

**FORMER  
WEST:  
ART AND  
THE  
CONTEMP  
PORARY  
AFTER  
1989**

Edited by  
Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh



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BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht  
The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England

This book has been published in the context of the curatorial and artistic research experiment FORMER WEST (2008–2016) developed by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht and realized through manifold partnerships with artists, theorists, activists, as well as art and educational institutions transnationally.

To all committed to forming the west.

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## Preface in Place of a Postscript

Maria Hlavajova

I hazard that a preface, even though neatly placed at the beginning of a volume, is usually written at the very end of a project, often just before the presses begin to roll, as is the case here. As it happens, I am writing as the 2016 United States presidential election day slides into its final hour, while the north of Europe, where I find myself confronting the news in disbelief, is already well into a new day. The phased, staggered dawn feels violent and unsettling. For the country that routinely calls itself the leader of the free world has just blatantly shown that bigotry, xenophobia, misogyny, racism, climate change denial, etc., are at the core of how it wants to be governed. All this to loud jubilation of right-wing ideologues in the west and across the globe, saluting the birth of a new world order, once again.

Twenty-seven years ago on this very day, a rather different vision of the new world order was projected with the end of the Cold War—one that the curatorial and artistic research experiment FORMER WEST has set out to inquire into. Then, the world's uneven division into the "first," "second," and "third" was said to be recomposed around an imaginary of another—singular, common—world. It was a tune different from the one we're hearing this morning, though it could be that in 1989 we could not quite hear through the noise of an old world's falling masonry, or foresee the impending reality, and understand how soon and

FORMER WEST

## A Missing People

Rosi Braidotti (in conversation with Maria Hlavajova)

MH: To think through constructions of a “we” in the present, I would like to begin this conversation with your notion of the “posthuman.” In your 2013 book *The Posthuman*, you suggest that after the assortment of “posts,” be it postmodern, post-industrial, postcolonial, post-communist, post-feminist, etc., “we seem to have entered the posthuman predicament,” as “the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns.” You write that “[f]ar from being the nth variation in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and somehow arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.” What do you mean when you say that the posthuman is decidedly *not* a concept? And, given the posthuman condition, how do we conceive of a “we”?

RB: For me, the crucial thing about the posthuman is that it is a *navigational tool*—a conceptual persona, a figuration. It is not a substantive concept, the way, for instance, “difference” is. With a navigational tool, one can produce a cartography. For me, such a cartography emerges from the intersection of three important philosophical sources. Firstly, from Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis, which focuses on the power

relations operational in the production of multiple social, scientific, political, and personal discourses circulating in our sociopolitical order. Foucault does not separate documents from monuments, texts from history, theories from practices; in this respect, he is a true materialist. Power, from his perspective, is both restrictive (*potestas*) and empowering (*potentia*) at the same time. It is not a question of either/or, but of and-and. This means that a dialectical scheme of analysis, which functions by binary oppositions, fails to capture the very nature of the multifaceted, multilayered, and multidirectional political economy of our time. If power is *not* linear, nor can be our resistance to it, especially in terms of the production of knowledge and subjectivity.

Secondly, such a cartography emerges from the monistic ontology of critical Spinozism, that is to say, the vital neomaterialism of my nomadic philosophical approach. And, thirdly, crucially, from feminist theory, notably, the feminist politics of location, also known as situated knowledges, to use respectively Adrienne Rich's and Donna Haraway's terms. In my estimate, feminist theory has invented the politics of bodily materialism, that is to say, the embodied and embedded politics of immanence.

