Privileged Nomads
On the Strangeness of Intellectuals and the Intellectuality of Strangers

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The Desert People are closer to being good than settled peoples because they are closer to the First State and are more removed from all the evil habits that have infected the hearts of settlers. (Ibn Khaldoun)

Exercises in Nomadology

It has become a cliche for connoisseurs of postmodern sensibility to say that we live in a world of flux, where mobility, experimentation and transgression have turned into core signifiers of the daily management of lifestyles. To seek adventure, to live the experimental life, to probe the limits of one’s identity, has become a singularly powerful motif in popular and elite culture alike, ranging all the way from ‘low’ transgressions and kicks such as bungy-jumping, wind-gliding, drug use and sexually promiscuous holidays towards more costly and rarefied pursuits such as surfing the Internet, high-tech mountain climbing, mobile phoning, continuous cosmopolitan travel, transgenderism and intellectual ‘nomadism’. The universal spread of such codings of movement and transgression bears witness to an unprecedented popularization (and banalization) of the cult of Romantic individualism and its core themes of authenticity, alienation and the aestheticization of the mundane. The precarious and elitist experimentalism of 19th-century Bohemian artists and intellectuals has ‘trickled down’ and become more democratically accessible, as the interval of ‘growing up’ has been lengthened and Bohemia itself (the social margin) has been expanded and institutionalized into a fully legitmate and subsidized social sanctuary (Pels and Crébas, 1991: 363).

A few snippets from the cultural mosaic may serve to illustrate the...
pervasiveness of such performative imagery. For some years now, a worldwide billboard campaign by Peter Stuyvesant, showing well-chiselled men and women striking suggestive poses against a vaguely cosmo/metropolitan background, has been running the caption: ‘There are no borders’; Chesterfield has promptly reacted by posting a similar billboard message: ‘Every one is an original’. A recent article in the Dutch press on flexi-work typically argued that (post)modern employees would be unwise to surrender to single lifetime employment, and had better turn into ‘work nomads’ migrating from assignment to assignment and from job to job; which led at least one commentator to criticize this as a sell-out to the postmodern ‘trash philosophy’ of nomadism (De Volkskrant, 1 July 1995 and 11 July 1995). In the Netherlands as elsewhere, politically correct multicultural festivals are typically named ‘Crossing Borders’ or ‘Roots Unlimited’; ‘Cultural Nomadism’ was also chosen to serve as the leading motto of the 1993 Venice Biennale. Closer to intellectual home, a successful 1995 lecture series at the University of Amsterdam (‘Nomadism: On Boundaries and Identity’) once again displayed the whole gamut of currently fashionable inflections of the discourse of mobility, exile and transgression. Around the same time, a research group on ‘Transnationality and Multiculturalism’ of the deconstruction-inspired Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, after having digested a heady batch of articles on nomadism, hybridity and exile, went on to test its readings in a ‘real-life’ situation, and set out on a ‘field trip’ to the Tropical Museum exposition on ‘Nomads in Central Asia’ – thus bringing would-be intellectual nomads face to face with representations of weather-beaten shepherds herding flocks of skinny goats across the endless tundra.1

In this article, I will be especially concerned with the way in which this discourse of nomadism has recently turned into a cognitive plaything of the educated elite, into its newest fad in self-stylization and self-celebration. It hence takes issue with a powerfully suggestive, but also risky and misleading set of metaphors which celebrate the traveller, the migrant, the exile, the stranger or the nomad as the quintessential postmodern subject, and especially, as the quintessential role model of the modern intellectual. Vocabularies of travel, migration and movement indeed proliferate copiously in present-day cultural criticism (Berman, 1983; Van den Abbeele, 1992; Chambers, 1994a; Robertson et al., 1994), which in this respect appears to have turned into a vast ‘travel literature’. Typically, (post)modern intellectuals like to think of themselves as ‘on the move’ (towards a ‘place called elsewhere’), ‘in transit’, ‘moving across frontiers’, ‘in a state of diaspora’ or ‘living between worlds’. They tend to sacralize the desirable state of ‘ambivalence’, ‘contingency’, ‘diffraction’, ‘hybridity’ or even ‘monstrosity’ (in the sense of combining unfitting, disparate identities) (see Haraway, 1991, 1992; Law, 1991), and preferably adopt the pose of the dislocated ‘traveller’, ‘tourist’ or ‘ethnographer’ (who Lévi-Strauss already described as a ‘professional stranger’). Nothing worse than being suspected to be ‘native’, ‘sedentary’, ‘rooted’ or ‘immobile’.

Said’s notion of ‘travelling theory’, to take a first example, has
– somewhat at cross-purposes from its author’s apparent intent – been read as implying that there is something essentially mobile or itinerant about theorizing, thinking or intellectual life in general; a view that is close to Clifford’s description of theorizing as ‘leaving home’ (Said, 1983; Clifford, 1989; Davies, 1994; Boer, 1995; Wolff, 1995; Braidotti, 1996). More recently, Said has modelled the vocation of the critical intellectual after the unaccommodated, dislocated condition of the ‘exile’ or ‘expatriate’, which is duly metaphorized into an attitude of intellectual disengagement and dissent: ‘Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others’ (1994: 39). Another illustration is provided by Iain Chambers, who similarly elevates the conditions of migrancy, travel, homelessness and exile into core symbols of our postmodern condition, and immediately lends them strong intellectual connotations. His celebration of ‘the nomadic experience of language, of wandering without a fixed home, dwelling at the crossroads of the world …’ suggests, as do Said and Clifford, that thinking has an intrinsically nomadic or ‘travelling’ character: ‘Thought wanders. It migrates, requires translation’ (1994a: 4).

