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On reading *Transpositions*: A response to Rosi Braidotti's *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*

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Introduction

The following series of short papers by Lisa Baraitser, Patrick Hanafin, Clare Hemmings and Rosi Braidotti, emerged out of a 'Talking Books' event hosted by The Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in November 2008, in which a panel discussed Rosi Braidotti's 2006 book, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Polity) with the author. In *Transpositions*, Braidotti deals with ethical and political subjectivity in contemporary culture, making a strong case for a non-unitary or nomadic conception of the subject, against the claims of ideologies such as conservatism, liberal individualism and techno-capitalism. She argues that a new form of ethical accountability is called for that takes 'Life' as the subject, not the object, of enquiry. This ethics is presented as a fundamental reconfiguration of our being in the world and it calls for more conceptual creativity in the production of worldviews that can better enable us to behave ethically in a technologically and globally mediated world. The nomadic ethical subject negotiates successfully the complex tension between the multiplicity of political forces on the one hand and the sustained commitment to emancipatory politics on the other.

Response by Lisa Baraitser

Reading Rosi Braidotti's most recent book, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Braidotti, 2006), entails staying open to at least two sensibilities at

work in her practice of philosophy. One is her enormous commitment and capacity to accurately chart, map, and thereby account for the contemporary moment in its schizophrenic globalized and technologized phase. To remain committed to this cartographic element is itself a question of ethics, a response to Deleuze's call to be worthy of our times and to remain alert to what happens to us in the present of our own historical era (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The other, again heeding to Deleuze's articulation of philosophy as a mode of creativity that takes place through fostering 'style' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987), is to find ways to produce new responses to the complexities of such an era; responses that may take the form of political thought and action, shifts in social locations and relations, changes in our habitual modes of being, the production of artistic work that creates new imaginaries, and so on. It is therefore at odds with the whole sensibility of this wonderful book to respond to *Transpositions* simply using a critical mode of enquiry to assess the implications and ramifications of the substantial and sustained thesis of ethical subjectivity that she unfolds. To do so would overwrite what remains excessive in the experience of reading it. *Transpositions* is quite simply infectious, in terms of both its rigour and its creativity. So much so, that by the end one is both dizzy and sobered, alarmed and uplifted, impelled and impeded. Braidotti calls for us to join her in her delight and concern for the present, and to take up her powerfully articulated philosophical nomadism as one possible response. There is no wavering permitted. The answer to her call needs to be an emphatic 'yes', or 'no'.

Her preferred answer is of course 'yes'. Something of an abyss opens up between those of us still attached to post-structuralism, which Braidotti sees as having made an invaluable contribution, but is nevertheless now outdated, and those on the other side – the side of materialist, vitalist, nomadic modes of thinking more adequate to the paradoxes with which we live. Central to Braidotti's argument is that the contemporary era is no longer that of postmodernity. Without adequate cartographies of the structural paradoxes brought about by the double pull of advanced capitalism – the way it drives us towards profound individualism and simultaneously multiplies difference for the purpose of commercial profit – we will be unable to respond adequately with what are now ill-fitting philosophical frameworks. Psychoanalysis in particular belongs to the old order, as well as post-Hegelian dialectical models of subjectivity that have striven to give primacy to the other, from Levinas and Derrida through to Butler and Agamben. Braidotti offers us a generous hand across the abyss. Just leap, she seems to say; it is a question of 'faith' as well as thinking. If transposition is itself a notion that captures the essence of a leap from one code, field or axis to another, then to transpose ourselves we need to be prepared to take a leap across this particular abyss. 'I know about loss, about pain, about the struggles to give up old, habitual ways of thinking and acting', she calls to us from the other side, 'it won't be pain free, but all the same ...'.

The challenge Braidotti sets us has nothing to do with a liberal or humanist discourse that poses creativity as a mode of self-actualization. One of the mantras of the book that only really becomes intelligible through the power of sheer repetition is that the 'subject' must be proposed as simultaneously nomadic, and yet emphatically embodied and embedded. Indebted to Guattari's ideas about transversality (Guattari, 1995), Braidotti's 'subject' doesn't coincide with individuals, selves or persons, let alone the idea of an interior world. That subjects emerge as singular beings is the historical manifestation of subjects understood simply as modes of individuation within a 'common flow of *zoe*' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 158), where *zoe* is the non- or pre-human life force, traditionally relegated to the beyond of discourse and politics. Braidotti brings *zoe* in from the cold, foregrounding this brutal inhuman force as a productive category. Notions of self and other and their inter-relation fall away in the face of this de-territorialization of the subject. Instead, subjectivity is understood in terms of variations in intensities of forces that are mutually co-dependent rather than unitary subjects that are able to recognize one another. In addition, Braidotti assigns the body a crucial function in its capacity to both channel *zoe*, and set its limits. Braidotti's 'body' is radically immanent, the name for a relatively stable spacial and temporal assemblage of these intensities and passions that we call an individual self. Thought of in her nomadic mode, the body is a 'sexualized, racialized and enfleshed complexity' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 142), not a unity. It is 'a specific slab of enfleshed existence that single subjects actualize'. Braidotti's subject is still imbued with memory, imagination, desire, specifically differentiated bodies, even unconscious processes. But each of these terms is transposed so that they no longer refer to an individually held interiority structured by language, but to trans-individual processes such as gene expression, which contributes to the inbuilt temporality of the subject; the flow of intensity that creates feedback relations between self and reality; an addiction to life, and so on.

