Traveling theorists

On biographical border crossing and feminist imagination

At the beginning of the twentieth century, two self-appointed ‘strangers’ – sociology and women – appeared on the stage of science (Wobbe 1997). The figure of the ‘stranger’ was introduced by Georg Simmel (1908) in his introduction to sociology as a new field of science – an inclusive sociology without clearly defined borders which could provide a home to the homeless and uprooted, the ‘strangers’ of the academic world. Nearly a half century later, the sociologist Viola Klein (1949) takes up the same topic, noting that the high preponderance of women among these ‘homeless’ sociologists is no coincidence. The humanitarian interest which is the starting point of social research provides the back-door through which women could slip into public life’ (Klein cited in Wobbe 1997: 12). The affinity between these three figures – sociology, women, and the stranger – as well as their unacknowledged and acknowledged intersections are the starting points of this article.

Strangers and/in sociology

Sociologists like Simmel (1908), Schütz (1971/1940) and Bauman (1990) have all taken up the topic of the stranger without explicitly theorizing their own biographical uprootings. Simmel refers to the Jew as the stranger par excellence, the perennial wanderer who, by coming today and staying tomorrow, presents an incongruent and indefinable unity between proximity and distance. Schütz writes about the stranger as exile and for Bauman, the stranger is constructed as the opposite of the friend, as an enemy whose fate is in the hands of the dominant classifier. While all three write about the stranger, none are particularly forthcoming about their own personal experiences of professional, civic
or national exclusion, persecution, or forced exile. They do not explicitly address these experiences in their work, nor do they mention them as instrumental in their choice of topics for their scholarly work. For Simmel, what counts in science are the thinker’s thoughts, not his biographical anecdotes (Simmel 1904 cited in Rammstedt 1995: 280) and this anti-biographical stance became a standard feature of much of the sociology which followed.

It was only recently that this unspoken rule was broken when a number of male writers like Edward Said or Stuart Hall and others began using their experiences as ‘strangers’ explicitly in their writing. For example, Said prefaced his well-known *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) with the remark that ‘this book is an exile’s book (p. xxx).’ By that, he was not only referring to his own history of migration from Palestine to Egypt and to the US, but to a feature of his work. In his view, the book could only be written by someone belonging to both sides of the imperial divide. Said explicitly drew upon the condition of being in-between to understand the history of imperialism and to offer unique insights into life at both the margins and the center. Exile provides a positive identity for him – a ‘salutary alternative to the normal sense of belonging to only one culture and feeling a sense of loyalty to only one nation (p. xxxi).’ Where Alfred Schütz (1971) emphasized the loss of orientation and identity deterioration which the stranger (as the exile) is doomed to endure, Said and others elaborated the concept of ‘stranger’ in an inclusive way; they have taken their biographical wanderings as a vantage point from which to write, using diaspora as a (personal and political) resource. In the meantime a whole group of diasporic intellectuals like Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and many others have all drawn upon their position of living inside and outside as ‘familiar stranger’ to think critically about the conditions of exile, relations of power in postcolonial and post slavery contexts, of being far away from ‘home’ and yet never entirely ‘arriving’, and of the consequences these experiences have for identity formation.

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1 Simmel had to deal with anti-Semitism in the academia when he was denied a chair in Heidelberg, due to an anti-Semitic referee report and Schütz and Bauman, each at different periods of time, had to leave their country of origin because of their Jewishness and live in exile (see Rammstedt 1995; Landmann 1958).
Woman as stranger

As male sociologists grappled with the notion of the stranger in their midst, a different debate emerged among feminist theorists who also drew upon the notion of the stranger. This time the stranger was ‘woman’, the archetypical ‘other’ to Man, who stands outside the institutions and values of patriarchal culture. The notion of woman as other has been elaborated by philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Julia Kristeva (1982; 1986), who understood women as the paradigm case for all marginalized, excluded or subordinate groups. Since then, many feminist scholars have drawn upon the subject of the stranger to link between the position of women as other and experiences of diaspora, exile or nomadism. Gayatri Spivak (1999), Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992), Uma Narayan (1997), Sarah Ahmed (2000), Inderpal Grewal (1996), Caren Kaplan (1996; with Grewal, 1994) and many others have tackled questions involving migration and exile, traveling, and the problem of ‘home’ and belonging, linking notions of gender and power to the experience of being a stranger.

Unlike the early sociologists, these feminist theorists do not seem reluctant to draw upon their own experiences of exclusion, migration or exile and we frequently found explicit and lengthy references to their lives in their work. These references often went well beyond the ‘biographical anecdote’ (so disliked by Simmel) to encompass a rationale for doing a particular kind of theorizing. Under the motto of making a virtue of a necessity, they took up the position of ‘stranger’ with a vengeance. Their biographical experiences of migration not only gave their scholarly critique an additional credibility (‘it takes one to know one’), but it enabled them to develop ways of thinking about the experience of being uprooted in ways, which lent an element of empowerment and, in some cases, even glamour, to events which might otherwise be marked by powerlessness, coercion and lack of choice.

