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Becoming-Woman and Time: When is the Subject of Feminism?

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Abstract

This paper considers the use of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-woman” for feminist theory. Since its first use, the concept has polarized feminist theory. For some, it presents the route out of masculinist logics that third-wave feminism has sought; for others, it denies the female experience and returns “woman” to universalizing, implicitly masculine presuppositions. The paper argues that both are partly right, and that the disagreement stems from an underdeveloped consideration of how “being” and “becoming” coexist in time. Following Rosi Braidotti, the paper claims that “woman” must be understood not in essentialist terms, but as the “virtual feminine” who is the contested subject of sexual difference. Seen this way, woman’s being is inseparable from her becoming. The paper therefore argues that we must understand the mutually constitutive relation of being and becoming that produces “woman” in this sense. Drawing on Deleuze’s discussion of Aion and Chronos, the paper sees the subject of feminism as temporally dislocated, with both a being and a becoming, rooted in a present that she is always moving beyond. But it claims that this is central for reconciling the conflicting understandings of becoming-woman, and so for preserving the concept as a feminist tool.

Deleuze and Guattari and feminism

It is rare for a concept to be so variously embraced and reviled within a single field as “becoming-woman” is within feminism. With this concept, Deleuze and Guattari question the idea that feminism should ground itself in the identity “woman” in order to stake out a political space. Instead, they argue that properly escaping patriarchal control requires moving beyond the man–woman gender binary altogether—that it requires “becoming” rather than “being.” This is because Deleuze and Guattari see social identifications as inseparable from a hierarchical relation, where “minoritarian” identities such as woman are defined only in terms of “majoritarian” identities such as man, and as such inevitably fall back into the structures of oppression they mean to escape (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 105). As Deleuze and Guattari describe it, becoming-woman avoids this danger by embracing the “minority” status of woman and following its path away from man. In doing so it actively rejects the power that

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man holds, as long as it never stops to revindicate this minority status as an identity that would—again—only be conceivable in terms of man qua majoritarian. This is why Deleuze and Guattari say that becoming-woman, as a process or movement, bears no resemblance to woman as an identity or stable political position. In their words: “Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity [woman] or even transforming oneself into it” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 275). Becoming-woman means, that is, distancing oneself from the “being” of woman as historical subject of feminism. And for some feminists this shift from being to becoming is just what feminism needs to escape the gender essentialism into which it can fall. At the same time, feminist criticisms of becoming-woman remain that are not inherently reactionary and do need to be addressed. As we will see, Deleuze and Guattari’s use of becoming-woman as a political tool risks subsuming female lived existence within a conceptual framework that is implicitly male, which in fact reinforces the patriarchal power they wish to go beyond. In this paper I will argue that we do not have to choose, and that the concept of becoming-woman can in fact help feminism to bridge the gap between positions that reject the identity “woman” and those that hold to its historical weight.

Although they often seem irreconcilable, I argue that the two sides of the problem—the lived reality of woman (her being) and her need to refuse masculinist determinations of what she should be (her becoming)—are only contradictory within an imprecise understanding of how being and becoming exist in time. To this end, I first lay out the positions in this debate, which I will call “post-feminist” and “identitarian” respectively, and discuss a provisional resolution: the “politics of location” theorized by Rosi Braidotti. I then consider what these positions imply for Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming” and argue that they expose a tension at its heart: that becoming must always have its own “being,” and cannot be conceived of as existing by itself. This means that becoming is always historically situated, and that becoming-woman is always the becoming-woman of some being. I therefore attempt to think this historicity through the temporality of becoming-woman, as it appears in the works of two thinkers of trans* becomings, Jenny Sundén and Caterina Nirta.¹ I argue that becoming can be understood with the concepts of Aion and Chronos, introduced in Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense*, which are highly abstract notions but also, I claim, importantly real. I conclude by saying that both becoming-woman and being-woman are essential concepts for feminism, as long as we know what the words “becoming,” “being,” and “woman” mean. With this paper I therefore hope to provide a way of thinking with and through becoming-woman that does not require us to arbitrarily choose a side—that does not see woman *only* as a refusal of man, but that nonetheless acknowledges that refusing man is essential for the viability of woman as a political category.

