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Who's normal?

A Posthumanist reading of Clarissa Pinkola Estés' "Joyous Body: The Wild Flesh"

In primary school I found out about a constructed 'difference' when my one friend started telling me everyday that she did not like the clothes I wore. I felt hurt and was made aware of something I was unaware of, an idea of normalcy and the notion that I was not.

Instead I chose to stay apparent when, through encouragement by my mother, I found the words "I do like how I dress." Someone, an authoritative and central figure to my identity, had allowed me not to fit in. That in itself is already a great privilege that I am still deeply thankful for. Whereas my difference was deliberate, that of which many others already suffer centuries of institutional, personal and symbolic oppression from are usually differences that are not, but by institutions of power have been placed outside normalcy.

In this essay I will discuss part of the chapter "Joyous Body: The Wild Flesh" written by Clarissa Pinkola Estés¹ in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* and argue how Estés gives a healing posthumanist account, as understood by Rosi Braidotti's writing on Posthumanism. First, I will shortly describe the chapter itself and alongside that, argue how Estés challenges the hegemonic western patriarchal humanist standards in said chapter, and how she hands the reader a broader understanding of beauty and what it means to be embodied. Furthermore, I will describe how Estés affirms a position of producing *situated knowledges* as understood by Donna Haraway and how that positioning ties in with Braidotti's understanding of Posthumanism.

¹ Estés herself is a poet, Jungian psychoanalyst and post-trauma specialist and comes from a Mestiza Latin (Native American and Mexican-Spanish) background and was later adopted into an immigrant and refugee family of Magyar and Danau Swabian (both Hungarian) tribal people. Both her families could hardly read or write, but had a rich oral tradition of old mythos, stories, songs and chants and had great knowledge of nature, planting, animals and sustainable living by way of making everything from scratch. Estés, now in her seventies, is considered a *cantadora*, keeper of old stories in the Latina tradition.

In the seventh chapter of Clarissa Pinkola Estés acclaimed book *Women Who Run With the Wolves* titled “Joyous Body: The Wild Flesh”, Estés first accounts of marvelling at the way wolves play, setting the tone for what is to come by stating “[t]hey all have their own body configurations and strengths, their own beauty. They live and play according to what and who and how they are.”² Throughout the book, the wolf is likend to the woman inspired by her studies of the wolves *Canis lupus* and *Canis rufus*, and shows here that women are often criticised for the same characteristics as wolves are. “Like wolves, women are sometimes discussed as though only a certain temperament, only a restrained appetite, is acceptable. And too often added to that is an attribution of moral goodness or badness according to whether a woman’s size, height, gait and shape conform to a singular or exclusionary ideal.”³

The singular or exclusionary ideal Estés mentions can be placed in the perspective of dominant Humanist viewpoints she herself was subject to as well, growing up and studying in North America mid 20th century. 19th and 20th century Humanism heavily relied on Protagoras “Man as the measure of all things”⁴, and its iteration by Leonardo DaVinci’s reformulation of that thought, to specifically the white European man as an ideal of bodily perfection, which also functions as a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values that centralise and universalise this standard for humanity⁵. In making the white male body standard, it becomes unmarked—invisible—allowing it to become an objective point of view, from which reason can originate and truth can be discovered through its god-like disembodied observation. A crucial feature of this line of Humanist thinking is then, that everything that is not the white European male, becomes different and therefore marked, “other”, and more often than not a way of justifying a “naturally-determined” inferiority. It becomes impossible therefore, when one’s body is marked, different, to openly value it as is because one would then never be considered as being capable of reason.

Estés throws the Western Humanist male standard off balance by describing various alternatives from different cultures, linked to her own and other’s own ancestors as vantage points. In the next paragraph I will go into how by way of multiple located perspectives she creates *situated knowledges* as described by Donna Haraway and how this can be considered an exemplary form of posthumanist discourse. First, I will consider how Estés ideas

² Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995) 213.

³ Ibid, 213.

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) 13.

⁵ Ibid, 13.

challenge the Humanist standard through criticism on the idea that women of size are always hungry for something; an explanation of the effects of the Humanist standard on the psyche of the “other”; and a deconstructive criticism of seeing the body itself as “other”.

