics should not position life only on the horizon of death, but also as the generative force of both human and non-human organisms (Braidotti 2006b). In terms of the immunological debate this means that the question is not that and how the organism is capable of self-preservation at the expense of some of its weak or diseased parts, but rather that in most cases it actually does not attack them. And I would like to add that, specifically in pregnancy, the organism does usually not expel the foetal other, but rather hosts it and nurtures it.

Wolfe (2010) explores the immunological paradox with Derrida's notion of the pharmakon. This refers to the process by which poison is injected so that the presence of what Nancy (2000) would call 'an intruder' is registered by a constituted system. That encounter, which triggers the infection or the disease, also creates a first line of defence against it. The first line of auto-immunological defence gestures towards a cure or to secure immunity from the very disease that is triggering the composition of the encounter. The auto-immunological principle is that the pathogen that is injected in controlled doses into the body does not destroy the entirety of the organism, but helps the immune system to learn how to defend itself. Derrida's ethics of immunity proposes not the exclusion, but the incorporation and vicarious substitution of the vital/lethal other.

None of these bio-political thinkers, however, ever take the maternal body and the placental assemblage into consideration, which makes Rouch's work all the more significant. Thus, they miss a crucial dimension of the immunity process. In my view, placenta politics is necessary to understand the specific form of auto-immunity that is the maternal-placental-foetal assemblage. Pregnancy foregrounds the crucial idea that the immune system does not always attack what has been injected into the body. If we focus on insemination, gestation and birth, the question shifts to another plateau: what are we to make of the fact that the female body actually hosts and cares for the egg, then embryo, then foetus, then baby? The placenta is the operative factor of immunologically compatibility: it is formed by the extension of the maternal body's blood vessels into another tissue that both connects and separates the embryo from the maternal organism. It is ejected as an extra entity about thirty minutes after the

birth has taken place. This is a far cry from the thanato-political or necro-political discourse of the tactical expulsion of alien elements or the aggressive elimination of the alien other. The paradigm of placenta politics presents instead a model of generative relationality.

In feminist materialist terms the mother-placenta-fetus assemblage can be read as a state of pacifist cooperation and co-creation between organisms, in a specific relational frame that facilitates their co-existence, interaction and growth. The placenta stresses the notion of evolution through mutual cooperation. I argue that the placenta is a powerful figuration – Deleuze (1994) would call it 'conceptual persona' – for a co-creative and collaborative model between separate yet related organisms, agents and living matter: maternal, placental and foetal. Placenta politics is about affirmative ethical encounters – it is the original form of transcorporeality.

I want to argue further that the placenta is the perfect figuration for thinking both unity and diversity, specificity and difference within a monistic frame. It foregrounds nomadic difference as a process of differential modulations by organisms that define themselves by mutual relations within a common matter. By extension it allows us to rethink political and ethical interaction on the basis of a materially grounded understanding of subject-formation. Becoming subject is an embedded and embodied, relational and ethical process framed by multiple encounters with both human and non-human factors and agents.

In order to conceptualize this vision, the best theoretical allies are the ontologically pacifist theorists, inspired by critical Spinozism, like Deleuze (1988b; 1992a). A monistic philosophy allows us to theorize organic processes of collaborative growth,

inserting complexity at the heart of philosophical thought. In this context, the maternal-placental-fetal assemblage can be understood as a figuration of affirmative relationality and multiple becomings. The placenta functions as an interface of multiple particles and components that jointly sustain the dynamic process of forming new organisms. This living process enacts a complex dynamics and expresses an affirmative vision of life as a cooperative effort. Placenta politics so defined expresses the vital force of the multiple agents and forces that co-exist through transformative encounters. Thus it is not only the case that the bio-political and the thanato-political relations exist in a continuum – in keeping with Foucault's original insight – but also that they are constituted by heterogeneous assemblages of diverse components. Placenta politics can be fully situated within the contemporary posthuman landscape.

This has a number of implications also for contemporary posthuman feminist politics (Braidotti 2016a). Firstly, knowing that contemporary nomadic or 'dividual' posthuman subjects are constituted through processes of mutual specification and differential modulation, we can define sexual difference as one of the motors of multiple differing within a common matter. The binary gender system is just a mechanism to capture this sexed multiplicity, which aims at reducing and disciplining the infinite modulations and the 'thousand little sexes' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 277), which constitute our virtual embodied and embedded, affective and relational structure.

Secondly, we need to consider the high level of technological mediation – both bio-genetic and informational – that surrounds sexuality and reproduction today. Contemporary bodies are shaped by a complex interaction of social and bio-

genetic elements, including the multiple hormonally loaded, contraceptive-pill driven, technologically mediated extended mother-machines (Roberts 2016). The toxic pharmacological aspects of contemporary reproduction (Preciado 2013) expose the gender system as a machinery that is currently multiplied, pulped, upheld, hacked, re-constructed and abolished on a daily basis. Both gene-editing and gender-editing have become part of our vocabulary and our social as well as technological practices.

It follows that we need more studies of placenta politics and the immunological paradigm within the feminist framework of bodily neo-materialist posthuman thought. By extension, it is also important to re-frame the maternal body. Where placenta politics offers a new line of thought for bio-politics and thereby a new possibility for critical reflection on both relational ethics and reproductive labour, the category of the pregnant posthuman (see *Pregnant Posthuman*) posits the maternal body as a subject, which supplies us with a figure as a starting point for critique, for re-thinking itself, and for developing and defending a different, sexuate ethics.

Cyberfeminism and Xenofeminism argue that the maternal body – technically female (see *Xenofeminsim*) – is not one. The myriad of technologically mediated practices and socially differentiated modes of mothering, ranging from surrogacy to the recently approved three-parent family, are the result of the pervasive impact of the apparatus of reproductive technologies and socio-economic practices. The explosion of the alleged linearity of the reproductive process also introduces new actors, from external donors to internal gene-editing practices, all of them reliant on technological mediation. Placenta politics respects this complexity while foregrounding the

specificity of the maternal-placental-fetal assemblage.

A posthuman theory of the subject emerges therefore as an empirical project that aims at experimenting with what contemporary, bio-technologically mediated bodies are capable of doing. These non-profit experiments with contemporary subjectivity actualize the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature-culture continuum and is technologically mediated. Not surprisingly, this non-profit, experimental approach to different practices of subjectivity runs against the spirit of contemporary capitalism. The perversity of this system, and its undeniable success, consists in re-attaching the potential for experimentation with new subject formations, back to an overinflated notion of possessive individualism (Macpherson 1962), fuelled by a quantitative range of consumers' choices. This is precisely the opposite direction from the non-profit experimentations with intensity, which I defend in my theory of posthuman subjectivity.

A neo-materialist nomadic approach allows us to analyse and re-think this posthuman 'exploded maternal body' thoroughly and to situate 'feminicity' (see *Feminicity*) in an ethically accountable framework. The impact of the fast-progressing reproductive technologies upon the complex maternal assemblage is best addressed within a neo-materialist nomadic philosophy of becoming geared to an affirmative relational ethics. The emphasis on monism casts a new light on explorations of the shifting boundaries between life and death and on the ethical and political implications for posthuman thought. Placenta politics expresses not only a new immunological paradigm, but also the posthuman politics of affirmation of life as radical immanence.

See also Pill, the; Pregnant Posthuman; Joy; Bios; Material Feminisms; Feminist Posthumanities; Trans-corporeality; Trans*; Feminicity.

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