



TRANSCENDING THE HUMAN/NON-HUMAN DIVIDE

Madina Tlostanova

To cite this article: Madina Tlostanova (2017) TRANSCENDING THE HUMAN/NON-HUMAN DIVIDE, Angelaki, 22:2, 25-37

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1322816>



Published online: 17 May 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

human/non-human binary in modernity/coloniality

One of the devastating consequences of modernity is a consistent cultivation and nurturing of the economic, social, cultural, ethical, epistemic and ontological dependence or, in the terminology of decolonial option, a global coloniality of being, of power, of gender, of perception and of knowledge (Mignolo and Escobar). Modernity/coloniality has been marked by a number of immobilizing oppositions such as modernity/tradition, man/woman, and particularly, human/natural. According to María Lugones, “dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human is the central dichotomy of colonial modernity” (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism” 743).

It is from this major division that other binaries emerge such as men/women or white/non-white. Large groups of people within this opposition did not count as humans and were coded as belonging to the animal world, and positioned lower in the legitimized chain of being. Throughout the last 500 years the West/North has determined the single norm of humanity, including the corporeal models, while all other people have been classified as deviations, dismissed to alterity, to nature, to the past, or subject to improvement to make them closer to the West (i.e., to culture, civilization, humanity) – either in the mode of Orientalism or in a progressivist manner. Not much has changed today in the realm of bio-political strategies. Yet the reciprocal resistant and re-existential movements – in the sense of alternative existence, of (re)building an other world and creating an other being (Albán Achinte) that have been silenced and neglected before – are acquiring a

madina tlostanova

TRANSCENDING THE HUMAN/NON-HUMAN DIVIDE

the geo-politics and body-politics of being and perception, and decolonial art

more visible position in theoretical, aesthetic and activist spheres throughout the world.

Global coloniality has been expressed in one of its most fundamental forms in the opposition of culture and nature, and the common idea that modernity switched exploitation from human beings to nature. This brings us to an important distinction between the *anthropos* and *humanitas* analyzed by Nishitani Osamu, who demonstrated how epistemic differences were translated into ontological ones when *anthropos* was constructed as a “position of the object absorbed into the domain of knowledge produced by *humanitas*” (266). “The asymmetrical relation between *humanitas* and *anthropos* is being continually reproduced: the former as

the owner of knowledge, the latter as the owned object to be folded into the domain of knowledge” (267). In other words *anthropos* is an other but an other who does not exist ontologically. It is a discursive construction invented by the same in the process of constructing its sameness in an act of enunciation hiding the locality and corporeality of the enunciator, in Mignolo’s decolonial semiotic wording (“Geopolitics of Sensing”). The classification of human beings, on which modernity/coloniality has always depended, needs a system of knowledge in which they would be sustained and justified, because this classification of human beings as not quite rational, mature or developed, not sufficiently masculine, not quite sexually normal, not quite sane or healthy, stemmed not from the object, not from these othered selves as such, but from the knowing subject and the system of knowledge in which this subject operates. In other words, it is an intentionally constructed otherness or a colonization of being, which is how the modern/colonial system of knowledge production created, maintained, and enacted racism, patriarchy and heterosexism (Mignolo and Tlostanova).

The inner logic and rhetoric of modernity has elaborated a mechanism of justification of any violence against humans and/or nature if it can be fashioned as a cost of development, progress, technological achievement and capital accumulation. Having made nature into the object of exploitation, modernity exiled into the sphere of nature and labeled as “costs” everything and everyone that was to be exploited. Christianity, Eurocentrism, civilizing mission, market, and developmentalist ideologies were used to remove certain groups of people from the realm of ethics and practice “misanthropic skepticism,” to quote Nelson Maldonado-Torres: “Unlike Descartes’s methodological doubt, Manichean misanthropic skepticism is not skeptical about the existence of the world or the normative status of logic and mathematics. It is rather a form of questioning the very humanity of the colonized people” (245–46). All racist taxonomies have been built on the grounds of such misanthropic skepticism. The savage was identified with nature,

and Caliban by definition was incapable of thinking, feeling in terms of emotions rather than raw affects, or creating art objects in accordance with particular aesthetics as opposed to mere aesthesis.

an other humanism and the geo- and body-politics of knowledge

Today we witness a major shift in the geography of reasoning from the Western Man to other agents. The *anthropos* as a biological being or human in the guise of animals presumably untouched by culture, in Jamaican thinker Sylvia Wynter’s terms, becomes a full-fledged acting and thinking subject (“Unsettling the Coloniality”). However, this reconsidered Caliban is not willing to be included by the *humanitas* into the sphere of sameness any more. Rather, what is at work here is a radical problematizing of (Western) Man, which has represented itself as the Man as such in the last 500 years, the bio-evolutionary chosen being. According to Sylvia Wynter, this is a motion in the direction of “after man towards the human” (ibid.). For her we are torn between the two extremes today – the Western model of humanism (including posthumanism), in which “Western Man” secures “the well-being of our present ethnoclass [...] conception of the human,” and a different model, whose goal is “the securing of the well-being of the human species itself/ourselves” (Ferry, Renault, and Philip 260). Such a position is not anachronistic, or lagging behind the fashionable Western posthumanism erasing the European locality of the concept of “Man” and European implication in it. Rather, what is at work here is a preoccupation with constantly problematized human existence grounded in a much more complex and pluriversal idea of reality than that of the Western humanist and anti-humanist tradition.

In decolonial, post-Continental, Africana and Caribbean thought there is an affirmation of an *other* humanism as a planetary dialogic humanism of the former other. This humanism is parallel to Western anti-humanism but grows out of

a different local history, a different tempolocality.¹ It is difficult to overestimate the importance of rehabilitated spatiality in the rethinking of the dichotomy of Man and nature, or the importance of the geo-politics and body-politics of being, knowledge, and perception. Corporeal decolonization in its ontological, epistemic, aesthetic and other dimensions has always stood at the center of decolonial thought. The geo-politics of knowledge, being and perception refers to the local historical and spatial grounds of knowledge, existence and aesthesis – the historical configuration of space and time. The body-politics can be defined as the individual and collective biographical grounds of understanding, thinking, being and perception rooted in our local histories and trajectories of origination and dispersion.²

In a way, the body-politics of knowledge, perception and being is a decolonial way of reflecting on the phenomena that stand in the center of the Western affect theory as well, understanding affect as an embodied perception (Shinkle). They intersect in the reconsidered ontology that re-emerges where before only epistemic and linguistic constructions were allowed to be seen. Affect intensifies social narratives and power relations with the biology of perception, the visceral responses subtending the semantic, cultural and other ideational codes. The intersection of somatic and ideational stands in the center of decolonial body-politics as well, particularly in the way the decolonial thinkers, such as Sylvia Wynter and Lewis Gordon, reconceptualize Franz Fanon's concept of sociogenesis (Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle"; Gordon, "Problematic People and Epistemic Decolonization"). In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon invokes the inextricable link between knowledge, perception and corporeality when he exclaims: "Oh my body, make of me always a man who questions!" (232)

Fanon's sociogenic principle, which was itself an elaboration of W.B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" (1903), allows the evaluation of the originations, genealogies, and trajectories of ideas grounded in pluriversal instead of universal principles, stressing the fact that

universalization comes precisely from the refusal to see how the social affects the rational. He grasped this important fact of the social contextuality of our identities and images when he juxtaposed sociogenesis with Eurocentric ontogenic (Freudian) and phylogenic (Darwinian) principles that are based on pretending to be objective and grounded in the dichotomy of territoriality and continentality of modern thinking. For Fanon it was crucial to ask not simply what does it mean to be, what does it mean to be human, or even what it is like to be human according to purely biological or "genomic" terms, as outlined by Sylvia Wynter ("Towards the Sociogenic Principle" 31), but rather what does it mean to be black in a racist society, to be constructed as black – ontologically and epistemologically – within a discourse whose rules you cannot control? Sociogenesis is a body-political and geo-political delinking from the colonial matrix of power and of being, up to its Foucauldian epistemic rupture, tracing a different transmodern trajectory of decolonization. That is why Sylvia Wynter, in her social ontological account of Western humanism, calls it merely an *ethnohumanism* ("Unsettling the Coloniality" 312) whose darker side is the marginalization and underrepresentation of the vast majority of the population defined as subhuman or *liminal*. Today the *anthropos*, who have been reduced to their bodies and devoid of reason or spirituality, practice border epistemology, refusing to submit to *humanitas* in their acts of epistemic and aesthetic disobedience. Claiming their "Caliban's reason" (Henry), they stress the necessity of changing the idea of humanity itself, which is comprised of *anthropos* as much as of *humanitas*.

