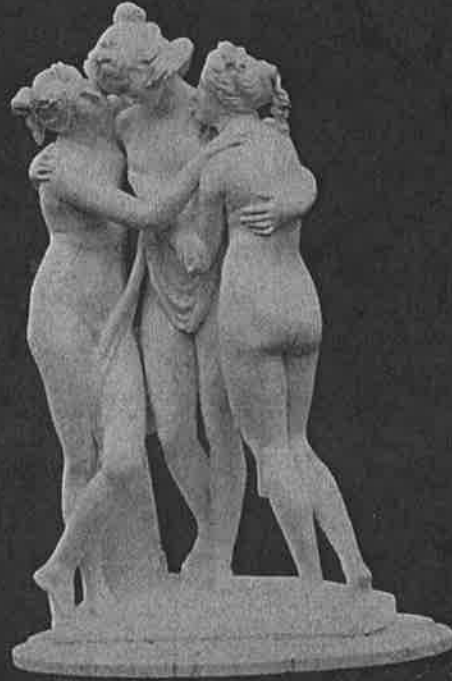


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Reflections on the Status of Continental Feminism

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THE LAST ELECTION CYCLE IN the United States featured an unprecedented moment in history. For the first time in the life of the nation, a woman was the presidential nominee of a major political party. The feeling in my heart of hearts is that, because of the axis of race, Hillary Clinton's political agenda and my own political priorities as a black woman may have nothing in common. Upon winning, her administration might have proven me wrong, but this is where I begin my encounter with her candidacy for president. I begin with the assumption that, as a white woman, her fight is not my fight.¹ Perhaps my ambivalence is really less about the kind of president Hillary Clinton *herself* would have been, and more about the kind of feminism that I've come to reasonably expect from white women. It's easy enough for white women (like Hillary Clinton) to assume that their concerns are sufficiently representative of *all* women's concerns, because the whiteness of their womanhood often serves to center not only their conceptions of what it means to be a woman, but also their understanding of gender oppression, and the content of their feminist program of liberation. The black womanhood that arises at the intersection of gender oppression *and* racial oppression may not figure into such accounts, precisely because, in being thus centered in terms of whiteness, these accounts remain blind to their own racialization.

I could be wrong about this. Indeed, I *want* to be wrong about this. Nevertheless, my hesitation toward Clinton's candidacy seems to be part of the much larger stakes of our exchange about continental feminism. I understand

this branch of scholarship (and activism) to name the feminism that deploys those methodologies of the continental branch of philosophy. As such, one might expect, from this branch of feminist critique, questions of agency, the destabilization of subjectivity, the role of power structures in that destabilization, and the role of experience in becoming epistemological agents (to name a few). When coupled with the question of race (racial embodiment, racial oppression, racial justice), the implications of such questions change in notable ways. In other words, race matters, and always figures into one's feminist comportment. This means that one's resistance against structures of gender oppression is always already implicated in one's relationship to structures of racial oppression. To my mind, this obligates continental feminists to be intentional about the relationship they occupy, quite simultaneously, to racial and gender liberation.

The following illustrates the ways in which continental methods oftentimes refract differently across race and gender axes. In her essay, "The Difference That Difference Makes: Black Feminism and Philosophy," Donna-Dale Marcano traces what a social constructivist account of subjectivity does for identities racialized as nonwhite.² She writes that "the strategy of social construction of race as it has been taken up in philosophy, other academic disciplines, as well as in the common culture has ... yielded a turn to nonreality or an eliminativist tendency" (55-56). In other words, the proposal that race is socially constructed is either followed by, or builds into the subtext, the assumption that races don't exist. Marcano is critical of this since, as she rightly points out, the premise of the non-reality of race is not necessarily one that supports a program of racial liberation. To the contrary, to conclude—via the continental trope of a socially constructed identity—that race isn't real then makes it particularly challenging to argue against structures that operate as though it is. Marcano notes the different implications (or, at the very least, what feel like different implications) for a social constructivist account of gender. To name gender as constructed is to denaturalize this axis of human identity. In so doing, "gender as constructed" positions us to acknowledge *multiple and complex* gender performances, which ultimately facilitates a more liberatory account of the existential condition of "woman." Writes Marcano, "the role of ambiguity and disruption [across the axis of gender] results in the production of a more complex [gender] *reality*" (56, emphasis added). Unlike what happens across the axis of race, this recognition of gender ambiguity does not do away with the reality of genders themselves.