Three perspectives on becoming-woman

Post-feminism and lines of flight

I will first lay out the different views I am discussing here. Claire Colebrook describes the position Deleuze and Guattari hold, that the category of woman is ultimately holding feminism back, as “post-feminist” (Colebrook 2013, 427). By this she means that this position follows feminism to its logical conclusion, but that this conclusion takes feminism beyond the assumptions about gender on which it was previously based.² This terminology can be applied more broadly to a range of feminist scholars writing on Deleuze and Guattari—Audronė Žukauskaitė, for example, who also uses the term, but also a host of others who are united in the project of taking feminism beyond

being-woman (Žukauskaitė 2019).³ For such thinkers, becoming-woman offers a “line of flight” away from traditional gender binaries, which blocks off recourse to a presupposed female subjectivity and forces feminists to think through new ways of acting and being in the world. As Deleuze and Guattari use the term, a line of flight is “like a tangent to the circles of signification and the center of the signifier” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 116). It is a movement away from meaning, away from identity, which has no objective except whatever lies beyond. In the words of Elizabeth Grosz, who adopts the concept in a feminist context, lines of flight can take feminism “beyond given segments to destinations unknown in advance” (Grosz 1994, 204). The point of this is to prevent feminism from stagnating once particular goals, for example suffrage or equal political representation, are reached, and to enable it to deal with what Grosz calls “the new”—the irresistible coming of the future, always different from the present, which brings an endless flow of challenges and opportunities to which feminism must adapt (Grosz 2000, 214; 2002, 19; 2011, 81). This post-feminist approach is not just a rejection of the gatekeeping of the category “woman” into which certain strains of radical feminism have fallen, but also a way of warding off the conservative tendencies from which such behaviors stem. By becoming “future-oriented,” then, as Anupa Batra describes it, post-feminism adopts a clear temporal perspective (Batra 2012, 73). Turning away from the world in which we exist now, in the present, such thinkers look to a world to come that may be better—although it is impossible to know how—and so actively reject what Grosz calls the “weight of the present” that burdens us with the patriarchal structures in which we currently live (Grosz 2011, 83).

Jardine and lived existence

Directly opposed to this optimistic reading of becoming-woman is another view, which we may call the “identitarian view,” that sees a drastic turn to the future as more perilous than beneficial. This is the view of Alice Jardine, which she lays out in *Gynesis*, one of the first feminist treatments of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought. This was also the dominant understanding of Deleuze and Guattari in the early years of their feminist reception, even being held initially by Grosz, although the post-feminist approach to becoming-woman is now more prominent. According to this view, by making becoming-woman distinct from being-woman Deleuze and Guattari efface the actual existence of female feminist subjects, since they cannot account for the specifically female situation in which such subjects are placed. As Gillian Howie sees it, the idea of becoming-woman involves a “flight into abstraction” that actively denies the real existence of female subjectivity (Howie 2009). By seeing becoming-woman only as a rejection of being-man, that is, Deleuze and Guattari would make the becoming-woman of woman no different from the becoming-woman of man, and so assimilate the feminist struggle to a more generalized struggle for liberation from gender as such. Here such thinkers are responding to Deleuze and Guattari’s description of becoming-woman as the first step on a “chain of becomings” along which everyone must pass, regardless of prior identity, that runs also through “becoming-child” and “becoming-animal” until it reaches the point of “becoming-imperceptible”—which is an existence beyond an identity even of becoming itself (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 279). Seen this way, woman can have no being—since her being is always only a mode of being-man—but nor can she have any becoming of her own, since becoming-woman is only part of a generalized becoming of existence which, so the criticism goes, is always implicitly a becoming of man. This is what Jardine means when she says that,

for Deleuze and Guattari, “woman is never a subject but a limit—a border of and for Man” (Jardine 1985, 217). Subjectivity is reserved for man, and woman can only exist as a function of this masculinity. It is precisely in this attempt to take femininity beyond the masculine world of identification that Deleuze and Guattari recapture it and reidentify it as—in Grosz’s terms, from her earlier work—the “object of male speculation and systems-building” (Grosz 1994, 206). From this perspective, a rejection of the present is incompatible with feminism, since it means rejecting the specificity of female existence which grounds the feminist project. This insistence on the being of woman, as opposed to her becoming, is therefore rooted in the present and the historical past that has led up to it.

Braidotti and the politics of location

It has been argued, on the post-feminist side, that Deleuze and Guattari’s designation of woman as minoritarian is only descriptive of contemporary power relations and need not make woman *essentially* peripheral (Stark 2017, 28). It is this contingency that makes post-feminism still a feminism, rather than a theory of non-specific liberation. Even if a philosophy of becoming does not exclude specifically feminist politics in theory, however, it remains the fact that Deleuze and Guattari say almost nothing about feminism as a *politics of becoming-woman*. When they do discuss feminist politics, it is as a politics of identity, which is only a preliminary stage on the way to a generalized politics of becoming that will shed the constraints of identity (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 276). With this loss of identity, woman would have to become minoritarian in relation to herself. Even in her becoming-woman, however, we must say that woman is not bound to see herself as minority, although she will not be a majority in the sense that the man who oppresses her is. Rather, while she may experience herself as minority insofar as she experiences herself in relation to man, she may also experience herself as majority in relation to herself, in her own positive self-determination that is not the same as the self-determination of man. It is necessary, therefore, to recognize that becoming is always a becoming of someone, who is always situated within certain conditions, and that these conditions do not simply vanish once becoming is begun. This is what the post-feminist tendency risks missing. Any theory that does not account for the conditions of becoming will necessarily ignore the past reality of the majoritarian gender binary, and hence threaten to reproduce its identitarian oppressions even in the movement beyond identity itself.

