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Reconceptualizing the vulnerability of Nature

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SUMMARY

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This thesis focuses on the area of research surrounding Western modern dualism(s), with a specific focus on the contested Culture/Nature dyad in which my quest for re-conceptualising the vulnerability of Nature is situated. My research question methodologically fits within a critique to Western philosophy of mind – with particular reference to modern philosophy and the concept of dualism. Within this body or research, I will attempt to give my contribution to troubling the dyads of Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability and their presumed dualist relationality.

The goal of this thesis is therefore to (1) render visible how the apparatus of dualisms has provided a framework to naturalize and legitimize a specific system of domination imbued in patriarchal values; (2) deconstruct the conceptualization(s) of a series of categories of Other(s) created by Western dualist philosophy, with a focus on one particular Other: Nature; (3) deconstruct the conceptualization(s) of vulnerability which too exist in a dualist dyad of Invulnerability/Vulnerability; (4) propose a new conceptualization of vulnerability as material continuity between Human and Non/human living beings.

This work is situated in a (queer)ecofeminist framework, as I believe in the inclusivity of ecofeminism to bring together multiple causes. By initially undercovering the mutual domination of Women and Nature, ecofeminism has gone past the boundaries of different oppressions, looking at the commonalities rather than at the differences of multiply dominated beings. I believe that it is only through reworking the concept of difference (as non-hierarchical) and by recognising the common roots of multiple oppressions that socio-political-economic transformation will be possible.

Key words: *Vulnerability, Ecofeminism, Human/Nature, Posthuman, New materialism*

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Reconceptualizing the vulnerability of Nature

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That's right, they said. That you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero.

(Ursula Le Guin)

Note: Using an inclusive language when discussing ontological categories of philosophy and referring to a linguistic archive of analytical and representational categories is a task which leaves me torn between the politically engaged will of inclusivity for the sake of dismantling the linguistic cage of traditional normative social categories, and the analytical need to use them if I want to describe the framework in which these categories has been forged, reified and further diffused. Nonetheless, I have decided to adopt the following strategy: I will add an * to all categories which are self-representational or reflective to an identity choice; and I will use a majuscule when referring to normative social categories to stress their analytical and prescriptive character; unless citations from other authors, in which case the form used by them will be respected.

I.   Introduction

In chapter 1, I will position my authorship with regards to the research path that I will undertake with this research, by questioning what contribution my own situated existence might bring to the specific research question of this paper. I will highlight the importance of choosing a topic for which I believe I bear responsibility and of which I can talk from a personal archive of material and discursive experience, as a moral/supportive/inclusive/political act. I will declare my own ego-histoire (Haggis, 2014) as an ethically driven onto-epistemological act (Barad, 2007), aimed at situating my point of view and making it visible, as it will impact the knowledge that this research will produce, as well as making it accountable in its partiality (Haraway, 1988). I will introduce the topic of the research as well as highlighting the steps that the research will take from an epistemological and methodological perspective.

In chapter 2, I will position this paper within the frame of the vast existing body of research surrounding Western modern dualism(s), with a specific focus on the contested Human/Nature dyad in which my quest for re-conceptualising the vulnerability of Nature will be situated. Initially, I will introduce dualism as a philosophical concept, underlying the various philosophical contributions that have built its current conceptualisations. Secondly, I will highlight the critiques that have been moved against this philosophical concept by ecofeminists, on the ground that it has justified the appropriation of Human and Non/human subjects. Ecofeminism will provide an important theoretical grounding, as well as a constructive positive example of how to go past the academic and political boundaries separating multiple dominations by highlighting the existence of common roots to multiple oppressions. The power-driven mechanisms on which dualism is grounded will also be made visible.

In chapter 3, I will provide an overview of the current literature on human vulnerability in the attempt to understand how much vulnerability is, as I suspect, constructed on: (1) the acceptance of an achievable and existing ideal invulnerable Subject; (2) the reproduction of the mechanism(s) of an ontological dualist system not neutral nor ahistorical. I will analyse its current conceptualization(s), as well as highlight the two major positions taken by researchers on the vulnerability of humans: (1) that vulnerability is a universally shared human condition; (2) that vulnerability is the result of power mechanisms in society which touch differently upon individuals and groups differently situated socially. I will underline the limitations of both positions in escaping the constraints of dualism.

In chapter 4, I will try to trouble the dualistic cut of Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability, to recognise the complexity and fictionality of both categories, with the aim of providing a more – I believe – realistic account of reality that does not need to reinforce difference to guarantee its existence. In order to build a new account of reality, it is necessary to find a new way to conceptualise these categories and to transform their relationality in one of continuity rather than separation. In this chapter, new materialist and posthumanist theories will provide theoretical tools to refuse the political and ethical constrains of Western binarisms with the aim of recognising the vitality and intra-constitutionality of matter (Barad, 2007), within a continuity of Non/human and Human beings (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Barad, 2007, 2008; Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013). Posthumanism will also provide a framework in which to re-think the human subject and provide the contours of a possible new political Human/Non-human subject, situating vulnerability as the manifestation of the material continuity between Human and Nature.

1. Situating the research: epistemological and methodological frameworks

1.1 Situating the authorship

I feel deeply compelled by situated knowledge theory (Haraway, 1988) to begin any research paths by questioning what contribution my own situated existence might bring to the specific question of research I am about to build. Without wanting to reinforce the exclusionary practices that might demand me to stay away from topics which do not reflect my own lived experiences, I do however believe in being accountable for my own research choices. Thus, in order to be accountable and without censoring my own voice, I believe in the moral/supportive/inclusive act of choosing topics for which I bear responsibility and of which I can talk from a personal archive of material and discursive experience. True to this stance, I have decided to approach an area of reflection which is deeply rooted in Western philosophy, of which I am a carrier and which I inhabit as an eco-queer, white, able-bodied, middle-class, (readable) woman*, (…). This list of adjectives, although possibly not exhaustive and certainly often re-evaluated as I further deconstruct certain social categories, helps me position myself in the matrix of social relations which I am entangled in, whilst also representing the discursive and conceptual limits of English (non-native) vocabulary of 21st century Europe.

The area of research which will be discussed in this thesis is that of the ontology and epistemology of Western modern dualism(s), with a specific focus on the contested Culture/Nature dyad in which my quest for re-conceptualising the vulnerability of Nature will be situated. This question methodologically fits within the critique to the tradition of Western philosophy of mind – with particular reference to modern philosophy – and specifically to the concept of dualism founded on the existence of two fundamental categories of things, of principles. Ontological dualism posits the existence of dyads of fundamental, original elements, which differ in substance and in property (Robinson, 2017).

(Queer) feminist critique, where I position myself, has highlighted how this supposed process of definition of fundamental elements, whose theory has evolved throughout the history of Western philosophy, is not to be regarded as ahistorical nor immune to power mechanisms. Positing the existence of fundamental ontological elements has the impact of also creating, materialising, said elements. How will these elements be related? How will they interact if they are positioned in (and actually structuring) social relations?

But the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures.

(Butler, 1990:2)

Feminist critique has underlined (Mathews, 2017:59) that the "*historical apparatus of dualism has evolved […] to naturalize and legitimate a particular, specifically patriarchal, system of domination*". The dyads Self/Other, Culture/Nature, Man/Woman, Mind/Body, (…), become spaces of obligatory and exclusive co-constitutive relationalities where a hierarchical classification takes place so that the Self will be existing on the ground of an Other, Culture will be differentiated by Nature and situated as preferential, Man will be the dominant category over Woman, Mind will be the space of preferred rational disembodied thought:

After the scientific revolution, after philosophical enlightenment, after methodological individualism dominating the social sciences, after psychological and sociological analysis of purposive action, the only remaining plausible actor is the human individual. The rest is superstition.

(Teubner, 2006: 2)

The consequences of hierarchical exceptionalism which is at the core of Western philosophy of the mind and its ontological categories, has been to provide ontological, self-representational justifications for some of the most inhuman (humanist) ventures of appropriation of human and non/human Others. As a Western situated Other, I feel compelled to bring forward a critical reflection on the contested category of Nature, specifically in the current socio-political-economic context threatening earthly survival, for as humans and Other species (inclusively, living beings) have gotten used to know it. I believe it is time for white, post-industrial, West to claim accountability for the degradation of nature and humans' living conditions, and to work on alternative stories for the sake of building different relationalities between creatures inhabiting this earth.

I come to approach this work, and to situate myself as a subject and as author of this research, with the same radical vulnerability expressed by bell hooks (1991):

> *Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.*
>
> *(bell hooks, 1991:1)*

As I approach my research question, and an existing vast interdisciplinary and feminist intersectional body of research, I do so with the ethical and academic intention of building on accountability and making visible the structures and exclusionary power relations on which the Western society that I inhabit is build. I do so inevitably by looking at the context of my socialisation, and the context in which my own experiences of inclusion and exclusion have been shaped.

