

UNDOING GENDER

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9. The End of Sexual Difference?

I am not sure that the millennium is a significant way to mark time or, indeed, to mark the time of feminism. But it is always important to take stock of where feminism is, even as that effort at reflection is necessarily marred. No one stands in the perspective that might afford a global view of feminism. No one stands within a definition of feminism that would remain uncontested. I think it is fair to say that feminists everywhere seek a more substantial equality for women, and that they seek a more just arrangement of social and political institutions. But as we enter any room to consider what we mean, and how we might act, we are confronted quite quickly with the difficulty of the terms that we need to use. Differences emerge over whether equality means that men and women ought to be treated interchangeably. The Parity movement in France has argued that that is not an appropriate notion of equality, given the social disadvantages that women suffer under current political circumstances. We will surely argue as well over justice, and by what means it ought to be achieved. Is it the same as "fair treatment"? Is it distinct from the conception of equality? What is its relation to freedom? And which freedoms are desired, how are they valued, and what do we make of serious disagreements among women on the question of how sexual freedom is to be defined, and whether it can receive a meaningful international formulation?

Add to these zones of contestation continuing questions about what a woman is, how we are to say "we," who is to say it and in the name of whom? It seems that feminism is in a mess, unable to stabilize the terms that facilitate a meaningful agenda. Criticisms of feminism as inattentive to questions of race and to the conditions of global inequality that condition its Euro-American articulation continue to put into doubt the broad coalitional power of the movement. In the United States, the abuse of sexual harassment doctrine by the conservative Right in its persecutorial inquiries into sex in the workplace present a serious public-relations problem for feminists on the Left. Indeed, the relation between feminism *and* the Left is another thorny matter, since there are now pro-business forms of feminism that focus on actualizing women's entrepreneurial potential, hijacking models of self-expression from an earlier, progressive period of the movement.

One might be tempted to despair, but I believe that these are among the most interesting and productive unsolved issues at the beginning of this century. The program of feminism is not one in which we might assume a common set of premises and then proceed to build in logical fashion a program from those premises. Instead, this is a movement that moves forward precisely by bringing critical attention to bear on its premises in an effort to become more clear about what it means and to begin to negotiate the conflicting interpretations, the irrepressible democratic cacophony of its identity. As a democratic enterprise, feminism has had to forfeit the presumption that at base we can all agree about some things or, equivalently, to embrace the notion that each of our most treasured values are under contestation and that they will remain contested zones of politics. This may sound as if I am saying that feminism can never build from anything, that it will be lost to reflection upon itself, that it will never move beyond this self-reflective moment toward an active engagement with the world. On the contrary, it is precisely in the course of engaged political practices that these forms of internal dissension emerge. And I would argue emphatically that resisting the desire to resolve this dissension into unity is precisely what keeps the movement alive.

Feminist theory is never fully distinct from feminism as a social movement. Feminist theory would have no content were there no movement, and the movement, in its various directions and forms, has always been involved in the act of theory. Theory is an activity that

does not remain restricted to the academy. It takes place every time a possibility is imagined, a collective self-reflection takes place, a dispute over values, priorities, and language emerges. I believe that there is an important value in overcoming the fear of immanent critique and to maintaining the democratic value of producing a movement that can contain, without domesticating, conflicting interpretations on fundamental issues. As a latecomer to the second wave, I approach feminism with the presumption that no undisputed premises are to be agreed upon in the global context. And so, for practical and political reasons, there is no value to be derived in silencing disputes. The questions are: how best to have them, how most productively to stage them, and how to act in ways that acknowledge the irreversible complexity of who we are?

I propose to consider a set of terms in this essay that have come into conflict with one another: sexual difference, gender, and sexuality. My title suggests perhaps that I am announcing the end to "sexual difference" in its presumed facticity or as a useful theoretical entry into questions of feminism. My title is intended as a citation of a skeptical question, one that is often posed to theorists who work on gender or sexuality, a challenge I wish both to understand and to which I propose a response. My purpose is not to win a debate, but to try to understand why the terms are considered so important to those who use them, and how we might reconcile this set of felt necessities as they come into conflict with one another. I am here as interested in the theoretical reasons proffered for using one framework at the expense of another as the institutional possibilities that the terms alternately open and foreclose in varying contexts.

I do not ask the question about the end of sexual difference in order to make a plea for that end. I do not even propose to enumerate reasons why I think that framework, or that "reality," depending on your take, is no longer worth pursuing. For many, I think, the structuring reality of sexual difference is not one that one can wish away or argue against, or even make claims about in any reasonable way. It is more like a necessary background to the possibility of thinking, of language, of being a body in the world. And those who seek to take issue with it are arguing with the very structure that makes their argument possible. There is sometimes a laughing and dismissive response to the problem:

you think that you might do away with sexual difference, but your very desire to do away with it is only further evidence of its enduring force and efficacy. Defenders of sexual difference make dismissive reference to the famous feminine "protest" elaborated by psychoanalysis, and in this way the protest is defeated before it is articulated. To challenge the notion of femininity is the consummately feminine act, a protest that can be read as evidence for that which it seeks to contest. Sexual difference—is it to be thought of as a framework by which we are defeated in advance? Anything that might be said against it is oblique proof that it structures what we say. Is it there in a primary sense, haunting the primary differentiations or structural fate by which all signification proceeds?

Irigaray makes clear that sexual difference is not a fact, not a bedrock of any sorts, and not the recalcitrant "real" of Lacanian parlance. On the contrary, it is a question, a question for our times. As a question, it remains unsettled and unresolved, that which is not yet or not ever formulated in terms of an assertion. Its presence does not assume the form of facts and structures but persists as that which makes us wonder, which remains not fully explained and not fully explicable. If it is the question for our time, as she insists in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*,³ then it is not one question among others, but, rather, a particularly dense moment of irresolution within language, one that marks the contemporary horizon of language as our own. Like Drucilla Cornell, Irigaray has in mind an ethics which is not one that follows *from* sexual difference but is a question that is posed by the very terms of sexual difference itself: how to cross this otherness? How to cross it without crossing it, without domesticating its terms? How to remain attuned to what remains permanently unsettled about the question?

Irigaray then would not argue for or against sexual difference but, rather, offer a way to think about the question that sexual difference poses, or the question that sexual difference *is*, a question whose irresolution forms a certain historical trajectory for us, those who find ourselves asking this question, those of whom this question is posed. The arguments in favor and against would be so many indications of the persistence of this question, a persistence whose status is not eternal, but one, she claims, that belongs to *these times*. It is a question that

Irigaray poses of modernity, a question that marks modernity for her. Thus, it is a question that inaugurates a certain problematic of time, a question whose answer is not forthcoming, a question that opens up a time of irresolution and marks that time of irresolution as our own.

