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SIGNS OF WONDER AND TRACES OF DOUBT: ON TERATOLOGY AND EMBODIED DIFFERENCES

Rosi Braidotti

[... A working definition of the term 'monster' has been available since the late eighteenth century, when Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire organized monsters in terms of excess, lack or displacement of his/her organs. There can be too many parts or too few; the right ones can be in the wrong places or duplicated at random on the surface of the body. This is the definition I have adopted in my work.]

THE EPISMOPHILIC STRUCTURES OF TERATOLOGICAL DISCOURSES

Discourses about monsters are fundamentally 'epistemophilic', in that they express and explore a deep-seated curiosity about the origins of the deformed or anomalous body. Historically, the question that was asked about monsters was: 'How could such a thing happen? Who has done this?' The quest for the origin of monstrous bodies has motivated some of the wildest theories about them.

The epistemophilic dimension makes teratology an ideal testing ground for Freudian critiques of scientific theories in terms of displaced sexual curiosity. For psychoanalytic theory, the desire to know, which is the drive that sustains scientific inquiries, is marked by curiosity about one's own origins, and is consequently stamped with libidinal investments. Psychoanalysis teaches us that desire is that which remains ungraspable at the very heart of our thought, because it is that which propels our thinking in the first place. As such, it will evade us in the very act of constituting us as subjects of knowledge. This is why no science can ever be either 'pure' or 'objective' for psychoanalysis. The monstrous or hybrid body is perfect evidence of such theory. In discourses about monsters, the scientific and the fantasmatic dimensions intersect constantly.

There is another, more concrete side to this epistemophilic issue. Historically, monstrous bodies have served as material for experimentation in biomedical practices that eventually led to comparative anatomy and embryology. Disposable bodies are useful to science.

Monsters are linked to the female body in scientific discourse through the question of biological reproduction. Theories of conception of monsters are at times extreme versions of the deep-seated anxiety that surrounds the issue of women's maternal power of procreation in a patriarchal society. To say that compulsory heterosexuality is one of the issues at stake in teratology may seem far-fetched until one reads, in a famous treaty on prodigies, a scathing and rather scurrilous account of the monstrous sexual practices attributed to female hermaphrodites – living in far away places like Africa – who take advantage of their monstrosity by indulging in 'same-sex sex. The year is 1573; the author is Ambroise Paré. Far-fetched?

Historical examples of the epistemophilic structure of teratology abound. Ambroise Paré concentrates his research on monsters entirely on the question of their reproduction and tells the most extreme versions of the deep-seated anxiety that surrounds the issue of compulsory heterosexuality. He tells the monstrous birth as a sinister sign ('mauvais augure') that expresses the guilt or sin of the parents. The most common forms of parental transgression concern the norms for acceptable sexual practice, which were regulated by the Catholic Church. Thus, the practice of intercourse on the Sunday or on the eve of any major religious holiday, as well as too frequent intercourse, are quoted reasons for monstrous births.

Sexual excess, especially in the woman, is always a factor. Too much or too little semen are quoted as central causes, as is the mixing of sperm from different sources – for instance, intercourse with animals. Hereditary factors are not ruled out. Intercourse during menstruation is fatal. The influence of stars and planets also matters, as does the consumption of forbidden food of the right food at the wrong time. But the monster could also be conceived because of bad atmospheric conditions, or by divine or diabolic interventions.

The devil is extremely resourceful when it comes to satanic penetrations and conceptions. Saint Augustine warns us that Satan – the great simulator – can take different forms. For instance, as succubus (the one who lies at the bottom) he can take the appearance of a beautiful woman; in this guise, he seduces a healthy young man, thus obtaining his sperm. Then he changes into an incubus (the one who lies on top) and, in this guise – as a man – and in full control of the sperm he has just extracted, he seduces and impregnates a chosen woman. Apart from showing the infinite malice of the evil genius, this would have to count as one of the earliest theories of artificial insemination.

CONTINUITIES AND SPECIFICITIES OF THEME IN TERATOLOGICAL DISCOURSES

The striking historical continuity of some themes regarding monsters is partly due to the two main features I have already pointed out: their non-objective status or 'impurity' and their epistemophilic charge. Clearly, the question 'Where do babies - however monstrous - come from?' is as transhistorical a line of inquiry as one is ever likely to get!

