

# Writing as a Nomadic Subject

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*I am rooted but I flow*  
Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*<sup>1</sup>

My lifelong engagement in the project of nomadic subjectivity has been partly motivated by the conviction that, in these globalized times of accelerating technologically mediated changes, many traditional points of reference and age-old habits of thought are being re-composed, albeit in contradictory ways. Paradoxically, old power relations are not only confirmed but in many ways exacerbated in the new geo-political context.<sup>2</sup> At such a time more conceptual creativity is necessary, and more theoretical courage is needed in order to bring about the leap across inertia, nostalgia, *aporia* and the other forms of critical stasis induced by our historical condition. It has become like a mantra to me: we need to learn to think differently about the kind of subjects we have already become and the processes of deep-seated transformation we are undergoing. The philosopher in me believes that a new alliance between philosophy, the arts and science is a crucial building block for this qualitative shift of perspective.<sup>3</sup> The writer in me, on the other hand, continues to muse about the complex ways in which the imaginary both propels and resists in-depth transformations.

## A MATTER OF STYLE

At the beginning of it all, for my generation, is the commitment to writing. Presented as a form of political and ethical engagement, it is essentially a visceral gesture. Writing is an intransitive activity, a variation on breathing, an end in itself; it is an affective and geometrically rigorous mode of inscription into life. If we had nothing left to say, some of us would just copy down random list of words, road signs,

cafeteria menus and even the old-fashioned phone book. Well before becoming a published writer I had been a consummate 'grapho-maniac'.<sup>4</sup> I have kept a diary since the age of eleven and still write it regularly. When my students boast of their digital 'second life', I feel a touch of pain in my heart at the thought of the 163 booklets into which I have replicated my life, without even realizing what a burden of responsibility this would create in the long run: some 'virtual reality' that is! Writing is living intensively and inhabiting language as a site of multiple others within what we call, out of habit and intellectual laziness, 'the self'.

Philosophically, the idea of the 'intransitive' nature of writing pertains to one of the axioms of post-structuralism, namely the primacy of language as the constitutive structure of human subjectivity. In this perspective, language is not just (or even) an instrument of communication, but rather an ontological site of constitution of our shared humanity.<sup>5</sup> We are spoken by language, written by it and, as Humpty Dumpty teaches us, we can never be considered masters of the process of meaning, no matter how hard we may long for it.

Thinkers of the calibre of Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray and Gilles Deleuze developed a social and political philosophy starting from this seemingly simple insight. Before them, Jacques Lacan had taken the primacy of the linguistic signifier – the Law-of-the-Father – as the key rule of our social-symbolic system. Working on the assumption of a fundamental isomorphism between the psychic and the social realm, Lacan has argued that language contains the symbolic rules and as such it structures the political ontology of our culture. Language functions as the mediator between the self and both the natural and social environments. It is like a third party that separates the human subjects from the conditions that engendered them in the first place, namely the maternal body. In a patriarchal system the task of splitting the mother-child unit is fulfilled by the Father. There is no denying the masculinism of this symbolic system, nor the violence – both physical and symbolic – it exercises upon women. The symbolic 'absence' of women spells their social destiny, which includes their inscription in the social contract as legal minors and their exclusion from the public sphere. Much of twentieth-century feminism took up this issue and turned it into a battlefield.

Allow me for now to follow through the fundamental theoretical point: that language is an ontological precondition for the constitution of the subject and in some ways 'external' to it, while at the same times it

is constitutive of the subject. What this means is that the relation to socio-symbolic structures, the relation to others, is the defining feature of all subjects and of our common humanity. This insight is the point of no return; from here onwards, the paths diverge in terms of tactics or strategies as to how to deal with it. 'Style' is the name we give to these tactical choices, which come down to two crucial and often overlapping options: resistance and ethics.

As to the former: given the coercive power of language, the writer's task is to resist the gravitational pull of the master signifier and oppose it. Out-manoeuvring its powers, the writer tricks (Deleuze's style), decodes (Foucault-like), unveils (Derrida) or seduces (Barthes) language into directions it was not programmed to follow. Writing so as to make the master signifier falter (Foucault), stutter (Deleuze), expose its drive to mastery (Derrida), reveal its affective core (Barthes) are all variations on the theme of loosening the despotic grip of language over the process of subject formation and of making sense. By extension, it follows that the real challenge is how to make manifest the powers of language and discourse such as they are exercised in the very task of producing subjectivity, knowledge and meanings. Writing enacts the micro-political, self-reflexive analyses of the power at work in its own structures and practices. By exposing the compulsive and rather despotic inclinations of language, the writer thus forces upon the readers a critical reflection into the workings of power itself. This critique includes the institutions that uphold and sustain that power, notably the university structure of departments, institutes, faculties and the whole hierarchical disciplinary machinery that spreads to specialized journals, citation indexes and careers management.