Much of this will be familiar to readers of Braidotti's earlier work. What marks *Transpositions* out, however, is the tying up of this nomadic, embodied and embedded subjectivity with a newer formulation of accountability and sustainability. What is 'ethical' for Braidotti is our capacity to recognize the power of *zoe* and to choose to be on the side of life – an ethics, that is, of affirmation. Braidotti is always careful to balance this with an acknowledgement of pain, specifically the pain of loss, of being uprooted from familiar and habitual modes of thinking and representation. There will be no movement, for instance, towards a post-nationalist European identity until some engagement with the loss of national identities can be acknowledged and relinquished. The ethical move here is the capacity to go beyond loss, pain and the negative passions more generally, towards new modes of identification. She likens this to shedding a skin. The work of moving beyond loss appears to be one of a systemic will, effort or commitment – at the end of

the day, the skin needs to be collectively shed, one way or another, despite the pain of doing so.

I want very much to sign up to this. I want to say yes to Braidotti's conception of ethics as the principle of dislodging anthropocentric ways of being, and becoming attentive to our fundamental reliance and inter-dependence on others, not just human others, but the vast array of machinic and 'earth' others that constitute singular 'beings'. Braidotti builds her account of the ethics of affirmation with enormous humility, always attending to the 'affective substratum' that is before her own thinking, using citation of other feminist, anti-racist, philosophical, scientific, political and cultural work to 'remember' in the continuous present. Given she works against dialectic, her task is not so much to overturn the old with the new, but to show how thought continuously zig-zags, which means she holds onto many aspects of the work of thinkers such as Foucault, Irigaray and even Freud, while adding in something new; in her terms 'scrambling the code'. This subtle motion between the old and new makes her work a rich gathering up as well as a radical break with past ways of thinking. She performs her philosophical nomadism with great skill.

But I have very bad habits, ones that don't feel so easy to kick. If you like, I'm addicted to ambivalence. One of the questions I have in relation to Braidotti's project is about process, or the 'how' of this leap. Although I want to believe that transpositions can occur through the active process of 'choosing' *zoe*, or 'forgetting' hurt, envy and resentment that block the route to an 'empowering present', I'm schooled in psychoanalytic ways of thinking that describe the incredibly precarious processes by which we develop capacities to detach ourselves from habitual modes of thinking and representation and make new identifications, and how often we fail, despite our best intentions, to manage this. I don't think that living with an awareness of this failure is the same as embracing a philosophy that celebrates loss, lack and aporia. I also want to be done with lack, and turn more to Laplanche (see Laplanche, 1999) than Lacan for an understanding of the always-too-much, rather than the lack of the other that constitutes subjectivity. Of course, Braidotti's shift is to de-anthropomorphize this statement. If life as *Zoe* is 'impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity' (ibid, p. 216) then as well as embracing *Zoe* as absolute vitality, Braidotti stresses the necessity of registering that *zoe* itself, not simply the 'other' is always too much. But I don't know how we are to make substantial changes to our modes of identification through sheer effort or will, and I think that simply acknowledging the pain of loss or actively trying to forget it, is not usually enough to create the conditions necessary for change, at least for these limited, moribund slabs of enfleshed existence we call 'human' beings. Despite knowing that it is absolutely the wrong question to ask in response to her work, I guess I am still asking what might be the difference

between transposition and working through, and whether each, with its own distinctive temporality, might not be necessary for the kind of change that Braidotti longs for.

Furthermore, Braidotti stresses that the body can only take so much before it cracks up. Cracking up *a bit* is inevitable, but the ethical task is to find joyful rather than negative ways of dealing with the overwhelming intensity of *bios/zoe*. Braidotti's ethics figures as an almost imperceptible dividing line between life and its extinction. In this sense, 'I can't take it anymore', the expression of the specific body's limit, can be read as an ultimate ethical statement. But this body sounds rather singular, autonomous and strangely unconnected to others, despite its constitution as a site for the intersection of flows and intensities. What if a body says 'I can't take it anymore', and another body nevertheless continues to hurt it? Has the body that has failed to find a joyful way of dealing with the overwhelming intensity of *bios/zoe* behaved unethically?¹ Does this not push all the responsibility for knowing when its enough back onto abused bodies, calling into question decades of feminist work on the dynamic interactions between dominance and submission that has sought to give back some of that responsibility to the one who wields power over the body of another? In addition, taking up Braidotti's notion of an 'intelligent flesh-mind-matter compound' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 184) that recognizes a continuum between thinking and bodily experienced affect, surely there is still something to be said for the notion that this mind-matter comes to recognize itself as mind-matter through our encounters with other specific mind-matter compounds, especially human ones, and not just with *zoe* itself? Leaving Hegel aside, even from a developmental perspective, we can trace with some small measure of predictability, some of the disturbances in our capacities to know the limits of our mind-matter and hence our very capacities to say 'I can't take it anymore' through tracking the minutia of early relational interactions between infants and care-givers. From this perspective, to have mind-matter is always to have mind-matter in relation to other mind-matter that helps to both establish, and simultaneously transgresses the infant's mind-matter. Following Laplanche, we come to have affective experience in the first place through the encounter with the enigma of maternal sexuality; itself, an encounter that marks affectivity as the already-too-much of all mind-matter.

I found myself incredibly moved, however, by an impassioned section in the closing passages of the book. Here Braidotti returns to the fundamental importance of difference, understood as the principle of not-One, in its capacity to mark 'a break as the site of origin of the subject' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 269). She writes:

This is what the psychoanalytic idea of the original loss stands for: it is the pound of flesh one needs to hand over in order to enter the socio-symbolic

contract. What is knocked out from the subject's psychic landscape is the delusion of One-ness, the phantasy of omnipotence. To recognize this basic, ego-deflating principle is the ground zero of subject-formation. The recognition of alterity in the sense of incommensurable loss and an unpayable outstanding debt to others entails the awareness that one is the effect of irrepressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of. This humbling experience of not-Oneness, which is constitutive of the non-unitary subject, far from opening the doors to relativism, anchors the subject in an ethical bond to alterity, to the multiple and external others that are constitutive of that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the 'self'. (ibid.)

