The idea of a ‘politics of sympathy’ has its roots in the classical liberalism of the eighteenth century, represented quintessentially by Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. A best-seller in its time, Smith’s treatise can be read as preparing the ideological ground for the *Wealth of Nations*, furnishing the economic logic of capital with the kind of natural moral counterpart it will need to compensate for suboptimal effects within the system. As a charitable ‘interest in the fortune of others’, sympathy becomes, so to speak, the *other* invisible hand, directing civil society towards remedies for the less desirable consequences, unintended or otherwise, of a free-market economy (urban destitution, child labour, colonial slavery…).

Today, with capital fully operative on a global scale, Smith’s careful attempt to strike a balance between rational self-interest and sympathetic fellow-feeling may appear quaintly obsolete. In place of naturalist appeals to a common moral sense, neoliberal ethics prefers the tighter legalistic discourse of universal human rights. The social agenda, however, remains essentially the same. As Alain Badiou suggests, the current ethical ideology presupposes a world composed solely of ‘victims’ and ‘benefactors’, positing a general human subject who is ‘both, on the one hand, a passive, pathetic [*pathétique*], or reflexive subject – he who suffers – and, on the other, the active, determining, subject of judgment – he who, in identifying suffering, knows that it must be stopped by all available means’. At the heart of this ‘debased consensus’ we find once again the classic Smithian figure of the judicious spectator: that model liberal humanist for whom ‘politics is subordinated to ethics, to the single perspective that really matters in this conception of things: the sympathetic and indignant judgment of the spectator of circumstances.’

Acknowledging the force of Badiou’s polemic, the following article outlines an alternative politics of sympathy, derived in part from Deleuze’s reading of Hume, and developed by way of contrast with Rorty’s pragmatist ‘politics of sentiment’. If sympathy in its Rortyan sense, as a feeling for the one who suffers, effectively depoliticizes the intolerable by personalizing it, the Deleuzean alternative explored here presupposes a politics in which the feelings engaged are essentially impersonal: ‘affects’ rather than ‘sentiments’. The idea of an ‘impersonal sympathy’ may be oxymoronic, but it both registers a break with the liberal agenda and allows for a critical connection between the ‘feeling of justice’ in Hume and the concept of ‘becoming everyone’ in Deleuze.

**Beyond sentiment**

Paraphrasing D.H. Lawrence, Deleuze characterizes sympathy as ‘something to be reckoned with … a bodily struggle, hating what threatens and infects life, loving where it proliferates’. The inspiration here is Lawrence’s essay on Walt Whitman, in particular its concise formulation of a fundamentally Spinozan ethic: ‘My soul and my body are one. … What my soul loves, I love. What my soul hates, I hate.’ Whitman’s encounters with miserable souls (a slave, a leper, a syphilitic) serve as a foil allowing Lawrence to introduce and refine his own conception of sympathy. In the encounter with the slave, for example, Whitman’s response is parodied as follows: ‘That negro slave is a man like myself. We share the same identity. And he is bleeding with wounds. Oh, oh, is it not myself who am also bleeding with wounds?’ But true sympathy, Lawrence insists, cannot be a question of identification or participation, of sharing the slave’s sad passion, or bearing the other’s burden. Had Whitman truly sympathized, he would have said: ‘That negro slave suffers from slavery. … If I can help him I will: I will not take over his wounds and his slavery to myself. But I will help him fight the power that enslaves him … if he wants my help, since I see in his face that he wants to be free.’
Sartre might be taken as exemplary of the authentic political sympathizer Lawrence has in mind – Sartre the honorary ‘Negro philosopher’, who helps the cause of Fanon, Cesaire, Senghor, and so on, through a series of interventions and polemics against colonialist oppression. If it would strain credibility to posit any direct link between Sartre’s militant praxis and the kind of libidinal vitalism espoused by Lawrence, there is nevertheless a rich passage in _Black Orpheus_, Sartre’s essay on the poetry of negritude, in which the themes of Lawrence’s study are clearly echoed. ‘Negritude’, Sartre declares, ‘is a comprehension through sympathy’, but a sympathy originating in desire rather than compassion, and hence less a question of feeling for the suffering other than of the suffering other’s own intuitive ‘sympathy with life’. Among European authors, Sartre continues, there is only Lawrence who comes close to Cesaire’s ‘cosmic sense of sexuality’. The Negro’s ‘passion of suffering in revolt’ is thus rooted not in _ressentiment_ but in a ‘Dionysian fecundity’ which ‘surpasses by its exuberance the misery, drowns it in its creative abundance which is poetry, love and dance’. The question is, then, how this singular poetic vision is to take on a universal political significance. Sartre was clear on the direction to be taken: when the Negro recognizes his suffering as a condition with specific historical causes, he ‘affirms his solidarity with the oppressed of all colors’. His cosmic sympathy becomes concretely political when, ‘at a blow, the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude “passes” … into the objective, positive, exact notion of the _proletariat_.’ Negritude now appears as the ‘minor term’ within a dialectical progression; insufficient in itself, ‘it serves to prepare the way for the synthesis or realization of the human society without races’. In this highly mediated sense, the poetry of negritude ‘which at first appears racial’ becomes ‘ultimately a song of everyone of us and for everyone of us’.

