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***BECOMING BONE SHEEP: ASSEMBLAGES, BECOMINGS, AND  
ANTIANTHROPOCENTRISM***

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**Abstract:** This article employs the graphic narrative *Becoming Bone Sheep* in order to present visually and textually the theories applied in building a critique of the Anthropocene. Concepts like gaze, becoming process, assemblage, de-flocking, racial proximity, zoe, affirmative transformations or networks will be theorized upon, resulting thus in an apparatus for the defence of all natural life. The graphic narrative exposes the flawed condition of man in relation with the nonhuman by representing a singular interaction between species – the gaze – which manages to dislocate the subjects from their individuality. Moreover, it draws on spatial confines that serve as an expression of parcelling the apparently unseen differences between the species, introducing in the discussion the re-evaluation of agency through what Braidotti calls *zoe*-centric ethics of becoming. Finally, it intends to delineate approaches for a further debate on countering oppressive structures in the context of Global South literature.

**Keywords:** assemblage, becoming, racial proximity, Anthropocene, critical animal studies

*We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender – Donna J. Haraway, Simians Cyborgs and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*

## **I. Background**

Abolish the shepherd, become one with the sheep. Deleuze and Guattari saw the process of “becoming” as a productive mechanism of reshaping one’s identity within an assemblage. The aim of this article is to build a critique of the Anthropocene by interpreting several configurations from the co-authored graphic narrative *Becoming Bone Sheep* (2014), while adopting Rosi Braidotti’s theory of *zoe*-centric ethics. The main focuses are the exigent stages of the “becoming” process, assemblage as the indispensable mechanism of hybridization and the position of the posthuman subject in relation with otherness, as I consider them to be key factors in eradicating the empiric hierarchical pyramid of the species regnum. Thus, the journey to the posthuman is an exceptionally productive endeavour, if we engender a positive consideration of heterogeneity with the purpose of cohabiting with the present.

*Becoming Bone Sheep* is a graphic narrative that displays the method through which the very ontology of sheep is challenged by means of inserting bone implants in their anatomic structure, in the name of medical research. Schlünder, Arens and Gerhardt attempt to build a cartography of human-nonhuman inter- and intra-relationships by illustrating the evolution of the posthuman “ethics of becoming”, leading to a deconstruction of subjectivity and ultimately questioning the value of agency in some socio-political practices. In choosing to graphically depict this development, the authors attempt to demonstrate through a system of collages how text, drawings and photographs manage to utterly blend and create a hybridized version of narration, steering the reader towards the closely related notion of the posthuman cyborg. The posthuman subject becomes an extensive topic of discussion, as it engenders an entity capable of transgressing interspecies boundaries formerly thought to be inviolable and eclipsing the traditional views on anthropomorphism or the relationship between human and nonhuman beings. Starting from Braidotti’s *zoe*-centric ethics, the narrative can be seen as a critique of the anthropocene, where the

connection between human individuals and nonhuman races is still confined within anthropocentric milieus. In building a case against human's status in the biological hierarchy, *Becoming Bone Sheep* comes as an exposure of our species' dominance over nonhuman beings, making way for a crucial shift in the behaviour concerning biopolitics, to such an extent that a post-anthropocentric future needs to be installed:

The belief in the capacity of discursive interventions to change the order of things as well as the faith in technological solutions to social problems are both marked by an indifference to the nonhuman environment, from which wider milieu human bodies seem to be separated somehow – the label “Anthropocene” is evidence of such a distancing that posits humanity as the driving force acting on a passive, abstracted nature. (Rosini 336)

Manuela Rossini argues that momentarily, our society is counting on the anthropocene in order to create and maintain a certain substantial distance between us and the thriving ecology found at the bottom of the pyramid. Nevertheless, it is clear that an association with the animal regnum in a post-anthropocentric future would have to establish affirmative inter-relationships based on mutual agency.