Park and Daston (1981) situate the continuity of teratology in a set corpus of canonical texts: first, the biological works of Aristotle and his classical followers, primarily Albertus Magnus; second, the tradition of divination canonized by Cicero in De Divinatione; third, the cosmographical and anthropological components. Glenister (1964) suggests instead a relative stability in the categories of historical analysis of monstrous births. The following seem to recur quite regularly: supernatural causes, astrological influences, seminal and menstrual factors, hybridity, mental impressions, philosophical and scientific explanations.

It seems clear that a degree of thematic consistency and order does exist. For the sake of convenience, ever since the encyclopaedic work done in the nineteenth century by Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire, the scientific history of monsters has been divided in three major periods: classical antiquity, the pre-scientific and the scientific eras. To these traditional distinctions, I would like to add a fourth one: the genetic turning point in the post-nuclear era, also known as cybernetic teratology, and the making of new monsters due to the effects of toxicity and environmental pollution.

In the rest of this chapter, I will concentrate on two themes, the continuity of which in the history of teratological discourses strikes me as particularly significant: the racialization of monstrous bodies and the question of the maternal imagination - race and gender as marks of difference. I would like to begin with an introductory remark.

As a signpost, the monster helps organize more than the interaction of heaven and earth. It also governs the production of differences here and now.

The traditional - historically constant - categories of otherness are sexual difference and sexual deviation (especially homosexuality and hermaphroditism); race and ethnicity; the non-human, either on an upward trajectory (the divine, or sacred) or a downward one (the natural environment, the animal, the degenerate, the mutant). A case apart is that of the inorganic other; that is, the machine or technological body-double, the relation of which to the monstrous body is strong. Discussion of this topic would require the kind of special attention that, I regret, I cannot give here.

The peculiarity of the organic monster is that s/he is both Same and Other. The monster is neither a total stranger nor completely familiar; s/he exists in an in-between zone. I would express this as a paradox: the monstrous other is both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity. The monster helps us understand the paradox of 'difference' as a ubiquitous but perennially negative preoccupation.

This mechanism of 'domestic foreignness', exemplified by the monster, finds its closest analogy in mechanisms such as sexism and racism. The woman, the Jew, the black or the homosexual are certainly 'different' from the configuration of human subjectivity based on masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and Christian values which dominates our scientific thinking. Yet they are central to this thinking, linked to it by negation, and therefore structurally necessary to upholding the dominant view of subjectivity. The real enemy is within: s/he is liminal, but dwells at the heart of the matter. With this in mind, let us look at some historical cases.

THE RACIALIZATION OF 'OTHER' BODIES

One of the dominant teratological discourses in antiquity is that of the monstrous races on the edge of civilization. We find a sort of anthropological geography, the study of territories or special lands where the monstrous races live. Homer had written about cyclops and giant races, of course, but it is Herodotus that started the anthropological trend in the fifth century BC. Though he was rather reserved about neighbouring civilizations such as the Egyptian and the Persian, he went quite wild over more distant lands such as India and Ethiopia, which he thought were populated by cannibals, troglodytes and monstrously deformed people. In the fourth century BC, Ktesias described the Indian tribes of Sciapodes, who had one single large foot on which they could hop faster than any bipeds; descriptions of Cynocephali (dog-headed people) and Blemmyae (headless people) also abound. Through the canonization these monstrous races receive in Pliny’s Natural History, they will become part and parcel of European medieval folklore. Medieval iconography will, of course, accentuate the monstrosity of monsters and provide moral readings of their morphological deformations.

Whence does this geographical and anthropological racist imaginary originate? Bernal (1987) suggests that the foundations for this topographic determinism of races can be found in Aristotle's Politics, in the following passage:

The races that live in cold regions and those of Europe are full of courage and passion but somewhat lacking in skill and brainpower, for this reason, while remaining generally independent, they lack political cohesion and the ability to rule others. On the other hand, the Asiatic races have both brains and skill but are lacking in courage and willpower; so they have remained both enslaved and subject. The Hellenic race, occupying a mid position geographically, has a measure of both. Hence it has continued to be free, to have the best political institutions and to be capable of ruling others given a single constitution. 2

The politics of climate and the justice of in media res were to have a long and rather successful history in European culture. In a set of continuous historical variations, our culture has tended to represent the furthest away as the most monstrous – that is, the least civilized, the least democratic or least law-

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abiding; though the actual structures of the scientific discourses conveying this idea underwent historical transformations – from the geographical discourse of the Greeks to the concern for jurisprudence in the eighteenth century, down to evolutionary anthropology in the nineteenth. The idea lived on, stubbornly and lethally.

The colonization of the North American continent, for instance, intensified the trend. Greek theories about climatic and geographical determinism of races lived on in the New World, though they underwent significant revisions. A papal bull by Paul II was needed in 1537 to affirm that Native Americans were fully human and therefore in possession of an immortal soul (de Waal Malefijt 1968), but this did not stop the European settlers from capturing them as ‘specimens’ and shipping them back to Europe to be placed on public display, a phenomenon which grew throughout the eighteenth century and turned into a major entertainment industry in the nineteenth.

It is worth noting the link between the exhibition of freaks and the orientalist and racist imaginary that underlies it. In the side-shows, spectators wanted to be shocked by the unsightly spectacle of primordial races, in order to be confirmed in their assumptions of racial superiority. Colonial narratives were used to aggrandize the human exhibits (Gould and Pyle 1897), using a pseudo-scientific language borrowed from that of natural-scientific imperialist explorations of unknown continents. Ethiopian, Indian, African and Asian ‘monsters’ came to be inscribed in these narratives of colonialist teratology.

Theories of geographical determination of monstrousness continued to be produced with stunning regularity. In the eighteenth century, the French ‘philosophes’, in their concern for jurisprudence, were not immune from the influence of such ideas, though on the whole they opposed slavery. Montesquieu in 1748 and Rousseau in 1764 followed the school of geographical determinism by stating that the northern regions were the ones capable of engendering true virtue and a democratic spirit (Bernal 1987).

Maupertuis (1759), on the basis of his analysis of a monstrosity called ‘les nègres-blanc’ (black albino), suggests that black babies are more likely to be born to white parents than white are to blacks; it follows that white is the basic human colour, and blackness is an accidental variation which became hereditary for people living in equatorial zones.

In the nineteenth century, as suggested above, experts pointed to organic disease, intemperance and intermarriage as possible causal factors, but they never abandoned anthropological explanations and ethnographic classification systems. Through the later part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the theory that certain forms of mental deficiency were a biological throwback to earlier races of humans, even to apes, was still widely believed, especially in evolutionary anthropology.

A contemporary version of the continuity of the Greek geoclimatic determination of monstrous races can be found in superstitions and legends surrounding the abominable snowman and, more significantly, in speculations about life in outer space and the colonization of other planets. Extraterrestrials, in popular science-fiction literature and films, perpetuate ancient traditions of representing far-away places as monstrously alien. They also highlight, however, the messianic or divine undertones of the monstrous other, thus reflecting the systematic dichotomy of the teras as both god and abjection.

That is the optimistic version of the contemporary situation. A less optimistic one was provided on the front page of the New York Times on 21 February 1995. In the Austrian city of Oberwart, a neo-Nazi group attacked a Gypsy settlement of 117 people and left behind a placard saying: ‘Gypsies go back to India’. In an important article entitled ‘Marvels of the East’, Wittkower (1942) analyses the history of racialized teratology centring on India: it originates, as stated earlier, with Herodotus. However wrong the neo-Nazis may be, they are certainly accurate in their fantasmatik geography.

I do not wish to suggest that this is all there is to the racialization of monstrous bodies. Specific historical variations obviously exist – for instance, the vehemence of attacks on Jewish monstrousness throughout the sixteenth century. In his Histoires prodigieuses et mémorables, extraîtes de plusieurs fameux auteurs, grecs et latins, sacrés et prophanes, Boaistuau (1598) devotes a whole chapter to the monstrous race of the Jews. Situated between sections devoted to comets, earthquakes and organic, malformed babies, the chapter on the Jews adopts a different tone. Relying on the classical repertoire of European anti-Semitism (the killing of Christ, the poisoning of water wells, and so on), it describes in minute and rather pictorial details the capital punishment that should be inflicted to ‘cette malheureuse vénine’ (Book I, ch. X: 35). No other chapter in this text displays such unabashed hatred or such dedication to violent retaliation for alleged sins of monstrousness. Clearly, the monstrousness of the European Jews is of the most negative and demonic kind, with little of the divine sense of wonder that accompanies other prodigies.

Later on, the racialization process intensified and shifted from Jews to African and Asian peoples. For instance, Linnaeus, in his classification system of all living beings, established a hierarchical relationship between the races, which was to become central to the European world-view. Thus, in the tenth edition of his Systema naturae (1759), Linnaeus postulates a race called homo monstruosUS, which is one of the branches of homo sapiens, living in remote regions of the earth. Black men are classified as being at an equal distance between apes and humans (though satyrs and pygmies are closer to the former than to the latter). This will promote the idea of ‘the search for a “missing link”, a creature half-ape, half-man’ (de Waal Malefijt 1968: 118). This creature was generally believed to roam about in Java and Africa.

The point, however, remains that, in the history of the racialization of the monstrous body, the continuity of certain themes intersects with singular and specific historical instances of teratological discourse. What is both surprising and intriguing is the recycling of the same themes and arguments through time, though they get pinned to different racial groups.
THE THEORY OF THE MATERNAL IMAGINATION

There is no doubt, however, that the ‘imagination’ hypothesis is the longest lasting theory of monstrous births. It attributes to the mother the capacity to undo the living capital she is carrying in her womb; the power of her imagination is such that she can actually kill or deform her creation. It must be borne in mind here that the power of the imagination has been a major issue since the seventeenth century. At that time, it had a double function: to create order through the principle of making connections or spotting resemblances, and yet also to upset that order (Encyclopédie 1765). This double function is to be found in Descartes’ treatment of the imagination in his metaphysics. It is also fully deployed in the debates about the maternal imagination.

In his study of freak-shows, Bogdan (1988) reminds us that, as late as the nineteenth century, the explanation for the birth of the famous dwarf General Tom Thumb was the theory of maternal impression. Shortly before Tom’s birth the family’s puppy had drowned. The mother had been distraught and wept hysterically, causing the baby to be ‘marked’ and shrink.

Boucè (1985) points out that, in popular teratology, the theory of the maternal imagination continues to be used to explain sexual promiscuity. For instance, as far back as 1573 Paré recounts Hippocrates’ story of a princess that was accused of adultery because she gave birth to a black baby. She was excused, however; when she pointed to a large portrait of a Moor that was hanging above the bed where she had consummated her normal, lawful and lily-white intercourse with her husband. Just looking at the picture of the black man had been enough.

In 1642 (Darmon 1977) Aldrovandi pointed out the cases of women who, during Charles V’s occupation of Picardy, gave birth to dark-haired, Spanish-looking children, strikingly similar to the foreign soldiers, the sight of whom – they claimed most forcibly – had ‘startled’ them so. Some of these accounts are not without a sense of humour. The anti-imaginationist Blondel tells of a woman who, on 6 January, gave birth to three babies: two white and one black. Darmon quotes the case of a woman who gave birth to a boy who looked very much like the local bishop. She saved her life, however, by saying that every Sunday she had stood in that church, in pious adoration of the man, and that she ‘imprinted’ his features on the foetus. Swammerdam quotes the case of a pregnant woman who, startled by the sight of a black man on the street, rushed home to wash herself in warm water. Her child was consequently born white, except for the spaces between his fingers and toes. She had been unable to reach these and they had therefore turned out pitch black on her child. The most recent record I found of this sort of imbrication of teratological and racialized accounts of female reproductive powers dates to the period following the landing of the Allied troops in Normandy. The blonde Norman women claimed that they delivered black babies because they had been ‘frightened’ by the first black soldiers they had seen (Darmon 1977).

Crucial to this theory is the assumption that the child’s entire morphological destiny is played out during conception and the period of gestation. Malebranche (1673) cites a spectacular incidence of this in his report of a pregnant woman who had watched a public hanging and gave birth to a still-born baby, strangled by the umbilical cord. It appeared, further, that even looking at a crucifix might be likely to engender a foetus with broken joints.

The case for the maternal imagination through the seventeenth century was upheld by Paré, Descartes and Malebranche. One implication of the importance attributed to the maternal powers of disruption is that procreation was not to be taken for granted but rather constituted a real ‘art’. Women became especially responsible for the style and the form of their procreative powers, and many medical treatises were devoted to advising them on how to deal with their delicate situation. A great number of these medical texts concentrate on how to reproduce baby boys, and several are devoted exclusively to the reproduction of male geniuses or ‘great men’.

According to common belief, pregnant women were to avoid all excitement and cultivate the serenity of their soul. A special warning was issued against reading, which was seen as the activity most likely to influence and inflame their inflammable imagination. Fraisse (1989), in her study of discourses on women during the French Revolution, focuses on the prohibition surrounding women’s reading. This activity seems to be fraught with unspeakable dangers, which, in the case of pregnant women, assume catastrophic dimensions. As late as the nineteenth century, the idea that reading could inflame the female imagination and cause irreparable damage to the woman’s frail nervous system remained in fashion. I cannot help being reminded of Freud’s patient Dora, whose neurotic symptoms were not unrelated to her reading the ‘unhealthy’ texts of Mantegazza and other sexologists deemed unsuitable for such a young lady.

The key categories in the theory of the maternal imagination are female desire or wishes (‘envies’), the imagination, and the optical structure of human emotions. Glenister (1964) argues that the maternal imagination or impression theory is an optical theory; it is about vision and visual powers. It contains a satanic variable in the tradition of the ‘evil eye’. All it takes is for a pregnant woman to think ardently about, dream of, or quite simply long for, certain foodstuffs or for unusual or different people for these impressions to be transferred and printed upon the foetus.

In what Boucè (1985) describes as ‘a pervasive epistemological haze’, this concept covers phenomena as diverse as the sequences of affective traumas, strong emotions, cravings, wild fantasies and simple memories.

The case against the maternal imagination was upheld by Blondel, Buffon, Maupertuis and the Encyclopédie. The opposition attacked relentlessly the epistemological haze of the maternal theory. Blondel, of the British Royal Academy, wrote a passionate treatise refuting the theory, based on the assumption of the ‘neutrality’ of the foetus from the mother. He claimed that the foetus is completely isolated from all sensations or emotions experienced by the
mother, thereby showing little knowledge of physiology but great rigour in his argument. Maupertuis followed a similar line.

The most systematic attack against this theory, however, comes from the Encyclopédie. Contrary to the view of Blondel, it is argued that the imagination is an important faculty which moves us all, especially pregnant women, quite deeply, but that there is no direct link between the movements of the imagination and physiological processes. There is a general understanding that all passions, emotions or sensations are likely to affect and enervate pregnant women. And there is no denying that these passions have bodily counterparts: the heart beating faster, the muscles contracting, and so on. What comes especially under fire is the faculty that Malebranche had called ‘sympathie’ (the capacity to feel with/suffer with); that is to say, the causal link between emotions and the capacity to act on other objects.

In fact, the eighteenth-century Encyclopaedists take great care to circumscribe the powers of the imagination because, being unruly, it ends up confusing our ideas and is thus an obstacle to true knowledge. In the same vein, they set out to re-educate the poor gullible women who actually believe in the power of their imaginations. They suggest the following experiment: interview pregnant women before they give birth and make a list of all their desires/envies', and then compare these to what their newly born baby looks like in an attempt to cure them of their superstition. With customary wit, they do admit, however, that whenever they attempted this experiment, the women got very annoyed and still would not change their minds. So, could women cause monstrous births? No, says the Encyclopédie. Were women to have the power actually to create - or deform - life, they might use it to manufacture perfect babies for a change, instead of producing monstrous ones. Moreover, they add ginglyerly, if the women possessed such powers, they would probably conceive many more baby boys than girls, given that all women are at all times affected by their desires for men.