Deleuze’s theory of a minoritarian politics can absorb almost all of Sartre’s analysis, retaining a link between negritude, sympathy and universality, and conceding that the ‘power of minority finds its figure or its universal consciousness in the proletariat’. Nonetheless, in so far as Deleuze attempts to draw a line under the dialectic, the element of historical mediation is necessarily absent. In place of that, the required connection between the ‘subjective, existential, ethnic notion’ and the political universal now goes by way of a vague essentialism in which ‘negritude’ itself denotes an objective, positive, inexact quality susceptible to greater or lesser intensities. As Deleuze and Guattari put it: if ‘even blacks, as the Black Panthers said, must become-black’ then there must be something singularly essential to ‘black’ that affects or has a meaning for everybody. Thus Jean Genet could insist ‘he was a black who might look white or pink, but he was still a black’ precisely because he understood, intuitively, that ‘black’ picks out only an anexact or vague essence, an impersonal potential or pure passion the seeds of which are to be found within everyone, in so far as everyone has the capacity for a ‘comprehension through sympathy’.

The idea of sympathy as a universal capacity, as the ‘soul or animating principle’ of every human passion, lies at the basis of Hume’s moral philosophy. Indeed, Hume goes further, inviting his readers to ‘take a general survey of the universe, and observe the force of sympathy thro’ the whole animal creation’. In practice, his concern is almost exclusively with the _polis_ rather than the cosmos, and in particular with the role played by sympathy in relation to ‘justice as an artificial virtue’. The originality of Hume’s approach to the problem of human society lies in its opposition to any contract theory premised on a natural conflict of egoistic interests. As Deleuze explains:

> the problem is no longer how to limit egoisms … but how to go beyond partialities, how to pass from ‘limited sympathy’ to an ‘extended generosity’, how to stretch passions and give them an extension they don’t have on their own … how [to] create institutions that force passions to go beyond their partialities and form moral, judicial, political sentiments (for example, the feeling of justice).

This idea of a ‘progress of sentiments’ is likewise central to Rorty’s ethics, within which ‘moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy’, a question of ‘expanding the range of our present “we”’. Hence, as with Hume, morality is not a matter of ‘rising above the sentimental to the rational’ or of discovering a subtle human essence which would provide a transcendental ground for human solidarity. Rather, and more modestly, the pragmatist adopts a microethical approach, aiming ‘to minimize one difference at a time’ – the difference between blacks and whites in a particular town in Alabama, for example – by invoking ‘a thousand little commonalities’ rather than specifying ‘one great big one, their common humanity’.

For Hume, there is an essentially poetic dimension to the extension of sympathy, which Deleuze glosses as follows:

> Here fantasy or fiction takes on a new meaning…. It is up to the imagination to reflect passion, to make it resonate and go beyond the limits of its
natural partiality ... in reflecting the passions, the imagination liberates them, stretching them out infinitely and projecting them beyond their natural limits.\footnote{14}

Similarly for Rorty, overcoming partiality ‘is not to be achieved by enquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.\ldots This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel.’\footnote{15} ‘The poetic task is thus one of ‘redescription’, and among the novelists Rorty identifies as exemplary in this respect are Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both produced sentimental novels whose detailed descriptions of their immiserated subjects had a profound effect on a mass readership, and in so doing made their own contribution to the course of enlightened social and political reform. In Rorty’s view, then, the sentimental novel serves as a model for liberal media in general, whose political role within ‘pluralistic bourgeois democracies’ is to manipulate the sentiments, and thereby influence the policies and actions, of the rich and powerful: ‘the people on top [who] hold the future in their hands’ and on whom ‘everything depends’.\footnote{16}

Dickens is particularly attractive for Rorty because, rather than criticizing ‘the age or society in which he lived’, he attacked only ‘concrete cases of particular people ignoring the suffering of other particular people’, thereby bringing to light hitherto unnoticed instances of ‘moral blindness’.\footnote{17} As Rorty is well aware, this Dickensian notion of ‘concreteness’ is open to the charge of ideological displacement: abstracted from ‘society as a whole’, the sentimentalist’s advertisement of surplus suffering typically refuses to confront, and thus effectively conceals, the cruelty inherent in the system of production that creates the conditions for such suffering in the first place. On Sartre’s account, for example, the most salient ‘concrete fact’ is that capitalism can only function by depositing a subhuman subgroup somewhere, a somewhere situated precisely beyond the range of any progress of sentiments. ‘We are human at their expense’ is an axiom global capital assumes as a constant, thereby inviting an inevitable return of the repressed: ‘The impossible dehumanization of the oppressed turns against the oppressors and becomes their alienation.\ldots To escape from this, they must harden, give themselves the opaque consistency and impermeability of stone.’\footnote{18} As such, while the sympathies of the ‘people on top’ may indeed be stretched by manipulation, they will only contract in face of any confrontation with the global axiomatic. The result is so much useless pathos: ‘we close the book with a tear for these folk, leave the cinema feeling “awful”, turn away from the set appalled at what people in countries “like that” are able to bring themselves to do.’\footnote{19}

From Sartre’s Marxist perspective, then, the role Rorty assigns to sentimental redescription is not only severely limited but amounts to a dissembling of the fact that ‘moral blindness’, rather than being restricted to particular concrete cases, is congenital to the system as a whole. Rorty’s response to such criticism is to take the conventional liberal line: by calling the ‘system as a whole’ into question Sartre only reinstates at one remove the idea of ‘Total Revolution’, thereby promoting ‘an experiment almost universally judged to have failed’\footnote{20}. Given that historical failure, the only viable alternative today is one of piecemeal reform designed to reduce unnecessary suffering and increase equality of opportunity; precisely that project to which sentimental redescription has made a proven contribution. Deleuze offers one way out of this ideological stalemate, cutting through Rorty’s rhetoric in the process: ‘They say revolutions turn out badly. But they’re constantly confusing two different things, the way revolutions turn out historically and people’s revolutionary becoming.’\footnote{21} The concept of a people’s revolutionary becoming opens up the possibility of an alternative political aesthetics, within which redescription can be redefined in terms of the invention of new percepts and affects, rather than the manipulation of established sentiments.

