Open Forum

Life in Theory

Three Feminist Thinkers on Transition(s)

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In this article, we present three well-known feminist theorists whose work has contributed to contemporary discussions about women in transition – Avtar Brah, Seyla Benhabib and Rosi Braidotti. Each has contributed to contemporary feminist thinking on migration, border crossing or transition and is, therefore, of interest for this special issue on 'Women in Transit'. All three theorists have developed metaphors which have enabled generations of feminists to think critically and creatively about women's experiences of migration and, more generally, about the problems and possibilities which border crossing entails.

These feminist scholars have not just dealt with the subject of transitions on a theoretical level, however. As we read what they had written about the subject of migration, we discovered references to their own biographical migrations as well. Each had, in fact, undergone multiple transitions in her own life. We became interested in how their biographical experiences of migration might have shaped or informed their writings on women in transition.

Our reasons for undertaking this project are both personal and scholarly. Helma Lutz, a child of refugees from the former East Germany, spent her early years in refugee camps in West Germany. She later moved to the Netherlands. Currently she works in Germany and has become a weekly border crosser. Kathy Davis was an 'army brat', moving from one military

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base to the other in the USA. She later moved to Germany and, six years later, settled in the Netherlands, where she has lived ever since. In addition to being migrants ourselves, both of us 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. 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.

We talked to Avtar Brah in Amsterdam. She was exhausted after spending a stimulating but strenuous week as a teacher in the NOISE Summer School, but graciously agreed to spend an afternoon with us. In order to meet with Seyla Benhabib, we travelled to Hanover, where she had been invited to give the prestigious Hannah Arendt lecture. We caught Rosi Braidotti inbetween conferences in her office at the graduate school for women's studies in Utrecht. The following is the result of our travels – and theirs.

AVTAR BRAH

Avtar Brah is a sociologist and teaches at the University of London, Birkbeck 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 conceptualization 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', which has since become highly influential in discussions in women's studies.

In the introduction of her book, Brah (1996: 1) 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.' 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'. To this day, Brah can listen to her mother's favourite song about a mother and daughter sitting together and talking and know that it made her think of her daughters. ('If I hear it today, I start crying, too.')

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' (Brah, 1996: 2). In the USA, 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 overnight. Brah's stopover 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 USA, 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' (Brah, 1996: 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 realized what it must feel like in the USA to be called a 'nigger'; to be outraged, mortified and, above all, *silenced* by racism. She remembers once walking with a black friend and suddenly realizing 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 realization 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.

On the one hand, Brah's 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' (Brah, 1996: 13).

At the same time, her biography of forced migration ('not being able to go home') and 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 focusing on the creative tension between them. At the same time, diaspora space acknowledges the 'entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put' (Brah, 1996: 181). As imaginary space (not community) which is 'inhabited' by those constructed as native and those constructed as migrant, Brah's metaphor, diaspora space, deproblematizes the migrant and opens up possibilities for us to view migration and travel as a global cultural, economic and political condition of late modernity. It is a concept of diaspora 'in which historical and contemporary elements are understood in their diachronic relationality' (Brah, 1996: 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 1970s, 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 know, 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 patronizing 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 – a 'bit of a collage' – 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 tried to enter the experience of a white, working-class woman in Southall[1] – the same community where Brah had done her fieldwork in the 1970s. Confronted by a community in which she saw only decay 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, you know. 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.'

But why was this article so difficult to write, we wondered. '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.' She sighs, perhaps remembering more than just her research agenda and the difficulties of getting funding for innovative and ambitious projects like her own: 'Holding it all together – it's a constant struggle.'

SEYLA BENHABIB

Seyla Benhabib is a philosopher and political scientist. She currently holds a chair in European Studies at Harvard University. Before coming to Harvard, she was professor of politics and philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. She has also held various guest professorships in Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries. Benhabib has published extensively on issues of gender, ethics, difference and postmodernism. More recently, she has written books on Hannah Arendt and on cultural diversity. 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 Gourges 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 20s, 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 post-doctoral studies with Habermas. A decade later, she went back to the USA which then became the axis of her 'transatlantic state of being' ('of never being here or there').

Albeit 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 USA, 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-1980s, 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 brought her to a sceptical re-evaluation of critical theory. She attacked the ideal of moral autonomy in universalist 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,[2] she is not willing to throw universalism overboard in favour of what she calls poststructuralist 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'etre. 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 understanding 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 USA I am Benhabib from Harvard.'

Benhabib's recent work on Hannah Arendt (Benhabib, 1996) resembles a project of homecoming in many ways. In the introduction, she stresses 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 Jewishness by writing about her (much as Arendt had written about Rahel Varnhagen). Benhabib nods in confirmation: 'I was fascinated by 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 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 whose 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.

ROSI BRAIDOTTI

Rosi Braidotti is a 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, 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 just 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 uses 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 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 honours at Canberra. While most Australian philosophers went to Oxford for their doctorate, Rosi 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 honours) 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 situatedness 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 long-standing critique of essentialism with her strong feminist commitment towards 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 makes no bones about the fact 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 centre – a centre 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.'

Any metaphor has its limitations. Braidotti acknowledges that some of the criticisms of 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 plans to deal with the criticisms of 'nomadism' in her next 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 disembedded, 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 is not a confessional book, but a genealogy about the context of her family's myriad migrations. Entitled *Rododendri* ('my mother's favourite 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.'

NOTES

1. 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.
2. 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.

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