Ethics is the other way around the vicious circle of language. It consists in unveiling this complex and paradoxical political economy and exploring its complexity and inner contradictions. To the extent that a text enacts the nexus of power and meaning, power and discourse of which it is composed, it both exposes and holds them to accountability. By making manifest such responsibility, a writer acknowledges the importance of a text's relationship to others. In this respect, writing is the visualization of ethical relationality through the in-depth critique of power. By acknowledging the constitutive presence of otherness within and all around the self, writing enacts the destitution of unitary visions of the subject as an autonomous entity. The tactics of resistance and the ethical approach are not only mutually compatible but also inter-linked. On both counts, the nomadic writer does not relate to language merely

as a tool of critical analysis and rational political intervention, but rather feels inhabited by it as an ‘other within’.<sup>6</sup>

I owe my acute awareness of the exteriority and primacy of language to my beloved post-1968 French teachers. They were amazing philosophers whose legacy I continue to respect and admire: Foucault, Irigaray and Deleuze especially. They taught me respect for the complexity of a linguistic structure we inhabit but do not control, and based their critique of unitary identity upon this insight. This means that I was trained never to write carelessly or just functionally: style is of the essence. Style however is no mere rhetorical decoration, but rather the deployment of fundamental conceptual premises. What those thinkers taught my generation is never to cater for the *doxa*, never to flatter our common sense, never play into the set habits of predictable readers. Writing, even and especially academic writing, has to challenge and destabilize, intrigue and empower.

A fundamental hermeneutics of suspicion lies at the core of this redefinition of style and is connected to the critique of unitary subjectivity. Foucault’s ‘death of Man’ argument rests on the assumption that ‘Man’ is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground.<sup>7</sup> It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social and symbolic location. The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. What is presented as a neutral category – ‘Man as the measure of all things’ – functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, which acquires transcendent value as much by what it excludes as by what it includes in the category of *the* human. The progression is from male to masculine and then onto human as the universalized format of humanity. This standard is posited as categorically and qualitatively distinct from the sexualized, racialized, naturalized ‘others’ of this subject and also in opposition to the technological artefact. Insofar as writing is committed to expose the structural injustices and constitutive exclusions of this vision of the subject, writing – as an intransitive activity – is intrinsically political and explicitly ethical.

The paradoxes of language were driven home quite concretely in my writing experience. When I started the project of nomadic subjectivity almost twenty years ago, I had no idea that it would take over my life. I ended up producing a trilogy of inter-connected and yet

self-contained books on the topic. *Nomadic Subjects*, in 1994, spun off two other volumes. *Metamorphoses*, published in 2002, explores the cultural politics of the nomadic condition and *Transpositions*, published in 2006, the ethical implications.<sup>8</sup> With the privilege of hindsight, it is tempting to assert some power of synthesis over this vast project, but that is an *a posteriori* and retrospective view. The project of nomadic subjectivity is quite rhizomatic in itself and it grew organically from a cluster of central and inter-related ideas. It is as if there is no possible conclusion, but only more productive proliferations and successive unfolding. The nomadic subject is my chosen figuration to engage in the task of drawing a cartographic reading of the present, in terms of cultural, political, epistemological and ethical concerns. It is my preferred way of expressing an insatiable and loving curiosity for the world.

#### MULTILINGUALISM

*What's the use of roots if you can't take them with you?*

Gertrude Stein

My project of feminist nomadism traces more than an intellectual itinerary; it also reflects the existential situation as a multi-cultural individual—or ‘di-vidual’<sup>9</sup>—a migrant who turned nomad. The trilogy that composes my work on nomadism was first conceptualized and, in some cases, expressed in several different European languages at once. My first book *Patterns of Dissonance* was originally drafted in French and had to be translated, but in the final version I re-wrote it directly in English.<sup>10</sup> By the time it went to press, therefore, it had become a translation without originals. My work as a thinker has no mother tongue, only a succession of translations, displacements and adaptations to changing conditions. Nomadism for me equals multilingualism. Although this entails large doses of lexical contamination and the occasional syntactical debacle, the real ‘creolisation’ effects<sup>11</sup> have always been, for me, acoustic. Accents are the traces of my multiple linguistic homes. They spell my own ecology of belonging, my loyalty to parallel yet divergent lives. I’m always writing with an accent.<sup>12</sup>

Over the years I seem to have developed a peculiar economy of writing as a way of negotiating with my many languages, acoustic resonances and cultural affiliations. Some books now exist exclusively in Italian, such as *Madri, Mostri e Macchine* and the co-authored *Baby-Boomers*, or French, as with *La philosophie, là où on ne l’attend pas*, without English counterpart.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, several selections of my essays have been

translated in many languages I do not speak (from Finnish to Korean, Hungarian, Chinese and Spanish), creating a slight sense of estrangement from my own brain-children: they are assemblages or combinations that defy any original. I have accepted their resilient autonomy and have let them go: nomadic writing is an act of constant dispossession. The nomadism which I defend as a theoretical option is therefore also an existential condition which, for me, translates into a style of thinking and a mode of relation to writing. Style is not decorative, but a complex strategic operation of positioning.

This approach to writing also alters the terms of the conventional pact between the writer and his/her readers. As readers and writers in an intensive mode, we are transformers of intellectual energy, processors of the 'insights' that we are exchanging and co-creators of affective inter-linkages. These 'in'-sights, however, are not to be thought of as plunging us inwards, towards a mythical 'inner' reservoir of identity-bound truth. On the contrary, they are forces that propel us outwards along the multiple directions of extra-textual collective connections and experiences. Reading and thinking are ways of living at a higher degree, a faster pace, a multi-directional manner; thinking occurs in and is a mode of relation to the extra-textual world. A post-personal writing/reading mode is consequently created as the appropriate way of doing nomadic thought, in that it allows for a web of connections to be drawn on the zig-zagging paths of shared subjectivity and not merely on the tightrope of identity.

