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**Getting Transformation into Good Trouble:
Making new spaces of possibility
with community and in practice**

PROCEEDINGS

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Getting Transformation into Good Trouble: Making new spaces of possibility with community and in practice

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The Posthuman Epistemology of Transformative Theories. The contribution of Posthuman Feminism

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Abstract: This conceptual paper explores the contribution that Posthuman Feminism—as conceptualized by Braidotti (2022, 2019, 2013)—offers to Transformative Learning Theories. We propose a reflection around the possibility of developing *non-constructivist* and *non-humanist* assumptions underpinning Transformative Learning Theories. In this endeavor, the argumentation unfolds in three steps: (1) first, a critique to discursive pattern of social constructivist paradigm that upholds binary distinctions, such as between nature/culture, nature/technology, human/nonhuman, subject/object, mind/body, masculinity/femininity, and so on, is presented; (2) secondly, the internal contradictions and external exclusions that have always composed the humanistic view of the human subject are reconstructed; and, (3) finally, it is argued in favor of a Posthuman Feminist reading of Transformative Learning conceptual device and it is shown in what sense and to what extent the Posthuman Feminism can be appropriated to transformative epistemologies.

Key Words: Posthuman Feminism; Transformative Theories; European Humanism; Affirmative Ethics

Introduction

This conceptual paper explores the contribution that Posthuman Feminism—as conceptualized by Braidotti (2022, 2019, 2013)—offers to Transformative Learning Theories. Our purpose is to examine how Posthuman Feminism enriches, through critical and creative cartographies, the philosophical assumptions on which Transformative Learning Theories are based. We propose a reflection around the possibility of developing *non-constructivist* and *non-humanist* assumptions underpinning Transformative Learning Theories.

In this endeavor, after a brief overview of different theoretical perspectives on transformative learning, the argumentation unfolds in three steps: (1) first, a critique to discursive pattern of social constructivist paradigm that upholds binary distinctions, such as between nature/culture, nature/technology, human/nonhuman, subject/object, mind/body, masculinity/femininity, and so on, is presented; (2) secondly, the internal contradictions and external exclusions that have always composed the humanistic view of the human subject are reconstructed; and, (3) finally, it is argued in favor of a Posthuman Feminist reading of Transformative Learning conceptual device and it is shown in what sense and to what extent Posthuman Feminism can be appropriated to transformative epistemologies.

The *social-emancipatory*, rooted primarily in the work of Freire (1984), *cultural-spiritual* (Brooks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006), *race-centric* (Sheared, 1994; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006), and *planetary* (O’Sullivan, 1999, 2002) views of transformative learning, despite their diversity, have contributed to formulating a culturally

bounded, situated, oppositional, and nonindividualistic conception of it, interested in processes of both social and individual change (Taylor, 2005, 2008). On the other hand, perspectives whose locus of learning concerns the individual—that is, the *psychocritical* one elaborated by Mezirow (2000, 2003, 2009)¹, which continues to represent the dominant transformative paradigm, as well as *psychoanalytic* (Kegan, 2000; Daloz, 1988), *psychodevelopmental* (Boyd, 1989; Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2001), and *neurobiological* (Janik, 2005)—tend to reflect a universal view of transformative learning and risk recognizing difference through the lens of personal ones (such as, for example, cognitive or learning styles, forms of rationality, selective attentions, characterological dispositions, and so on). At the same time, views whose locus is sociocultural have placed much greater emphasis on the notions of *difference* and *positionality*—where one’s *position* is relative to class, race, gender and sexual orientation, age and able-bodiedness—and their relationship to both the process and the practice of transformative learning. These theoretical conceptions converge in arguing that *speaking truth to power* represents a promising method to reach an adequate understanding of the conditions that can promote a radical and transformative education.

The evolution of transformative learning theory, over the last three decades, especially in the United States, is more understandable when viewed as parallel to and strongly influenced by the development of adult learning theories—that began to draw on situated cognition theory, practice-based studies, feminist theories and methodologies, critical social theory, and postmodern theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Merriam, 2008). Learning in adulthood is now described in relation to embodied learning, the emotions, spirituality, relational learning, arts-based learning, and storytelling. Similarly, as Gunnlaugson (2008) suggests, the *second wave* of theory development in the field of transformative learning has moved—and keeps doing it—toward the integration of the various factions of the theory and into a more inclusive and holistic perspective.