I believe that the choice of this topic finds its origins in an emerged and very material feeling; in the memory of a younger self trying to make sense of a context (with the discursive tools offered by a specific set of cultural and social markers situated historically and geographically) that constitutes me as a subject, whilst also setting the limits of my possible existence. In different moments of life, I have felt unknown forces materialising around me, ordering adherence (at times violently, but often times subtly) to a constituted and constitutive order: I have seen my mother reproducing the script (Wiederman, 2005) of a gender role without questioning it; I have seen her taking on professional and household work without questioning her double charge; I have seen a father able to exempt himself from the distribution of a series of responsibilities thanks to his so-called "*privileged irresponsibility*" (Tronto, 1993:121); I have found myself bound to a sexual script that did not conform to my desire, yet shaped its direction; I have been reminded with abuse and violence that my sexual identity is unwelcome in a multiplicity of spaces; I have felt the complexity of a binding heteronormative[1] (Butler,

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[1] For additional literature on the context of origin of the topic please refer to the following works:
- Rubin, Gayle (1975). The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex in Rayna R. Reiter (eds.), *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, pp. 157-210;

1990) capitalist system as it has marked my body and a multiplicity of othered bodies on the grounds of productive and consuming value. I have felt the stigma of *difference* (referring to the discursive and material practices which are hegemonic in society and to which "a different subject" is confronted with and reminded of regularly). It is what Iris Young (2004:59) defined as "*cultural imperialism*", one of the faces which oppression might take and which "*involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment of the norm [...] the culturally dominated undergo a paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible*" (59). This universalized tale of existence has deep impacts in the self-perception and self-attribution of value, as this cultural hegemony leads oppressed subjects to always be "*looking at one's self through the eyes of others [...] she receives from the dominant culture only the judgement that she is different, marked, or inferior*" (60).

How to survive within a context that shapes your experience and constitute your subjecthood on the grounds of values which do not reflect your own deep perception, and how to escape the prescriptive constitutionality that also orients the relationalities that a living being can build around itself? Resistance to the norm is how I have learnt to inhabit this eco-system, and from this position of resistance I will begin my reflection.

1.2   Epistemology and Methodology of the research

Declaring my own ego-histoire (Haggis, 2014) represents an ethically-driven onto-epistemological act[2] (Barad, 2007) aimed at situating my point of view and making it visible, investigating the complexity of my surroundings by never forgetting to anchor myself in a specific (albeit not immobile) position in a web of social relations. My positioning will impact the knowledge that this research will produce, as well as making it accountable in its partiality (Haraway, 1988). Rendering visible my experience of oppression, opening a crack in my being for the scrutiny of a reader, is an act of political and academic activism: where I acknowledge my partiality of being, my contradictions, my hybridity; how much I am being constituted by said positioning whilst I resist normative powers. I am sharing my own vulnerability, admitting

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- Wittig, Monique (1992). *The straight mind and other essays*. Boston: Beacon Press;
- Rich, Adrienne (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 5, pp. 631-660;
- Pateman, Carole (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

[2] With the term onto-epistemology Barad (2007) refers to entanglement of the practices of knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology). According to Barad such practices cannot be separated as they are intra-connected (rather than inter-connected) material practices. Barad's concept of intra-action is further elaborated in Chapter 4.

my own openness, whilst also kicking against vulnerability's current normative conceptualisations. I will question vulnerability's current conceptualisations, as they often appear connotated by claims of inferiority, victimhood, stigma, and shame – which deeply impact (although not reflect) the space which I can inhabit.

Such conceptualisations of vulnerability appear to be justifying contemporary ethical claims and interventions aimed at minimising the impact that vulnerability has on those affected by this unwanted state or condition. I will argue that such conceptualizations are embedded in the power-influenced, white, patriarchal and heteronormative Western philosophy, which operates dualist cuts between multiple beings and thus (1) contribute in materializing subjects as marked by their difference, and (2) position them as inferior to the normative Subject, owner of the hegemonic tale of humankind.

> *The point of challenging traditional epistemologies is not merely to welcome females, slaves, children, animals, and other dispossessed Others (exiled from the land of knowers by Aristotle thousands of years ago) into the fold of knowers, but to better account for the ontology of knowing.*
>
> *(Barad, 2008:329)*

In the attempt to understand how much vulnerability is, as I suspect, constructed on: (1) the acceptance of an achievable and existing ideal invulnerable subject; (2) the reproduction of the mechanism(s) of an ontological dualist system not neutral nor ahistorical, I will analyse its current conceptualization(s), attempt to deconstruct and shake its presumed a-priori ontological grounds.

Whilst arguing for a critical deconstruction of the multiple categories of Other(s) created by Western dualist philosophy, I will focus on one particular Other: Nature. Through an analysis of its specific conceptualisations, I will investigate ways to build a different Human/Nature relationality. Whilst focusing on the constitution of Nature and its oppositional character(s), I will also be drawing a series of considerations that can be applied to further dualisms.

Concerning the discussion that will be carried out on Nature and its conceptualisations, what will be tackled are the anthropocentric discursive grounds on which the ideal subject operates, to deny Nature of any ontological legitimacy other than that of being possessed and exploited:

Excruciatingly conscious of nature's discursive constitution as "other" in the histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and class domination of many kinds, we nonetheless find in this problematic, ethno-specific, long-lived, and mobile concept something we cannot do without, but can never "have". We must find another relationship to nature besides reification and possession.

(Haraway, 1992:296)

Haraway will be of great support thanks to her work on tracking down and following the biases, re-constructions, artefacts on Nature, constructed through scientific discourses; demonstrating how they have mutually reinforced each other across multiple disciplinary fields, further establishing and making invisible the ontological Western constructions of Nature/Culture and a series of other "*troubling dualisms (such as) self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/ made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man*" (Haraway, 1991:177).

I will therefore focus on discussing the importance of decentring the human subject as fundamental measure of all things, to then discuss how to build a conceptualisation of Nature's vulnerability void of patronising interventions, but rather aimed at exploring a continuity between Human and Non/human living beings, for the sake of earthly survival.

This research is situated in a (queer)ecofeminist framework as I believe in the inclusivity of ecofeminist to bring together multiple causes. By initially undercovering the mutual domination of Women and Nature, ecofeminism has gone past the boundaries of different oppressions, which are so often today reinforced rather than tackled, looking at the commonalities rather than at the differences of multiply dominated beings. I believe that it is only through the acknowledgement of difference (as non-hierarchical) and by recognising the common roots of multiple oppressions that socio-political-economic transformation will be possible.

My argument will also be sustained by theories of new materialism and posthumanism, as they align in their rejection of anthropocentrism, with the support of posthuman critical theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad. New materialism will support the epistemology of this research, which not only questions discursive power structure and

practices, but also recognises the power of matter and materiality within and around all bodies; what is linguistically constructed and materially impacted. New materialism, as well as Posthumanism refuse the political and ethical constrains of Western binarisms and aim at recognising the vitality of matter, within a continuity of Non/human and Human beings (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Barad, 2007, 2008; Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013) Posthumanism will also provide a framework in which to re-think the human Subject and provide the contours of a possible new political Human/Non-human subject, situating vulnerability as the manifestation of the material continuity between Human and Nature.

2. Ecofeminism and dualism(s)

2.1 An introduction to dualism

Dualism in the philosophy of mind is the theory that posits the existence of two realities: material (physical) and immaterial (spiritual). These two realities are related as categorically different and separate from each other; although, in principle, supposedly equal. Dualism distances itself from other versions of categorisation of reality: monism, which theorises the existence of a single substance which makes up all elements of reality; and pluralism which holds the existence of various many kinds of substances and not just two, like dualism theorises (Robinson, 2017).

The origin of dualism can be attributed historically to Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, in what is known as the *mind-body problem* (Robinson, 2017). Quite intuitively, material reality is perceivable and definable; not so much immaterial reality. The question which early philosophers posed themselves was therefore how to define and distinguish physical and mental properties, and how do describe the relationship between the two. The deep abstract character of this question has given rise to a multiplicity of philosophical positions and contributions. Plato's theorised that substances are not physical but rather material, as they survive the constrain of finite physical bodies. Universal Forms, in Plato's theory, make up the world and make it intelligible (Robinson, 2017). Because Forms are immaterial, human beings can only grasp them through the immateriality of their mental intellect. Aristotle argued instead for the unity of body and soul, and for the soul being the form of its body. In his view the nature of matter is in direct relation with the nature of the substance: a human being (form) will be the individual with the cognition required to be such (mental). Modern philosophy has touched upon the mind-body problem through the theorising of substance dualist Descartes, who provides the most precise and long-lived theory. According to Descartes two kinds of substances exist: (1) matter which occupies space, (2) mind which thinks. Descartes believed that bodies are machines working according to own determinate a-priori laws, which can be however influenced by the mind's intervention. The major question left unanswered by Descartes is how these two substances could interact between themselves when being so radically different (Robinson, 2017).

Dualism as a theoretical tool, which cuts through reality by creating boundaries and constituting basic ontological elements, takes multiple forms depending on which criteria is adopted to look

at reality. Dualism mainly refers to substance, or to property, or to predicate. Property dualism postulate the existence of two different kinds of property in the world, separated and different: in order for life to exist, a vital property, a force, needs to exist. Mind is considered an ensemble of properties, but not a different substance. Mental phenomena are not physical, but they are made possible by physical substances. Substance dualism is based on the existence of an object which possesses properties: the mind is not just the collection of its thoughts, but also an immaterial substance with immaterial properties (thoughts). The body cannot think, but it has properties which the mind can influence (Descartes' position). Predicate dualism argues that multiple predicates are necessary to explain the world and that material or psychological experiences cannot be explained with the same predicates (material experiences will be explained with physical predicates and psychological experiences will be explained with psychological predicates) (Robinson, 2017).

I will focus here on Cartesian dualism. Arguing for the existence of different substances which take up different forms, raises the following questions: what are the forms in which reality is divided? How will these forms interact between themselves? What will be the relation between the two? Will it be one of hierarchy? Or will different substances have an equal value? Claiming that to different substances belong different properties (different capabilities?) might also extend to different forms having different properties (different capabilities?). In a Western framework of philosophy where dualism takes the form of a universal organising principle of thought, I argue that its power in segmenting and structuring reality is too grand not to interrogate it from the perspective of the power in which it is created. Discussing power, I will refer to the Foucauldian (1998) theorisation, which argues that power is not just the power exercised by State authorities and other officially recognised institutions, but it is also constituted by normative forces which determine the acceptability and legitimacy of identities, behaviours, redistribution of resources, social recognition and relations. It is the invisible field in which social relations take place, in which normative policing constantly reminds players the rules of the social game. Power is embodied, it is enacted, it is negotiated: it is discursive and constitutes a very material reality for the agents at play. Power is exercised by these agents, and power constitutes these agents.