Freudian psychoanalysis deemed that all women of size are are hungry for something, [formulated by his own family’s active ridicule of stout people (218)] due to inappropriate feeding of the mother in regard to the child’s needs and emotions and later possess ‘a thin person screaming to get out.’⁶ Due to the canonical position Freudian theory held, and the persisting image of the lean white male as ideal of health, being of size was considered “other.” When suggesting such a ‘screaming thin woman’ to Estés her ancestral lineage, the Tehuana tribeswomen, she was asked if she meant the “possession by an evil spirit? Who would put such an evil thing inside a woman?” Estés gives a further account of the nature of such an evil spirit in her always elaborative footnotes, writing “[i]f ever there were an ‘evil spirit’ in women’s bodies, it would be mostly introjected by a culture that is very confused about the natural body.”⁷ In explanation of a women’s size, not overlooking the reality of destructive eating, which is however not the norm for most women, Estés simply likens body type to an inheritance from their immediate or more distant kin. This notion formulates a sharp criticism of Humanist’s idealistically considered ‘normalcy’ as robbing someone who is considered “other” of her female body identity with the rest of her family’s; the pride felt for her body type that was given her by her own ancestral line. She concludes her criticism stating “the attack on women’s bodies is a far-reaching attack on the ones who have gone before her as well as the ones who will come after her.”⁸

Next to the notion that by criticising one’s body type, one implicitly disqualifies their kith and kin Estés goes into more effects of the Humanist standard on the psyche of the one who is made “other.” She writes that the constant maligning of women’s inherited bodies creates a generation anxious and neurotic women, who’s ‘instinctive affliction’ with her body is destroyed, diminishing her confidence. In line with the white male body constituting reason, the (non-white) female body, or any configuration in between sexes, constitutes the unreasonable. Estés describes this when saying a women is caused by criticism on appearance to question whether she is a good person or not and to base her self-worth on the way she looks, keeping her preoccupied. The only thing women are hungry for, Estés

⁶ Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 216.

⁷ *Ibid*, 528.

⁸ *Ibid*, 217.

writes, is acceptance from their surrounding culture and if there is really ‘a woman screaming to get out’ she is screaming for the ceasing of other’s projections onto her.

Humanism however, does not only criticise “other’s” bodies as it does everyone’s by honing an impossible standard of individual perfectibility and valuing a disembodied view, which in all reality, no one human actually possesses, but only ascribe themselves through a belief in a strict dichotomy between the mind and body. Estés describes this other-ing of the body in saying: “We tend to think of body as this ‘other’[to the mind] that does its thing somewhat without us, and that if we ‘treat’ it right, it will make us ‘feel good’.”⁹ She continues to encourage the reader to imagine that instead, the body *informs* the soul [or mind] and to consider the body as the *launcher* of experiences through feeling sensations and emotions in relation to our senses (including our skin) and being able to translate these feelings to chills, blushes, aching, tears, and furthermore being a repository of our memories. These memories that mingle with said feelings when we lay our bodies to rest: the dream-state that can only be induced under certain physical conditions or with chemical alterations of the physical structures of the body. Estés positions herself against the humanist standard by defining the dichotomy between mind and body out of existence through asserting the body as the grounding point where all experience takes place and is formulated–translated–from; by criticising the judgements of women’s bodies that lead to a waste of energy spent on unattainable physical ideals; and by deconstructing these judgments of bodies to show how they tear one away from positive connection to ancestral bodies and lives.

Next, as previously mentioned, I will discuss Estés’ production of *situated knowledge*, first describing Donna Haraway’s formulation thereof. This I will do because Haraway’s concept lays the foundation of Rosi Braidotti’s definition of the ‘posthuman subject’ and posthuman ethics. After I will discuss further the accounts told of Estés’ own and a friend’s encounter with their ancestors and, similar to the visitors of the later in the chapter recounted Butterfly Dance by *La Mariposa*, the Butterfly Woman¹⁰, visit the “ones who have *not*

⁹ Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 220-1.

¹⁰ Estés describes the Butterfly Woman as *La vow mitológica*, Wild Woman personified for “she is old because she represents the soul that is old. She is wide of thigh and broad of rump because she carries much.” She performed what is called The Butterfly dance in the mesa of Puyé, New Mexico. I did not go into her story as it would not fit within the confines of scope of this essay and as what is represented is also laid out within other parts I did discuss.

forgotten.”¹¹ What is ‘forgotten’ being exactly the ideas of one’s situation and its relation to the past.