\textbf{Justice in the soul}

For Hume, the problem to which justice is the solution resides in a particular passion, namely ‘the interested affection’.\footnote{22} As with Plato’s theory of justice in the soul and in the city, Hume’s account can be viewed from two different perspectives, the individual or the institutional. As a project for the individual psyche, the aim is to achieve a state of ‘calmed affection’ through a combination of purifying reflection and eidetic variation. By the power of imagination, ‘the nearest must become the most distant, and the most distant, the nearest’, such that, notwithstanding the natural limits of our sympathies, ‘we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England.’\footnote{23} The ‘feeling of justice’ is thus in essence a ‘sentiment generalised and purged of personal interest’, an artifice by way of which ‘I imagine myself disinterested when in fact I am interested’.\footnote{24} The crucial point here is that the relation between justice and the passions is not one of limitation or elimination. On the contrary, as Deleuze explains:
Passions are not limited by justice; they are enlarged and extended. Justice is the extension of the passions and interest, and only the partial movement of the latter is denied and constrained. ... We must understand that justice is not a reflection on interest but a reflection of interest, a kind of twisting of the passion itself in the mind affected by it. 25

If the project for the psyche is one of maximal extension, the project in the case of the polis is one of optimal integration: the harmonizing of individual passions or interests within 'a totality not given in nature', through a combination of social convention and state imposed sanction. 26 In Hume's scheme, these two dimensions of justice are clearly codependent: optimizing integration requires maximizing extension, but the latter in turn will require some degree of external persuasion – that is, the creation of institutions that force individuals 'to go beyond their partialities and form moral, judicial, political sentiments'. As John Rawls points out, in this respect Hume is offering a theory of justice that is 'not the best imaginable, but the best given human beings as they are'; the result is 'a quite conservative scheme' in which 'the value of equality is largely ignored'. 27 This is hardly surprising given the fundamental role Hume assigns to the institution of property. The general rule in which individuals can be taken to have a common interest is 'not only useful, but even absolutely necessary to human society'. 28 Nonetheless, while it may be true that institutions are required in order to 'convert violence into conversation', where the convention of patrimony trumps every other, that discourse will be limited in the end to a 'conversation of proprietors', a democratic exchange from which the dispossessed will be excluded both by definition and, where necessary, by force of a now institutionalized violence. ('What social democracy has not given the order to fire when the poor come out of their territory or ghetto?') 29

To distance the Humean idea of justice from any such reactionary programme it will be enough to divorce the ideal of an optimal harmonization of interests from that of a maximal extension of sympathies. It is, then, in relation to the latter that a Deleuzean equivalent of Hume's 'disinterested subject' might be constructed, on the basis of a conceptual link between sympathy and becoming. Deleuze himself invites that connection by way of the concept of assemblage: becoming involves an assembling of heterogeneous terms, and the assemblage is a 'co-functioning, it is "sympathy", symbiosis'. 30 As with the extension of sympathies in Hume, becomings are intimately bound up with poetic artifice: 'writing is inseparable from becoming ... it is in writing [that] one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or vegetable, becomes-molecule to the point of becoming imperceptible.' 31 If becomings are passions of a kind, they constitute not merely the pathetic modes of everyday life but the affective flows through which we enter into a new or different assemblage. As Hume suggests, 'we enter, to be sure, more readily into sentiments, which resemble those we feel every day. But no passion can be entirely indifferent to us; because there is none, of which every man has not, within him, at least the seeds and first principles.' Just as for Hume it is 'the business of poetry to bring every affection near to us by lively imagery, and make it look like truth and reality', so for Deleuze it is the business of the 'great novelist [to] invent unknown or unrecognized affects and bring them to light as the becoming of his characters'. 32

The difference is that for Deleuze 'affects are no longer sentiments or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them.' 33 Ironically enough it is in Dickens, Rorty's model sentimentalist, that Deleuze finds the purest account of just such an affect. According to him, 'no one has described what a life is better than Charles Dickens', and the affect invented to express the impersonality of 'a life' is most perfectly realized in the near-death scene of Riderhood in Dickens's Our Mutual Friend. Riderhood, 'a disreputable man, a rogue, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care for him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life ... Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death.' In this limit situation, Dickens's characters do not feel any compassion for the individual 'Riderhood'; rather, they encounter 'a "homo tantum" with whom everyone sympathises and who attains a kind of beatitude ... individuality fades away in favour of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other'. 34 John Rajchman's commentary on this passage, from which he extracts the Humean moral, is worth quoting at length:

We need a new conception of society in which what we have in common is our singularities and not our individualities – where what is common is 'impersonal' and what is 'impersonal' is common. That is precisely what Dickens's tale shows – only through a process of 'im-personalization' in the interval between life and death does the hero become our 'common friend'. It is also what Deleuze brings out in Hume ... In place of the dominant idea of
a social contract among already given selves or subjects, Hume elaborates an original picture of convention that allows for an ‘attunement’ of the passions prior to the identities of reason; only in this way can we escape the violence toward others inherent in the formation of our social identities or the problem of our ‘partialities’.35

In this context, the ‘singularities we have in common’ can be read as functionally equivalent to the ‘little commonalities’ Rorty would like to discover between, for example, black and white Alabamans, only now they have been wholly impersonalized, emptied of pathos or personal sentiment. The singularities black and white Alabamans will have in common are the little that is left over once the big commonalities – the identitarian predicates ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘Alabaman’ – have been subtracted from their state or territorial function. What will be left over is not a ‘common identity’ or bare ‘human being’, but the deterritorialized variables of a life, the seeds or first principles of impersonal ‘minoritarian becomings’.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, becomings form a sequence which ends with ‘becoming imperceptible’. Becoming imperceptible ‘means many things’, but at its most banal it means simply ‘becoming like everybody else’ or, more precisely, ‘becoming everyone’ (devenir tout le monde). In order to become everyone we must ‘eliminate … everything that roots each of us (everybody) in ourselves, in our molarity’, rid ourselves of ‘all the objective determinations which fix us, put us into a grille, identify us and make us recognized’.36 Eliminating everything that ties us to our ‘social formation’ no more demands the extinction of subjectivity as a ‘passional assemblage’ than does the Humean ‘feeling of justice’ demand the elimination of our interests or passions. Rather, in the same way that justice involves a ‘twisting of the passion itself in the mind affected by it’ so becoming everyone requires that we ‘gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency’: to that level at which ‘everything becomes imperceptible … which is nevertheless precisely where the imperceptible is seen and heard’.37

It is, then, from the plane of consistency that the ‘singularities we have in common’ can be extracted, by a dis感兴趣的主体现在从其社会形成的具体性中解脱出来。有限于这些术语，德勒兹的成为序列清晰地符合休谟的正义模型：通过艺术地成为所有人来最大限度地扩展同情，最大限度地抑制偏见，通过抑制所有身份利益来抑制所有偏见。在休谟自然主义理论的道德性中，很明显为什么德勒兹的‘生活’伦理学的目的不是为了‘解放存在于人类本性中并被文化所变形的东西’。38 对于德勒兹来说，正如对于休谟一样，问题不在于社会化使一种原始状态变形，而在于它不够远。解决‘感兴趣的关系’的问题—无论是正义还是成为所有人—都意味着不退却于出文化，而是超越出自然的限制偏见。在这种意义上，象征暴力在形成我们的社会身份方面是必不可少的；如果没有它，就没有变量来脱离，因而就没有媒体通过这个延伸的同情来减轻（所谓的‘种族’）暴力在现实中的可能。

39 Deleuze’s
ethical thought may ultimately range far beyond the limits of Hume’s own, but if the concept of *devenir tout le monde* erases the boundary between *polis* and cosmos, human and non-human, ‘becoming everyone’ and ‘becoming everything’, it arguably does so only to carry the Humean principle of maximally extended sympathy to its logical, cosmopolitical end.

**Minoritarian redescription**

Rorty’s notion of poetic redescription can be given a Deleuzean application in relation to the political role of a ‘minor literature’. The issues involved turn on the significance of minority predicates for ‘a people’s revolutionary becoming’. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, any such predicate, if it is to count as more than a state or territorial function, must become ‘a universal figure, or the becoming of everybody. Woman: we all have to become that, whether we are male or female. Non-white: we all have to become that, whether we are white, black or yellow.’ Such slogans effect a radical break with the liberal problematic of sympathy, modelled on the compassion of the majoritarian benefactor (active, white, male…) for the minoritarian victim (passive, black, female…). Nonetheless, given the political ‘awkwardness’ of the examples involved (woman, black, Jew, etc.), one might reasonably object that the break is not so radical, that the examples themselves presuppose the schema of a minoritarian ‘other’ defined as such in relation to a majoritarian ‘we’ – a suspicion only compounded by Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion that, ‘in a way, the subject in a becoming is always “man”’.

While there is clearly a case to be answered here (as evidenced by the extent to which ‘becoming-woman’, for example, has been critically interrogated by feminist theorists), it seems equally clear from the context that if ‘man’ is, in a way, always the subject in a becoming, he is so primarily as its target or victim. If there can be no becoming-man, it is because ‘man’ as the majority figure, as the measure or standard relative to which all ‘others’ are positioned, is precisely that which is to be overcome. By the same token, any minority, having been specified as ‘other’ in terms of that measure, will itself be subject to a ‘becoming-other’ in so far as ‘it ceases to be a definable aggregate in relation to the majority’. It is, then, in this sense that the concept of sympathy might be detached from any notion of compassion and linked instead to a ‘shared deterritorialization’ of identity predicates the standard function of which is to maintain a given state of domination.

Echoing Deleuze and Guattari, Badiou insists that any valid political deployment of a cultural predicate requires an element of semantic universalization: ‘If someone wants to use the words “French” or “Arab” in … a progressive political determination, everything depends on what this determination … means for everyone, what it means universally.’ The Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi raises the issue in much the same terms: ‘How can we create a fighting and competitive culture, which would bear within itself its own originality and specificity, while still being universal?’ For both Khleifi and Deleuze, the predicate ‘Palestinian’ can be and has been inscribed in a political determination in such a way as to have a meaning for everyone. As Deleuze notes, the manifesto of the Palestinians is (or at least was) ‘we are a people like any other’. With this slogan, the predicate ‘Palestinian’ becomes a universal figure of minoritarian consciousness, linked to the becoming of everybody. How, then, might the poetic operations of cultural redescription contribute to the universalizing inscription of a minority predicate within a political process? Clearly, as Badiou suggests apropos the dialectical poetry of negritude, it cannot be a question of simply ‘turning the subjective situation upside-down’, twisting shame into pride by changing the predicate values from negative to affirmative. Rather, the minoritarian author must extract the latent political universal by focusing exclusively on the singularities locked into the local social formation, singularities unique to the ‘subjective, existential, ethnic’ situation but detachable from it as universalizable affects – that is, as the becomings of its real characters. Thus Khleifi describes the impact of his 1980 docudrama, *Fertile Memory*, as follows:

This film turned the PLO’s militant cinema upside-down. It demonstrated that it is more important to show the thinking that leads to the political slogan than the expression of this slogan that is political discourse. For the first time, we could see Palestinian women in their private environment, all by themselves. Their memory was becoming subject, since they were themselves the subjects of their people’s drama.

In focusing on the lives of ordinary women, Khleifi is able to bring to light hitherto unnoticed affects that go beyond the individual capacities of those who undergo them. To see the life of a Palestinian woman in her private environment, all by herself, is to witness the singularity of a life, an impersonal life individuated in a person like any other, someone with whom everyone can ‘sympathize’ without being manipu-
lated into feeling a condescending compassion for the victim. As minoritarian subjects of their people’s drama, the women become universal political figures without leaving their own territory, whether private or public, whether their oppression is patriarchal or colonial. Khleifi’s film thus meets the requirements for a minor literature, as ‘a work containing no private history that is not immediately public, political and popular’, a work which is above all an ‘affair of the people, and not of exceptional individuals’.51 Deleuze himself offers the Canadian filmmaker Pierre Perrault as a model:

Perrault thinks that if he speaks on his own, even in a fictional framework, … he won’t get away from a ‘master’s or colonist’s discourse’, an established discourse. What we have to do is find someone else ‘legending’, ‘caught in the act of legending.’ Then a minority discourse, with one or many speakers, takes shape. We come here upon what Bergson calls ‘fabulation’ … To catch someone in the act of legending is to catch the movement of constitution of a people. A people isn’t something already there. A people, in a way, is what’s missing … Was there ever a Palestinian people? Israel says no. Of course there was, but that’s not the point … once the Palestinians have been thrown out of their territory, then to the extent that they resist they enter the process of constituting a people.48

What Deleuze says of Perrault can equally be said of Khleifi, who likewise enters into a relation of assembling or co-functioning, catching a minority in the act of legending, producing a collective discourse with one or several voices, projecting images of a revolutionary becoming which take on a life of their own. In this way, minoritarian redescription transforms ordinary lives into a fabulatory composite of ‘percepts and affects, landscapes and faces, visions and becomings’ that effectively deterritorializes the system of ‘dominant perceptions and affections’ by which the political situation had previously been defined.49 If, as Deleuze suggests, ‘the PLO had to invent a space-time in the Arab world’,50 Khleifi’s films can be read as contributing to that invention in documenting the ‘embryonic subjects’ whose lived ‘spatio-temporal dynamisms’, individuated in culturally specific manners and voices, served to dramatize the Idea animating the Palestinian people.51

Khleifi’s relationship to his subjects illustrates the key difference between a Deleuzean and a Rortyan approach to redescription: where the sentimentalist writer operates as a compassionate advocate addressing the powers that be on behalf of those ‘suffering too much to have a voice of their own’,52 the minoritarian author enters into a becoming with the people themselves, with the aim of producing a collective utterance. Likewise, while for Rorty redescription furthers the liberal agenda of ‘tolerance’, facilitating the integration of minorities into the majority, for Deleuze a minoritarian politics will cut both ways, effecting ‘revolutionary becomings’ through a general deterritorialization of identity predicates:

Becoming-Jewish, becoming-woman, etc. … imply two simultaneous movements, one by which a term (the subject) is withdrawn from the majority, and another by which a term (the medium or agent) rises up from the minority … There is no subject of the becoming except as a deterritorialized variable of the majority; there is no medium of becoming except as a deterritorialized variable of a minority. We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things. You don’t deviate from the majority unless there is a little detail that starts to swell and carries you off. Anything at all can do the job, but it always turns out to be a political affair.53

As Rorty himself suggests in relation to the extension of sympathies, it is the ‘little details’ that make all the difference. But everything turns on the kind of examples given. On the Rortyan model, we are generally persuaded to sympathize with others not by refined appeals to human dignity or a common humanity, but by the sort of banal reasons to be found in sad, sentimental stories: ‘because this is what it’s like to be alone, far from home’, or, ‘because her mother would grieve for her’.54 On the Deleuzean model, by contrast, the tendency of such stories to personalize the issues ensures that their generic characters are precisely not real or concrete enough to function as authentic triggers or mediators for sympathy. Hence the examples offered by Deleuze and Guattari, while on the face of it infinitely more trivial, are of a different order: it is ‘because of the glasses’ (spectacles that give his nose ‘a vaguely Semitic air’) that the hero of Arthur Miller’s novel Focus enters into a becoming-Jewish, not because Jews have mothers who suffer too.55 Here it is the impersonality of the little detail that provokes the extension of a sympathy, the stretching of a passion beyond a given identitarian boundary.