In this article, we will present three well-known feminist theorists whose work has contributed to contemporary discussions about women crossing borders - Avtar Brah, Seyla Benhabib, and Rosi Braidotti. Each has developed metaphors – diaspora, exile, nomadism – which bring together ‘women’ and

2 A good example of this is a friend who, after living in the Netherlands for several years, was asked to speak on a radio program about ‘migrant women in the Netherlands’. She was incensed. ‘Me? A Migrant Woman??!! If you want to call me something, call me a “Nomad”!’
'stranger', thereby providing frameworks for thinking about women's experiences of migration and, more generally, about the fruitful input of these experiences for critical feminist (and sociological) scholarship. Each theorist has herself undergone multiple border crossings in the course of her life and drawn upon these experiences, more or less explicitly in her work. By taking a look at these 'travelling theorists', we hope not only to unravel some of the interconnections between their biographical experiences and their theoretical work, but also to uncover what may be at stake in theorizing about strangers, more generally.

Our reasons for undertaking this project are both personal and scholarly. Kathy Davis was an 'army brat', moving from one military base to the other in the US. She studied in Germany and, six years later, settled in the Netherlands where she has lived ever since. Helma Lutz, a child of refugees from the former East Germany spent her early years in refugee camps in West Germany. During her studies she stayed in Turkey for some time and later moved to the Netherlands. Currently she works in Germany, lives in Amsterdam and has become a weekly border crosser.

In addition to being migrants ourselves, we both do biographical research. We, therefore, have a strong interest in individual life histories and, more particularly, in the – often surprising – resourcefulness and courage with which people negotiate the hurdles of their lives under often inhospitable and usually difficult conditions. As biographical researchers, we know that migration invariably entails a turning point in 'normal' biographies, requiring a rethinking of the person's life history, identity, and place in the world.

And, finally, as feminist scholars, we have both grappled with the problem of situating ourselves in our work – that is, of producing scholarship, which is explicitly partial, admittedly partisan, and hopefully accountable. In this project, we have not only been influenced by work in cultural studies (Hall, Bhabha, Said), but in women's studies (Kaplan and Grewal, Narayan, Ahmed). While many of these scholars – albeit in very different ways – have celebrated the condition of exile, hybridity, and diaspora as a vanguard position for the postmodern intellectual, Caren Kaplan (1996) is more skeptical about the

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3 It is not surprising that migration has been a popular topic of biographical research (see, for example, Apitzsch 1999; Dausien, Calloni & Friese 2000) or that social scientists working on migration have found themselves increasingly interested in biographical research (see, for example, Bourdieu 1993; Benmayor & Skotness 1994; Chamberlain 1997).
phenomenon of the ‘traveling theorist’. She does not believe that experiences of exile provide a better view or should be regarded as a privileged vantage point. While she agrees with Said that exile can generate a critical consciousness, she also finds it a problematic metaphor, which absorbs all migrants under one theoretical umbrella, regardless of the historically specific conditions under which their migrations have occurred. In her view, traveling theorists would do better to situate their theories. This would entail being accountable about who is writing about the experience of dislocation as well as what s/he has to gain in writing about this process of dislocation in a particular way.

The Interviews\textsuperscript{4}

We talked to Avtar Brah in Amsterdam. She was exhausted after spending a stimulating but strenuous week teaching at a summer school in Utrecht, but she graciously agreed to spend an afternoon with us. While she was forthcoming about her theoretical work, she seemed much more hesitant when recounting more personal details about her life. After the interview was over, she explained that she was doubtful whether there was a ‘one-to-one relationship’ between what she had written and her life history. This statement turned out to be somewhat paradoxical, as we will see, since Brah’s biographical experiences are clearly expressed and linked to her theoretical insights in her writings. Seyla Benhabib was even more reluctant to speak about her biography. After months of e-mail correspondence in which we had to convince her that we were not just journalists in search of a sensational ‘scoop’, she finally agreed to meet with us. We traveled to Hanover in Germany where Benhabib had been invited to give the prestigious Hannah Arendt lecture. She met with us in her hotel room after the lecture and we chatted for several hours. Afterwards we had dinner together and she confided to us that this was the first time she had talked about her personal history in such detail. However, she could now understand the value of a project like ours. In contrast to Brah and Benhabib, Rosi Braidotti was an easy informant. We caught her in between conferences in her office at the graduate school for women’s studies in Utrecht. She is probably the most well-interviewed professor in Dutch women’s studies, a popular presence in the media, and she had few reservations about telling us her life story. The following is the result of our travels – and theirs.