## **II. Three examples of graphic representations and assemblage**

### 1. The Gaze

Located in the Swiss Alps, the town of Davos is the place where a research institute carries out experiments on local sheep. Some of the animals from the rural area (mostly females) are chosen to become “project sheep,” having to complete a “becoming” process that alters their anatomy considerably, preparing them for their ultimate mission, since their physical structure is distinct from that of humans. There is a strong macroscopic dualism between the agents, considering that the sheep are offered only two futures: death for the meat industry or a life of experiments for scientific decipherment. By all means, the absolute judges for the selection are the humans, already recurrently positing themselves above all species, but “neither animality nor nature justify human exceptionalism” (Herbrechter 175). In *About Looking*, John Berger explains the position that the two races hold:

[...] animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are. (16)

In one of the panels of the graphic narrative, we take part in an exchange of gazes that disturbs the reader, insofar as they are compelled to pause and reconsider the entire evolution of their experience up to this point. This is the first moment in which the process of becoming in relation materializes. We participate in a staring contest that outperforms any innocent look, as the glaring eye of the sheep captures and questions the integrity of a hierarchical system in which every other being occupies a position that is always lower than the human. Thus, as Haraway admits that the “relocated gaze forces me to pay attention to kinship” (Haraway, *Modest* 52), the posthuman subject also submits to harmonise the racial balance, seeking a vitalisation of post-anthropocentric relations. The “REVELATION” (Schlünder et al 278) of such a prospect generates a comprehension of imposed boundaries that during the Anthropocene humanity intended to justify. The posthuman is capable of transgressing such boundaries by obliterating speciesism, meaning “the anthropocentric arrogance of Man as the dominant species whose sense of entitlement includes access to the body of all others” (Braidotti 80) and, according to Braidotti, it is his mission to maintain the newly founded spheres of interaction accessible:

The middle ground of that particular interaction has to remain normatively neutral, in order to allow for new parameters to emerge for the becoming-animal of anthropos, a subject that has been encased for much too long in the mould of species supremacy. Intensive spaces of becoming have to be opened and, more importantly, to be kept open. (80)

## 2. Triple assemblage

The emergence of such spaces of interaction must abide to some extent to the mechanisms of hybridization. In creating a universal space of belonging, coordinating a multiplicity of diverse circuits leads to the materialization of a network of becoming through which the posthuman can migrate. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “[t]here is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (...) and a field of representation (...) and a field of subjectivity. (...) Rather, an assemblage establishes

connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders” (Deleuze and Guattari 23). *Becoming Bone Sheep* emphasizes the importance of this network of becoming by insisting on two assemblages: the empirical form of the graphic narrative and the living environment of the sheep as a combination of farm, clinic and lab. To these two we can add the figure of the cyborg, as a prototypical nonhuman/posthuman created by the same means.

When engaging in the construction of a graphic narrative, special attention must be paid to the arrangement of text, drawings, and photographs, in order to render an ideal tool made of combined techniques of representation, whose purpose should be that of acquiring a better interpretation and understanding of meaning. The graphic narrative becomes a medium of interaction between its components, producing a homogenous mixture that doubles as an apparatus of projection. What emerges is the quintessence of the representational performance, a hybrid, knowledge-offering source that encapsulates a universal multiplicity, which in its turn encompasses and does not discriminate between its constituents. Moreover, as Lisa Diedrich remarks:

the graphic elements allow for a complex demonstration of movement across and between scales, from micro-cellular to macro-social environments and back again, as a way to demonstrate the ongoing and recursive processes of subjectification and de-subjectification through particular formal elements, including juxtaposition, nesting, and assemblage. (244)

This kind of movement entails the integral prospect about the becoming process, as its heterogeneity rapidly turns into a fully operating assemblage that succeeds in illustrating, through its structure, that hybridity enhances every configuration.