Put like this, the leap doesn't seem so far after all, and even a coward like me might one day try it.

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Note

- 1 Claire Hemmings makes a similar point in this issue, identifying a certain idealization of the critic in Braidotti's work who has the capacity for both self-renewal and to know her own limits at the same time.

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On reading *Transpositions*: A response to Rosi Braidotti's *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*

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Throughout her latest book, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Braidotti, 2006), Rosi Braidotti observes that *we* are all in this together. The *this* that we are all in, the commodification of life in globalized biocapital, places an ethical responsibility on all of us to resist our position as subjects of control, to resist differently. It is a call for a nomadic ethics beyond the traps of territory and identity. In this we can see a development of Braidotti's previous work in *Patterns of Dissonance* (Braidotti, 1991), *Nomadic Subjects* (Braidotti, 1994) and *Metamorphoses* (Braidotti, 2002). She seeks to undo the hegemonic construct of the fixed and bounded transcendent subject of modernity and instead proffers a transversal subject that engages in a creative re-definition of politics from below. For Braidotti, this figuration of an active citizen can be seen in the multiple locations of the struggles of new social movements from feminism to environmentalism. In locating her rethinking of subjectivity and ethics in actually existing political struggles, she is engaging in a means of thinking the move from the *what* of – what she would term the transcendental arrogance of the subject – to the *who* of the complex singularities of the transversal subject.

The task for Braidotti then is to attempt to rethink the political in a manner that gives body to each unique individual, to re-imagine the way in which we conceive the political in order to undo the way in which the default setting of citizenship remains the disembodied transcendent subject. It can be said to constitute an active refusal of disembodiment. Who then is the *we* for Braidotti? This deceptively easy question forces us to think of another way of thinking political community. For it is not merely a question but an affirmation: Who *is* all of us in our material individuality, a community of anonymous yet embodied singularities who demand another thinking of the political. For Braidotti the *we* represents 'multiple and contradictory communities' rather than a hegemonic community. This is a politics and ethics of becoming something other than what we are defined as. This could be seen as similar to the Arendtian notion of the

political as the open space of interaction and communication between individuals. It would refer not to *what* those who share this space are, but to *who* they are. It is a space that subsists alongside the time of the political as currently conceived. However, this temporal space is not some utopian time to come, but one very much rooted in the present. It is the other time that coexists simultaneously with the time of the hegemonic political order. The fact that such alternative temporalities subsist simultaneously is made abundantly clear in Braidotti's own definition of her embodied position as holding a privileged position within European academe and also trying to create alternative spaces of thinking and acting from this privileged position. This living in and between both the linear time of the academy (*chronos*) and the circular time of critical praxis (*aion*) appears to be the paradoxical position in which the nomadic ethicist exists. Is there a way around this paradox? Or can there be or should there be? Is it all we have left as critical theorists or radical thinkers? This concern of the 'presumed capacities of the critic' is one that Clare Hemmings addresses in her contribution to this issue. Does the critic have a political role or more importantly can or should the critic have a political role? More importantly, how can this role be subverted or reinvented?

Reading this work as someone who engages with the politics of the legal subject, my interest in *Transpositions* lies in the way in which the mode of thinking subjectivity as transversal may help provide a political and ethical counter-narrative to the imposed bounded subject of liberal legalism. This would involve a move from a thinking of legal subjectivity as deathbound and always already male, to a thinking of singularities without identity who relate to one another and to the environment in which they are always provisionally located. In order to develop a conversation between Braidotti's nomadic ethics and critical legal theory, we need to push her thinking further and in other directions. Braidotti is of course not primarily concerned with engaging in a critical legal analysis of the subject, but throughout the book tantalising references are made to what one might call a critical politics of rights, which are not developed at length. In what follows, I want to take these threads and discover to what extent Braidotti's work may be productive for a critical philosophy of law.

The majoritarian masculine legal social compact is built on the desire to survive.¹ This is not a politics of empowerment but a politics of entrapment in an imagined natural order. In this paradigm, as Barbara Duden notes: 'flesh is extinguished and replaced by a disincarnate notion' (Duden, 1993). Braidotti's thinking of the differential 'we' who are all in this together engages in an undoing of this *what* of the masculine legal subject. Braidotti's critique of Peter Singer's utilitarian liberal model of animal rights provides us with a key to opening up Braidotti's thinking of liberal rights discourse. She notes that Singer's model of animal rights is tantamount to a becoming-human of animals (Braidotti, 2006, p. 107). This model contains the same flaws as those of the

traditional liberal model of rights as applied to humans, that is it is a hegemonic model informed by a notion of social relations that valorizes male power and capitalist social organization. As such, those groups who seek legal recognition based on their excluded identity find themselves being constructed as what Wendy Brown has called 'wounded attachments' as being recognized as full citizens only through their position as victim. This backward-looking recognition of loss creates a model of rights attached to injury and victimhood. Braidotti's alternative model premised on philosophical nomadism states that 'no qualitative becoming can be generated by or at the centre, or in a dominant position. Man is a dead static core of ego-indexed negativity' (ibid, p. 107). This becoming-animal of the human helps us to move beyond the trap of making rights discourse another form of subjection under the guise of emancipation. The question left hanging is how might one develop in this model a thinking of rights that undoes the basis of rights discourse as based on loss and injury? This resonates with Lisa Baraitser's concern in this issue to be 'done with lack' and to distinguish a living with failure from philosophical celebration of loss and lack.

