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# On Feminist Nomadism

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**Barry Smith**

To grasp the full poignancy of Rosi Braidotti's piece, and of the sad strain of academic feminism that it represents, it is necessary to think back to a time, not so long ago, when children still represented the primary form of social insurance for almost all groups in society. This was a time, too, when infant mortality rates were by modern standards atrociously high, giving rise to the inevitable consequence that the bulk of the creative energy of women was spent in a struggle with childbirth, a struggle that was often literally fatal for both mother and child. In the modern world, of course—as a result of tremendous strides in medical technology—women have for some few decades (though still only in relatively restricted portions of the globe) been freed from this cruel necessity to devote to childbirth the larger part of the most creative period of their lives. The creative talents of women have, accordingly, begun very rapidly to make themselves felt to increasing degrees in all spheres of human activity. Western science and technology have in this way brought about a liberation of womankind, a social transformation that has few parallels in human history.

It is odd, then, that a representative of academic feminism should choose, in the fashion of Braidotti, to denigrate just that Western reason that has made possible the very liberation for which feminists have fought. This denigration becomes more understandable, however, when one realizes that Braidotti has almost no notion of what Western science in fact consists. The essence of Western science she sees as lying, not in the myriad ways in which it enables all of us to enjoy healthier, longer, and more fulfilled lives, but rather in what she calls the “rational violence” of the Manhattan Project and Pol Pot. Western

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science is reduced in her eyes to the level of a mere “source of persistent anxieties.” In its stead (which is to say in place of hard thinking, the often thankless working out of the experimental and theoretical consequences of scientific hypotheses over what may be many years, the painstaking testing of results, the often hard-fought battles that must be won if one is to persuade one's colleagues and competitors of the reasonableness of one's ideas, the often mammoth technical hurdles that must be overcome to translate scientific results into products of benefit to the wider society), Braidotti proposes what she calls a “nomadic style”—a way of thinking that she identifies, rather vaguely, as “a mode of existence that expresses the human being's creative, positive power.”

Braidotti provides no indication at all as to how this non-theoretical mode of being/thinking might lead to any sort of humanly valuable outcomes. She tells us only that these outcomes, whatever they are, will be “beautiful,” “ethical,” and free of “violent impulses”; that they will enable the nomadic thinker “to confront complexity” and yet “avoid relativism.” Certainly Braidotti nowhere explicitly advocates a return to pre-Enlightenment technology; she merely attacks those forms of thinking and of intellectual organization upon which modern science and technology, including medical technology, rest.

Nomadic thinking is, we are told,

marked by “a mixture of speaking modes.” We are told further that Braidotti herself always tries “to mix the theoretical with the poetic or lyrical” in what she writes. The nomadic style of thinking is marked in addition by its interdisciplinary nature. Then Braidotti tells us, in the same self-advertising tone that is a constant feature of what she writes, that:

One important implication of this . . . feature is the element of risk it introduces into intellectual activity. Nomadic thought is a more daring, more risky form of intelligence, which is freer and more disrespectful than the established norms.

At the same time, we are told that this same “more daring, more risky form of intelligence” is rather easily come by:

I think the great space of female theoretical creativity is all the spaces where repetitive chores are made, especially doing the dishes or ironing the clothes. It is in those moments of half-consciousness that the thinking is sharpest and the inner mental landscape the clearest.

Our nomadic heroine will not, of course, be troubled by this and the many other blatant contradictions in her “discourse.” Consistency, after all, is a mark of “phallogocentric” (male) thinking, where feminist nomadism is somehow able to “combine coherence with mobility.”

I call “ethics of sexual difference”—adapting the concept proposed by Luce Irigaray—a feminist nomadic project that allows for internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices. In this respect feminism is a form of consciousness of complexity. Insofar as it allows for contradictions and flaws, it is also quite a liberating inner experience.

Feminist nomadism believes in a “de-centered subjectivity,” and is able

to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges. The choice of this figuration translates my desire to explore and legitimate political agency, while taking as historical evidence the decline of steady identities.

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Where phallogocentric reason believes in conscious, discursive, argumentative, linguistically expressed thought, nomadic feminists, following such contemporary critical thinkers as Deleuze and Irigaray, “bank on the affective as a force capable of freeing us from hegemonic habits of thinking.” Feeling, then, or better still, desire is to be the motive force of the feminist nomadic style. Not “I think, therefore I am,” which is “the obsession of the West, its downfall, its folly,” but rather, or so it seems from what Braidotti writes: “I want; therefore it is the case.” Feminist nomadism, in other words, embodies a rather touching, not to say childlike, “belief in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making, as a way to step out of the political and intellectual stasis.”

