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Advancing Women In Leadership

## **Feminist Academics as Nomadic Subjects: Reconceptualizing Women in Universities**

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**Introduction:** Women in universities - an old, old problem

From a feminist perspective, it is more than a little axiomatic to say that higher education has traditionally produced and reproduced, naturalized and valorized specific sets of behavior, specific forms of knowledge and specific versions of intellectual practice which celebrate that which is coded as masculine at the expense of that which is produced as feminine.

The production of this opposition is attendant on the primacy of the western cultural separation of the public from the private and the celebration of all that is associated with the first term at the expense of all that is subsumed under the second. This, in turn, is based on the construction of masculinity as synonymous with rationality, intellect, reason, culture and the production of femininity as all that is not male: in this binaristic logic women are irrational, emotional and nurturing. Braidotti (1994a) summarizes the situation well when she writes:

the universalistic stance, with its conflation of the masculine to represent the human and the confinement of the feminine to a secondary position of devalued

"otherness", rests upon a classical system of dualistic oppositions, such as, for instance; nature/culture, active/passive, rational/irrational, masculine/feminine. Feminists argue that this dualistic mode of thinking creates binary differences only to ordain them in a hierarchical scale of power relations. (p. 155)

Consistent with this logic, the university has been naturalized as a homogeneous male institution: the true home, if you like, of the 'enlightened male subject'.

Women's marginality within academic environments manifests itself in diverse and complex ways. Women have been consistently absent, not just from the classrooms, offices, and meeting places of Academe, but also from the discourses, texts, and subjects on which a university education is based (Rich, 1979). There are fewer women academics in universities than men, they tend to be concentrated in the lower employment categories, and by extension, more likely to be engaged in teaching than in research. Women have been under represented on decision making bodies, and have encountered a 'glass ceiling' in attempts to achieve promotion (Porter, 1995).

The phallogentric nature of university environment has prompted significant debate among feminists in academia and given rise to a wide range of activities designed, in one way or another, to challenge the dominant masculinist culture. Despite many years of effort, however, universities remain male dominated environments within which women continue to be employed at lower levels, on shorter contracts, and with narrower career prospects.

In other words, there exists a significant gap between the hopes many of us held for the future of women in universities and the current (on-going) realities faced by those of us working in these environments. It is this gap and what it tells us about the on-going need for feminist reform in academic circles that has inspired this paper. More specifically, we are interested in using the work of feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti as a basis for identifying a particular 'mindset' that is valuable for thinking about the on-going challenges associated with the cultural transformation of university environments. We will illustrate the need for and value of these mindsets through a discussion of one particular university, and one specific attempt by women within that university to improve women's participation in research activity.

This introduction, then, is followed by four main sections. In the first, we demonstrate the ways in which our case site, Central Queensland University, reflects the same kind of phallogentric ideologies that can be seen to characterize university environments more generally. In the second, we outline some of the major (feminist) strategies developed within this university to improve women's research activity and discuss some of the differences of opinion concerning how this is best achieved. In the third section, we will explore what it is that Rosi Braidotti's model of nomadic subjectivity offers to those women engaged in the work of cultural transformation, and in the fourth and final section, we will provide a brief example of how nomadic consciousness can shape the day-to-day practice of women academics.

As any exploration of gender and its consequences necessitates analysis of the

particular context within which women are located, it is necessary for us to begin this paper with a brief overview of the particular university that we will be using to illustrate our points.

## **Section one: An old problem in a new context**

### **Women at Central Queensland University**

Defined as a multi-campus, integrated regional university, Central Queensland University (CQU) is one of Australia's newest universities having been established first as an Institute of Education and awarded university status in 1992. It has its largest campus in Rockhampton, Queensland, and constituent campuses in the smaller cities of Gladstone, Bundaberg, Mackay, and Emerald catering for an enrollment of approximately 15,000 students (with most of these studying primarily in distance mode). The majority of the university's staff and students are located at one of these campuses although there are a range of employees located at campuses in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, and also in Fiji, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

These students are distributed along traditional gendered lines with women occupying the majority of space in Arts (73%), Education (78%) and Health Science (79%) but moving only gradually into Science (26%) and even more slowly into computing (8%) or Engineering (8%).

Just as the student body continues to reflect long standing patterns of gender segregation, so, too, does the CQU staffing profile demonstrate an uneven distribution of men and women at the top and bottom of the academic scale. Out of all of the academic women employed at the University, 37% are located at the lowest level, level A (compared to 17.62% of men); 41% are at level B (compared to 30% for men); 16% of women and 39 % of academic men are employed at Level C; and a mere 5% of women (as opposed to 13% of men) are employed at Associate Professor or Professor level.

These staffing/student profiles are further complicated by the university's regional/rural location. The main campus at CQU is located in Rockhampton, a city which prides itself on being the 'beef capital' of the world, and which is flanked at every entrance by oversize statutes of various breeds of bull.

While clearly there is nothing automatically sinister about statues of these very worthy animals, it does, perhaps, go at least some way towards signifying a fairly broad based endorsement of masculine culture which underpins both Central Queensland generally, and the University itself. The individual experiences of women within the University indicate that there are still a great number of (mostly) men in senior positions who are often ignorant about and/or hostile towards any kind of 'feminist' or women-centred thoughts. To provide two brief examples, one staff member was advised that the feminist research she wished to undertake was "not a structural priority" within the university while another was told that feminism

was not an appropriate methodology for postgraduate research.

These brief anecdotes illustrate what is, by and large, a suspicious attitude within the university to feminism and feminists. This attitude, coupled with the staff/student profiles introduced above, has a number of consequences for women at CQU: consequences similar to those experienced by women at other universities throughout Australia and the world. Relative to men, women are more likely to be: employed on a short-term contract; combining higher degree study with full-time work; teaching higher numbers of students; supervising fewer post-graduates; applying for fewer research grants; in receipt of less grant funding; and employed at the lower end of the relevant scale.

This context has given rise to considerable debate among-between women and men at CQU and various programs designed to improve the skills/opportunities/confidence of academic and non-academic women have been put into place. The past six years have seen the introduction of programs focused on improving women's research skills/abilities and profiles (Women in Research); a broad based professional development program (Women at CQU: Making a Difference); a Senior Women's Program; and a broad based professional development program for general staff (Springboard). The university has also developed a detailed Sexual Harassment Policy and a Gender Representation on Committees policy. Despite these initiatives, however, recent surveys of women at CQU have identified an ongoing belief that the university's 'culture' - and its attitude towards women - have been extremely slow to change (Affirmative Action Working Party, 1996; Mulherin, Gregor, Rowan, 1996). These feelings appear to be well supported by analysis of the rise and fall of some of the key initiatives focused on women. A brief exploration of one of the highest profile of these initiatives - Women in Research - is instructive.

### **Women in Research: A brief case**

In 1994, a research team at CQU began to investigate the relationship between gender and the research activities of women at CQU. The resultant "Research Factors" survey sought to identify those factors that impacted upon women's participation in various forms of research activity (Cox, Eade, Gregor, McNamee, 1995). When completed, the survey showed that women were significantly more likely than men to: have experienced a break in full time employment; be employed on a part time or fractional basis; be employed in their present occupation for less than six years; have been engaged in research activity for less than five years; be engaged in higher degree study; be less (formally) academically qualified; have lower levels of research activity; and to have not applied for research funding.

In responding to the data reported by the Research Factors survey, a range of women at CQU met throughout 1994 and 1995 to debate the 'best ways' in which they could respond to this situation. This led ultimately to the creation of a group known as Women in Research. The group's overarching aim was to work to improve women's research skills, activities and profiles through a range of formal and informal mechanisms. Financial support was sought and obtained from the Vice-Chancellor of the University and after a sustained period of lobbying, the Chair of

the group was accepted as a member of the University's Research Management Committee.

In addition to this, the group supported the following kinds of activities:

Research training workshops (and follow up one-on-one support) intended to help women develop the skills necessary to undertake research activity

Visiting speaker series intended to provide information on specific topics and also to serve as positive role models

Work in progress forums within which women present and receive feedback on their research

Occasional Papers publications designed to encourage women into refereed publications

Various networking opportunities (newsletters; lunches; aml networks; and so on)

From 1994 to 1998, the group's activities remained relatively frequent, and institutional awareness of and support for the group appeared strong. There was evidence that high numbers of women were participating in the group's professional development activities, and women were both more likely to apply for and to receive internal grant funding in 1996 than they were in 1994.

Despite the undoubtedly positive achievements of the group, this is not quite the success story that we once felt it to be. Over the past two years the profile of the group has declined, the activities have fallen off, the group has lost its position on the research management committee, and few women on campus actively identify with the group. Perhaps most significantly, women in a survey taken to respond to the federal government's call for submissions regarding the future of AA/EEO legislation, identified that while they were still unhappy about their current status within the University, they were disinclined to attend professional development programs targeted at women (Affirmative Action Working Party, 1996).

In other words, despite a sustained effort on the part of a number of women, one of this institution's (women's) key attempts to respond to the particular needs of women came, for a significant time, to a halt. Now, in the year 2000, the group is once again starting to come together, to meet regularly, and to attempt to develop a range of strategies that will respond to women's on-going identification of their 'marginal' status in the university; despite their continuing under-representation in research activities; their lack of success in attracting internal research funds; and

the institution's increasing emphasis on the importance of research activity.

In working, once more, to generate activities designed to support women engaged in research at CQU, those associated with Women in Research must deal with the same old problems concerning women's status and participation within university cultures and a new, but very real, challenge: how to sustain individual and organizational commitment to gender reform in an environment that has proven itself to be extremely resistant to transformation? In this paper we are interested in exploring some of the ways in which we believe challenges such as those faced by a re-emerging Women in Research group can be usefully approached. A crucial opening move involves acknowledging that there are significant differences of opinion among women (at CQU and elsewhere) about the need for, or possibility of, or ways to achieve this on-going work of cultural transformation. In the next sections of this paper, we will explore competing opinions concerning the underlying or fundamental nature of the problem that groups such as Women in Research must respond to and then go on to outline a theoretical framework that we believe provides a useful means for conceptualizing marginality, resistance, transformation, and the on-going nature of gender based reform.

## **Section Two: Debates over the nature of the problem**

Firstly, then, many of the debates that have taken place within and about Women in Research have reflected a widespread uncertainty as to the nature of the problem faced by women. In many cases, discussions about the relative status of women and men and the necessary responses to this differential status fall within the long-standing sameness-difference debates that dominated feminist critical thinking at the turn of the century and intermittently ever since.

The basic dilemma is quite simple - is it better for women to assert their sameness to, or their difference from, men in the quest for 'equal' rights? Either position, however, is decidedly complex and both have been well represented in the discussions among Women in Research members. The insistence that women are the 'same' as men is based on the claims of 'natural justice' and suggests that women deserve equal treatment to men because of the shared human capacity to reason (Bacchi, 1990, p. 10). Those who argue from the 'same as' perspective have generally sought to construct the female body as a 'neutral' site.

The claim that women are 'different' from men says that women are in need of different kinds of support structures and different kinds of opportunities while also being likely to operate in different ways and for different reasons (for analysis see Hills, 1996; 1998). Those arguing from this perspective insist on the immediacy of the body to women's existence and argues that this difference must be acknowledged and valued within any particular context - such as a university, for example.

Let us illustrate both positions through reference back to the CQU context. Firstly, if one argues that women are the same as men, then the quest for equal rights is

generally limited to providing what could be seen as technically equal access to the same opportunities. In this equal opportunity model, the woman who is 'good enough' will ultimately reap the rewards associated with research success in a university environment. What is not attended to, in this model, is the extent to which women's progress continues to be measured against normative masculine models. Similarly, the physical realities of being a woman tend to be denied with the institution displaying little real tolerance for the interrupted career pathways or the day-to-day realities of childcare or motherhood.

To claim a similarity with men, therefore, is to continue to be defined by a male centered logic. That is, by arguing that we can be 'as good as', 'equal to', or even 'better than' men, we are continuing to define ourselves in terms of the criteria established to keep us out of the space in the first place. Those who insist on 'sameness' ignore the fact that while women may well gain access to the same sites as men the meanings that will be made out of their presence in that site will continue to be markedly different.

On the other hand, to hope for a recognition and valuing of differences is to pursue an impossible goal. In a patriarchal context, it is impossible for women to be defined as different from men and still accorded 'equal' value. Within patriarchy men must always have higher status. In addition to this, where such arguments are based on either issues of biological or psychological difference, then we are off on the pathway to essentialist representations of women which are always used to justify different treatment of men and women; and to support the production of spaces such as universities as the 'natural' homes for 'men', 'masculinity', 'intellect', and 'rationalism'. It is within this version of the difference debate that women are reinscribed as fundamentally different (in nature, personality, and ability) from men, and thus as 'naturally' suited to different spheres of activity, or different activities within any particular sphere. This kind of argument has been used to support claims that men are, for example, naturally better researchers, while women's strengths lay primarily in the classroom.

The dangers of both the same-different positions, then, are that we are constantly brought back to a masculine frame of reference within which women are constructed as the problem. As Lloyd (cited in Wearing, 1996, p. 49) notes: "Both of these ideas accord males centrality, normality, and the power to define the female in their interests and on their terms." Bacchi (1990, p. xvi) makes the consequences of this clear: "The assumptions...seems to be that, if we get an answer to the question of difference, everything else will fall into place. Men do not have to change, nor does the system, except to the extent that it must 'accommodate' women."

One of the major challenges facing those seeking to effect some kind of cultural transformation, therefore, is to develop a way of articulating the diverse experiences of women - and their generally differential status in relation to men - in ways that are not phallogentric. Grosz (1989) writes:

patriarchal systems of representation always submit women to models and images defined by and for men. It is the submission of women to representations in which

they are reduced to a relation of dependence on men. There are three forms phallocentrism generally takes: whenever women are represented as the opposites or negatives of men; whenever they are represented in terms the same as or similar to men; and whenever they are represented as men's complements. In all three cases, women are seen as variations or versions of masculinity - either through negation, identity or unification into a greater whole. (p. xx)

These comments provide an uncanny reflection of the ways in which Women in Research have been positioned and conceptualized within the university. While Women in Research achieved some success, and won some concessions from university management, these successes depended largely upon the willingness of those 'in power' to accept either the sameness or difference perspective that was endorsed by whoever was speaking on behalf of Women in Research at any particular time. It is our frustration with this phallocentric bind that has driven us to look for alternative ways of conceptualizing women's location and activities within University contexts. However, the path towards finding new images for Women in Research has been far from smooth.

### **Searching for a New Image**

The apparent difficulty of conceptualizing women, let alone female academics, outside the usual stereotypes of Woman can be illustrated through the experience of finding a logo for Women in Research (WIR). Over several months, there were efforts to develop a logo: a logo which would be distinctive, draw on women's history through the colors of white, green, and purple and indicate our concern with research. Several attempts by graphic artists to work to our specifications and suggestions came up with a number of ludicrous, even insulting rough drawings. The final straw for the committee was a stylized square made up of parts of women's bodies with a pen superimposed on a set of cheeks. This image was apparently offered in full seriousness and the artist responsible was quite upset by the rejection of his work. After the group managed to locate a different graphic designer, she came up with a stylized WIR lettering which turned into a great banner and letterhead. This whole process took approximately 18 months and consumed valuable energy. It also reinforced the group's awareness of the need for them to continue to be mindful of the group's general public presentation.

While this example offers a clear and literal illustration of the limiting ways in which women are constructed in university contexts, there are far too many examples that spring from 'everyday' practices. For example, individual women with ambition are described as 'macho', 'butch', or being 'on the make'; women who are promoted are seen as moving 'too far, too fast'; 40 year old men are 'young turks' but 40 year old women are 'no spring chickens'. In addition to this, we've been told that equity, is not a suitable goal for any research center that is committed to excellence. When we've conducted workshops specifically for women we've been called isolationist and discriminatory; when we've conducted workshops for women and men we've been accused of being co-opted by the establishment. We've been token women, phallic women, failed women, sad women and all the kinds of bunny-boiling vixens made famous by Glenn Close in the movie Fatal Attraction. Within

this culture, it seems almost impossible for women to be represented in any 'positive' way or outside of phallogentric logic.

Despite the ease with which we can access a ready bank of examples to illustrate our point the various positions offer no real choice at all. That is because these options circulate within the terms of the sameness-difference debate discussed above for they illustrate how feminist academics are so often judged against the impossible and undesirable ideals of becoming the same as men or becoming Woman - a specific and limited kind of woman - and in both cases feminist academics will always be found lacking. From our perspective, however, these static definitions lack the ability to conceptualize feminist subjectivity in positive, celebratory, or multiple terms. Clearly, new ways of thinking about and therefore practicing and living as feminist academics needs to be developed. We need new strategies - new ways of conceptualizing difference - if we are to chart a way out of the masculinist terrain of university culture.

From our perspectives, then, what women at CQU are most in need of is a language for speaking about their on-going experience of marginality in ways that move beyond the limitations of the phallogentric models identified above.

More than this, we need a way of recognizing two things. First, we need a means of acknowledging that there are different and equally valid ways of pursuing the feminist project of reinventing cultural space. Second, we require a framework that can acknowledge that it is the multiplicity of feminist practice, (when the multiplicity is not read against a hierarchy where some 'feminists' are better than other 'feminists'), which will transform cultural contexts and lead us out of a phallogentric deadlock.

We are not looking for a survival package - we are looking for a positive way forward. For these reasons we find ourselves very much in accord with Betsy Wearing (1996, p. 68) who writes: "The way forward then is to deconstruct woman as 'other' to men, while retaining difference and the acceptance and respect of one's own body and that of the different sex." We are very committed indeed to identifying what is, for us at least, a positive way forward in this context. This leads to our exploration of new ways of thinking about this challenge.

### **Section Three:**

#### **A new way of thinking: women and nomadic subjectivity**

Thus far, we have mapped out some of the limiting ways in which women have been positioned within the space of the university. Universities, however, cannot be understood in homogenous, static, or monolithic terms. Clearly, cultures and the individuals within them are sites for diversity and struggle. Recent feminist theory, with its attention to the dynamics of power, has highlighted that while various social institutions (such as universities) reproduce dominant images, practices, and gender norms, they do not form a coherent or unchallengeable front. On the contrary, Moira Gatens (1996a) argues that "different aspects of contemporary liberal sociabilities jostle against each other, create paradoxes of all kinds, and

present opportunities for change and political action" (p. xi). For this reason, Gatens (1996b) argues that a rigid and exclusionary politics for feminism is not sufficient to address the complexity of our present. Feminist politics, she suggests, needs to "engage with the sexual norms of our culture on two fronts: the macropolitical and the micropolitical" (Gatens, 1996b, p. 178). She argues for the need both to address the ways in which female subjectivity is constructed in a restrictive manner through various patriarchal institutions and discourses and to experiment with the possibilities of creating new discourses, ways of speaking about and speaking as women. According to Gatens (1996b) "we do not have to choose between this or that: we may say feminist politics this and feminist politics that" (p. 178).

Acknowledging that there are multiple ways in which otherness is constructed, and similarly, multiple ways in which it is deconstructed, makes room for political movement and opens spaces for multiple and varied contributions to this project. Such a framework means that if women and feminism are invested in multiple ways, then accordingly their struggles will be multiple. Judith Butler (1990) recognizes this potential when she argues that:

If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old. (p. 149)

Rather than searching for a new essentialist unity, Donna Haraway (1990) argues that there has been a "growing recognition of another response through coalition - affinity, not identity" (p. 197). Haraway (1990) goes on to remind us that:

The permanent partiality of feminist points of view has consequences for our expectations of forms of political organization and participation. We do not need a totality in order to work well. The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of a perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one. (p. 215)

Taking up Haraway's (1990) rejection of a "dream of a common language" (p. 215) and sharing Butler's and Gatens' concern for a new configuration of feminism, Rosi Braidotti (1994a) calls for a nomadic type of feminist practice, "where discontinuities, transformations, shifts of levels and locations can be accounted for, exchanged, and talked about" (p. 172). Braidotti (1994a) draws on and extends Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of nomadic subjectivity to detail a sexually specific kind of feminist consciousness that uses both the macro-politics of the fixed identity Woman and the micro-politics of women in a politically transformative process she calls "becoming-post-Woman-women" (p. 169).

The nomad appeals to Braidotti because of its abilities to pass through occupied territories (such as universities) while remaining in excess of them - its necessity of operation on partial and discontinuous identities and its ability to make transitory connections. It is precisely because of the nomad's ability to make transient connections and its transgressive and mobile image that Braidotti (1994a) has

chosen this as her figuration for a new feminist subjectivity and politics. She writes:

Being a nomad, living in transition, does not mean that one cannot or is unwilling to create those necessarily stable and reassuring bases for identity that allow one to function in a community. Rather, nomadic consciousness consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent. The nomad is only passing through; s/he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help her/him to survive, but s/he never takes on fully the limits of the national, fixed identity. The nomad has no passport - or has too many of them. (p. 33)

As an insistence on mobility and a refusal to be 'pinned down' or trapped within the options offered by masculinist discourses is one of the hallmarks of nomadic feminism, we find that it provides the means to break out of the limited options detailed above. Indeed, nomadic subjectivity exists in excess of the limitations of a context. In Braidotti's (1994a) terms: "As an intellectual style, nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere" (p. 16). The nomad, she argues:

[I]s a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity...[it] expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts...without and against an essential unity...as Deleuze put it, the point of an intellectual nomad is about crossing boundaries, about the act of going (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 23)

While nomadic subjectivity is primarily about the 'act of going', movement for its own sake is not the point: the goal of any nomadic journey is always to destabilize the binary terms that it moves between. Furthermore, where one goes depends (for Braidotti) on where one starts and one of the coordinates here is sexual difference. Thus embodied identity is the starting point of nomadic journeys. Three levels of sexual difference are central to Braidotti's project of the feminist nomadism and they all have to do with theorizing difference as positive. First, the difference between the sexes; second, differences among women; and third, the differences within each woman. At each of these levels, Braidotti's model of nomadic feminism answers our own need for ways of conceptualizing women in education and Women in Research that do not fall back into simplistic or essentializing categories.

## **Level one**

The central strategy of the first level of the project is the political need to locate subjectivity in the body. This is not a call for essentialist notions of a natural body but for embodied subjectivity which, as a site of difference, replaces the universal subject (male, white, middle-class, and heterosexual) with one structured by a multiplicity of intersecting axes such as gender, sexuality, race, age and ethnicity. Such a strategy is extremely useful for feminist attempts to de-essentialize the body for it denies the universalizing assumptions of man as the norm against which woman is devalued and makes visible the specificities of both male and female subjectivities. As she writes:

The starting point for the project of sexual difference - level one - remains the

political will to assert the specificity of lived, female bodily experience... and the will to reconnect the whole debate on difference to the bodily existence and experience of women. (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 160)

At this level, the project of nomadic feminism provides a way of speaking about the differences between the sexes not in essentializing/phallocentric terms as deviations or devaluations but as differentially situated, embodied, and asymmetrical speaking positions. At this first level, then, Braidotti's political project is concerned with the affirmation of embodied subjectivity that is combined, by necessity, with the critique of supposedly neutral theoretical models. For those of us working at CQU, this involves recognizing that women who undertake research do so in particular bodies that are positioned in different relationships to the university generally and the research culture/activities more specifically.

## **Level two**

The second level of Braidotti's political agenda is based on acknowledging the differences among women. This involves conjugating the specifics of female subjectivity with the feminist concern for the deconstruction of the signifier 'Woman as other'. Here the coordinates of the molar identity "woman" set the specific starting points for a feminist process of becoming. The starting point for this strategy is the recognition that the political project of feminism has a commitment to deconstructing the phallocentric signifier of 'Woman' and to celebrating the many differences between women. This second level is about denying the monolithic and essential category of 'Woman' as it has been historically produced and moving to an understanding of women. At this level, women at CQU are challenged to acknowledge - in more than just a tokenistic fashion - the existence and significance of substantial differences between us. While our quest for a presence and a voice within the university culture has encouraged us to present a 'united front' it is vital that our attempts to communicate to those in powerful positions about our shared experiences of disadvantage do not become an excuse for denying the point that not all women at CQU - nor anywhere else - are disadvantaged in the same way or for the same reasons. Nor, indeed, do they feel the same way about their positions/experiences.

## **Level three**

Braidotti's final point is to highlight the differences within each woman. Here, she uses the nomadic model of embodied subjectivity to view difference as internal to the subject where our desires cause a multiplicity within ourselves. Subjectivity does not correspond to consciousness. Instead, our multiplicity is characterized by both conscious and unconscious desires. According to Braidotti (1994a):

what feminism liberates in women is also their desire for freedom, lightness, justice, and self-accomplishment. These values are not only rational political beliefs, they are also objects of intense desire. (p. 167)

This desire towards feminism connects the three layers of Braidotti's (1994a) map of feminist subjectivity for it is activated by personal experience and is a pre-

condition for the capacity to articulate feminist politics as "willful social transformation" (p. 167).

Overall, Braidotti's political project is to provide female feminists with a map that depicts the multiple, sexually specific and often contradictory ways of conceptualizing female subjectivity. The feminist subject might use this map to navigate ways out of phallogentric gender dualisms and create new versions of "post-Woman women" (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 169). This is a call not for pluralism but for the interconnection of particularities that can be established through a recognition of diversity within feminists and feminisms. A crucial point here for women at CQU is that Braidotti's identification of multiplicity as a 'real' and 'legitimate' characteristic of feminist thought and gender reform allows us to acknowledge and embrace our own diverse and multiple responses to our contexts. Instead of searching for 'the one true path' to lead us out of a phallogentric culture, women are genuinely and consistently freed within this framework to recognize the multiple ways in which we can contribute to the transformation of university culture.

## **Processes of transformation**

Braidotti's framework is valuable to us because it provides a liberating representation of the work associated with transforming university environments. As a critical strategy the multiple and mobile lines of nomadic feminism not only form connections between our lived experience and our critical activity, but they can also be used to form non-hierarchical, experimental, and transformative alliances across diverse fronts in a feminist community. Our differences become strengths not weaknesses, as nomadic feminism charts political movement between different forms of resistance and conceptualizes multiple responses to specific contexts without privileging one form over the other. In this framework, the multiple ways in which women interact or represent themselves within specific contexts are not judged in relation to each other but, rather, can be conceptualized as multiple contributions to the process of social transformation.

This is significant for it means that there is no need to work for one, essentially superior model of resistance or transformation. Each response is conceptualized as contributing to social transformation. For this reason, Braidotti (1994b) calls for a multiplicity of alternative subjectivities or what she (following Haraway) calls feminist figurations. She argues:

Figurations are not pretty metaphors: They are politically informed maps, which play a crucial role at this point in the cartography of feminist corporeal materialism in that they aim at redesigning female subjectivity...In this respect, the more figurations that are disclosed in this phase of feminist practice, the better. (Braidotti, 1994b, p. 181)

Braidotti also acknowledges the crucial point that while some figurations will constitute radical departures from norms for women, others may not; indeed others may have the appearance of fairly traditional feminine practice. What is significant is the way in which these traditions are taken into non-traditional spaces or

territories. From this perspective, simply being a woman in a university can be a transgressive act.

Acknowledging that there are multiple ways in which women can deterritorialize traditional roles, images and spaces for women in universities is an important means of making visible diverse ways of being a 'female academic', a 'feminist', or a 'woman'. This allows women to recognize their own contributions to the broad political project of feminist reform, without requiring them to demonstrate how their contribution matches up to any feminist dogma. Such a framework might prevent us from being immobilized in orthodoxy. In other words, it might enable us to move beyond feelings of inadequacy and anxiety about not settling in the 'correct' position: feelings that can have such an inhibiting effect on new feminist practice. Relinquishing this desire for the one 'true' way forward, makes room for multiple, diverse and, at times, contradictory pathways towards social and political transformation. This is crucial, for, it is only by working across multiple fronts that the resistance and transformation of masculinist, patriarchal or phallogocentric cultures becomes conceivable. Just as importantly, this nomadic framework allows for the diverse pathways followed by individuals in their transformative projects to be acknowledged as important and strategic political interventions.

#### **Section four:**

#### **Nomadic subjectivity and women in universities: What can it mean for us?**

Rather than concluding this paper with a discrete example of nomadic practice, we want to highlight the politics and practices of nomadism in terms of multiple characteristics, which are themselves unstable, shifting and most importantly, open to negotiation and contestation. This can work as a framework to energize and sustain us in the work of gender reform, rather than as a set of prescriptive guidelines that would ultimately alienate and exhaust us.

From our perspective, nomadic subjects are feminists engaged in the fundamentally political project of reconceptualizing difference as a positivity (Hills, 1998). Sustaining this project is a commitment to the creation of alliances across and within disciplines and physical locations. From this basis, a nomadic politics and different nomadic subjects may share some of the following characteristics:

a commitment to identifying the phallogocentric bias inherent in our culture, which manifests itself particularly in the tendency to leap from the particular to the universal (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 219) and a determined insistence on the politics of sexual difference

a commitment to occupying and deterritorializing spaces traditionally coded as masculine and feminine and opening up new possibilities for self-image and identification in women by attaching meanings to the site that transgresses traditional and dominant meanings; by occupying spaces traditionally coded as male women may make connections or assemblages with the signifying practices of

that space in order to problematize, exhaust and denaturalize these conventions

an associated commitment to the transgression and displacement of the cultural codes of gender and the interruption and deconstruction of conventional images of "Woman"

a refusal to rank or hierarchize various figurations and a critique of the implicit system of values conveyed by high theory in its support of a conventional image of thought (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 211)

a desire to make connections across disciplines and across time zones: in a process known as "female bonding" (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 207)

Clearly, this list is not exhaustive. While the characteristics outlined above clearly operate in terms of the feminist commitment to personal and cultural change, they are not constrained within rigid or formulaic notions of what that change should look like or how it should be achieved.

For example, the Women in Research group at the Central Queensland University has taken an inclusive approach to the support of research by, for, and about women, a significantly under-represented group in research endeavors at this university as in others across the country. This strategic choice has not been a 'watering down' of feminist agendas nor a 'failure of nerve' to be separatist but rather a recognition that multiplicity, diversity - and the often unlikely alliances that spring from them - are crucial political interventions into the complex and shifting institutional contexts of our present time. As Braidotti (1994a) puts it, "nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections" (p. 35).

From our perspective, a new politics based on nomadic consciousness enables feminists to operate on multiple fronts and meet the increasingly diverse challenges within and across the shifting dynamics of university culture. We find the strategies of nomadic practice extremely productive because they allow us to challenge very different but equally phallogocentric ways of defining feminists from positions, which remain in excess of binaristic structures. In other words, the figuration of the nomad appeals to us because it enables us to articulate our difficult relation to both the patriarchal discourses of university culture and the exclusionary discourses of political dogma while speaking as feminist academics. The figure of the nomad, then, is a way of articulating the paradoxical relation of women and university culture for it is both inside and outside the terrain it covers. It also allows us to celebrate difference among and within women. From this perspective, disagreement, opposition, and contradiction are not seen as signs of weakness but rather they are important markers of the necessarily complex, diverse and multiple positions taken up by feminists across the political spectrum.

From this basis we would argue that it is a matter of political urgency for women to take up multiple positions within university culture: deterritorializing traditionally male environments and reinventing them for a post-gender age. Thus, as women in higher education travel in diverse directions, resisting settlement and fixity, adopting fluid, multiple and mobile subjectivities, and operating across and against boundaries and borders, they open up new possibilities for post-Woman-women within all spaces of the academy.

## Some Parting Comments

This paper has described the geographically and historically specific politicized space of the Central Queensland University and has charted some of the ways in which women are 'positioned' and how they can 're-position' themselves within this space. The feminist engagement with nomadism discussed above offers a particular means of surveying, contesting and transforming this territory. However, we do not want to argue that there is anything inherently radical about nomadic practices nor that they will be transgressive or transformative in every context. Indeed, we want to make it clear that we are not arguing for the adoption of nomadic feminism per se. Nomadic feminism is one strategy currently adopted by women at this university who are facing the dilemma of yet another backlash.

Ironically, the one constant we can count on is that the specificities of this context will shift. It is on this point, however, that nomadic feminism can be most instructive for it enables us to see that as our context changes so must our responses to it change. We cannot rely on habituated responses or purist dogmas but must be mobile enough to develop new strategies that are specific to the constantly altering self-representations of a regional university. Such a strategy has the political ability to "call into being new, alternative ways of constructing the female subject" (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 208). This new mode of appreciating feminist activity in higher education might then resonate with the feminist desire for personal and cultural change, and enable us to transform how we conceptualize both women and universities.

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## Endnotes

iIt is important to acknowledge that the structure, constitution, and eventual activities of this group were not easily developed. There were serious differences among those who attended initial meetings concerning the best way to address the problem as well as considerable disagreement concerning the nature of the problem

itself. These differences of opinion related, among other things, to issues such as: the image the group wished to present; the extent to which it should identify itself as overtly feminist or even as targeted exclusively at women, whether or not men were entitled to membership of the group; whether or not it was possible for the group to work for change 'within' traditional university structures; or whether it was necessary/desirable to pursue a more radical model whereby the women declared their independence from existing university structures, and of course, the processes by which decisions about these preceding questions would be made.

Clearly, all of these debates have occurred among many different women in many different environments throughout the world. What we are interested in here is the collective anxiety of the group to forge a 'coherent' and 'singular' identity and the long-term consequences that this has had. Ultimately, the 'majority' of the members were keen to ensure that the group developed a high profile within the university and that its eventual policies and activities were widely understood and uniformly promoted. Inevitably, this meant that some members of the initial working party were dissatisfied by the decisions taken by the group and withdrew.

Those who remained within the working party adopted what might be called a "Gorbachev" approach to reform seeking to effect change from within the existing university structures and through negotiation rather than confrontation. The resultant terms of reference and activities reflected this decision.

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