Although her account of social constructivism doesn't address this, it seems as though Marcano's demonstration of the different implications of gender and racial "spectrality" bears significance for white subjectivities. Indeed, I would argue that if she is right—and the spectrality of race takes us to the *disappearance* of race (to its *nonreality*)—the implications for white feminists

are even more dire. The dominant practitioners of culture learn their cultural performance through the forgetting of their dominant position in that culture. Said otherwise, white folks learn to become white through the forgetting of their whiteness. If it is the case that a social constructivist critique of identity makes it easy to entertain the nonreality of race, then, to the white social constructivist, this orientation of identity may render whiteness even more invisible than it already is. When one's dominant position in a culture remains hidden, one's complicity with the oppression of others (from that position of dominance) remains hidden as well. To this end, the racial eliminativism implicated in the social constructivist critique of identity arguably positions the white continental feminist to develop a program of gender liberation that—across the axis of race—either facilitates or does nothing to counter the oppression of black women. This is because her feminism is blind to its whiteness, and therefore remains uncritical of that whiteness.

I cite this as but one instance of the ways in which the outcomes of a continental agenda are always racially sensitive. Falguni Sheth's account of the category of "care" serves as another such instance. As used by continental feminists, Dr. Sheth notes that "'care' is more easily understood when applied to family structures that reflect a nuclear-family approach, rather than one that understands 'care' within the context of diaspora, or through 'families of choice. ...'" This conceptualization of care not only forecloses these alternative modulations of home and kinship, but it begins with certain reductive assertions about how the patriarchy (and, perhaps, the feminine, more broadly) signifies within that category of care. I read Dr. Sheth's point to be aligned with the one I make about the "social constructivist" approach toward identity. As they currently stand, both seem to be shaped out of scholarly and existential commitments that "belong—generally speaking—to specific cultural, racial, class-specific demographics" (Sheth).

To be sure, Marcano's critique of social constructivism does not propose (nor would anyone, I hope) a naturalized conception of race. The point I take from her work is that, because gender oppression is always racially situated, we have to be cognizant of the relationship between our proposals for gender liberation and our proposals for racial liberation. For black feminist thinkers, the insistence is that the former must not come at the expense of the latter. But one might argue that this ought to be the commitment of *all* feminists working out of a (continental) tradition, which seems to come out of a spirit that is diametrically opposed to "policing ... conceptual and methodological borders" (Sheth), and to "assumptions of totality [and] foundationalism" (Miller). As Jami Weinstein puts it, continental philosophy has rejected "the premium placed on a strict definition of clarity and rigor," and has prioritized a notion of the human as "a lived, embodied, subjective [and] dynamic being. ..." To that end, this tradition is built out of a critique of its limits. Continental

philosophy "is willing to shift the boundaries of its areas of study in response to critical engagement from direction that it did not anticipate" (Miller). A continentalism that is also feminist would only make this more so, so that—as Elaine Miller puts it—the continental feminist "[reaches] out toward a new universal out of the radically singular."

That racial privilege often remains invisible to those receiving it, and painfully salient to those dehumanized as a consequence, is something that, according to Falguni Sheth, "most of us [continental philosophers] already know." As feminists who are continental, we know that the intersection between racial and gender oppression affects all feminist thinkers, insofar as all feminist thinkers are both gendered and racialized (albeit in multiple ways). And we also ought to know the ease with which white women are able to engage in critiques of gender oppression as questions of racial oppression (or rather, their relationship to it) remain hidden behind the privileges they enjoy (as a consequence of their race). So why is the influence of this truth often absent in our philosophical engagements? To reference Mariana Ortega's analysis of visuality, why do the images of *Philosophy* and *Knowledge* continue to convey wisdom as whiteness, even among continental feminist circles?

