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Nomadic Encounters: Turning Difference Toward Dialogue

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Abstract

This chapter explores the usefulness of Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity in navigating through cross-cultural feminist research while studying abroad. Employing an experimental writing style, the piece investigates ways in which Braidotti's writing can provide a companion theory as well as an inspiration for students studying abroad to reflect on their estrangement from home in terms of a possibility to see the world through new eyes and to be transformed in ethical ways. Braidotti's theories prove notable here for their usefulness in assisting students studying abroad as they face the challenge of thinking through cross-cultural difference in creative and nonreductionist ways.

Keywords

nomadic feminism, cross-cultural research, feminist and queer methodology, femme, figuration, national exclusion, home, (be)longing, study abroad, collaborative writing

This chapter explores the usefulness of Rosi Braidotti's theories of nomadic subjectivity in navigating and thinking through cross-cultural encounters and research while studying abroad. Written as a collaborative effort on the part of a Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) professor and two students, these reflections arise from our shared set of educational experiences in Antioch's traveling Women's and Gender Studies in Europe (WGSE) program. Across these journeys, rife with cross-cultural encounters and challenging us to negotiate creative approaches for thinking nonreductively through difference, we have found Rosi Braidotti's work to be indispensably instructive. The chapter is experimental in style, and it combines the theoretical and practical questions marking our journey with student personal accounts and critical reflections.

As the WGSE program director, Iveta has been bringing groups of US undergraduate women's/gender studies students on this program to Utrecht, Berlin, Prague, and Krakow for a decade now, connecting regularly with WGS scholars in Utrecht. Across the years, WGSE students are regularly overjoyed in meeting Braidotti and listening to her lectures on Continental feminist philosophy, sexual difference theory, neomaterialism, or postsecularism. One of the highlights of the WGSE program, Braidotti's lectures introduce students to questions of situatedness of theories and of how scholarly inquiry, including feminist scholarship, travels in today's globalized world.

Along with Braidotti helping introduce WGSE students to Continental feminism, her figuration of nomadic subjectivity offers a fitting framework for cross-cultural research into feminist topics that each WGSE student conducts as the group travels across Europe. While "collecting" information and building a basis of knowledge on the topic of their choice, students are asked to conceptualize their research comparatively, root it in specific cultural and geopolitical contexts, and avoid projecting patterns and frameworks of meaning from their experiences in the United States. Being away from home for a whole semester and experiencing pangs of homesickness, students struggle to approach difference in its own distinctive context while often at the same time (on a personal and emotional level) yearning for the familiar. It is in these respects that the potential utility of Braidotti's writing first expresses itself to us, providing a companion theory and a challenge, as well as an inspiration to reflect on the estrangement from home not only in terms of a loss but also in terms of a possibility to see the world through new eyes and to be transformed in ethical ways.

One of the difficulties WGSE students face when they come to Europe to conduct their feminist research is that they sometimes repeat the mistake that the US feminist scholar Kendall initially made when she traveled to Lesotho in the early 1990s in search of "fellow lesbians." Taking for granted that women who love other women in southern Africa would inevitably be making sense of their life experiences and sexuality along the same identity categories as what she was accustomed to in the United States, Kendall was surprised that her questions about lesbians and lesbian sex did not resonate with the locals and were met with confusion or laughter (Kendall 1999, p. 162). Bringing along our preconceptions and categories of expectation—often despite better intentions—is a story reaching back long before late-twentieth-century feminist scholarship's efforts at coming to know the world through encounters across distance, and it should not be surprising to find new iterations today. One of the unique things about Kendall's experience is her learning from the disconnection she found to adjust her ears and eyes rather than continuing to insist that reality conform to what prior life had prepared her for.