\textsuperscript{4} All three interviews were conducted in the summer and autumn of 1999.
‘Holding it all together’: Avtar Brah on diaspora

Avtar Brah is a sociologist and teaches at the University of London, Birbeck College. She is one of the most senior members of the editorial collective for Feminist Review and played an active role in introducing the topics of race and racism to feminist debates. She is well known for her conceptualisation of ‘difference’ and her path-breaking theoretical work on intersections between gender, race/ethnicity, and class. In her collection of essays, Cartographies of Diaspora (1996) she develops the concept of ‘diaspora space’.

Since the early 1990s ‘diaspora’ has become a widespread theoretical concept in sociology, used and developed to create an alternative way of thinking about transnational migration and ethnic relations, which avoids essentialised discourses of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ (see Bauman 1995; Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997; Gilroy 1997; Parekh 1994; Segal 1995). In a critical evaluation of ‘diaspora’s’ theoretical potential, Anthias (1998) comes to the conclusion that most of these articulations do not overcome the problems earlier identified with ethnicity, because ‘diaspora itself relies on a conception of ethnic bonds as central, but dynamic, elements of social organisation’ (Anthias 1998: 576). In contrast, Brah is notable in her intersectional approach which addresses the cross-cutting and mutually amplifying alliances between class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality and culture. Brah’s work has since become highly influential in discussions about migration, nationalism, identity formation and globalisation in women studies.

In the introduction of her book, Brah (1996) notes that her ‘whole life has been marked by diasporic inscriptions. I have had “homes” in four of the five continents – Asia, Africa, America, and now Europe’ (p. 1). She has been confronted with the typical migrant experience: When does a place of residence become a ‘home’? Brah was born in India, in the Punjab. When she was five years old she moved with her parents to Uganda, East Africa, where her father sought his fortune in what was then considered a ‘land of opportunity’. She remembers how sad her mother was at having to leave her two oldest daughters – recently married – in India, that she left ‘a part of her behind’.

At the age of 17, she won a scholarship to the University of California in Berkeley. She remembers being asked by the scholarship panel whether she saw herself as African or Indian. Looks mattered for these white, American male panel members and ‘my look’ could apparently not be a signifier of ‘African-ness’ (p. 2). In the US, she became active in the student movement, demonstrations against the Vietnam war, boycotts organized by labour union activists, and anti-racist politics. On her way back to Uganda (‘I never imagined myself
living in the West for good. I felt I needed to go back to my country and do good, so to speak.'), she stopped over in Britain for a small holiday and to visit her brother and 'got stuck there', for good as it turned out. Idi Amin had come to power through a military coup in Uganda and expelled all South Asians from the country over night. Brah’s stop-over turned into a refuge; Britain became her country of ‘permanent abode’ and she has never been back to Uganda since.

Her first encounters in Britain also changed her life radically. In the us, she had been treated as the ‘foreign student’ – exotic, someone who ‘looked Indian’ at a time when India was associated with chic visits to Poonah and spiritual awakening. ‘Within weeks of being in London I had been called a “Paki”. I had arrived in Britain as a young adult – my sense of myself fairly secure. Yet I had been outraged, mortified and, most importantly, temporarily silenced by this racist onslaught’ (p. 9). No longer a foreign student or a temporary visitor, she was suddenly constituted as an inferiorized Other, irrevocably enmeshed in Britain’s imperial history. She also realised what it must feel like in the us to be called a ‘nigger’; to be outraged, mortified, and, above all, silenced by racism. She remembers having once walked with a black friend and suddenly realising that he thought she didn’t want to be seen with him: ‘the impact that that had on him, that I had lighter skin and he had darker skin.’ The direct experience of racism in Britain as well as her realisation that she had not always been aware of the impact of the colour hierarchy herself made her see herself in another light and shaped her politics.

These politics are irrevocably linked to the struggle against racism and the political subject ‘black’. Black is a signifier of the ‘entangled racialized colonial histories of “black” settlers of African, Asian and Caribbean descent, affirming a politics of solidarity against a racism centered around colour (...) and the silent text of “non-whiteness” operating a common thematic within this discourse’ (p. 13).

At the same time, her biography of forced migration (‘not being able to go home’), her shifts in self-representation depending on the power context in which she has lived have brought home to her how essential a politics of intersectionality is. ‘In East Africa, blacks were at the bottom, Indians in between, and whites at the top. Segregated geographies, separate schools. If I look back on my relationship to Africans or to Europeans, I was both inside and outside, all the time.’ For Brah, identity is about hierarchies which are constantly in flux and need to be seen in context. It is not surprising that she has always been a dissident voice within oppositional politics – whether marxism, feminism, or anti-racism. She finds any politics constituted around
the primacy of one axis of differentiation (gender, race or class) over all others limited in its ability to do justice to the everyday experiences of most individuals who – like herself – have mixed allegiances and move in and out of different identities.

