
ESSAY — *Nomadic subjects* and the feminist archives

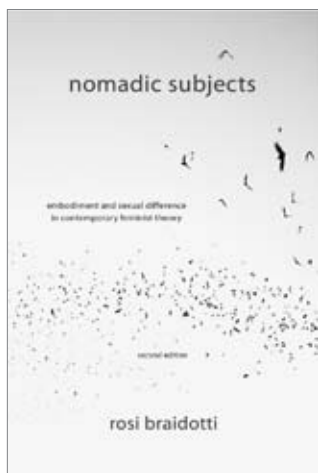
Lisa Baraitser

A delicious uncertainty is put into play by the publication of the second edition of Rosi Braidotti's ground breaking text, *Nomadic subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. It is an uncertainty of temporal and intellectual location, and it requires that we engage in a sifting process, moving between different time-zones, being prepared to jettison familiar reference points, giving ourselves over to the experience of dwelling in a feminist archive. We have to hold in tension ourselves as both old and new readers, or the same readers once new, and now grown old. I find myself turning pages half-way through a chapter, suddenly unsure of when a piece was written, wanting to know which papers are the 'originals', which have been tampered with, and in what ways, and which have been left to speak in their own voice to the concerns of the time. Are we sure we remember what these concerns were, who raised them, the ordering and subsequent disordering of the sequence of feminist theorising, who said what to whom and when? And do we have any bearings on where and when we are now?

These questions of the when and the where have a particular resonance when posed in relation to collecting women's histories, or indeed female feminist subjectivities, and the paradox of the conjunction 'feminist' with 'archive' may provide us with a way of adequately responding to the questions this second edition raises. For *Nomadic subjects* is certainly an archive of feminist theorising, but one that is neither institution, nor law, not static. It is indeed rhizomatic, performative, transformative, perhaps 'transpositional'

in the way it leaps about without ever being chaotic, if we read this archive back through Braidotti's later work (2006). It is an archive that changes shape over time, just a little, not too fluidly – it is a second edition, after all, but not an overwriting of the earlier work, and Braidotti retains as much as she reshapes. She lets us read the text as both historical document and living archive whilst it morphs nevertheless into something else. This second edition challenges us to do the same – to try to change, a little.

Archives, however, are curious, ambivalent and disturbing cultural objects. We always have to ask who governs them, and question the ways they govern us. We are compelled to probe their function and purpose, and the political implications of being included or excluded from the archive, to ask who gets to speak from the archive, and who is absent, silenced or suppressed. There are obvious intersections with discussions about the formation of textual canons that feminist and post-colonial scholars began many decades ago. But archives also call on us to question our very understandings of memory, retention and recollection; the where and the when, of what it might mean to retain an idea or theory, of the nature of the 'original' text prior even to its first recording, and the place of the inscriptional practices of recording themselves. Perhaps one of the most nuanced discussions of archive and its relation to memory and inscription can be found in Derrida's enigmatic text, *Archive fever* (1995) which I want to turn to briefly. I accept it is not perhaps the most obvious text to consult in order to think about feminist archives, since Braidotti's work is almost viscerally



opposed to many of the figurations that move through Derrida's work.

At the beginning of *Archive fever*, Derrida draws our attention to the root of the Greek term 'arkhe' that names both acts of 'beginning' and acts of 'commanding', and that leads him to approach archive as part of a practice of patriarchal governance. Whilst archive signals a place of shelter, the physical and material place where official documents written by male law-givers were housed, the concept of archive also shelters itself from this memory of its roots, meaning that it forgets that it also shelters from the sense of arkhe as commandment. This is arkhe as law and institution, that is also linked to 'a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded' (2). In what Derrida calls this 'domiciliation, in this house arrest' (2) archives take place, and it is here that the law becomes institutionalised as *law*. Derrida reveals, then, that at the intersection of place and law, the archive both exposes and hides its patriarchal authority through the heterogeneous process of gathering together signs, which is the material practice of archive formation. We could say that this process of ex-

posing and hiding is integral to archive more generally, as one memory is always retained and placed at the expense of another. Archiving simultaneously maintains and manages memory and also buries it. And in burying memory, in sheltering from its own forgetting, archives are more like a technical 'prosthesis' to memory, rather than a place from which spontaneous live internal experience can emanate. Thus Derrida's point is that archives are both institutive and conservative – they do begin anew, they commence, and they also gather in and cover over, both poles being governed by patriarchal law that archive institutes. For Derrida this links archive to the ambivalence of the Freudian death drive. On the one hand the death drive is the principle of the destruction of archive in that the death drive leaves no archives of its own, and destroys in advance its own archive. The death drive is 'anarchivic' in that it works to destroy the possibility of memorisation, repetition, and reproduction. However, at the same time, archive can only take place 'at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory' – in other words, at the place of the death drive, rather than a place of spontaneous, alive and internal experience. The death drive is both linked to the destruction of the archive, and to what Derrida calls 'archive fever' – a 'compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement" (p. 91). Derrida shows that archive, whilst seeming to point to the past, a repository of past memory, can only take place in relation to the future: 'The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come' (p. 36) Our feverish desire for archive is a desire for return to originary experience, that is only ever postponed. Despite Freud's desire for *arkhē* 'in the nude, without the archive'