Now a generation later, into the second decade of the 2000s, WGSE students still tend to bring their cultural and generationally specific expectations about identity categories with them abroad, although this time, the context is Western and East-Central Europe, with the students more often looking for queer- or trans-identified persons rather than lesbians. As Joy writes later on in this chapter, "As a queer *femme*, I came to Europe in pursuit of people like me." Confusion and disappointment follow when these exact identity scripts do not materialize, and often this failure is understood in terms of some sort of time delay, lag, or lack. Driven by an assumption of sameness, this search for identity categories that would be recognizable through US

students' eyes in a way fosters sameness in a performative way while helping foreclose the possibility of people making sense of their gendered and sexed life experiences through contextually specific paradigms.

In this chapter, we wonder what benefits there might be for WGSE students of deliberately, for a semester, "suspending," so to speak, the sociological concept of identity as *the* primary analytical tool, and instead approaching their cross-cultural feminist research through the prism of the continental philosophical concept of (postmodern) subjectivity. Specifically, might there be benefits to approaching field research from the position of Braidotti's "nomadic subject" and along the lines of her language of "figuration"? Braidotti's project seems particularly appropriate for cross-cultural research set in Europe in that it is marked by its conscientious exploration of European locations' specificity. Furthermore, the nomadic subject's persistent emphasis on the feminist concept of location and on a careful mapping of different encountering positions could, we believe, operate as a corrective against quick identity projections and unexamined value judgments. As Braidotti has articulated it herself, nomadism is about "speaking from somewhere specific and hence well aware of and accountable for particular locations" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 15).

How would our perception of ourselves and our approach to others (including foreign others) change if we sought to think through the prism of Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity as driven not only by one's conscious will but also by unconscious desires (Braidotti 2011c, p. 124)? How would our understanding of global politics and transnational exchange change if we took seriously, with Braidotti, the charge to supplement (the necessary) struggles for political rights with a (equally necessary) project of mapping and transforming the cultural imaginary? And would transnational encounters benefit from following Braidotti's plea to carefully account for one's location (understood as both a geopolitical space and historical/cultural memory)?

The insistent attention turned toward the politics of location seems the main strength of Braidotti's nomadic project if activated in cross-cultural research. In our understanding, foregrounding the politics of location would amount to (1) reflecting on the researcher's own historical and present status as a culturally embedded and embodied (sexed, gendered, raced, etc) subject, and (2) drawing a cartography of the interviewees' subject position, while also (3) accounting for and unraveling power differentials between the two (or more) emergent subjects in process. In such an intersubjective encounter, the objective would not be to (mis)recognize one's identity scripts in others, however differently they might be culturally located, through a projection of one's own ways of organizing life onto them. Rather, the starting point—carefully reflecting on one's location—already implies a process of a mutually transformative encounter, as for Braidotti one's location "is not a self-appointed subject position but rather a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 16). As she emphasizes, because "a great deal of our location escapes self scrutiny," the politics of location requires "an intervention of others" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 16). Starting cross-cultural research by accounting for one's location would thus mean collectively negotiating an account of one's cultural embeddedness through interactive exchanges with others. Such intersubjective dialogue-ing would ideally result in one's heightened self-reflexivity and the developing of a "critical distance between oneself

and one's home grounds" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 16), which could then work in the direction of avoiding the pitfalls of quick value judgments.

Braidotti's conscientious re-writing of the concept of difference would provide additional inoculation against judgments of difference as lagging or lacking. Braidotti's project seeks to unhinge difference from the Hegelian oppositional framework in which alterity tends to be reduced to inferiority. Adopting the Spinozian/Deleuzian ethical, relational, collective subject driven by the desire to be affected by, and to affect, others, the objective is to open oneself to encounters with difference, understood on its own terms rather than hierarchically. Rather than about passing value judgments, encounters with alterity (including cultural alterity) are here imagined as mutually affirming projects of drawing cartographies of different locations and mapping the transformations that result from these intersubjective encounters. Rather than reduced, difference is affirmed.