How might the default setting of liberal rights discourse that Singer falls into, that is the granting of rights to animals within the framework of the abstract and always human subject of rights, be transformed or transposed by a more holistic relational notion of rights which takes account of our relation to other citizens, animals and the environment? This is a critical question for the relation between law and political struggle. It calls for a detailed interrogation of the possibilities of thinking rights with sexual difference and environmentalism in a more sustained and creative way, which would break down the imposed limits and borders contained within rights discourse. This can be interpreted as a call for a relational politics in which individuals are no longer the mere masks that resound with the fixed speech of law, but unique existents who speak to another who listens. How can we think of a relational notion of right dislodged from the repressive state apparatus?

In this regard Braidotti's notion of becoming-imperceptible is linked to the becoming-animal of humans in its uncoupling of another foundational binary of western philosophical thinking that of a life qualified by death or a political philosophy which valorizes our mortal condition and creates a politics of survival. This notion of becoming-imperceptible expresses what Gilles Deleuze has termed the mode of being *as if already gone* (Boutang, 1995). To be as if already gone is to accept death and not allow it to become the limit of thinking, that is, a living with, or being with death, which sees it not as an intruder but as that without which we cannot live. The ultimate threat to a legal order built on death control is the individual who refuses to accept law's prohibition to self-style their death, the one who refuses to be styled by law's speech. In self-styling one's death one is choosing to affirm one's life and the desire not to live a degraded existence. This act is lost on those blinded by a conservative morality

that opposes death to life. This majoritarian politics of survival attempts to arrest death by composing a narrative that valorises life.

As she stresses throughout her discussion of the question of biopolitics, Braidotti's approach is based on a *zoe*-politics. Braidotti's reading of biopower is indebted to both Deleuze's vitalist ethics and feminist theory. This is an intriguing intervention in debates on biopolitics and allows us to think of a politics of life (as material embodied singularity) as a resistance to the established order of Life (as transcendental and always already male subject). Braidotti regards the feminist practice of the politics of locations as the 'missing link between the theory and practice of a non-unitary, relational and outward-bound definition of the subject' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 251). In this regard Braidotti does not specifically refer to the work of Adriana Cavarero who offers another innovative way of reading biopolitics via a different theoretical trajectory, but nonetheless one that shares a similar outlook or sensibility.² It would be interesting as a follow-up project to see how Braidotti might bring to bear in greater detail Cavarero's thinking as a means of developing this point further. In particular, I can see in Cavarero's notion of the *absolute local* common points of concern for a radical politics of singularities. For Cavarero, the *absolute local* refers not to *what* those who share this space are, but to *who* they are. This space is the space of the *who*, the unique individual. It is a space that subsists outside the time of the political. Cavarero's relational thinking engages in a deconstruction of belonging, the marginalization of qualities and the depoliticization of the *what*. Like Braidotti's thinking, Cavarero's is wedded to actually existing political struggle. It is not a utopian political space, an academic ivory tower cut off from the urgency of the political, but is embedded in actual political praxis. Cavarero also looks to sexual difference thinking as an exemplar for a radical politics. For her, 'the theory of sexual difference becomes a concrete politics tied to the material context where language is generated' (Cavarero, 1995, p. 99). In this sense there is no divide between theory and practice, theory is a praxis that impacts on the political.

In seeking 'a micro-politics of becoming and an ethics' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 142), Braidotti's nomadic ethics bears relation to what William Connolly calls an 'ethos of engagement' with existing social givens, which may bring about unexpected consequences or transformations. This process Connolly terms 'an ambiguous *politics of becoming* by which a new entity is propelled into being out of injury, energy and difference' (Connolly, 1999, p. 160). This is a politics of self-artistry that can result in a transformation of accepted notions of the political. Connolly's notion of an ambiguous politics of becoming is a useful one in reading what Braidotti is trying to achieve critically and politically. Any attempt to think beyond actually existing politics is rife with risk. It requires an undoing of and thinking against accepted models of subjectivity, identity and politics. This process cannot be achieved within the confines of one book or many. It can only be achieved paradoxically by continuing to work

within and against the *chronos* of the hegemonic political order. This book is part of such a process, a discourse on method in becoming something other than what one is. The book could be seen as an example of the praxis of refusal of the actually existing political order that is also an affirmation in Blanchot's sense. This negative affirmation is perhaps all that remains for us as committed writers. As Blanchot has put it:

To bring to light the singular character of this refusal is one of the theoretical tasks of the new political thinking. This theoretical undertaking obviously does not entail drawing up a programme or a platform, but rather, independent of any programmatic project, indeed of any project, maintaining a refusal that is an affirmation, bringing out or maintaining an affirmation that does not come to any arrangements, but rather undoes arrangements, including its own, since it is in relation with dis-arrangement or disarray or else the non-structurable. (Blanchot, 1995)

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Patrick Hanafin is Professor of Law at Birkbeck Law School, University of London. He has been a visiting professor at the School of Law at the University of Porto, Portugal and at the Law Faculty at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He has held research fellowships at the European University Institute in Florence and at the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School. His books include *Conceiving Life: Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy* (2007); *Constituting Identity: Political Identity Formation and the Constitution in Post-Independence Ireland* (2001); and *Identity, Rights and Constitutional Transformation* (with Melissa Williams) (1999).

Notes

- 1 For an illuminating analysis of this phenomenon see Cavarero (2002); also Cavarero (2003) and Esposito (2002).
- 2 See further Braidotti's introduction to Adriana Cavarero's book *In Spite of Plato* (Cavarero, 1995).