the decolonial body- and geo-politics of knowledge, being, feeling and perception

The decolonial body- and geo-politics of knowledge, being, sensing and perception somewhat intersect with the Western mainstream theories of affect, but only at the level of the enunciated,

not at the level of the enunciation; at the level of the contents and some phenomena, not their perception or interpretation. It is important to differentiate here between the decolonial delinking perspective and a number of more well-known and academically established postcolonial theorists who attempted to imbue the Western affective turn with a lacking racial dimension without questioning the approach itself and usually continuing to speak in its conceptual terms (see Ahmed; Gilroy). This is in tune with the general position of postcolonial studies attempting to cautiously explain the experience of the colonized others through the concepts invented by the same (and within the Western system of knowledge and the modern subject-object division. The epistemically disobedient decolonial option, on the contrary, aims at undermining the very epistemic grounds and principles of modernity/coloniality and not just adding and describing various regions or phenomena through generally accepted and shared means and disciplinary gimmicks and within the universally accepted scholarly myths. I do not find it relevant to compare the established Western theory of affect with decolonial reflections on animalized and dispensable lives. This would be like comparing the proverbial apples and oranges, with Western theory always taking the default position subsuming all others to its norm. In contrast with postcolonial studies we – the decolonial thinkers – normally abstain from using the term “affect” and refer to the geo-politics and body-politics of being and perception and the decolonial aestheSis instead (see Mignolo and Vázquez’s “Decolonial AestheSis Dossier”). Therefore any references to Western theorists of affect here are needed for the sole reason of pointing the readers in the necessary factual and phenomenological direction to help them make a shift from the realm of familiar terms and categories to the unknown decolonial sphere with its own concepts and discursive operations. But methodologically and theoretically there can be no intersections between the Western affective turn and the decolonial body-politics and geo-politics of knowledge, being, and perception,

or a “theory-in-the-flesh,” to quote Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s metaphor from their seminal *This Bridge Called My Back*. Theory-in-the-flesh is “the one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity,” using “flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our ‘colonial wound’” (23), or in Anzaldúa’s words, “una herida abierta” where “the third world grates against the first and bleeds” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 25). Although the affective turn and the decolonial body-politics of knowledge both look in the same direction, they do it with an epistemic spatial difference as well as with a time lag – in this case, as in the case with a number of postcolonial categories, an obvious Western time lag: the embodied knowledge has stood in the center of non-Western theorizing for a long time remaining unnoticed by the mainstream Western theory until recently. The non-Western subjects are initially deprived of their ability to think and their bodies are systematically disciplined and taxonomized by the bio-power in order to be either classified as part of nature or mutated and retailed to be in line with Western principles of bodily representations, acting as a distorted mirror and always marked by insurmountable difference imposed and constructed by the West. This non-Western body is hypersensitive to the bodily dimensions of knowledge, perception, creativity, sexuality, and gender. Because in his or her experience the highly constructed material bodily difference is constantly put forward, essentialized, and problematized, such a person is seen or made invisible only and exclusively through this bodily difference.

To paraphrase William Du Bois and Lewis Gordon, these are problem people, or people seen as problems, people whose humanity is always under suspicion and whose bodies act as powerful markers of difference, assimilation, rejection, resistance, and re-existence (Gordon, “What does it mean to be a problem?”). The geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge are opposed to the state bio-politics as forms of

contestation and delinking from racist ontology and epistemology. In the modern/colonial world marked by imperial and colonial differences, the Western universal “secondary qualities” are replaced with those determined by the colonial local histories (geo-politics) subordinated to imperial ones, and colonial subjectivities – the “wretched of the Earth,” the *anthropos*.