Embedded in this division of reality in mind and body – and by extension, to all activities connected to either – is a hierarchical vision of rationality as the superior human activity, embodied by the Renaissance-situated human subject: a self-aware, autonomous individual, capable of language and rational thought, elevated above all other living beings and most

certainly above irrational Nature. By contrast, such Subject is clearly distinct, through a clear cut, from all categories, features, and activities associated with Nature.

2.2   An ecofeminist critique of dualism

The conundrum of mind-body has been and still is a major point of discussion and critique. Many critiques have been made to Cartesian substance dualism, and I will open this research within the feminist ontological and epistemological critique of dualist apprehension and construction of reality, specifically with the support of ecofeminist critique(s). Within this methodological space, I believe there is a highly generative power to bridge differences: I believe in the exercise of trespassing political and academic boundaries for the sake of co-contamination and with regards to the partiality of subjects in knowledge creation. Disciplines and causes unwilling to partake and being contaminated by others, will not be able to provide the knowledge, which as Donna Haraway (1988) proposes, is objective only in that it is made up of partial and situated accounts of reality. Only by bringing these multiple accounts it might be possible to claim objectivity of knowledge; this epistemic view bridges the separation of disciplines and causes by arguing for a necessary connection.

By reason of their positioning in the intersection of two major articulations of domination, that of Woman and Nature, ecofeminists have focused their theoretical work on how the domination of these two Other-ed categories experience oppression, and how their oppression can be read together. In doing so they have opened up a philosophical discussion which encompasses a larger set of categorical Other(s):

> *In Western traditions of thought, the category of the feminine is constructed in opposition to that of masculinity, while the category of nature is constructed in opposition to that of culture; this opposition is a hierarchical one that not only dichotomizes the masculine and feminine but also ranks men above women and culture above nature.*
>
> *(Mathews, 2017:54)*

Articulating the discourse on the mutual domination of Nature and Women in all its complexity is not the point of this research and I will not dwell on it extensively, but for the sake of a comprehensive understanding as the paper proceed, I find it important to highlight some major elements that will contextualise further the reading. Ecofeminism should be viewed as

encompassing multiple, and quite diverse, theoretical perspectives; it is important to highlight some of the different articulations and the consequent tensions within this philosophical and political movement before further opening the discussion towards the multiplicity of oppressions grounded on Western philosophical dualism.

In order to understand the mutually reinforcing domination of Nature and Women, it is possible to find extensive references in the work carried out by Warren (1996), who has done a cartographical work to highlight the different conceptual links between women and Nature. According to Warren (1996:x) there are multiple ecofeminism(s) (just as there are multiple feminisms) which have conceptualised the relationship between the domination of women and the domination of Nature differently: for example focusing on cultural and scientific changes that have historically reinforced the exploitation of Nature and the subordination of Women; or locating the domination in conceptual structures of Western tradition such as dualisms (which clearly represents the articulation of critique where this paper is situated); or by highlighting through empirical work the unequal impact in which climate change affects women in more precarious situations than men. Another reason why there are multiple articulations of these dominations of Women and Nature, comes from the existence of multiple conceptualisations of "Woman" as a social and political category: multiple historically situated conceptualisations of "Woman". Historically, there are major theoretical and political differences between first-wave "liberal" feminists who fought for equal opportunities on the grounds that women should be allowed to develop as full human and to distance themselves from a natural state of subordination following the trajectory of men's emancipation (Mathews, 2017); and second-wave feminists, some of whom welcomed the association with Nature as an essentialist embodiment not to be disregarded but embraced and reclaimed (Griffin, 1978; Irigaray, 1985) to distance oneself from male disembodied trajectories of individual and social development. As stated by Mathews (2017:57) this Gynocentric feminist however "*had no more dismantled the underlying ideology of subordination – dualism – than liberal feminist had*".

This brief overview wants to materialise the tensions and multiple positions which exist within ecofeminism, particularly in regard to what I consider the problematic arguing point – that has been and still is at times used – to claim the existence of a preferential essentialist relationship between Women and Nature. This will not be the arguing point of this research as I do not want to bestow upon women the responsibility of being actors of change whilst further relegating them to a traditional role of care-givers. This research will however position itself as

ecofeminist, but from the perspective of a shared accountability and of a multiplicity of interconnected oppressions, to articulate the complexity of this ontological system of thought and its domination on a series of Other(ed) categories.

Returning to *the categorical opposition discussed* by Mathews and delving deeper into the discussion on how dualism creates categories and construct their relationality, I believe it useful to now discuss what Mathews defines the "*dilemma of dualism*" (2017:54): how dualisms influence the organisation of thought in Western philosophy. This will allow me to situate the process of ontological differentiation between Subject(s) and Other(s) within this specific system of thought, and to better deconstruct the Man/Woman, Human/Nature, Culture/Nature, […] dualisms. Major in ecofeminist research have been the attempts to investigate how dualist mechanisms of distinction between Subject(s) and Other(s) work, for the purpose of denouncing some of modern most dehumanising appropriation of human Other(s) or natural Other(s) (Warren, 1994, 1996; Plumwood, 1993; Merchant, 1980,1990; Code, 2006; Gaard, 1997).

Arguing that oppression finds grounds in this dualist ontological paradigm, they have investigated its articulation and philosophical grounding, underlying that dualism does not only distinguish two ontologically different elements or categories, on the grounds of a constructed and instrumental *difference*, but also position them in a hierarchical relation thus legitimising appropriation and oppression:

> *Ecofeminism has been developed in response to the ways in which 'woman', other subordinated groups (e.g. the aged, differently abled, ethnic minorities) and 'nature' are conceptually linked in Western thought, such that processes of inferiorization have been mutually reinforcing.*
>
> *(Phillips, 2016:469)*

2.3 A complex system of oppressions

Ecofeminists have criticized Western philosophy for having justified - and structured - a system of appropriation not only of Women and Nature, but also of a series of individuals differing from the "*identity of the master*" (Plumwood, 2003:42) and marked by differing gender, sexuality, race, class, (dis)ability, etc. According to Warren (1994) and fundamental to ecofeminist philosophy, sexism, racism, classism, speciesism and androcentrism are systems

of oppression which mutually reinforce each other and lead to the degradation of life and the destruction of nature:

> *What makes ecological feminism multicultural is that it includes in its analysis of women nature connections the inextricable interconnections among all social systems of domination, for instance, racism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, colonialism, as well as sexism.*
>
> *(Warren 1994:2)*

Ecofeminism is indeed grounded on the idea that multiple systems of oppression reinforce themselves, as Western culture has constructed a system of thought with which *difference* has been naturalised.

As Haraway stresses (1991) the creation of "*difference*", manifested in the division (or in the boundaries) between distinct ontological categories, "*plagues 'Western' knowledge: it is the patriarchal voice in the production of discourse that can name only by subordinating within legitimate lineages*" (80). By deconstructing the ontological space where difference is created, Haraway has tried to render visible the prescriptive ontological, epistemological, and political power over "*those inhabiting 'natural' categories or living at the mediating boundaries of the binarism(s)*" (134). According to Haraway, binarism(s), dualisms, are systemic to Western logic of domination of women, people of colour, environment, animals, and every-body who is "constituted" as Other (135). The logic of Western dualism which I tackle here with the support of Haraway is a space of political power relations: the articulation of the dualist relationship between the Self and the Other, which materialises in the division between Nature and Culture, too.

Together with Haraway I want to underline that *difference* is not ahistorical; it is grounded in logics of power and social domination. Haraway suggests that humans need to construct a new theory of 'difference' whose "*geometries, paradigms, and logics break out of binaries, dialectics, and nature/culture models of any kind*" (Haraway, 1991:129), to build a "*relationship that will realize [...] the unity of humankind with Nature and will try to understand its working from the inside*" (Haraway, 1991:80).

As stated by Scott (1999) difference is built through relationality; but difference itself is built and transformed into a fundamental characteristic intrinsic to the individual or the group itself. When difference itself is conceptualised and reified, it becomes a standardised norm. Agreeing with Young (2004) that oppression refers to the injustice and disadvantages that people suffer not because of tyrannical societies, but because of "*everyday practices of a well-intended society [...] embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols*" (Young, 2004:41) that discriminately affect groups, I find the logic of differentiation funded in dualism particularly important to analyse, in that its ontologically and politically consequences are of materialising ontological Other(s) and relegating them in inferior positions to the referent Subject. The mechanism of differentiation on which these oppression and domination systems are based upon is grounded on power relationships in which dominant values, social categories and subjects, are then institutionalised and naturalised on the grounds of difference and exclusion:

> *[...] difference, in other words, will be re-worked as dichotomy, and the second group will end up playing nature to the first group's master identity.*

> *(Mathews, 2017: 57-59)*

Not only these dominant hierarchical systems of values create and relegate a series of social Other(s) in relation to a master subject, but they also contribute in reifying and guaranteeing their continued existence through the interiorization within the inferiorised social Other(s) of the hegemonic cultural systems – defined by Young (2004:60) through the concept of "*double consciousness*". Their hegemony has created deep structures in culture which ensure the continuation and expansion of oppression:

> *But once the process of domination forms culture and constructs identity, the inferiorised group (unless it can marshall cultural resources for resistance) must internalise this inferiorisation in its identity and collude in this low valuation, honouring the values of the centre, which form the dominant social values"*

> *(Plumwood, 1993:48)*

This clearly raises the question, which I would argue is political, as its manifested consequences are in the order of political legitimisation of the inferiorised Other(s), of how to tackle this system of ontological domination of thought and to question the standardized norm.