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On reading *Transpositions*: A response to Rosi Braidotti's *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*

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Response by Clare Hemmings

Rosi Braidotti's most recent book, *Transpositions: on Nomadic Ethics* (Braidotti, 2006), continues to develop the author's feminist critical engagement with the world she lives in, and might best be understood as the last in the trilogy following *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Theory* (Braidotti, 1994) and *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Braidotti, 2002). As in all her work, Braidotti brings together a passion for theory and creativity in order to address the key question of what constitutes a useful political attitude for the social critic interested in having something real to say about the complexities of everyday experience. From the outset, Braidotti invites us to read her writing as a series of

transpositions that respond to and intervene in contemporary life. That this is indeed an invitation is confirmed by the ongoing refrain that grounds the book: 'We are in this together'. The 'we' for Braidotti is a loose collectivity of progressive, left-leaning cultural and social critics, whose current responsibility is to develop an ethically accountable attitude to the 'this' we currently inhabit (I interpret Braidotti's 'we' a little differently from both Lisa Baraitser and Patrick Hanafin, who read it more expansively). Anything less than this intention constitutes bad faith on the part of the critic for Braidotti, and I agree with her.

Unlike many writers who form part of what has been called the 'material turn', however, Braidotti never settles for easy answers about what this attitude should include. In this vein, *Transpositions* resists certainties about the nature of either the subject or object of enquiry, and avoids being prescriptive about what precisely a critic should do or think in order to approximate the accountability she desires. Braidotti's openness in this respect derives from her refusal to oppose poststructuralist and materialist perspectives, and following this, a refusal to let go of her conviction that both the 'we' and the 'this' of her refrain are non-unitary, changing and therefore tend to the elusive. For Braidotti, complex, adaptable critical attitudes are essential if the horrors of late capitalist proliferations are ever really to be altered. The critic's responsibility, then, must partly be to hold political commitment apart from the nostalgia for (fantasies of) unity in either subject or object of analysis, as only then will she be truly present and capable of meaningful action. And she will need to reinvent herself again and again to repeat this relevance.

It will come as no surprise to those familiar with Braidotti's work that she chooses Donna Haraway and Gilles Deleuze as her guides in this endeavour. The critical attitudes and epistemologies nurtured in *Transpositions* are those that emphasise processes of becoming – woman/animal/machine – over those that rely on reified or codified knowledges, or 'habits' of thinking and being in world. For example, critical responsibility in the present requires being able to leave behind the banalities of identity politics. For Braidotti, the oppositional thinking of identity politics, the already known of what is marginal and transgressive, is as deadening as the capitalist imperatives that prioritise empty fame and wealth. Instead, we need to invest in the serendipity of connected values and pleasures that emerge from being in and of life. Further, stubborn attachments to old ways of thinking and being in the world – habits again – only provide superficial or temporary satisfaction, and in fact actively work to sap life of its creative energy and the critic of her political passion. We must move out of our comfort zones, reassess our everyday habits and capacities for connection; this is the only way of ensuring that we are acting affirmatively on the side of non-profit, of lasting rather than superficial transformation, of the new rather than the resin-cast. Thus, Braidotti's call is as much for a change of style, an altered aesthetics of meaning, as it is for a different epistemology. Indeed, it is counter to the spirit of *Transpositions* to separate out these 'attitudes' in the first place.

What a serious and generous book *Transpositions* is! It is rare (proving Braidotti's point of course) to read a theoretical text that values creativity over critical distance so rigorously and vigorously, and that risks being damned on the basis of a refusal to be prescriptive. Implicit in her call is a chiding: we (critics) want our work to be relevant to this (changing) world, but we want to remain untouched in the process. We want to comment from the sidelines and retain a clear sense of who we are; we want to know in advance and finally what the answer to the question 'what are we to do?' will be. And that, insists Braidotti, is disingenuous and irresponsible: worse, it has something in common with the populist certainties that propel the search for individual over collective well-being.

That responsible critical habits need to presume rather than foreclose change is not to say that 'anything goes', however. In fact, Braidotti spends considerable time in the book exploring the importance of *limit* to what we can individually or collectively become. To focus on limit appears to contradict her emphasis on 'lines of flight', but for Braidotti, if critical connection is not to overwhelm and destroy in addiction mode then we must also be able, enable ourselves, to say that enough is enough, or 'I can't take (it) anymore'. The idea of limit expresses an ability to disconnect and reflect long enough to re-enter the political and critical fray. It includes an important reflexivity that values experience as knowledge and can thus take account of warning signs to help circumvent the critical exhaustion that leaves us bitter or inert. In this sense, Braidotti's insistence on the importance of limit is driven by her interest in sustainability of political engagement. My sense here is that Braidotti is splicing pragmatist and optimist traditions together, in order to hold her paradigm back from falling into a pure hedonism of unknowing that would also lack care. This balancing act – between the possibility of spinning out of control on the one hand and inertia on the other – is the basis of ethics through the book, and this is why the concept of location remains so important. To be located – grounded even – is to be able to reflect on possibilities for transformation as they arise in the moment of *their* transformation, but from a particular place and with likely effects uppermost in mind. This is essential for critical sanity.

Despite this emphasis on limit, however, I must confess to several anxieties that lingered for me when being invited to become political otherwise, which, as for Lisa Baraitser, do indeed circle around this issue of too much possibility. I think in this I remain more Foucauldian than Deleuzian in my interest in staying with/in the knots of time rather than being propelled into transformed, transposed alternatives that I find too dizzying and that I have been unable to generate real feeling for. I wonder, for example, what it means that so much of *Transpositions*' passion rests on the capacities of the critical subject, even while concerned with her dissolution as she currently knows herself. She has the ability to be transformed, while her passion is her commitment to non-profit, her ability to risk and her refusal to reside in the banal. But can her critical passion ensure that transposition attaches to the non-profit in this way?