What attracted me to French philosophies of difference such as Deleuze's multiple subjects of becoming, or Irigaray's 'virtual feminine' is precisely that they do not stop on the surface of issues of identity and power, but rather tackle their conceptual roots. In so doing, they radicalize social constructivist methods and push the psycho-sociological discussion of identity towards issues of subjectivity, that is to say, of entitlement and power. It is particularly important not to confuse the concept of subjectivity with the notion of the individual or individualism: subjectivity is a socially mediated process of entitlements to and negotiations with power relations. Consequently, the formation and emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, 'external' to the individual self while it also mobilizes the self's in-depth and singular structures.

In this perspective, 'subjectivity' names the process that consists in stringing the reactive (*potestas*) and the active instances of power (*potentia*) together, under the fictional unity of a grammatical 'I'.

The subject is a process, made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire, that is to say, entrapment and empowerment. Whatever semblance of unity there may be is no God-given essence, but rather the fictional choreography of many levels of a relational self into one socially operational self, within a monistic ontology. The implication is that what sustains the entire process of becoming-subject is the will to-know, the desire to say, the desire to speak; it is a founding, primary, vital, necessary and therefore original desire to become (*conatus*).

#### CRITIQUE AS CREATIVITY

*If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk out well wadded with stupidity.*  
George Eliot<sup>14</sup>

To announce blandly that nomadic subjectivity requires a monistic ontology may be a bit of a mouthful, but all those who ever identified with Dorothea in *Middlemarch* or Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss* may not be cognitively aware of the fact that s/he actually moved into a monistic universe of intersecting affective relations that simply make the world go round. George Eliot, alias Mary Evans, was a woman of many talents and not the least of them was linguistic. A polyglot and a formidable thinker, George Eliot also translated Spinoza into English. She was acutely aware of the continuum between the natural, even the cosmic or planetary factors (floods, wars, lunar eclipses), and the social and cultural ones. They work as a whole, in a continuum. Were we able to acknowledge this, we would indeed be able to 'hear the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat'. As it is, the comforting platitudes of accepted common sense (*doxa*) have us walking around well wadded with stupidity indeed.<sup>15</sup>

The roar which lies on the other side of silence is the Spinozist indicator of the raw cosmic energy that lies within, beneath and alongside the subjects and underscores the making of their cultures, civilizations and societies. Monism is the premise for vitalist materialism and as a concept it helps us make sense of that external dimension of subjectivity, which in fact enfolds within the subject. The self as the internalized score of cosmic vibrations<sup>16</sup> is indeed such stuff as dreams are made of.

A 'monistic universe' refers to Spinoza's central concept that matter, the world and humans are not dualistic entities structured according to principles of internal or external opposition. This is a way of undoing Descartes's famous mind-body distinction, but for Spinoza the concept goes even further: matter is one, driven by the desire for self-expression and ontologically free. It aims at enacting its desire (*conatus*) which is the expression of the subject's essential freedom of becoming. The absence of any reference to negativity and to violent dialectical oppositions caused intense criticism of Spinoza on the part of Hegel and the Marxist-Hegelians. Spinoza's monistic worldview was seen as politically ineffective and holistic at heart.

This interpretation changed dramatically in the 1970s in France, when a new wave of scholars rehabilitated Spinozist monism precisely as an antidote to some of the contradictions of Marxism and as a way of clarifying Hegel's relationship to Marx.<sup>17</sup> The main idea is to overcome dialectical oppositions, engendering non-dialectical understandings of materialism itself,<sup>18</sup> as an alternative to the Hegelian scheme. The 'Spinozist legacy' therefore consists in a very active concept of monism, which allowed these modern French philosophers to define matter as vital and self-organizing, thereby producing the staggering combination of 'vitalist materialism'. Because this approach rejects all forms of transcendentalism, it is also known as 'radical immanence'. Monism results in relocating difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of differing which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others. Because it is self-organizing, matter is vital, smart and, in the third millennium, technologically mediated, through bio-technologies and information technologies. This doubly mediated structure alters also the terms of interaction between humans and non-humans. It has consequently engendered a notion of 'matter-realism'<sup>19</sup> as an auto-poietic notion that replaces more static definitions of 'materialism'.

#### NOMADIC BECOMING

Creativity is a 'matter-realist' nomadic process in that it entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification so as to open them up to that roar that lies on the other side of silence. Becoming nomadic as a variation on the theme of becoming-minoritarian is neither the swinging of the pendulum of dialectical opposition, nor is it the unfolding of an essence in a teleologically



ordained process supervised by a transcendent consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Nomadic becomings are rather the process of affirmation of the unalterably positive structure of difference, unhinged from the binary system that traditionally opposed it to Sameness. Difference as positivity at the heart of the subject entails a multiple process of transformation, a play of complexity that expresses the principle of not-One. Accordingly, the thinking subject is not the deployment of in-depth interiority, nor is it the enactment of transcendental models of reflexive consciousness. It is a collective assemblage, a relay-point for a web of complex relations that displace the centrality of ego-indexed notions of identity.