But this is not to reject the idea of becoming-woman altogether. The concerns animating the post-feminist approach remain significant, and politically urgent. It is rather to recognize that, as Rosi Braidotti says, the becoming-woman of woman will not be the same as the becoming-woman of man. Man has his own becoming-woman, as the “undoing of [his] central position” (Braidotti 2003, 53). Woman too has a certain centrality that must be undone, insofar as her being partakes of and is secured by the being of man, but she is also in large part peripheral, insofar as her minority is conditioned and upheld by that male being. Her becoming cannot therefore take the same route as that of man, in theory or in praxis, since this would entail an emancipation of that which in her is oppressive only to the exclusion of that which in her is oppressed. This is the importance of what Braidotti calls the “politics of location,” through which one “unveil[s] the power locations which one inevitably inhabits as the site of one’s identity” (Braidotti 2002, 12). And it is this that Braidotti finds lacking in Deleuze and Guattari. As she says: “Deleuze’s critique of dualism acts as if sexual differentiation or gender dichotomies did not have as the most immediate and pernicious consequence the positioning of the two sexes in an

asymmetrical relationship to each other” (Braidotti 1994, 169). In their zeal to do away with the male–female binary, Braidotti thinks, Deleuze and Guattari miss the fact that sexual difference is a historical reality, which dictates the historical conditions in which becoming must take place. Instead, Braidotti says, we must see these conditions as the “essence” of woman in her becoming, which ground her in the “stock of culturally coded definitions, requirements, and expectations about woman and female identity” from which she begins and man does not (Braidotti 1994, 181).

With this talk of “essence” Braidotti is not simply returning to being-woman as *the* subject of feminism. If every becoming includes both its conditions and the line of flight it follows, then the becoming-woman of a black woman is not the same as that of a white woman, nor that of a trans* woman the same as that of a cis woman, nor that of a black trans* woman the same as that of a white trans* woman, and so on indefinitely, such that ultimately no becoming-woman is the same as any other. This means that the category of woman is itself infinitely internally differentiated, and there can be no saying what woman “is” prior to the fact. But, nonetheless, sexual difference does exist. The “essence” of the subject of feminism can only be, then, that such a subject exists in a sexually differentiated world, and that it is this fact of sexual differentiation through which their becoming must run. Following Irigaray, Braidotti calls this historically situated subject of feminism the “virtual feminine,” which she opposes to “Woman as Other-than or different-from” (Braidotti 2002, 27). This virtual feminine is not only different from the biological essentialism the term “Woman” suggests, but is in fact directly opposed to it insofar as “differences among women [are] constitutive of the category of sexual difference and not exterior or antithetical to it” (Braidotti 2002, 27). In sum, for Braidotti the subject of feminism is:

Not Woman as the complementary and specular other of man but rather a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity. “She” no longer coincides with the disempowered reflection of a dominant subject who casts his masculinity in a universalistic posture. She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process, a mutant, the other of the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis. (Braidotti 2002, 11–12)

With this Braidotti takes up a firmly post-feminist stance, but one now grounded in the historicity of the feminist subject on which the identitarian view insists. This is why she criticizes Grosz as a “utopian writer, caught in the ‘no-place’ and ‘not yet’ of poststructuralist theories of difference and quite contented with this position” (Braidotti 2002, 106). Becoming-woman, for Braidotti, is not the leap into the future Grosz wants but a “*working-through* [of] the multi-layered structures of one’s embodied self” (Braidotti 1994, 182). It is this reflective and reflexive relation of becoming to its own historicity that Deleuze and Guattari elide, and which is central to the use of becoming-woman for feminism.

Becoming and being

Colebrook and the double politics

I have already mentioned that, in their discussion of becoming-woman, Deleuze and Guattari do acknowledge the practical necessity of identity for subaltern political