Epistemological Doubts, Philosophical Orientations, and Posthuman Subjects

Our research interests are rooted in the field of transformative learning and in the practice of fostering the development of it in a variety of settings, such as school, professional development, and gender education. Also, transformative learning—seen as teaching for change—represents one of the adult education teaching constructs that has most affected our educational practices.

The educational and teaching experiences we conducted during the past ten years involved undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral students at University of Florence, Siena, and other Italian Universities. Our students are enrolled in *Adult Learning, Curriculum & Teaching*, or *Inclusive Education* Programs. The courses we teach are, mostly, *Facilitating adult learning*; *Adult learning and education: Theory and practice*; *Research on organizational learning*; *Gender, difference, and curriculum*; *Methods of teaching in elementary school*. Our classes are, by and large, linguistically and culturally homogeneous and composed, for the most part, of

¹ Taylor (2003, 2005), Taylor & Cranton (2013), and Hoggan (2023) have highlighted how in the United States the preponderance of both theoretical and empirical literature on transformative learning refers to the original formulation given by Mezirow (2000; 2009). The same analysis can also be extended to our national context, within which, in the extensive literature on the topic, attention to Mezirow’s theory is almost ubiquitous, running the risk of assuming it as the only conception, using some of its assumptions uncontestedly, and neglecting the contributions that the growing presence of other views can offer to its development in terms of both analytic and synthetic metatheory.

Caucasian Italian women ranging in age from 20 to 30 years. The number of attending students per class is between about 20 to 150.

In the early years of our academic journey we predominantly focused on the views of transformative learning whose locus of learning is *individual* and, only more recently, we approached those whose locus is *sociocultural*. However, the sharing by all these conceptions of Transformative Learning of philosophical underpinnings related to *social constructivist* and *humanist* assumptions (Taylor & Cranton, 2013) began to arouse in us a sort of epistemological unease linked to three considerations.

The first consists in recognizing that social constructivist paradigm is based on a discursive pattern that upholds binary distinctions, such as between nature/culture, nature/technology, human/nonhuman, subject/object, mind/body, masculinity/femininity, black/white, local/global, present/past, and so on (Roth, 2011; Braidotti, 2019; Cozza & Gherardi, 2023). This logic of dualistic oppositions—based on a hierarchical organization of dominant dichotomies composed of superordinate and subordinate meanings that relate to each other in implicative terms—risks reducing *difference* to being different from, or in being worth less than (Roth, 2011; Braidotti, 2022). That is, there are axes of reference and dimensions of sense, whose specific, historically variable, contents are worth less than others. A radical gesture of *defamiliarization* from social constructivist assumptions implies, among other things, to explore the idea of subject formation as an event that takes place transversally, in between nature/technology, male/female, black/white, local/global, present/past—in assemblages that flow across and displace binary oppositions (Braidotti, 2019). This produces educational practices based on *becoming-other*, both in relation to involving the non-human elements of education, be it animals, natural entities or technological apparatus.

Hence, the second consideration takes up the invitation—made by Braidotti (2013, 2022)—to practice productive forms of *conceptual disobedience* toward the humanistic vision of Man. The scholar (2019) suggests to take distance from the abstract universalism that composes the human in the humanistic scheme, proposing to assume subjects as neither unitary, nor autonomous, nor self-determined, but embodied and embedded, relational, and affective collaborative entities, activated by relational ethics. Suspending belief in a unitary and self-evident category of “we humans “, however, is by no means the premise to relativism. On the contrary, the author provocatively emphasizes the statement “we humans “ was never neutral, but in fact indexed on sexualized and racialized hierarchies that controlled access to power¹. Fundamental social categories such as class, race, gender and sexual orientation, age and able-bodiedness have functioned as markers of human “normality “. They still are key factors in framing the notion of and policing access to something we may call “humanity “. “Who qualifies as a human in that view is the kind of being that skillfully combines high Humanist standards of individual physical and mental perfection with collective intellectual and moral values. This is the generic sweep that turned Humanism into a civilizational standard, positioning Europe as the centre of world progress. Incidentally, that is what makes Eurocentrism into a structural and not just a contingent attitude “ (Braidotti, 2019, p. 171).

Given these premises, the loss of humanist unity is the starting point for constructing alternative ways of *becoming-subjects-together*. It is a practice to lead the new subjects that we

¹ Braidotti (2013, 2022) describes Leonardo’s famous sketch of the Vitruvian Man as an emblematic image of humanism. That perfectly proportioned, healthy, male, and white body still constitutes the model which became the golden mean for classical aesthetics and architecture. The human thus defined is not so much a species as a marker of European culture and society and for the scientific and technological activities it privileges.

are capable of becoming away from the violent aspects of European Humanism, most notably the violence of sexualized, racialized and naturalized exclusions and of colonial domination. It is about redefining the human after Humanism and anthropocentrism, as a *zoe/geo/techno-mediated being* (Clarke & Haraway, 2018; Braidotti, 2013, 2019), immanently related to and hence inseparable from the material, terrestrial and planetary locations that we happen to inhabit.

Braidotti (2022) describes posthuman feminism as the transformative, radical, and decolonial struggle to affirm positively the differences among marginalized people(s). Its radical spark lies in the subversive politics manifested in creating alternative visions of the human generated by people who were historically excluded from, or only partially included into, that category. It means creating other possible worlds. This transformative edge assumes that no emancipatory process, however partial, is ever completely subsumed or incorporated into the dominant socio-economic conditions, to which it is attached by critical opposition. Discrete margins of intervention remain available.

How to Activate Them?

The third consideration regards the sense of epistemological discomfort generated by the attempt to answer this question and linked to the need to: (A) unlearn our privileges, including humanist and anthropocentric Eurocentric habits of mind, through the methodological practice of *defamiliarization* (Braidotti, 2019); (B) increase awareness of the forms of racism and sexism that we have inevitably internalized—by drawing on the construct of *revolutionary feminist self-consciousness* (hooks, 2000, 2010) that *academicized* feminist pedagogies have risked depriving of its radicality; and (C) understanding how to cultivate their emancipatory dimensions in educational settings and construct *our white professional identities* in an *antiracist* and *feminist* sense—abandoning the myth of *white or Euro-American epistemology* (Brookfield, 2014, 2021; Teo, 2022) of neutral and non-impositional facilitation.

It is not merely a matter of taking the position—now well-established in the transformative learning literature—that without developing awareness of our own frames of reference and how they shape our teaching and educational practices, there is little chance of fostering deep, epistemological changes in others (Taylor, 2009). What is at stake is to build transformative models from which new, different and even contradictory definitions of what it means to be human can be invented. This is because I believe that education is tasked with revealing the diversity of the world and dissolving the white, Eurocentric blanket that has suffused past years and culture by resisting radically the forms by which domination manifests itself and exploring how to transform individual uncertainties into collective solutions that work and help make the world more inclusive and socially cohesive.

Disidentifications from dominant models of subject formation is a way of decolonizing our imaginary through a radical disengagement from the axes and institutions of power in our society. These include the gender system with its binary representations of femininity and masculinity (Braidotti 1991); white privilege and racialized hierarchies, which are critiqued by postcolonial (Gilroy 2000) and race discourses (Hill Collins 1991; Wynter 2015). Disidentifications in these cases occur along the axes of *becoming-woman* (sexualization) and *becoming-other* (racialization), and hence remain within the confines of anthropomorphism. A further shift is needed to develop post-anthropocentric forms of identification.

The construct of revolutionary feminist self-consciousness offers a twofold solicitation. The first relates to the legitimacy in arguing that the personal is political (hooks, 2010), that is, the belief that lived experience is as important as factual information and that in the learning process, there should really be room for telling one's personal story by all/all participants. The

second, finally, is to take up the contribution of visionary feminism, which encourages analyzing our lives from the perspectives of gender, race, and class to be able to accurately understand our position within the white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy systems of which we are a part (hooks, 2015). This is especially relevant for those who, like us, are part of privileged segments of highly educated women who have risked underestimating the consequences of the feminist focus on careerism and their own academization.

Conclusive Reflections

Posthuman Feminism represents both critical and creative framework for performative and generative practices of fostering transformative learning across disciplines and settings. It unfolds into a series of rhizomic folds that can enrich the philosophical assumptions underpinning transformative learning theories.

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