

Becoming-maternal: things to do with Deleuze

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When I was first asked to participate in this conference, my immediate thought was that I would do something that would relate to my growing appreciation of Deleuze. Given that the privileged discourses that bring us together are psychoanalysis and the maternal, it seemed to make good sense that a Deleuzian alternative should be heard. Although there is nothing directly related in my own past work, I had not anticipated that the whole discourse of the maternal and motherhood should be represented only by silence in Deleuze's own work, and that feminist scholarship in turn has largely failed to remark that absence. This seems quite extraordinary, particularly in the light of the shared endeavour of both Deleuzian philosophy and feminist takes on the maternal to find ways to not only contest, but to go decisively beyond conventional modes of thought that would recognise value only in the subjectivity of the sovereign individual. At very least, psychoanalysis has not made that mistake, but I cannot escape the enduring feeling that any model that bases itself around the concept of lack – however that might be twisted and transformed in relation to the maternal – will struggle to incorporate the positivity that would critically revalue the feminine. My fall back position is to offer initially a reading drawn from phenomenology, by now an established path for feminists, but to swiftly move on to speculate on how the slide from encounter to connection might open up at very least a quasi-Deleuzian approach. This paper, then, steps out into somewhat uncharted territory, gleefully taking Deleuze at his own word and raiding his philosophical toolbox. As Colombat helpfully puts it: 'The problem is not to vow allegiance to a given vocabulary, but to connect oneself to a *thought* that *develops* through a virtually unending creation of concepts' (1991, p. 16).

My starting point, then, derives from the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty – itself another area of gender unawareness – and its subsequent development in the specific area of the maternal through the work of feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray (1993), Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Iris Marion Young (1990). Although Merleau-Ponty clearly questions the binary of inside/outside in his insistence on the interplay between the psychical and the physiological, when it comes to the encounter with the other, he remains largely concerned with the transformatory effects of an externality on the embodied subjectivity of the self. Certainly, human corporeality always goes outside itself, enfolded in and enfolded by the indeterminate flesh of the world – as Grosz explains:

flesh is being as reversibility, being's capacity to fold in on itself, being's dual orientation inward and outward, being's openness, its reflexivity... (1994, p. 44)

Yet for all that Merleau-Ponty understands the senses as reversible, and mutually constitutive, one familiar notion remains: 'I am always on the side of my body' (1968, p. 148). The subject-object distinction bears little resemblance to the ontological separations of the convention but it is not redundant.

In contrast, feminist thought has turned inward to examine both viscerality and the other within the same, especially in the ambiguous relation of self and other in pregnancy, and thereafter in infant care. For Irigaray (1993) in particular, Merleau-Ponty, despite using the language of invagination, repeats the conventional pattern of erasing the debt to maternity, and of not just refusing sexual difference but – subconsciously at least – of reiterating a phallic standard. Irigaray in turn was widely criticised initially for her apparent celebration of the undifferentiated maternal dyad which threatens to resituate the mother as a potentially overwhelming, all-enveloping presence from whose grasp the infant/subject can only eventually emerge by disavowing the state of primary indifferenciation. Subsequent readings of early Irigaray are more nuanced and acknowledge her clear recognition of the dangers of just such a scenario, not least exemplified in her essay 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other' (1981) in which she apparently addresses her own bond to the mother. Nonetheless, she insists that our common – albeit largely disavowed – maternal origin could ground new forms of the imaginary in which subjectivity was marked not by an inflexible reflective interval that locks the binary of self and other into the model of the selfsame, but by the closeness and fluidity of that first embrace which speaks to the contiguity between-subjects:

The internal and external horizon of my skin interpenetrating with yours wears away their edges, their limits, their solidity. Creating another space – outside my framework. An opening of openness. (1992, p. 59)

It is the mediating presence of cotangibility that both holds open an irreducible difference at the 'living, moving border' of the body, and participates in a commonality. Difference remains in touch, figuring a mutuality of sense experience and affect that reshapes all elements of the encounter. What Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty have in common is a keen appreciation of the significance of touch as the sense that both metaphorically and substantively entwines the corporeality of the one with the other, forming a bond that in maternity might be said to precede the emergence and constitution of subjectivity.

**Margrit Schildrick,
Becoming-maternal: Things to do with Deleuze**

All this is highly appealing, but what it suggests to me is a further move from a relational economy of touch that transcribes the maternal-foetal and mother-infant bond to something yet more challenging to the integrity of the embodied subject. If we accept the inter- and indeed intra-dependency of the maternal dyad, then can we not extend that further to take on the model of connectivity that intrigues Deleuze when he writes of desiring machines and assemblages? The instant objection might be that there is an unbridgeable qualitative gap between speaking of the interweaving of human flesh and the human/animal/machine connections that Deleuze proposes. Certainly Deleuze himself would offer no easy correlations, but does not Merleau-Ponty's own concept of flesh ontology, and particularly in his understanding of the 'flesh of the world', go well beyond the merely human? As he develops it in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), flesh designates not a materiality as such but an elemental medium in which self and the world are constituted in mutual relation. To think pregnancy and infant care through the medium of flesh, then, cannot – in Merleau-Ponty's terms – refer to an isolated and self-sufficient dyad. Just as Deleuze and Guattari would claim, we are invested in a wider social and environmental field from the start that fundamentally displaces the psychoanalytic narrative of an individual Oedipalised life in which the closure of the dyad is necessarily breached by the intervention of the 3rd: the Name of the Father.