In one of these configurations, we find depicted another assemblage: a “spatial arrangement per se, [...] this odd mixture of farm, clinic and lab which allowed extraordinary views of ordinary sheep” (Schlünder et al 277). The environment in which sheep are supposed to live has also gone through a radical hybridization, where the agricultural confinement, the medical institution for humans or nonhumans and the territory of scientific experimentation merged into a domain for knowledge production. Passing from stable to hospital and then laboratory, we perceive the sheep’s ability to take up residence in any habitat by transgressing environmental boundaries (much like the posthuman subject that is postulated) and succumbing to a

forced change of scenery. There are evident boundaries between the spaces through which the two species can circulate with clear suggestions of almost non-existent interaction between them. The spatial division correlates directly with the need of preserving the hierarchical system untouched, thus maintaining a conspicuous distance from animality. One of the panels of *Becoming Bone Sheep* illustrates tiles, rooms, walls, hallways, gates and doors – numerous elements interpreted as borders that create a schematic design of incarceration. Nevertheless, the new hybrid space becomes a platform through which the representation of sheep compels the human spectator to reconsider the ordinariness of the nonhuman. By mapping a territory of evolution, the authors intend to transpose the reader/viewer into the experience of becoming:

Inserted into the matrices of technoscientific maps, we may or may not wish to take shape there. But, literate in the reading and writing practices proper to the technical-mythic territories of the laboratory, we have little choice. We inhabit these narratives, and they inhabit us. (Haraway, *Modest* 172)

Therefore, by migrating in the hybrid territory of becoming, the subject manages to not only comprehend the limitations imposed on the sheep, but also become in relation with them so that a higher position in the regnum hierarchy becomes obsolete.

The third form of assemblage is the cyborg, another “figure[s] of hybridity, impelling and interpellating humans to reconstitute themselves in like composite manner – beyond myths of pure biological origins and fallacies of technological exceptionalism, across the nature-culture divide” (Borbély and Petrar 130) appearing “precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed” (Haraway, *Simians* 152). Consequently, we address its appearance with critical uncertainty, as such entity fully renovates our standards of perception for the advent of humanity. The metamorphic body engenders the image of a chimera, a sort of Frankensteinian monstrosity without the ugly consequences.

In comparing the three forms of assemblages, a recurring sequence of interrelations between dichotomic characters surfaces as a network of becomings: the graphic narrative takes part in spreading the propaganda about the process of hybridization by showcasing it through its intrinsic design, a hybrid landscape of knowledge production identifies with the escape route of a transcending life form,

while the first encounter with a posthuman body emerges from the association of organism and machine.

### 3. De-flocking, racial proximity and agency

The third graphical instance proposes to depict the procedure of de-flocking, which means “creat[ing] singular, individually measurable and observable animals” (Schlünder, 95). As illustrated in the panel (Figure 3), the text of the narrative also portrays this event. Sentences are united into a block paragraph in the beginning, gradually becoming single lines of text and ultimately being reduced to a single word. This mirrors the process of de-flocking: the perilous endeavour aims to de-centre the plural congregation of sheep, diving into their integrity as a species and individualizing their existence. Separating sheep from their innate herd instinct distances the animal from its ontological identity, subscribing it to another instance of becoming.

When confined in their natural habitat among their same-species relatives, sheep take no interest in humans. This is one of the key factors when deciding the sufferer of the experiments:

the relation of sheep to humans relies on a (supposed) mutual emotional disinterest. But the closer emotional relation of sheep to each other – their herd or flocking instinct – has to be dissolved to be able to perform the experiments in an epistemologically and ethically correct way. Replacing these intra-species relations with inter-species relations always takes the longest time span in the experimental procedure. (Schlünder 96)

It is through this exchange of experience that the nature of the sheep is inverted. They become closer, although individually, to their human caretakers, departing from their intrinsic code of behaviour. The closeness is not merely a geographical adjacency, but a rise in emotionalism from the part of the nonhuman. Nevertheless, the risk of this becoming is adventuring too far into the relationship, since apparently the only consequence of bearing names, not numbers is a “rearrangement” of the nonhuman condition, the sheep ultimately being put face to face with death. (Schlünder et al. 292)

Accordingly, we understand that the sheep’s agency succumbs to that of the human, sustaining Braidotti’s claim that “we live in the era of the anthropocene, that is to say an age when the earth’s ecological balance is directly regulated by humanity” (Braidotti 79). It is safe to say that the present human subject believes that she is the

sole bearer of agency in the bio-political territory, always tilting the ecological balance in her favour so as to preserve the anthropocentric milieu intact.