movements. “It is, of course, indispensable,” they say, “for women to conduct a molar [i.e. identity-based] politics, with a view to winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity,” even if in this politics there always lies the danger of becoming trapped in “a subject” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 276). It is this acknowledgment that feminist readings of becoming-woman tend to take up. As I have also said, however, even here Deleuze and Guattari distinguish the identitarian politics of being from the politics of becoming they ultimately call for, and so this statement does not quite align with the post-feminist politics of becoming-woman that developed in their wake. Indeed, in context this statement reads as little more than an afterthought, meant to ward off accusations of impracticality, and for this reason the identitarian criticisms described above do have some weight. This does not mean, however, that post-feminist developments of this politics are misplaced. Even if, as I claim, Deleuze and Guattari pass over the specifically feminist value of becoming-woman, this does not mean that it is not there. Rather, from a post-feminist perspective the point of this statement is that, even if the normative goal remains creative becoming, this is philosophically impossible without some grounding in the past. This is what Colebrook means when she talks of Deleuze and Guattari’s “double politics”—the simultaneous establishment of a political ground and of a becoming that always transcends it. This idea of double politics, for Colebrook, allows us to “refuse” identitarian systems as we go beyond them, rather than either internalizing their hierarchies or bypassing them entirely (Colebrook 2000, 1). Without this doubling, any becoming would fall into the “no place and not yet” Braidotti criticizes, the unbound movement towards non-identity which transcends the materiality in which it is situated. But with it, the concept of becoming-woman may be saved. What risked becoming an untethered flight into non-identity can now become, on the strength of this feminist pragmatics, a thoroughly grounded negotiation of an identitarian system that allows for resistance in its cracks—at the points where the identity “woman” becomes inadequate to the political subjectivity it is supposed to represent.

Here, woman is more than just “not man”, since she reclaims her minoritarian identity as a point of resistance. Colebrook therefore argues that becoming-woman must be conceived of as a “defiant and affirmative refusal”—a movement beyond the inadequate identity of being-woman that is nonetheless turned back on it, that is oriented towards the identity it rejects (Colebrook 2013, 431). Becoming-woman is grounded, but always in relation to what it is not, which is to say that it is a movement “beyond” that can never actually reach the other side. It is always going beyond but can never do away with that limit which it transcends. On this understanding, man does not go *through* woman to achieve his becoming, as Jardine and others say. Rather, becoming-woman is “the reversal of a performative pragmatics or strategic essentialism ... what is repeated when one becomes-woman is not the resulting effect—such as female qualities—but the differential power from which such qualities emerge” (Colebrook 2013, 449). In becoming-woman, one acts out the production of the minoritarian identity of woman, but one leaves this production open such that no clear identity, man or woman, can emerge. But this cannot be a denial of identity as such. It implies the deconstruction of identity, this is true, but this does not entail its negation. The double politics Colebrook describes rather works in a wholly different register: it is a unification of identity with non-identity, and of being with becoming. Woman is produced—this is a historical fact—but the production of woman does not resemble woman. Nonetheless, it is in a sense inseparable from her insofar as it is defined by what it produces.

Becoming-woman is understood as the going-beyond of a culturally and historically gendered limit, but this limit exists precisely in its transgression.

This then highlights a certain potential tension in Deleuze and Guattari's project. As a line of flight from being, becoming sometimes seems like an absolute denial of the reality or possibility of identity: at the end of the chain that begins with becoming-woman we find "becoming-imperceptible" or—what amounts to the same thing—"becoming-all-the-world" (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 279).⁴ In its most "accelerated" form becoming is untethered from its cultural and historical situation. The subject of becoming loses herself in a pure going-beyond that is no longer a going-beyond of anything; she has become "no longer anything more than an abstract line, or a piece in a puzzle that is itself abstract" (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 280). On this understanding, becoming is an unrestrained forward movement: it is a line of flight, a going-beyond, which is not anymore oriented towards that limit which it passes. This accelerated becoming thus denies the being it once had, and the historical world in which it exists. Rather than going beyond identity, and so transforming its reality, it turns its back on that reality and forges a new irreality outside of the history with which it breaks. This is what the identitarian position criticizes, as it takes becoming-woman to entail a rejection of the past reality of woman, and to be defined only by this acceleration towards becoming-imperceptible. In Howie's words, becoming-woman is "a philosophy of affect, unable to address itself to the context or location of the affect, [and] a philosophy of the event, unable to address itself to the conditions of the event" (Howie 2009, 101). And if the whole of becoming came down to this, Howie would be right. Read together with the rest of *A thousand plateaus*, however, it becomes clear that as much as becoming is defined as movement, and change, it is not by that token an infinite speed. Pure acceleration may be the "guiding idea" of a certain kind of praxis, as Katja Čičigoj says, but becoming in itself may be movement of any speed, and as such carries with it its moments of rest (Čičigoj 2019, 104). We can say, in fact, that the movement of becoming is nothing less than the movement of the world itself, and as such is a movement of speed and slowness in equal and non-hierarchical measure. This is the Spinozism from which Deleuze's metaphysics grows: "arrive at elements that no longer have either form or function, that are abstract in this sense even though they are perfectly real. They are distinguished solely by movement and rest, slowness and speed" (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 254). It remains true that Deleuze and Guattari do not discuss becoming-woman, specifically, in this way. We however can, and when we do we see that becoming-woman has ample room for the limit of woman it leaves behind: this limit is constituted in the moments of rest, where becoming slows down enough to form blocks of identity, although these blocks are—however slowly—always changing, always moving away from what they once were.

