

# Introduction

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Why Deleuze? Why now? One answer to this problem might appear to lie in Gilles Deleuze's affirmation of difference, thus placing him and his work in a far more general resistance to the Western metaphysical tradition's commitment to being as self-identical. Perhaps, as the postmodern attention to language and signification has demonstrated, what something *is* is an effect of a dispersed system of relations and differences, with relativity being that which conditions experience but remains necessarily beyond experience. One should no longer strive to know or determine being, and in this liberation from some ultimate ground one abandons all moralism, prescriptivism and hierarchy. The postmodern world is a world without meta-narratives or authority only because it is also a world without ground. When Deleuze and Guattari insist that relations are external to the terms related (Deleuze and Guattari 3), they challenge the common sense assumption that our experienced world and its order are the direct and immediate outcome of underlying identities or substances.

The general appeal of Deleuze for feminism has, for some time now, resulted from the identification of Deleuze as a philosopher of difference: as a critic of ultimately determining substance, as an antidote to the Hegelian interpretation of difference as the mere vehicle for identity and knowledge, and as an antagonist of all that is Platonic, stable or unified. Both the excitement and the alarm generated by Gilles Deleuze's concept of "becoming-woman" lay in its seemingly post-modern potential. Feminists had long noted that appeals to essence, nature, being or necessity had done them no favours. As long as "woman" had a nature, patriarchy could be explained and justified. While postmodernism in general appeared to offer a liberating anti-foundationalism, where women were no longer tied to their biology or history, Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis

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on difference and becoming actually offered “woman” as the key to all becomings (Deleuze and Guattari 275). In this regard, while reservations were expressed about the appropriation of the feminine for yet one more liberating theory that had not yet considered the concrete embodiment of women’s struggles, Deleuze could also be hailed as part of a post-modern pantheon of difference. Here, Deleuzian “becoming” would free the concept of woman from its humanist and patriarchal dependency on man, remove all thought of a prescriptive, identity-based or essentialist feminism, and enable sexual difference to be thought beyond its usual binary and hierarchical figures. While post-modernism in general is an anti-essentialism, Deleuze’s becoming-woman has the added benefit of tying the project of fluidity, non-identity, difference and mobility to that which has always been identified with natural inertia, biology, timelessness and non-transcendence--the feminine. Woman or the feminine would be the key to all becomings, then, not because of any essence, but because man or the human has been constructed as that which establishes the truth of identity and presence. Woman could be affirmed strategically as that which has always been associated with the other of man; “becoming-woman” signals that space or imagined other necessary to the production of the male subject as the truth and order of female matter.

Until relatively recently feminist approaches to Deleuze have therefore been oriented by the problem of difference’s anti-essentialist force. Early assessments of Deleuze expressed reservations about the affirmation of difference and non-identity just as women were beginning to form their own subject positions (Jardine). Deleuze could be placed within a tradition of male subjectivity that defines itself in opposition to the mere fixity of being. As Rosi Braidotti noted in *Patterns of Dissonance*, a celebration of postmodern non-identity can function as yet one more maneuver in a tradition of modern Cartesianism that defines the subject as other than any object, as nothing more than the mastery and negation of being-in-itself. While Braidotti has subsequently turned to Deleuze in

an affirmative spirit, she nevertheless tempers her celebration of becoming and nomadic wandering with the recognition that some minimal concept of identity or subject position is necessary for political action. Braidotti herself desists from giving a fully-fledged theoretical answer to the relation between difference and identity but her recognition of the problem opens the way for those feminists who have been stringently critical of the affirmation of difference *per se*.

In opposition to those who have located Deleuze within an affirmative destruction of essence, identity, being and nature, are those feminists who regard difference as a *doxa*, as a definite position, value and decided term within a political arena. The clearest expression of the political and necessary problems in any unthinking celebration of difference is given in Rita Felski's landmark essay "The Doxa of Difference," where, according to Felski, Deleuzian feminism is yet one more example of an unreflective celebration of difference. Difference is, as Felski points out, never *difference in itself*. Difference is always articulated, defended, defined and used from socially and politically constituted positions. Felski's criticism, although it includes Braidotti's turn to Deleuze in its sights, actually offers one of the best opportunities for realizing the feminist potential in Deleuze's philosophy. If feminists are going to be different--if sexual difference can delimit and point beyond the Western logos-- then difference needs to be thought differently, and not just affirmed as one more revolutionary concept.