I think for many of us it is a sad time for feminism, perhaps even a defeated time. A friend asked what I would teach in a feminist theory course right now, and I found myself suggesting that feminist theory has no other work than in responding to the places where feminism is under challenge. And by responding to those challenges, I do not mean a defensive shoring up of terms and commitments, a reminding of ourselves of what we already know, but something quite different, something like a submission to the demand for rearticulation, a demand that emerges from crisis. It makes no sense, I would argue, to hold fast to theoretical paradigms and preferred terminologies, to make the case for feminism on the basis of sexual difference, or to defend that notion against the claims of gender, the claims of sexuality, of race, or the umbrella claims of cultural studies. I begin with Irigaray because I think her invocation of sexual difference is something other than foundational. Sexual difference is not a given, not a premise, not a basis on which to build a feminism; it is not that which we have already encountered and come to know; rather, as a *question* that prompts a feminist inquiry, it is something that cannot quite be stated, that troubles the grammar of the statement, and that remains, more or less permanently, to interrogate.

When Irigaray refers to the question of sexual difference as a question for our times, she appears to refer to modernity. I confess to not knowing what modernity is, but I do know that many intellectuals are very worked up about the term, defending it or decrying it. Those who are considered at odds with modernity, or are considered postmodern, get characterized in the following way: one who "calls into question or debunks terms like reason, the subject, authenticity, universality, the progressive view of history." What always strikes me about these kinds of generalizations is that "calling into question" is assumed to mean "debunk" (rather than, say, "revitalize") and the status of the question itself is never given much intellectual play. If one calls such terms into question, does that mean that they cannot be used anymore? Does it mean that one is now prohibited from such a term by the superego of theoretical postmodernism or that they are proclaimed as exhausted

and finished? Or is it simply that the terms do not function in quite the same way as they once did?

A few years ago, I had the occasion to discuss Leo Bersani's book, *Tomos*. I realized that he was no longer sure whether he could say that lesbians were women, and I found myself reassuring him that no one had issued a prohibition on the use of the word. I certainly have no qualms about using such terms and will reflect later in this essay on how one might continue *at the same time* to interrogate and to use the terms of universality. If the notion of the subject, for instance, is no longer given, no longer presumed, that does not mean that it has no meaning for us, that it ought no longer to be uttered. On the contrary, it means only that the term is not simply a building block on which we rely, an uninterrogated premise for political argument. On the contrary, the term has become an object of theoretical attention, something for which we are compelled to give an account. I suppose that this places me on the divide of the modern/postmodern in which such terms remain in play, but no longer in a foundational mode.

Others have argued that all the key terms of modernity are premised on the exclusion of women, of people of color, that they are wrought along class lines and with strong colonial interests. But it would also be important to add, following Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, that the struggle against those exclusions very often ends up reappropriating those very terms from modernity, appropriating them precisely to initiate an entrance into modernity as well as the transformation of modernity's parameters. Freedom comes to signify what it never signified before; justice comes to embrace precisely what could not be contained under its prior description.²

In the same way that the terms of an exclusionary modernity have been appropriated for progressive uses, progressive terms can be appropriated for regressive aims. The terms that we use in the course of political movements which have been appropriated by the Right or for misogynist purposes are not, for that reason, strategically out of bounds. These terms are never finally and fully tethered to a single use. The task of reappropriation is to illustrate the vulnerability of these often compromised terms to an unexpected progressive possibility; such terms belong to no one in particular; they assume a life and a purpose that exceed the uses to which they have been consciously put.

They are not to be seen as merely tainted goods, too bound up with the history of oppression, but neither are they to be regarded as having a pure meaning that might be distilled from their various usages in political contexts. The task, it seems, is to compel the terms of modernity to embrace those they have traditionally excluded, where the embrace does not work to domesticate and neutralize the newly avowed term; such terms should remain problematic for the existing notion of the polity, should expose the limits of its claim to universality, and compel a radical rethinking of its parameters. For a term to be made part of a polity that has been conventionally excluded is for it to emerge as a threat to the coherence of the polity, and for the polity to survive that threat without annihilating the term. The term would then open up a different temporality for the polity, establishing for that polity an unknown future, provoking anxiety in those who seek to patrol its conventional boundaries. If there can be a modernity without foundationalism, then it will be one in which the key terms of its operation are not fully secured in advance, one that assumes a futural form for politics that cannot be fully anticipated, a politics of hope and anxiety.

The desire to foreclose an open future can be a strong one, threatening one with loss, loss of a sense of certainty about how things are (and must be). It is important, however, not to underestimate the force of the desire to foreclose futurity and the political potential of anxiety.³ This is one reason that asking certain questions is considered dangerous. Imagine the situation of reading a book and thinking, I cannot ask the questions that are posed here because to ask them is to introduce doubt into my political convictions, and to introduce doubt into my political convictions could lead to the dissolution of those convictions. At such a moment, the fear of thinking, indeed, the fear of the question, becomes moralized as the defense of politics. And politics becomes that which requires a certain anti-intellectualism. To remain unwilling to rethink one's politics on the basis of questions posed is to opt for a dogmatic stand at the cost of both life and thought.

To question a term, a term like feminism, is to ask how it plays, what investments it bears, what aims it achieves, what alterations it undergoes. The changeable life of that term does not preclude its use. If a term becomes questionable, does that mean it cannot be used any

longer, and that we can only use terms that we *already know how to master*? Why is it that posing a question about a term is considered the same as effecting a prohibition against its use? Why is it that we sometimes feel that if a term is dislodged from its foundational place, we will not be able to live, to survive, to use language, to speak for ourselves? What kind of guarantee does the foundational fix exercise, and what sort of terror does it forestall? Is it that in the foundational mode, terms are assumed, terms like the subject and universality, and the sense in which they "must" be assumed is a *moral* one, taking the form of an imperative, and like some moral interdictions, a defense against what terrifies us most? Are we not paralyzed by a kind of moral compulsion that keeps us from interrogating the terms, taking the risk of living the terms that we keep in question?⁴

As a way of showing how passions for foundations and methods sometimes get in the way of an analysis of contemporary political culture, I propose to consider the way in which the efforts to secure a theoretical basis for political struggle often read precisely in opposition to the travels of certain key political signifiers within contemporary public culture. The most confusing for me has to do with the status of the term "gender" in relation to feminism, on the one hand, and lesbian and gay studies, on the other. I was surprised, perhaps naively, to understand from my queer studies friends that a proposed methodology for gay and lesbian studies accepts the notion that whereas feminism is said to have *gender* as its object of inquiry, lesbian and gay studies is said to have *sex and sexuality* as its "proper" object. Gender, we are told, is not to be mistaken for sexuality, which seems right in a certain way, but imagine then my shock when the Vatican announced that gender ought to be stricken from the United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) platform on the status of women because it is nothing other than a code for homosexuality!⁵ Added to my worries is that some of my closest associates within feminist theory scorn the notion of gender. They claim that sexual difference is the preferred term to gender, that "sexual difference" indicates a fundamental difference, and that gender indicates a merely constructed or variable effect.