Brah’s concept of diaspora space allows her to do justice to the kinds of experience, which have been part of her personal and political biography. It offers a critique of discourses of ‘fixed origins’ and ‘homeland’ by focussing on the creative tension between them. At the same time, diaspora space acknowledges the ‘entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put’ (p. 181). As imaginary space (not community) which is ‘inhabited’ by those constructed as native and those constructed as migrant, Brah’s metaphor disaspora space de-problematizes the migrant and opens up possibilities to view migration and travel as a global cultural, economic, and political condition of late modernity. It is a concept of disaspora ‘in which historical and contemporary elements are understood in their diachronic relationality’ (p. 197). As Brah puts it, ‘I just can’t see any other way of thinking about this because that is what our life is like.’

Brah’s work has evolved since the early seventies when she did her fieldwork on young Asian immigrants in Britain. She began writing from a marxist perspective which was informed by her involvement in feminist, socialist and anti-racist politics. ‘These things overlapped for me, although they did not necessarily overlap for everyone (...) some people viewed them as different compartments. You could be a socialist and then, therefore, your priority was class. Or, you are looking at feminism and then your priority is women (...) and the woman was always white, of course.’ A sociologist by training, Brah has recently become interested in psychoanalysis as a way to explore the subtle, ‘unconscious’ workings of racism (how ‘nice academics’ could be very patronising without even being aware of it).

Putting this new shift in her thinking into practice has not been an easy matter. It required another kind of text as well as a different way of working. In 1999, Brah wrote an essay The Scent of Memory in which she imaginatively and with great empathy tries to enter the experience of a white, working class woman in Southall – the same community where Brah had done her fieldwork in the seventies. Confronted by a community in which she saw only decay

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5 Brah’s piece was a meditation on Tim Lott’s autobiography The Scent of Dried Roses (1996) in which he reconstructs his family history in West London in the wake of his mother’s suicide in 1988.
and where she felt increasingly lonely, this Southall woman committed suicide. What touched Brah was how this ordinary woman faced changes and loss, was 'right in the middle of it all', and yet did not blame or pathologize the immigrants for what she saw happening in her community. 'When we talk about racism, we forget that there are people like that who in their quiet, polite sort of way, go on with their lives and not becoming racist. What makes a woman like her? That's a very serious question for me. It raises the issue of how we can nurture that kind of subjectivity.' By the same token, it's not very difficult for someone to become a fascist. 'Fascists are not the sort of people who are completely different from us. So, in that sense, I don't just want to complain and contrast. I want to go into the complex ways in which we get connected through our biographies, our social histories.'

Interestingly, Brah found this particular article extremely difficult to write. 'It took me two years to complete - it left me raw inside. It was trying to find a way to connect to all those histories of exploitation, oppression, inequality. It's different than an abstract solidarity with the working class, this connection stuff. And it is seeing how these histories are embedded in everyday experiences like that woman's.' As she put it: 'Holding it all together - it's a constant struggle.'

'Choosing to live outside the walls': Seyla Benhabib on exile

Seyla Benhabib is a philosopher and political scientist. She was professor of politics and philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, held a chair in European Studies at Harvard University, and recently took up a position at Yale University. Benhabib has held various guest professorships in Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries. She has published extensively on issues of gender, ethics, difference and postmodernism. More recently, she has written books on Hannah Arendt and on cultural diversity (see Benhabib 1996; 1998; 1999a; 1999b). Her next two books will be about democracy and identity and on European multiculturalism.

Benhabib's metaphor for feminist subjectivity, the exile, is a well known, often quoted, but also highly controversial concept within feminist scholarship. By invoking the experience of exile, Benhabib argues that the social critic who is in exile does not need to adopt the 'view from nowhere', but can take up the 'view from outside the walls of the city', wherever those walls and those boundaries might be. 'It may indeed be no coincidence that from Hypatia to Diotima to Olympe de Gouges and to Rosa Luxemburg, the vocation of the
feminist thinker and critic has led her to leave home and the city walls' (Benhabib 1992: 228).

Benhabib has left the city walls herself more than once in her life. Born in Istanbul, Turkey, she started her studies in philosophy and social sciences in Istanbul. In 1971, when she was in her early twenties, she went to Yale to complete her MA and later her PhD thesis. In 1979 she moved to Frankfurt, Germany with a Humboldt fellowship to complete her postdoctoral studies with Habermas. A decade later, she went back to the United States which then became the axis of her 'transatlantic state of being' ('of never being here or there').

Albeit the fact that her education and her formative years have been spent in different countries and Benhabib has had to speak different languages, she insists that translatability has never been a problem ('For me languages come easily'). She grew up in an upper-class household of Sephardic Jews 'where we spoke three and at times four languages', including Ladino, the language of the Spanish Jews, Turkish, French and Italian. After grammar school, Benhabib attended an English high school. German was her last foreign language, which she learned at the university. No wonder she is a convinced language polyglot: 'There is no psychological or cognitive reason why children should not be exposed to two or three languages in the course of their education' (Benhabib 1999: 65). Her engagement with languages has a political dimension as well. 'This idea of one culture, one language, one people comes to us from the 19th century. But languages carry within themselves the histories of fragmentation, of ruptures and breaks. We have to give up the philosophy of presence. Meaning is always dissemination.'