Building on Foucault, Deleuze argues that, considering the de-territorializing force of processes of becoming, they gather force from some energetic core, or vibrating hub, of activity which is the creative pole of power as *potentia*. As I argued earlier, this is opposed to the restrictive pole of institutionalized power as *potestas*, which can only replicate and perpetuate it. Only potential or joyful affirmation has the power to generate qualitative shifts in the processes of becoming, hence the axiom that there is becoming other than minoritarian/nomadic/woman/animal/other. According to Gatens and Lloyd this nomadic becoming is an ethology, that is to say a process of expression, composition, selection, and incorporation of forces aimed at positive transformation of the subject.<sup>21</sup> As such it is also crucial to the project of a creative redefinition of philosophical reason and of its relation to conceptual creativity, imagination and affectivity.

Becoming has to do with emptying out the self, opening it out to possible encounters with the 'outside'. Virginia Woolf's intensive genre is exemplary here, in that the artist's 'eye' captures the outside world by making itself receptive to the totality of perception. What gets activated is a seemingly absent-minded floating attention or a fluid sensibility that is porous to the outside and which our culture has coded as 'feminine'. This sensibility is central to the creative process. It combines the accuracy of the cartographer with the hyper-sensitivity of the sensualist in apprehending the precise quality of an assemblage of elements, like the shade of the light at dusk, or the curve of the wind just before the rain falls. In those moments of floating awareness when rational control releases its hold, 'Life' rushes on towards the sensorial/perceptive apparatus with exceptional vigour and higher degrees of definition. This onrush of data, information, affectivity, is the relational bond that simultaneously propels the self out of the black hole of its atomized isolation and disperses it into a myriad of bits and pieces of data

imprinting or impressions. Conceptualized by Deleuze as the folding in and out of perception, it also confirms the singularity of that particular entity which both receives and recomposes itself around the onrush of data and affects.

One needs to be able to sustain the impact with the onrushing affectivity, to 'hold' it, without being completely overwhelmed by it. But 'holding' it or capturing it does not occur on the paranoid or rapacious model of a dominant, dialectically driven consciousness. It rather takes the form of a sustainable model of relational interconnections by an affective and highly receptive subject which quite simply is not one, not there, not that—it is always becoming. The singularity of this nomadic, floating subjectivity rests on the meta-stability of thresholds of sustainability. These involve the spatio-temporal co-ordinates that make it possible for subjects to coincide temporarily with and be synchronized with the degrees, levels, expansion and extension of the head-on rush of the 'outside' folding inwards. Whether the outside is a roar of cosmic energy or the unspectacular and barely perceptible heartbeat of a squirrel is just a matter of degrees. What is mobilized is one's capacity to feel, sense, process and sustain the impact with the complex materiality of that 'outside'.

In terms of writing practices, the processes and flows of becoming, and the heightened states of perception and receptivity which they both assume and engender defy the canonical genre classifications and instal a sort of parallelism between the arts, sciences and conceptual thinking. The point of convergence is the quest for creativity, in the form of experimenting with the immersion of one's sensibility in the field of forces—formatted as by music, colour, sound, light, speed, temperature, intensity. Deleuze and Guattari argue for instance that writers speak the unsayable; painters make visible forces that previously were not, much as composers make us hear sounds that were unheard of.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, philosophers can make thinkable concepts that did not exist before. Artistic genres are variables co-existing along a continuum. It comes down again to the question of style, where style is a navigational tool. It negotiates our path across sets of material ('matter-real') coordinates that, assembled and composed in a sustainable and enduring manner, allow for the qualitative transformation of the affects and the forces involved. They thus trigger the process of becoming.

The imagination plays a crucial role in enabling the whole process of becoming-minoritarian and hence of conceptual creativity and ethical empowerment. It is connected to memory: the affective force of

remembrance propels the process of becoming-intensive. When you remember in the intensive or minority-mode, however, you defeat linearity, to open up spaces of movement and of de-territorialization that actualize the virtual possibilities which have been frozen in the image of the past. Opening up these virtual spaces is a creative effort. When you remember to become what you are – a subject-in-becoming – you actually reinvent yourself on the basis of what you hope you could become, with a little help from your friends.

It is crucial in fact to see to what extent processes of becoming are collective, intersubjective and not individual or isolated: it is always a matter of blocks of becoming. ‘Others’ are the integral element of one’s successive becomings. A Deleuzian approach favours the destitution of the liberal notion of the sovereign subject and consequently overcomes the dualism Self/Other, Sameness/Difference, which is intrinsic to that vision of the subject. Subjects are collective assemblages, that is to say they are dynamic, but framed: fields of forces that aim at duration and affirmative self-realization. In order to fulfil them, they need to be drawn together along a line of composition. This is rather like pitching a musical tone.

#### WHAT VIRGINIA WOOLF KNOWS

Remembering in this nomadic mode is a key element of this process. Virginia Woolf’s work reflects admirably the dual structure of time: the linear one – *Chronos* – and the undifferentiated one – *Aion*. Being and Becoming confront each other in an unsteady balance. *Aion* is the ‘pure empty form of time’, free of content, which is shot through with vibrations of becoming. If this be chaos, it is not chaotic, but generative.<sup>23</sup> It produces assemblages that organize space and time around them. The ‘haecceity’, or individuated aggregate, is the specific and highly contingent actualization of a field of forces stable enough and consolidated by their structural affinity, so as to be able to constitute a plane of immanence.