The being of becoming-woman

This is where the queer theorists Jeffrey Cohen and Todd Ramlow go wrong. They see becoming as a radical detachment from historicity but embrace this as the ultimate "inhumanism" of queer non-identitarian existence (Cohen and Ramlow 2005/2006). For them, Deleuze's suicide was the final performance of a "becoming-queer, becoming-world" that a politics of becoming aspires to (Cohen and Ramlow 2005/2006, 10). Becoming cannot, however, be just the annihilation of being. In fact, we can even say that becoming depends upon being just as much as being depends upon becoming—or, to go even further beyond the dualism into which Deleuze and

Guattari sometimes fall, that being and becoming are not ontologically distinct, but describe only relative perspectives on the movement-rest, speed-slowness that is existence itself. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze describes the eternal return as just this process: the pure repetition of being, the continued existence in time of existence itself. To truly “think the eternal return” means to think in terms of “pure becoming,” but “all we need to do to think this thought is to stop believing in being as distinct from and opposed to becoming or to believe in the being of becoming itself” (Deleuze [1962] 1986, 48). Deleuze, like the rest of us, struggles to distinguish terminologically between the being that is in becoming and the being beyond which becoming goes, but this is precisely because becoming is the going-beyond of the being that exists in its transgression. Existence is always in process, but this process never goes absolutely beyond itself—it can never actually “be” imperceptible—because it is always grounded in the simple fact that it exists. What “is” in existence is that which is determined as having its own being, but this determination always takes place within existence, and so can never be distinct from the process of existence that is always going beyond being. The creation of “beings” is therefore indeterminate and incomplete, but nonetheless real, since there is no “irreal” outside of existence—by definition. So Deleuze describes individuation—the coming-into-being of “beings”, which are also “becomings” as entities that through their repetition in time transgress their own limits—thus:

Individuation as such, as it operates beneath all forms, is inseparable from a pure ground that it brings to the surface and trails with it ... The individual distinguishes itself from it [this ground], but it does not distinguish itself, continuing rather to cohabit with that which divorces itself from it. It is the indeterminate, but the indeterminate in so far as it continues to embrace determination, as the ground does the shoe. (Deleuze [1968] 2017, 198–99)

We must conclude that becoming-imperceptible can never actually be achieved, since this would efface the being of becoming and, in the same stroke, render impossible the becoming of being. The indeterminacy of becoming is assured by its grounding in its own existence, which is always historically situated and hence distinguishable from whatever it is not. Becoming-woman is distinguished from becoming-animal, for example, by its specification as the going-beyond of a *particular* limit, the limit of historically and culturally gendered existence, which is its being and its ground that is carries with itself.

What this means is that, far from denying its own historicity, as Howie claims, becoming-woman always contains its own conditions. Becoming is always an “event,” understood, in the broadest strokes, as the irruption of the new. This means it is a change in a given structure that changes the nature of the structure itself—that forms new relations and so takes the structure beyond itself. But a structure is already only a specified network of relations, which has a determinate “being” insofar as it is determinable, while its determination—as we have seen—always ultimately depends on a fundamentally indeterminate ground: the ground of existence itself, in its becoming. As such, the event always inheres in the relations it creates, but these relations are also the being of the event. What this means is that becoming-woman and being-woman mutually condition each other—as long as “woman” is here understood in Braidotti’s sense as the virtual feminine, as the subject of sexual difference. One who is being-woman is always becoming-woman, because her identity is in precisely this creation of new relations that go beyond the limit of being-woman. We can therefore

say in Deleuzian terms what the “being” of woman, of the virtual feminine, is: it is the being of a becoming, but of a becoming that also exists in the being that it at once conditions and goes beyond. This, then, is the subject of feminism Braidotti describes: one who exists, inevitably, in a world of sexual difference, but whose existence as a subject is a challenge to that world.

Time

So we can now answer two major criticisms of becoming-woman: first, that it erases the identity of being-woman, and second, that it conflates the becoming-woman of woman and the becoming-woman of man. Neither are valid points once we realize that becoming-woman also entails a being of the becoming of woman, which in turn entails a becoming of the being of the becoming of woman, and so on *ad infinitum*. A third potential criticism remains, however, and it is one that hangs over much work on Deleuze: what does any of this *mean*? Can this being-becoming entity-non-entity actually exist, or is this just more abstract systems-building? Clearly, the question of becoming-woman cannot come down to raw ontological speculation. It is a subjective matter, which attempts to describe, analyze, and ideally improve the lived experiences of its subjects. Therefore, what the above analysis “means” can be recast in more concrete terms: it is the question of how becoming-woman is experienced, and of what manner of subjectivity may be adequate to this mutually conditioned being-becoming in time.