Among the seminal tributaries to this new discursive trend must be included Benjamin’s famous stylization of Baudelaire as the metropolitan flâneur and dandy (a characterization which subtly extends towards nomadic and bohemian intellectuals such as Benjamin himself (see Shields, 1994; Wolff, 1995: 46–7); the theme of ‘eccentricity’ as broached by Lacanian psychoanalysis; Bakhtin’s theory of linguistic hybridity and heteroglossia; Foucault’s interpretation of the Enlightenment ethos as an aesthetics of transgression and as a ‘limit attitude’ of permanent self-invention (itself strongly inspired by Benjamin’s Baudelaira) (Foucault, 1984); and, especially, Deleuze’s Nietzschean vision of ‘nomadic thinking’, which has been extremely influential throughout postmodernist philosophy, sociology and cultural studies (Deleuze, 1977; Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 434ff.). Deleuze’s model of nomadic subjectivity precisely legitimizes this metaphoric shift from the ‘real’ or literal to the ‘imagined’ and self-styled condition of migrancy, and inspires a romanticized image of nomadic life which is much better suited to the flight of ideas (of fancy?) than the flight from economic hardship or political oppression. His nomad, after all:

… is not necessarily one who moves: some voyages take place in situ, are trips in intensity. Even historically, nomads are not necessarily those who move about like migrants. On the contrary, they do not move; nomads, they nevertheless stay in the same place and continually evade the codes of settled people. (1977: 149)

This set of emblems and topics is encountered across a broad spectrum of disciplines, schools and strands of thought which overlap considerably in their conceptual tastes and general direction of interest. British-American-Australian cultural studies, for example, as represented
Cultural studies in the nomadic mode seamlessly join the recent tradition of postcolonial criticism or colonial-discourse analysis, which effusively celebrates the black or subaltern experience as an exilic or ‘diaspora’ experience which generates ‘double consciousness’, cultures of hybridity, creolization and an ‘ethnicity of the margins’ (Gates Jr, 1988; Said, 1990; Spivak, 1990; Hall, 1990, 1992, 1996; Bhabha, 1993; Gilroy, 1993; West, 1994; Young, 1995). Hall, for example, canvasses an explicitly metaphorical conception of diaspora, which is defined:

... not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Hall, 1990: 235)

Postcolonial studies, in turn, map on to recent feminist critical writing, which is likewise strongly attracted by tropes of strangerhood, marginality and outsidership, and endlessly talks about ‘double vision’, hybridity, ‘traitorous identities’ and ‘inappropriate(d) others’. The standpoint epistemology of Hartsock (1983) and Harding (1991) here extends towards the lesbian and black (and black lesbian) feminism of, for example, Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1984), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Carole Davies (1994); which is also variously exemplified by Kristeva’s idea of women as generically ‘exiled’ (1986), De Lauretis’s vision of ‘eccentric subjects’ (1990), Hill Collins’s theme of the ‘outsider within’ (1986, 1991), Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ feminism (1991, 1992) and Braidotti’s (1994) figuration of women as ‘nomadic subjects’. This feminist writing in turn shades over into the romantic celebration of ‘ethnography’ and the modelling of the intellectual as ethnographer, both in modern constructivist and reflexive anthropology (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Clifford, 1988, 1992; Radway, 1988) and
in modern ethnographic studies of science (e.g. Knorr-Cetina, 1983; Shapin and Schaffer, 1985; Latour, 1987; Woolgar, 1988). Other significant variations on this prolific theme emerge from the new sociology of mobility (a magnetic subject in sociological postmodernism), especially as it derives from MacCannell's (1976) vision that ‘tourism’ constitutes the most typical feature of modernity, and is especially characteristic of modern social theorizing (see Van den Abbeele, 1980, 1992; Culler, 1983; Morris, 1988; Clifford, 1992, 1997; Urry, 1990; Robertson et al., 1994). Finally, there is the broad current of social-philosophical theorizing on ‘strangerhood’ and ‘homelessness’ as core emblem of (post)-modern times, as a ‘presence’ that concentrates both the promises and urgencies of our contemporary predicament (Berger et al., 1974; Harman, 1988; Kristeva, 1988; Bauman, 1991, 1995; Chambers, 1994a; Maffesoli, 1997). Berger et al. typically picture modern man as suffering from a deepened condition of homelessness, from a ‘metaphysical loss of home’, which is the correlate of the ‘migratory’ character of modern experiences of society and self (1974: 77; see also Shotter, 1993). Bauman strings some of the most salient metaphors together in his recent discussion of pilgrimage and strangerhood:

I propose that in the same way as the pilgrim was the most fitting allegory of modern life strategy preoccupied with the daunting task of identity-building – the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player offer jointly the metaphor for the postmodern strategy moved by the horror of being bound and fixed. (Bauman, 1995: 91)

**The Intellectual as Stranger**

This titillating talk of travel, and the mutual resonance or cross-modulation of the images of the stranger and the intellectual which is engendered by it, represent a postmodernist inflection of what in fact constitutes a venerable topos in the history of modernist social thought. Metaphors of peregrination and strangerhood have long been inscribed in modern intellectual discourse as indicative of the intellectual experience itself, as tracing the universal itinerary of reason: truth is homeless, and homelessness, in reverse, breeds truth. Accordingly, the figurations of the intellectual and the stranger have regularly played a game of discursive hide-and-seek; their close metaphoric conjunctions traditionally opened up vast possibilities of cross-reference and mutual substitution. The stranger has often been envisioned as both the historical and normative prototype of the true intellectual, possessing a unique set of epistemic advantages; while the true intellectual has preferably been defined as a ‘displaced person’: as someone estranged, uprooted, marginal to his culture of origin and its parochial customs, values and beliefs. Hence the long-standing connection between estrangement or distanciation from local cultures and beliefs, and claims about ‘better vision’, a deeper reflexivity, increased objectivity, cognitive innovation, access to larger truths (see Kolakowski, 1990: 57).
This cross-modulation of associations and ideal types already emerges in the very birth-hour of the intellectual: the Dreyfus Affair which tore apart turn-of-the-century France (see Charle, 1990: 183ff.). At this point in time, the ‘abstract’ and disengaged condition of the left-wing intellectuals was conceived by themselves as a title of honour and as an ethical and epistemic promise, while their right-wing adversaries, the spokesmen for the Nation and of ‘native’ thought, preferred to read it as a curse and conspiracy. *Les intellectuels* themselves felt capable and called upon, by virtue of their professional autonomy and its resultant detachment, to speak for universal values of truth and justice; their disinterested universalism was thought to found and legitimize a unique competence to mingle in public political controversy. Members of the nationalist faction such as Brunetiére and Barrès, however, considered such ‘Kantian’ intellectuals to be dangerously alienated from French culture and the French race. Truth, reason and justice, it was claimed, had no imaginable existence beyond blood and territory: a historical and cultural ‘situatedness’ which such ‘logicians of the absolute’, who celebrated the universality of humankind and the transcendent unity of human reason, perversely sought to deny. They were hence little else but outsiders, without ‘feet in the ground’, déracinés, who unjustifiably claimed to exercise political judgement notwithstanding their lack of competence and their abstract verbalism.9