The meaning of the decolonial body-politics of knowledge, perception, and being is well expressed in Walter Dignolo’s reformulation of Descartes’s “Cogito ergo sum” into “I am where I think” (“I Am Where I Think”). The rehabilitated and re-accentuated space in this case is not only a physical space that we inhabit but also our bodies as specific spatial entities – the privileged white male bodies or the damned, non-white, dehumanized and often gendered bodies originating from the underside of modernity (Dignolo). The body-politics of knowledge then stresses locality as not merely a geo-historical location of the knowing subject but also an epistemological correlation with the sensing body, perceiving the world from a particular locale and specific local history. The Anzaldúan global colonial wound from which the geo-politics and the body-politics of knowledge emerge has been inflicted by the geo-racial classification of locales and their inhabitants in the frame of which people are seen as inferior through ontological colonial difference (they are not considered ontologically human) and epistemic colonial difference (they are not considered rational beings). If

the affirmation “I am where I think” is pronounced from the perspective of the epistemic disavowed, it implies “and you too,” addressed to the epistemology of the zero point. In other words, “we are all where we think,” but only the European system of knowledge was built on the belief that the basic premise is “I think, therefore I am,” which was a translation into secular terms of the theological foundation of knowledge (in which we already encounter the privilege of the soul over the body). (“I Am Where I Think” 169)

As Anu Koivunen points out,

the notion of affect is a possibility to move beyond the individual and personal, and to shift critical attention away from language, discourse, and representation and emphasize the real instead. The concept of affect is in line with and an outcome of this moving from body to matter, from culture to nature, from identity to difference, from psychic to social. (90–91)

Indeed, without soma there can be no sign. The Western affect theories are starting to question their previous tendency to homogenize all human experience and deny the multiple conceptions of the self. The decolonial option has always striven to combine and balance the discursive and real dimensions in an intersectional way. Human affects and mechanisms of perception may be universal or not, as some Western affect theorists now also claim and argue about (see Connolly; Leys). But even if we assume that there is an all-human universality in our affects, the manifestations of these affects and modes of perception are always locally, historically, culturally specific, not in any deterministic way but still impossible to ignore. For example, I descend from the two colonized indigenous groups of people subsumed by one of the second-rate empires of modernity and subsequently dehumanized. This dehumanization has taken racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, sexual and other forms leaving me as a decolonial scholar with very meager options of either mimicking the imperial sameness in the capacity of a postcolonial model minority or being discarded from modernity as a dangerous disobedient other. The third option I took more than fifteen years ago is a decolonial option which allows me to delink from the imperial thinking and start from this radical statement: if I am rendered subhuman by the system, I will formulate my interventions, organize my agency, express my creativity and my rationality precisely in this capacity of an absolute other, instead of begging to be included into the sameness. It is crucial for us who are rendered subhuman to contemplate how we inhabit the colonial matrix of power and how we respond to it. It is

important to claim our epistemic rights grounded in local histories and in concrete bodies instead of being grounded in abstract disciplinary principles established in local European histories and by body agents who prefer to erase their own contextuality and corporality.

The body-politics of knowledge, being, and perception stands at the crossroads of ontology and epistemology, problematizing their relations. At first sight what could be more ontological than the body in all its materiality? And yet we imbue bodies with certain metaphysical characteristics precisely through the way we perceive, manifest, manipulate, and use them as tools of resistance and re-existence. Therefore, bodies remain epistemological as much as ontological or biological.

In this sense the decolonial body-political theorizing and our re-establishment of an other humanism as a humanism of the other are not dragging behind the latest Western theories trying to revive the homogeneous idea of the self as a sovereign individual. For example, Sylvia Wynter understands human as praxis and not as a noun ("Human Being as Noun?"). It is not that we are insisting on the material reality because we have not yet reached the post-structuralist idea of identification. It is just that the wretched of the Earth with our systematically denied humanity have experienced the metamorphosis of imaginary and mythic concepts into reality in a rough and often violent way. Nikolay Karkov refers to this as "the *real* nature of humanism fiction, the fact that the fictive character of the liberal subject does not make it any less *real*," or, I would add, any less suffocating (57). What is at work here is a destabilizing of the usual subject-object relationship from a specific position of those who have been denied subjectivity and regarded as mere tokens of our culture, religion, sexuality, race, etc. For us, stressing the subjective specificity of our knowledge would be drastically different from a mere postmodernist claim at situated knowledges.