Remembering in the nomadic mode is the active reinvention of a self that is joyfully discontinuous, as opposed to being mournfully consistent, as programmed by phallogocentric culture. It destabilizes the sanctity of the past and the authority of experience. The tense that best expresses the power of the imagination is the future perfect: ‘I will have been free.’ Quoting Virginia Woolf, Deleuze also says: ‘This will be childhood, but it must not be my childhood’,<sup>24</sup> shifting away from the reassuring

certainties of the past to the openings hinted at by the future perfect. This is the tense of a virtual sense of potential. Memories need the imagination to empower the actualization of virtual possibilities in the subject. They allow the subject to differ from oneself as much as possible while remaining faithful to oneself, or in other words: enduring.

This is the 'plane of immanence' which composes and sustains the actualization of processes of becoming as relational, external and collective. This process of composition and assemblage of forces is what desire (*conatus*) is all about, as an ontological layer of affinity and sympathy between different enfolded subjects. This intensive approach to the processes of becoming does not pursue a Hegelian project of recognition of consciousness and hence does not posit desire as Lack, as is the case in the Lacanian equation. Nor is desire linked to the violent struggle for individual autonomy, as argued by Jessica Benjamin in her psychoanalytic work on desire and domination.<sup>25</sup> Desire as plenitude rather challenges the matrix of having and/or lacking access to the dialects of recognition by Self and Other. Becoming is molecular, in that it requires singular overthrowing of the internalized simulacra of the self, consolidated by habits and flat repetitions. The dynamic vision of the subject as assemblage is central to a vitalist, yet anti-essentialist theory of desire, which also prompts a new practice of sustainable ethics.

Desire is the propelling and compelling force that is driven by self-affirmation or the transformation of negative into positive passions. This is a desire not to preserve, but to change: it is a deep yearning for transformation or a process of affirmation. Empathy and compassion are key features of this nomadic yearning for in-depth transformation. The space of becoming is a space of affinity and correlation of elements, among compatible and mutually attractive forces and the constitutive elements of the process. Proximity, attraction or intellectual sympathy is both a topological and qualitative notion: it is a question of ethical temperature. It is an affective framing for the becoming of subjects as sensible or intelligent matter. The affectivity of the imagination is the motor for these encounters and of the conceptual creativity they trigger off. It is a transformative force that propels multiple, heterogeneous 'becomings' of the subject.

The sheer genius of Virginia Woolf illuminates this process, notably her ability to present her life as a gesture of passing through, i.e. of writing 'as if already gone', in a vitalist and productive relationship to mortality. In *The Waves*, for instance, Woolf captures the concrete

multiplicity – as well as the shimmering intensity – of becoming. She is the writer of multiple and intransitive becomings, in-between ages, sexes, elements, characters. Woolf's texts enact a flow of positions, a crossing of boundaries, and an overflowing into a plenitude of affects where life is asserted to its highest degree. She is an intensive multiplier of affects. Woolf also provides Deleuze with a model for the 'plane of immanence', where different elements can encounter one another, producing those assemblages of forces, without which there is no becoming. She expresses with stark intensity the pain involved in trying to synchronize the heterogeneity of life as *zoe*, as positive vitality.

Although Deleuze recognizes the extraordinary position of Woolf as a conveyor or relay point for this passionate process of becoming in both *Dialogues* and *A Thousand Plateaus* he is very careful to disengage Woolf's work from her being-a-woman, and even more from the 'écriture féminine' style made popular by sexual difference feminism in the 1980s. Woolf's language expresses the free indirect speech that is central to the nomadic vision of the subject as heterogeneous assemblage. Yet, something in what feminists of sexual difference call the 'feminine libidinal economy' of excess without self-destruction and desire as plenitude without lack, is central to the whole Deleuzian project of becoming.<sup>26</sup> This is why he positions the 'becoming-woman' so prominently as a necessary moment of transition in his scheme of things, not only in his philosophy of the subject, but also in the related theories of aesthetics and art. Nonetheless, as I argued at length elsewhere, Deleuze cannot resolve his ambivalence towards it.<sup>27</sup>

Woolf's intensive genre and her flair for affirming positive passions provide not only a significant illustration of the functions of writing and desire, but also for the project of an ethics of sustainability. The intensive text is an experimental site, a laboratory for the new in the sense of the actualizations of experiments in becoming. The literary text as an experiment in sustainable models of change is grounded in accurate knowledge and subjected to the same rigorous rules of verification as science or philosophy. This fundamental parallelism cuts across different areas, disciplines and textual genres. Life, science and art are equally enlisted to the project of experimenting with transformations. The author, writer or agent is a complex multiplicity, a factor of empowerment of *potentia*, that is to say multiplier of virtual possibilities, through the rigorous application of the rules of composition of assemblages. Intensive writing is cosmic, or rather: 'chaosmic'<sup>28</sup> and vitalist in essence.