As a member of a religious and cultural minority community, Benhabib has developed a sensitivity to national myths and nationalist narratives of legitimation. She emphasizes the benefits of her various geographical and cultural moves, while minimizing the disadvantages ('In my life there is more gain'). She was trained to be part of the intellectual political elite with a mission towards society – all very much in tune with the ideals of Enlightenment. During her student years, first in Turkey and then in the US, she became active in the student movement. The different societal contexts as well as the demands and the dynamics of this movement appealed to her search for universal ethics. In this sense, the Left was her home. Influenced by the writings of Marcuse and other representatives of the 'Critical Theory' (Frankfurter Schule) she saw herself as part of an international left movement and refused to join her family when they emigrated to Israel. ('I was not a Zionist. I did not want to be part of the militaristic and nationalistic enterprise.')
By the mid-eighties, however, she had begun to interrogate the universalistic claims of the Left from the standpoint of feminism. (‘With my two sisters and my very strong mother I always had many strong women in my life. I did not even have to think about feminism, it only took me some time to realize it.’). In particular the Kohlberg-Gilligan debate (see Davis 1991) brought her to a sceptical re-evaluation of Critical Theory. She attacked the ideal of moral autonomy in universalistic and contract theories as viewing the moral self as disembedded and disembodied, arguing that they tended to privatize women’s experience and, therefore, their exclusion from moral theory altogether. Instead she posited an interactive universalism ‘which acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid’ (Benhabib 1992:153).

Since then, Benhabib has dealt with the claims of community, gender and postmodernism. Unlike many of her contemporaries with whom she has heated debates on the subject, she is not willing to throw universalism overboard in favour of what she calls post-structuralist particularism. She is critical of postmodernism for several reasons. First, it engenders a ‘retreat from utopia’ within feminism. In her view feminism is still in need of a (utopian) model in order to provide itself with a raison d’être. Second, she dismisses the ‘celebration of fragmentation’ as a concept, which conflates fragments with fluidity: ‘Fragmentation has its downside. It has a psychic as well as a moral cost. When the fragments are in contradiction to each other, they are pulling into different directions.’ As an alternative she prefers Jessica Benjamin’s concept of ‘synthesis’, which enables the construction of coherence by discarding what does not make sense from the life-story. This concept appeals to Benhabib, both in terms of her work and her biography.

But Benhabib is clearly reluctant to include her biography in her writing. Contrary to many of her contemporaries, she does not make statements about her cultural, religious and ‘ethnic’ background or her nationality. ‘It is because I dislike the culture of narcissism. My work is not in the first person in the sense that philosophy and social theory are always written from the standpoint of the universal.’ Partly this resistance comes from her personal experience of living in Germany: ‘Because the ignorance and prejudice and lack of under-

6 See, for example, Benhabib et al (1995) Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange in which she enters a debate with Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser.
standing of Turkey’s culture was so great in Germany, and because I am such a bizarre exception, I have not been able to trust people to be able to understand my own fragments. In Germany I am always introduced as Born in Istanbul. That’s my identity. In the US I am Benhabib from Harvard.’

Benhabib’s recent work on Hannah Arendt (1996) resembles a project of homecoming in many ways. In the introduction, she stresses that her admiration for Arendt’s thinking and admits that her affinity with Arendt’s writing is undoubtedly rooted in her own deeply-felt identification with Arendt as a Jew whose work is embedded in European philosophical traditions. Although Benhabib is not a German Jew, but a Spanish Sephardic Jew, her book on Arendt reflects her own Jewish identity and the political implications of being Jewish.

We wondered whether Benhabib was ‘copying’ Arendt’s way of dealing with Jewish-ness by writing about her (much as Arendt had written about Rahel Varnhagen). Benhabib nods in confirmation: ‘I was fascinated what Arendt was doing with Rahel Varnhagen and maybe I tried to do in a philosophical way what Arendt herself did with Varnhagen in a more biographical way. But there is a crucial difference. Arendt says that if you are attacked for who you are, your identity becomes a political one. Writing about being Jewish in a post-Holocaust world means writing about options narrowed down to either being an ethnic Jew or an Israeli citizen.’ For the time being, Benhabib has chosen her place in the ‘diffused Jewish diaspora’ – a space from which she can speak as an exile. ‘Exile suggests the distance between the place of origin and the contemporary context in which one is spending one’s life.’