Subsequent cognitive developments have only fortified such associations between uprootedness and intellectuality. Two highly influential and mutually reflective cases in point are offered by Georg Simmel’s portraiture of the stranger as (in all effect) an intellectual, and Karl Mannheim’s depiction of the *freischwebende Intelligenz* as collectively estranged. Simmel’s stranger is not the ‘barbaric’ alien who lacks any commonality with the group and completely falls outside of it (as in Schmitt’s vision of the stranger as existential enemy, see Schmitt, 1996). Strangerhood rather exemplifies a special type of social interaction and mutuality. The stranger ‘who comes today and stays tomorrow’ is a potential traveller who, while still perceptibly marked by his mobility, is able to connect group membership organically with outsidership and opposition. The specific mobility of the stranger, and the amalgam of detachment and involvement which he embodies, lay the foundations for a specific form of *objectivity*. In contrast to the established, the stranger is capable of observing even that which is close to him from a bird’s eye perspective: ‘He is freer, practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective; he is not tied down in his actions by habit, piety, and precedent’ (Simmel, 1950: 405). Although Simmel initially adduces the merchant and the Jew as historical incarnations of this marginal position, his formulations rather suggest that it is the modern *intellectual* who functions as his proximate point of reference.

Similar connections between social marginality and a more reflexive or objective view are elaborated by Mannheim. His (semi-)detached intelligentsia is a relatively classless stratum which lacks a firm anchorage
in the social order. Its social basis is sufficiently differentiated to prevent confinement within a parochial group view, which enhances the expression of and negotiation between a multiplicity of perspectives. Such a heterogeneous, unstable identity and the exchange of perspectives which is facilitated by it, enable the intellectuals to develop a synthetic view of the totality of a given historical situation. Their detached, nomadic position provides a sociological springboard for the specific ‘impartial partiality’ of the sociology of knowledge, of which the free-floating intellectuals are considered to be the privileged *stadtholders*. Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* suggests the possibility of superseding the partialities of social and political thought in a dynamic synthesis, according to which the socially unattached intelligentsia, by virtue of its specifically dislocated position, is able to act as ‘the predestined advocate of the intellectual interests of the whole’ (Mannheim, 1968: 140).

Let me briefly list a few more recent examples of this close concatenation of the themes of estrangement and intellectual vision. Kristeva’s *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (1988) displays the full set of metaphoric oscillations between the condition of modern man as a ‘stranger unto himself’ and the more particular condition of exiled intellectuals who suffer from and celebrate a hybrid identity (such as Kristeva herself); which feeds a romantic dream of autonomy and transcendence, as well as a fair amount of narcissistic self-fascination. Kristeva’s stranger, like Simmel’s, is first of all the *distanced* person who is capable of wider contemplation than the members of his group; the interval that separates him both from the others and from himself enables him, if not to dwell in truth, at least to relativize and self-relativize where others are victimized by ‘the routines of monovalence’ (1988: 16). Iain Chambers’s *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, as we saw before, likewise metaphorizes notions about migrancy, travel, homelessness and exile into core symbols of our present condition; symbols which are similarly overdetermined by strong intellectualist connotations. But Chambers also remains aware of the analogy’s seamy side, and retains something like a ‘bad conscience’ about its cognitive risks. Still, in his view, it is a risk to be run:

In the oblique gaze of the migrant that cuts across the territory of the Western metropolis there exists the hint of a metaphor. In the extensive and multiple worlds of the modern city we, too, become nomads, migrating across a system that is too vast to be our own, but in which we are fully involved. (Chambers, 1994a: 14)

Where previous margins have folded in to the centre, the migrant’s sense of rootlessness, of living between worlds, is perhaps the most fitting metaphor of our (post)modern predicament (Chambers, 1994a: 6–7, 27). A more sociologically sobered-up version of the same connection of ideas is offered by Zygmunt Bauman’s various discussions of strangerhood and the nature of ambivalence (1991, 1995). As in Kristeva and Chambers, Bauman’s
stranger is perceived as the most representative emblem of (post)modern times, the true embodiment of the ambivalence and indeterminacy which constitutes modern life in the metropolis, which is typically ‘carried on by strangers among strangers’ (1995: 126). Bauman likewise tends to intellectualize the stranger, in a manner which is reminiscent of Simmel’s seminal suggestions, but also to read the link between strangerhood and objectivity ‘the other way’, by modelling the task of the critical intellectual after that of the quintessential nomad. Especially when describing the historical experiences of European Jewry as ‘strangerhood incarnated’, as the epitomy of non-territoriality and homelessness, he tends to interpret this allegedly most radical and universal condition of estrangement as articulating the very pattern of universality. His paraphrase of Kafka imperceptibly verges on acceptance when it is claimed that ‘The stranger is universal because of having no home and no roots. Rootlessness relativizes everything concrete and thus begets universality’ (1991: 90).11

The epistemological link between marginality and objectivity and the transmutation of particularity into universality remain intact even as Bauman enters an important sociological specification, which usefully complicates and ‘duplicates’ Mannheim’s idea about the semi-detached intelligentsia; it is rather felicitously described as the ‘neolithic revolution of the intellectuals’. In our century, the intellectuals have collectively passed from a nomadic towards a more settled existence as a result of professionalization, rationalization and institutionalization, and have turned into well-settled and well-salaried servants of the knowledge society. The free-floating intellectual does not disappear, but becomes an exception – somebody who is at war not so much with a closed, parochial society as with ‘the parochiality of his better established, sated, and self-satisfied colleagues’ (Bauman, 1991: 91). Marginalized intellectuals are strangers not just in relation to the ‘natives’ and their dominant values, but:

\[\ldots\] first and foremost, and most blatantly and most poignantly, they are strangers in relation to the fellow members of the knowledge class \ldots the universality they seek is forged out of the opposition to that very particularity for which their own knowledge class (the class which they reject and by which they are rejected) serves them as the prototype. (1991: 93)