Finally, we understand Braidotti's "figuration" both as a literary genre and as a feminist methodology of self-reflexively narrating one's encounters with difference. The different positions that make the cross-cultural encounter are carefully mapped out, and the transformations that took place accounted for. Research conceptualized along these lines might not be about looking for specific identities but rather about "mapping emergent subjects," where the language of an emergent subject includes the researcher as well. At the end of the process, rather than narratives of cultures presumably lagging behind (because of not procuring wanted identities), we might have figurations of cross-cultural encounters, of subjects in process, and of mutual transformations. The researcher-subjects' self-reflexivity would be enhanced, along with their understanding that their ways of experiencing and organizing the world through specific identity categories might be provincial and culturally specific rather than universal.

Conducting their cross-cultural research on *femmes* in the Netherlands and Poland (Joy) and mixed-race Dutch Indonesian and Afro-German women (Kelsey), Joy and Kelsey reflected on the yearning for sameness they both experienced and with which they struggled. Their self-reflections (see below) illustrate how the longing to "recognize familiar in unfamiliar" was at least partially motivated by the feelings of homesickness they experienced while abroad. Kelsey, in particular, engages the figure of home directly in her reflections, using Braidotti's writing to reflect on the concept of home as she works through her own, more immanent sense of homesickness, taking occasion to compare these experiences with interviewees' parallel, although quite different, sense of perpetual homelessness. As a woman of color traveling and studying in Europe, Kelsey did not come to Europe expecting to find perfect reflections of herself in other women. Yet, she writes, "I was certainly hoping for flickering resemblances." Kelsey continues:

> My status as a traveler and a foreigner, particularly as a person of color in Europe, felt wrought with precarity and slippages that I could not foresee. I was anxious for moments of closeness with other mixed-race women of color, no matter how disparate our diasporic histories or distinct our national and racial affiliations. Braidotti insists that nomadism is about "critical relocation" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 15).

Becoming nomad involves a consistent attentiveness to where you have been, where you are going, and who you are as a product of perpetual departures and arrivals. Of course, it is difficult to critically relocate while still reeling from the shock of dislocation. While I was expecting to feel out of place, I could not have predicted that my positionality as a (North) American would be so frequently contested, making my once stable status as an American interlocutor in cross-cultural encounters more untenable.

In our initial conversations about cultural sensitivity on the WGSE program, we were encouraged to purposefully counter negative stereotypes about the "American Tourist" as a rambunctious and callous space-taker with a voice steeped in imperial grammar. I started modulating my voice on the street. I did not want to constantly mark myself as foreign, but more precisely, I did not want to announce myself as a foreign (North) American. However, as weeks passed, I realized that my earliest impulses to manage my visible and auditory American status were futile. When one of my peers mentioned that her American-ness was not immediately visible in Germany but that she still had to self-police the bigness of her voice to take up less space, I felt for the first time how her white body phenotypically excused her national origins, making her voice and our language her only adversary. I could travel through the Netherlands, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland without saying a word and my brown body would still be audible and incapable of pardoning my foreignness.

When I was walking silently through the train station in Leiden and a middle-aged Dutch man muttered "dirty Moroccan" as I passed, I felt the loudness of my brown body and how it functioned as unintelligibly American and ambiguously "Other." I sought refuge in the mixed-race Dutch-Indonesian and Afro-German women I interviewed and, as a result, I found that homesickness inspired many of my questions. I attempted to override our otherwise mercurial affinities, resulting from oscillating degrees of (un)familiarity with the socio-cultural conditions of each other's lives as mixed-race women with incongruous national landscapes. I only wanted to lean into sites of confluence. I went abroad and wanted to see home there.

Braidotti argues that "The nomad does not stand for homelessness . . . it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 57). When I first encountered this provocation, I could not digest it. The nomad as an eternally "dynamic and changing entity" felt like precisely what Braidotti resolutely claimed it was not: a disembodied metaphor without a literal referent (Braidotti 2011c, p. 5). Braidotti's nomad registered as a mythical conglomeration of romanticized notions of limitless mobility that does not account for the disorientation caused by nonvolitional movements. I imagined subjectivity without a desire for fixity as an impossible foreclosure of longings for "home." What I failed to account for is that formulations of home are fundamentally volatile and inherently shape-shifting. Our desires for home are not usually about grafting where we have been onto where we are going, even if the narratives we tell ourselves about going home might indicate an eternal struggle to grow backward while

growing forward. Home, like any location, "is not a self-appointed and self-designed subject position," or a geographical and emotional position internalized by affected subjects, "but rather a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 16). Conceptions of home often shift imperceptibly as different communities and environments affect us so rapidly and relentlessly that we cannot recognize ourselves and our desires as perpetually emergent.