What this amounts to is a new grounding for a relational ethics that starts from the production of epistemic and political accounts of one's location in terms of space (geopolitics, class, ecological dimensions) and time: a location is a time zone (a historical or genealogical dimension). Such cartographies are not only collectively produced, but are also exchanged among different parts of a political subject. For nomadic thinkers, this is an "assemblage"—a transindividual form of subjectivity. Simply put, we need to be able to agree on the basic parameters of the locations we inhabit and the world we live in. One of the characteristics of times of crises like ours is that people don't seem to live in the same world. In the context of Brexit, the pro-Leave and the pro-Remain camps have a dramatically divergent vision, not only of Great Britain's role in the European Union and the world, but also of what Britain is all about to begin with. They each simply work with different cartographic accounts. Furthermore, a nomadic assemblage, or a transversal subjectivity, does not involve human agents only. These assemblages also include the ecological (Félix Guattari would say the ecosophical) dimension, as well as technological mediation. The encounters of these heterogeneous elements—politicized, transversal subjectivities; earthly "others" like animals, plants, the planet as a whole; technological mediation—compose a plane of immanence.

That is a mouthful, being philosophy, but what it comes down to is that politics begins by composing a "we"—a people, if you will—that was missing until that moment. "We" coalesces, driven by political passions, in a space of relational interaction. This is the process of composition of a materially embodied and embedded nomadic entity—a community, a people. What binds them—us—is the praxis of cartographic thinking aimed at the construction of new political subjectivities. They are

bonded by what Genevieve Lloyd calls in *Spinoza and the Ethics* (1996) a "collaborative morality," and which I recast in the mode of an ethics of affirmation. This assumes, of course, a Spinozist and, therefore, monistic vision of life-as-becoming; the rejection of transcendental universalism and mind-body dualism; and the emphasis on the intelligent and self-organizing force of vital matter. We—humans and non-humans—are driven by the ontological desire for the expression of our innermost freedom, which I call *potentia* (and Spinoza calls *conatus*).

MH: In these terms, could one think the proposition of "former west" to be an example of such a collective drafting of contemporary cartography?

RB: I indeed understand "former west" to be such a composition. It is an example of an attempt to compose a cartography of the contemporary by way of a conceptual experiment with thinking differently about our location. One can find parallels to this in my reworkings of methodological nationalism and the conceptual Eurocentrism of critical theory. I share with you the desire to address the epistemic and world-historical violence engendered by the self-aggrandizing claims to universalism of the so-called west. In my professional career, I have observed how much of our time has been wasted arguing the basic case that was supposed to have been obvious to everybody, namely, that the "man" of European humanism is not the center of the universe. I am a student of Foucault, and this might be his main meta-methodological imprint on me. For him, critical thought is the cartography of the fallout of the crisis—the crisis being the death of "man" (and of his "second sex"), the reduced status of the human, the decline of the west, etc. But, paradoxically, the analysis is not fully negative. Firstly, it contains the germinal life of possible futures. Secondly, there is an instrumental use of the crisis, as Gayatri Spivak has noted: it becomes the *modus operandi* of the former imperial subject. It will take a long time for that former imperial subject to accept that it is no longer the center of the world, and not even the center of what used to be *its* world. Think of the extent to which pro-Brexit Britons refer to their empire—as if it still existed! In the same vein of thought, Achille Mbembe said recently in *Libération* that France has a great deal of difficulty coming to terms with the world today, because it still thinks the world turns around a French universalist image of reason and "man." But living matter is nomadic; it is in perennial motion. The world has moved on, and sprouted multiple, scattered, new centers that flow somewhere between Caracas, São Paulo, Johannesburg, and Mumbai. Any European and North American center of what we used to call the west (defined less as a specific geopolitical location than as an abstract set of qualities, norms, and values), has to find its place alongside these. There is room, but it's not the same place the west has been accustomed to: this new location needs to be negotiated multilaterally and is not to be taken for

granted. Moreover, in the process of subject-formation, we have another crucial change: the new location needs to be articulated against a great deal of emotional and cognitive resistance and ignorance from within. In order to accomplish this kind of qualitative change, one needs to disidentify from former privileges and entitlements. This is a sort of tactical unlearning, which both feminist and postcolonial theories have written eloquently about, and which means leaving behind the familiar idea of the “human” and moving nomadically across the unknown. We need to disidentify from “man” and learn to think differently about ourselves. We need to learn specifically from the South of the world, in its multiple locations.