(p. 92), archive is the impossibility of such an originary experience: 'the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event' (p. 17)

What happens, however, if we choose to oppose the logic of return and commencement, if we attempt to unleash the archive from the secret that it shelters, the secret of the patriarchal Law 'of the house' (p. 7), so that the archive can roam in a more nomadic manner, though perhaps without ever completely breaking free? We could contrast Derrida's account, for instance, with Foucault's archive (1989-97), which is more discursive, less ontological. For Foucault there is no origin to the archive – only shifting discursive domains governed by the *appearance* of statements as unique events, but which constitute the law of what can be said. And then, since we've shifted from Derrida to Foucault, it may look like a little step from Foucault to nomadic feminism, from Foucault to Braidotti. It is, however, a veritable leap – a joyous and affirmative and generous leap, as well as rigorous and scholarly and grounded leap. But, crucially, it is a leap that does not abandon the ground it leaps from, but names and recuperates genealogies of feminist thought.

The first half of *Nomadic subjects* is, in fact, one of the most generous readings of the history of debates about sexual difference – debates that were a key part of the crucial work of creating feminist theory – that I have read. By generous, I mean that part of Braidotti's method which is retentive, without this having anything to do with repetition. Her memorisation is an active re-writing of the place of women and of feminist thought, in order, like the impulse that drives Luce Irigaray's work, to bring women into speech.¹ However, this act of counter-memory pro-

ceeds through a kind of gathering up, even when Braidotti knows that certain paradigms are outmoded – when they are no longer adequate to mapping the complexity of the current moment. Older modes of thinking are not spurned for the new, but are revealed as still active, even though not directly usable in an analysis of our current era. Eschewing the sensibility of rupture, Braidotti opts for a certain form of continuity even if this continuity of thought takes a zigzagging form. What I appreciate so much about Braidotti's 'teaching' (and this book is just that – a teaching) is the principle of conceptualising difference in its positive form. A different difference, not a difference thought of as what is different from the abject other, or difference as endless deferral, but difference from what is also like you, difference as a form of multiple becomings, difference 'released from the hegemonic framework of oppositional, binary thinking within which Western philosophy has confined it' (*Nomadic subjects*). If we think of *Nomadic subjects* then as an archive, it is an archive with a difference and one that also *makes a difference*. Much like the post-colonial archive, it must create a different relation with the law-givers, it must renegotiate beginning and commanding. A feminist archive would be necessarily 'outlaw', perhaps like Kristeva's notion of herethics (Kristeva, 1977; Oliver, 1993), or Irigaray's notion of the necessary outside of the masculine-feminine binary, constituting a border-territory between the symbolic, materiality and desire. It could have no origin, but in a different way from Derrida's impossible origin. It would have to overturn the image of a house where official documents are guarded. The feminist archive would need to become nomadic.

Braidotti's own term for the act of archiving is 'counter-memory'. She defines: 'counter-memory as what resists assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing

the self. It includes those who forget to forget injustice'. So, like Derrida, Braidotti's archive involves forgetting to forget, but here the emphasis is on injustice rather than the retention of a prosthetic memory. Braidotti's archive literalises that forgetting to forget by providing a temporary dwelling for feminist thought.

I think here we can see the double temporality in Braidotti's work – on the one hand she urges us forcefully and urgently, contra Derrida, to attend to the present. This is reminiscent of the writings of the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, who insists that this time is the only time we have – this collection of weeks, this month, these years, and we have an ethical injunction to live, and inhabit, and respond to the time that we have. Like Deleuze suggests, we need to get on with the difficult task of thinking the present. Deleuze, as Braidotti glosses him, 'redefines philosophy as the nonreactive activity of thinking the present, the actual moment, so as to account adequately for change and changing conditions' (*Nomadic subjects*, p. 247). And yet at the same time that other trajectory in Braidotti's work is just as important, and also forms part of her ethics – this is her commitment to the duration of ideas, the ones that *remain*; ideas that have a certain kind of persistence, as they are precisely those ideas that we insist on not forgetting. Braidotti's archive reminds us that we cannot just dissolve sexual difference, for instance, through the slight of hand that is the term 'gender', and neither can we get 'beyond gender'; just as we cannot shift our psychic attachments or our symptoms easily or quickly, but have to go through the slow arduous process of an analysis, one that unfolds over several years. And some other things persist too – sometimes, as Braidotti notes, it's just plain nice to stay with someone one loves.