## GLOBAL HYBRIDITY OR: THE PERVERSE NOMADISM OF ADVANCED CAPITALISM

A few years ago my American publisher asked me to re-write *Nomadic Subjects*, fifteen years after its original publication. This was not just an update, but a thorough re-write of the entire manuscript (published in 2011). The thinking behind was that both the nomadic predicament and its multiple contradictions had truly come of age. At the start of the third millennium a diffuse sort of nomadism has become a relevant condition for a great deal of world denizens. Furthermore, after thirty years of post-structuralist, post-colonial and feminist debates for, against or undecided on the issue of the 'non-unitary' – split, in-process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional, nomadic – subject, issues of fragmentation, complexity and multiplicity have become household names in critical theory.

The ubiquitous nature of these notions, however, and the radical-chic appeal of the terminology does not make for consensus about the issues at stake, namely what exactly are the implications of the loss of unity of the subject. In other words the 'so what?' part of the discussion on nomadic subjectivity is more open than ever, while the contradictions and the paradoxes of our historical condition multiply all around us. The questions that motivate the project of nomadic subjects consequently are: what exactly are the political and ethical conditions that structure nomadic subjectivity today?

This philosophical line of enquiry is not to suggest, however, that the nomadic subject should ever be taken as a new metaphor for the human condition. Such generalizations are not helpful in times of fast changes and economic and social transformations. Following the method of the politics of location, what we need instead is higher degrees of accuracy in accounting for both the external factors and the internal complexity of nomadic subjectivity. The different modes and forms of mobility in advanced capitalism complicate the task of the social and cultural critic. They require more historically grounded, socio-economic references and subtler degrees of differentiation. Thus nomadic thought amounts to a politically invested cartography of the present condition of mobility in a globalized world. This project stresses the fundamental power differential among categories of human and non-human travellers or movers. It also sustains the effort to develop suitable figurations for the different kinds of mobility they embody and engender.

As I argued earlier, the figuration of the nomad renders an image of the subject in terms of a non-unitary and multi-layered vision, as a

dynamic and changing entity. The perverse hybridization induced by advanced capitalism translates in socio-economic terms in the state of so-called 'flexibility' of a large proportion of the working force. Interim, un-tenured, part-time, sub-standard, underpaid work has become the norm in most advanced liberal economies. The universities and the research world are far from immune from this fragmentation and exploitative approach. This negative and exploitative brand of capitalist flexibility induces the fracture of life-long careers or professions, offering little compensation in return.

Political theorists have addressed this pseudo-nomadism as a feature of advanced capitalism, notably Hardt and Negri, Virno and the group gathered round the journal *Multitudes*.<sup>29</sup> My nomadic subject is part of the same theoretical tradition, though genealogically it plunges its roots in feminist theory and anti-racist politics. A world economy, linked by a thick web of transnational flows of capital and labour, functions by internal and external flows of migration and mobility. The so-called flexibility or precariousness of actual work conditions makes for social instability, transitory citizens and impermanent settlements. Globalization is about the mobilization of differences and the deterritorialization of social identity; it simultaneously challenges the hegemony of nation states and their claim to exclusive citizenship<sup>30</sup> and it strengthens their hold over territory, cultural identity and social control. It also produces a global political economy of 'scattered hegemonies'.<sup>31</sup> Advanced capitalism is a surveillance society, a system of a centre-less but constant security which pervades the entire social fabric. It instals a complex political economy of fear and consumerist comfort that operates not only between the geopolitical blocks that have emerged after the end of the Cold War, but also within them. Post-industrial or information societies actively induce a qualitative proliferation of differences, for the sake of consumeristic consumption.

Firmly grounded and centred in world-cities that function as organizing principles in the stratification and distribution of wealth, the globalized network society practises a perverse force of nomadism. Goods, commodities and data circulate much more freely than human subjects or, in some cases, the less-than-human subjects who constitute the bulk of asylum-seekers and illegal inhabitants of the world.<sup>32</sup> A commodified form of pluralism is the capitalist brand of opportunistic nomadism that proliferates today. The dense materiality of bodies caught in the very concrete conditions of advanced global societies flatly contradicts advanced capitalism's claims to being 'immaterial', 'flowing'

or virtual. Expressed with Deleuze, these differences are not qualitative, but rather quantitative and as such they do not alter the reactive power of the majority as the phallo-Euro-centric master-code. The centres proliferate in a fragmented manner, but lose none of their powers of domination. The conclusion is clear: it is important to resist the uncritical reproduction of sameness on a planetary scale.

The 'disposable' bodies of women, youth and others who are racialized or marked off by age, gender, sexuality and income and reduced to marginality, come to be inscribed with particular violence in this regime of power. They experience dispossession of their embodied and embedded selves in a political economy of repeated and structurally enforced eviction.<sup>33</sup> Translated in the language of philosophical nomadism, the global city and the refugee camps are not dialectical or moral opposites: they are two sides of the same global coin, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us.<sup>34</sup> They express the schizoid political economy of our times. Massive concentrations of infrastructures exist alongside complex, worldwide dissemination of goods. The technologically driven advanced culture that prides itself in being called the 'information society' is in reality a concrete, material infrastructure that is concentrated on the sedentary global city. The contrast between an ideology of free mobility and the reality of disposable others brings out the schizophrenic character of advanced capitalism—namely, the paradox of high levels of mobility of capital flows in some sectors of the economic elites and also high levels of centralization and greater immobility for most of the population. As Vandana Shiva points out, within globalization we must distinguish between different modes of mobility: 'One group is mobile on a world scale, with no country, no home, but the whole world as its property, the other has lost even the mobility within rootedness, lives in refugee camps, resettlement colonies and reserves.'<sup>35</sup>