Deleuze – both with and without Guattari – is little interested in origin stories that name the maternal-feminine and it is not even clear that reproduction is a sexually marked space, but he does pose one interesting question to feminists when he asks:

isn't the supreme goal of the WLM, by mechanized and revolutionary means, the construction of a non-Oedipal woman, in place of the disordering exaltation of mothering and castration? (quoted in Braidotti 1991, p. 117)

Braidotti suggests that such a woman might only be one born without a mother which sounds the alarms of yet another masculinist appropriation of origins, but the problem for Deleuze seems more to be located in the signification of the mother rather than its sexual specificity. Similarly, the language of invagination also reappears – stripped again of sexual difference – but figuring the infolding relationship with otherness that equally rejects the Lacanian account. In his reflection on Foucault, Deleuze writes: 'I do not encounter myself on the outside, | find the other in me... It exactly resembles the invagination of a tissue in embryology' (1988, p. 98). Indeed, it is genetic and molecular biology, not natality, that Deleuze engages with. The problem for feminists – and particularly those who have found a way forward in phenomenology, is that Deleuze refuses to engage with the substantive flesh

**Margrit Schildrick,
Becoming-maternal: Things to do with Deleuze**

of the female body. It is disconcerting to our expectations, but should not forestall further exploration of pathways that might dispense with the Oedipal impasse and lack.

To make sense of the new approach, it is first necessary to understand why Deleuze shows little interest in reproduction as such. The simplest answer would be that reproduction is always subordinated to production where the latter signals a proliferation of difference, a dynamism and vitality that mobilises multiple becomings. Reproduction on the other hand is mere repetition in the sense of the iteration of sameness – ‘in the father’s image’ is the trans-historical trope – and a certain stasis. Although Deleuze is somewhat ambivalent about the term repetition and uses it both positively and negatively, reproduction is clearly associated with a sedimentation of possibility, a closing down of potential. But perhaps we could characterise a rethought maternal desire in the same way that Elizabeth Grosz speaks of Deleuzian desire in general as an unspecified intensity which she calls:

(p)roductive, though in no way reproductive, for this pleasure can serve no other purpose, have no other function, than its own augmentation and proliferation. A production, then, that makes, but that reproduces nothing. (1995, p. 183)

A further highly related point of explanation is that insofar as Deleuze is influenced by Bergson’s notion of vitalism, what matters to him is the endless generation and elaboration of ever new forms of life through the rhizomatic spread of nodules and connective channels, rather than the more familiar pattern of growth and development through aborescent branching that preserves a central origin which remains essential to the whole. The rhizome is composed not of units – like mother/womb/foetus/infant but, say Deleuze and Guattari:

of dimensions, or rather directions in motion... When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 21)

Above all the universe endures, not so much in the individual life recreated generation by generation, but as Braidotti (2006) understands it in the impersonal force of a non-organic power that exceeds the singularity of lived experience and personal interest. If, in such a model, what is meant by life is no longer bookended by the event of personal birth (and finally death), then a radical rethinking of maternity and natality is required. The Western socio-cultural predisposition – if not the psychic one – to identify the maternal, as exemplified in each individual mother, as the root of life, bears less weight than the notion of a generative power sustained not through the closure and self-sufficiency of the maternal-

**Margrit Schildrick,
Becoming-maternal: Things to do with Deleuze**

infant dyad but through multiple connections. But is there a way of thinking beyond the perception that this is just another erasure of the maternal-feminine that leaves women once again unrecognised?

In positing a sense of life as something that far exceeds any particular instances of it, I am not suggesting a turn to spiritualist ideology of whatever form, but rather an exploration of Deleuze's philosophy of becoming other/imperceptible (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) in which the differential 'being' of any subject is always in a process of unravelling through an acknowledgment of the multiple webs of connections that constitute becoming. And when Deleuze insists on the rhizomatic nature of life – its proliferation in ever-new forms along multiple and unpredictable pathways – he decisively breaks with the notion of an atomistic subject – which feminism must surely approve, and signals the possibility of a state of what I shall call *becoming-maternal* as a prepersonal and non-organic power that goes beyond any individual lived experience. It is not of course a term he ever uses, and indeed many feminists have taken issue with the existing concept of becoming-woman insofar as it is a space that may be occupied by anyone, regardless of sexual difference (Battersby 1998; Braidotti 1991; Irigaray 1985). And as Battersby notes:

Deleuze and Guattari do not – cannot – consider the fact that the mother's relationship to her child might produce modes of 'belonging together' that are neither the bonding of two individuals nor a temporary grouping of fragments via 'assemblages'. (1998, p. 194)

But whatever Deleuze may have intended, I cannot believe that an exclusive focus on the feminine as origin and end serves the interests of everyday women well, and particularly in the increasingly diversified and technologised context of natality. In any case, although in the broad sense, the production of life is a continuing project, not a discrete event, and it constitutes what Deleuze calls 'a plane of immanence' (2001, p. 168) – a non-temporal and unstructured coalescence of creative forces – it is continually actualised in the individual body, women's bodies. In other words, it could represent personal value, as well as taking its place in the cycle of becoming. Becoming-maternal, then, is both marked by discrete events and is the locus of incorporeal forces and intensities that have no necessary anchorage in time or place. As a woman, I may be an individual progenitor of life, but more importantly, that singular process is subsumed in the intensity of the irreducible and dynamic force of becoming.

**Margrit Schildrick,
Becoming-maternal: Things to do with Deleuze**

For Deleuze, the potentiality of becoming depends on the processes of connection and transformation, the capacity of desire, in his terms, to enter into surprising assemblages. And, as Parisi notes, the:

production of machinic desire... destratifies the Oedipal woman, organic sex and filiative reproduction by constructing a collective body-sex, letting desire run parallel in all dimensions of communication and reproduction.

(Parisi 2004, p. 39)

It is an approach clearly pertinent to a highly technologised society, and if we begin to understand *birth* in such a mode, then contemporary mothers already participate in just such openings. In place of the restrictive and oppressive molar identities assigned to women – pregnant female, nursing mother, infant carer, infertile woman – that speak to the organisation and stratification of embodied practices, the move is towards a micropolitics of molecular becoming, of ever-evolving affiliations, points of encounter and engagement in which issues of power and dependency refuse to settle but shift and flow amongst all the elements. The foetus/infant too escapes its molar determination to participate in a non-teleological process that extends beyond the conventional site of reproduction. One significant implication of such a model is that the question of origins has no clear meaning. Where psychoanalysis must always look back and speculate on that which is past, Deleuze is concerned only with the mobilisation and expansiveness of becoming. The nostalgia for what putatively is lost, and the illusion of a return to the indifferenciation of the maternal embrace, have no purchase; becoming-maternal operates in a very different register.

In insisting that what is valuable in the individual life is not its self-completion or independence, nor yet its own reproduction, we can shift the focus of maternity to the productive powers put into play through its interconnections and interactions with an array of others, both organic and non-organic. Not only does each woman become open to and affected by the world of others – the phenomenological starting point – but all the technological apparatus of pregnancy and natality can be reconstrued as an element of becoming rather than an insult to being. When anxious second wave feminists coined the phrase ‘the mother machine’ (Corea 1988) to figure the dangers of the regulatory apparatus that surrounds the mother and apparently undermines her self-determination, they spoke to a modernist mindset that the Deleuzian mode emphatically contests. Far from being a term of negative value, the mother machine can be reconfigured precisely as a desiring machine, the point of take off and production in the generation of new life forms and in mobilising new assemblages. The formation of a gamete in vitro, the scan that monitors the foetus in utero, the hand – or instrument – that guides the neonate’s head from the birth canal, the infant

**Margrit Schildrick,
Becoming-maternal: Things to do with Deleuze**

mouth on the maternal breast, are all nodular moments in the intensifying networks of the desiring mother machine. The rhizomatic spread of such desire is indifferent to any distinction between natural and artificial; it is rather a matter of connections, disjunctions, and transformations. The point is not that every connection or moment of contact will be positive, but that these are not scenarios to inherently fear or seek to avoid: as Braidotti remarks, the ethics of the form of life that Deleuze envisages ‘requires adequate assemblages or interaction: one has to pursue or actively create the kind of encounters that are likely to favour an increase in active becomings’ (2006, p. 217, my emphasis).

In place of the feminist impasse that so often results from Lacanian theory, I recommend the Deleuzian approach as an enabling project that may produce new ways forward. It makes no claim to provide any kind of final answer, and nor does it override existing ethical and political concerns about maternity, but suggests an alternative starting place. To understand the concept of life – and all that it implies – in the Deleuzian mode functions as a different dimension of thinking that facilitates a means of attending to the issues from unexpected and unfamiliar perspectives. Specifically, if life is rethought as an energetic and proliferative force, no longer defined by any specific trajectory, then the individual mother’s existence and expression are not the centre of ethical concern. Instead, *becoming-maternal* encompasses all those linked together in the connective tissue that constitutes a more extensive and substantive version of the flesh of the world. Given that there is so little reference to reproduction and mothers in the Deleuzian canon, I cannot offer a scholarly reading of an existing approach, but can strive to push the stalled debate onto ground whose very unfamiliarity may provoke renewed movement. Above all, the Deleuze who provides a very different way of reflecting on the significance of life in terms of the multiplicity and productivity of assemblages, and of the destratification of molar identities in favour of molecular becomings, represents, not a worked-through alternative way of thinking mother trouble, but a challenging starting point for reconfiguring what is at stake.

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**Margrit Schildrick,
Becoming-maternal: Things to do with Deleuze**

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**Margrit Schildrick,
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