However, this promising epistemological duplication of the condition of nomadic marginality, which no longer covers the position of intellectuals as a generic social category but restricts its privileges to marginal types, appears to be abandoned and negated in favour of another universalizing gesture which once again reverses the connection. In doing so, Bauman re-introduces a sociologized and historicized version of the romantic view of the modern subject as a ‘universal stranger’ which is encountered in more psychoanalytic terms in Kristeva and in more culturalist terms in Chambers. The ‘neolithic revolution of the intellectuals’ is read as a rather spectacular episode in the much wider process of the ‘universalization of strangerhood’
itself. Following Luhmann, the modern individual in differentiated and functionally segmented society is depicted as a priori ‘socially displaced’, always a partial stranger, an inhabitant of divergent worlds. The experience of strangerhood, or more generally, that of existential and mental ambivalence, sheds its particularity in order to turn into a universal human condition. Closely repeating Kristeva, Bauman concludes by affirming that, once rootlessness becomes universal, particularity is effaced and strangerhood in effect has dissolved: ‘If everyone is a stranger, no one is’ (1991: 97).12

**Nomadic Narcissism**

The previous accounts are not simply suggestive of the cognitive force, but also begin to clarify the knowledge-political risks which are inscribed in the long-standing connection between the condition of outsidership and the vocation of social criticism. Indeed, the association has proven to be as misleading as it has been suggestive. While detachment from local beliefs and set conventions has legitimately been viewed as an epistemic precondition for accessing new, different types of knowledge and styles of thought, intellectuals have typically also flirted with strangeness and marginality. They have been led to transmute bohemian self-fascination and self-complaint into political apology and self-aggrandizement, and have often staked their historical bids for power and privilege upon their self-appointed spokespersonship for larger classes which they projectively construed as marginal and estranged. The Marxian view of the proletariat only represents the most familiar of such self-denying and simultaneously self-magnifying projections. The appointed and summoned subject of historical transformation (but who effectively issues the summons?), is defined in such a manner as to obliquely refract the most salient social and psychological characteristics of the ‘critical’, estranged, nomadic situation of the revolutionary intellectual himself (Pels, 1998).13

The risk involved in the epistemic conjugation of intellectuality and marginality is therefore effectively the same as the constitutional paradox which traverses all representational practices, the universal danger that resides in the very logic of speaking for others: which is to disregard the inevitable hiatus between representer and represented, and to underestimate the existential ‘strangeness’ which persists between spokespersons and those who (or that which) is spoken for (the working class, the fatherland, the seals, the ozone layer, Planet Earth, the innocent unborn, etc.). It hence subsumes crucial positional differences under a postulate of identity which camouflages the particular interests of the representers, precisely by projecting them as more general or even universal ones (Pels, 1993). Closer scrutiny of such attempted camouflage reveals, in Bauman’s lucid terms:

… the uncanny resemblance the stage actors of ideological scenarios bore to the intellectual scriptwriters. Whoever happened to be named as the sitter in
a given portrait-painting session, the product was invariably a thinly disguised likeness of the painter. In organic ideologies, the intellectuals painted their self-portraits, though only rarely did they admit this to be the case. (Bauman, 1992: 1)

This is what Robert Michels (1987: 147) already referred to as the *effet de mirage* of spokespersonship, and what Bourdieu has more recently analysed as the ‘mystery of ministry’, the mistaken identity which intellectual spokespersons postulate on the basis of the structural homology between their own contradictory position as ‘dominated dominants’ in the fields of cultural and political power, and that of the dominated *tout court* in the broader social field, or the field of social classes. This homologous position feeds a (symbolically effective) misrecognition of the fact that spokespersons always also speak for themselves in the act of speaking for others (Bourdieu, 1991: 182–3, 214–16, 243–8).

The postmodernist narrative of nomadism, despite its deep-lying suspicion about generalizing the particular and its incantation of difference, still liberally permits such a camouflage to unfold into a new version of intellectualism, or a new ‘narcissism of the intellectuals’. Construing the migrant, exile or nomad as alter ego of the modern intellectual, or beyond this, as a privileged metaphor for modern subjectivity, often leads towards an intellectualist domestication and appropriation of the experiences of ‘real-life’ migrants or exiles, while it simultaneously euphemizes the comparatively settled, sedentary and privileged situation of academics, who are invited to indulge in fictions of social ‘weightlessness’ and dreams of perpetual transcendence in boundary-breaking journeys of the critical mind.14 Metaphorizing the nomad easily induces affectations of estrangement which support an exaggerated and self-complimentary rhetoric of creativity and innovation. In this respect, the self-stylization of intellectual nomadism is only the latest ‘character mask’ of academics settled and salaried enough to be able to flirt with uncertainty, mobility and radical individuality, while in reality their movements are comfortably bracketed in terms of job independence, somewhat more adventurous holidays, larger chunks of free time, speeding across the electronic highway and institutionally paid transcontinental flights.15 The jet set intellectual may well imagine himself a true nomad in body and spirit, ‘like a rolling stone’, avid for new experiences and new ideas; but often his practical mobility does not extend very far beyond the airport lounges which he transits en route towards another international meeting of his peers. Border-crossing, if it does not refer to such banal situations, usually boils down to little else but a well-intended resolve to disregard the limits of one’s home discipline (in efforts towards transdisciplinarity which have meanwhile become a common staple of modern academic life) or, maximally, shuttling between and combining different styles of writing.16