A specific decolonial humanism grounded on an alterglobal ecological philosophy grows out of a dialogue with indigenous cosmologies, which, in contrast with modernity discourses,

have never been built on the dichotomy of Man and nature and on pigeonholing the animals below the humans (see Vandana Shiva's "Earth democracy" linked to the Indian concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbkam* – the earth family or the community of all beings supported by the earth 1). Western philosophy has come to decentralize the human being and, consequently, anti-humanism in its critical Foucauldian, Braidottian or late Harawayan forms relatively recently and out of touch with non-Western thinking (Braidotti; Haraway). For instance, Braidotti clearly states that her approach to posthumanism is grounded firmly in an anti-humanist position by which she means not a banal misanthropy but a "delinking of the human agent from the universalistic posture, calling him to task, so to speak, on the concrete actions he is enacting" (223). In the liminality of modernity such views have always existed, though they have been interpreted as prejudices within the rhetoric of modernity with its logic of coloniality. This largely indigenous approach echoes contemporary Western forms of rethinking anthropocentrism and thinking beyond the limitations of the species-oriented world. Similarly Erin Manning introduces a category of "more-than-human" in her essay "Another Regard." It grows out of her specifically defined autistic perception grounded in the inclusion of other than human species into the life world of a person who is not necessarily an autistic but nevertheless shares with autists a number of general perspectives on the world. The gist of this perception lies in a refusal to chunk the world into species, subjects and objects, which in an autistic perception are always preceded by a relational field (Manning 65). Autistic perception, according to Manning,

is a tendency in perception on a continuum with all perception, not a definition of autism. It is a [...] perceptual style that actively thinks-feels the edgings and contourings of fields of relation coagulating into instances of shaped experience [...] The direct experience of the in-actness of worlding results in an ecological sensibility to life-living. (Ibid.)

Within such a nomadic relational ethics of becoming maximally autistically sensitive, the human is no longer the starting point for meaning formation or even any meaningful experience.

eurasian calibans, or are you a horse?

In a number of contemporary theories and art projects the position of Western anti-humanism and posthumanism built on its basis, and decolonial drives of another humanism intersect and interact in remarkable ways. Problematizing the border between the human and the animal, the man-made and the natural, the machine and the living, the individual and the communal, occurs neither merely in the direction of affirming or rejecting one's own humanity, nor in the direction of a condescending humanization of animals or other living beings. Rather, the idea of the commonality of our destiny and the quest for some grounds for understanding is being accentuated. This leads to the importance of multi-spatial or "pluritopic hermeneutics" (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 13) linked to María Lugones's ideal of traveling along other (not necessarily people's) worlds with a loving perception ("Playfulness"), bringing unexpected volatile intimacies resisting any ossification or institutionalization as in the established modern divisions into the human and the animal, the *anthropos* and the *humanitas*.

Many examples of contemporary art from the former colonies of the Russian/Soviet empire, i.e., places marked by imperial and secondary colonial differential, focus around the problematic of human, non-human, and subhuman, humanism and anti- or posthumanism. The Eurasian version of Caliban's protesting art is often fashioned as an exaggerated "Asiatic" identity when artists make themselves into emblematic Orientalist objects to articulate their aesthetic-political statements. The haunting motif of dispensable lives of the new nomads of the global coloniality re-emerges again and again in the images of the "bereaved" – the obvious parallels to Franz Fanon's the wretched of the Earth, often presented in an

extremely dehumanized way, e.g., as live people sold in the market as food, packed in sacks (Meldibekov).

In the aforementioned article on another (or deep) regard, Manning provides a disturbing example of an autistic scientist, Dawn Prince, communicating with primates and learning a gorilla language as an intersection of body, mind and spirit. In the midst of a playful and joyful communication a chimpanzee, Kanzi, once asked her, using sign language, if she were a gorilla. Prince indeed crossed the species line in her autistic regard and managed a communication grounded in concern and not a mere mimicking. Manning points out: "Dawn's movement comes from an affective attunement to a long standing connection to non-human languages [...] She listens with movement, listens to how it expresses in the now of the encounter" (56). Such a communication is completely relational and, in Manning's words, it "creates a *body*-ing in a shifting co-composition of experiential spacetimes" (57). This relational movement accentuates the communicative interactional element of the participants' contact. Ideally, as in the case of autistic regard, the object/subject or species division of the world is erased and replaced with relational and operational, forever open and becoming perception and movement.