This question is here left on hold; it will be further discussed when approaching the dualism of Invulnerability/Vulnerability in the next section, where an analysis of current conceptualisation(s) on vulnerability will show how they have coincided with different attempts to dismantle ontological dualism. The chapter will illustrate how, in the field of vulnerability studies, the breakout from dualism has been attempted by either (1) prolonging vulnerability on the ideal subject(s), arguing for a universalisation of ontological vulnerability and the unreality of invulnerability; or (2) by trying to embrace vulnerability as a potential force.

2.4   Ecofeminist considerations on the Human/Nature dualism

Plumwood (2003) offers an important theoretical insight into the functioning of dualisms for the con-structuring of reality, and the appropriation of Nature specifically, through her analysis of the Human/Nature dualisms; an important theoretical ground for ecofeminists to understand how multiple forms of oppressions are correlated, to the detriment of Other(s). As stated by Plumwood, these dualisms pervade Western philosophy and, since they have not existed in an ahistorical vacuum but are situated in time and geographically, their evolution can be traced from ancient Greece to modern times. It is important to underline that the framework of discussion – when highlighting the geographical situatedness of the research – is Western philosophy. By discussing the relation Human/Nature, what is being discussed is a very specific relationality constructed, just as the terms in the dyad are themselves constructed. Neither Nature nor Human exist as a-priori entities, they are not universal, and they are not discovered but rather constructed within multiple philosophical frameworks (Haraway, 1991). The framework of this research will be that of Western Philosophy, and it will be my priority to constantly reiterate the framework of analysis, for the sake of a situated discussion from a perspective which, as an author, I inhabit and I can talk about with the necessary accountability.

Plumwood identifies a series of dualisms which are useful to understand the complex net in which the hegemony of exclusion operates, constituting Subject(s) and Other(s) in Western dualist philosophy:

culture/nature
reason/nature

male/female

mind/body (nature)

master/slave

reason/matter (physicality)

rationality/animality (nature)

reason/emotion (nature)

mind, spirit/nature

freedom/necessity (nature)

universal/particular

human/nature (nonhuman)

civilized/primitive (nature)

production/reproduction (nature)

public/private

subject/object

self/other

(Plumwood 1993:43)

Although Plumwood underlines that the list is not complete, and leaves it open to further additions, I believe it provides extensive support on my discussion of oppression as constructed by Western philosophy, in that it visually and conceptually identifies the axes of creation of dominant Subject(s) and of devalued Other(s). To this list of dualisms, further associations can be added when further relations of Subject/Other are identified through emerging awareness on different axes of oppression: today we could for example add the dualisms of heterosexual/queer and reason/erotic (Sedgwick, 1990), as dualisms in which the domination of a master embodiment of sexuality (heterosexual) is at play, to the detriment of differing Other(ed) sexualities.

The categories on the left represent the foundations of the Western dominant Subject – the referent in the attribution of value: HE embodies culture and reason; HE is male and anchored in HIS mind (not in his body); HE is a master to Other(s) and is endowed with reason and rationality in the making of decisions; HE is free from spiritual beliefs and HE embodies civilisation; HE is Human and untouched by Nature; HE is universal; HE is the actor of public space, where HE creates and accumulates resources; (and HE is definitely white).

The mechanics of this system, using Gaard's (1997) words, work on two levels: (1) *vertical* - by creating linkages between the devalued categories on the right to reinforce their subordination on multiple grounds, (2) *horizontally* - by reinforcing the category of the Subject through difference from the Other(s). Based on difference and exclusion, the Subject ontologically defines himself by subordinating and highlighting the difference between himself and the Other(s). According to Plumwood (1993), the horizontal linking between the categories functions by: (1) *backgrounding*, as the master relies on the services of the Other but denies dependency; (2) *radical exclusion*, as the master amplifies the differences between Subject and Other(s); (3) *incorporation*, as the master's qualities become the ideal standard; (4) *instrumentalization*, as the Other(s) exist only to serve the master; (5) *homogenisation*, as Other(s) are perceived as homogenous and not bearing any specificities.

From Plumwood's series of dualisms it is possible to acknowledge the presence of Nature as subjugated category on the right of multiple dyads. Additionally, where Nature has not been indicated directly, it still appears by virtue of a traditionally Western association of the terms on the right of the dyad with Nature.

culture/nature

reason/nature

mind/body (*nature*)

rationality/animality (*nature*)

reason/emotion (*nature*)

mind, spirit/nature

freedom/necessity (*nature*)

human/nature

civilized/primitive (*nature*)

production/reproduction (*nature*)

Following Plumwood's discussion on how the system of dualisms works, it is possible to ground Nature's conceptualisation in Western culture as follows: (1) Nature is conceived as a resource at the service of the human subject, to which the latter does not acknowledge its dependency; (2) Nature is not human, it is ontological different; (3) Everything that is human is valued higher than anything being, or being associated with, Nature; (4) Nature is a resource

that exists not in itself but only to serve humans; (5) Nature is a monolithic entity denied its specificity.

> *Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature have, nevertheless, if they are not rational beings, only a relative value as means and are therefore called things. On the other hand, rational beings are called persons, inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves i.e. as something which is not to be used merely as means and hence there is imposed a limit on all arbitrary use of such beings, which are thus objects of respect.*

> *(Kant 1981:35–6)*

In Western's philosophy, Nature has been conceived as an external resource open to human's use and exploitation, and multiple dominations are often justified on the grounds of Other(s) being closer to nature and therefore delegitimised as subjects or citizens (Plumwood, 1993). As stated by Plumwood (69): "*nature in the West is instrumentalised as a mere means to human ends via the application of a moral dualism that treats humans as the only proper objects of moral consideration and defines 'the rest' as part of the sphere of expediency*". Parallelly, Nature also appears as an instrument with which social norms are justified "*to the detriment of women, nature, queers, and persons of colour*" (Gaard, 1997:147) (I would also add poorer social classes, (dis)able individual…). In Western society, Nature is conquered and mastered over (Code, 2006), and appreciated only as an externality to many systems of economic production. It is the setting in which human's action takes place, but human's embeddedness into Nature is denied so that human's action happens onto Nature and not with/within Nature. This language of mastery is clearly grounded in a dualistic and value-permeated logic of a system which reinforces the differentiation between the two elements of a duality Human/Nature, for the benefit of the first and the damage of the second.

Haraway has argued at length, from the "*belly of the monster*[3]" (Haraway, 1992: 298), that discourses of sciences have deeply contributed in inventing and re-inventing Nature throughout their history. What Haraway has underlined, which is important for understanding Nature, it

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[3] In "*The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others*" (Routledge, 1992), Donna Haraway defines "the belly of the monster" as the local/global geographical and time-situated space of post-modern, post-industrial society from which she, and everyone, are reading and writing. In this society of "terminal industrialism" (marked by death) global technology is remaking the world in the image of commodity production. The act of "remaking the world" is indicative of the artifactuality of discourses on Nature. Nature is not pre-discursive; it does not exist prior to its conceptualization.

that: *"Biology has intrinsically been a branch of political discourse, not a compendium of objective truth"* (Haraway, 1991:98). In extracting the genealogies of the artefactual versions of reality which have been handed down, as if universal objective truths, in the history of these disciplinary fields, Haraway has tracked down and followed the biases, re-constructions, artefacts; how they have mutually reinforced each other across multiple disciplinary fields, further establishing and making invisible the ontological Western constructions of Nature/Culture and a series of other *"troubling dualisms"* (Haraway, 1991:177).

Sciences have successfully created, integrated and vehiculated dualistic versions of reality, which have been naturalised as the only possible. An account of reality constructed by a limited amount of presumed objective experts, mutually influencing, and passing onto each other a series of tools and images with which to "observe" reality whilst also creating it through an arbitrary hierarchical difference, which differentiates how mutually excluding humans conceptualise themselves by difference to Nature (Haraway, 1991). According to Plumwood this has created an alienated account of what it means to be humans as:

> *"outside of nature, having no true home in it or allegiance to it. They stand apart from it as masters or external controllers of nature. […] But human/nature dualism is the reason why we have to be reminded of this apparently obvious truth. The key to existential homelessness and to our denial of our dependence on nature is the dualistic treatment of the human/ nature relationship"*
>
> *(Plumwood, 1993:71)*

This overview of the major critiques moved to Western dualism by ecofeminist scholars is necessary to ground the critiques that I will move to the conceptualisation(s) of vulnerability within the dualist Invulnerability/Vulnerability that will be developed in the following two chapter: focusing on the vulnerability of Humans in Chapter 3, and of Nature in the fourth and final chapter.

3. Conceptualisation(s) of vulnerability

3.1 An introduction to vulnerability

The language of vulnerability is flourishing in the context of Western contemporary society; its discursive and material manifestations fuelled by sentiments of an unsettled present affected by global political and economic crisis, threats to individual and national safety, as well as urgent ecological alarms on the degradation of the environment. Vulnerability as will be discussed in this chapter will mostly refer to the vulnerability of humans, for it has a lengthy anthropological history which has focused on understanding how humans inhabit this earth and how they deal (within different societies) with the very conditions of being human: relationality, death, etc.