This new narcissism (of bourgeois posing as bohemians, of the ‘classy’ posing as *déclassé*, of the comfortably settled imagining themselves to be
reckless risk-takers) is easily complicitous with new forms of political correctness, as soon as the metaphorics of nomadism also facilitate identification between such counterfeit strangers and ‘real-life’ migrants, refugees, guest workers or illegal aliens, feeding vanguard illusions which are structurally comparable with those which are promoted by the allegedly defunct grand narratives of modernity. Especially if identities are claimed which accumulate several indices of alienation, such as a Jewish, gender-oppressed, politically dissident or ethnically migrant background, symbolic profits are rife; living in the crossfire of such multiple oppressions is often said to make for enhanced epistemic reflexivity and legitimacy of spokespersonship. But even such multiplied or kaleidoscopic nomads do remain intellectuals who purport to speak in the name of others; and as such, easily tend to ignore and euphemize their own specific ‘strangeness’, the specific sociological difference which they make as professionals of the mind and the word. (Another romantic strategy is to magnify a rather quiet index of alienation, such as indifference towards specific academic mores, or vague political cynicism, into an indicator of generic bohemianism or outsider-ship.) Once again, we encounter the pars pro toto logic which we have identified as constituting the ‘original sin’ of representation: the logic of identification which conjures away the strangeness of the representer over against the represented, precisely by metaphorically representing him as a generic stranger.

This is not to suggest that awareness of such ‘spokesperson problems’ is entirely absent from the strands of thought which I have been reviewing. One finds many contrapuntal statements which in some way balance the account, by warning against the seductions of romantic hyperbole, or by measuring the political gap between representers and represented. Both Said (1990: 362–63) and Clifford (1992: 107), for example, are sharply conscious of the differences which set apart ‘cosmopolitan’ exiles from mass immigrants or refugees. Wolff goes further in connecting the metaphoric discourse of travel, and its misleading suggestion of universal and equal mobility, with ‘exclusionary moves in the academy’: obviously, ‘we are not all “on the road” together’ (1995: 129). But the problem is not tackled in a focal manner, and the sociological specificity of the marginal intellectual still tends to be held back behind the allegedly more general and ontologically primary condition of marginality or hybridity as such. While conceding that hybridity may easily turn into ‘a celebratory notion where everything is wonderful, a place without struggle or pain’, and distancing himself somewhat from the idea of the postmodern nomad, Hall nevertheless does not let go of the Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual (Terry, 1995: 60, 68–9; Hall, 1996: 502). Gilroy, in turn, is quite sensitive to the authoritarian effects of essentialist identifications between privileged black elites and their less privileged constituencies, and to the dangers of pastoralization that lurk in attempts to theorize black identity in terms of the experience of diaspora; but he tends to reproduce the same mystificatory spokesperson logic in his evident romanticization and
intellectualization of black musical expression and black popular culture more generally (1993: 31–9, 72ff., 81, 101).

The Feminist Nomad

Before concluding, let me elaborate a final example of this play of particularity and generality in a more detailed manner: Braidotti’s Deleuze-inspired figuration or fiction of the ‘nomadic subject’ as informing a radical feminist politics of sexual difference (Braidotti, 1994). Braidotti offers an interesting case because, unlike, for example, Deleuze, Kristeva or Chambers, the scope of universalization of the metaphor is generously restricted to humanity’s better half, and hence articulates a closer, more differentiated and also more consciously political ‘politics of location’. Simultaneously, however, Braidotti reinstates a quasi-essentialist notion of sexual difference that tends to absorb and override alternative, potentially cross-cutting axes of social stratification, pleading a postulate of gender identity which ignores at least one crucial sociological difference which separates feminist intellectual spokespersons from the female subjects they claim to represent. The project of empowering women as speaking and thinking subjects is consistently identified with ‘the positivity of the difference that feminist women can make’. This identification of feminist and female, of representer and represented, is legitimized in terms of a political ontology which affirms an essential, undeniable, because bodily inscribed asymmetry between the sexes. Modernity is invariably associated with masculine discursive power, or what is called the ‘phallogocentrist’ regime, which supports stable identities, dualities, and hierarchies; while the female world and female bodily experience are conceived as essentially shifting, uncertain, ambivalent and hence postmodern and nomadic almost by definition.18

This suggests that Braidotti’s essentialist figuration of the nomad is first of all a myth for the radical feminist intellectual, and operates a pars pro toto logic which is quite similar to the vanguardism of more ‘patriarchal’ narratives of emancipation.19 The novel definition of female subjectivity aspired to is a feminist and thus theoretized subjectivity, or the critical subjectivity claimed by feminist theorists who wish to cut an iconoclastic, subversive figure against conventional ‘sedentary’, ‘phallogocentric’ thought. Although inspired by experiences of peoples or cultures which are literally nomadic, ‘it is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling’ (1994: 5). As a subject which has ‘relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity’, the nomad defines the prototype of the woman of ideas, a female feminist subject whose becoming-subject is typically sustained by ‘the will to know, the desire to say, the desire to speak, to think, and to represent’ (1994: 22, 120, 159; my italics). Even though philosophy and high theory are fiercely criticized as examples of ‘overinvestment in the theoretical mode’, one simultaneously encounters a passionate glorification of ideas as ‘beautiful events’ and of thinking (in a Deleuzian vein) as living in the fast lane, as ‘life lived at the
highest possible power’ (1994: 101±2). Typically, feminists must shoulder a double responsibility: ‘for and towards the act of thinking’ and for ‘our gender’ (1994: 187, 202, 256). In addition, as in Kristeva and Chambers, the nomad is stylized as a linguistic merchant (in fact a cultural capitalist): a polyglot in a permanent state of translation, who, by finding herself in permanent transit between languages, has become an expert in the ‘treacherous contingencies’ of language, and hence is capable of ‘some healthy skepticism about steady identities and mother tongues’. Her ‘acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries’ and her ‘intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing’, provisionally restricts itself to the world of the academic intellect, to allegedly revolutionary practices such as transdisciplinarity and the mixture of various speaking voices and writing styles (1994: 36±7).