Temporalities of trans*

This question is not entirely new. Trans* theory is concerned with precisely this: how to become-woman without being defined solely as “not a man”, where “woman” is, again, the virtual feminine, or the subject of binary sexual difference. In a sense, this should be the simplest task: if becoming describes the continued movement of existence through time, then the strain of keeping together should fall on the side of being, which is actively resisting this future-ward passage. Becoming-woman should, then, simply be a matter of sitting still and letting existence go where it will. Except, of course, that experience tells us that this is not the case. Majoritarian identities persist unless something is done about them. Becoming-woman therefore means taking up the relations of being-woman and living them in themselves, so taking them beyond themselves and, hence, beyond the being-man by which they are defined. But such a movement is not easy. The relations that constitute being-man hold quite firm, because they have the weight of the past behind them. If we sit still and move into the future as we are then nothing really changes; all our present relations come with us. At the same time, becoming-woman cannot just be a letting-loose of all existing relations, since this would dissolve the being of the subject and her becoming along with it. Rather, becoming-woman must mean forming new relations in such a way that existing relations are effaced through their incompatibility with the becoming of existence. That is, becoming-woman must be the creation of new modes of subjectivity that go beyond their past identity and *create their own past*: this is what Colebrook calls “counter-historicism” (Colebrook 2009, 14), or Braidotti the “activation” of “counter memories” (Braidotti 1996, 312). The question is what it means to form relations with a mode of existence that did not exist prior to these relations. Becoming-woman can never be directed but must instead proceed through—as Deleuze consistently emphasizes—experimentation, or “a throw of the dice” (Deleuze [1968] 2017, 260). This is a movement of becoming,

but one that carries and constitutes its own being along with it. As such, the task of trans* theory here is to “experiment” with ways of being-woman, which is the only being able to condition the becoming-woman it seeks.

But of course we need to know where to look: we need to see in what *material existence* this double politics can be based. This is the task approached by Jenny Sundén and Caterina Nirta, who separately respond to José Esteban Muñoz’s idea of “queer futurity”—the idea that queerness cannot exist in the present, since this present is always shackled with its cis-heterosexist structurations, and so must be sought in a going-beyond towards an always-displaced future queer utopia (Muñoz 2009). Both Sundén and Nirta draw on Deleuze to theorize the emergence of this futurity—this “newness”—and both agree that this must be done without ignoring the present conditions in which it emerges. The two differ, however, in their understanding of the temporal status of the new in relation to its conditions. Sundén, for her part, agrees with Muñoz that queerness can escape the “here and now” of hegemonic gender by looking to the future as a “hopeful potentiality”, albeit one that “gains momentum by a turn to queer pasts in an effort to imagine the future differently” (Sundén 2015, 206). In this formulation the mutual conditioning of being and becoming is understood as a relation of past and future, wherein trans* subjectivity consists in the strategic movement between the two. This is what Jasbir Puar calls an “interstitial shuffling,” which does not allow itself to be captured in the identity or non-identity of either (Puar 2015, 67). Nirta, on the other hand, explicitly disagrees with Muñoz for his focus on the “there and then” of queerness, which, she says, ignores the material conditions of the present, and by failing to account for the “passage from possibility to actuality” ends up in idealism (Nirta 2016, 7). Nirta argues that we should instead focus on the “virtualities” already existing in the present, which can be “actualized” in the here-and-now as a unified being-becoming of existence (Nirta 2016, 24). On this account, the new already exists *in potentia* in the present, and any move towards the past or the future is either regressive or unnecessary. Despite their shared theoretical framework, then, the two are separated by a stark conceptual and practical difference. For Sundén, relations of trans* subjectivity can only be formed in a futurity that is external to the one who forms them, thus necessitating a certain “break” with the interiority of that trans* individual. For Nirta, in contrast, this new futurity is already internal to the one who seeks it, and so forming relations with it does not require a break so much as a shift of perspective to see what was already there. The question is how such a rift could arise when the content and framework of both authors seem to so closely align.

Aion and Chronos

The answer is, predictably, that time is not as simple as it may seem—as Nirta says, we must ask not “what” is the future, but “when is the future?” (Nirta 2016, 12). We have referred to becoming as a future-ward movement of existence, but, as we have seen, being too has its futurity. Just as becoming is conditioned by the being it transgresses, so too is being conditioned by the becoming that creates it: if becoming is the movement between structures—the forming of new relations—then being is the structuration that is continually formed and upheld in this way. Being and becoming coexist not just in the moment but across time: there is a becoming that has been, a becoming that is, and a becoming that will be, and at every moment there is also the being that each becoming has, or is, which it at once goes beyond and is understood within. In effect, time is always doubled. There is a time of becoming, and a time of being: what Deleuze