Can critical force alone achieve this suturing of what is good and careful to the 'we' who are struggling to make sense of the complicated life we find ourselves within? What I am getting at here is that such affective certainty seems at moments to split off the good from the bad in ways that curiously ignore the complexity of the 'this' that Braidotti otherwise cherishes. What are we to do or be to enable accountability for the moments when what we thought was non-profit turns out to have been consumerism all along? And in related vein, what if we do not know our limits, except when they are thrown back in our face?

Let me try and approach this problem from another angle. My uncertainty is partly about the presumed capacities of the critic, but it is also bound up with concerns about temporality. From the habits that deaden us, to pain and pleasure that we are encouraged to leave behind, to the implicit call to invest in a future than is different from the one we can currently imagine, time runs back and forth in *Transpositions*. The present is the time and place of ethical make or break, is the time for us to commit to breaking old habits and invest in becoming-otherwise. We must work now – hard, fast, carefully – within and outside of ourselves in order to remake the past and re-imagine the future. The critic must be ever vigilant, full of energy, self-transforming while remaining true to a progressive politics, even when moving outside of herself, beyond anthropomorphism (a key theme throughout the book). But should we invest so heavily in what sometimes tilts into transcendence, particularly when we take into account the important issue of limit that Braidotti lingers over? Not only does the force of the saturated present feel like a new kind of critical burden – 'be ever vigilant!' – the concept of limit that guides *Transpositions*' ethic of care is most likely to be retrospective. 'Enough' is frequently a cry too late or a cry too early; 'I could have stayed later', or 'I should have left earlier' are the phrases that let us know that some other duration would have been the right one. Having had 'one too many' cannot undo the past, of course, but can only precipitate the resolution to do better next time. The 'we' who are in 'this' present together always seem to be relinquishing the past, shedding our skin or rushing headlong into things we may regret.

And perhaps it is so; hindsight may indeed be the epistemological and ethical inclination most suited to the present. But I worry (still) about the way that ethical capacity here seems to rely on the critic's concomitant capacity for self-renewal, for attaching steadfastly to the good and the true even through her transformations, and for knowing her own limits. It relies on the ability to 'get back out there' that belies the impact of the worst blows that we undergo and that not all people possess or can sustain. Are only the strong-hearted, the ones who can stand the openness and survive retrospective clarity, the inheritors of an ethical future? For the abandonment of the devastated not to be the implication of a politics of transposition, we need to be attentive to both loss and possibility in the present, it seems to me. The ability to get back up must surely depend on what has been lost, how often and with what

consequences. We cannot, and should not in my view, insist on becoming-other over and above acknowledging what has been lost in the past and present, because we need to be able to take stock, and not just of those left standing. In this respect, we need to be all too human, rather than seeking too soon to see with different eyes.

About the Author

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Powers of affirmation: Response to Lisa Baraitser, Patrick Hanafin and Clare Hemmings

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Let me thank first of all my colleagues for their thoughtful and generous comments on my work. I feel very inadequate in trying to do justice to their critical insights.

I shall consequently limit my ambitions to the simple task of explaining a few concepts that have guided my work over the past 5 years.

The starting point is the insight I share with Patrick Hanafin that 'the traditional bounded subject of liberal legalism' is situated within the horizon of mortality as the defining feature of his agency (the gender is no co-incidence). My project of affirmative politics is an attempt to relocate critical praxis within a non-necrological perspective and hence to stress vitalism and productive activity. In so doing, indeed, I cross the thin line that separates cultural critique from political praxis, as Clare Hemmings astutely notes. Insofar as psychoanalytic theory partakes of a Hegelian tradition of negativity, I also put some distance between myself and all that, as Lisa Baraiter rightly points out.

My generation, trained by the poststructuralists in a hermeneutics of suspicion about the unitary subject of liberal political social and legal theory, struggled endlessly with a central paradox: how to combine incisive and lucid critique with the production of alternatives, criticism and creativity; reason and the imagination have been perennial concerns. In my own writing, this paradox was unfolded in a number of inter-related issues:

1. How to balance the creative potential of critical thought with the necessary dose of negative criticism and oppositional consciousness it entails?
2. How to resist the present, more specifically the violence of the times, while being worthy of our times, and hence engage actively with the present conditions?
3. How to expand the understanding of the political subject so as to create the optimal conditions to strive for the production of social horizons of hope, and hence for sustainable futures?
4. How to include the non-human, the animal and the planetary others in this enlarged understanding of political subjectivity today?

Let me state at the outset that there is nothing wilful or voluntaristic about this – I think rather the very historical condition of advanced global capitalism make it imperative to raise these questions. In books like *Transpositions*, I provide detailed and reasoned cartographies of our present historical condition in defence of this statement. It is not a matter of choosing to stick to the old humanistic and anthropocentric ways of thinking, but rather of being historically propelled into a situation in which we need to think differently about who we are in the process of becoming.

Moreover, the context we are operating in is saturated with its own negativity: from the environmental concerns and the multiple 'natural disasters' that punctuate our existence, to the state of perennial warfare we have entered since 2001 – which includes the militarization of the social space and of all border controls. Contemporary bio-political governance includes therefore a

hefty necro-political dimension, which fuels a political economy of negative passions in our social context. We live in a state of constant fear and in expectation of the imminent accident.