Thus modulating between the generic experience of ‘women’ and the more selective ambitions of ‘women of ideas’, Braidotti’s nomadic subject remains predicated upon a grand epistemic binary which remains undeconstructed, even while dualistic thinking is strenuously rejected as constituting the inner logic of patriarchy: that of a fundamental incommensurability between the sexes, which is not considered one difference among many, but rather as a founding structural difference from which all others tend to emerge (e.g. 1994: 117). Her politics of positioning therefore presumes a grand duality of the sexes as an ontological or metaphysical ‘last instance’, which subsumes all differences which potentially operate within the category of womanhood under the postulated identity of female embodied experience. Although she does at one point allude to the hiatus between intellectual women and the ‘domestic foreigners’ in our Western metropolises, and points out the ‘paradox of proximity, indifference, and cultural differences between the nomadic intellectual and migrant women’, this hiatus is not focally addressed and remains submerged in the postulate of sameness of gender and women’s generically nomadic condition (1994: 255–6). Even though female identity is defined as a ‘site of differences’, the starting point for feminists, in Braidotti’s view, must remain the conviction that Woman is ‘a general umbrella term that brings together different kinds of women, different levels of experience and different identities’. Hence the self-imposed ‘paradox of woman’ is never resolved: the fact that feminism is based upon a notion of common, even essentialized, female identity, while the postmodern nomadic critical style demands full deconstruction of all such fixed and essential identities. Her continued belief in womanhood as a positive essence, and her strategic re-essentialization of female sexual embodiment, therefore turn Braidotti into a perversely paradoxical spokeswoman of the ‘ontological desire’ of women, which in large measure reveals itself as the desire of feminist intellectuals to be something, to cut a difference in the intellectual world. Indeed, whose self-legitimation is at stake here? Who is actually being empowered, if not a new type of academic intellectual?
In the Third Space

Amidst many possible conclusions with regard to the epistemological advantages and risks of the discourse of nomadism and marginality, let me emphasize a fairly obvious one. It concerns the danger of homogenizing and overgeneralizing something like a nomadic state, and the dire need for empirical sociological specification which (minimally) registers category differences between privileged ‘migratory elites’ (such as metropolitan strollers, jet set professionals, cosmopolitan academics and leisuring tourists) and underclass strangers: victims of political exile, ethnic cleansing or economic poverty. Within all such categories, from high to low, one may further distinguish between the relatively settled and assimilated and the relatively marginal and hybrid (cf. Bauman’s contrast between established and outsider intellectuals), without forgetting that even marginal intellectuals remain privileged nomads, and that, more generally, intellectual spokespersons, by dint of their sociological specificity, retain a specific strangeness towards or distance from the groups for which they speak, even if they do their utmost to merge and become identical with them.

If this hiatus between representers and represented is more attentively addressed, there is a better chance of coming to terms with the painful paradox that ‘underclass strangers’ are often attracted to virtually the opposite of what nomadic intellectuals so enthusiastically propagate. They tend to embrace an essentialist politics of identity which banks on cultural traditionalism, social closure and ethnic fundamentalism, in which the redemptive dream of a return to the homeland and the eternal roots is kept vigorously alive (cf. Esman, 1994: 7, 176ff.). From this perspective, the ghettoized immigrant poor are easily caught in a debilitating localism which affords little room for the hybrid and cosmopolitan identifications which are pleaded by the cultural elites (Friedman, 1997: 83–5). According to Castells, the fundamental dividing line in the modern ‘dual city’ precisely opposes the cosmopolitanism of such nomadic elites, who live on a daily connection to the whole world, to the tribalism of local communities, ‘retrenched in their spaces that they try to control as their last stand against the macro-forces that shape their lives out of their reach’ (1994: 30). Although mass travel and mass migration have speeded up everyman’s pace of life, social inequality also increasingly expresses itself in terms of mobility, opposing a globalized ‘travelling class’ of the ‘speedy’, who lack a clear sense of place and easily adapt to alien cultures, to the space-bound, sedentary class of the ‘slow’, those who have difficulty in adapting to strange places and tongues, and as a result, maintain a strong sense of cultural boundaries and cultural identity (cf. Castells, 1989: 227, 350).

In this fashion, the self-celebration of postmodern intellectuals as nomadic ‘wandering stars’ is only the latest in a long series of romantic projections which transform the oppressed into missionary forces of historical emancipation, by reclaiming their empirical consciousness as a critical consciousness typically favoured by the intellectual elite itself. This may
induce a stricter distinction between two existential situations which are too easily collapsed in postmodernist thought: the condition of *marginality*, which refers to the relatively privileged situation of intellectuals (including marginal and subaltern ones) as ‘dominated dominants’, and the less ambiguous and contradictory condition of *oppression/exploitation* of the dominated as such: those who literally have ‘nothing to lose but their chains’. Simple oppression or subjugation, Haraway also intimates, is not sufficient ground for a critical ontology (1991: 192–3). Often it does not so much clarify as stultify, and enforces a cramped affirmation of cultural particularism and exceptionalism. Intellectuals who claim to represent the oppressed had better recognize that the marginality which they celebrate in such generic fashion first of all describes their own precarious position as outsiders *within*, as new entrants in the dominant cultural game, who occupy a mediating *third position* which is not only removed from the centre but also distanced from the standpoint of the oppressed themselves.21

Hence we may (roughly) draw three positions, distinguishing between the dominant centre, the dominated periphery and the ‘third space’ of the ‘dominated dominants’, who occupy positions in the cultural field which are relatively marginal to both. Within the larger stratum of the ‘dominated dominants’, we once again need to specify differences between established and *marginal* intellectuals, for example, first-generation academics issuing from oppressed class, gender or racial backgrounds, who often act as ‘outsiders within’ the centres of cultural reproduction. There are two ways in which such ‘outsiders within’ may attempt to euphemize or escape their condition of (double) marginality; two ways of transmuting particularity into universality, and of elevating their specific ‘in-between’ location into a transcendental ‘view from nowhere’. ‘Nomadic thinking’ offers a convenient vehicle for both forms of escape (and promotes ‘nomadic narcissism’) by offering a strategic denial of place, a withdrawal from the epistemological field, a way of being *not there*. The first strategy operates through the ‘metonymic fallacy’ which we have discussed above, according to which intellectuals ‘organically’ identify their positional interests with those of an idealized and allegedly more powerful historical subject such as the working class, womanhood or the black community. The second option is to reinvent the ‘view from nowhere’ in a dream of endless motion and social weightlessness, which effectively returns the self-styled nomad to the old privileges of the transcendental subject and his freely wandering mind.

