

Difference and Hierarchy Revisited by Feminism

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I have created a man as Yahweh has
The Book of J. (65)

I borrow my epigraph from *The Book of J*, in David Rosenberg's translation and with an introduction and commentary by Harold Bloom. The proud speaker is Hava (Eve), after having given birth to her first child, Cain. Considering that the first creation was Yahweh's shaping "an earthling from clay" (*Book of J* 61), Eve may well boast of her more sophisticated feat. In his ingenious interpretation, Bloom argues eloquently that, given the biblical representations of women we have as compared with those of men, the author of the passages of the first five books of the Bible attributed to J was a woman. The critic justifies his reading by beginning to invoke his profound knowledge of the Bible (including all its authors or sources: J [the Yawist], E [the Elohist], D [the Deuteronomist], P [the Priestly], and R [the Redactor]). He summons as well his great familiarity with western literature, his expertise and imaginative skills as a literary critic, and his many "years of reading experience" (*Book of J* 10). J, says Bloom, could not but have been an aristocratic, talented, highly educated woman of Davidic descent, perhaps Solomon's daughter, living, the critic surmises, in the reign of Rehoboam of Judah, and thus a contemporary and possibly close friend of the author of II Samuel. Bloom is no believer; for him the stories of the Bible are fictions, some of them of the highest literary quality. His interpretation of the *Book of J* is, therefore, nothing but a *literary appreciation*. According to Bloom, *The Book of J* is a poetic masterpiece, "comparable to *Hamlet* and *Lear*, the *Commedia*, the *Iliad*, the poems of Wordsworth, or the novels of Tolstoy..." rather than "to the Koran or the Book of Mormon" (*Book of J* 11).

The sexual identity of J is of slight interest to me. I do sympathize with Adrienne Rich when she cries out, while expressing her utmost admiration for Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West," "If a woman had written that poem, my God!" (Rich 116) But the truth is that the poem in which a woman-singer is granted so much poetic power and agency was written by a great male poet (a strong poet, Bloom would say). There are plenty of examples of this, Saramago's *Blimunda* being one of them. In order to understand why this is so, you just have to reread the ironies in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Without access to proper education, adequate income, independence, breathing space, and the suffrage, in a word, without the sense of dignity that comes with equity and full citizenship, only very rare and exceptional women (like the former American slave Phillis Wheatley, for example) could act and feel like free, creative individuals in our culture, even if their exceptionality does prove the capability of every woman. Three thousand years earlier, a cultivated, sophisticated J, whether male or female, also sang of powerful women, women who were capable of fending for themselves, in sharp contrast with lesser males, including undistinguished patriarchs and even a petulant, peevish, child-like and undoubtedly male Yahweh. Only a woman writer, Bloom insists, could have given us such wonderful portraits of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and especially Tamar, in contrast with the ironic and rather lame pictures of, at most, trickster patriarchs (did not Jacob rob Esau of his birthright?). Explicitly risking feminist charges of essentialism, Bloom goes so far as attributing to "female genius" J's ironic portrayal of Yahweh as a capricious, if not downright flawed, human creature with more than human powers. If among the earliest representations of biblical characters there are such strong women, no suggestion of (sexual) difference and consequences thereof being ever mentioned, how could our culture have produced a society so firmly based on (sexual) difference, a patriarchal, misogynous society, in which women consistently appear downgraded and are definitely considered secondary, ancillary, and downright inferior and discardable? Of course, women are not the only people discriminated against and oppressed by status and hierarchy in our culture. Like sex, also class, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, occupation, sexual orientation, health, or age, for instance, are factors of discriminatory differentiation, often with devastating consequences. Feminist theories and struggles cannot but take

into account the vast system of domination and inequity of contemporary societies, of which sexism is just one form. But I am concerned here with the overall subalternity of women in the western culture and with why, how and when this subalternity came about and went on to gain theoretical grounding. Apparently, not in the very first version of the Torah, the patriarchal era not quite in place yet, as we can see in J's imaginative creation, but certainly in the Redactor's final version (as e. g. in the discriminatory purification laws of Leviticus 12.1-5),¹ and especially in the New Testament, Leonardo Boff's compelling re-interpretations of the Virgin Mary as the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit notwithstanding (Boff 2003).² Paul's neoplatonic 1 Corinthians 11.3 puts hierarchy in place for Christianity: "the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God". Drawing on the work of classicist Page duBois, I submit that a similar change occurred in ancient Greece, one other major cradle of western culture.