In this unsettled present, I find it of particular importance to discuss the current concept of vulnerability for the purpose of understanding how vulnerable subjects and groups are constituted as such. I agree with Koivunene, Kyrölä and Ryberg (2018:5) that mobilising vulnerability also means being critical to the ways in which "*this notion of the individual subject has implicitly been male, white, Eurocentric, cis-gendered and able-bodied, allowing 'vulnerable groups' to almost automatically signify those diverging from it*". According to Cole (2016:262), vulnerability studies specifically target "invulnerability", a masculine ideal which denies its weaknesses and dependence, labelling them as undesirable conditions. This "*myth of the liberal subject*" defined by Fineman (2008:19) connects this paper back to the ideal subject discussed as the referential parameter in the dualistic system of categorisation, deconstructed in the first part of the paper. From this realisation and in response to Plumwood's invitation to extend her list of ontological principles funding Western philosophy (as discussed in the previous chapter), I will add the dualism Invulnerability/Vulnerability to the list. I will argue that through the analysis of this dyad it might be possible to shed additional light on how Western dualism system works as it appears to permeate most discussions on vulnerability; and in turn by taking into account the functioning of dualism it might be possible to provide additional insight on how vulnerability is conceptualised. This will also make it possible to further push the boundaries of current conceptualisations for the sake of a renewed relationality between Human/Nature.

By undercovering the anthropocentric principle hidden in dualist ontology, on which vulnerability too is built, I will open a discussion on how this dualist system can be broken, breached, its mechanisms of hierarchisation uncovered.

Proceeding through this section it will become more evident how the language of vulnerability, spanning from around 1980s to present time, has been generated by a multiplicity of disciplines and perspectives which offer quite diverse discussions and multiple strands of reflection on vulnerability. In my attempt to design a critical overview of positions and conceptualisation, which does not aim to nor claim exhaustivity, but which will focus on those most useful for the proceeding of this paper, I will touch on multiple disciplines and provide a reflective reconstruction.

Through the discussion on ontological dualism and its hierarchical functioning, in the first section of this paper, it has been highlighted how categories are generated and marked through *difference* from an unmarked subject and how this ontological tool permeates Western liberal philosophy. Ecofeminist critique, and feminist critic more inclusively, have attempted not only to denounce how oppression and hierarchy on social categories marked by gender, race, sexuality, class, (dis)ability, and others, structurally constitute and position individuals and groups, but also to investigate ways to escape it. I believe that studies on vulnerability with consideration to the functioning of dualism, can help identify ways in which multiple current conceptualisations of vulnerability, rather than escaping dualism, are currently rather reinforcing it.

3.2 (Human) vulnerability between universalisation and situatedness

A first consideration in approaching vulnerability studies is that vulnerability appears to have been conceptualised in two major ways: the first is to understand vulnerability (1) as an ontological condition of life, which finds its derivation in the very Latin word *vulnus* (wound), therefore stressing the potentiality to suffer and to be harmed of humans, whilst the second suggests (2) a more situated understanding of vulnerability that makes visible the mechanisms and circumstances that create and affect individuals in unequal ways, thus making some more vulnerable than others, or "*more-than-ordinarily vulnerable*" (Sellman, 2005). This first consideration highlights how vulnerability has mostly been thought and discussed with regards to human's "*susceptibility to external harms posed by our biophysical or social environment*" (Li, 2017:437), thus focusing mostly on the threats to humans by the "*external*" environment, rather than those inflicted by humans onto it.

Before approaching the discussion on the reconceptualization of the vulnerability, I will provide an overview of how (human) vulnerability studies are reinforcing a system of ontological dualisms and thus posing limits to a more transformative discussion (as the vulnerability of the Other(s), conceptualised in contrast to the invulnerability of the Self, operates only by minimising this unwanted vulnerable state).

Studies on vulnerability as an ontological condition, focus on the inheritance of vulnerability as a fundamental shared condition. This conceptualisation has mostly been employed to anchor social responsibility onto moral obligations, calling for an ethics of support towards vulnerable Others. Moral theorist Goodin (1985) argues for the existence of moral grounds on which individuals hold responsibilities to protect the interests of vulnerable and dependent Others, thus grounding social solidarity in individual moral responsibility: "*the principle of protecting the vulnerable is first and foremost an argument for aiding those in dire need*" (1985:111). His theorisation of vulnerability stresses that individuals are in relations of dependency within a context of social life; but arguing that vulnerable individuals should be supported, implies the theorisation of the existence of individuals or a groups (or even governments) acting from a state of invulnerability or privileged independency, offering care and support to less "fortunate". Nussbaum (1986) stresses that individual's *goodness*, and what is good in human life, is made possible only through a recognition of its essential vulnerability, therefore suggesting that human's vulnerability to external harm is inevitable to the embodied human condition. The universal vulnerability of humans calls for a moral responsibility:

> *As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and rights abuses. And we are vulnerable to the natural environment and to the impact on the environment of our own, individual and collective, actions and technologies.*
>
> *(Mackenzie, Rogers, Dodds, 2014:1)*

Legal theorist Fineman also proposes a concept of vulnerability as a universally shared, but unequally distributed condition, therefore calling for the moral responsibility of legal and

political justice systems to address social and economic disparities shared by different groups in society, which are differently affected by vulnerability:

> *I want to claim the term "vulnerable" for its potential in describing universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition that must be at the heart of our concept of social and state responsibility.*
>
> *(Fineman, 2008:8)*

In introducing her "*vulnerable subject*" (2), as a subject to which social and political intervention should be addressed, she calls for politics, ethics and law, to meet the real-life needs of individuals, thus moving from a formal equality to a substantial equality of rights and dignity. Through her work she joins the critique to the myth of the liberal individual who independently, autonomously, rationally and self-sufficiently lives HIS life (the so-called "liberal man"): "*self-interested individuals with the capacity to manipulate and manage their independently acquired [...] resources*" (10).

Consideration on ontological vulnerability have also been built around the conceptualisation of vulnerability as a condition rooted in the embodiment of humans. Turner (2006) stresses the propensity of embodied humans to be affected by disease and sickness and death, which are inevitable, as "*aging bodies are subject to impairment and disability*" (2006:29). Butler (2004) has argued for the precarity of human life due to the human body's dependency and vulnerability to external factors. She has theorised the universal precarity of human lives as grounds for sparking an ethical obligation towards treating human beings as equal. She argues that humans share a common vulnerability, that comes from life itself, from human beings being "*laid bare from the start*" (Butler, 2004:23) adding that "*loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.*" (Butler, 2004:20).

The conceptualisation of vulnerability (and invulnerability), reviewed recently by Butler, as '*politically produced, unequally distributed through and by different operations of power*' (Butler et al., 2016: 5) offers us an entrance into the second position with regards to the concept of vulnerability.

Multiple researchers have suggested caution with the conceptualisation of a universal ontological vulnerability: "*What happens to structures of privilege and marginalisation if vulnerability is understood as a universal condition of all (human) life?*" (Koivunene, Kyrölä and Ryberg, 2018:2). Against the dangers of connotating vulnerability as simply inherent to human life, a more situated understanding of vulnerability appears useful to make visible the mechanisms that create and affect individuals in unequal ways. In the field of care studies, feminist scholars have also focused on the dangers of connotating individuals as vulnerable, for its risk of leading to the discrimination of groups and individuals and to paternalistic responses, arguing for a more situated understanding of vulnerability as the manifestation of power inequalities between individuals. In this sense, vulnerability becomes a politically produced condition, embedded in social relationship, with differing historical impacts on different historical social categories, and which determines not only excluded, marginal, Other(ed) subjects, but also inappropriate(d) others[4] (Trinh Minh, 1986/7). Through this perspective, vulnerability rather than an ontological universal condition, becomes a constructed manifestation of political power onto which agency and negotiation is applicable, and through which individuals and groups can be held accountable; vulnerability becomes a tool through which is possible to criticise the political notion of the "*individual subject (...) constructed as male, white, Eurocentric, cis-gendered, and able-bodies, allowing for "vulnerable groups" to almost automatically signify those diverging from it*" (Koivunen, Kyrölä, Ryberg 2018:5). This conceptualisation of vulnerability highlights tensions which are not universal, but rather played between a multiplicity of individuals and groups placed in multiple dualist dyads: hierarchically situated in multiple positions of a system of multiple oppressions. Erinn Gilson (2016) argues that vulnerability has a special heuristic value as it can be used to manifest the complexities, tensions, as well as the ways in which gender, sexuality and power interlace in contemporary society. This second understanding of vulnerability underlines "*the ways that inequalities of power, dependency, capacity, or need render some agents vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others*" (Rogers, Mackenzie, Dodds 2014:6), thus making considerations on vulnerability more the results of a specific process of creation of social categories and mutual exclusions, grounding vulnerability as a result of social processes which invites an investigation on differing levels of experienced vulnerability. In this conceptualisation, vulnerability rather than

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[4] Those who are not considered appropriate by the social norm; those who transgress existing categories and for whom existing categories are not representative; those who are not yet represented by the language: thus invisible. Those who are more easily appropriated under the regime of social normative policing, whilst living in the margins; those who more likely suffer from oppression. For extensive discussion: - Trinh T. Minh-ha (1986/7). She, The Inappropriated Other, in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Post-coloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

being a universal shared condition embedded in humanity, becomes a tool for political mobilisation: "*recognition wields the power to reconstitute vulnerability*" (Butler, 2004:43).

3.3   Considerations on (human) vulnerability

The first position has highlighted the universality of vulnerability, making it a shared condition of all Subject(s) and Other(s): this conceptualisation manifests an attempt to escape the normative dyad of ontological constitution of subjects, by extending a condition attributed to the vulnerable-constituted Other(s) on the "<u>right side</u>" of the dyad (*Human*/<u>Nature</u>; *Man*/<u>Woman</u>; *Heterosexual*/<u>Queer</u>), to the invulnerable unmarked subject on the "*left side*". This attempt to conceptualise vulnerability as a shared condition aims to reduce the undesirability of vulnerability, in relation to the hegemonic view of invulnerability which acknowledges its achievability. However, by extending vulnerability as universal condition, it does not undermine the existence of differently constituted Subject(s) and Other(s), nor it tackles the ontological categories which are thus created and put in relationality. If invulnerability is achievable, then how come some are more vulnerable than others? (Cole, 2016).