The discourse of nomadism, in other words, easily induces self-identification with either the centre or the periphery, and tends to camouflage the third position as a specifically interested place from which the critical intellectual speaks. Suspended in between the dominant and the dominated, the hybrid intellectual’s continual negotiations with both build up a position of interest which derives from his/her *inter-esse*, from professionally ‘speaking in between’. Both identifications, on the other hand, suggest disinterestedness, although in the contrasting sense of seeking truth for truth’s sake, or selflessly dedicating oneself to larger
causes of human liberation. Ultimately therefore, they do not acknowledge a politics of location that clearly registers the double game of spokespersonship, in which particular intellectual interests continually mediate and overdetermine the pursuit of more general interests of truth, justice and emancipation, and spokespersons simultaneously serve themselves while serving the cause of others (cf. Bourdieu, 1991: 180–3).

Such a contextualization of ‘third’ intellectual spaces may also clarify the question of the cognitive profits of marginality, which has haunted the sociology of knowledge from its very beginnings in Marx, Simmel, Lukács and Mannheim (see Pels, 1998). It could well be argued here that, in our era of professionalized Big Science, the pursuit of innovation has become a routine enterprise, which has been institutionalized in a separate social domain which is driven by competition for originality and distinction. Conversely, as was suggested above, Bohemia has also become regularized and normalized, and hence no longer necessarily counts as the privileged spot where newness enters the world. If change, transgression and experiment have thus become routinized features of mainstream culture, it is important, nevertheless, not to lose the distinction (relative though it may be) between ‘normal’ invention, which follows the rules of ‘a previously invented art of inventing’, and the ‘heretical invention’ which challenges the very principles of the old (scientific or social) order (see Bourdieu, 1981: 271–2). Such extraordinary invention still seems the privilege of newcomers or ‘outsiders within’, who are able to forge a delicate but crucial mediating link between periphery and centre. That is why the Deleuzian negation of the centre as ‘dead and empty, where nothing grows’ is equally spurious and deceptive as the reverse romance of dwelling ‘at the gates of the city, where nomadic tribes halt for a brief pause’ (Braidotti, 1996: 34). It is precisely the ‘elite marginality’ of the hybrid intellectual, who reflexively acknowledges her dependence on the centre even while struggling against it, which may offer a place where the intricate connection between creativity and estrangement, which is so easily appropriated by the privileged nomads of Western academia, still holds.

Minimally, one may assume that different positions and interests in the intellectual and social field produce different visions: if perhaps we do not see better from the margins, we do indeed see differently, and we do see different things. The spectral ‘law’ of social distanciation dictates that the centre only becomes visible in its entirety and systematicity from an eccentric position. Hence there is some room for an epistemological ‘praise of marginality’ because, presumably, social and conceptual innovation (in the above sense of heretical, code-breaking change) is usually born at the margins and is embodied and promoted by ‘strangers’. Recently indeed, the new wave of marginal intellectuals who have emerged from the feminist and postcolonial movements have made a large dent in the academic world; they have introduced new ways of seeing, opened up new fields of inquiry and fostered new democratic attitudes with respect to the mores and rituals of academic life. But the same rule that claims that the established have
difficulty in viewing themselves from a distance, also predicts that margins themselves remain comparatively blind to what is nearest and closest: the margin itself. The new feminist and black academic elites have also fostered new forms of political correctness, downplaying the constitutive ‘strangeness’ which has distanced them as cultural professionals from their ‘classes’ of origin, and which has often permitted them to advance towards positions of academic prestige and power. Intellectual nomads, they may have come from faraway places and inauspicious beginnings; but many of them have arrived and settled, as outsiders within the centre; strangers who have come in order to stay.

Notes
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1. In view of such fashionable identifications, it is hardly surprising to find Alan Sokal’s spoof article in the spring/summer 1996 issue of Social Text to be cleverly entitled ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’.

2. See also his double romanticization of the exilic experience, both in its riskiness and ‘essential sadness’, and in its promise of mobile, plural or ‘contrapuntal’ thought: ‘Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience . . . . Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure. . . . Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew’ (Said, 1990: 365–6).

3. Perhaps one should add the contributions of an older tradition of right-wing political existentialism, as exemplified by Marinetti’s glorification of movement, speed, transgression and exuberance, or Schmitt’s familiar notions of the limit concept, the limit attitude and the state of exception (see Schmitt, 1996).

4. Another eloquent instance of intellectualist romantic hyperbole is found in Gabriel: ‘By their intensity both in communication and the immediacy of their memory, nomads reflect par excellence the lifestyle of a free people. The impact of their art and their way of life has two important aspects: 1. The fundamental idea that all life, experience and existence is without frontiers or boundaries. 2. The foundational idea of not glorifying fulfillment in terms of territory or resources. Life of sedentary or settled peoples is mostly controlled by state apparati, codified and written laws, and is dictated by resources which they transform and use. In nomadic thought, all human settlement, related to the availability of resources, is only temporary. Nomads reject the formation of the state because it curtails their freedom of movement. . . . Nomads have thus developed a way of life, and an aesthetic attitude, which defy and critique both the settlement and art inspired by the state. . . . Intrinsic to the nomadic mode of expression is an ever-constant
shifting of its form and content and the relationship among them and their audience’ (Gabriel, 1990: 396–7, 406).

5. See also Mouffe’s view of cultural identity as resulting from permanent hybridization and nomadization: ‘By accepting that only hybridity creates us as separate entities, it affirms and upholds the nomadic character of every identity’ (1994: 110–11).

6. Spivak, for example, identifies as a common cause of both deconstruction and feminism ‘an espousal of, and an attention to, marginality – a suspicion that what is at the center often hides a repression’ (1990: 378).