That women in global modernity under advanced capitalism do not own their bodies and minds as their own, or do so only at great risk, are systematically silenced or victimized in the media, continue to be considered minor and inferior, and are often treated as less than dirt, is easily demonstrated. To come up with plenty of examples, you just have to follow the news and the media worldwide, in which, at any rate, the visibility and active presence of women compared to those of men is 27%, not to mention the fact that very often the images of women in the media are stereotypical and degrading. (Altés 2013; *Il corpo delle donne*) A more insidiously perverse form of recent media violence against women is the infamous Blachman TV show in Denmark that consists of a host and his male guest judging the body of a stark naked woman standing still and

¹ As I write, Jewish women are still fighting in Israel for the right to pray, on a par with men, at the Western Wall (cf. NYT 10 May 2013); by the same token, women in Roman Catholicism are still barred from priesthood.

² For a feminist critique of biblical representations of women, see Santos (2002) and Ramalho (2001). For feminist interpretations of the Bible, see Fiorenza (1998). Portuguese feminist theologians have frequently addressed this issue as well. See, e.g., Toldy 2010, 171-184.

mute before the two men and just listening to their comments (Bahadour). In the United States, where, as Katha Pollitt reminded us recently, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was never adopted, women in the military are sexually harassed, if not raped, on a regular basis (Pollitt, “ERA”; Risen). Rape and exploitation of women in Europe have always been common. Glamorous men of wealth and social privilege have always been known to take advantage of vulnerable, young girls with impunity, as we learn once again with the recent sexual abuse scandal of BBC television presenter Jimmy Savile (*The Other Side of Jimmy Savile*). And yet the media these days pay more attention to what is happening in “less advanced” societies.³ In India, women and even girls as young as 4, 5, 9 and 11, are regularly raped, tortured, and often murdered as a matter of course (Rahman).⁴ In Brazil, sexual assaults in transit vans have suddenly gained media notoriety after an American student was brutally gang raped in Rio de Janeiro (McDonough). In Africa as well, rape of “sub-human women” by “out-of-control men” has become “ubiquitous” in the culture, as three commentators recently put it in a consciousness-raising newspaper article (Tutu). The so-called Arab Spring did not bloom for women, whose citizenship rights, if granted, would be perceived by the patriarchal, Muslim authorities in Egypt as seriously threatening consensual, male supremacy (Kirpatrick); Tahrir Square, once the symbol of fight for freedom and democracy for all, has become the stage of brutal violations of women’s rights, dignity, and physical integrity (Terror in Tahrir Square). In Liberia, female students are fighting for their scholarly probity in schools where academic success is dependent on sexual favors, a phenomenon not yet totally nonexistent in “more advanced” societies. In Israel, Jewish women immigrants from Ethiopia have been forced to undergo birth control

³ On 17 March 2013, *The Guardian* reported the rape of a 14-year old girl on a Glasgow bus; on 28 March 2013, the same paper reported the conviction of two American high school football players for raping a 16-year old girl; the infamous Oxford paedophile gang, accused of grooming, raping, and sexually exploiting teenage girls for years, was finally condemned in the UK, as reported by *The Independent* on 15 May 2013. But see how racism conditions media reports on violence against women (Harker).

⁴ During the past few months, the media have reported too many cases of extreme violence against women in India, including rape and murder of small children.

injections, presumably to prevent the wrong kinds of Jews from multiplying in god's country (Brogan). In Indian Reservations in the United States, one in three Native American women is raped over her lifetime, although many Native women are too demoralized to report the crime (Erdrich). In academia, women do not fare much better, as witness the recent misogynist attacks on the Cambridge classicist and intellectual Mary Beard (Orr). The same is true of successful female business executives, like Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer (Pollitt, "Who's Afraid"). Even successful women writers have complaints about persistent sexism in the field (Kogan).