The second position underlines the role of power, institutions and socially constituted norms in the construction of vulnerability attributed to Other(s), calling into analysis constitutive power and making visible the tensions between individuals and groups. Within this conceptualisation, aware of tensions but also in the attempt to revaluate the agency of the inferiorised Other(s), I would situate what Robyn Wiegman (2014:7) has defined the "*reparative turn*": the attempt to rehabilitate and re-evaluate Other(ed) individuals and groups on the grounds that the characteristics associated with them are preferable and more representative of the complexity of human social interactions, than those represented by the ideal of an unmarked subjects: does HE actually exist? This position too, I argue, presents limits with regards to the how bodies are ontologically constituted, inasmuch as by embracing "*the potential of vulnerability*" (Murphy, 2013:86) the risk of losing sight of the material oppression to vulnerable-constituted bodies comes into sight. Using Butler's (2016: 25) words, I agree that '*vulnerability cannot be the basis of group identification without strengthening paternalistic power*'.

Why this reflection on power when discussing the ontological constitution of bodies? I argue that without highlighting the power mechanisms with which Other(ed) bodies are constituted as vulnerable, and without awareness to the systems of oppression which they enact, there

cannot be a critical reflection on Western system of dualist thinking aimed at transforming the relationality between Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability. Reflecting on the categories which dualism creates necessitates a broader reflection on which systems and tools create them and are vehiculated by them. I agree with Cole (2016:273) that "*vulnerability has to be reframed as a claim about injustice*" to make it a useful heuristic and make visible power mechanisms. As Matthews (2018:55) argues: "*The hold of dualism on the Western imagination had proved resistant to argument and hence correction because it served a political purpose and was held in place by powerful political interests. The political purpose it served was to naturalize and legitimate male domination or, in the lexicon of 1980s feminism, patriarchy*".

Conceptualising vulnerability as either (1) universal, or (2) situated, I argue, does not allow Western bodies to escape the constitutive and power-embedded dualist constitution of reality. I believe it is necessary to challenge the ground of Western ontological cuts, rather than just attempting at diminishing the situated vulnerabilities (which however do exist and do affect the lives of all Other(ed)). I will not deny the existence of conditions of situated vulnerabilities and I will not call for a lack of intervention to give relief and support to vulnerable Other(s), as they are the results of the current Western social framework which needs to be accountable and provide support in the immediateness; but I will claim that vulnerability need to be reconceptualised to become a tool of social transformation, and not only of intervention. Vulnerability must be recognised as a product of a system based on specific conceptualisations of Human and of Nature, and on specific relationalities and exclusions. In the following chapter I will try to trouble the dualistic cut of Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability, to recognise the complexity and fictionality of both categories, with the aim of providing a more – I believe – realistic account of reality that does not need to reinforce differences to guarantee its existence, but that will rather have to find a new way to conceptualise it and to transform relationalities in continuity.

4. The vulnerability of Nature

4.1 Reconceptualising Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability

The discussion on the vulnerability of the environment is growing in urgency. As I write multiple social movements in Europe are taking the streets claiming that the planet is in danger, calling for Government's accountability and urging policy change to guarantee future generations the possibility to prosper. Given the social momentum, I will start the discussion on Nature's vulnerability here: in the claims of these movements, by underlying two initial elements which I would like to consider: the first is (1) to reflect on what it means to demand Governments to take action to limit the impact of human economic activity on Nature; the second is (2) to consider what the increased awareness on the impacts of human actions on Nature actually means for human beings, and specifically for whom. Demanding accountability to governments and calling for their actions to "save the planet" effectively reinforces the image of Nature as an affected and dependent Other, that humans needs to be responsibility for, and to protect from further damage (from its own vulnerability to human's actions); whilst fear for human and earthly survival is indicating a growing awareness that Nature is finite and cannot be exploited without regards, as neo-liberal economy has so far claimed - hence the risk to consciously terminate all lives on earth, including human lives. I would like to caution against the risks, hidden in these claims, of further reinforcing humanist exceptionalism: (1) viewing Nature as a victim to humans' actions that need to be protected posits it as an inferior to humans (2) setting as the ultimate goal the survival and well-being of humans maintains humanist anthropocentrism (3) connotating humans as a sort of endangered species risks making humans' survival paramount against the survival of other living beings, whilst opening up to risks of dystopian employment of technologies to create enhanced humans[5] and falling in delusions of (anthropo)grandeur (Ferrando, 2013) (4) reinforcing the idea that humans are the only ones who can find effective solutions to guarantee the survival of earth.

Looking for new solutions first requires understanding the context in which the categories of Human/Nature, Invulnerability/Vulnerability are situated within this reflection: the context of

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[5] This referrers to the philosophical movement known as *Transhumanism*, which focuses on the possibility of reconceptualizing and enhancing humans through science and technology. This movement is funded on the principle of perpetual growth and development of the human species; it maintains a very strong principle of human exceptionalism over all other living beings. For extensive discussion:

- Ferrando, Francesca (2013). Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms Differences and Relations, in *An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts*, Vol.8(2), pp. 26-32

contemporary Western technological advanced capitalism, with its logic of ever progressing commodification[6] and consumption of bodies (Human and Non/human), and with its discursive and material practices, which linguistically and conceptually constitute and limit this discussion. Attempting at transforming dualist relationality in continuity and to counter the risks that this system of production/consumption of bodies currently represents for earthly survival, requires a step back, rather than a step into, technological – for how it is currently conceived in Humanist terms – delirium. I believe that the idea that technology can provide the solution to current threats, without a radical reconceptualization of what it means to be human and to inhabit this earth within the present socio-economic-political system, is doomed to fail – as it has so far done. I will borrow Ursula Le Guin's invitation (1989:6): "*In order to speculate safely on an inhabitable future, perhaps we would do well to find a rock crevice and go backward […] With all our self-consciousness, we have very little sense of where we live, where we are right now… if we did – if we really lived here, now, in this present – we might have some sense of our future as a people*". Speculating safely – as currently possible within the urgency and anxiety of survival – is necessary. However, rather than to find answers that Western philosophy does not yet allow, blinded by its current discursive constraints (which only allow to see and materialise a limited realm of possibilities) I believe it is necessary to look back into current categories, modes, practices of living and of ontologically and epistemologically understanding Humanity and Nature before moving forward.

Staying within the contested and generative dyads of Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability, I suggest beginning by looking into them in terms of continuity. Supported by feminist authors which have cautioned against connotating vulnerable subjects as passive victims lacking agency, I would caution not to connotate Nature as a vulnerable object to human action, in order not to risk falling again in a mechanism of paternalistic intervention from the height of human's "superior" agency. Rather, I would suggest looking into this category, as well as that of human, and understanding how they are currently conceptualised in dualistic relation to one another and to view whether their current relations is representative of their complexity.

The hyper-separation that currently connotates Human/Nature living beings in the presumed Invulnerability/Vulnerability relationality, within a dualistic framework, renders difficult the

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[6] The term *commodification* refers to the process, typical of capitalist economy, of transformation of objects, ideas and people into goods that have an economic value and can be traded.

conceptualisation of another possible relationality. I would argue that the ground for this new relationality can be found not quite in the dismantlement of *difference* per se, but rather in the transformation of difference as a non-hierarchical, non-justificatory (for appropriation), non-instrumental marker. The relation between the traditional elements of a dyad is to be rethought not in a frame of exclusion, but rather in one of continuity. In order to bring forward the discussion, I will attempt at troubling the two categories of Human and Nature and I will situate vulnerability in continuity between the two.

4.2 Reconceptualising the Human: the shift towards Posthuman partiality and interconnectedness

Within a context of power structuring social relations, no-body is innocent. By innocence I refer to the impossibility of any-body to be universal, to look at phenomena from a vantage point of externality. There is not a blueprint, apart from a pretended one, for what human existence should look like. In this discussion, I will get support from Donna Haraway's conceptualisation of "situated knowledges" (1988) to discuss the importance of acknowledging the partiality of experience, which she argues is the basis for the epistemology of scientific research: to dismantle the ideal of a monolithic, solid, individual, and disconnected human subject. Secondly, I will try to further open up the Western human subject with support of Posthuman critical theorist Rosi Braidotti.

According to Haraway (1991), bodies are marked by very specific socio-historical conditions of observation and embodiment: for example, "*gender is an unavoidable condition of observation. So are class, race and nation*" (106). When Haraway argues that these conditions of observation are historical, what she underlines is that none of them exist prior to being conceptualized, prior to a framework which socially constructs their discursive and material meanings, as well as relations; gender, class, race, nation, nature are constructed, they do not exist as an essential given. Being constructed however does not make their impacts and the social relations they generate any less real.