I thought I would feel most at home talking to mixed-race European women about the fragility of racial ambiguity and frustrations of racial misrecognition, experiences that felt most formative to me as a multiracial American. These topics, while resulting in the flickering resemblances I craved, felt remote to me in Europe. Our speech only became frenzied and eager for immediate contact when we spoke about the categorical foreignness associated with being a person of color in Europe. Locating my racial "home" no longer followed the same conversational patterns and topical trends. Slipping out of my race and American-ness while abroad and into local European articulations of national eccentricity as a result of racial otherness untethered me from parts of myself I saw as more or less unchangeable.

When I spoke with Dutch-Indonesian and Afro-German women about race, nationality, and home, I intimately understood their experiences of peripheral and capricious national belonging. My sensitivity toward discussions of home and homecomings with the women I interviewed was generated by my own attunement with feelings of racial homelessness as a mixed-race woman in the United States, but it was also heightened by my prior knowledge of diasporic histories from a US-based academic perspective. Many immigrant populations in America have a contentious and complicated relationship with designations of home and nation, so when I encountered similar sentiments among Afro-German and Dutch-Indonesian women, I was able to contextualize their stories within larger narratives of diasporic dislocation. Although I was unfamiliar with the national and racial specificities of their experiences, I did have a pre-existing academic framework for thinking about diaspora and home that proved useful while I was researching in Europe, both for better understanding the experiences of the women I was interviewing and for processing my own racialization in Western and Eastern Europe. Our contemporaneous locations as brown women in predominantly white European spaces rendered us all nationally illegible, at least in public where people of color are routinely asked "Where are you from?" and "Don't you miss home?" Our conversations often felt like sites of mutual emergence where we became with one another and our positionalities were illuminated interactively. My alignment with their experiences of national alienation registered as an instance of Deleuzian "deterritorialization," a phenomenon that Braidotti describes as something that "estranges us from the familiar, the intimate, the known, and casts an external light upon it" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 16). Surprisingly, deterritorialized estrangement from what I knew of my racial and national self led to a kind of critical relocation and resultant self-reflection that clarified blind spots about my mixed-race identity in my "homeland".

When I shared that I was Latina, African American, Native American, and European with a woman in Germany, she paused and said, "Wow, you are just the face of the future over there, aren't you?" This statement marked a dramatic tonal shift in a serious conversation we had been having about how Afro-German people often feel alienated from national models of proper citizenship. No matter how foreign I felt in Germany, I had to remember that women like me, unlike the mixed-race European women I spoke with, were becoming increasingly marked as emblems of national futurity in the United States. Sensationalist journalism reports on census findings that indicate a rapid growth of mixed-race populations in the twenty-first-century US as a symptom of racial progress and a statistically ensured "postracial future." Of course, statistics aside, assertions of postracism are patently false.

While mixed-race North Americans are not explicitly told to go *back* home like many of the Dutch-Indonesian and Afro-German women I met, we are implicitly directed to go *forward* home, toward a postracial homeland that has yet to come. We are simultaneously of the moment and after the moment, prized for being not-yet. Before critically relocating myself as a mixed-race woman of color in Europe, I did not recognize that my own highly publicized but temporally postponed racial inclusion doubled as national inclusion. While I experience deferred access to a "homeland" in the United States, this does not disqualify me and many other mixed-race American subjects from receiving the benefits of spatial enclosure within the bounds of the nation and national futurity.

