

Becoming-Animal and Becoming-Woman Explored Through a Feminine Minor Literature

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To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. Kafka's animals never refer to a mythology or to archetypes but correspond solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them. There is no longer anything but movements, vibrations, thresholds in a deserted matter: animals, mice, dogs, apes, cockroaches are distinguished only by this or that threshold, this or that vibration, by the particular underground tunnel in the rhizome or the burrow. (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 13)

Abstract

In this essay I will critically examine the concepts of becoming-woman and becoming-animal as discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I will explore them in terms of lines of flight and reterritorialization and how these might be realized differently through literature and art, namely *écriture féminine* (Cixous), a writing that destabilizes the molar phallogocentric tradition. More specifically I will discuss Clarice Lispector's literary work *The Passion According to G.H.* and Leonora Carrington's short stories. Femininity has been historically linked with chaos, the body, and animality rather than reason, in order to exclude women from logocentric disciplines of knowledge. I propose that this oppressive association might be reclaimed and reterritorialized to offer liberatory possibilities towards becoming. I do not aim to offer a structuralist or literary interpretation of these works, but rather to illuminate how these stories might function mechanically according to Deleuze and Guattari's concept creations in the way Deleuze and Guattari do with Kafka as *a minor literature*. In *G.H.*, the title character experiences her domesticity and bourgeois femininity as a confining rigid identity but experiences a deterritorialization and ontological interruption of her bounded everyday experience once she discovers unexpectedly a cockroach on her floor. She begins an ongoing line of flight towards becoming-cockroach, and therefore towards better understanding the being of this primordial creature, one that most humans experience as other, invader, and disgusting. Carrington's surrealist stories

offer darkly comic tales of transformation, of hoards of animals, of hybrids (both animal and sexual), and of becoming-animal, becoming-human, and becoming-woman. I will use Cixous' and Braidotti's writings on Lispector and Elizabeth Grosz' readings of Deleuze and Guattari to aid my exploration into how the notions of becoming-animal and becoming-woman open new liberatory positions hitherto unavailable.

Keywords: Becoming, *Écriture Feminine*, Feminist Theory, Materialism, Minor Literature, Leonora Carrington, H el ene Cixous, Deleuze and Guattari, Clarice Lispector

Becoming is a concept explored by Deleuze and Guattari in the plateau "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible..." from *A Thousand Plateaus*. Becoming-animal is a liberatory line of flight away from the rigid molar assemblages of "human" and "reason" towards rhizomatic movements, packs and multiplicities, and reterritorializations. Like animals, women have historically been linked to the body, the Earth, and the chaos that accompanies these. This association between women and the chaotic material body has formerly been harnessed as a tool of oppression—materiality that must be bound within form—but I suggest that it may be reclaimed to create a freeing line of flight towards becomings. As Deleuze and Guattari use Kafka's works to show the functionings of becomings, I will use H el ene Cixous' notion of * criture feminine*, a literature centred around feminine ways of knowing and experiencing, to illustrate becomings within and through the works of both Clarice Lispector and Leonora Carrington. In Clarice Lispector's 1964 novel *The Passion According to G.H.*, the title character, a bourgeois sculptress living in Brazil, experiences an "absolute molecular deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 58) of her world and identity through a transformative encounter with a cockroach on her apartment floor. This leads her to a series of openings and becomings, ultimately leading her to lose her humanity altogether. Similarly, in Leonora Carrington's short stories, her characters, primarily women, undergo animal transformations, joining packs and abandoning humanity. These two writers exemplify becomings in differing ways; while Lispector's G.H. is unexpectedly affected by a series of becomings after an encounter with another kind of being (an insect), Carrington's characters freely choose to renounce and challenge the stifling molarities around them to join pack animals and nomadic creatures instead. These becomings testify to the ecofeminist conception of the importance of all beings and ways of existing and destabilize the oppressive binary-machines of the State.