7. Critical of the traditional notion of the ‘field’ as place or home, Clifford emphasizes the essential aspect of mobility of cultures, and the importance of boundary areas (such as beaches) and of ethnographers and informants as boundary people: ‘In tipping the balance toward traveling as I am doing here, the “chronotype” of culture . . . comes to resemble as much a site of travel encounters as of residence, less a tent in a village or a controlled laboratory or a site of initiation and inhabitation, and more like a hotel lobby, ship, or bus. If we rethink culture and its science, anthropology, in terms of travel, then the organic, naturalizing bias of the term culture – seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, dies, etc. – is questioned. Constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply into view’ (1992: 101). Subsequently, following Morris (1988), Clifford exchanges the ‘bourgeois’ hotel setting for the more appropriately bohemian motel metaphor. Chambers rather prefers the perspective of a ‘leaky habitat’ in order to emphasize ‘a more open-ended sense of dwelling in culture’ (1994b). Even more wet, Gilroy elaborates the image of the (slave) ship as a moving micro-system of cultural hybridity and as metaphoric for Black diasporic culture (1993: 4, 12, 16).

8. See also Latour’s insistent theme of the rise of hybrid socionatural artefacts (e.g. 1993).

9. See Spengler’s criticism of the (Jewish) intelligentsia for its ‘nomadic’ Heimatlosigkeit (cf. Boterman, 1992: 50), or Curtius’s characterization of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge as an instance of ‘European nihilism’, i.e. of the spirit of uprooted strata of modern intellectuals (Curtius, 1929, in Meja and Stehr, 1982: 419).

10. See also how exile is simultaneously intellectualized and universalized in an earlier text: ‘Our present age is one of exile. How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one’s own country, language, sex, and identity? Writing is impossible without some kind of exile’ (Kristeva, 1986: 298).

11. See Bauman’s earlier interpretation of the Jew as a ‘universal stranger’, and of the sociological privatization of the condition of strangerhood as a universalization of the Jewish experience: ‘In this sense, now we are all Jews’ (Bauman, 1988–89: 37). Gilroy has pertinently criticized this privileging of the diasporic experience of Jews as ‘the only non-national nation’, which in his view typifies a distinct Eurocentrism, and represents a misguided attempt ‘to lodge the dynamic interplay between modernity and ethnic particularity into the overloaded encounter between friends, enemies, and strangers’. Slaves stood opposed to their masters and mistresses as neither simply enemies nor strangers (Gilroy, 1993: 213–14).
12. See also Harman’s view that the modern stranger, who for Simmel and Schutz was still an exception, has now become the rule: ‘to be marginal is, paradoxically, to be in the mainstream’ (1988: 93, 159).

13. Analogous accounts could be given of right-wing nationalist representations of the Nation. In this respect, there is a curious parallelism between the Marxist theory about the Entfremdung – ultimately economic – of the proletariat and the radical-nationalist theory about the political and cultural Überfremdung of the nation. See also Hitler’s description of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a ‘dictatorship of Jewish intellectualism’ in his closing address to the 9th Party Congress of the NSDAP in Neurenberg, September 1937.

14. Susan Bordo has effectively criticized the deconstructivist fantasy of dislocation and ceaseless movement as a reinvention of the transcendentalist ‘view from nowhere’ in a new ‘dream of being everywhere’ (1990: 142–3). Wolff likewise argues that the imagery of travel and nomadism, by suggesting ungrounded and unbounded movement, feeds an exclusivist deception, since ‘we do not all have the same access to the road’ (1995: 128–9). See also Van der Veer, criticizing Braidotti and Bhabha (1997: 93–5).

15. Friedman similarly targets the ideology of hybridity as a form of intellectual porkbarreling of ‘the highly educated world travellers of the culture industries’, i.e. those who can actually afford a cosmopolitan identity. (1997: 81). Van der Veer agrees in the same volume that ‘The celebration of hybridity, syncretism and multiculturalism in Cultural Studies needs to be examined critically. Bhabha’s claim that one can bring newness into the world, that one can reinvest oneself when one is writing from the cultural interstices, is a conceit of the literature-producing and consuming world’ (1997: 102).

16. In strenuous efforts to imitate Nietzsche’s stylistic pluralism, and to accentuate Bakhtinian insights in the hybridity of language (cf. Haraway, 1991: 176, 181; Bhabha, 1994: 59; Braidotti, 1994: 36–7; Young, 1995: 20ff.). See also the addiction to ‘new literary forms’ in constructivist science studies (e.g. Ashmore, 1989).

17. Cf. the flirtation with multiple marginality in Lorde: ‘As a forty-nine year old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an inter-racial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong’ (1984: 114). Or the celebration of ‘dual ethnicity’ or bi-raciality in the image of the ‘Black Indian’ in hooks (1992: 179ff.). But see also the resistances against such ‘additive’ models of oppression in recent feminist standpoint thinking (Hill Collins, 1991).

18. ‘If fragmentation and an unstable identity are the defining characteristics of the poststructuralist condition, women have always been poststructuralist . . .’ (Braidotti, 1996: 20). The (Dutch) book where this statement appears (Wekker and Braidotti, 1996) offers a range of telling examples of the ‘nomadic narcissism’ which I have been criticizing here.

19. Alcoff and Potter more prominently thematize the ‘contradictory’ position of academic feminists, and worry ‘that we will commit the “metonymic fallacy” once again by assuming that what is liberatory for us is liberatory for all women’ (1993: 14). See also Ahmed’s (1996: 142) misgivings about the idealizing risk of Davies’s (1994) model of (black) ‘migratory subjectivity’.
20. Such expressions are curiously reminiscent of the theme of thinking as ‘living dangerously’ in writers of the Conservative Revolution such as Schmitt, Freyer and Heidegger. See Heidegger’s Rectoral Address of May 1933 (Heidegger, 1993).

21. See also Ahmed’s suggestion, contra Davies, that a subjectivity of resistance is not simply located outside dominant categories, but “in the gaps within rather than ‘beyond’ specific practices, in the ‘elsewithin’ rather than ‘elsewhere’” (1996: 142).

22. While perhaps we have all become a little more strange, some of us are still stranger than others. It is arguable that the influence of such ‘deviants’ is often greater, in the long run, than that of those who count as eminent thinkers during their own lifetime. Such ‘lesser’ figures habitually reflect the spirit of their times better than those who are now recognized as the true Olympians, whose views have survived time, but who were often considered idiosyncratic by their contemporaries (Kinneging, 1994: 17–18, 20–2).

References