In the same way as Khleifi’s film, Genet’s memoir of his time spent with Palestinians takes the women, and the mothers in particular, to be of the essence; but they become universal political figures only to the extent that they cease to resemble stock sentimental characters. For Genet as for Khleifi this requires an aesthetic distillation, an extraction of the unrecognized affect from the familiar affection: ‘Fancy having gone
so far only to find that what lies beyond the horizon is just as ordinary as here! Then the writer of memoirs wants to show what no one else has ever seen in that ordinarness.\textsuperscript{56} One of the book’s central scenes will serve as a final example. In the early 1970s, Genet spent a night at the home of a Palestinian soldier and his mother. Since the son was out on a mission, Genet was offered his bedroom. In the night, as he pretended to be asleep, the mother crept in with a tray holding a cup of coffee and a glass of water. A short time later,

Another two little taps at the door, just like the first two. In the light of the stars and the waning moon the same long shadow appeared, as familiar now as if it had come into my room at the same time every night of my life before I went to sleep. Or rather so familiar that it was inside rather than outside me, coming into me with a cup of Turkish coffee every night since I was born. Through my lashes I saw her move the little table silently back to its place and, still with the assurance of someone born blind, pick up the tray and go out, closing the door. … It all happened so smoothly that I realized the mother came every night with a cup of coffee and a glass of water for Hamza … For one night and for the duration of one simple but oft-repeated act, a man older than she was herself became the mother’s son.\textsuperscript{57}

It is, then, ‘because of the coffee’ that Genet first enters into a becoming-Palestinian. Genet’s own commentary on this passage, which appears long before the scene itself, radically undermines its pathos:

The various scenes in which Hamza’s mother appears are in a way flat. They ooze love and friendship and pity, but how can one simultaneously express all the contradictory emanations issuing from the witnesses? The same is true for every page in this book where there is only one voice. And like all the other voices my own is faked … The only fairly true causes of my writing this book were the nuts I picked from the hedges at Ajloun. But this sentence tries to hide the book, as each sentence tries to hide the one before, leaving on the page nothing but error: something of what often happened but what I could never subtly enough describe…\textsuperscript{58}

Thus Genet registers his unease at having strayed too far into the realms of personal sentiment, at having failed to find the impersonal collective voice the situation demands. As if to compensate, he pretends to begin again, reterritorializing his passions on a different little detail as the trigger for all his subsequent becomings. This time, it was ‘because of the nuts’. Though Genet undoubtedly attains a kind of beatitude in leaping from one singularity to another, his objective problem is how to redescribe a revolutionary-becoming the reality of which ‘lay in involvement, fertile in hate and love; in people’s daily lives; in silence, like translucency, punctuated by words and phrases’.\textsuperscript{59} It is the problem with which each sentence struggles in ‘an almost spiritual combat’.\textsuperscript{60} But Genet’s inevitable failure only confirms Deleuze’s claim that it is ‘the greatest artists (rather than populist artists) who invoke a people, and find they “lack a people”, the ‘people to come’ capable of extracting the truth from their errors, the reality from their fictions.\textsuperscript{61}

Deleuze’s point has its exact equivalent in Rorty’s existentialist aesthetic. For Rorty, the ‘great authors’ are simply those whose genius outlived them because their idiosyncratic fantasies happened to catch on with other people, thanks to the ‘accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need’. As a consequence, the strong poet’s ‘metaphoric redescriptions of small parts of the past’ come to take their place ‘among the future’s stock of literal truths’.\textsuperscript{62} It is in this context that Rorty offers examples of ‘little details’ comparable to Deleuze’s own:

Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being’s sense of self-identity. For any such thing can play the role in an individual life which philosophers have thought could, or at least should, be played only by things which were universal, common to us all… Any seemingly random constellation of such things can set the tone of a life.\textsuperscript{63}

The same small things may be at stake here, but whereas in Deleuze’s theory of becoming these things ‘always turn out to be political’, in Rorty’s version they are always already personalized and, thereby, depoliticized. For Rorty, creative becoming is essentially a question of becoming what one is: ‘recreating all “it was” into a “thus I willed it”’.\textsuperscript{64} The emphasis is thus on self-redescription or poetic self-creation, a ‘search for personal autonomy’ which is, or ought to be, wholly private, divorced from the public domain in which political deliberation is to be limited to a ‘banal moral vocabulary’. But for such private projects to be possible, it must already be the case that the ‘constellation of small things which sets the tone of a life’ has been arranged or contained within the metaphysical form of the ‘person’ or the ‘individual’. In Deleuze’s metaphysics, it is the same constellations in play, but now rigorously subtracted from the category of the person or individual. The sense of ‘a life’ can then be reset upon a plane of immanence and variously
redescribed as an assemblage of deterritorialized variables, a prepredicative vagueness, an anonymous yet singular essence. Hence for Deleuze creative becoming is ultimately a question of becoming-imperceptible as who one is, a problem of dis-identification and im-personalization. Conceived as public rather than private, politicized rather than personalized, the small things thus come to play the role the philosophers attributed to the big things: they become agents or media of the universal, capable of triggering political sympathies in accordance with a ‘new conception of society in which what we have in common is our singularities and not our individualities’. 

**Utopia and ‘human fraternity’**

In their final work, Deleuze and Guattari make no effort to disguise their contempt for ‘the Western, democratic conception of philosophy as providing pleasant or aggressive dinner conversations at Mr Rorty’s’, preferring instead an image of the philosopher as solitary conceptual inventor, one who will ‘crawl away’ at the mere mention of ‘a little discussion’. This polemical contrast between ‘communication’ and ‘invention’ is no doubt overstated. Isabelle Stengers offers a useful qualification, reserving a space for inventive conversation where ‘emotions, values, what it is to think or resist, what it is to hope … are all at stake’. Deleuze’s aggressive non-conversation with Rorty can be read in precisely these terms, with the stakes involved turning on the relation of utopian thought to political practice, and how to think through ‘the demands of human solidarity’.

Utopia, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, ‘stands for absolute deterritorialization, but always at the critical point at which it is connected to the present relative milieu, and especially with the forces stifled by this milieu’. Badiou offers a good example of one such critical point: the situation of the sans papiers (‘illegal immigrants’) in contemporary France, stifled by a milieu of institutionalized racism expressed in populist slogans such as ‘France for the French’ or official statements such as ‘France cannot open its doors to the misery of the world’. The local resistance to this xenophobia is organized around a simple prescription: ‘everyone who is here is from here’. The connection to ‘utopia’ in this context may not be immediately obvious, but it becomes clearer in light of Herman Melville’s reflections on the situation of immigrants to America in the mid-nineteenth century:

Let us waive that agitation national topic as to whether such multitudes of foreign poor should be landed on our American shores. Let us waive it, with the one only thought, that if they can get here, they have God’s right to come; though they bring all Ireland and her miseries with them. For the whole world is the patrimony of the whole world; there is no telling who does not own a stone in the Great Wall of China. But we waive all this; and will only consider how best the emigrants can come hither, since come they do, and come they must and will.

Melville’s rhetoric adds force to Badiou’s prescription while bringing out its latent utopian premiss: ‘everyone who is here is from here’ precisely because ‘the whole world is the patrimony of the whole world’. The latter may be a ‘normative’ statement of absolute deterritorialization, but to take it as being itself prescriptive would amount to a kind of category mistake.

As Peter Hallward notes, ‘a prescription concerning immigration cannot proceed, today, on the basis of a utopian rejection of international borders (although it can and must concern the “reception” of immigrants here and now…)’; which is exactly Melville’s point in waiving ‘all this’ in order to focus on the then-and-there question of ‘how best the emigrants can come hither’. But if projections of absolute deterritorialization are not themselves prescriptive, they may nevertheless be read as descriptive exercises equivalent to a radicalization of Hume’s moral fictions: in the space of ‘one only thought’ Melville imagines himself disinterested, stretches his passions as far as Ireland and China, and declares the convention of patrimony effectively null and void.

In his essay on Melville, Deleuze traces the idea of utopia as absolute deterritorialization back to the ‘two faces’ of nineteenth-century messianism, American and Russian. Through their respective projects of universal immigration and universal proletarianization, each introduces the figure of the ‘man without particularities’, the maximally deterritorialized human: ‘a being without property, family or nation, [who] has no other determination than that of being man, Homo tantum’. In spite of the failure of both revolutions, Deleuze maintains a fidelity to their utopian thought as the means by which philosophy ‘takes the criticism of its own time to its highest point’, or, more precisely, ‘takes the relative deterritorialization of capital to the absolute … suppresses it as internal limit, turns it back against itself so as to summon forth a new earth, a new people’, a summons necessarily linked ‘to what is real here and now in the struggle against capitalism.”
capitalism ‘as such’, but against its manifold inegalitarian effects. Hence his repeated appeals to fellow-leftists to return from ‘totalizing’ theory back to traditional class politics and the repair of poverty.24 Though the Rortyan pragmatist remains committed to the utopian ideal of ‘universal brotherhood’, he will ‘read Christ’s message of human fraternity alongside Marx and Engels’ account of how industrial capitalism and free markets – indispensable as they have turned out to be – make it very difficult to institute that fraternity.73 Confronting that difficulty practically is, then, our concrete ethical task; the task to which ‘sentimental redescription’ may be usefully applied. It is thus solely with regard to the pressing demands of social justice that Rorty promotes a politics based on compassion, ‘respect for the other’, and the management of purely conventional human rights.76

While such an approach may be pragmatically expedient, its limitations from Deleuze’s post-Sartrean perspective are clear enough. In refusing to pose the problem in terms of ‘society as a whole’ and thus take social criticism ‘to its highest point’, Rorty’s politics of sentiment necessarily leaves the global axiomatic fundamentally unchallenged. ‘We are human at their expense’ remains a limit internal to the system, ensuring that any reformist deterritorialization of patrimony remains relative to the interests of the ‘people on top’, thereby revealing ‘human fraternity’ and the ‘free market’ to be, in practice, mutually exclusive Ideas. On this account, the liberal ideology of sympathy faces a structural problem defying even those in whom the moral sentiments have progressed as far as Rorty might wish, a point well illustrated by an encounter between two philosophers from different traditions: Michael McGhee, a ‘western Buddhist’, and Professor K.J. Shah, a Wittensteinian Jainist. The awkwardness of their exchange, in spite of their fraternal feelings, stems from nothing so rarefied as an incommensurability between language-games or the ineliminable presence of cultural difference. The stumbling block, as McGhee explains, is brutally material:

We could not be ‘brothers’ for structural reasons to do with the relations between our countries, i.e. capitalism made fraternity between us impossible. Fraternal feelings are not a substitute for fraternal relations … Fraternal relations are rooted in specific conditions, an image of which might be our eating at the same table, from the same cooking pot. But within societies and between them, this is not how things stand… Not only are there gross inequalities, but there are causal relations between the presence of wealth and the presence of poverty. Those are the conditions which estrange us.77

To challenge the ‘indispensability’ of free-market conditions on utopian grounds is, in essence, to reject Hume’s claim that ‘stability of possession’ is a rule ‘absolutely necessary to human society’, an axiom liberal capital takes to be self-evident. (As Badiou observes: ‘What is vaunted here, what ethics legitimates, is in fact the conservation by the so-called “West” of what it possesses’.78) To resist that axiomatic need not entail, as Rorty would have it, a return to the idea of Total Revolution. It involves, rather, a specific commitment, within the present relative milieu, to the potential revolutionary becoming of precisely those ‘expendable’ people on whom, in terms of the system as a whole, our own form of ‘humanity’ is made to depend. The problem for theory becomes one of how to rethink the nature of the affinity between ‘us’ and ‘them’ beyond the miserable circuit of economic exploitation and humanitarian intervention. It is, in Stengers’s terms, a question of inventing new ‘concepts that will affirm hope and reason “in front of” or “for” the many against whom crimes have been committed in the name of hope and reason’.79 To think in front of rather than ‘on behalf of’ requires a different conception of ‘human fraternity’, such as Deleuze finds already in Lawrence, Melville and the American pragmatists, for whom sympathy now has nothing to do with ‘filthy charity’, paternalist philanthropy, or any mystical notion of participation in the One:

Like Melville before it, pragmatism will fight ceaselessly on two fronts: against the particularities that pit man against man and nourish an irredeemable mistrust; but also against the Universal or the Whole, the fusion of souls in the name of great love or charity. Yet, what remains of souls once they are no longer attached to particularities, what keeps them from melting into a whole? What remains is precisely their ‘originality’, that is, a sound that each one produces, like a ritornello at the limit of language … According to Lawrence and Melville, brotherhood is a matter for original souls: perhaps it begins only with the death of the father or of God, but it does not derive from this death, it is a whole other matter – ‘all the subtle sympathisings of the incalculable soul, from the bitterest hate to passionate love’.80

This is the fraternity beyond any paternal function that Khleifi detects in the ordinary lives of Palestinian women, recording the original sounds each one produces. The same voices ‘fertile in hate and love’ Genet can only impersonate, registering both ‘the impossibility of identifying with the Arab cause’ and ‘the shame of not being able to do so’.81 The difference between the two goes to the heart of the problem of
sympathy. Entering into a becoming with a people already his own, Khleifi’s voice is simply one of a multitude, all equally authentic. Genet, by contrast, ‘betraying the cause’ by failing to identify with it wholeheartedly, pronounces himself a fake. But this in turn is a kind of sham, hiding the fact that a soul no longer attached to particularities, whether their own or another’s, will no longer ‘identify’ with anyone, including themselves. Genet’s inability to fully participate clearly has little to do with any cultural or ideological difference; nor does his feeling of shame arise from a lack of fraternal relations (he eats at the same tables, sleeps in the same beds). The problem, though no less material, is essentially transcendental, concerning the conditions of possibility for ‘becoming everyone’. By virtue of those conditions, then, his claim to being an ‘individual’ is something that can be taken as ethically primitive: ‘the primeval distribution by the gods of ἀίδος and δίκη, “shame” and “justice”’.

And, as those gods would have it, the shame of ‘betraying a just cause’ by failing to identify with it is because his passions are played out within an economy that can be taken as ethically primitive: ‘the primeval distribution by the gods of ἀίδος and δίκη, “shame” and “justice”’.

Notes

6. Ibid., pp. 59–60, p. 11.
8. TP, p. 291.
13. PSH, p. 87.
15. CIS, p. xvi.
20. PSH, p. 231.
33. WP, p. 164.
34. PI, pp. 28–9; translation slightly altered.
36. TP, pp. 279–80; D, p. 45.
37. TP, pp. 161, 70.
38. CIS, p. 64. An idea Rorty attributes to Foucault.
40. TP, p. 470.
41. TP, p. 291.
42. E, p. 108.
45. E, p. 108.
46. Dreams of a Nation, p. 49.
47. ECC, p. 57.
49. WP, pp. 177, 197.
52. Cf. CIS, p. 94.
53. TP, p. 291.
54. Cf. TAP, p. 185.
55. TP, p. 291.
56. PL, p. 39.
57. PL, p. 167.
58. PL, p. 27.
59. PL, p. 3.
60. Cf. ECC, p. 125.
62. CIS, pp. 37, 42.
63. CIS, p. 37.
64. CIS, p. 29.
65. WP, pp. 144, 146.
69. Melville, Redburn, ch. 58.
70. On the normative aspect of Deleuze’s ontology, see Patton, ‘Utopian Political Thought’, pp. 42ff.
72. ECC, pp. 86–7.
73. WP, pp. 99–100.
75. PSH, pp. 88, 204.
80. ECC, p. 87.
81. ECC, p. 127.
82. McGhee, Transformations of Mind, p. 274.
83. Cf. E, p. 49. I would like to thank Gavin Everall, Peter Hallward, John Mullarkey, Peter Osborne and Keith Robinson for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

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