Benhabib does not agree with some of the criticisms, which have been made of her metaphor ‘exile’ (for example, by Rosi Braidotti) and, indeed, has difficulties with the concepts like ‘nomad’. ‘Nomadism requires having many passports. As a metaphor it does not deal with the power and complexities of the nation state systems within which we still operate. We still need to have identity cards at border crossings. And we still need to be able to negotiate the different spaces in which we are. Unlike the nomad who does not seem to have a particular home and who’s home is in different places at different times, exile suggests the loss of an origin and a home space. However, in a biographical sense, I am not forced to stay in exile. It is a choice.’
Playful travels: Rosi Braidotti on nomadism

Rosi Braidotti is philosopher, professor of women’s studies, and prolific writer on a wide range of subjects, from poststructuralist philosophy, sexual difference and embodiment to cybertechnology, popular culture, environmental issues, and the future of Europe. She is also the author of a well-known collection of essays, *Nomadic Subjects* (1994) which has become one of the most influential and controversial studies in contemporary feminist scholarship. In this book, Braidotti reworks Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of ‘nomad’ into a powerful metaphor for the ‘female feminist subject’. A ‘creative fiction’, the ‘nomad’ provides a playful and empowering image for the feminist critic. It breaks definitively with the link between feminism and victimization and oppression. The feminist ‘nomad’ is the agent par excellence, always in transit and constantly transgressing boundaries.

Braidotti is herself the prototypical nomad. She has undertaken multiple intercontinental migrations, from Italy to Australia to France and, finally, to the Netherlands. ‘I had migration forced upon me, but I chose to become a nomad. And there’s a whole story behind that.’ Braidotti was born into a lower middle-class, white family in Northern Italy—a border region, which has historically been marked by conflict and migration. She describes her family history as a ‘tradition of displaced women’: strong women who were forced by war or ‘history falling on their heads’ to ‘pack up and leave’. Their men were notable for their absence. ‘They seemed to just disappear into the night.’

When Braidotti was 14, her parents migrated from Italy to Australia for economic reasons. She grew up in the ‘Little Italy’ of Melbourne—a typical New World city full of tightly-knit ethnic communities where ‘you didn’t have to even learn English if you didn’t want to’. Braidotti explains that she never felt a particular affiliation with Australia. She eschews all romanticism about ‘ethnic communities’, noting that they are so often deeply patriarchal, racist, conservative, and nationalist. ‘Not a basis for any identity I would lay claim to.’

As is typical for many girls of her class background, Braidotti used education as a way to move on. ‘Being an intellectual is the closest thing to my true identity,’ she notes. She won a scholarship, becoming the first person in her family to attend the university, and embarked on what was to become a long, painful, but also inevitable process of ‘leaving home.’ She began her studies in social sciences, but soon discovered that ‘listening to other people’s stories’ was too painful for her (‘I couldn’t bear it’). She turned to philosophy and completed a double major with honors at Canberra. While most Australian philosophers went to Oxford for their doctorate, Braidotti headed straight for...
France. The next phase of her life – my 'highpoint' – was spent in Paris. It was a time of real intellectual excitement: Foucault, Irigaray, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari. By 1981, she had a doctorate (again with honors) and, after a brief and unhappy sojourn in Australia, returned to Paris. With some difficulty, she managed to regain her Italian citizenship ('otherwise I never could have stayed in Europe') and embarked on psychoanalysis – 'seven years, three-days a week of dismantling and reconstructing my identity'. It was during this period that Braidotti explicitly grappled with many of the identity issues which were later to become the linchpins of her intellectual work: the significance of belonging and of leaving, the compulsion to keep moving as a repetition of the original trauma of being uprooted, and the empowering and disempowering features of transitions.

In 1988, Braidotti took on one of the first chairs specifically earmarked for women's studies in Utrecht in the Netherlands and has been there ever since. Roots at last? We wondered, but Braidotti laughs. It was love and the job, which anchored her to the Netherlands. However, she has always had trouble feeling that she belongs. She has little affinity with 'the Dutch system', which – as she puts it – she is incapable of ever understanding. Her strategy has been to situate herself as 'resident foreigner'. Reflecting on her own history of migration, she no longer regards her moves as repetitive 'uprootings' ('My psychoanalyst warned me!'). What began as forced migration, has become for her a matter of choice. She can choose to leave, but she can also choose to stay.

Braidotti's notion of feminist subjectivity 'in the nomadic mode' resonates with her life history. 'Nomadism' is a metaphor – an intellectual configuration – which allows women in transit to reformulate their experiences of migration in a way which provides an optimal sense of agency. It enables a kind of situated-ness which takes the realization of being uprooted as a starting point, without resorting to an idealization of the community of origin ('My father never wants to go back to Italy and he would have a heart attack if he saw it now.'). In this respect, Braidotti feels strongly tied to the project of Europe. 'Europe is never just one identity.' Being a European requires inventing rather than 'reclaiming' an identity. It is the ideal place to look for possible lives, relationships, identities – a place from which to ask the question 'Which one?'

'Nomad' is a forward-looking concept; it asks the question of how to play it from here. It incorporates Braidotti's longstanding critique of essentialism with her strong feminist commitment toward the empowerment of women. It captures the need within feminism for a bond among women, which is fluid, changing, and respectful of diversity and complexity. 'Nomadism' is a subjectivity of liberation rather than assimilation. It moves beyond the early feminist
lament about women as victims without falling into a postmodern cynicism with its dissolution of identity. The ‘nomad’ embodies consciousness, which is ‘a form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity’ (Braidotti 1994: 23).