in *The logic of sense* calls “Aion” and “Chronos” respectively. Aion is the time of the event, which is always coming into being but never “is”—it describes the forming of relations, the ungrounded ground of the movement of existence itself. Chronos, on the other hand, is the time of “things”—the time of that which comes to be in these relations, which is grounded in the movement of existence but does not at all resemble it. Because of this doubling, no “single moment” can actually exist as “single.” As Deleuze says, “past, present, and future [are] not all three parts of a single temporality, but [form] two readings of time, each one of which is complete and excludes the other” (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 72). This is to say that what becoming “is” is never clear, and so we do not just need to know *where* to look for it—we must also know *how* to look. At the moment I am writing this, I, the male author, have my being-man that seems simple and self-evident: it is my past historical existence as male, and my future continued existence as male, both centered on and determined by the relations that constitute “me” at this very moment. At the same moment, however, I am constituted *as* male by a movement of becoming that cannot be centered on any one subject or point in time, since it is definitionally prior to and distinct from what it constitutes. This single moment is, clearly, “singular” insofar as it refers simply to existence as it is now—whatever that existence may be. But at the same time (figuratively speaking), this indeterminate singularity consists of a multiplicity of incompatible temporalities. In what sense then can being and becoming share a present when becoming is the constitution of the present of being? The two may coexist, but they coexist in their irreconcilable difference.

It is this differential coexistence that we need to understand. Deleuze describes Aion as “the past-future” into which this single moment is infinitely divided, which “endlessly decomposes itself in both directions at once and forever sidesteps the present”, while Chronos is “the present which alone exists”, which determines past and future only as modes of its present (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 89). As the time of the event Aion is not conceivable in terms of any linearity, since it could only be determined as such in relation to determinate points, or “presents”, in Chronos. When “I” think of “my” self, then, it is necessarily in terms of Chronos—as a linear succession of presents—since this linearity is a condition for my continued existence as “me.” “I” cannot experience Aion, since to do so would be to experience my own constitution, which would preclude experience of myself. As such, for “me”—and, more generally, for the subject of being—Aion is in some sense out of time. It is always displaced from the present in which it is posited, and so exists subjectively only as the indeterminate condition of Chronos. However, by just the same token, “I” can have no past, since my existence is conceivable only in terms of present points that are necessarily distinct from their constitution. What I call a “past me” cannot in itself exist because, insofar as it is “me,” it is determined only as a mode of my present, and insofar as it is not “me” it is not determinable at all. What, in this case, can I possibly mean when I say “me”? What possible subjectivity can I have, either as being-man or becoming-woman? “I” am constituted infinitely and again in the future-ward movement of existence, in the continuous repetition of time, but each new “me” is ontologically distinct from every old “me” since I always exist *now*, in the present, and can have no past or future. So, while existence in Chronos is a condition of personal subjectivity, the very terms of this condition deny its possibility. And, as we have already seen, the subject of becoming-woman is always grounded in her historicity—that is to say, her past, which constitutes the present that she lives. A Deleuzian double politics therefore seems to contradict itself, in that it is a subjectivity of the a-subjective. All my existence resides in a paradox: I can have

no past without renouncing my present, and vice versa, such that “my” subjectivity—despite all appearances—cannot, logically, exist.

But of course Deleuze embraces paradoxes, as long as they still make “sense.” Existence itself is problematic, he tells us, and so complete resolutions are impossible; the best we can do is to state the problem well (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 64–66). The world moves—existence exists—and we can never adequately understand it simply because there is no “it” to understand: there are only events, defined as the coming-together and rending-apart of new and old relations. So what is crucial is that we are not dealing with a single timeline, divided up into neat chunks. Aion, as past-future, is not simply “before and after” Chronos, and nor is Chronos, as the infinite present, “in the middle” of Aion. Aion and Chronos are mutually exclusive, but they are not separate: as we have seen, they are mutually conditioned in the movement of existence—the event—and so coexist, with no temporal gap. In this sense, then, Aion does have a present of sorts. As Deleuze says, becoming initially seems to “sidestep the present,” but this sidestepping is “precisely what becoming cannot do, for it is *now* becoming and hence cannot leap over this ‘now’” (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 187–88). What “now” means in the context of Aion is however nothing like the “now” of Chronos. In the latter case, “now” is self-evident: it is what *I* mean when *I* say “now,” which describes the state of *things* as they are arranged at this one, central point. The “now” of Aion, on the other hand, is what Rachel Loewen Walker calls the “living present”—it is that present which resists the “fixed ‘now’” of Chronos, and which provides the “material of continuity” of temporal existence (Walker 2014, 54). The “now” of Aion is, in other words, something like the becoming-present of Chronos. It is the principle of its present consistency, what Deleuze calls the “Instant,” which arranges Chronos “within” Aion but which has in itself no consistency—except as the “present of the pure operation,” which is the abstract inflection point of past-future movement (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 190–92). Aion therefore is, like Chronos, “present,” but its present is the “other present”—the non-present or becoming-present of the present, which is also the futurity of the present as it repeats in time.