The United Nations Meeting on the Status of Women in Beijing in 1995 exhibited yet another challenge to academic commitments. In particular, what is the status of universal claims within the domain of

international human rights work? Although many feminists have come to the conclusion that the universal is always a cover for a certain epistemological imperialism, insensitive to cultural texture and difference, the rhetorical power of claiming universality for rights of sexual autonomy and related rights of sexual orientation within the international human rights domain appears indisputable.

Consider first the surprising use of gender in the UN context. The Vatican not only denounced the term gender as a code for homosexuality but insisted that the platform language return to the notion of sex, in an apparent effort to secure a link between femininity and maternity as a naturally and divinely ordained necessity. In late April 1995, in preparation for the NGO meetings in Beijing—called the prepcom—several member states, under the guidance of the Catholic Church, sought to expunge the word “gender” from the Platform for Action and to replace it with the word “sex.” This was called by some on the prepcom committee an “insulting and demeaning attempt to reverse the gains made by women, to intimidate us and to block further progress.”⁶ They wrote further: “We will not be forced back into the ‘biology is destiny’ concept that seeks to define, confine, and reduce women and girls to their physical sexual characteristics. We will not let this happen—not in our homes, our workplaces, our communities, our countries and certainly not at the United Nations, to which women around the world look for human rights, justice, and leadership.” The statement notes:

The meaning of the word “gender” has evolved as differentiated from the word “sex” to express the reality that women’s and men’s roles and status are socially constructed and subject to change. In the present context, “gender” recognizes the multiple roles that females fill through our life cycles, the diversity of our needs, concerns, abilities, life experiences and aspirations . . . the concept of “gender” is embedded in contemporary social, political and legal discourse. It has been integrated into the conceptual planning, language, documents and programmes of the UN system. The infusion of gender perspectives into all aspects of UN activities is a major commitment approved at past conferences and it must [be] reaffirmed and strengthened at the 4th world conference.⁷

This debate led Russell Baker in the *New York Times* to wonder if the term gender hasn’t so supplanted the notion of sex that we will soon find ourselves in relation to our erotic lives confessing to having had “gender” with someone.

As gender became intensified at the UN discussion as a code for homosexuality, the local fields of queer theory and feminism were taking quite a different direction, at least apparently. The analogy offered by methodologically minded queer theorists in which feminism is said to be concerned with gender and lesbian and gay studies with sex and sexuality seems far afield from the above debate. But it is surprising to see that in the one case gender appears to stand for homosexuality, and in the other, it seems to be its opposite.

My point is not simply that academic debate seems woefully out of synch with the contemporary political usage of such terms, but that the effort to take distance from gender marks two political movements that are in many ways opposed to one another. In the international debate, the Vatican denounces the use of the term “gender” because it either (1) is a code for homosexuality, or (2) offers a way for homosexuality to be understood as one gender among others, threatening to take its place among masculine, feminine, bisexual, and transsexual, or, more likely, threatening to take the place of male and female altogether. The Vatican’s fear—and they cite Anne Fausto-Sterling⁸ on this matter—that homosexuality implies the proliferation of genders. (*La Repubblica* claims that in the United States the number of genders has leaped to five: masculine, feminine, lesbian, homosexual, and transsexual.) This view of homosexuality as proliferating gender seems to be based on the notions that homosexuals have in some sense departed from their sex, that in becoming homosexuals, they cease to be men or women, and that gender as we know it is radically incompatible with homosexuality; indeed, it is so incompatible that homosexuality must become its own gender, thus displacing the binary opposition between masculine and feminine altogether.

Interestingly, the Vatican seems to share a certain presupposition with those who would make queer studies into a methodology distinct from feminism: whereas the Vatican fears that sexuality threatens to displace sex as the reproductive aim and necessity of heterosexuality, those who accept the methodological division between queer theory and feminism hold out the promise that sexuality might exceed and

displace gender. Homosexuality in particular leaves gender behind. The two are not only separable but persist in a mutually exclusive tension in which queer sexualities aspire to a utopian life beyond gender, as Biddy Martin has so ably suggested.⁹ The Vatican seeks to undo gender in an effort to rehabilitate sex, but method-oriented queer theory seeks to undo gender in an effort to foreground sexuality. The Vatican fears the separation of sexuality from sex, for that introduces a notion of sexual practice that is not constrained by putatively natural reproductive ends. And in this sense it appears that the Vatican, in fearing gender, fears the separation of sexuality from sex, and so fears queer theory. Queer methodology, however, insists on sexuality, and even in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, on "sexuality and sex." Such understandings evacuate gender as well, but only because gender stands for feminism and its presumptive heterosexuality.¹⁰

In both contexts, the debates were about terminology and whether the term "gender" could be allowed into the platform language for the NGO meetings, and whether the term "sexual orientation" would be part of the final language of the UN conference resolutions. (The answer to the first is yes; to the second, no, but language regarding sexual autonomy was deemed acceptable.) Terms such as gender, sexual orientation, and even universality, were contested publicly precisely on the question of what they will mean, and a special UN meeting was convened in July of 1995 to come up with an understanding of what "gender" means.

My view is that no simple definition of gender will suffice, and that more important than coming up with a strict and applicable definition is the ability to track the travels of the term through public culture. The term "gender" has become a site of contest for various interests. Consider the domestic U.S. example in which gender is often perceived as a way to defuse the political dimension of feminism, in which gender becomes a merely discursive marking of masculine and feminine, understood as constructions that might be studied outside a feminist framework or as simple self-productions, manufactured cultural effects of some kind. Consider also the introduction of gender studies programs as ways to legitimate an academic domain by refusing to engage polemics against feminism, as well as the introduction of gender studies programs and centers in Eastern Europe where the overcoming of "feminism" is tied to the overcoming of Marxist state ideology in

which feminist aims were understood to be achievable only on the condition of the realization of Communist aims.

