

Angela Balzano

Per farla finita con la famiglia. Dall'aborto alle parentele postumane [Doing Away with Family. From Abortion to Posthuman Kin], Milano, Meltemi, 2021, pp. 200

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Hoping for reproductive degrowth as a path to multispecies justice and non-familistic unprecedented alliances, in her latest book Angela Balzano reframes the Foucauldian analysis of biopower and biopolitics according to a transfeminist, materialistic and ecosystemic approach, and carries on her longstanding dialogue with such authors as Donna Haraway, Sarah Franklin, Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, to name but a few. The book adopts a situated interdisciplinary perspective that has the feminist Studies of Science and Technology as its point of departure, and has a theoretical approach that sometimes adopts a pamphlet-like style. Here, *figurations*, intended as located and transformative cartographies, entangle theoretical focuses (identified in the book as “*ritornelli speculativi*” [speculative refrains] with contemporary embodied accounts (called *Embedded Living-withs - Convissuti radicati*), which root them in the situated experience of Balzano as a transfeminist activist and academic and inside present and historical Italian feminist struggles for reproductive justice.

The book fills a considerable gap of much contemporary debate around reproductive labor, which, as in the case of Social Reproduction Feminism (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019), often still maintains a taken-for-granted humanism due to its Marxist roots, and, at the same time, distances itself from the winding technophobias of some eco-veg-feminist positions. Reading this book, it becomes crystal clear that the flourishing of multispecies lives is not incompatible with new technologies of re/production in the abstract, it is rather incompatible with the capitalistic system that prioritizes more profitable animal-machines compositions, colonizing “disposable” lives for the sake of totalizing value extraction. At the same time, distinguishing between primary and secondary goods is not necessary, given that extractivism regards wheat as well as silicon and that both extractivism and our so-called “ecological footprint” are not the same for everyone, which among other things makes the definition of Anthropocene meaningless, unless we disaggregate its parts and confront it on a political level.

Can the contemporary re/productive system be turned against itself and reconceived in playful, desiring and generative ways to counter its present identitarian, xenophobic and necrophilic semantics and pragmatics? Can this be done with *re-spect* for other-than-human lives, that is setting aside the human exceptionalism that dictates the agenda of anthropocentric solutions for imminent catastrophes, which coincidentally see the same

responsible actors as the only visible victims to whom tailored solutions are addressed? After all, extinction is a classic fantasy of privileged humans, for whom the worst-case scenario is something yet to come, whereas there are catastrophes that clearly happened because of such privileged subjects and still mark the memories and experiences of many, such as slavery, genocides, forced migrations and factory farming. “Homo sapiens was born because other, not white and non-Western, humans have died and because entire ecosystems have been adapted to his needs”, writes Balzano without ambiguity (p. 69, book reviewer’s translation).

The book includes three chapters whose “musical” structure opens and closes with two corresponding Intros and Outros. In the first chapter, going from the figuration of Trotula, the first renowned Medieval medical practitioner, to the history of abortion in Italy, the transfeminist fight for chemical abortion and its artistic tactics (the *Sfertility Game*, collectively created by the Favolosa Coalizione and illustrated by Percy Bertolini) are discussed to counter the fundamentalist constellation of the pro-life imaginary and political alliances. Balzano deals with science, in her own words, as a “huge case of mansplaining” (p. 28, book reviewer’s translation), in which female human and nonhuman bodies are signified by a plethora of normative roles that, while regulating them, also instrumentalize their value and reinforce their re/productive functions: think about the birth of modern gynecology and its racist-sexist complicity with slavery, as well as the capitalization of female animals inside the animal-industrial complex. Here, the author also discusses the male hormonal contraception, experimented from 1999 to 2012 at the Sant’Orsola Hospital in Bologna, but whose trial has been discontinued notwithstanding the limited side effects compared with female oral contraception.

In the second chapter, the concept at the core of the book, the *Cyborgfare*, i.e. the automatized biocapitalistic regime that succeeds to the workfare – without actually replacing it – is introduced by means of a trans-species posthuman family of figurations that goes from ectogenesis to cloned and genetically improved animals (the well-known Dolly the sheep and the lesser-known Rosita, the cow producing super-proteic milk), through the HeLa cells expropriated from the body of Henrietta Lacks and, eventually, the social robots as a blatant example of contemporary feminized labor. Always complexifying her arguments, Balzano wonders whether what Herzig and Subramanian (2017) call “life in the age of bio-everything”, the present time in which biotechnologies value everybody all the time (cognitive labor included, which is never disembodied), only territorializes our desires without escape.

However, Balzano’s lucid reasoning never leads her to refuse such biotechnologies *per se* and further problematizes how different (never merely additive) technosocial compositions must always take into account the different partialities that are configured together. Thus, which different compositions they can make happen, depending on the embodied actors and

the networks they are imbricated into. This is clearly explained through an apparently “futuristic” (although already technically implementable) example such as ectogenesis, that is the growth of a foetus outside of the uterus, which could potentially be employed either for heteronormative pro-life reasons or for transfeminist liberatory ones, although undoubtedly the current socio-economic conditions do not seem to privilege any of the minority scenarios that Balzano wishes for.