At least since Platonic dualism was founded in Ancient Greece, women have been linked to the body, the chaos, and the animality of nature. It was supposed that while men are endowed with reason, women are essentially confined to their bodies, unable to reflect on Platonic ideals or concepts such as truth, justice, or beauty. This grouping has served to justify the reproductive exploitation of women, as well as the claim that women's minds are inherently inferior or deficient. Although historically this association of women with bodily matter has been oppressive, I believe that women, as well as those who desire moments of becomings-woman, might harness this link as a power for hitherto unknown becomings. In experimenting with the body, we can affect and be affected in unforeseen courses, and recognize our inherent connectedness to other strata of beings. Or, as Lispector writes, realize that: "I too, who was slowly reducing myself to whatever in me

was irreducible, I too had thousands of blinking cilia, and with my cilia I move forward, I protozoan, pure protein” (Lispector, 54). This appreciation for molecular beings, not just human molar subjects, might open up new relations of becoming that recognize the value of all ways of existing, both becoming-woman and becoming-animal or insect.

Creating art is one of the many ways in which one might initiate becomings. In the act of writing, one takes on the identity of the characters and beings described, not imitating or acting “like” them but becoming them (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 238). Deleuze and Guattari use literature, particularly the works of Franz Kafka, to explore their concept-creations through *minor literature*—literary works that exemplify becoming-minoritarian, a social and political process in which one releases and reterritorializes one’s molar identities and instead moves toward the molecular.

Kafka, a Jewish Czech man who spoke German, unformed and reterritorialized the standard or “major” German language into a minor language (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 16). Through his artful iteration of the language in his destabilizing, marginal voice, he blurred the limiting territorialities of the language and expressed impossible new identities or ways of being. By writing in such a way, Kafka evades interpretation and over-codification, instead expressing a radically free, flowing form of writing. Kafka also brilliantly illustrates becoming in his tales of becoming-animal in the becoming-cockroach in *Metamorphosis* as well as in other stories with less explicit becomings-animal, such as the becoming-fish or becoming-sea monster of Lena in *The Trial* or the becoming-mole or mouse within the endless rhizomes of offices in *The Castle* and *Amerika*. Kafka is so effective in illustrating becoming because his animals, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 13), do not at any time refer to archetypes or mythologies, but to new freer forms of molecular movement and deterritorializations. Kafka’s worlds subvert strict significations, interpretations, and subjectifications equally, permitting instead lines of flight away from the molar and into the burrow or the pack.

Like Kafka, Cixous’ *écriture féminine* is a minor literature, revolutionary in both the political sense and radical in creating space for new lines of flight within the literary medium. In Cixous’ famous essay “Le rire de la Méduse,” she argues that the history of writing has been masculinist and centred around male subjectivity—the naturalization of their hierarchized values, desires, and sociality, minimizing the importance of women’s perspectives and experiences. Further, language is structured in the form of binary opposites, rigid structures, and linear timelines; undermining experimentation and creativity, especially when the body is involved because it centralizes the masculinist focus on unitary identities and withholds recognition of other ways of engaging, desiring, or knowing. Cixous calls for a form of writing that is not confined to patriarchal norms, a new medium that exists outside of the phallogocentric tradition, one which allows for women to freely express themselves in every sense, not merely in the conventional written fashion privileged by history. This unique type of writing is baptized as *écriture féminine*, a writing that encourages using the body and, like Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 256) call for an ethics of discovering “what a body can do.” Cixous creates a new language that allows for a plurality of becomings-woman, not just of women themselves, but of anyone

who desires becoming-woman. Cixous (1976, 6) does not call for an *écriture féminine* in the molar, rigid sense, nor for a mere inclusion of women to be subsumed by a totalizing dialectic, but for the undoing of strict significations and formations, allowing for reterritorializations and for one to “carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history.” *Écriture féminine* allows for the fluid experimentations that make becomings possible; the becoming-woman and becoming-Medusa of Cixous are among such examples. I propose that Lispector’s and Carrington’s works constitute *écritures féminines* that illustrate becoming-minoritarian through becoming-woman and becoming-animal both.

The Passion According to G.H. is a story of becoming-insect in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense: G.H. does not grow antennae or a shell as in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, she does not even scurry on the floor, but she rather experiences the affects, the very real feelings and perceptions of the cockroach and the bodily intensities of the non-human. Lispector introduces the novel with the narrator experiencing a cataclysmic disruption of her privileged everyday life when her maid moves out of her apartment, inducing an ontological and spiritual crisis. After her maid, a working class, indigenous Brazilian woman, quits, G.H. begins to clean her old room. In doing so, she crosses a threshold into the living space of someone she experiences as alien to her privileged, sheltered world, beginning a transformation into becoming-minoritarian (Braidotti, 160). In the maid’s closet, G.H. notices drawings of three figures outlined in charcoal: a man, a woman, and a dog. These drawings do not touch each other, they are discrete and limited to their own milieus, as are the rigid binaries of man-woman and human-animal, leading G.H. to question her comfortable molar assumptions of gender, class, and species. Describing the outlines, G.H. says: “It was a violation of my quotation marks, the quotation marks that made me a citation of myself” (Lispector, 34). When G.H. suddenly notices a cockroach on the floor of the wardrobe, she is arrested by a feeling of visceral disgust at this primordial, abject creature. G.H. is filled with hatred, loathing the fact that cockroaches are so ancient and invasive.

The cockroach is a challenge or foil to human subjectivity—it does not think like us or individuate itself; it cannot pretend to transcend the matter it is composed of in the way human subjects do, it is rather a disrupting line of flight from the arborescent moral stabilities of human identity. Becoming-insect is a common theme in Deleuze and Guattari’s work; insects, unlike certain other animals, are difficult to anthropomorphize—they escape human understanding. They buzz, vibrate, and drum instead of speaking, singing, or barking, disrupting the signifying regime. Insects are most repulsive to humans when they travel in packs, for it is within these multiplicitous groups that the loss of the individual subject is so apparent: “the blackness of hundreds of bedbugs, crowded together one atop the other” (Lispector, 40). These pack animals remind G.H. of her childhood poverty, of “leaky roofs, cockroaches and rats” (40). G.H. also describes the roach in terms of her revulsion towards darker peoples like her maid, identifying the roach as appearing like “a dying mulatto woman” (49). Like cockroaches, G.H. implicitly perceives other classes and races as invasive and filthy vermin, causing G.H. to uncomfortably confront her own molar identities as an affluent light-skinned Brazilian woman. G.H. feels that her

privileged humanity is threatened by this cockroach, and thus crushes it with the wardrobe door, leading the cockroach to spit a foamy white discharge of its insides.

Like a woman, a cockroach is inseparable from “the awareness of living, inextricable from its body” (Lispector 43). The discharge of the roach is the abject feminine, inducing G.H. to “abject herself” (Kristeva, 5), experiencing a transformation so bodily she feels as though she had vomited. The disgust that G.H. feels causes an “upheaval” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 240) of the self and “an inhumanity immediately experienced in the body as such” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 273). She finds her “self” becoming a non-self, becoming-imperceptible-with the insect. G.H. claims “it was a mud in which the roots of my identity were shifting” (Lispector, 51). Here, G.H.’s stable arborescent organization is interrupted and thrown into an escaping line of flight with G.H. finding her humanity deterritorialized, becoming instead an indiscernible flux of movement. Hoping to hold on to her stable humanity, G.H. wishes that someone would call her telephone to interrupt the process of deterritorialization she is continually undergoing, but it is no use. G.H. reaches the plane of consistency of becoming-cockroach once she puts the insect’s insides in her mouth, further developing her becomings in actualizing them through direct actions. G.H.’s mouth enters into compositions and relations with the particles of the insect matter. Insects that walk close to the ground are seen by humans as filthy and lowly beasts, described by the *Bible* as unclean forbidden animals unfit for human consumption. In “committing the forbidding act of touching the unclean” (Lispector, 67), G.H. releases herself from the last remaining arborescent roots of her humanity—her reason and Christian morality—and gives her “self” over to becoming. This forms an ecstatic joy that G.H. reaches, a complete and utter deterritorialization in becoming-imperceptible along with the cockroach, where G.H. and the cockroach produce something altogether new, not quite human and not quite cockroach. Through this series of becomings, G.H. further understands the struggles and experiences of the Other, of the insect as well as the minority, recognizing the interconnectedness of all strata and species.

In addition to becoming-insect, G.H. undergoes becoming-woman. As a middle-class, financially independent woman with her own apartment, G.H. is in a unique situation for a woman of the mid-20th century, she is neither man nor woman in the strict sense—she is what escapes, the “in-between” that disrupts dualisms (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 277). Like the abject insect, G.H. is minoritarian, ambiguous, but she understands herself in terms of the masculine—as an independent, rational subject. As she becomes-cockroach, G.H. feels connected to abject matter, to the mucus of the insect and the discharge linked to the feminine. When she reflects on a time when she was pregnant and decided to have an abortion, she feels linked to her body and begins becoming in a way she has never felt before. Time becomes non-linear, and her patriarchal molar conception of her subjectivity is altered. The eyes of the cockroach evoke images of ova, inducing G.H. to become moving, living matter, emitting her particles with the ovum particles of the insect. In becoming-insect, G.H. undergoes a liberatory line of flight that allows her to become-bodily, something which has been historically associated with the feminine. In reclaiming this embodiment as deterritorializing, G.H. transforms what was once an oppressive association into something liberatory.

Deleuze (1993) uses Lewis Carroll's nonsensical worlds of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* to illustrate their philosophy of contradictions and paradox. Another notable surrealist, Leonora Carrington, also effectively demonstrates paradox in the forms of becomings in her hybrid-creation characters. Carrington's works commonly feature humans undergoing becoming-animal along with animals becoming-human through relationships and friendships. Her characters are often bourgeois young women who renounce the molar pillars of human identity—their well-to-do families, expensive clothing, and manners—to join packs of animals. These women renounce the despotic order-words of their families to become nomadic, destabilizing the powers of the State and the Oedipal family. Packs, as well as their well-dressed heads of the herds, often make appearances in these stories, equally experiencing becoming-human and becoming-woman along with the young women protagonists. These relationships form new ambiguous forms of being, indiscernible in terms of molar categories. Leonora Carrington's short story "As They Rode Along the Edge" features a woman in the process of becoming-cat. While Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming-animal is nearly impossible with our Oedipalized domesticated animals, Carrington shows that when cats undergo their own becoming-animal in taking lines of flight from domesticity, humans are rendered capable of "becoming-with" them (Haraway, 38). In the story, a woman named Virginia Fur joins a pack of feral cats, "fifty black cats and as many yellow ones," mixing her particles with theirs in such a way that her smell becomes "a mixture of spices and game, the stables, fur, and grasses" (Carrington, 39). Virginia not only grows a mane of fur, but more crucial for her becoming she joins the "customs" of the glaring by hunting, ceasing to bathe herself in the human fashion, and by abandoning human society to instead enjoy the company of the cats, living as just one cat among many. The citizens of the mountain in which Virginia lives respect her, but only because "the people up there were plants, animals, birds; otherwise things wouldn't have been the same" (Carrington, 40). Virginia is a kind of ambiguous marginal hybrid, a deviant from both molar human and animal classifications, challenging the rigid binary-machines of the State. Not only do humans undergo becomings in Carrington's phantasmagorical world, but plants do as well—while the cats are hunting on the mountain, "the brambles drew back their thorns like cats retracting their claws" (39). The plants do not imitate the cats, they rather enter into a relationship with the surrounding cats by joining their "herd" activity. Carrington demonstrates that everything is in an endless process of becomings towards molecular transformations and that this is not simply limited to the human or anthropomorphized animals. Virginia furthers her becomings-animal with bestialism, by becoming lovers with a wild boar, facilitating a series of becomings including the becoming-human and becoming-woman of the boar.

In another story entitled "Pigeon, Fly!," Carrington chronicles the experiences of a young woman invited by a musical sheep-human androgyne named Ferdinand to paint for an important man named Celestin des Airlines-Drues. When she arrives at his home, she notices a horse-drawn carriage carrying a coffin. In a clearing, there appears a large flock of sheep-humans bleating together, preparing for a funeral procession. In their collective bleating, the sheep form a trance-like collective and facilitate the transformation of the young woman. The woman has been called there to paint a portrait of the deceased, but