Male violence against women is rampant everywhere, as newly reported by Rebecca Solnit ("a rape a minute, a thousand corpses a year") (Solnit). In war zones, conflict situations, and refugee camps, women are even more vulnerable to all kinds of violence, including sexual violence (*Sexual Violence Research Initiative*). Add to all this sexism in the workplace, that is to say, the sexual harassment of women in the workplace by men holding positions of power over them: employees in the office or even domestic help in the family home hounded by their bosses or masters of the house and often complying for fear of losing their jobs, or just for the interruptive thrill of an exciting moment of pleasure in a dreary life of nonstop drudgery work. The logic of such sexual behavior seems to be that male supremacy is an undisputed fact, male will and desire come first, male power authorizes anything, and females are supposed to be always there docilely to oblige. The well-known formula for such aggressive masculinity, still widely sanctioned by the culture at large, is "boys will be boys".⁵ And who is to blame women who benefit from the situation by manipulating male desire and prepotency to their own advantage? My question is: how did we get to such a misogynous display of sexual difference which, by debasing, decharacterizes and dehumanizes women?

I argue in this paper that at some point in the western culture the conceptualization of difference literally made the difference, and that the idea of hierarchy was the motor behind the revised notion of difference. Western philosophy has amply discussed the concept of difference from

⁵ See Bordo, esp. 229-264 ("Gentleman or Beast? The Double Bind of Masculinity").

many different angles — from Leibniz and Kant to colonialist thought and anti-colonialist resistance, and to critical theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postcolonialism — but perhaps not enough attention has been paid to how the concept came under the aegis of hierarchy, as is still the case today. That in Leibniz’s identity of indiscernibles difference was actually what defined identity is still a major tenet of the intellectual and social structure of our culture. Identity needs difference in order to be itself. But since identity (the selfsame) in the western culture establishes itself early on as the defining subject, difference cannot but be the defined object (the so-called Other). Hence, different, in the culture, has always meant inferior, often with dire consequences: think Holocaust — and many other forms of genocide of which the West can boast.⁶ Recently, in the context of postcolonial thinking, the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has dealt with this issue from the point of view of equity, that is to say, by calling for equitable, multicultural (I would add, multisexual) (human) rights. Santos argues that people and peoples have the right to be equal whenever difference demeans or renders them inferior; and that they have the right to be different when equality de-characterizes or neutralizes them (Santos, “Por uma concepção”, 30). But what if avoiding neutralization strands people and peoples in inferiority or subalternity? My concern is that “difference,” as we have come to understand the concept in the western culture, may well be impossible to disengage from the concept of hierarchy. Hence, in part, the reluctance of many feminist theorists to accept the designation of sexual difference(s) and their adoption of “gender” instead. However, the latter “non-concept,” as Rosi Braidotti calls it, has its own problems, of which more below.

I propose, then, to travel with Page duBois back to a time in the western culture when difference, including sexual difference, was not the issue because hierarchy was not yet in place, a time in which human beings might be described, rather than by difference, by diversity — the “infinite variety” that centuries later Shakespeare’s Enobarbus found in Cleopatra alone. In her work as a whole, and more specifically in *Centaur and Amazons*, duBois explains the emergence of hierarchy in ancient Greece

⁶ Of course, the West is not the only culprit of genocides in the world, but it is my major focus here.

and the consolidation of what is still understood today as the proper ordering of human society: the male at the top, then the female, then the child, then the slave, then the barbarian, and finally the animal.⁷ duBois does not ignore the perennial existence of misogyny in ancient Greece (e.g. *Sappho Is Burning*, 32). What she argues forcefully is that in the fourth century BCE there was a shift in the history of western culture, a change from a previous mythic, literary, poetic consciousness, based on analogy and polarity, having harmony of reasoning and feeling, and concerned with the right conduct of the entire life of the city, to one that gave precedence to the logos and rationality, focussing on the Greek male as the subject of the city and concerned with an elite. Basically, it was a shift from an imaginative, all-encompassing discourse in the fifth century BCE to a hierarchical, discriminating, philosophical discourse in the fourth century BCE. In other words, there was a major change from Aeschylus' tragedy of and for the democratic city to Plato's and Aristotle's elitist discourse. This is when the idea of difference — sexual, racial, and species difference — was understood as a difference that had nothing to do with infinite variety and everything to do with hierarchization and stratification. The new social, civic ordering was no longer based, as before, on polarity and analogy but rather on hierarchical differentiation, subordination, and dominance. Platonic and Aristotelian notions of superiority and subordination established the great chain of being. In this new, hierarchical model of the city, the Greek male was the undisputed subject at the center of the polis, while the female was gradually conceived of as subaltern and not really a part of the polis. Sophocles' *Antigone* shows how women came to represent a dangerous force for finding themselves ambiguously both inside and outside the city, a threatening force that needed to be conceptualized in order to be regulated and controlled — or even silenced. Lacan's understanding of the silencing of Antigone in Sophocles' tragedy as the "inception of culture itself" is duly critiqued by Judith Butler in *Antigone's*