It is this present that is hidden by the male–female gender binary, since as the present of futurity it undermines the identitarian value of Chronos on which essential gender identities are based. Chronos, as the time of the infinite present, purports to represent existence just as it is—as it fits within the identities it is given—but it can only achieve this representation by denying the time of the event and its own constitution. In fact, Chronos sets points in time, but once a point is set it is already past, because the movement of existence has gone beyond it. When Nirta calls for a trans* theory of the present, then, this is what she means: a theory not of Chronos but of Aion, which is the future of the present in which trans* subjects live. But of course, if the present of Aion is a future-present—a present of the future-ward becoming of the world—then in a sense Sundén is also right, in that a trans* theory of the present is also a trans* theory of the future, in accordance with what we now understand “present” to mean. The problem of Sundén’s formulation, however, is that she frames the past–present–future relation in terms of a chronological passage of time, rather than as a differential coexistence of incompatible temporal modalities. By focusing on the “then and there” and “not yet” of becoming-woman, which avoids the pitfalls of utopianism by a reflective turn back on past conditions, Sundén inserts an ontological break between past and future that goes beyond the reality of “what exists” (Sundén 2015, 206). As Nirta says, future utopianism is incompatible with a commitment to immanent materialism, since “what is not in the present is not in immanence (it is outside of life)

and therefore unable to become, this is, to live” (Nirta 2016, 15). When we seek the future, then, as the time of the new, we must nonetheless seek it in the present, which is definable only as the “Instant” of past–future relations that are becoming *now*.

The subject of feminism

To become woman means, then, to be woman, but this being is always also becoming what it is not. As we have just seen, the task of trans* theory as Nirta describes it is to form present relations with being-woman—with the virtual feminine—that are not determined in terms of man. It is in these relations that the historically grounded feminist subject can emerge. But, as we have also seen, this at first glance seems impossible, since this being-woman could only be determined in the newness of the relations that form it; and this seems to require a leap into the future that leaves behind the present, thus radically breaking with the actual, material world. When we acknowledge that we are necessarily constituted by a temporality that goes beyond “us,” however, certain possibilities open up. Through this understanding of being and becoming in time we see that we are no longer constrained by any law of self-identity that insists on our coherence as subjects—that, in fact, for us to be subjects we must be non-self-identical. Woman exists in Aion; this is axiomatic, insofar as Aion necessarily conditions her concurrent existence in Chronos. Her existence in Aion is, however, impossible, in that it contradicts the consistency of Chronos on which that existence is based. She exists in Aion, therefore, only insofar as she goes beyond herself, but this going-beyond is nonetheless a going-beyond *into herself*, in that it is a going-beyond into her being-conditioned. The becoming-woman she is not yet, then, still in some sense exists within her, but this “within” is inseparable from the radical “beyond” that constitutes her *as she cannot and yet must exist*—in her essentially paradoxical and internally differentiated state.

To conclude: I have argued that neither an extreme post-feminist position nor a more classically identitarian position is appropriate for our use of the concept of becoming-woman. Both are problematic not only in practical terms, but also in theoretical terms, as they efface either the being or the becoming of actual feminist subjects existing in the world. Instead, I have argued that Braidotti’s concepts of the politics of location and the virtual feminine are vital. Finally, I have then attempted to develop and reinforce these concepts through a consideration of the temporality of being and becoming. My central points, then, are these. (1) That becoming-woman should not be thought of as a flight from being or gender to some abstract point, since such pure abstractions are impossible. This is why we must be careful with overly utopian post-feminist uses of the concept of becoming-woman, which reject the historical being-woman in which becoming-woman necessarily exists. (2) That, at the same time, we should not reject becoming-woman on the same grounds, since attempts to protect being-woman from becoming-woman are theoretically unsound. As my analysis of the doubling of time has shown, there is no being-woman that is not already a becoming-woman, because the singular self-identical subject also cannot exist. And these together imply (3) that the concept of becoming-woman can, by reconciling the post-feminist and identitarian positions, allow feminism to progress beyond the aporia these opposing views seem to imply. An understanding of the temporality of becoming reveals that becoming-woman and being-woman are not, in fact, contradictory at all, but are together constitutive of the lived existence of woman in a sexually differentiated world.

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Notes

1 As is now standard in the literature, I use an asterisk here to denote the openness of the term “trans” to meanings and identities beyond any simple dictionary definitions (see Tompkins 2014).

2 As Colebrook notes, the term “post-feminism” can have other meanings—including the anti-feminist position that feminism has achieved all it had to do, and so gender is no longer an issue. It should be clear that my use of the term has no relation to this.

3 See also Gilson (2019), Čičigoj (2019), Kedem (2019), and Stark and Laurie (2019), who all take *de facto* post-feminist positions alongside Žukauskaitė in Carr and Scholtz’s collection *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Feminism* (2019), as well as Marrati (2006), Lorraine (2009), and Stark (2017).

4 Brian Massumi translates *devenir tout le monde* as “becoming everybody/everything”, to account for the dual meaning in the original French; I find “becoming-all-the-world” equally adequate to this task, and much easier to read.

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