In her excellent piece “The Market for Feminist Epistemology,”\* Harriet Baber refers to the “pink fluffy ghettos” of Women’s Studies Departments that have arisen in universities throughout the Western world. She points to the special system of incentives to which young women academics are subjected by the existence of such departments, whose relaxed standards and accelerated avenues of promotion have tended to insulate women from the pressures in operation in more established academic disciplines. Braidotti gives us an extra insight into why the work that is done in such departments is in many cases of such low quality: its methodology consists not in formulating and testing hypotheses and subjecting one’s results to the hard court of experiment and criticism, but rather, merely, in “listening to the multiplicity of women’s voices.”

Of course one additional problem faced by those who would deny thought, reason, and the diligent search for truth, and who would substitute instead a mere “listening to a multiplicity of voices,” is the political relativism that is thereby implied. For on what basis could one admit some “voices”—those, for example, which are in harmony with one’s own political goals—and exclude others—say, those of the pro-life movement or of Islamic fundamentalist women? Braidotti

\*“Feminist Epistemology: For and Against,” *The Monist*, 77, 4, October 1994.

is aware of this challenge to provide a justification for her views; but because she denies theoretical reason and the discipline that it presupposes, she has no rational means to confront it. She turns for help, instead, to her basic principle of “I want; therefore it is the case.” I want a non-relativist, committed, non-hegemon-

ic, feminist philosophy; therefore, I have got one. At the time same she disguises her lack of justification for every single one of the claims she makes by utilizing a pseudo-theoretical style, spiced with a dash of glamorous daring-to-be ethical, all of which amounts, in the end, to nothing more than nonsense on stilts. •

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## Nomad, Come Home

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### Ellen R. Klein

I used to believe that no area of philosophical criticism was more epistemically and pedagogically insidious than that espoused by the “analytic” feminists. Unfortunately, I was wrong. If Rosi Braidotti’s work is any indication of what it means to do philosophy as a “postmodern” feminist, then philosophy has reached yet a new low.

Braidotti is “very committed to the task of elaborating a feminist epistemological” position in terms of what she refers to as a “nomadic style.” Features of this style include, first, its interdisciplinary nature—with its ability to introduce “risk” into any philosophical structure—and second, the fact that it incorporates a “mixture of speaking modes; for instance . . . the theoretical with the poetic.”

I am hard pressed to see just what could be so “risky” about the “crossing of disciplinary boundaries,” or why such a crossing is peculiarly feminist, or even why she does not simply use the *pret-a-porter* term *interdisciplinary*.

Moreover, she is not forthcoming in offering an account, or examples, of the nomadic style in a way that separates it from the corpus of traditional Western thought. If the only distinction is that nomadic feminist philosophy intermingles poetry with logic then such a style is as old—and as male—as Plato.

For Braidotti, however, style runs deeper. Metaphor does not merely acces-

sorize logic, it stands alongside it as an equal. Unfortunately, in her heady flight from the traditional, Braidotti gets caught in the rigorous muck that sticks to and holds together all of philosophical modernity. Thus, in the final analysis, the new nomadicism is really nothing more than the old postmodernism in drag.<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, Braidotti attributes “nomadic” to any brand of feminism that restores to thought “a freedom of movement and a vital power such as they have rarely known,” and that returns to ideas their “freedom of movement, their vital force, and their beauty. . . .” Of course, what these nomads are freed from is the now all-familiar bogeyman of feminism—“phallogocentric dogmatism.”

But Braidotti’s claim is thin on evidence in that it is based solely on a single claim by a single philosopher—Descartes. Unfortunately, this leaves her vulnerable to the charge of strawmanning with respect to the rest of classical epistemology.<sup>2</sup> For epistemology is not merely rationalism; rationalism is not merely Descartes; Descartes is not merely the cogito; and the cogito is only incidentally about the “I”—the “king of creation” of an ahistorical pure self. It is more fundamentally about broad, radical, philosophical skepticism (with a twist of theism tossed in).

Furthermore, there is the problem that without an “I” Braidotti’s exclamations (e.g., “I think it irresponsible” and “I am amazed”) are no longer hers. Such astonishments become no one’s or everyone’s, and I, as an “I,” do not want them for my own. More important, however, is the

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