once she finishes, she notices that the face she has painted is her own. In this story, the woman joins the sheep herd, and as a result, the lines separating her and the dead woman grow imperceptible, the binaries of subject-object, human-animal, and dead-alive become indiscernible. In another story entitled “Jemima and the Wolf,” a young woman, Jemima, challenges the molarities of the Oedipal family, class, and gender through her becoming-animal and becoming-woman. Jemima ignores her State-prescribed duty of attending class and refuses to act “ladylike” or mannerly to the horror of her mother. Jemima’s mother, a haughty aristocrat, commands her daughter to stop being “difficult,” using order-words, claiming Jemima’s conduct is not natural for “a little girl of a good family” (Carrington, 193). Her mother gives her a doll, the ideal of femininity: frail, beautiful, silent, but Jemima despises what this toy represents and thus breaks the doll’s head against a rock exclaiming: “Isn’t it enough that the world is full of ugly human beings without making copies of them?” (193). Jemima takes a line of flight from her family’s rules, preferring instead the company of stray cats and bats, eating insects and dancing with them in ecstasy. She meets the head of a wolf pack and falls in love with him, promoting her becoming-wolf in new ways, following his lead. In fleeing their humanity and rigid womanhood, Carrington’s characters show the nomadic becomings that can be made possible through relations to animals. Both the sexual and animal becomings in these works exemplify Deleuze and Guattari’s characterization of becoming as destabilizing and deterritorializing, allowing for freer ways of being and relating to one another.

Deleuze and Guattari use Virginia Woolf’s novels to illustrate the ways in which writing can induce zones of proximity between different molarities. The rhizomatic lines of flight within Woolf’s modernist prose show many possible modes of becoming, the becoming-other among the many characters of *The Waves*, or the becoming-other of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Carrington’s writing passes in-between molarities of species and gender, like Woolf producing “a becoming-woman as atoms of womanhood capable of crossing and impregnating an entire social field, and of contaminating men, of sweeping them up in that becoming. Very soft particles—but also very hard and obstinate, irreducible, indomitable” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 276). Carrington narrates the interwoven immanence of all identities, evoking Virginia Woolf’s “I am this, I am that” (Woolf, 11). In the act of writing, Carrington must undergo molecular transformations herself in order to understand these multiplicitous ways of being and becoming.

These accounts of becoming illuminate new means of connecting with other ways of being and undo the oppressive molar identities that separate us. While Deleuze and Guattari might conceive of feminism as a molar endeavor that considers women and minorities as molar collectives as opposed to molecular becomings, I believe their notion of becoming has potential to guide eco-feminist projects. I do not mean to conflate the issues of women and minorities with those of animals and the environment, but rather to demonstrate how one might understand them together through becomings, or, in Donna Haraway’s terms, “becoming-with” (38). Minoritarian groups, with their understandings of molecular becomings and their unique ontologies, might offer guidance on how to treat other marginalized molecular beings, guiding an ecology to come. The interconnectivity of all matter is highlighted by the various forms of becoming within both Carrington’s and

Lispector's works. Through becoming-animal, our molar differences are effaced to form new molecularities, creating an improved recognition of the value of all living, flowing matter. This allows for a recognition that all life upon Earth is important, driving the imperative to recognize and treat all matter with respect, including women, minorities, animals, and the Earth equally. The minoritarian status of woman is mirrored by the insect and the rat. While these animals might be large in number, they are still a minority in relation to the despotic rule of humanity. These animals are molecular pack animals, challenging rigid institutions and identities. Women, like insects, compose much of the population, but are subjected to the regime of Man, where society is centred around the white, male, heterosexual experience. In becoming-woman and becoming-animal, one is rendered capable of releasing oneself from human exceptionalisms and molar boundaries of species and gender to instead recognize the symbiotic, transformative relations we might form. As Haraway (36) argues of interactions with animals:

Touch does not make one small; it peppers its partners with attachment sites for world making. Touch, regard, looking back, becoming with—all these make us responsible in unpredictable ways for which worlds take shape. In touch and regard, partners willy nilly are in the miscegenous mud that infuses our bodies with all that brought that contact into being.

In experiences with varying ways of existing, such as those in Carrington's and Lispector's works, we come to understand the need to recognize and respect difference, in the domains of the sexual and species, but also in an infinity of molecular forms.

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