As if that struggle internal to the gender arena were not enough, the challenge of an Anglo-European theoretical perspective within the academy casts doubt on the value of the overly sociological construal of the term. Gender is thus opposed in the name of sexual difference precisely because gender endorses a socially constructivist view of masculinity and femininity, displacing or devaluing the *symbolic* status of sexual difference and the political specificity of the feminine. Here I am thinking of criticisms that have been leveled against the term by Naomi Schor, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, and others.

In the meantime, sexual difference is clearly out of favor within some reigning paradigms in queer theory. Indeed, even when queer theory is seeking to establish the anachronism of feminism, feminism is described as a project unambiguously committed to gender. Within critical race studies one finds, I believe, very little reference to sexual difference as a term.¹¹

But what is this sexual difference? It is not a simple facticity, but neither is it simply an effect of facticity. If it is psychic, it is also social, in a sense that is not yet elaborated. Much recent scholarship seeks to understand how psychic structure becomes implicated in dynamics of social power. How are we to understand this conjuncture or disjuncture, and what has it to do with the theorization of sexual difference?

I want to suggest that the debates concerning the theoretical priority of sexual difference to gender, of gender to sexuality, of sexuality to gender, are all crosscut by another kind of problem, a problem that sexual differences poses, namely, the permanent difficulty of determining where the biological, the psychic, the discursive, the social begin and end. If the Vatican seeks to replace the language of gender with the language of sex, it is because the Vatican wishes to rebiologize sexual difference, that is, to reestablish a biologically narrow notion of reproduction as women's social fate. And yet, when Rosi Braidotti, for instance, insists that we return to sexual difference, it is rather different from the Vatican's call for such a return; if for her sexual difference is a difference that is irreducible to biology and irreducible to culture or to social construction, then how are we to understand the ontological

register of sexual difference? Perhaps it is precisely that sexual difference registers ontologically in a way that is permanently difficult to determine.¹² Sexual difference is neither fully given nor fully constructed, but partially both. That sense of “partially” resists any clear sense of “partition”; sexual difference then operates as a chiasm, but the terms that overlap and blur are perhaps less importantly masculine or feminine than the problematic of construction itself; that what is constructed is of necessity prior to construction, even as there appears no access to this prior moment except through construction.

As I understand it, sexual difference is the site where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed, where it must and can be posed, but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered. Understood as a border concept, sexual difference has psychic, somatic, and social dimensions that are never quite collapsible into one another but are not for that reason ultimately distinct. Does sexual difference vacillate there, as a vacillating border, demanding a rearticulation of those terms without any sense of finality? Is it, therefore, not a thing, not a fact, not a presupposition, but rather a demand for rearticulation that never quite vanishes—but also never quite appears?

What does this way of thinking sexual difference do to our understanding of gender? Is what we mean by gender that part of sexual difference that *does* appear as the social (gender is thus the extreme of sociality in sexual difference), as the negotiable, as the constructed—precisely what the Vatican seeks to restore to “sex”—to the site of the natural, where the natural itself is figured as fixed and non-negotiable? Is the Vatican’s project as unrealizable as the project to produce gender *ex nihilo* either from the resources of culture or from some fabulous will? Is the queer effort to override gender, or to relegate it to the superseded past as the proper object of some other inquiry, feminist, for example, that is not its own? Is this not an effort to still sexual difference as that which is radically separable from sexuality? The regulation of gender has always been part of the work of heterosexist normativity and to insist upon a radical separation of gender and sexuality is to miss the opportunity to analyze that particular operation of homophobic power.¹³

From quite separate quarters, the effort to associate gender with nefarious feminist aims continues along other lines. In a disturbing

cooptation of antiimperialist discourse, the Vatican went so far as to suggest that gender was an import from decadent strains within Western feminism, one imposed on “Third World countries,” often used interchangeably with the term “developing countries.”

Although it is clear that gender did become a rallying point for some feminist organizing at the 1995 UN conference, it became most tense as an issue that emerged when a Honduran women’s group objected to the appointment of an ultraconservative Christian delegation to represent the Honduran government at the September conference. Led by Oscar Rodriguez, the president of the Latin American Episcopal conference, the attempt to oppose a kind of feminism labeled as “Western” was opposed by grassroots movements within the country, including the vocal Women’s Rights Centre in Honduras.¹⁴ The state apparatus thus in conjunction with the church appropriates an anticultural imperialist language in order to disempower women in its own country. Apart from claiming that Beijing was going to represent a feminism that was “a culture of death” and one that viewed “motherhood as slavery,” this still unnamed form of feminism also claimed that the concerns of the Beijing conference represent a false feminism. (The Vatican as well in its letter of apology for its own patriarchalism sought to distinguish between a feminism that remained committed to the essence of the dignity of women, and a feminism that would destroy maternity and destroy sexual difference.) Both Rodriguez and the Vatican took aim at “unnatural genders” as well, homosexuals and transsexuals. The Women’s Rights Centre (CDM) responded by pointing out that it was not interested in destroying maternity but was fighting for mothers to be free of abuse, and that the focus of the Beijing conference was not “unnatural genders,” but “the effects of structural adjustment plans on women’s economic status, and violence against women.” Significantly, the Christian group representing Honduras was also vocally anti-abortion, drawing clear lines among so-called unnatural genders, the destruction of maternity, and the promotion of abortion rights.

In the platform language, gender was finally allowed to stay, but lesbian had to remain “in brackets.” Indeed, I saw some delegates in San Francisco preparing for the meetings by wearing tee shirts with “lesbian” in brackets. The brackets are, of course, supposed to signal that this is disputed language, that there is no agreement on the appropriate

use of this term. Though they are supposed to relieve the word of its power, calling into question its admissability, they offer up the term as a diacritically compounded phrase, one which achieves a kind of hypervisibility by virtue of its questionability.

The term "lesbian" went from this bracketed form to being dropped from the language altogether. But the success of this strategy seemed only to stoke the suspicion that the term was reappearing at other linguistic sites: through the word *gender*, through the discourse of motherhood, through references to sexual autonomy, and even to the phrase "other status"—understood as a basis on which rights could be violated; "other status"—a status that could not be named directly, but which designated lesbians through the obliquity of the phrase: the status that is "other," the one that is not speakable here, the one that has been rendered unspeakable here, the status that is not one.