In this global context, what used to be the high-energy political activism of the Left has been replaced by collective mourning and melancholia. A great deal, if not most, of contemporary social and political theory stresses vulnerability, precarity and mortality. As far as I am concerned, our political sensibility has taken a forensic shift: the astounding success of Giorgio Agamben's 'bare life' (1998), with its emphasis on destitution and genocidal destruction and the revival of interest in Carl Schmitt's homicidal politics of friends and foes are strong expressions of the contemporary obsession with political violence, wounds, pain and suffering.

I do not want to suggest that the politics of mourning and the political economy of melancholia are intrinsically reactive or necessarily negative. A number of critical theorists argue forcefully the case for the productive nature of melancholia and its potential for creating solidarity (Butler, 2004; Gilroy, 2004). I am also convinced that melancholia expresses a form of loyalty through identification with the wound of others and hence that it promotes ecology of belonging by upholding the collective memory of trauma or pain. My argument is rather that the politics of melancholia has become so dominant in our culture that it ends up functioning like a self-fulfilling prophecy, which leaves very small margins for alternative approaches. I want to argue therefore for the need to experiment with other ethical relations as a way of producing an ethics of affirmation.

I want to take consequently a very different direction and argue the case for affirmation, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's neo-vitalism, but also indebted to Nietzsche and Spinoza (Ansell-Pearson, 1999). The focus in this line of thought is on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. The key terms in this affirmative politics are relations, endurance and radical immanence; the result is the notion of ethical sustainability. References to the non-human, inhuman or post-human play a very central role in this new ethical equation that rests on a fundamental dislocation of anthropocentric premises about agency.

Beyond Oppositional Negativity

Critical theory assumes political subjectivity to be about resistance, which is expected to mean the negation of the negativity of the present. Being against implies a belligerent act of negation of the present conditions: a double negative that engenders an affirmative. I want to argue instead that oppositional consciousness is not the same as negativity and that, as a consequence, critical theory is about strategies of affirmation. Nomadic

political subjectivity consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit, for ourselves and for future generations. As Adrienne Rich put it in her recent essays, the political activist has to think 'in spite of the times' and hence 'out of my time', thus creating the analytics – the conditions of possibility – of the future (Rich, 2001, p. 159). Critical theory occurs somewhere between the no longer and the not yet, not looking for easy reassurances in dualistic oppositions, but rather for evidence that others are struggling with the same questions. Consequently, we are in this together.

This shift of perspective assumes philosophical monism and a strong ethical and affective component of subjectivity; it is thus an anti-rationalist and anti-dualistic position. Conceptually, it borrows from Deleuze the idea that a subject's ethical core is not his/her moral intentionality, as much as the effects of power (as repressive – *potestas* – and positive – *potentia*) his/her actions are likely to have upon the world. It is a process of engendering empowering modes of becoming (Deleuze, 1968). Given that in this neo-vitalist view the ethical good is equated with radical relationality aiming at affirmative empowerment, the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others. Oppositional consciousness and the political subjectivity or agency it engenders are processes or assemblages that actualize this ethical urge. This position is affirmative in the sense that it actively works towards the creation of alternatives by working actively through the negative instance by cultivating the relations that are conducive to the transmutation of values.

In other words, the work of critique must not assume that the conditions for the overturning of negativity are necessarily available in the present time or space. Moving beyond the dialectical scheme of thought means abandoning oppositional thinking. This means that oppositions are not tied to the present by negation and hence emerge out of a different set of premises, affects and conditions. Affirmative politics rests on a time-continuum that indexes the present on the possibility of thinking sustainable futures. The sustainability of these futures consists in their being able to mobilize, actualize and deploy cognitive, affective and collective forces that have not so far been activated. How to ethically assess and format these forces becomes a crucial issue for critical theory – in terms of an ethics of affirmation that is also an ethology of forces. These driving forces concretize in actual, material relations and can thus constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others.

Such a vision of the subject, therefore, does not restrict the ethical instance within the limits of human otherness, but also opens it up to inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces. The emphasis on non-human ethical relations can also be described as a geo-politics or an eco-philosophy, in that it values one's reliance on the environment in the broadest sense of the term. Considering the extent of our technological development,

emphasis on the ecology of belonging is a form of bio-centred egalitarianism (Ansell-Pearson, 1999) that posits a nature-culture continuum (Haraway 1997) within which subjects cultivate and construct multiple ethical relations. The concepts of radical or neo-vital politics become very relevant here. According to this pragmatic ethical approach, we need to create the conditions for the emergence of affirmative relations, by cultivating relational ethics or becoming.

An affirmative ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others. This practice of relating to others requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centred individualism. It implies a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged sense of community, which includes one's territorial or inhuman, that is, environmental inter-connections. It is an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings for subjects constituted in and by multiplicity.

What is Affirmation?

In order to understand the kind of transmutation of values I am defending here, it is important to de-psychologize this discussion about negativity and affirmation, and approach it instead in more conceptual terms. What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative affects can be transformed. This is not a matter of faith, but of praxis or political conviction. It implies a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning. The slightly de-personalizing effect of the negative or traumatic event involves a loss of ego-indexes perception, which allows for energetic forms of reaction. Clinical psychological research on trauma testifies to this, but I cannot pursue this angle here today. Diasporic subjects of all kinds express the same insight. Multi-locality is the affirmative translation of this negative sense of loss. Following Glissant (1990), the becoming-nomadic marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances. Every event contains within it the potential for being overcome and overtaken – its negative charge can be transposed. The moment of the actualization is also the moment of its neutralization. The ethical subject is the one with the ability to grasp the freedom to depersonalize the event and transform its negative charge. Affirmative ethics puts the motion back into e-motion and the active back into activism, introducing movement, process, becoming. This shift makes all the difference to the patterns of repetition of negative emotions. It also reopens the debate on secularity, in that it actually promotes an act of faith in our collective capacity to endure and to transform.