In “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” Donna Haraway lays out the groundwork for a reformulation of what is considered as ‘scientific knowledge’ in relation to feminist standpoint theory¹² and stresses the cessation of what she calls the god-trick; erasing the process and producing subject from scientific knowledge, and thereby claiming its universal perspective. Instead Haraway introduces “a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*.”¹³ Haraway’s *situated knowledge* considers a few ground principals that I will lay out here, before applying them to a part of Estés her chapter. First, an accountability for the production of knowledge is needed, where the idea of knowledge *production* already challenges the Humanist idealism of knowledge as something that can be discovered and aims to deconstruct the power relation between scientist and passive subject created by such a ‘discovery’ ideology. This accountability can be formulated through a reclamation of embodiment, Haraway formulates this as:

We need to learn in our bodies (...) how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners [eye-sight] in order to name where we are and are not, (...) objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence to all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promise objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.¹⁴

In allowing ourselves to become answerable for what we learn how to see, this way of seeing and its origins can more clearly be questioned, criticised and reiterated on, by including multiple ways of seeing. This multiplicity of perspectives is also Haraway’s aim for

¹¹ Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 224.

¹² Described in Sandra Harding’s *The Science Question Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) specifically.

¹³ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988): 581, <https://jstor.org/stable/3178066>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 537-8.

an ideal process of scientific knowledge production and she explains how Sandra Harding calls this necessary variety “a need for successor science project and a postmodern insistence on irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges.”¹⁵ Furthermore in relation to situated knowledge *not* being about the splitting of subject and object, Haraway explicitly remarks that situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge—human or not—is seen as actor and agent, thus as active subject, and not as a resource, remarking on the insistence of Ecofeminists in regarding the world as active subject. Only then can accounts of a ‘real’ world—science—be independent from the logic of discovery and changed to one of a apparent “power-charged social relation of ‘conversation.’”¹⁶ Situated knowledges are then, as formulated by Haraway, collective accountable, located, embodied, productions of scientific knowledge that regard the agency of the subject; its objectivity relies on the multiplicity of different active subjectivities.

Rosi Braidotti defines the ‘critical posthuman subject’ and posthuman ethics in a similar fashion as Haraway defines the mode of production of situated knowledge and its corresponding ‘active subject.’ I will shortly go into Braidotti’s two definitions to illustrate their connectedness. “In my own work,” Braidotti writes “I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable.”¹⁷ Next to her similar highlighting of eco-philosophy/-feminism, multiplicity, difference and accountability and she also aims to shift the focus from a unitary to a *nomadic* subjectivity, which entails a chance for moving (successive and/or contrasting) perspectives throughout one’s lifetime—learning, essentially. Secondly, Braidotti describes the proposition of posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject—as the collectivity of subjectivities Haraway proposed, but perhaps less so instructed—as being “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism”¹⁸ and describes this inter-connection not as dependant or vulnerable but as an “affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, 579.

¹⁶ Ibid, 592-3.

¹⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49.

¹⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49-50.

¹⁹ Ibid, 50.

Finally, back to Estés's work and how her production of *situated knowledges* positions her in line with Braidotti's formulation of posthumanist thinking. In the chapter "Joyous Body: The Wild Flesh" Estés writes of her experience of performing a tandem storytelling called "Body Talk" about both her own and her friend Opalanga's meetings with their respective ancestral peoples. She describes that Opalanga is "an African American *griot* and she is very tall, like a yew tree, and as slender," who has a gap between her front teeth, and then herself as being "*una Mexicana*, and am built close to the ground and of extravagant body."²⁰ She recounts how, when growing up in the United States, Opalanga was told the split between her teeth was a sign of being a liar and that Estés herself was told her size was the sign of having no self-control. Estés continues that after mourning for the bodies they were not allowed to enjoy they instead marvelled at the mysteries of one another, and told each other and the audience their stories of meeting their ancestors. Opalanga found some of her ancestral people from the Gambia in West Africa, of whom many had among their tribe people who were tall, slender and had gaps between their front teeth like her, and that it was considered by them as *Sakaya Yallah*, "opening of God" and was understood as a sign of wisdom²¹. Estés too, found that when meeting her ancestral people in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico they had a completely different regard of their own and her similar inherited body shape for they explained that women are "*La Tierra*, made round like the earth herself, for the earth holds so much."²² It is precisely this confidence and strength through acceptance that is robbed when one is judged for their given bodies and inherited traits and over time becomes estranged from them, what was also considerably the aim of Western imperialism through the Humanist standard, but in Estés' position as well as mine when trying to actively move away from such a brutalist line of thinking, one must rearrange one's internalised notions of 'normalcy' to fit the many ways one can be proudly *different* and regard others who are with the same acceptance accordingly. Estés writes "[w]e learned, from powerful people outside our United States culture, to revalue the body, to refute ideas and language that would revile the mysterious body, or that would ignore the female body as an instrument of knowing." Once again, elaborating on this statement in her footnotes to express her criticism, which I share, of the argumentation that likens living with 'aboriginal, old or ancient' values to sentimentalism, stating that this is "once again,