### III. *Zoe*-centric ethics of becoming

In order to dismantle the injurious consequences of a predicament that ignores otherness for the sake of believing in human's utmost singularity, it is necessary to conceive a system of ethical cartographies that open up to the assimilation of nonhuman entities. Rosi Braidotti postulates upon a *zoe*-centric ethics of becoming that emphasizes the non-human, vital force of Life (Braidotti 60):

*Zoe* as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself (Braidotti 2006, 2011b) stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. *Zoe*-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. (60)

Subsequently, posthumanism manages to remodel traditional prospects of the other by withdrawing from the humanist prison of indifference. In doing so, a "sort of 'anthropological exodus' from the dominant configurations of the human as the king of creation" (65) occurs, creating an extended space of interaction for "multiple belongings" (49). From this point of view, *Becoming Bone Sheep* stands as an example of liminality, exposing the dystopian "product of a collective social desire" (Schlünder et al. 294) in its attempt to represent a Christ-like figure, much like Donna Haraway's OncoMouse™.

Nevertheless, resting on Rosi Braidotti's definition of the critical posthuman subject, liberation from the anthropocentric geopolitical determination should arrive from the part of the human that experienced "affirmative transformations" (Braidotti 66):

I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and



hence community building. My position is in favour of complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on the ethics of becoming. (49)

Therefore, the network of becomings exemplified constitutes a large part of the posthuman's frame. The multiplicity of interpellations engenders an entity capable of symbiosis in a post-anthropocentric society, or as Haraway puts it: "to be one is always to *become with many*" (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 4). Certainly, in creating such a subject, a renouncement of hierarchies, speciesism and other boundaries is fundamental: 'Man' will no longer be the measure of all things. Instead, as "technological developments presage a nonhumanist posthumanity" (Preface to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, 33), all subjectivity transcends former convictions by becoming in relation with "this post-anthropocentric Nietzschean orgiastic dance of life" (Borbély and Petrar 107). Altogether, the interrelation between posthuman and nonhuman has to reside on the parity of their identities, but in order to arrive at that point, "posthumans may well have to take first the downward path of theriomorphic, de-anthropocentric transformation" (143).

#### **IV. What could the future hold?**

Reading *Becoming Bone Sheep* with a welfarist approach, we can observe how such a proposal "limits the extreme forms of cruelty or exploitation of non-human animals by humans. It appreciates the capacities of other creatures (particularly the capacity to suffer) but generally subordinates the interests of non-human animals to humans" (Cudworth and Hobden 91). As such, the guise under which animal welfare is hidden is mistakenly materialising new forms of hierarchical discrimination. The sort of animal agriculture that employs more "humane" ways of commodification is flooded with superficial accounts of benevolence towards the nonhuman, intending to prevent a critique of violent farming and testing practices. Power structures come at play in this regard, upholding a sort of principle of stalling that correlates with discourses in which the nonhuman animal is seemingly at an advantage, but definitely still at risk of being manipulated and put in harm's way. In *The Emancipatory Project of Posthumanism*, Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden intend to build a posthuman politics that does not renounce its place within the a biopolitical regime, but instead focuses on ways in which acceptance, co-habitation and compassion pave the way towards a better understanding of the other through intersectional means and

practices. In putting a mirror in front of the human, they question the sovereign position and implement a model of emancipatory being that goes along with Braidotti's *zoe*-centric ethics.

Additionally, Cudworth and Hobden's project aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of "species thinking" in which "we humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such" (200). His notion posits that humanity has the ability to reflect upon our place in the world as a collective entity, comprehending the ways in which our actions can impact the global ecosystem. This mode of thought is essential in recognizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and the necessity of acting in a manner that is both sustainable and responsible. Through this perspective, we can begin to take the necessary steps towards safeguarding our planet and ensuring its longevity and vitality. Therefore, by considering such interconnectedness, we can begin to understand how much damage speciesism could produce on a global scale. However, in order to build a model of planetary integration, it is important to notice where the faulty line is drawn on the map:

The Western conception of the human as an autonomous, rational, being able to make decisions and choices about actions has been foundational for ideas about political agency and about emancipation, but such notions have only developed alongside, and in contradistinction to, the non-human lifeworld, in particular the 'animal'. (Cudworth and Hobden 90).