Within the discursive frame of this international meeting, it seems crucial to ask what it is that occasions the linking of the inclusion of lesbian rights with the production of unnatural gender and the destruction of maternity as well as the introduction of a culture of death (presumably antilife, a familiar Rightist translation of what it is to be pro-choice). Clearly, those who would oppose lesbian rights on this basis (and there were others who oppose them on other bases), either assume that lesbians are not mothers or, if they are, they are nevertheless participating in the destruction of maternity. So be it.

Importantly, though, I think we see in this scene a number of issues simultaneously at play that are not easily separable from one another. The presumption that gender is a code for homosexuality, that the introduction of lesbian is the introduction of a new gender, an unnatural one that will result in the destruction of maternity, and that is linked with feminist struggles for reproductive rights, is irreducibly homophobic and misogynist at once. Moreover, the argument, advanced by a church-state alliance, one that was echoed by the U.S. delegation as well, is that sexual rights are a western imposition was used most forcefully to debunk and contain the claims of the grassroots women's movement in Latin America to represent women at the conference. Hence, we see an augmentation of church-state ideological power over the women's movement precisely through the appropriation of an antiimperialist discourse from such movements.

Over and against a church-state alliance that sought to rehabilitate and defend traditional ethnic purities in an effort to impede claims of sexual autonomy, an alliance emerged at the meetings between feminists seeking language supporting reproductive rights, rights to be free of abuse within marriage, and lesbian rights.

Significantly, the organizing at both conferences on the issue of sexual orientation did not, as the Vatican presumed it would, take cover behind the term "gender"; "sexual orientation," for all its legal and medical strangeness as a term, and "lesbian" became the language that the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission sought to have included among the bases on which human rights violations against women can take place.

What does seem noteworthy, though, is that the UN conference did achieve consensus on language. The language is rhetorically important because it represents the prevailing international consensus on the issue and can be used by both governmental and nongovernmental agencies in various countries to advance policies that are consistent with the wording of paragraph 96 of the conference's Platform for Action:

The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behavior and its consequences.

Lastly, it seems important to ask after the status of the UN language itself, a language that is supposed to be wrought of international consensus, not unanimity, one that is supposed to represent the consensus on what are universally acceptable claims, universally presumed rights. That what is permitted within the term "universal" is understood to be dependent on a "consensus" appears to undercut some of the force of universality itself, but perhaps not. The process presumes that what will and will not be included within the language of universal entitlement is not settled once and for all, that its future shape cannot

be fully anticipated at this time. The UN deliberations became the site for the public ritual that articulates and rearticulates this consensus on what will be the limits of universality.

The meaning of "the universal" proves to be culturally variable, and the specific cultural articulations of "the universal" work against its claim to a transcultural status. This is not to say that there ought to be no reference to the universal or that it has become, for us, an impossibility. The bracketing of the universal only means that there are cultural conditions for its articulation that are not always the same, and that the term gains its meaning for us precisely through the decidedly less than universal cultural conditions of its articulation. This is a paradox that any injunction to adopt a universal attitude will encounter. For it may be that in one culture a set of rights are considered to be universally endowed, and that in another those very rights mark the limit to universalizability, that is, "if we grant those rights to those people we will be undercutting the foundations of the universal as we know it." This has become especially clear to me in the field of lesbian and gay human rights where "the universal" is a contested term, and where various governments and various mainstream human rights groups voice doubt over whether lesbian and gay humans ought properly to be included in "the human," and whether their putative rights fit within the existing conventions governing the scope of rights considered universal.

It is for me no surprise that the Vatican refers to the possible inclusion of lesbian rights as "anti-human." Perhaps that is true. To admit the lesbian into the realm of the universal might be to undo the human, at least in its present form, but it might also be to imagine the human beyond its conventional limits.

Here the notion of universality is not a foundation upon which to build nor is it a presumption that allows us to proceed; it is a term that has become scandalous, threatening to include in the human the very "other" against which the human was defined. In this sense, in this more radical usage, "universality" works against and destroys the foundations that have become conventionally accepted as foundations. "Universality" becomes an antifoundationalism. To claim a set of rights as universal even when existing conventions governing the scope of universality preclude precisely such a claim is both to destroy a concept of the universal and to admit what has been its "constitutive

outside," in so doing performing the reverse of any act of assimilation to an *existing* norm. I would insist that such a claim runs the productive risk of provoking and demanding a radical rearticulation of universality itself, forcing the universal into brackets, as it were, into an important sense of unknowingness about what it is and what it might include in a future not fully determined in advance.

To be excluded from the universal, and yet to make a claim within its terms, is to utter a performative contradiction of a certain kind. One might seem foolish and self-defeating, as if such a claim can only be met with derision; or the wager might work the other way, revising and elaborating historical standards of universality proper to the futural movement of democracy itself. To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the "not yet" is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains "unrealized" by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its *existing* formulation, and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy the place of the "who," but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them. The excluded, in this sense, constitutes the contingent limit of universalization. This time around, the brackets fell from "lesbian" only to be consigned to "other status," the status of what remains other to language as we speak it. It is this otherness by which the speakable is instituted, that haunts its boundaries, and that threatens to enter the speakable through substitutions that cannot always be detected. Although gender was not the means by which homosexuality entered the official UN language, sexual freedom did become such a term, a rubric that brought lesbians and heterosexual women together for a time, one which gave value to autonomy and refused a return to any notion of fated biology. That the sexual freedom of the female subject challenged the humanism that underwrites universality suggests that we might consider the social forms, such as the patriarchal heterosexual family, that still underwrite our "formal" conceptions of universality. The human, it seems, must become strange to itself, even monstrous, to reach the human on another plane. This human will not be "one," indeed, will have no ultimate form, but it will be one that is constantly negotiating sexual difference in a way that has no natural or necessary consequences for the social organization of sexuality. By

insisting that this will be a persistent and open question, I mean to suggest that we make no decision on what sexual difference is but leave that question open, troubling, unresolved, propitious.