Referring specifically to the role of the researcher in science (but I would argue it could be extended to any-body which reflects about and within a social environment) Haraway argued that subjects should always reflect, deconstruct, criticize, their location with an understanding of objectivity of knowledge produced on reality as "*a particular and specific embodiment and definitely not […] a false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibilities. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision*" (Haraway, 1991:190). In

this regard, what objectivity is <u>not</u> is a view from nowhere; in contrast to a view grounded in a body with its complexities and contradictions (Haraway, 1991:195), and in connection with everything that surrounds it. There is therefore not one universal way to be human, as human is a localised concept embodied differently at different times and in different geographies. What Haraway does, that I believe is fundamental to trouble the ideal human subject, is to open it up to its own hybridity, contradiction, dependency and accountability. Understanding that bodies are constructed, never given, not quite vulnerable as such, but rather open, further entangles them (with)in Nature. Hybridity of bodies refers to the fact that bodies are constituted discursively, but also materially: they are crafted and natural, social and material. With her iconic figure of the cyborg (1985), and with a new politics funded on the cyborg's hybridity, Haraway has underlined how bodies are inevitably contaminated and permeable. The cyborg is comfortable with transgressing boundaries, it is aware of its fictionality; ultimately aware of its own non-innocence in regard to what it conceives, touches, creates, and relates with. The cyborg is an organic and machine-like creature, which recognises its discursive and material constitution, but escapes the domination of either. It is aware of the non-innocence of psychoanalytic tales of consciousness development; it escapes the dogma of the language of the unconscious, structured by non-innocent discourses; it is aware of society's tales and how they materialise bodily constraints whilst attempting at creating "natural" hierarchies on the grounds of fictional differences grounded in the darkness of an unconscious accessible only to a few experts – objective in their vision from nowhere, observers unaware of their power of constructing reality (Haraway, 1985, 1988). The cyborg's body is a post-dualist body in that it recognises its own hybrid constitution as organic and machine, cultural and natural. Haraway argues, echoing Latour's "*we have never been modern*" (1993): "*we have never been human*" (2008) and by echoing both I would argue that it is necessary to rethink that it actually means to *differentiate* the human from its surrounding environment.

As Bowden (2019:136) affirms, major society problems the West faces today – with a specific reference to ecological crisis and the potential end to life as Humans have so far understood and experienced it – demand not only new solutions, but rather that Humans themselves transform in new ways. Transformation in terms of morphosis is not quite what I would envision for the future of living beings, but I do believe in a transformation of what it means to occupy space in the world as a human beings (ultimately a living being), of what it means to be human (ultimately living). This transformation is not a morphosis in the sense that it does not demand for humans to enhance their material existence, but rather to make the existing

relationalities and mutual dependencies with the surrounding environment(s) or ecosystems emerge.

Posthuman critical theorist Rosi Braidotti (2016:16) underlines the importance of disidentifying with "*established patterns of thought [as] crucial for an ethics and politics of enquiry that demands respect for the complexities of the real-life world we are living in*". Braidotti theorizes the posthuman subject as a subject rid of Humanist exceptionality, but also refuses to reconceptualize it as a technological advanced transhuman, transcending its own bodily limitations. Creating a new posthuman subject, within a new materialist approach, means understanding the complex limitations of a humanism that has failed to recognize the "*environmental, socio-economic, and affective and psychic dimensions of our ecologies of belonging*" (Braidotti 2018:2, quoting Guattari, 2000).

The posthuman subject is enmeshed in a complex series of ecological interdependencies; this subject rests on "*an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth others'*" (Braidotti 2013:48). This ecological posthuman is a relational subject who does not need to resort to the dialectics of "Others": assigning hierarchical differences onto Others to reinforce itself. The posthuman represents a position to look at the world and at the self – an embodied, accountable, position immersed in a complex web of power and material relations on a multiplicity of levels: social, psychic, ecological, and cellular (Braidotti, 2013:102). "*The posthuman subject is nonunitary*" (McCullagh, 2019:143) it is not monolithic, and it is aware of its own partiality (to refer back to Haraway's invitation to trouble the subject human and recognise its own contradictions and dependencies).

> *I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable.*
>
> (Braidotti, 2018:49)

A political subject is needed, and as a queer ecofeminist who recognises the importance of fluidity, hybridity, adaptability, renegotiation as tools of resistance to normative social powers, and who believes in the need to create new imaginaries, I firmly believe that this "new" subject

cannot simply be anthropocentric. Shaping a new subject, or rather undercovering a hidden connected subject, allows to move towards building a new ethics that it is not only focused on what humans need, but rather jointly accountable for what a shared ecosphere made of a multiplicity of interdependent and mutually vulnerable/open living beings need (Williams, 2019: 107). Such ethics would be built on the accountability of former humans, with the recognition of the violent actions of appropriation of Human and Non/human Others which have taken place throughout history and which have built society and human life on the backs of Others (Williams, 2019).

4.3   Reconceptualising Nature

As argued throughout the paper, Nature cannot be prior to its conceptualizations. If Nature is not out there, and certainly not there to be conquered, discovered and possessed, then how are Humans in contact with it?

> *An emerging second wave argues that both the object of scientific research – nature – and scientific methods themselves are inevitably marked by their historical location.*
>
> *(Harding, 1992:496)*

If Nature too, and not just Humans, are marked by "*the social relations of a particular time and place*" (Hartsock 1992, 511), then this relation to time and place invites to view it as an actor or an agent, situated and active, not passive, nor something to be discovered, controlled and possessed. I share Haraway's aversion for the logic of discovery, which quite easily echoes (in the mind of a Western educated individual such as I) a series of counterfeited memories transmitted within a cultural archive about the great discovery journeys of the 15th century, truly manifesting Western pre-colonialism and self-celebration. To exit the dynamic of discovery, Haraway invites to move towards a "*social relation of 'conversation'*" (Haraway, 1991:198). Imagining being in contact with Nature through a conversation bares Humans of any presumed externality to Nature, because no conversation is done without reciprocal sharing or questioning (that is rather what I would ironically and wilfully call a *manologue).* In this way, both Humans and Nature become co-creators of knowledge.

But how to converse with(in) Nature? Imagining Nature as no longer out there, no longer a background or an object of analysis; no longer silent, no longer a site, but rather si(gh)ting (Haraway, 1992:295), is a very uncomfortable concept for (Western) Humans. This rethinking of agency and its extension to Nature runs counter to the norm, and any resistances to this conceptualisation highlight how deeply interiorised the idea of Nature as a passive, non-rational, non-agentic object, is:

> *He put earphones on his head and switched on the machine. He listened for a moment to the faint familiar humming sound; then he picked up the axe, took a stance with his legs wide apart and swung the axe as hard as he could at the base of the tree trunk. The blade cut deep into the wood and stuck there, and at the instant of impact he heard the most extraordinary noise in the earphones. It was a new noise, unlike any he had heard before – a harsh, noteless, enormous noise, a growling, low-pitched, screaming sound, not quick and short [...] but drawn out like a sob, lasting for fully a minute, loudest at the moment when the axe struck, fading gradually fainter and fainter until it was gone.*
>
> *(Roald Dahl, The sound machine, 1949:29)*

In Dahl's short story, the idea that a tree might hurt, and that it might growl at the swing of an axe, could be fairly uncomfortable. The idea that there might even be an intentionality in the tree breaking its branch (which almost hits the character in the head in a following passage of the novel), could even be laughable. But what is actually intentionality? I agree with Bowden (2019:131) that "*an agent's intention directs their action by setting the conditions that an agent must bring about in the world in order for their action to be deemed successful*". If supposing that the tree in Dahl's story intentionally broke its own branch might be caricatural, I believe it is not quite as parodical to acknowledge that non-humans are living matters, moving and acting within the scope of their abilities to meet successful outcomes, to guarantee their survival or follow a living desire.

There is a certain anxiety in the acknowledgement that not only human might have the exclusivity of agency. Extending agency to Non/human(s) allows to question human's exceptionality, for a more levelled intra-connection among earthly inhabitants (Barad, 2007). By contrast to inter-action, which presumes a clear cut between multiple independent beings,

intra-action materialises beings (Barad, 2007:142). Agency has thus far been associated with the pre-requisite of rational thought, a well rooted heritage of renaissance humanism. Rational thought has traditionally been associated with Humans, but with a series of exclusion of multiple Others: women, racialised people, non-humans, […] who did not quite reach the status of humanity, being denied it for a constructed association with "more natural" states. Depriving rationality its foundational role to human exceptionality, allows to reconsider what it means to be a living being – and to extend agency to non-humans.

The idea of Nature's agency is not new, particularly in STS (Science and Technology Studies). An important contribution comes from quantum physicist Karen Barad, whose work on the agency of non-humans can be introduced with her well-known quote: "*there is a sense in which the world kicks back*" (Barad, 2007:215). Barad underlines that not only Humans are moving, kicking, resisting, the rule of domination and appropriation. Nature is a co-constructor of life as Humans know it; it shapes, sights, shrugs. It is not a passive entity for Humans to abuse, but rather an (intra)acting agent. Non/human agency dismantles the supremacy of rational action, traditionally exclusively attributed to Humans (or rather to white/cis/hetero/able-bodied/(…) Men-Subject), and therefore dismantles Western philosophical grounding on strict dualistic structuring.

Going back to how Human and Nature converse, I believe Barad can support further opening up to an already existing relationality, much like Haraway does by situating individuals as dependent from a specific time and geographic setting, with her concept of intra-action (Barad, 2007). According to Barad, beings exist by virtue of being constituted by a multiplicity of intra-acting agents; they are not prior to an enactment and exist only through relationality: intra-actions co-produce Human and Non/human matter within the complexity of the constructions of time and space (180). Discussing the agency of non-humans, allows to overcome the illusion that Humans are independent, autonomous, sovereign, and to open up to the awareness that agency is enmeshed in multiple inseparable configurations and enactments, within multiple interacting systems (Bowden, 2019:136, quoting Schmidt, 2013). This relational ontology discussed by Barad is fundamental to move past ontological separateness of bodies, as beings come to matter by mutual intra-constitution. Barad beautifully highlights how matter, how living bodies, come to exist in intra-connection within the existing material-discursive boundaries, which ultimately determine the realm of possibility of existence for bodies.