So, it's not simply that this archive that *Nomadic subjects* constitutes, looks back and collects up the past, but that Braidotti makes

ideas continue to be significant. She makes them present in her work, collapsing linear time, and insisting on multiple timelines. This is reminiscent of the psychoanalyst and painter, Bracha Ettinger's notion of the matrixial (2006) – an alternative substrata of psychic life to that of castration and separation that precipitates the subject. The matrixial runs alongside the psychic logic of castration, but remains from the birth of subjectivity as a co-affective encounter between two not merged not-yet-I's, figured as the developing infant and developing mother in the last stage of pregnant subjectivity. Ettinger posits a 'transject' rather than an object or subject, and this capacity for co-affective exchange that is the origin of sexual difference understood in Braidotti's terms, is what remains throughout adult life. So Braidotti moves between critical/reactive modes and also affirmative ones that speak of the desire for change rather than the nostalgic desire for return to an impossible origin. Desire here is understood as a structural force with both erotic and ethical elements. This suturing of the material, affective and embodied with the ethical is absolutely characteristic of Braidotti's work.

Thus, we arrive through our zigzagging journey in the feminist archives, at a totally new figuration of the subject. We can see the seeds for this figuration in *Nomadic subjects*, and where it becomes overwritten in parts with a Deleuzian sensibility. By the time we arrive at Braidotti's recent work, her subject is even more clearly Deleuzian and yet crucially *still feminist*: Braidotti's nomadic subjects are certainly material, bodily and affective entities, situated and ethical. They are politically located slabs of flesh, but the social and symbolic forces that constitute such subjects are impersonal, playing across what Deleuze calls a 'body without organs'. This is Deleuze's way of signalling both a personal and impersonal entity – a body is still a subjective site, even

if it has no interior, no 'organs' and the social and symbolic forces that constitute this material subject still require a 'surface' or plane of signification across which to operate. Hence the body in this subjective field is 'a play of forces, a surface of intensities; pure simulacra without originals'. We have finally moved beyond the dichotomy, masculinity-femininity and are in the 'real' of multiple sexual subjectivities. Here, the celebrations begin.

Lisa Baraitser

Department of Psychosocial Studies,
Birkbeck, University of London

Dit is een bewerking van een voordracht van *Lisa Baraitser* tijdens een evenement georganiseerd door Aletta, Instituut voor Vrouwengeschiedenis op 17 november 2011, waarbij *Rosi Bradoitti* de tweede (herziene en uitgebreide) druk van haar boek 'Nomadic Subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory' (Columbia University Press) presenteerde. (352 bladzijden, \$ 26,50/18,50 pond, ISBN 978-0-231-15389-8)

Note

- ¹ See for example, *Speculum of the other woman*, 1974, (Eng. trans. 1985); *This sex which is not one*, 1977, (Eng. trans. 1985); *When our lips speak together*, 1977; *And the one doesn't stir without the other*, 1979, *An ethics of sexual difference*, 1984, (Eng. Trans. 1993).

Literatuur

- Braidotti, R. (2006). *Transpositions: on nomadic ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ettinger, B.L. (2006). *The matrixial borderspace (Theory out of bounds)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, M. (1989-97). *The archeology of knowledge*. New York: Routledge, p.44. Orig. Paris, 1969, p.129.
- Kristeva, J. (1977). *Stabat Mater*, in T. Moi (Ed.). *The Kristeva reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Oliver, K. (Ed.) (1993). *Julia Kristeva's outlaw ethics, in Ethics, politics, and difference in Julia Kristeva's writing*. New York: Routledge.



Uitnodiging Gendergala 2013

U bent van harte uitgenodigd om op
8 maart 2013
(Internationale Vrouwendag)
deel te nemen aan het Vierde Gendergala
van het Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies

Spreeksters:

Maaïke Meijer en Saskia Grotenhuis
Muziek wordt verzorgd door *Dolores*

vrijdag 8 maart 2013 van 18.00 - 21.30 uur
Koffiehuis Koninklijke Hollandsche Lloyd
Oostelijke Handelskade 44, Amsterdam

Meer informatie en inschrijven:
www.tijdschriftgenderstudies.eu

Oproep – Digitale gemeenschap

Het Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies wil gaan werken aan een **digitale gemeenschap** rond ons onderwerp.

We zijn actief op **facebook** met onze titel 'Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies'.
Sluit je aan bij onze groep voor alle laatste nieuws!

Verder is het voor ons handig om naast uw postadres ook uw **mailadres** te hebben, zodat we u als abonnee ook af en toe portvrij kunnen benaderen.

U kunt uw adres opgeven op
tvgarchief@gmail.com.

Ook onze website wordt verbeterd.

Heel graag uw medewerking voor een levendig en toekomstbestendig
Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies.