

ROSI BRAIDOTTI

# metamorphoses

TOWARDS A MATERIALIST THEORY OF BECOMING

# metamorphoses

TOWARDS A MATERIALIST  
THEORY OF BECOMING

ROSI BRAIDOTTI

Polity

Copyright © Rosi Braidotti 2002

The right of Rosi Braidotti to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2002 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

*Editorial office:*

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

*Published in the USA by*

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Braidotti, Rosi.

Metamorphoses : towards a materialist theory of becoming / Rosi Braidotti.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7456-2576-8 (hardback : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-7456-2577-5  
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Feminist theory. 2. Becoming (Philosophy) I. Title.

HQ1190.B737 2002

305.42'01–dc21

01002613

Typeset in 10 on 12pt Times

by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: [www.politybooks.com](http://www.politybooks.com)

metamorphoses

For Anneke



# Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes first and foremost to my colleagues in the department of women's studies in the Arts Faculty of Utrecht University who continue to provide a nurturing and stimulating work environment: Berteke Waaldijk, Rosemarie Buikema, Gloria Wekker and Mischa Peters.

I am especially indebted to Dean Wiecher Zwanenburg and Dean Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen for granting me sabbatical leave in 1995, which allowed me to do the basic research for this book. I spent the sabbatical as a fellow in the School of Social Studies of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, USA. I am grateful to the Institute for providing me with a fellowship for that academic year. I also owe thanks to the Netherlands America Commission for Educational Exchanges and especially to the Fulbright Commission and to Jan Veldhuis for awarding me a senior Fulbright Grant that allowed me the year off. In Princeton, at the Institute for Advanced Studies I was most fortunate in having Joan Scott as mentor and point of reference. As ever a source of inspiration, Joan Scott has strongly marked my intellectual development. I also profited immensely from conversations with Michael Walzer, Albert Hirschmann, Clifford Geertz, Evelyn Hammonds, Mary Poovey, Peter Gallison and Carrie Jones. My work at the Institute was facilitated by a fantastic team of librarians, to whom I owe sincere thanks: Elliot Shore, Marcia Tucker, Rebecca Bushby, Faridah Kassim and Pat Bernard.

I also profited greatly from my visit to the Philosophy Department of Melbourne University for several months in 1996. I thank Professor T. Cody, the Arts Faculty of Melbourne University and the postgraduate students for awarding me the official visiting fellowship that greatly facilitated my stay

in Melbourne. I also wish to thank the Netherlands Research Organization (NWO) and the Australian Research Council for jointly sponsoring my stay in Australia as part of their bilateral exchanges.

I profited greatly from a month's visit to the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna, in 1996. Dr Cornelia Klinger was extremely supportive and the environment of the Institute very stimulating. Also in 1996 I was fortunate enough to be involved in the symposium 'Sustainability as a Social Science concept', which was held in Frankfurt, at the Institute for Social-Ecological Research and was sponsored by the UNESCO-MOST programme. I thank Professor Egon Becker and Dr Thomas Jahn for their high standards and intellectual leadership.

Being a nomadic scholar, I have also learnt a lot from a shorter but not less stimulating visit to the Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género of the Arts Faculty at the University of Buenos Aires, which I visited for two weeks in October 1998. Dr Nora Dominguez and Dr María Luisa Femenías really made this an unforgettable event. I am also grateful to the Faculty Research Institute on Culture and History (OGC) of Utrecht University for sponsoring this visit.

The two-week visit to the Gender Unit at the University of the Western Cape in Capetown, South Africa, in October 1997, was also very important to me. This was sponsored by the UNITWIN exchanges between UWC and Utrecht University. I wish to thank especially Denise Jones, who made all the difference, Wendy Woodward and Rhoda Kadhali, as well as all the staff and students of the Gender Unit. In Utrecht, Rosemarie Buikema and Renee Römkens were extremely supportive.

From 1998 to date I have had the honour of being appointed Recurrent Visiting Professor at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics. This appointment was also financially supported by the Research Institute for Culture and History of Utrecht University (OGC), which again I thank. In London I was fortunate in engaging in thought-provoking exchanges with Professors Henrietta Moore, Anne Phillips and Tony Giddens, as well as all the staff and students of the Gender Institute, whom I gratefully acknowledge.

In Utrecht, I depended on several generations of patient and dedicated research assistants who kept the manuscript alive when I was swamped by work: Esther Captain, Yvette van der Linde, Mischa Peters and especially Titia Blanksma and Claire Needler who saw me through the very difficult last phases.

Among my colleagues, I am especially indebted to Veronique Schutgens and Trude Oorschot who, as co-ordinators of the Netherlands Research School of Women's Studies, facilitated my work as director and freed me for research and writing. Thanks also to Esther Vonk and my European partners in the ATHENA network for women's studies, especially Gabriele

Griffin, Nina Lykke, Harriet Silius and Diana Anders. My sister Giovanna provided brilliant insights and high-level scientific information, as well as wit and support. Wiljan van den Akker and Harry Kunneman were present in their criticism and support for my work, as were many other friends and colleagues near and far. A deeply loving thought goes out to Kathy Acker and Clare Duchen, who died far too young. One special friend I do wish to thank is Annamaria Tagliavini in Bologna, who provided constant stimulation, information and challenges to my thinking. Without her inquisitive and fast mind, her wit, and our e-mail discussions, this text could never have been completed.

Last but not least, I thank my life-companion Anneke Smelik, for whom change is a way of life and transformation an ethical issue.



Lightning Source UK Ltd.  
Milton Keynes UK  
UKOW06f1139260515

252290UK00002B/316/P



# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
Prologue	I
1 Becoming Woman, or Sexual Difference Revisited	11
2 Zigzagging through Deleuze and Feminism	65
3 Met(r)amorphoses: becoming Woman/Animal/Insect	117
4 Cyber-teratologies	172
5 Meta(l)morphoses: the Becoming-Machine	212
<i>Epilogue</i>	264
<i>Notes</i>	271
<i>Bibliography</i>	274
<i>Index</i>	295

# Prologue

‘I am rooted, but I flow.’

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 69

These are strange times, and strange things are happening. Times of ever-expanding, yet spasmodic, waves of change, which engender the simultaneous occurrence of contradictory effects. Times of fast-moving changes which do not wipe out the brutality of power-relations, but in many ways intensify them and bring them to the point of implosion.

Living at such times of fast changes may be exhilarating, yet the task of representing these changes to ourselves and engaging productively with the contradictions, paradoxes and injustices they engender is a perennial challenge. Accounting for fast-changing conditions is hard work; escaping the velocity of change is even harder. Unless one likes complexity one cannot feel at home in the twenty-first century. Transformations, metamorphoses, mutations and processes of change have in fact become familiar in the lives of most contemporary subjects. They are also vital concerns, however, for the scientific, social and political institutions that are expected to govern and take care of them.

If the only constant at the dawn of the third millennium is change, then the challenge lies in thinking about processes, rather than concepts. This is neither a simple nor a particularly welcome task in the theoretical language and conventions which have become the norm in social and political theory as well as cultural critique. In spite of the sustained efforts of many radical critics, the mental habits of linearity and objectivity persist in their hegemonic hold over our thinking. Thus, it is by far simpler to think about the concept

A or B, or of B as non-A, rather than the process of what goes on in between A and B. Thinking through flows and interconnections remains a difficult challenge. The fact that theoretical reason is concept-bound and fastened upon essential notions makes it difficult to find adequate representations for processes, fluid in-between flows of data, experience and information. They tend to become frozen in spatial, metaphorical modes of representation which itemize them as 'problems'. I believe that this is one of the issues that Irigaray addresses, notably in her praise of the 'mechanic of fluids' against the fixity and lethal inertia of conceptual thinking (Irigaray, 1997). Deleuze also takes up this challenge by loosening the conceptual ties that have kept philosophy fastened on some semi-religiously-held beliefs about reason, logos, the metaphysics of presence and the logic of the Same (also known as molar, sedentary, majority).

The starting-point for my work is a question that I would set at the top of the agenda for the new millennium: the point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical modes. Or, as Laurie Anderson put it wittily: nowadays moods are far more important than modes of being. That is a clear advantage for those who are committed to engendering and enjoying changes, and a source of great anxiety for those who are not.

One of the aims of this book therefore is both to explore the need and to provide illustrations for new figurations, for alternative representations and social locations for the kind of hybrid mix we are in the process of becoming. Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied, positions. A cartography is a theoretically-based and politically-informed reading of the present. A cartographic approach fulfils the function of providing both exegetical tools and creative theoretical alternatives. As such it responds to my two main requirements, namely to account for one's locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time (historical and geneological dimension), and to provide alternative figurations or schemes of representation for these locations, in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also as empowering or affirmative (*potentia*). I consider this cartographic gesture as the first move towards an account of nomadic subjectivity as ethically accountable and politically empowering.

By figuration I mean a politically informed map that outlines our own situated perspective. A figuration renders our image in terms of a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity. The definition of a person's identity takes place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flow and connect in between. We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation.

A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self – it is no metaphor. Being nomadic, homeless, an exile, a refugee, a Bosnian rape-in-war victim, an itinerant migrant, an illegal immigrant, is no metaphor. Having no passport or having too many of them is neither equivalent nor is it merely metaphorical, as some critics of nomadic subjectivity have suggested (Boer 1996; Gedalof 1999; Felski 1997). These are highly specific geo-political and historical locations – history tattooed on your body. One may be empowered or beautified by it, but most people are not; some just die of it. Figurations attempt to draw a cartography of the power-relations that define these respective positions. They don't embellish or metaphorize: they just express different socio-economic and symbolic locations. They draw a cartographic map of power-relations and thus can also help identify possible sites and strategies of resistance. In other words, the project of finding adequate representations, which was raised to new heights by the poststructuralist generation, is neither a retreat into self-referential textuality, nor is it a form of apolitical resignation, as Nussbaum self-righteously argues (1999). Non-linearity and a non-unitary vision of the subject do not necessarily result in either cognitive or moral relativism, let alone social anarchy, as neo-liberals like Nussbaum fear. I rather see them as significant sites for reconfiguring political practice and redefining political subjectivity. The book will accordingly engage throughout with my cartographic reading of the present, in terms of cultural, political, epistemological and ethical concerns.

In these times of accelerating changes, many traditional points of reference and age-old habits are being recomposed, albeit in contradictory ways. At such a time more conceptual creativity is necessary; a theoretical effort is needed in order to bring about the conceptual leap across inertia, nostalgia, aporia and other forms of critical *stasis* induced by the postmodern historical condition. I maintain that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves and the processes of deep-seated transformation. This quest for alternative figurations expresses creativity in representing the kind of nomadic subjects we have already become and the social and symbolic locations we inhabit. In a more theoretical vein, the quest for figurations attempts to recombine the propositional contents and the forms of thinking so as to attune them both to nomadic complexities. It thus also challenges the separation of reason from the imagination.

One of the central concerns of this book is consequently the deficit in the scale of representation which accompanies the structural transformations of subjectivity in the social, cultural and political spheres of late post-industrial culture. Accounting adequately for changes is a challenge that shakes up long-established habits of thought. Most persistent among those is the habit that consists in dealing with differences in pejorative terms, that is to say, to represent them negatively. Hence my leading question, which has become a

sort of red thread through all my books: how can one free difference from the negative charge which it seems to have built into it? Like a historical process of sedimentation, or a progressive cumulation of toxins, the concept of difference has been poisoned and has become the equivalent of inferiority: to be different from means to be worth less than. How can difference be cleansed of this negative charge? Is the positivity of difference, sometimes called 'pure difference', thinkable? What are the conditions that may facilitate the thinkability of positive difference? What is the specific contribution of poststructuralist philosophies to these questions?

By the year 2000, the social context had changed considerably since the days when the poststructuralist philosophers put 'difference' on the theoretical and political agenda. The return of biological essentialism, under the cover of genetics, molecular biology, evolutionary theories and the despotic authority of DNA has caused both an inflation and a reification of the notion of 'difference'. On the right of the political spectrum, in Europe today, contemporary racism celebrates rather than denies differences. In this reactionary discourse, however, differences of identity are essentialized and attached to firm beliefs about national, regional, provincial or at times (see the French National Front, the Italian Northern 'lega' or the Haider phenomenon in Austria) town-based parameters for the definition of identities. Resting on fixed notions of one's territory, these ideas of 'difference' are deterministic, and also exclusive and intrinsically xenophobic. In this context, moreover, difference is a term indexed on a hierarchy of values which it governs by binary opposition: what it conveys are power-relations and structural patterns of exclusion at the national, regional, provincial or even more local level. It is because of what I consider the political and social regression of this essentialistic notion of 'difference' that I find it important to reset the agenda in the direction of a radical (poststructuralist) critique. The notion of 'difference' is far too important to be left either to the geneticists or to the various brands of nostalgic supremacists (white, male, Christian) who circulate these days.

This is therefore less a book about philosophy than a philosophical book. It aims at providing a singular cartography of some of the political and cultural forces operative in contemporary culture. From there on, I will present a number of my own variations on nomadic thought, with special reference to Gilles Deleuze's and Luce Irigaray's philosophies of difference. After surveying the state of contemporary feminist philosophies of the subject in general (chapter 1) and of the nomadic subject in particular (chapter 2), I will go on to explore contemporary culture and cultural studies (chapter 3). I will offer readings of some of the more striking aspects of contemporary popular culture, especially the powerful lure of technology and of technobodies (chapters 4 and 5), as well as the Gothic or monstrous social imaginary that so often accompanies their representations (chapter 4). I will argue

that the current cultural fascination with monstrous, mutant or hybrid others expresses both a deep anxiety about the fast rate of transformation of identities and also the poverty of the social imaginary and our inability to cope creatively with the on-going transformations. At the centre of it all I will place the social, cultural and symbolic mutations induced by technological culture. Throughout, I will try to stress the important and original contribution that a non-unitary vision of the subject can make to critical theory and cultural practice. Resting on a nomadic understanding of subjectivity, I will attempt to de-pathologize and to illuminate in a positive light some contemporary cultural and social phenomena, trying to emphasize their creative and affirmative potential. By addressing from a variety of angles the issue of nomadic subjectivity, I will attempt simultaneously to produce an adequate cartography of this historical situation and to expose the logic of the new power-relations operative today. This book functions therefore like a walk along a zigzagging nomadic track of my own making, which was inspired by philosophies of difference and more especially by concepts such as embodiment, immanence, sexual difference, rhizomatics, memory and endurance or sustainability.

I will also stress issues of embodiment and make a plea for different forms of thinking about and representing the body. I will refer to this in terms of 'radical immanence'. This means that I want to think through the body, not in a flight away from it. This in turn implies confronting boundaries and limitations. In thinking about the body I refer to the notion of enfleshed or embodied materialism (I use the two interchangeably). I have turned to the materialist roots of European philosophy, namely the French tradition that runs from the eighteenth century into Bachelard, Canguilhem, Foucault, Lacan, Irigaray and Deleuze. I call this the 'materialism of the flesh' school in that it gives priority to issues of sexuality, desire and the erotic imaginary. I connect to it the corporeal feminism of sexual difference. This Continental tradition produces both an alternative vision of the subject and tools of analysis which are useful in accounting for some of the changes and transformations that are occurring in post-industrial societies in the age of globalization. In my critical exegesis of Deleuze's theory of becoming and Irigaray's theory of sexual difference, I will argue that nomadology is not at all incompatible with feminist practices of sexual difference, but rather that the two can reinforce one another and strike a productive alliance.

After thirty years of postmodernist and feminist debates for, against or undecided on the issue of the 'non-unitary', split, in-process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional, nomadic subject, issues of fragmentation, complexity and multiplicity should have become household names in critical theory. The ubiquitous nature of these notions, however, and the radical-chic appeal of the terminology do not make for consensus about the issues at stake, namely what exactly are the implications of the loss of unity of the

subject. Much disagreement and arguments at cross purposes have been voiced as to the ethical and political issues which the non-unitary subject raises in contemporary culture and politics (Nussbaum 1999). In other words the 'so what?' part of the discussion on nomadic subjectivity is more open than ever, while the contradictions and the paradoxes of our historical condition pile up around us. What exactly can we do with this non-unitary subject? What good it is to anybody? What kind of political and ethical agency can she or he be attached to? How much fun is it? What are the values, norms and criteria that nomadic subjectivity can offer? I am inclined to think that 'so what?' questions are always relevant, excellent and a welcome relief in the often foggy bottoms of critical theory.

Although it is critical in orientation, this book is never negative. I believe that the processes of transformation are on-going and that the equivalent process of transformative repossession of knowledge has just begun. With that comes also the quest for alternative figurations to express the kind of internally contradictory multi-faceted subjects that we have become. There is a noticeable gap between how we live – in emancipated or post-feminist, multi-ethnic societies, with high technologies and telecommunication, allegedly free borders and increased controls, to name just a few – and how we represent to ourselves this lived familiarity. This imaginative poverty can be read as the 'jet-lag' problem of living simultaneously in different time-zones, in the schizophrenic mode that is characteristic of the historical era of postmodernity. Filling in this gap with adequate figurations is the great challenge of the present. And I cannot think of a bigger one for the future.

What is adequate about new figurations needs to be the object of a collective discussion and confrontation, and of public debates, and it cannot be determined by a single individual. I believe that such critical, discursive exchanges should be at the heart of critical theory today. The first question that I would consequently like to address to my readers is cartographical: do you agree with the account of late post-industrial culture I will provide here? Do we live in the same world? in the same time-zones? How do you account for the kind of world *you* are living in? Drawing that cartography is the beginning of philosophical dialogue today. My project consequently joins forces with other attempts made from different philosophical traditions (Fraser 1996) to reconstruct the public sphere and to develop a public discourse suitable to the contradictory demands of our times.

The cartographic approach of my philosophical nomadism requires that we think of power-relations simultaneously as the most 'external', collective, social phenomenon and also as the most intimate or 'internal' one. Or rather, power is the process that flows incessantly in between the most 'internal' and the most 'external' forces. As Foucault taught us, power is a situation, a position, not an object or an essence. Subjectivity is the effect of the



constant flows or in-between interconnections. What attracts me to French philosophies of difference such as Deleuze's multiple subjects of becoming, or Irigaray's 'virtual feminine', is that they do not stop on the surface of issues of identity and power, but rather tackle their conceptual roots. In so doing, they push the psycho-sociological discussion of identity towards issues of subjectivity, that is to say, issues of entitlement and power. I find it particularly important not to confuse this process of subjectivity with individualism or particularity: subjectivity is a socially mediated process. Consequently, the emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, 'external' to the self while it also mobilizes the self's in-depth structures. A dialogue with psychoanalytic theories of the 'split' nature of subjectivity is consequently high on my agenda and will run throughout the book.

This brings me back to the emphasis I want to place on issues of figuration. Political fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems. The choice of an iconoclastic, mythic figure, such as the nomadic subject, is consequently a move against the settled and conventional nature of theoretical and especially philosophical thinking. Nomadism is also, however, a cross-reference to the 'hidden' face of Western philosophy, to its anti-logocentric undercurrents, which F. Chatelet described as the 'demonic' tradition best symbolized by Nietzsche (Chatelet, 1970). Deleuze banks on this philosophical counter-memory, when he celebrates nomadic thought as a genealogical practice that re-locates philosophy away from the gravitational pull of metaphysics (Deleuze 1973b). Deleuze is particularly intent upon challenging the domination of conscious rationality as a model for the subject, and devotes his energy to re-imagining the philosophical subject altogether. Irigaray's project is analogous: she focuses her critique on the phallogocentric structure of thought and the systematic exclusion of the feminine from theoretical representation. Whereas Irigaray draws inspiration from the untapped resources of a virtual 'feminine', which feminists have to re-configure in their own specific imaginary, Deleuze places all hopes on in-depth transformations of the subject in terms of sexually differentiated processes of becoming (see chapter 2). Nonetheless, there is a point of convergence between Irigaray and Deleuze in their effort in re-inventing the very image of the subject as an entity fully immersed in relations of power, knowledge and desire. This implies a positive vision of the subject as an affective, positive and dynamic structure, which clashes with the rationalist image traditionally projected by institutionalized philosophy.

Thus, my choice of the nomadic figuration is also a way of situating myself vis-à-vis the institution of philosophy as a discipline: it is a way of inhabiting it, but as an 'outsider within', that is to say critically but also with deep engagement. Last, but not least, this figuration has an imaginative pull that I find attuned to the transnational movement that marks our historical situation.