My conversations with Dutch-Indonesian and Afro-German women about shared feelings of foreignness, theirs perpetual and familiar and mine temporary and unfamiliar, generated moments of intersubjective emergence. Their highly marked national exclusion in Europe amplified my own unmarked national inclusion in the United States. Incorporation is often quieter than the loudness of alienation. Nations expel people loudly and hold people silently enough for the intimacy to feel natural to the point of being undetectable. By critically relocating myself as a mixed-race woman away from home, I saw my positionality at home for the first time.

While perfect incorporation and complete exclusion are both in a sense mythic figurations, Kelsey poignantly gets at materially significant differences in how boundaries across and within cultures are constructed and construed, which is a key step in their recognition and potential re-negotiation. While we should not forget that inclusion cannot have a meaning without the possibility, the potential threat, of exclusion, perhaps the mutual presence of each—the event of their coincidence—might destabilize or at least denaturalize the Other as fixed and given.

Joy's encounters with the varieties of European otherness began as a project of interviewing *femme*-identified women in two very different contexts of The Netherlands and Poland. After experiencing some frustration meeting lesbian/queer women who seemed to "look and act *femme*" but did not necessarily identify with the label, Joy realized the similarities between the motives and yearnings that underlay her search for *femmes* and Kendall's earlier search for lesbians. After reflecting critically

on her search for the familiar from the perspective of Braidotti's writing, Joy changed the way she conceptualized her research, reconsidering *femme* along the lines of Braidotti's figuration. What would happen if instead of looking for *femme*-identified women (as a sociological category) in Europe, we would approach *femmeness* as a sort of figuration or sensibility? Joy writes:

> As a queer *femme*, I came to Europe in pursuit of people like me: non-heterosexual women with a deeply political love and respect for femininity. My search for women who would identify as *femmes* yielded few results, however—a failure I attributed to temporal and geographical constraints. *Femme*-identified women were nowhere to be found in The Netherlands or in Poland, I conceded—and yet surely they would flourish if their respective countries would allow for it! Under this teleological, future-based logic of sameness, I wrote an ethnography analyzing the phenomenon of the "disappeared *femme*," in which I blamed the dearth of interviewees on the political climates of each country. Like Kendall in Lesotho, I didn't stop to consider how my definition of *femme* might in fact be a laughably inappropriate translation of Dutch and/or Polish lived experience.
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> As I composed my self-reflexive paper on the data I had gathered, however, I realized that my US-based concept of *femme* was in desperate need of redefinition. In searching for *femme* with a US gaze, I had unwittingly contributed to the othering—and disappearance of—queer femininity. And yet, I was not the only culprit. My research on homonationalism and post-communist Catholic heteronormativity had shown me the extent to which *femmes* in The Netherlands and Poland, respectively, truly were "disappeared'" And if this were the case, Europe was facing a tragic loss of potential.
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> I came to these realizations through engaging with the writings of Braidotti. Her work on nomadic subjectivity illuminated to me my failure in the field—by uncritically imposing an (limited) understanding of *femme* as an identity onto a foreign context, I had ignored the positivity of difference in favor of sameness and thus furthered an ethnocentric practice of speaking for, and not between, the Other. I felt disgusted with myself, certain that I had done a disservice to feminist research by projecting an Anglo-American identity on two climates that could not be further from the United States (and from each other) in terms of LGBT treatment. And yet, much as Braidotti opened my eyes to my mistakes, her writing also suggested a prospective remedy. In line with Braidotti's reframing of the question of identity, I came to wonder whether my research would benefit from seeing *femme* as a *figuration*, a "materially embedded cartography of different nomadic subjects" (Braidotti 2011c, p. 5).
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> And so, I have decided to rework my project entirely. Today I tell the story of *femme* in the spirit of *l'ecriture feminine*: articulating the body through an emphasis on sexual difference. I want to find out how women are silenced, but even more so, how *femme* has the power to, borrowing from Braidotti in the chapter *Identity, Subjectivity and Difference*, "stimulate a revision and redefinition of contemporary subjectivity" (Braidotti 2002h, p. 170). I couldn't help but notice how my interviewees want to speak—need to speak. Yet, so much of what we have

to say we don't have the words for, and so much of what we do say is wordless. It bubbles forth at once—a touch, a gesture, an expression. Our feminine lives are impossible to ignore.