Given all this, the “post” of the posthuman as a navigational tool allows us to account for these ongoing developments in the order of the production of knowledge within advanced capitalism. That order has been historically, ethically, and cognitively humanistic, Eurocentric, and blindingly anthropocentric. As you can see, I am not particularly nostalgic about it.

MH: You have systematically engaged with work that displaces this very anthropocentrism as both “a habit of thought” and a value system, advocating the philosophy and practice of relationality. Could you speak to your critical reconsiderations of the ecological nature-culture continuum in western thought and politics?

RB: Here is where situated cartographies come into the picture, posing a complex quandary for somebody like myself, a woman on the left. In regard to your question, the problem has always been that green and red politics do not match: environmentalism and Marxism have often been at odds with each other. Historical Marxism, based on a Hegelian philosophy of history that predicates progress through different phases dictated by reason, is also based on the principle that progress is achieved by emancipation from the limitations of a natural order: nature is that which we need to be liberated from. In feminist and anti-racist struggles, nature is an issue; it is not a neutral term, but one that indexes access to power, entitlements, and the right to be fully human. The classical left is anthropocentric by conceptual necessity, with a couple of exceptions—Rosa Luxemburg being a major one. The legacy of Marxism includes major deficits in terms of environmental thinking, which is often dismissed as a merely “cultural” phenomenon, and in relation to feminism and postcolonialism, which are often reduced pejoratively to “identity politics.” As somebody who is much closer to critical Spinozism and the politics of radical immanence than to an exclusive focus on the notion of “class,” I am weary of the long-term effects of the Marxist rhetoric of revolution. Of course, all this is changing rapidly within the context of the anthropocene. I recognize the work around the commons—including Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Commonwealth* (2009)—as a crucial attempt to bring nature back into the conversation on the left. But there is a long way to go.

There is another aspect to this: a monistic ontology based on Gilles Deleuze’s vital materialism also demolishes another classical division, that between natural entities and manufactured and technological ones. For Spinoza, there is no ontological difference between what is born or generated and what is made, because the nature of all things is their relational force, their ability to affect and be affected by others. Such an ethology of forces, which results in affirmative ethics, also produces a displacement of anthropocentrism as a habit of thought and as a value system. Guattari develops this point most fully in *The Three Ecologies* (1989) and his ecosophical approach allows for a nature-culture continuum that includes media and digital networks. This has produced what in 2005 Matthew Fuller called “media ecologies,” and ten years later, Jussi Parikka called “mediacultures.” In other words, the monistic vision of “life” as a symbiotic system expands the notion of “matter” into self-organizing vital systems, including the environmental, technological, psychic, social, and other kinds. Here, neomaterialist theory replaces the social-constructivist methods with the politics of radical immanence and the composition of transversal alliances or assemblages—both human and non-human, including technological agents—for the sake of actualizing alternatives. That positions media theory, cyber studies, and cyberfeminism at the heart of critical theory.

MH: But then, in the context of discussing the constructions of a “we” at present, it is not just *any* collectivity that one would want to belong to. Given the violent resurfacing of contemporary populisms and fascisms—both in a historical form that has survived the past century and in the new variety that brings alarming, ever more brutal socioeconomic, political, and cultural innovations—I am reminded how fascism embraces nature.

RB: This shows indeed how complex the condition under discussion really is, and that it cannot be approached through simple dichotomies. Now, as forms of fascism seep violently into the present, we need to keep in mind how historical fascism has loved nature, precisely because it made nature into a system that indexes hierarchical relations. The history of environmentalist movements is clear in this regard: the first “national parks” and special “reservations” in Europe, the United States, and Africa were initiated by right-wing regimes that assimilated the natural order to national heritage. That is still the case today, though more subtly. Benito Mussolini called the Mediterranean Sea “*Mare Nostrum*,” that is, *our* (meaning *his*) sea. This is the same sea that refugees struggle to cross today, but *their* sea is a liquid grave. The navigational tool of the posthuman sets up an operational agenda in order to negotiate such insidious fascist and colonial formations and distributions of power. The questions are: How does this reactionary legacy square with the global environmental movements of today?