This metaphoric reverberates with the works of Taus Makhacheva – a Diasporic Avarian (Northern Caucasus) artist with whom I feel a strong affinity because we share the destiny of postcolonial post-Soviet cosmopolitan others with the Caucasus roots and decolonial views. Makhacheva was born in Moscow, educated in the West but maintains symbolic links with her native region in modern Dagestan. The boundary between human and animal, human and machine, man-made and natural, object and subject, the dilemmas of belonging and exclusion from various communities, not necessarily human, the ironies of affirmative action and mimicry, are problematized in many of her works. In the video-filmed performances of this participatory anthropologist-cum-artist she examines the unstable boundary between the same and the other, acceptance

and rejection, drawing attention to our efforts to merge, mimic, assimilate, or leak into the other, no matter if it is another person or a community – natural or social, rural or urban, real or imagined.

Makhacheva touches upon the problematic of communication between people, different cultures and communities, people and animals, people and technological gadgets, etc. Some of the characters in her performances mimic animals or camouflage themselves as members of a non-human community. Such is the 2009 performance *Rekhen*, translated from Avarian as flock, where a young man standing on all fours covers himself with a traditional shepherd's heavy fur coat (*timug*) and slowly and cautiously approaches a herd of sheep trying to integrate into their community, and ultimately fails. Where is our limit of making sacrifices to become one of the same? – the artist reflects on this question in the work. But in this project the object–subject binary is still intact.

A different modality in the treatment of Man/animal and social-natural binary we find in *Karakul* (2007) where a partly anthropomorphic and partly zoomorphic being of indeterminate gender (Makhacheva herself) hiding under an Astrakhan fur costume, a fabric usually used in the manufacturing of men's hats in the Caucasus, comes into a strange relationship with a horse (a game very much resembling the “autistic regard” as described by Erin Manning, with its focus on experiencing the world in the complex relations of its emergent unfoldings (66)). The two protagonists run around a walled yard, the karakul-covered creature imitates the horse's physical movements, attempts to establish a relationship, and finally appears in the video documentation riding the horse. This is done not in any aggressive conquering manner but rather in an act of physical bodily communication stressing the visual and tactile interaction and merging of two different types of “fur” – the smooth silky horse skin and the curly coarse sheepskin covering the artist from head to toe. In this communicative game the border between natural and social, as well as between identification and

desire, is once again eroded and problematized.³ In *Karakul* Makhacheva accentuates the changing of the world itself, the metamorphosis of its sensual and perceptive landmarks as a result of interaction of these two completely different beings who can symbolize anything – from gender difference to intercultural contact. Like most serious art, this work asks questions rather than answers them, making the audience reflect on the leaking boundaries between the human and the animal. What kind of event is this? Are they both horses or do they play horse, or maybe they play human? Or does the strange *karakul*-covered being play its own game? How human and how animal or other-than-human and/or animal is the creature in the Astrakhan costume? Does it want to possess or to identify with the horse? Does it eventually manage to overcome the boundaries of human destiny and teleology, in the treatment of other worlds and other beings when it hides its humanity under the karakul cover and mimics the movements of one of the first domesticated animals – the horse? Obviously it is done not to tame the animal but to interact with it on an equal basis of two living beings. We cannot know what the horse “thinks” when seeing this strange creature repeating the horse's movements, wishing to establish a dialogue, to find a common source or ground that it can share with a horse. This unlikely interaction creates the world anew for both of them. It is a different world as a result of their communication, or in Manning's words, “moving in counterpoint with a language that trembles on the edges of understanding” (67).