I am also inspired by Braidotti's Foucaldian understanding of power not just as restrictive but also as empowering, affirmative (2011c, p. 4). Before I began this project, I was interested in the way embodiment had *failed* women—wasting the body away, quite literally cutting girls down to size. I am speaking, in part, of anorexia. And of forced institutionalization, the Modernist belief in psychosomatic sickness, with no thought to what might have induced it. In creating my *femme*-inist methodology, I am investigating how embodiment has *worked in our favor*. Today my research is on strength, not weakness—I am less interested in how women are overwhelmed and more interested in how we are overwhelming.

To begin with, I am looking into Julia Kristeva's idea of the semiotic—the bouncy, feminine unconscious. All my interviewees are writers and diarists, creating their own story. They are my collaborators. We are writing the unwritten, writing that which is secret and sinful and particular and not a man's story, not even a gay man's story. The universal story of womanhood is that it never gets told. And when it is told, we can't recognize it. I write in this subversive, diaristic way as a homage to my institutionalized sisters. I write a diary because I, too, need to be vulnerable. I need to give back.

My *femmes* know what it's like to exist in Kristeva's pre-verbal space. They are constantly talking, but no one is listening. They are the disappeared girls; their words are nonsensical, non-translatable. They erupt out of us in an archive of feeling. *Femme-on-femme* power transmits itself through affect, through compassion. Through letting other women be unabashedly themselves. I am aware that there is a wealth of resources on *femme* life: Dahl (2010), Hollibaugh (2000), and Nestle (1992). It is not something I have discovered; it can speak for itself. But oh, when it does speak! It uses words like home, like innate, like fluidity. *Femme* is not a solid immutable house; it is a collective space held up by affect. *Femme* is nonlinear. Braidotti writes:

> One of the strengths of feminist theory is the desire to leave behind a
> linear mode of intellectual thinking, the teleologically ordained style of
> argumentation most of us have been trained to respect and emulate. . . .
> It is important for feminists to break away from the patterns of masculine
> identification that high theory demands, to step out of the paralyzing
> structures of exclusive academic style. Nomadism is an invitation to
> identify ourselves from the sedentary phallogocentric monologism
> of philosophical thinking and to start cultivating the art of disloyalty.
> (Braidotti 2011c, pp. 23–4)

As *femme,* I cultivate this act of disloyalty. As *femme*-nist researcher, I am aware of my situatedness. As ethical subject, I am here to reach out. Across the Atlantic. Across the divide. Across the symbolic. Across language. I am here to learn and to yearn. My methodology is never dualist: mind and body go together. I am researcher

and researched. I am home and away. Braidotti shows us that an ethical subject is driven by desire for connections with radical otherness, where no recognition is required and difference is experienced on its own terms. A politics of becoming. There are limits to these micropolitics, but an ethical subject is always stretching those limits.

So, a politics of caring and accountability, then. We talk to each other across axes of difference to tell necessary fictions. There is no one right way to be here, to be queer.

Joy's realization with her encounters outside normativity demand of us imagination and improvisation and a resolve to move toward the other without recourse to the familiar tools of orthodoxy. Our nomadic encounters turn on our coming to realize the meanings engendered in the spaces between us. In a certain sense, the very qualities of identity, with all its commonly un-examined normative baggage, become cast in particularly clear relief when the world and the people around diverge from the familiar well-worn scripts we have come to know.

With their initial desire to "find home" foiled and recognized, Joy and Kelsey's focus shifts to the process of becoming subjects through dialoguing with those they meet during their travels. Reading Braidotti as a companion theory while traversing the European intellectual and physical landscape can sensitize the WGSE (and other study-abroad) students to pay attention to "the moments of intersubjective emergence" (Kelsey). Attention shifts from searching for the familiar and the same to letting difference (including one's own) unfold on its own terms.

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