Is green politics today more aware of its inner pitfalls? I think a lot of progress has been made. I am thinking of a seminal book by Rob Nixon called *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), in which he not only takes the Marxist left to task for its uncritical anthropocentrism, but also points out the blind spots of the US' environmental movement. The biggest blind spot being the neglect of the effects of US foreign policy on the earth and its habitats: the devastation caused by wars and bombardments far outweighs any other form of destruction of this planet. So, why is this aspect systematically overlooked in favor of recycling and other urbanized, lifestyle-oriented environmentalist practices? Yet, that being said, there are other significant developments occurring, like the transnational environmental justice movement, which assembles First Nations peoples, anti-colonial forces, media, and other activists in favor of land rights, and usually against global mining companies. Here, classical Marxism is revised with a global perspective, but it is also supplemented by indigenous epistemologies, anti- and decolonial politics, and advanced uses of information technologies. With their emphases not only on land, but also on clean water, and with reliance on non-western spiritual value systems, these movements are among the most promising at the moment. You see, one needs to keep the bigger picture in mind and work very hard to keep track of where the posthuman predicament is leading us. We need complexity and relational ethics. We need cartographies of knowledge and praxis that help us spot the generative potential of ongoing developments. We need embedded, embodied, accountable readings of what's happening, which include the posthuman cartography of new power relations, as is the case in the contemporary iterations of what we call fascism.

I have fought concentrations of power and fascism all my life. And yet, here we are, in the Netherlands, with Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom ever so popular! Fascist policies and attitudes are once again surfacing in Europe and elsewhere, with enormous consequences. Not only do we see new renditions of the despicable colors and shapes we know from historical fascism, which today so effectively manage to mobilize the masses, as Foucault had it, there is also that fascism in us all to contend with: "In our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us." The love for the strong leader who promises to save us; the glorification of resentment and other negative passions; the legalization of racism and xenophobia—these are some of the micro-fascisms of today. In his extraordinary preface to the 1983 edition of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Foucault equates the book to an "introduction to the non-fascist life," and I have devoted myself to explore precisely "this art of living counter to all forms of fascism." I think that is our foremost task, in art and in academia. To think and practice non-fascist lives. "Do not become enamored of power," we must insist together with Foucault and Deleuze.

MH: It is indeed fundamentally disturbing to observe how contemporary fascisms shape our present in ever more sophisticated disguises. From within this disconcerting condition—or perhaps in spite of it—throughout your work, you have advocated for affirmative ethics as a form of political activism in both critical theory and practice. You have written about it as something of a "creative paradox," compounded by contextual considerations of our historical condition as defined—by and large—by an alarming growth of xenophobia and racism, paired with a lack in our capacity to negotiate coexistence with those from whom we differ, or with whom we don't agree. You also claim, considering that the binary opposition of the Cold War era has been replaced by an all-pervasive sense of threat and global paranoia—whether related to migration and the so-called refugee crisis, environmental catastrophe, or the dysfunctional institutions of public life (academia included)—that we must find other ways of learning to live in a world of entanglement, and of entangled differences. What does this recasting of critique as affirmation really mean? And, put somewhat bluntly, how does one do politics with affirmation within the present predicament?

RB: You've just sketched a mini-cartography of the contemporary rise of the inhuman aspects of the posthuman condition, including the micro-fascisms nested in its midst. The kind of affirmative I have in mind in such a context is not a triumphant optimism, and decidedly not in the sense of "good life" fantasies or the semi-holistic pacification of antagonisms and conflicts, as is often assumed. That would be a caricature of affirmative Spinozist politics. The standard objection the left has raised against monism concerns precisely the danger of passive acceptance of the conditions of the present: If all matter is one and self-organizing, is there not a risk of acquiescence to the status quo? How do the politics of radical immanence differ from the geometries of dispossession? Is the appeal to ontological positivity not just a form of indifference to the messiness of real-world relations and experiences? So many real-life relations are negative, destructive, so what do we make of these?