What is negative about negative affects is not a normative value judgement but rather the effect of arrest, blockage and rigidification, which comes as a result of a blow, a shock, an act of violence, betrayal, a trauma or just intense boredom. Negative passions do not merely destroy the self, but also harm the self's capacity to relate to others – both human and non-human others – and thus to grow in and through others. Negative affects diminish our capacity to express the high levels of inter-dependence, the vital reliance on others that is the key to both a non-unitary vision of the subject and to affirmative ethics. Again, the vitalist notion of Life as 'zoe' is important here because it stresses that the Life I inhabit is not mine, it does not bear my name – it is a generative force of becoming, of individuation and differentiation: a-personal, indifferent and generative.

What is negated by negative passions is the power of life itself – its *potentia* – as the dynamic force, vital flows of connections and becoming. And this is why they should neither be encouraged nor should we be rewarded for lingering around them too long. Negative passions are black holes. This position is an anti-thesis of the Kantian moral imperative to avoid pain, or to view pain as the obstacle to moral behaviour. This displaces the grounds on which Kantian negotiations of limits can take place. The imperative not to do unto others what you would not want done to you is not rejected as much as enlarged. In affirmative ethics, the harm you do to others is immediately reflected on the harm you do to yourself, in terms of loss of *potentia*, positivity, capacity to relate and, hence, freedom. Affirmative ethics is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost and dispossessed. One has to become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection: one has to endure.

Endurance is the Spinozist code word for this process. Endurance has a spatial side to do with the space of the body as an enfleshed field of actualization of passions or forces. It evolves affectivity and joy, as in the capacity for being affected by these forces, to the point of pain or extreme pleasure. Endurance points to the struggle to sustain the pain without being annihilated by it. Endurance has also a temporal dimension, about duration in time. This is linked to memory: intense pain, a wrong, a betrayal, a wound are hard to forget. The traumatic impact of painful events fixes them in a rigid eternal present tense, out of which it is difficult to emerge. This is the eternal return of that which precisely cannot be endured and, as such, returns precisely in the mode of the unwanted, the untimely, the un-assimilated or in-appropriate/d. They are also, however, paradoxically difficult to remember, insofar as re-membering entails retrieval and repetition of the pain itself.

Psychoanalysis, of course, has been here before (Laplanche, 1976). The notion of the return of the repressed is the key to the logic of unconscious remembrance, but it is a secret and somewhat invisible key that condenses space into the spasm of the symptom and time into a short circuit that mines the very

thinkability of the present. Kristeva's notion of the abject (1982) expresses clearly the temporality involved in psychoanalysis – by stressing the structural function played by the negative, by the incomprehensible, the un-thinkable, the other – of understandable knowledge. Later Kristeva (1991) describes this as a form of structural dissociation within the self that makes us strangers to ourselves.

Deleuze calls this alterity 'Chaos' and defines it positively as the virtual formation of all possible form. Lacan, on the other hand – and Derrida with him, I would argue – defines Chaos epistemologically as that which precedes form, structure and language. This makes for two radically divergent conceptions of time, and – more importantly for me today – of negativity. That which is incomprehensible for Lacan – following Hegel – is the virtual for Deleuze, following Spinoza, Bergson and Leibnitz. This produces a number of significant shifts: from negative to affirmative affects; from entropic to generative desire; from incomprehensible to virtual events to be actualized; from constitutive outsides to a geometry of affects that require mutual actualization and synchronization; from a melancholy and split to an open-ended web-like subject; from the epistemological to the ontological turn in poststructuralist philosophy.

Nietzsche has also been here before, of course. The eternal return in Nietzsche is the repetition, not in the compulsive mode of neurosis, nor in the negative erasure that marks the traumatic event. It is the eternal return of and as positivity. In a nomadic, Deleuzian-Nietzschean perspective, ethics is essentially about transformation of negative into positive passions, that is moving beyond the pain. This does not mean denying the pain, but rather activating it, working it through. Again, the positivity here is not supposed to indicate a facile optimism, or a careless dismissal of human suffering. It involves compassionate witnessing of the pain of others, as Zygmunt Bauman (1993) and Susan Sontag (2003) point out – in the mode of empathic co-presence.

Being Worthy of What Happens To Us

This de-linking of pain from suffering is not fatalism, and even less resignation, but rather a Nietzschean ethics of overturning the negative. Let us call it *amor fati*: we have to be worthy of what happens to us and rework it within an ethics of relation. Of course repugnant and unbearable events do happen. Ethics consists, however, in reworking these events in the direction of positive relations. It is not a matter of wilfulness, nor is it carelessness or lack of compassion, but rather a form of lucidity that acknowledges the meaninglessness of pain and the futility of compensation. It also re-asserts that the ethical instance is not that of retaliation or compensation, but it rather rests on active transformation of the negative.

What is an adequate ethical question? One that is capable of sustaining the subject in his/her quest for more inter-relations with others, that is more 'Life', motion, change and transformation. The adequate ethical question provides the subject with a frame for interaction and change, growth and movement. It affirms life as difference-at-work and as endurance. An ethical question has to be adequate in relation to how much a body can take. How much can an embodied entity take in the mode of inter-relations and connections, that is how much freedom of action can we endure? How much activity can be put into activism? Affirmative ethics assumes that humanity does not stem from freedom but rather that freedom is extracted out of the awareness of limitations. Affirmation is about freedom from the burden of negativity, it is about achieving freedom through the understanding of our bondage.

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