Zygmunt Bauman echoes these concerns in his ethical mapping of different postmodern ethical subjectivities.<sup>36</sup> He specifically criticizes the consumeristic focus of mobility embodied in the tourist and praises instead the pilgrim as a subject that combines loyalty with itinerant life-patterns. Bauman also expresses deep concern for the vulnerable, disposable bodies that constitute the human waste of the globalized world. Given the fluid, internally contradictory and ferocious nature of advanced capitalism, the social and cultural critic needs to innovate on the very tools of analysis. A trans-disciplinary approach that cuts across the established methods and conventions of many disciplines is



best suited to the task of providing an adequate cartography of the shifting lines of segmentation and racialization of the globalized labour market. This process cannot be kept separate from the genderization and sexualization of the same market. The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction.

#### THE CRITIQUE OF THE CENTRE FROM THE CENTRE

Both politically and epistemically, nomadic subjectivity provokes and sustains a critique of dominant visions of the subject, identity and knowledge, from within one of the many 'centres' that structure the contemporary globalized world. In this respect my nomadic subject project constitutes an act of resistance against methodological nationalism and a critique of Euro-centrism from within. The methodology that sustains it is derived from the feminist politics of location and figurations. The work on power, difference and the politics of location offered by postcolonial and anti-racist feminist thinkers like Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Avtar Brah, Helma Lutz, Philomena Essed, Gloria Wekker, Nira Yuval-Davis and many others who are familiar with the European situation is especially important for my nomadic project.

A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self; it's no metaphor. Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather materialistic mappings of situated, i.e. embedded and embodied, social positions. Being nomadic is not a glamorous state of jet setting, integral to and complicitous with advanced capitalism.<sup>37</sup> It points to the decline of unitary subjects and the destabilization of the space-time continuum of the traditional vision of the subject. Being homeless; a migrant; an exile; a refugee; a tourist; a rape-in-war victim; an itinerant migrant; an illegal immigrant; an expatriate; a mail-order bride; a foreign caretaker of the young or the elderly of the economically developed world; a high-flying professional; a global venture financial expert; a humanitarian relief worker in the UN global system; a citizen of a country that no longer exists (Yugoslavia; Czechoslovakia; the Soviet Union) – these are no metaphors. Having no passport or having too many of them is neither equivalent nor is it merely metaphorical. These are highly

specific geo-political and historical locations – it's history and belonging tattooed on your body. One may be empowered or beautified by it, or be scarred, hurt and wounded by it. Learning to tell the difference among different forms of non-unitary, multilayered or diasporic subjectivity is therefore a key ethical but also methodological issue. Figurations attempt to draw a cartography of the power-relations that define these respective and diverging positions. They don't aim to embellish or metaphorize: they just express different socio-economic and symbolic locations.

In late postmodernity Europe shares with the rest of the world the phenomenon of trans-culturality, or cultures clashing in a pluri-ethnic, poly-lingual and multi-cultural social space. World-migration, a huge movement of population from periphery to centre, has challenged the claim to the alleged cultural homogeneity of European nation-states and of the incipient European Union. Present-day Europe is struggling with multi-culturalism at a time of increasing racism and technophobia. The paradoxes, power-dissymetries and fragmentations of the present historical contest rather require that we shift the political debates from the issue of differences between cultures, to differences *within* each culture. In other words, one of the features of our present historical condition is the shifting grounds on which periphery and centre confront each other, with a new level of complexity which defies dualistic or oppositional thinking.

Black, post-colonial and feminist critics have emphasized and criticized the extent of these paradoxes as well as the rather perverse division of labour that has emerged: thinkers located at the centre of past or present empires are actively deconstructing the power of the centre – thus contributing to the discursive proliferation and consumption of former 'negative' others. Those same others, however, – especially in post-colonial, but also in post-fascist and post-communist societies – are rather more keen to reassert their identity, than to deconstruct it. The irony of this situation is not lost on any of the interlocutors: think, for instance, of the feminist philosophers saying: 'how can we undo a subjectivity we have not even historically been entitled to yet?'<sup>38</sup> Or the black and post-colonial subjects who argue that it is now their historical turn to be self-assertive. And if the white, masculine, ethnocentric subject wants to 'deconstruct' himself and enter a terminal crisis, then – so be it! The point remains that 'difference' emerges as a central – albeit contested and paradoxical – notion and practice. Which means that a confrontation with different locations is

historically inevitable, as we are historically condemned to our history. Accounting for them through adequate cartographies consequently remains a crucial priority.

My nomadic subject pursues the same critique of power as black and postcolonial theories, not in spite, but because of the fact that it is located somewhere else. Philosophical nomadism addresses in both a critical and creative manner the role of the former 'centre' in redefining power relations. Margins and centre shift and destabilize each other in parallel, albeit dissymmetrical, movements. I want to resist the identification of the centre as inertia and self-perpetuation and to the aporetic repetition of Sameness. The challenge is to destabilize dogmatic, hegemonic, exclusionary power structures at the very heart of the identity structures of the dominant subject through nomadic interventions. If we are to move beyond the sociology of travel and the breast-beating of critical thinkers squashed by white guilt, we need to enact a vision of the subject that encompasses changes at the in-depth structures.