The point of ontological monism is not the universal sedation of conflicts, but rather the setting up of a non-dialectical structure of differentiation. Such a structure accepts the analytic function of binary oppositions, but rejects their substantive and normative dimension. In other words: in the current system, to be *different-from* means to be *worth-less-than*. Such a distinction is not written in nature, but rather codified in a social system that indexes gradations of difference in terms of power relations, and which become naturalized by force of habit. This is what monism wants to change. Non-dialectical difference—or the positivity of difference—is the advantage of a monistic worldview. By extension, a non-antagonistic play of differences and disagreements is perfectly feasible. This is what Deleuze and Guattari are getting at with their emphasis on praxis based on the actualization of the virtual.

This praxis is primarily ethical—it aims at overturning the negative social and political charge of difference—but this ethics defines our politics: it is the ethics of affirmation. Whereas in a dialectical system antagonistic oppositions generate the revolutionary energy, the impetus for progress, the politics of radical immanence works differently. We start with the reliance on cartographies, which assumes that critical thinkers can and must endeavor to access the present in order to account for its power relations in a situated and non-transcendental manner. The point is this, however: accounting for a set of conditions does not mean accepting them. It is quite the opposite: we focus on some conditions—say, the posthuman—in order to study how they are composed, and what forces and material interests keep them afloat. This cartographic approach not only identifies the points of resistance (a classic of biopolitical thought), but, more importantly, injects creative alternatives into the system. We first need to compose a collective assemblage, a transversal kind of subjectivity—a missing people who labor to actualize virtual alternatives. Far from being a form of complicity with the system, this project aims at overturning it.

The real difference between a Marxist and a critical Spinozist vision is the cartography of advanced capitalism. In my view, dialectics cannot explain the current state of schizophrenia we are in (to reference the subtitle of Deleuze and Guattari’s magnum opus). Capitalism is neither a productive nor a dialectically-structured system. It is a process-ontology that continues to reterritorialize and recode through multiple flows of information. It is an axiomatic system, which gives no arguments or reasons for what it does, but is driven by flows of re-stratification, which are driven by the short-term profit principle. There is no logic, no philosophy of history, no cutting-off point. The adequate political response is the collective production of counter-codes and alternative flows of political desire. If we have multiple mechanisms of capture, then, it follows, we also have multiple forms of resistance on the part of non-unitary, nomadic, posthuman subjects.

MH: What does this mean for activist practice, and, more specifically, for the composition of what you call “a missing people”?

RB: Of course, it follows that we also get multiple different ideas about how activism and a non-dialectical politics of liberation work. I have stated in my trilogy on nomadism that the big lesson of feminism and anti-racist, postcolonial thought is that political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of dialectical opposition, but can rely instead on creativity, that is to say, affirmation. What is affirmative is the overturning of dominant negativity in the forms of resentment, social injustice, fragmentation, envy, and hatred. What is also affirmative is the pursuit of the actualization of counter-values. A counter-actualization strives to sustain processes of transversal subject-formation that do not comply with

the dominant norms. These counter-subjectivities are enacted through a collectively shared praxis and support the process of (re)composition of what is not yet there: a missing people.

Dialectics is a “readymade” system that relies on a robust—albeit antiquated—philosophy of history; it provides the conditions for resistance through dialectical negation; it gives a leading role to the intellectuals, and has a messianic vision of the future. All very reassuring, it’s no wonder this system sounds so attractive. But for me, dialectics rests on a mistaken cartography of the political economy and structural features of advanced capitalism. Once again, the politics of radical immanence starts by assembling people who share the same cartography—say the posthuman condition—and on the basis of that alliance or assemblage, different forms of action get activated. Radical immanence, or the nomadic politics of becoming, is multilayered: it is simply not the case that we need only *one* political line. Many modes of engaging with power relations are needed, considering that we are facing one thousand plateaus of domination. Nor is it the case that theory—notably, philosophy—is supposed to give us all the answers, neatly contained within its premises. Action precedes theory, always.