So what produces monsters? Maupertuis goes to some length in trying to provide an elaborate answer to this eternal question. He proposes a theory of magnetic correspondence between mother and foetus: their respective particles exercise a mutual fatal and foetal attraction which sets in train the process whereby babies are formed. Needless to say, whenever the particles are not strong enough, a monster will be produced by lack; in cases of overattraction of the same particles, a monster by excess is likely to be the result.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, this question must have begun to seem quite redundant to some people, because the Encyclopédie responds dismissively, quoting chance or misadventure as the only possible sources of deformity. To the optical-epistemological question: ‘Why do some babies look more like their mothers than their fathers?’, they answer (Volume VII, entry ‘foetus’, p. 2): ‘[Il faut bien voir que cela a lieu, sans trop nous instruire du comment ni du pourquoi.’

The theme of monstrous births began to lose scientific momentum. Within less than a century, as teratology gained scientific credibility and led to embryology, homo monstruosus became of little scientific relevance to embryological debates, though his place in anthropology was assured for centuries to come.

Preliminary Conclusions

First, to sum up on the subject of the maternal imagination. In the eighteenth century, the pro-imagination lobby did not fail to respond to the criticism; they emphasized the powerful link between the mother and the foetus, ridiculing any suggestions of the latter's 'neutrality'. They extended this into an attack on the limitations of the rationalist approach and also adopted something of a feminist line in stating that they were taking the side of the poor women, who constantly took the blame for monstrous births. By showing that they were overwhelmed by the imagination, they could be exonerated and even helped out.

In a historical perspective, this theory was indeed a step forward for women, as it recognized their active role in the process of generation. However, scientific teratology was instrumental in creating, or strengthening, a nexus of stifling interdictions, imperatives and even, in effect, pressing advice on women. The disciplining of the maternal body that followed from all this - all for her own good', of course - runs parallel to the reorganization of the profession of midwifery, which has been amply documented by feminist scholarship (Oakley 1984; Ehrenreich and English 1979).

The fundamental contradiction that lies at the heart of the quarrel about the maternal imagination concerns the understanding of the woman’s body. By the end of the eighteenth century, the mother’s body seems to be in a position structurally analogous to the classical monster: it is caught in a deep contradiction that splits it within itself. The female, pregnant body is posited both as a protective filter and as a conductor or highly sensitive conveyor of impressions, shocks and emotions. It is both a 'neutral' and a somewhat 'electrical' body. There is an insidious assimilation of the pregnant woman to an unstable, potentially sick subject, vulnerable to uncontrollable emotions. This can be linked to the eighteenth-century discourse about the pathologization of woman (Fraisse 1989).

Second, to conclude the notion of the racialization of the monstrous others. The persistence of the racial and racist overtones in teratological discourses intersects with the continuous emphasis on controlling and disciplining the woman’s body. Thus, teratology shows the imbrication of genderized and racialized narratives and the role they play in constructing scientific discourses about the female body. Their interconnection is such that any analysis of female embodied experience simply needs to take into account the simultaneous - if often contradictory - effects of racialized and genderized discourses and practices.

Third, to say some final words on monsters as non-scientific objects of research. Any historical account of teratological discourses has to face up to the limitations and aporias of scientific objectivity. Monsters are not just one object of scientific inquiry. They are many objects, whose configuration,
structure and content shift historically. If they can be called an object at all, they are one which is the effect of, while being also constitutive of, certain discursive practices: climatic and geographical anthropologies in antiquity; theological divination through the Renaissance; then anatomy; embryology; until we reach today's cybernetic and environmental chimio-teratology.

Clearly, the epistemophilic or imaginary charge surrounding the monster is partly responsible for this paradox of simultaneous complexity or changeability as well as continuity. The monstrous body, more than an object, is a shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about his or her embodied self. Gender and race are primary operators in this process.

As a way of concluding, I would like to propose a redefinition: the monster is a process without a stable object. It makes knowledge happen by circulating, sometimes as the most irrational non-object. It is slippery enough to make the Encyclopaedists nervous; yet, in a perfectly nomadic cycle of repetitions, the monstrous other keeps emerging on the discursive scene. As such, it persists in haunting not only our imagination but also our scientific knowledge-claims. Difference will just not go away. And because this embodiment of difference moves, flows, changes; because it propels discourses without ever settling into them; because it evades us in the very process of puzzling us, it will never be known what the next monster is going to look like; nor will it be possible to guess where it will come from. And because we cannot know, the monster is always going to get us.

NOTES

1. I have developed this idea at some length in my article: 'Mothers, Monsters and Machines' (Braidotti 1994: 75-95).

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