4.4 Vulnerability as a material-discursive manifestation in continuity

As discussed in the previous chapter, research on the vulnerability of Humans has mostly been oriented around two major stances: the first is the stance that views human anthropologically vulnerable due to their very embodiment (therefore having a certain susceptibility to external threats, to the risk of pain, of disease and death); the second views vulnerability as a situated condition caused by the social positioning of individuals or groups in society, grounded in a power-based system of oppressions – as defined by Young (2004:40) as an "*inhibition to the ability to exercise a capacity and express needs, thoughts and feelings*". As already discussed, I believe that these positions on human vulnerability taken individually do not help breaking through a dualist understanding of reality, nor to trouble the categories of Human and Nature, of Invulnerable and Vulnerable; certainly not to reconceptualise the vulnerability of Nature. Troubling the categories of Human and Nature, as it has been done in the first part of this last chapter, supports reconsidering the relationality between them and critically weakens the dimension of "external threats" to the well-being of Humans, as well as the paternalistic view of Nature as a resource to protect for the well-being of future generations, or of other living beings. In a way also the dyad internal/external is being troubled. If Humans are part of Nature, and Nature is part of Humans, then I would suggest that within this continuity, vulnerability should be a manifestation of material connection; a shared condition located in a shared accountability.

Vulnerability, as a discursive concept, refers to a very specific understanding of the Self and of the world, and I find it therefore paramount to trouble it, for the sake of demonstrating that it may exist in a more realistic continuum between Human and Nature. Talking about vulnerability from a position of situatedness, but with the goal of structural transformation rather than of intervention to minimise, requires the understanding that as a concept, it is constructed politically; and contemporarily its own material existence need to be recognised as it manifests in an interconnectedness of beings. Situating vulnerability as a political and material concept, calls for a new materialist understanding of what it means to be vulnerable, as well as what it means to be a Subject: adopting a new materialist approach helps grounding subject(s) as agents made of vital matter (Braidotti, 2018) as well as discourse forces, occupying a certain geographical space at a certain time; being connected within a web of Human and Non/human relations, being open to the actions of the agents surrounding it. This materiality of existence allows to situate all agents in a web of interconnection, it acknowledges embodiment

and material constraints (without denying discursivity), it recognises that no universal mode of existence is primal and no one truth exist about reality.

I suggest looking at vulnerability from a framework of continuity and co-constitution of Human and Nature. I argue that neither Nature nor Humans exist without them being conceived and without acknowledging their deep material interconnection; to find new ways to develop this continuity, both categories have to be troubled, shaken, opened to one another. If Human and Nature are in a relation of continuity, then what meaning or what materiality does vulnerability take? I suggest that vulnerability should then be seen not as an externality, but rather as the material connection of openness which of course brings risks to the vitality of bodies or to their capacities. Deleuze and Guattari argue that Human/Non-human assemblages increase or diminish the capacities of action of beings which are parts of such assemblages (McGullagh, 2019). In this sense, vulnerability becomes the openness to the possibility of being impacted by beings (both in a positive enhancing or in negative undermining way) which are part of such assemblages, or ecosystems, and/or to have an impact on them.

I argue that recognising a certain intra-constitution and intra-relationality between living beings is the only way to allow the formation of an extended accountability: where responsibility shifts from an individual or group level to other ontological categories (which would normally be seen as distant and external). Being accountable for more than oneself whilst recognising one's own constitution, not just through other human beings but also Non-human, allows a sense of extended connectivity which is necessary to find new ethical solutions for earthly survival. There is a "*vital bond between humans and other species […] both necessary and fine*" that needs to be acknowledged as it is "*the effect of shared vulnerability*" (Braidotti 2013:79).

As Barad (2007:393) underlines, ethics should be shifted from a response to another individual, based on a moral responsibility, towards a responsibility and accountability among living beings': "*relationalities of becoming of which "we" are part*", aware of a mutual vulnerability as hybrid subjects. The becoming which Barad refers to comes from the idea that beings *become* through a process of intra-creation: Humans are materially bound, not so much as morally, to other agents in an ecosystem – it is what Barad (2007) refers to as an "*ethics of (re)attachment and self-reorientation*" which will make dependencies re-emerge and oblige (present) Humans to re-conceptualise themselves. Within a new materialist framework, these ecosystems translate

as networks inhabited by humans and non-humans, by organic and inorganic materials which are bound to one another and dependent from one another.

Braidotti (2013), in line with Barad, argues that the posthuman subject raises major ethical questions: where ethics has been insofar founded on the moral action of an individual subject towards another, now the subject would no longer count as a singular human being. Ethics and ethical claims therefore have to be rethought based on multiple connected subject(s). Becoming ethically bound in materiality to what insofar Western philosophy has discursively defined as an "Other", is the ultimate aim of reflecting on attempting to make a new political subject emerge. Denying the individuality of beings and their presumed independence, autonomy and pure rationality, is the first step to build new radical subjects which recognise their embodied dependency and thus reflect on themselves as a "we" and no longer as an "I" when it comes to occupying an eco-social political space. If current humanist individualisation is failing at addressing the major environmental and political challenges of Western societies in the 21st century, I would argue it is because of the discursive resistance to this much needed transformation of the way living beings currently reflect on themselves and on the world and how their recognise their intra-connection and vulnerable openness.

Transformation is necessary to open up the human to a system in which it is already embedded in, but which he denies. Recognising vulnerability in the continuum between Humans and Nature might be the first step to materialise said intra-dependency among living-beings, with the ultimate aim of achieving a more levelled cohabitation within present ecosystems.

II. Conclusion

In chapter 1, I have positioned my authorship with regards to the research path that I have undertaken, by questioning what contribution my own situated existence might bring to the specific research question. I have highlighted the importance of choosing a topic for which I believe I bear responsibility and of which I can talk from a personal archive of material and discursive experience, as a moral/supportive/inclusive/political act. I have declared my own ego-histoire (Haggis, 2014) as an ethically driven onto-epistemological act (Barad, 2007), aimed at situating my point of view and making it visible, as it impacts the knowledge that this research produces, in its partiality (Haraway, 1988). I have introduced the topic of the research as well as highlighted the steps that the research has taken from an epistemological and methodological perspective.

In chapter 2, I have positioned this paper within the frame of the vast existing body of research surrounding Western modern dualism(s), with a specific focus on the contested Human/Nature dyad in which my quest for re-conceptualising the vulnerability of Nature will be situated. Firstly, I have introduced dualism as a philosophical concept, underlying the various philosophical contributions that have built its current conceptualisations. Secondly, I have highlighted the critiques that have been moved against this philosophical concept by ecofeminists on the ground that it has justified the appropriation of Human and Non/human subjects. Ecofeminism has provided an important theoretical grounding, as well as a constructive positive example of how to go past academic and boundaries separating multiple dominations by highlighting the existence of common roots to multiple oppressions. The power-driven mechanisms on which dualism is grounded have also be made visible.

In chapter 3, I have provided an overview of the current literature on human vulnerability in the attempt to understand how much vulnerability is, as I suspected, constructed on: (1) the acceptance of an achievable and existing ideal invulnerable subject; (2) the reproduction of the mechanism(s) of an ontological dualist system not neutral nor ahistorical. I have analysed its current conceptualization(s) and discussed the two major positions taken by researchers on the vulnerability of Humans: (1) that vulnerability is a universally shared human condition; (2) that vulnerability is the result of power mechanisms in society which touch upon different individuals and groups differently situated. I have underlined the limitations of both positions in escaping the constraints of dualism.

In chapter 4, I have attempted to trouble the dualistic cut of Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability, to recognise the complexity and fictionality of both categories, with the aim of providing a more – I believe – realistic account of reality that does not need to reinforce difference to guarantee its existence, but that will rather have to find a new way to conceptualise it in order to transform relationality in continuity between the two categories of these dyads. In this chapter, new materialist and posthumanist theories have provided theoretical tools to refuse the political and ethical constrains of Western binarisms with the aim recognising the vitality and intra-constitutionality of matter (Barad, 2007), within a continuity of Non/human and Human beings (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Barad, 2007, 2008; Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013). Posthumanism has also provided a framework in which to re-think the human subject and provide the contours of a possible new political Human/Non-human subject, situating vulnerability as the manifestation of the material continuity between Human and Nature.

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SUMMARY

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This thesis focuses on the area of research surrounding Western modern dualism(s), with a specific focus on the contested Culture/Nature dyad in which my quest for re-conceptualising the vulnerability of Nature is situated. My research question methodologically fits within a critique to Western philosophy of mind – with particular reference to modern philosophy and the concept of dualism. Within this body or research, I will attempt to give my contribution to troubling the dyads of Human/Nature and Invulnerability/Vulnerability and their presumed dualist relationality.

The goal of this thesis is therefore to (1) render visible how the apparatus of dualisms has provided a framework to naturalize and legitimize a specific system of domination imbued in patriarchal values; (2) deconstruct the conceptualization(s) of a series of categories of Other(s) created by Western dualist philosophy, with a focus on one particular Other: Nature; (3) deconstruct the conceptualization(s) of vulnerability which too exist in a dualist dyad of Invulnerability/Vulnerability; (4) propose a new conceptualization of vulnerability as material continuity between Human and Non/human living beings.

This work is situated in a (queer)ecofeminist framework, as I believe in the inclusivity of ecofeminism to bring together multiple causes. By initially undercovering the mutual domination of Women and Nature, ecofeminism has gone past the boundaries of different oppressions, looking at the commonalities rather than at the differences of multiply dominated beings. I believe that it is only through reworking the concept of difference (as non-hierarchical) and by recognising the common roots of multiple oppressions that socio-political-economic transformation will be possible.

Key words: *Vulnerability, Ecofeminism, Human/Nature, Posthuman, New materialism*