Makhacheva's fascination with Man–animal–machine boundaries and her interest in the modern mutations of the ambivalent Caucasus male identity is expressed in the series “Topographies of masculinity” presented at the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2012. She shatters the exotic and demonizing stereotypes often associated with the Northern Caucasus (whose inhabitants have acted as an equivalent of Amerindians in the Russian imperial imaginary) and presents a problematically female intruder in all-male (machine- or animal-



Fig. 1. Sequence of screenshots from Taus Makhacheva's *Karakul* (Dagestan, 2007). Photo and video project, 3:16 min., color, silent. Courtesy of the artist. © Taus Makhacheva.





dominated) closed spaces, subcultures and forms of socializing, which imparts her view with an ironic detachment and balancing between sameness and otherness. In *Let me be part of a narrative* (2012) Makhacheva juxtaposes the video of the Dagestan Dog Fighting Championship to the Soviet propagandistic documentary about the Dagestani wrestler Ali Aliyev who held the multiple world champion title for many years. In both cases she detects the same impulse – a competitive and potentially commercialized spirit as a form of self-expression and a way of converting male violence into relatively peaceful forms. The emulating drive corresponds to a particular masculine honor code, as well as courage to meet one's defeat with dignity. The dog owners identify with their animals almost completely and transfer their own masculine impulses onto the fighting Caucasian sheepdogs, to the point of displacement.

In *The Fast and the Furious* (2011) the artist comes to the world of illegal street car racing, which in the Caucasus has its own genealogy linked to male technical fetishism with the additional association of cars with horses and trick-riding as essential to the Caucasus masculinity. The car is seen as a living being – a “beast” standing for previous insubordinate thoroughbred horses tamed by their warrior owners. To stress the fluidity of transition between the natural and the technical she creates a disturbing animal-machine hybrid – a completely fur-covered jeep and drives it to the races, perplexing the audience with this out-of-place object that is ready to be admired and stroked as a living being.

Another facet of the human-non-human divide, in this case, man-made and natural, is accentuated in *Gamsutl* (2012). It is an abandoned and quickly collapsing hard-to-reach ancient Avarian mountain village carved in and from the rocks. The picturesque ruins grow into the wild landscape harmoniously, blending with the environment, as if the life cycle has come to an end and it is time for nature to claim its eternal rocks back from the people. The (male) protagonist of this video takes part in a peculiar ritual of re-membering

and re-enactment and striving to extract and carefully recreate the spatial memory of the forgotten past. Through a bodily merging with this palimpsest of many cultural strata and dramatic historical events (the Russo-Caucasus War, Soviet modernity, the post-Soviet abandonment and return back to nature) he is trying to corporeally relive Gamsutl in his ironic mimicry of natural and architectural objects, trying on various identities and deciphering them through touching Gamsutl's surfaces and breathing in its air.

conclusion

Some of the contemporary ways of rethinking human nature regarded above, the intersections, links and discrepancies with other species and inanimate nature, as well as machinic civilization, make us think about the near future in which the human being as a concept will be inevitably rethought and the very idea of the (hu)man will be ultimately decentered from the body-political and geopolitical perspective. The vanishing human as we know it still has a chance of conceptualizing its condition, and its destiny, even if the points of non-return seem to be already passed. This understanding and sensibility is accurately grasped by many decolonial visual and verbal artists, endorsing and playing on, instead of hiding, their geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge, being, and perception. They urge us to surrender to the flow of uncompromised aesthesis, as the ability to percept the world through our senses, which is freed from the constraints of normative aesthetics. This shift allows us to liberate our minds and bodies from the myths and constraints of modernity (including its central human/natural divide) that have driven humankind to its demise today.



disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

The author and publisher wish to thank Taus Makhacheva for permission to use screenshots from her video *Karakul* in this paper.

1 For one of the most thorough summaries of posthumanist tendencies, see Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*.

2 A more detailed explanation of the body-politics and geo-politics of knowledge, being and sensing is presented in Madina Tlostanova and Walter Dignolo's *Learning to Unlearn*.

3 For more details on eroding the identification/desire dichotomy, see Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, especially chapter 6.

bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. Print.
- Albán Achinte, Adolfo. "Artistas Indígenas y Afrocolombianos: Entre las Memorias y las Cosmovisiones. Estéticas de la Re-Existencia." *Arte y Estética en la Encrucijada Descolonial*. Ed. Zuma Palermo. Buenos Aires: Del Siglo, 2009. 83–112. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1989. Print.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013. Print.
- Connolly, William E. "The Complexity of Intention." *Critical Inquiry* 37.4 (2011): 791–98. Print.
- Du Bois, William B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: McClurg, 1903. Print.
- Dussel, Enrique. *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanity, 1996. Print.
- Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove, 1967. Print.
- Ferry, Luc, Alain Renault, and Franklin Philip. *From the Rights of Man to the Republican Idea*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. Print.
- Gordon, Lewis R. "Problematic People and Epistemic Decolonization: Toward the Postcolonial in Africana Political Thought." *Postcolonialism and Political Theory*. Ed. Nalini Persram. New York: Lexington, 2007. 121–42. Print.
- Gordon, Lewis R. "What does it mean to be a problem? W.E.B. du Bois on the Study of Black Folk." *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 62–95. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, Peoples, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003. Print.
- Henry, Paget. *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Karkov, Nikolay. "From Humanism to Post-Humanism and Back: Notes on the Geopolitics of Knowledge." *Personality, Culture, Society* 15.3–4 (2013): 52–70. Print.
- Koivunen, Anu. "Force of Affects, Weight of Histories in *Love is a Treasure*." Papeburg and Zarzycka 89–101. Print.
- Leys, Ruth. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (2011): 434–72. Print.
- Lugones, María. "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling and Loving Perception." *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppression*. Oxford: Rowman, 2003. 77–100. Print.
- Lugones, María. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia* 25.4 (2010): 742–59. Print.
- Makhacheva, Taus. *The Fast and the Furious*. Photo and video project. 21:06 min. Color, sound. Makhachkala, Dagestan, 2011. Web. 5 May 2015. <<https://vimeo.com/32660493>>.
- Makhacheva, Taus. *Karakul*. Photo and video project. 3:16 min. Color, silent. Dagestan, 2007. Web. 5 May 2015. <<https://vimeo.com/32648464>>.
- Makhacheva, Taus. *Rekhen*. Video. 7:21 min. Color, silent. Dagestan, 2009. Web. 5 May 2015. <<https://vimeo.com/32659626>>.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21.2–3 (2007): 240–70. Print.
- Manning, Erin. "Another Regard." Papeburg and Zarzycka 55–72. Print.

Meldibekov, Ye. *Pastan on the Street*. Media-project. 2006.

Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995. Print.

Mignolo, Walter. "Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience." *EIPCP* Sept. 2011. Web. 1 Dec. 2014. <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0112/mignolo/en>>.

Mignolo, Walter. "I Am Where I Think: Remapping the Order of Knowing." *The Creolization of Theory*. Ed. Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. Durham, NC and London: Duke UP, 2011. 159–92. Print.

Mignolo, Walter, and Arturo Escobar, eds. *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Mignolo, Walter, and Madina Tlostanova. "Knowledge Production Systems." *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*. Ed. Helmut K. Anheier, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Victor Faessel. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012. 1005–10. Print and Web.

Mignolo, Walter, and Rolando Vázquez, eds. "The Decolonial AestheSis Dossier." *Social Text*: Periscope. Posted 15 July 2013. Web. 15 Feb. 2017. <http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the-decolonial-aestheSis-dossier/>.

Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color, 1981. Print.

Nishitani, Osamu. "Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of Human Being." *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference*. Ed. Naoki Sakai and John Solomon. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2006. 259–73. Print.

Papenburg, Bettina, and Martha Zarzycka, eds. *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*. London: Tauris, 2013. Print.

Shinkle, Eugenie. "Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodied Perception and Contemporary Fashion Photography." Papenburg and Zarzycka 73–88. Print.

Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace*. Boston: South End, 2005. Print.

Tlostanova, Madina, and Walter Mignolo. *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and*

tlostanova

the Americas. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. Print.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Human Being as Noun? Or *Being Human* as Praxis – Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn: A Manifesto." 2007. Web. 17 Feb. 2017. <<https://ru.scribd.com/doc/237809437/Sylvia-Wynter-The-Autopoietic-Turn>>.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and What it's Like to be 'Black.'" *National Identity and Socio-Political Change: Latin America between Marginalisation and Integration*. Ed. Mercedes Duran-Cogan and Antonio Gomez-Moriana. New York: Garland, 2000. 30–66. Print.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument." *The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 257–337. Print.

Madina Tlostanova
Linköpings universitet
Institutionen för Tema (TEMA)/Tema
Genus (TEMAG)
581 83 Linköping
Sweden
E-mail: madina.tlostanova@liu.se