Like Brah’s concept ‘diaspora space’ (or Benhabib’s ‘exile’), ‘nomad’ is a metaphor – not a panacea. Braidotti is the first to admit that her metaphor has its limitations. She is not writing for the dispossessed and the refugees (‘they already are nomads, it’s not an option for them’). ‘Nomad’ is directed at those who occupy the ‘white center’ – a center, which fantasizes itself as sedimentary and self-sufficient. She is speaking to feminist intellectuals. ‘As an intellectual, you have choices and nomadism is something you can choose as a way of thinking which opens up possibilities for critical and self-critical reflection.’

Braidotti has been criticized for equating the subjectivity of a comfortable, privileged post-modern white intellectual like herself with that of migrant and refugee women, thereby neglecting differences that ‘race’, nation and ‘ethnicity’ can make for women. For example, Gedalof (1996) notes: ‘To be marked by one’s race or ethnicity, as are women of colour and “post-colonial” women in a world which takes whiteness and western-ness as the invisible, unmarked norm, is to be “placed” in ways that Braidotti’s nomad never is’ (p. 192). She argues that Braidotti’s plea for nomadism as a possibility for the creative celebration of dislocation and her simplified message that ‘all that counts is the going’ should be rejected as hopelessly naïve. ‘If they are to offer a means of rethinking women’s place in specific community identities, nomadic trajectories cannot simply sidestep location and take to the road’ (Gedalof 2000: 343).

Any metaphor has its limitations. Braidotti acknowledges that some of the criticisms her concept of ‘nomad’ have been well-taken and that she has at times perhaps not done justice to the painful side of migration (She deals with the criticisms of ‘nomadism’ in her new book, Metamorphoses). Despite these criticisms, however, she still finds ‘nomad’ a useful – and, in some cases – preferable metaphor for the feminist intellectual. An alternative metaphor like ‘exile’, for example, is too disembodied, too detached, and, ultimately, too disempowering in Braidotti’s view (‘as though “homelessness” were all that women had in common’). It is too close to the realities of refugees ‘from the East and the South and movements of populations away from war-torn homelands, issues such as exile and the right to belong, the right to enter, the right to asylum, are too serious merely to be metaphorized into a new ideal’ (Braidotti 1994: 21). In contrast, ‘nomad’ expresses the need to be sedimented, ‘to speak from somewhere, rather than from nowhere’.
Language plays a central role for Braidotti. She writes of the feminist as polyglot – the one who speaks more than one language – and she consistently refers to feminist scholars as hyphenated linguistic identities: Bulgarian-French (Kristeva), Italian-American (de Lauretis), or Algerian-Jewish-French (Cixous). Linguistic categories become a shorthand way to situate the feminist scholar, while, at the same time, representing the emotional genealogies, the shifts, and ultimately the ‘locations to be visited’ in order to understand the complexities of her life and work.

To illustrate her point, Braidotti explains that she is now in the process of writing a book about her family history. Research for this book has taken her to Australia, Germany, Italy, Copenhagen, and even Buenos Aires. It’s not a confessional book, but a genealogy about the context of her family’s myriad migrations. Entitled Rododendri (‘my mother’s favorite flower’), the book is being written in Italian – a language which Braidotti has never used before (‘a virginal language’), but which has a different emotional charge than if she had grown up speaking it. Writing this book has made her happier than she has ever been before.

Braidotti explains that her migration experience is both the most painful and the best part of her life. ‘It rescued me from a fate worse than death, but it has meant that I have had to deal with the pain of leaving my parents behind.’ ‘I don’t want to minimize the problems of migration. I know them only too well. But if you write books, you have to give people hope. In that way, I guess I really am a migrant. Always wearing my best clothes.’

**Intersections between biography and theory**

We began this article with the claim that the notion of ‘stranger’ has become a metaphor for the postmodern condition and has been employed by contemporary sociologists like Bauman to understand experiences of migration, border crossing and, more generally, the meaning of home and belonging for postmodern individuals. While many of these theorists have themselves had experiences of exile, they do not always draw upon them explicitly in their theories. Feminist theorists, in contrast, seem to be more ready to use their own experiences of being a stranger in their theories. By making explicit use of their biographies, they show how their experiences of migration can be an analytic device for understanding the conditions facing those who leave their homes for far away lands.
Each of our three 'traveling theorists' had the experience of moving between countries, continents, and cultures. Each drew upon these experiences to develop metaphors for making sense of migration. These metaphors enabled historically specific understandings of the mixture of coercion and choice, of longing for 'home' and looking forward to a new future, as well as the possibilities for taking a critical position as intellectual. Metaphors do not simply reflect the realities of migration, but structure the experience in such a way that certain aspects are highlighted while other aspects are downplayed (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). It is our contention that a closer look at the biographies of our protagonists has not only allowed us to understand how different experiences shape the kinds of theories which each has produced, but also to understand better what is at stake, more generally, when different metaphors for migration are used.