Response to Rosi Braidotti's *Metamorphoses*

Metamorphoses is Braidotti's third large book in feminist theory, following *Patterns of Dissonance* and *Nomadic Subjects*. It is the first of two volumes, the second of which is forthcoming from Polity Press. Before we enter the details of the book, let us consider what this work seeks to accomplish. It essays to bring together a Deleuzian perspective on the body and becoming, with a feminist perspective on sexual difference and the becoming of Woman; it undertakes a sustained work in the philosophical and cultural criticism of film and, in particular, the ways in which bodies, machines, and animals become intermixed under specific social conditions of production and consumption. It is, as well, not only a sustained defense of Irigaray, but a pedagogical effort to get readers of Irigaray to read her otherwise. The text also makes use, despite some Deleuzian protestations against a psychoanalytic perspective, of a psychoanalytic account of the subject that emphasizes the noncoincidence of the subject to its own psychic constitution, the persistence of the unconscious wish, and the cultural and social structuring of unconscious aims. The text also bespeaks a faith in the continuing use of psychoanalysis as a cure for certain orders of psychic suffering. If we thought before reading this text that bringing Deleuze and Lacan together would be difficult, or that subjecting both authors to a feminist reading that insists upon the primacy of sexual difference might be taxing, or that all this high theory would be difficult to bring together with a culturally savvy analysis of a number of popular films, we were doubtless right. But the text does achieve a certain syncretism of views, and this syncretic accomplishment is mobilized in the service of a theory of affirmation, one that not only seeks to counter the logics of negativity associated with Hegel, but that implies the possibility of an activism that does not rely upon a liberal ontology for the subject.

The text also offers a complex and knowing critique of technology, refusing recourse to a pretechnological past. Braidotti believes instead

that a philosophical approach to the origin of life in sexual difference has concrete ethical implications for technological interventions in bodily and reproductive life. While embracing the breakdown among distinctions that humanism has supported among animal, human, and machine, Braidotti cautions us against thinking that we might produce and transform the body in *any and all* directions. Whereas transformation is the stated task of her text, and we might say that it is the event of this text, it would be wrong to think that nomadology, as Braidotti conceives it, or that the work of metamorphosis, of literally changing shape, is an infinite task, one that can take place without any limits. There are modes of transformation that work with and through the body, but there are others, in her view, that seek to overcome bodily life or exceed the parameters of bodily difference. These latter Braidotti opposes on ethical and political grounds. It suits the aims of phallogocentrism, for instance, to construe "transformation" as the overcoming of sexual difference, to use it as the occasion to reinstall masculinist forms of mastery and autonomy, and so to obliterate sexual difference and the specific symbolic domain—the specific symbolic future—of the feminine. Similarly, she opposes any capitulation to a technological remaking of the body that colludes with somatophobia, an effort to escape from bodily life altogether. (Difference and the body remain, for Braidotti, not only conditions of transformation, but the very vehicle and instrument of transformation, that without which transformation in the normative sense cannot take place.)

Braidotti's view of transformation not only establishes a relation to a certain philosophical inheritance but also constitutes one of the most significant dimensions of her own philosophical contribution. At once a theory of activism, or an activist theory, her account of embodiment works philosophically and politically at once, construing transformation in both of these ways at once. Whereas some critics of poststructuralism have maintained that there can be no "agency" without a located and unitary subject, Braidotti shows that activity, affirmation, and the very capacity to transform conditions are derived from a subject multiply constituted and moving in several directions. The line from Spinoza through Deleuze that Braidotti follows, which includes a certain reading of psychoanalysis and might also share some affinities with Nietzsche, argues that the will to live, the affirmation of life takes place through the play of multiplicity. The dynamic interaction of multiple effects

brings forth transformation itself. For those who claim that a multiply constituted agent is diffuse or scattered, it should be said that for Braidotti multiplicity is a way of understanding the play of forces that work upon one another and that generate new possibilities of life. Multiplicity is not the death of agency, but its very condition. We misconstrue where action comes from if we fail to understand how multiple forces interact and produce the very dynamism of life.

Transformation is produced by the play of forces, some of which are importantly unconscious, working through bodily means, so that when creativity takes place and something new is inaugurated, it is the result of an activity that precedes the knowing subject, but is not, for that reason, fully external to the subject. Something that precedes me constitutes who I am, and this paradox gives articulation to a conception of the subject irreducible to consciousness. We are not referring to a master subject—a liberal individual who knows and decides on a course of action—as if the subject only inaugurates action and is not acted upon in various ways. That the subject is produced in sexual difference seems to mean, for Braidotti, that this is a body acted upon by other bodies, producing the possibility of a certain transformation. It is an induction into life, a seduction to life, where life itself cannot be understood apart from the dynamic transformation for which we seek to give an account.

This philosophical view has particular global and cultural relevance for those who seek to know what transformation might look like in the context of dynamic global networks. Whereas some would say, in a Marxist vein for instance, that the social world is a sum of totalizing and totalized effects, Braidotti would, I think, oppose this stasis, and seek to know how from various networks, technological and economic, possibilities of transformation are conditioned and produced. But here again, we have to understand that this transformation can only take place if we understand bodily processes as its condition and venue. For Braidotti, bodily processes have to be specified in terms of sexual difference. And sexual difference is the name for a future symbolic that comes to value the not-one as the condition of life itself.

In a way, and without my quite knowing it, I have produced some of the texts that Braidotti's position opposes. Like Braidotti, I have come to represent a version of feminist poststructuralism that has overlapping commitments with hers, but one that tends to work with different texts

and different problematics. Poststructuralism is not a monolith; it is not a unitary event or set of texts, but a wide range of works that emerged in the aftermath of Ferdinand de Saussure, the French Hegel, existentialism, phenomenology, and various forms of linguistic formalism. My sense is that it would be right to say, as Braidotti does, that I sometimes stay within the theology of lack, that I sometimes focus on the labor of the negative in the Hegelian sense, and that this involves me in considerations of melancholy, mourning, conscience, guilt, terror, and the like. I tend to think that this is simply what happens when a Jewish girl with a Holocaustal psychic inheritance sits down to read philosophy at an early age, especially when she turns to philosophy from violent circumstances. It may be also that I am concerned very often with questions of survival since I wasn't sure that either my own gender or my own sexuality—whatever those terms finally mean—were going to allow me to be immune from social violence of various forms. Survival is not the same as affirmation, but there is no affirmation without survival (unless we read certain suicidal acts as affirmative). Survival, however, is not enough, even as nothing more can happen for a subject without survival.¹⁵ When Braidotti considers pain and suffering and limitation, she is moved to find the way through and beyond them, to engage a certain activism that overcomes passivity without taking the form of mastery or control. This is a fine art form that is crafted through a certain insistence on finding the possibilities for both affirmation and transformation in what might be difficult, if not potentially dangerous: new technologies of the body, global communication networks, and patterns of transnational immigration and displacement.