²⁰ Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 215.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 216.

attempt to sever women from the legacies of her matrilineal lines. It is peaceable to the soul to take from the past knowledge, present power and the future ideas all at once.”²³

Estés illustrates Harding’s notion of *successor* knowledge and Braidotti’s *nomadic* subjectivity; that by regarding past, present and future perspectives alike one can foster a deeper, more peaceful understanding of oneself and others alike. Previously we have also read how Estés formulates her accountability, first when asking the Tehuana women of her ancestral tribe how they regarded Freudian ideology of “the thin screaming woman inside” and thereby stating her own vantage point [not position], creating room for conversation for them to share their different insights regarding their position together creating a *multiplicity*, to this multiplicity is also added when Estés recounts the story of Opalanga’s experience in the West and with her ancestral people in the Gambia. Through the performance itself and the mourning of their bodies as rejected by Western society, Estés presently *connects* to Opalanga by way of sharing similar past and present stories while learning from each other’s different past lives, newly found present understanding and future regard. This animated fluctuation between difference and similarity creates what I understand as the foundation of Braidotti’s claim for inter-connectedness. Needless to say, Estés also clearly accounts for the sources of her information and interaction with other people throughout, *locating* her and other’s positions. In this and the previous paragraph I connect Estés her account of her own and her friend’s interaction with their ancestral people, giving them a broader insight of ways to regard the inherited traits of their bodies previously shamed by Western ideologies, to Donna Haraway’s and Rosi Braidotti’s conditions for *situated knowledge* and posthumanist subjectivity.

In this essay we have looked at how Clarissa Pinkola Estés gives a posthumanist account in the seventh chapter of her book *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, titled “Joyous Body: The Wild Flesh.” I attempted to do so by first arguing how Estés challenges Humanist ideology, initially describing how she does so by criticising the notion that women of size are always hungry, and writes that through defining the thin body as a standard by ridiculing wider bodies her connection to her ancestors who are also of size is implicitly criticised, destabilising one’s familiar identity; secondly by deconstructing the effects of such judgements such as an abnormal energy in a woman’s life that is spent on fussing over unattainable physicality disguised as morality; and thirdly by deconstructive criticism of the binary distinction between mind and body making the body itself “other”, whereas she

²³ Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 528.

asserts the body as the launching point all experience takes place and is translated from. Furthermore I gave a description of Donna Haraway's main points for developing *situated knowledge* and how this relates to the similar conditions Rosi Braidotti has set in order to speak of a 'posthuman subject / -ethics' and showed how Estés does this by locating herself and the people of which she speaks; fostering inter-connections between herself and others by relation and differentiation from them interchangeably; discussing a present multiplicity of standpoints throughout cultures and within herself and others; and having a nomadic and successive attitude towards knowledges from past present and future times. Through this essay I have wanted to give a view of Estés' insight and rich positions regarding the body and its considerable beauties and strengths in any and every shape, and into what Estés in her chapter and I in this essay argue to be an important revaluation of the body as inter-connected with our ways of seeing itself and all around us simultaneously. The topic of this essay plays in a larger context of Humanist and capitalist disregard of the body that will not further go into than I did, but again, these ideologies have participated in a great many tragedies of our time and times past, and are as in many others also internalised within myself. So much that when reading Estés' work, it instills waves of feeling that I had never felt; ways of seeing that I never had seen, and I am glad that I did, in order to initiate a process of becoming as well, a posthuman subject.

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