Brah’s transitions between being forced into positions of superiority or inferiority in different contexts play a vital role in her work. While class and nationality gave her privileges in Africa and the US, she became a member of a despised ‘ethnic’ minority in Britain; this made her all-too aware of the importance of hierarchies of differences and how migration unsettles these. Her experience of enforced migration (literally, being expelled from Uganda and staying put in Britain) accounts for her choice of a theory, which is firmly rooted in the material and historical realities of migration. The healing power of her metaphor – diasporic spaces – does not erase these realities, but provides a sense of community based on political action which joins different people across national and other divides.

Benhabib’s experience of displacement is quite different. Unlike Brah, all her migrations were desired (her own decisions), not forced on her. Educated as a child of the Jewish diaspora, she was at home in many languages before she traveled physically. She started her wanderings well prepared. For her, it was easy to join the student movements’ manifestations in Ankara one day and demonstrate for the same purpose in the streets of Boston a week later. Although globalism was not an issue in her student days, she came to stand for a cause of international scope, for justice and equality and the politics that enable them. In her work it is not the differences between classes, ethnicities or cultures which keep her busy, but the search for universal norms for the judgement of good and bad. (In this sense she is a true scholar of Habermas). Her choice of metaphors reflects this stand: the exile observes society from a distance, while – at the same time – being a respected and embedded member of it, an authority, allows her or him to speak up and to be heard. The position of the ‘familiar stranger’ is one which she can share with other exiles, intellec-
tuals of a transnational community around the world. For her, exile is both, a legacy and an intellectual location which she is not prepared to exchange for the ‘safe’ feeling of belonging to one place and nationality. This point of view enables her to avoid feelings of fragmentation: she does not have multiple identities, but basically one: the universal intellectual.

Braidotti is much more the cosmopolitan, traveling from academic setting to academic setting. Although she sustains a sentimental longing for her ‘roots’, she defines her movements as opening up rather than closing down possibilities. The concept of metaphor not only provides a satisfying way to describe her own experiences of moving from university to university, but it allows her to link her experiences with that of other – less fortunate – women whose migration has been less voluntary and successful. She can espouse a feminist program which is both attuned to the realities of postmodern life while countering critiques that she has left the materiality of most women’s lives behind. In short, being in the possession of more than one (‘good’) passport, she enjoys the privileges of a transnational existence in which not only her theory travels around the globe, but so is she. In that sense her message is just as universal as that of Benhabib. Braidotti transgresses her membership in a small group of international scholars by taking up the ‘cause of women’ and becoming their spokesperson. Indeed, the combination of old fashioned feminist claims with post-modern ways of being is her trademark.

In conclusion, even this cursory look at the biographies of these scholars shows that their experiences not only are reflected in their work, but that their work enables them to re-interpret these experiences in ways which mediate the gains and losses of migration and allow them possibilities for action. More generally, by looking at the biographies of social theorists we can see how theories are developed as situated knowledge – knowledge shaped by the specific historical circumstances and cultural context in which the theorist writes (Haraway 1991). Of necessity, theorists have a personal stake in what they write. Metaphors are a device by which they can make sense of their own experience – as well as the experiences of others – in ways that will allow them to move forward. Understanding how biographical trajectories shape theoretical imagination can be a road to a more reflexive and, hopefully, more accountable sociology.

We started this biographical journey by taking Caren Kaplan’s statement that traveling theorists should be made accountable for the metaphors and theories they produce. Without a doubt, the scholars we have discussed here have all generated concepts which provide critical and inspiring approaches to life in the global age of migration.
At the same time, all three theorists are privileged academics who have not only suffered from their migration experience, but have been able to put it to good use. Not all exiles, including diasporic intellectuals, are as successful in getting their work taken up in the academy. Norbert Elias is, of course, the perfect example of an intellectual in exile whose recognition only came very late in life. Situating one's self as ‘nomad’ or ‘exile’ or even ‘diasporic intellectual’ in the academy lends authority to one’s position; it is also trendy and ‘third world scholar’ has become a fervently sought commodity in many academic arenas (Narayan 1997).

However, as Kaplan warns, many individuals may not be served by a celebration of ‘exile’, ‘nomadism’ or ‘diaspora’, even in their most sophisticated renditions. For those who are, quite literally, on the road, they might well prefer a location or a home to which they might belong, free of suffering from hunger and poverty, the outrages of war, or the fears of violence. In short, metaphors must take into account material practices. It is, in this sense, that theorists should situate themselves, but also explore what is at stake in the way they position themselves within their theories. Biographies are only one step toward a more reflexive sociological and need themselves to be constantly challenged, interrogated, and ultimately re-told.

References