I suppose the questions I would be compelled to ask about forced emigration would include the following: What forms of loss do those who are compelled to emigrate undergo? What kind of dissonance is experienced by those who no longer have a home in one country, and do not yet have a home in a new country, but live in a suspended zone of citizenship? What forms do the pains and sufferings of continued colonization take? What is it to be displaced at home, which is surely the case for Palestinians under occupation at the present time?

My wager is that Braidotti would not dismiss these scenes of suffering *as* suffering, but that, methodologically, she would seek to identify these sites of fracture and mobility as conditions for new possibility. In this sense, her critical mode of reading seeks to identify possible

sites of transformation, seeking to open up what might otherwise seem like a trap or a dead end, and finding there a new social condition for affirmation. That there is a fractured state, or a state of displacement, can surely be a site of suffering, but it can also be the site for a new possibility of agency. We might lament the loss of proximity and privacy as conditions for human communication but also consider the possibilities for transformation by global networks and the possibilities for global alliance.

There is, I think, not so much a program for transformation in this text that is a detailed agenda about what should be transformed and how. Rather, the work of transformation is exemplified by the text, in its practice of reading, in its relentless search for what is mobile and generative. Braidotti counters, on the one hand, the pessimistic predictions of a Left that thinks that social processes have already done all their dirty work, and that we live as the lifeless effects of their prior efficacy. On the other hand, she counters forms of agency—usually modeled as phallogocentric mastery—that either deny the body or refuse sexual difference, thereby, in her terms, fail to understand how life itself requires the play of multiplicity.

There are, of course, some unsettled questions between Braidotti's position and mine. I'll try to formulate them in question form with the hope that this text, like others, will be taken up as part of an ongoing critical conversation.

Sexual Difference

Braidotti argues that sexual difference is often rejected by theorists because femininity is itself associated with a pejorative understanding of its meaning. She dislikes this pejorative use of the term, but thinks that the term itself can be released into a different future. This may well be true. But is it fair to say that those who oppose this framework therefore demean or debase femininity, or believe that femininity can only have a debased meaning? Is it fair to say that those who do not subscribe to this framework are therefore against the feminine, or even misogynist? It seems to me that the future symbolic will be one in which femininity has multiple possibilities, where it is, as Braidotti herself claims, released from the demand to be one thing, or to comply with

a singular norm, the norm devised for it by phallogocentric means. But must the framework for thinking about sexual difference be binary for this feminine multiplicity to emerge? Why can't the framework for sexual difference itself move beyond binarity into multiplicity?

Butch Desire

As a coda to the above remark, consider the following: There may be women who love women, who even love what we might call "femininity," but who cannot find a way to understand their own love through the category of women or as a permutation of femininity.¹⁶ Butch desire may, as some say, be experienced as part of "women's desire," but it can also be experienced, that is, named and interpreted, as a kind of masculinity, one that is not to be found in men. There are many ways of approaching this issue of desire and gender. We could immediately blame the butch community, and say that they/we are simply antifeminine or that we have disavowed a primary femininity, but then we would be left with the quandary that for the most part (but not exclusively) butches are deeply, if not fatally, attracted to the feminine and, in this sense, love the feminine.

We could say, extending Braidotti's frame of reference, that this negative judgment of butch desire is an example of what happens when the feminine is defined too narrowly as an instrument of phallogocentrism, namely, that the full range of possible femininity is not encompassed within its terms, and that butch desire ought properly to be described as another permutation of feminine desire. This last view seeks a more open account of femininity, one that goes against the grain of the phallogocentric version. The view improves upon the first position, which simply attributes a psychological disposition of self-loathing or misogyny to the desiring subject at hand. But if there is masculinity at work in butch desire, that is, if that is the name through which that desire comes to make sense, then why shy away from the fact that there may be ways that masculinity emerges in women, and that feminine and masculine do not belong to differently sexed bodies? Why shouldn't it be that we are at an edge of sexual difference for which the language of sexual difference might not suffice, and that this follows, in a way, from an understanding of the body as constituted

by, and constituting, multiple forces? If this particular construction of desire exceeds the binary frame, or confounds its terms, why could it not be an instance of the multiple play of forces that Braidotti accepts on other occasions?

Deleuze

Although Braidotti refers to my 1987 book, *Subjects of Desire*, to support the claim that I reject Deleuze, she needs to know that every year I receive several essays and comments from people who insist that I am Deleuzian. I think this might be a terrible thought for her, but I would ask that she consider that the Spinozan *conatus* remains at the core of my own work. Like her, I am in favor of a deinstitutionalized philosophy (a “minority” philosophy), and that I am also looking for the new, for possibilities that emerge from failed dialectics and that exceed the dialectic itself. I confess, however, that I am not a very good materialist. Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language. This is not because I think that the body is reducible to language; it is not. Language emerges from the body, constituting an emission of sorts. The body is that upon which language falters, and the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers, in ways that remain largely unconscious. Although Deleuze opposed psychoanalysis, Braidotti does not. Psychoanalysis seems centered on the problem of the lack for Deleuze, but I tend to center on the problem of negativity. One reason I have opposed Deleuze is that I find no registration of the negative in his work, and I feared that he was proposing a manic defense against negativity. Braidotti relinks Deleuze with psychoanalysis in a new way and thus makes him readable in a new way. But how does she reconcile the Deleuze who rejects the unconscious with a psychoanalysis that insists, rightly, upon it?

Speech, Bodies, and Performativity

In my view, performativity is not just about speech acts. It is also about bodily acts. The relation between the two is complicated, and I called it a “chiasmus” in *Bodies that Matter*. There is always a

dimension of bodily life that cannot be fully represented, even as it works as the condition and activating condition of language.

Generally, I follow Shoshana Felman’s view in *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* in which she claims, following Lacan, that the body gives rise to language, and that language carries bodily aims, and performs bodily deeds that are not always understood by those who use language to accomplish certain conscious aims. I take it that this is the importance of the transference not only for the therapeutic situation but for the theorization of language that it occasions. We say something, and mean something by what we say, but we also do something with our speech, and what we do, how we act upon another with our language, is not the same as the meaning we consciously convey. It is in this sense that the significations of the body exceed the intentions of the subject.