Deleuzian feminists have, over the past decade, recognized the problem of the social and political meaning of difference and have therefore supplemented Deleuze's project with the analysis of the figures and senses of difference that have inevitably been defined through the image of gender (Lorraine; Olkowski). One should not just affirm "woman" as the other, as different and beyond the strictures of patriarchy; one should, following Irigaray, look at the way oppositions between identity and difference have been defined on the model of the male subject. Only then can becoming-woman be affirmed as more than the celebration of what is dif-

ferent *from* man. Only then can difference be thought not as a value within a field of already defined terms but as what goes beyond the image of man as a thinking being who recognizes, defines and orders difference-- what Deleuze refers to as the "image of thought" (*Difference and Repetition*).

It is possible to criticize Felski for having missed the unique nature of the Deleuzian project. Yes, the postmodern affirmation of difference is an uncritical celebration of a specific value that always emerges from some specific political and social condition, but Deleuze's difference is *not* to be conflated with a bland postmodernism. Just as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have pointed out that global capitalism is enabled and sustained by the simple affirmation of difference and that only the production of a common humanity can effect the imagination of a point beyond the exchange, equivalence and ungrounded flow of capital, so one could turn to Deleuze's difference as radically other than any postmodern notion of a free flow of signifiers. But in order to recognize the force of Deleuze's difference in this sense--as critical of postmodern capitalism's flows of signification--one needs to take Felski's criticism of difference seriously. If Deleuzian difference is *not* a refusal of fixed positions and a retreat from political force just what is it?

Here we need to turn to the feminist work on Deleuze that approaches difference as sexual difference (Grosz), and perhaps we also need to flirt with the concept of essence, a concept that Deleuze himself was capable of articulating in ways that were compatible with positive difference. Today, perhaps, the great divide in the thought of sexual difference lies in the Lacan/Deleuze binary, a binary that, like all other simple dualisms, organizes a complex field of relations, differences, distinctions and contraries. On the one hand, following the seductive mobilization of Lacan by Joan Copjec (1994) and Slavoj Žižek, one could see sexual difference as the figure through which being comes to be. In order to say that anything *is* at all some difference needs to be marked between self and other, between presence and absence, and thought must *both* struggle to

think the “all” of being *and* recognize an “all” that lies beyond thought. This conflict between that which must think all, and that which is not-all is parcelled out into the two logics of male and female subjectivity. Male subjectivity is structured around the abandonment or negation of an outside, and, concomitantly, the “lure of transcendence” or the idea of an “all” to be captured by thought (Copjec 2002, 9). Woman stands for that other logic or non-phallic *jouissance*, for it recognizes that being is not-all; feminine desire is not oriented to totality.

On the other hand, Deleuze offers a way of thinking sexual difference beyond the male-female binary, not because of an anti-essentialism, but because of a far more rigorous essentialism. For if one *really thinks*, if one encounters what *is* in its radical singularity as possessing a power, force and potential—a capacity to relate—that goes beyond constituted terms, then sexual difference no longer explains the *thought (by a subject) of being*. Rather, thinking *is* sexual difference, the desiring response of life to life. And if life is sexually different—becoming through creation, encounter, striving and production—then no single point of creation, such as the difference between male and female bodies, can stand for or explain life or creation as such. Sexual difference is not, thereby, subsumed beneath a general notion of difference. For the concept itself is seen as an event of sexual difference, as one of the ways in which life preserves in its being, enables action and effects relations—relations that are both the effect of an encounter but that also determine what each point of relative stability in any encounter *is*. Thought can only have a world because something offers itself *to be thought*, but this neither determines what thinking is, nor does it exhaust the potential of the world to produce other encounters, beyond those of thought or what we have taken thought to be. One might have to think different styles of thinking, different modes of conceptualization, different responses to life on the basis of different bodily forces. If biologism and essentialism have been placed as pejoratives in postmodern feminist discourse this is because biology has been seen as a determin-

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ism, where social relations flow from the being of bodies or the essence of individuals. But Deleuze's biological life does not have its basis in a plane of substances that then produce relations. On the contrary, one can--and one should--strive to imagine different worlds where the essences, singularities and differences of life are not reduced to any single logic or set of relations, such as the relation between man and woman. In this regard, one could go beyond the idea that Deleuze offers a future to feminism by giving women a way of thinking essence as a potential to become, and say that feminism offers Deleuzian philosophy a future. If difference is to be more than just a single flow or system of relations then one might need to begin with *at least* one other sexed subject, one other body whose desire is not that of subject grasping the being of an object.

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