MH: Through a composition of the missing political subject . . .

RB: The political subject of this praxis is not given, and it is certainly not generated through a dialectical template. “We” are always a missing people: our subjectivity needs to be composed as a collective assemblage around shared desire to actualize new potentials. Our politics (the desire for change) is supported by our relational ethics (relational capacity to assemble and coalesce). The political aim is not pre-set by a deterministic philosophy of history, but needs to be composed and activated by interrupting the flows of codification of advanced capitalism. Think of the commons—the digital and other commons, of indigenous land rights, of the unregistered migrants’ battle to actually “be” here in the EU, etc. Basically, the wager is that, at this point in history, “we” simply do not know what our enfolded selves, minds, and bodies—as one—can actually do. “We” need to find this out by composing a transversal platform where we can assemble, discuss, and draw adequate cartographies of our condition, embracing an ethics of experiment with virtual intensities. Speaking of which, I am referring to *a* people, as opposed to any conception of *the* people. For all populisms, whether from the left or the right, are the same to me. On the right of the political spectrum, abstract appeals to sacralized notions of cultural authenticity have replaced the rhetoric of blood and soil. Cultural essentialism disguised as civic pride is today’s right populism and it is deeply racist. On the left of the political spectrum, classes devastated by decades of economic decline and enforced austerity have endorsed the public expression of white people’s—mostly men’s—anger, producing a virulent form of urbanized, indigenous

populism. A sharp sense of wrong, of injury disguised as political disenchantment, is today's left populism; it is deeply misogynist as well as xenophobic. I cannot accept either of these sides.

In this context, the affirmative is not a psychological state. The affirmative is a way of processing the pain of social and symbolic marginalization. It is an ethology of passion. It is what makes this very conversation possible; we are an assemblage, and together, the two of us relate to thousands of others. This is also what makes it possible for somebody like you—who is working on reclaiming the space of art, to work differently, as a space of being together otherwise, and, I would think, as a space of critical citizenship—not to die of depression, anguish, and despair at the spectacle of *la misère du monde*. It is what has enabled us to draw shared cartographies of advanced cognitive capitalism together for so many years now. A body-without-organs in the body that is experimenting with the actualization of the virtual. In Spinoza's sense, it is the embrained body and embodied brain at once, but it is also a nomadic body in becoming. The thinking collective body that functions as an assemblage to produce an adequate understanding of the conditions of our unfreedom, our bondage, our marginalization.

To think affirmation from here means to uncover a type of political economy whereby you pursue an ethical good made by the mappings of the multiple relations of which you are part, as your factor of hope. It doesn't mean that you're particularly in a good mood. It is a method for extracting knowledge from pain, by transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost, dispossessed. A motor for the collective construction of horizons of hope, for creating conditions that would allow an assemblage of a people that could act in the face of pain, work through pain. It is not a situation where the intellectual, or theorists like you and I, can be in charge; it is a humble, collective working-through. A critique related to the present not through negativity and subsequent frustration, but in its being directed toward creating the conditions of possibility for overturning this very negativity, and thereby actualizing alternatives—even if the conditions for that are not necessarily available in the present time and space. We can “borrow” the energy to act from the future, as it were. For the future is nothing more than a sustainable present, activated in the construction of hope. Or, put differently, the future is the memory of what will have been a just and fair world, which we need to activate now.

**This is an edited version of a series of conversations between Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova that took place in August–October 2016.**

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978-0-262-53383-6



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Distributed by the MIT Press  
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
 Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142  
<http://mitpress.mit.edu>  
 Printed and bound in Belgium