The point is not just mere deconstruction, but the relocation of identities on new grounds that account for multiple belongings, ie: a non-unitary vision of a subject. This subject actively yearns for and constructs itself in complex and internally contradictory webs of social relations. To account for these we need to look at the internal forms of thought that privilege processes rather than essences and transformations, rather than counter-claims to identity. The sociological intersectional variables (gender, class, race and ethnicity, age, health) need to be supplemented by a theory of the subject that calls into question the inner fibres of the self. These include the desire, the ability and the courage to sustain multiple belongings in a context, which celebrates and rewards Sameness, cultural essentialism and one-way thinking. *Nomadic Subjects* is my contribution as a European nomadic subject moving across the variegated landscape of whiteness, to a debate which black, anti-racists, post-colonial and other critical thinkers have put on the map. There is something about a claustrophobic self-referential Euro-centred philosophical thought that is not living up to the challenges of diversity multiculturalism and the kind of mediated societies which we have already become. We need more planetary dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

The nomadic subject is a myth, or a political fiction, that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of

experience. Implicit in my choice of this figuration is the belief in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making, as an element fuelling our creativity. Political fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems. The nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. Not all nomads are world travellers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one's habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions and the consciousness-raising that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling.

Attention to embodiment and the politics of locations produces a visionary epistemology.<sup>39</sup> The need for more creativity or new figurations rests on the awareness that there is a noticeable gap between how we live—in emancipated or post-feminist, multi-ethnic globalized societies, with advanced technologies and high-speed telecommunication, allegedly free borders and increased border controls and security measures—and how we represent to ourselves this lived existence in theoretical terms and discourses. The systems of theoretical representation we have inherited from critical theory in the past are simply inadequate to the task. This imaginative deficit can be read as the 'jet-lag' problem of being behind one's time, or inhabiting simultaneously different time-zones, in the schizophrenic mode that is characteristic of the historical era of postmodernity. Filling in this gap with adequate figurations is therefore one of the greatest challenges of the present, one which enlists the resources of the imagination as much as conceptual tools.

Nomadic becoming is neither a reproduction nor just an imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive inter-connectedness. Nomadic shifts enact a creative sort of becoming; they are a performative gesture that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience and knowledge. They urge us to reflect upon the affects and ethics of our own writing practices and the potency of our own figures of speech, so as to fully assess their potential for empowerment. Critique and creativity are informed by this joyful nomadic force and can be seen as the self-styling of different modes of resistance. I see nomadic subjectivity as both an analytic tool and a creative project aimed at a qualitative shift of consciousness that is attuned to the spirit of our age. So as to be worthy of our times, while resisting them, we need to go on becoming.

## NOTES

- 1 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Grafton Books, 1977), p. 80.
- 2 See Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
- 3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la Philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991). English translation: *What is Philosophy?*, translated by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 4 Neologism of my invention to describe people, mostly women for whom writing is a life-giving mediating factor.
- 5 See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- 6 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 7 Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). English translation: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).
- 8 Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).
- 9 In nomadic thought: a singularity bounded by its own powers to endure intensities and relations to others.
- 10 Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
- 11 Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- 12 This is the title I gave to my memorial article for Françoise Collin, see Rosi Braidotti, 'Thinking with an Accent: Françoise Collin, *Les cahiers du Griff*, and French Feminism', *Signs*, 39. 3 (2014), 597–626.
- 13 Rosi Braidotti, *Madri, Mostri e Macchine* (Rome: Manifesto Libri, 1996); Rosi Braidotti, *La philosophie, là où on ne l'attend pas* (Paris: Larousse, 2009); Rosi Braidotti, *Baby Boomers: Vite parallele dagli anni Cinquanta ai cinquant'anni* (Florence: Giunti, 2003).
- 14 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 226.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*
- 17 The group around Althusser started the debate in the mid-1960s; Deleuze's path-breaking study of Spinoza dates from 1968 (English in 1990); Macherey's Hegel-Spinoza analysis came out in 1979 (English in 2011); Negri's work on the imagination in Spinoza in 1981 (English in 1991).
- 18 Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*; Pheng Cheah, 'Nondialectical Materialism', *Diacritics*, 38.1 (2008), 143–157.
- 19 Mariam Fraser, Sarah Kember and Celia Lury, *Inventive Life. Approaches to the New Vitalism* (London: Sage, 2006).
- 20 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1980). English translation: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

- 21 Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
- 22 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*
- 23 Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life. The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
- 24 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 294.
- 25 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love. Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).
- 26 Claire Colebrook, 'Is sexual difference a problem?', in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, edited by Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 110–127.
- 27 See *Patterns of Dissonance; Metamorphoses. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming; and Transpositions*.
- 28 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis. An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995).
- 29 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000).
- 30 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas, an Introduction* (London: University College London Press, 1997).
- 31 *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, edited by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- 32 Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004); Braidotti, *Transpositions*; Paul Gilroy, *Against Race. Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Colour Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 33 Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control. Sovereignty in an Age of Globalisation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
- 34 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 35 Vandana Shiva, 'Homeless in the 'Global Village'', in Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), pp. 98–106 (p. 98).
- 36 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
- 37 Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 38 Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 15.
- 39 Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women. Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).