As the Western tradition is found to be a central territory for the prevalence of anthropocentric thought, we ought to reconfigure this malicious intent by displacing the Eurocentric reservation for nonhuman wellbeing towards areas that could, almost inherently, understand the precarious condition of the animal through an intersectional lens. Questioning the arbitrariness of such tradition, *Becoming Bone Sheep* manages to retrace a recent history of mistreatment: "How were clinical reasoning, surgical techniques and agricultural practices knitted together? Which hems and stiches would I need to rip to understand its historical fabric? What kind of practices had brought this place into existence, had made it possible?" (Schlünder et al. 279). Unpacking the "historical fabric" would therefore lead, in this case, to the discovery of yet another layer of Western domination over nonhuman lives. In this case, reiterating the possibility of encountering safer spaces of interaction between

planetary spaces leads us to the opposite pole, where a history of repression, colonisation and violence is bound to understand the perils of domineering power structures. Therefore, the unfortunate coordination of repression (hi)stories is deemed to cooperate in order to provoke a re-evaluation of priorities, especially in regards to the precariousness of life. Of particular relevance to this discourse is the exploitation of natural resources and animal populations in the Global South. The rapacious expansion of European colonial powers in Africa and Asia, for instance, led to the widespread hunting of species such as elephants and rhinos for their valuable ivory, as well as the overfishing of marine life in the waters surrounding these regions. The consequences of such practices were devastating, not only for the animal populations themselves, but also for the indigenous communities who were historically and continue to be marginalized and impoverished by such actions. Moreover, the impacts of colonialism and globalization on the Global South have also contributed to the destruction of vital ecosystems and habitats, further exacerbating the threat to animal populations. The proliferation of industrial agriculture and monoculture, for example, has led to the decimation of forests and other ecosystems, depriving animals of their natural habitats and rendering them increasingly vulnerable to extinction. In light of these pressing concerns, it is incumbent upon scholars and activists to work towards unravelling the historical fabric of Western domination and creating safer spaces of interaction between human and nonhuman lives, as “the planetary environmental crisis calls on us to extend ideas of politics and justice to the nonhuman” (Chakrabarty 13). This might involve advocating for more sustainable and equitable economic systems, supporting the rights of indigenous communities, and protecting vital ecosystems. Ultimately, a more just and equitable world will require a fundamental rethinking of our relationship with the natural world and the nonhuman lives that inhabit it.

All things considered, the question that seems to encompass the extensiveness of this debate comes from Elizabeth Deloughrey, who asks: “how might we parochialize the Anthropocene in order to engage the often-conflicting narratives of relationship to place, multispecies, and planet?” (352). Making the case for Cudworth and Hobden’s emancipatory project, Braidotti’s zoe-centric ethics, the model of the graphic narrative as an assemblage, the focus on a planetary discourse (especially in regards to the Global South) and the usage of transmedial and intersectional lenses, it seems like there is hope to be found in “a Humanities to come” (Spivak 526), but without falling

prey to doctrines that are “particularly vulnerable to naturalizing dominant forms of environmental discourse, particularly those that do not fundamentally engage with question of difference, power, and privilege” (De Loughrey and Handley 14).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude with, relying on the ability of the posthuman to metamorphose into an all-inclusive sentient being, we can observe that such a becoming promises not only a rejection of the belief that the human is the only beneficiary of agency, but also supports an empathetic milieu of harmony with the nonhuman. Thus, understanding *Becoming Bone Sheep* as a medium for exposing the utterly deficient condition of the nonhuman in relation with Man, we can perceive that the graphic exemplification of hybrid assemblages proposes a re-evaluation of kinship, emotionalism, speciesism and the space of interaction. The ultimate objective of this productive endeavour runs in parallel with the posthuman’s transgression of the human-centrist horizon, made possible under the aegis of what Braidotti calls *zoe*. Moreover, uncovering the irreverence of the Western tradition entails a holistic awareness ebbed into an intersectional framework that is ready to counter the hegemonic practices found at work within discourses of dominance, repression and violence. Therefore, awareness of the vital force of life deterritorializes anthropocentrism and gives way to posthumanism – an open gate towards the liberation from the pernicious and conservatory attitude of the self-centred man.

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