In George Yancy's edited volume on white self-criticality, white scholars (many of whom are women) engage this examination.³ Yancy orients the conversation toward what he names an "un-suturing" performance of whiteness. As un-sutured, the subject avails herself to "being touched" by epistemologies that counter a white-centric universe. In so doing, she is made vulnerable, and potentially dispossessed of the types of disavowals and forgettings that would undermine her antiracist projects. As un-sutured, the white subject understands that, in an anti-black world, a comportment of whiteness includes being "ambushed" by certain "white racist relational processes that exceed the white self" (Yancy, xiii), for which she must take responsibility. She unexpectedly finds herself enacting practices that not only undermine an antiracist agenda, but doing so *despite* the best of intentions.

The value in this practice of un-suturing is not some endpoint at which one is completely rid of racism. Rather, its value lies in knowing that one must always be vigilant for the ways in which whiteness creeps back into the center, and in knowing that effective white ally-ship is about living in the dispossession of one's self-assurance. Un-suturing is about coming to terms with an inevitable failure, and about the commitment to fail better. To this end, if continental feminism takes seriously the goal of effective ally-ship,⁴ it must understand its failure as an always-alive possibility. It must always be ready for the vulnerability and dispossession of being called to task by black feminisms. In other words, continental feminism must prioritize the project of examining whiteness for the sake of repositioning and reconstituting it.

Unless it is also this explicit project of critiquing whiteness, continental feminism is not the effective critical engagement that it could (and should) be. Falguni Sheth alludes that this version of continental feminism is one void of “conceptual and methodological ... gatekeeping.” I will add that this (un-sutured) version of continental feminism will also be one that begins from a negotiation with “the implications of [white women’s] racialization.”⁵ To note, many white feminists working within the continental tradition have taken up the invitation to do this work.⁶ Through it, they not only become more effective allies against anti-black racism, but they are also better positioned to transform the all too exclusive field of philosophy.

The work involved in creating a society in which *all* women enjoy liberation from patriarchy becomes more effective when it understands that there is no universalized conception of patriarchy.⁷ Rather, patriarchy is shaped through the racialized compartments of the bodies involved. It is *performed* differently, and *affects* differently, depending on the races in the room. I suspect that my ambivalence toward Hillary Clinton is because I’m not yet convinced that she gets this. I understand that she was charted to shatter a ceiling in November 2016, and that did not happen. But I also understand that the ceiling that hovers over me (and over black women) gathers and dispenses oppression somewhat differently, at the intersection of gender *and* race. As a consequence of this intersection, her victory could easily have had very little implications for black women.

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NOTES

1. I acknowledge the severe sexism that Hillary Clinton has faced in her long political career, and continued to face during her presidential campaign. As such, I’ve tried to discern (and to then disown) the ways I have inadvertently appropriated the caricatured version of her, which has been produced by a culture that continues to respond punitively to women in positions of authority. Nonetheless, I am plagued by her comments in 1994 in support of the Bill Clinton administration’s Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. In describing black inner-city youth as “not just gangs of kids anymore [but instead] the kinds of kids that are called ‘super-predators,’” Hillary Clinton demonstrated a disregard for the ways in which racially coded language perpetuates structural racism. I’m also aware of her adjusted positions on mass incarceration, reflected in her campaign’s promise to not only “end ... the era of mass incarcerations” but to also desist from accepting donations from private

prisons, and to ban racial profiling across the judicial process. To that end, the ambivalence that I account for here is not without conflicting sensibilities and tense soul searching.

2. *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, edited by Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines and Donna-Dale L. Marcano. 2010. Albany: SUNY Press, 53–65.
3. *White Self-Criticality Beyond Anti-racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?* Edited by George Yancy. 2015. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books.
4. The focus of my comments has been the intersection of race and gender. However, this is not to forget the multiple other intersections through which our feminisms are invariably plural. A similar performance of un-suturing and dispossession must happen across axes of nationality (in particular, the difference between Western Europe/North America and “the rest”), sexual orientation, religious affiliation, economic welfare, age, and ability (to name a few).
5. Anika Maaza Man (now Anika Maaza Simposon). “Race and Feminist Standpoint Theory,” in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, 112.
6. See, for instance, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. 2007. Albany: SUNY Press.
7. Elaine Miller notes that the continental tradition emerges out of a wariness of totality and foundationalism. Jami Weinstein recommends this tradition on its valuation of ambiguity and complexity. To that end, one would expect a continental feminism to open up the question of patriarchy in this way.

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