Heterosexuality

It would be a mistake to say that I am against it. I just think that heterosexuality doesn’t belong exclusively to heterosexuals. Moreover, heterosexual practices are not the same as heterosexual norms; heterosexual normativity worries me and becomes the occasion of my critique. No doubt, practicing heterosexuals have all kinds of critical and comedic perspectives on heterosexual normativity. On the occasions where I have sought to elucidate a heterosexual melancholia, that is, a refusal of homosexual attachment that emerges within heterosexuality as the consolidation of gender norms (“I am a woman, therefore I do not want one”), I am trying to show how a prohibition on certain forms of love becomes installed as an ontological truth about the subject: The “am” of “I am a man” encodes the prohibition “I may not love a man,” so that the ontological claim carries the force of prohibition itself. This only happens, however, under conditions of melancholia, and it does not mean that all heterosexuality is structured in this way or that there cannot be plain “indifference” to the question of homosexuality on the part of some heterosexuals rather than unconscious repudiation. (I take this point from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.) Neither do I mean to suggest that I support a developmental model in which first and foremost there is homosexual love, and then that love

becomes repressed, and then heterosexuality emerges as a consequence. I do find it interesting, though, that this account would seem to follow from Freud's own postulates.

I fully support Braidotti's view, for instance, that a child is always in love with a mother whose desire is directed elsewhere, and that this triangulation makes sense as the condition of the desiring subject. If this is her formulation of oedipalization, then neither of us rejects oedipalization, although she will *not* read oedipalization through the lack, and I will incorporate prohibition in my account of compulsory heterosexuality. It is only according to the model that posits heterosexual disposition in the child as a given, that it makes sense to ask, as Freud asked in *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, how heterosexuality is accomplished. In other words, only within the thesis of a primary heterosexuality does the question of a prior homosexuality emerge, since there will have to be some account given of how heterosexuality becomes established. My critical engagement with these developmental schemes has been to show how the theory of heterosexual dispositions presupposes what would defeat it, namely a preheterosexual erotic history from which it emerges. If there is a triangularity that we call oedipalization, it emerges only on the basis of a set of prohibitions or constraints. Although I accept that triangularity is no doubt a condition of desire, I also have trouble accepting it. That trouble is no doubt a sign of its working, since it is what introduces difficulty into desire, psychoanalytically considered. What interests me most, however, is disarticulating oedipalization from the thesis of a primary or universalized heterosexuality.

Mimesis

Braidotti reports her pleasure at finding at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London a work of art that contains the phrase, "ironic mimesis is not a critique." I wonder whether the statement is true. Is the kind of critical mimesis that Luce Irigaray performs in *The Speculum of the Other Woman* included under such a view? Does Braidotti want to dispense with the part of Irigaray that enters into the language of philosophy as its shadow, to infiltrate its terms, to manifest the occluded feminine, and to provide a disruptive writing

that casts the self-grounding authority of masculinist philosophy into question? Why would not this kind of mimesis be critical? I think we make a mistake if we think that this kind of mimesis results only in a slave morality, accepting and fortifying the terms of authority. Irigaray does something else with those terms. She turns them; she derives a place for women when there was no place; she exposes the exclusions by which certain discourses proceed; and she shows that those sites of absence can be mobilized. The voice that emerges "echoes" the master discourse, but this echo nevertheless establishes that there is a voice, that some articulatory power has not been obliterated, and that it is mirroring the words by which its own obliteration was to have taken place. Something is persisting and surviving, and the words of the master sound different when they are spoken by one who is, in the speaking, in the recitation, undermining the obliterating effects of his claim.

Anglo-European Divide

Braidotti argues that feminist theory in Europe has been subject to the hegemony of U.S. feminism, and I presume she is referring to white women's theory as well. For her, it is important to defend a European feminism in order to engage with key issues, including immigration, new European racisms, the ethics of reproductive technology, and the politics of the environment, to name a few. It is notoriously difficult for U.S. feminists and theorists more generally to take account of their first-world privilege in ways that do not resolve into self-aggrandizing guilt or histrionic efforts at self-effacement. Theory emerges from location, and location itself is under crisis in Europe, since the boundaries of Europe are precisely what is being contested in quarrels over who belongs to the European Union and who does not, on rules regarding immigration (especially in Belgium, France, the Netherlands), the cultural effects of Islamic communities, of Arab and North African populations. I am an American, but I am trained in European philosophy. Only decades ago, I was part of a family that understood itself as European Jews, and I grew up with older adults speaking several languages I did not understand and English in heavy accents. When I went to Germany to study German Idealism, my grandmother considered that I was "returning" to where I belonged, and that this was a good and

proper thing. Her brothers were schooled in Prague, and she knew there was a German-Jewish intellectual heritage. I still spend too many Sundays reading Benjamin and Scholem, and it may be that this inheritance (one that can be traced through Derrida) is more important to me than American sociology and anthropology. I listen to Braidotti speak in English, knowing that Italian was her first language (even though she lived in Australia for many years), and I am aware that her English is quicker than mine. When I reflect upon it, I would wager she has more friends in the American feminist community than I do.

My German is not too bad, and I spend more time arguing with Habermasians than most people would believe. There is a transatlantic exchange at work between us: we both cross over. Braidotti has helped to show us what this process is, and how the multiple locations that we inhabit produce new sites for transformation. Can we then return to the bipolar distinction between European and American with ease? The wars against Afghanistan and Iraq have clearly produced a longing for the European Left among many progressive Americans, even though this longing in its naïve form tends to forget the resurgence of national sovereignty and the pervasive institutional racism against new immigrants that mire Europe at this time. Doubtless, however, one needs the distinction between European and American in order to mark the hegemonic functioning of the American scene within feminism. But it is perhaps more important at this time to consider the feminisms that are left out of that picture, those that emerge from subaltern localities, from “developing” countries, the southern hemisphere, Asia, and from new immigrant communities within the United States and Europe alike.

If American feminism signals a preoccupation with gender, then it would seem that “American” is allied with the sociological, the theory of social construction, and that the doctrine of difference risks losing its salience. But perhaps the most important task is to think through the debates on the body, since it may or may not be true that cultural construction effaces both sexual difference and bodily process. If the “drive” is the convergence of culture and biology, then it would seem that the “drive” holds out the possibility for a productive exchange between those who speak in the name of the body and those who speak in the name of culture. And if difference is not code for heterosexual normativity, then surely it needs to be articulated so that

difference is understood as that which disrupts the coherence of any postulation of identity. If the new gender politics argues against the idealization of dimorphism, then does it argue against the primacy of sexual difference itself? And if technologies of the body (surgical, hormonal, athletic) generate new forms of gender, is this precisely in the service of inhabiting a body more fully or does it constitute a perilous effacement? It seems crucial to keep these questions open so that we might work theoretically and politically in broad coalitions. The lines we draw are invitations to cross over and that crossing over, as any nomadic subject knows, constitutes who we are.