The last chapter, containing the proposal of the author for re/productive degrowth, centers around posthuman trans-species kinships, going back to the much divulged and misinterpreted slogan “Make Kin not Babies” by Donna Haraway (2016) and situating it, among other examples, in the geopolitical routes of outsourced parenting and migrating minors travelling alone. Rephrasing Paul Preciado against catholic nationalism, Balzano intones the slogan “closed legs, open harbors” as a way to reclaim a “vulvar” autonomous space of pleasure, desire and – why not – dysfunctionality, that is strongly political (so different, for example, from the one longed for by Patricia MacCormack, 2020, who appeals to a vulvar principle which is detached from actual women’s bodies) and subtracted from the all-pervading power of capital. A further anti-dualistic corrective of the presumed return of Haraway to earth is then offered when Balzano differentiates the latter’s chthonic and compostist vision of Gaia from the hypothesis of James Lovelock: “Haraway is not Lovelock, she does not forget that feminist techno-science has a lot to learn from the knowledge of the earth” (p. 131, book reviewer’s translation). This goes hand in hand with never taking the advancements of technoscience for granted, but always problematizing the social norms that orient them. Let us consider the case of gene editing of CRISPR-Cas 9, a relatively inexpensive technique that can be employed with “corrective” functions and that could be considered a biomimetic technology, given that it is already used by bacteria, working as a kind of immune system. What are the social norms that such technique supports? Who is funding these studies? For whom? Do the goals of the resulting assemblages pursue a sympoietic a-hierarchical becoming-with, or the existing hierarchies of the living? By working with “nature”, biomimicry risks orienting its generative “pluripotentiality” and emerging processes towards the privatization of specific forms of life incorporating it into the economic realm and further extending the colonization of zoe (Johnson and Goldstein 2015). On the contrary, what posthuman kinships require is taking care of and composting with different and proliferating assemblages like those that the Diatoms, the last figuration that Balzano introduces, create: microalgae actually working as chthonic goddesses, invisible breathing Amazons travelling across borders being nurtured by and nurturing multiple ecosystems, that are shared among many dimensions, spaces and agents.

This book talks about technosocial, naturecultural assemblages but also

works like an assemblage itself, where several writing styles and heterogeneous subjectivities are brought together in a way that gives space to differences while making them resonate the one with the other in “melodic landscapes”: here, plural voices, human or not, answer the questions that the author alone cannot respond to, nor would she claim the right to. Self-determination is most often a privilege, reproduction is not the same for everyone, reproductive technologies are not accessible to everyone everywhere in the same way: the explicit choice of a feminist standpoint that overtly criticizes universality by dismantling the disembodied truths of science and its narratives, but at the same time never opts for relativism as the alternative, continuously makes it clear that no technology exists in a void, so no technology can be discussed without considering the network of practices and apparatuses in which its representations and imaginaries are embedded. At the same time, no body, not even the one incorporating the authorial voice, can speak in the singular and always requires to be located in relational webs crosscutting the lines of class, gender, ethnicity, ability and species, which makes it impossible to yield to both utopian and dystopian scenarios.

The book has the merit of combining the theoretical and the empirical as in the more fruitful tradition of feminist STSs, whose also borrows the self-reflexive approach. It does not only problematize the current applications of technoscience that look for the extraction of lively capital through numerous case studies and with a strong theoretical backing; it also has the merit of supporting the plea for a truly liberated and ecosystemic technoscience, one that is eventually accessible and usable beyond the privilege of a certain kind of human being and possibly oriented to the well-being and flourishing of all lives: “We can connect to the network or to the earth, we do not have to choose” (p. 22, book reviewer’s translation), writes Balzano: what we should try to avoid is the language of management and rather adopt one of *respons-ability* that puts forth our involvement in others’ lives as well as our constitutive co-dependency. Our entangled partialities and vulnerabilities are a condition of possibility, not a lack thereof.

References

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Silvia Cervia

Genere e scienza come costruzione sociale. Il ruolo delle istituzioni nello sviluppo della ricerca [Gender and Science as a Social Construction. The role of institutions in research development], Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2018, pp. 216

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The gender issue, a topic widely addressed in feminist science studies in previous decades, has also recently emerged in the public sphere and as a target for institutional policies in academic and research environments. One reason for this emerging attention involves the European Union's (EU's) incentives for universities to address the underrepresentation of women in research and innovation and to adopt specific gender equality plans and strategies. The book *Genere e Scienza come costruzione sociale* by Silvia Cervia retraces the process of the progressive definition of the issue as a social construct, specifying the role that feminist reflection and activism played in this process while revealing its hidden pitfalls. The theme is highly relevant because, as the author points out, gender and science constitute a paradigmatic arena for exploring the process of building scientific knowledge and its meanings.

The volume explores the vast research literature about female participation in science in the arduous attempt to reconstruct a taxonomy of concepts that, as highlighted in the analysis carried out in the initial chapters of the book, coexists in a multiplicity of interpretative perspectives. This work reconsiders different theoretical views in the sociology of science, such as Merton's normative system of science, the sociology of scientific knowledge, the empirical programme of relativism (Collins 1985; Collins and Pinch 1993), laboratory studies (Latour 1997; Knorr Cetina 1995), and the post-academic science (Ziman 2000), looking for traces of the gender issue and any points of similarity (or disagreement) with the feminist reflection on the relationship between gender and science. In this excursus, the author focuses in particular on the distinction between elements that are *external and internal* to science that contribute to gender segregation. External elements refer to forms of (self or hetero) exclusion of women deriving from the organizational functioning of science and its practices, while *internal elements* correspond to *material* (objects of investigation)