⁷ *Centaur and Amazons*, passim, but see especially chapter VI ("Hierarchy"). In what follows, it will be clear that neither I nor duBois take seriously the theories of prehistoric matriarchy and gynocracy, inspired by such different scholars as Johann Jakob Bachofen, Erich Neumann or Maria Gimbutas. This issue is critiqued by Cynthia Eller in *The Myth of Matriarchal Pre-history*.

Claim (47). Françoise Meltzer, in turn, understands “culture” thus identified as the emerging “architecture of patriarchy,” in which indeed autonomous women could have no place.⁸ In the *Phaedo* (117d), Socrates’ wife, Xanthippe, had to be removed from the scene, not so much because she was giving passionate and noisy vent to her pain at the prospect of Socrates’ death (after all, Socrates’ friends also end up weeping uncontrollably right before he drinks the poison) but rather because, in their corporeal mortality, “women interrupt the scene of philosophy,” where immortality is being discussed, and “disturb the tranquility of the scene, reminding the dying of the body and of loss” (*Sappho Is Burning*, 88-89). Elsewhere, duBois reminds us that “women do not speak for themselves in philosophical discourse in antiquity,” and are perhaps best understood in the fourth-century BCE Greek polis as part of the category of slaves (*Slaves and Other Objects*, 193). In fifth-century BCE Greece, grants duBois, male citizens already knew they were different from females, barbarians, slaves, and animals; but only fourth-century BCE philosophers told them they were superior and reassured them of their supremacy. A major goal of the Greek male becomes then “to dominate the female and her body, to control its potentiality, to subdue it to his interests” (*Sowing the Body*, 147, n. 29).

The status of women in our culture has not changed much since the philosopher announced, in the *Timaeus*, that cowardly and unjust males would disgracefully become women at their second incarnation (90e-91a) (cf. *Centaur & Amazones*, 135). Aristotle’s overall views on women, clearly seen as *not-men*, leave no doubt that women are inferior creatures, belonging to a lower degree of nature’s ladder (*scala naturae*). To say that women are *not-men* is not the same as simply to say that women are not men. Of course, women *are not* men, as men *are not* women either — fifth-century BCE Greece knew it. They are *different*, even if the two phrases — “women are not men” and “men are not women” — came to convey distinct meanings. The difference therein established already implies hierarchy, as shown, for example, in the long journey of women in pursuit of economic citizenship in twentieth-century United States: because they

⁸ Cf. also duBois, “Antigone and the Feminist Critic”. In her most recent book, *Out of Athens*, duBois usefully surveys modern, influential readings of Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

were not men, women were, often still are, *barred from* certain jobs; because they were not women, men were, often still are, *exempted from* certain obligations.⁹ Myths of femininity and masculinity have conspired with social structuring to justify separate spheres, in labor legislation as in many other sectors of social life. Recent scientific theories presuming genetic differences between the male and the female brain (what I would term *scientific sexism*) carry the same danger of stereotyping and discriminating as the old scientific racism and classism revived in the 1990s.¹⁰ There is also what Jessica Valenti has recently termed “organic sexism,” that is to say, the “theory” that women are “natural” and should therefore reject such an “unnatural” practice of “invasive machinery” as contraception and keep busy constantly watching diaperless babies from a few months old (Valenti). In her work on the pervasiveness of racism in modern western societies, Ann duCille coined the term *periracism*, the prefix *peri* — meaning *before*, *after*, and *around*. Feminists could do worse than adopt the concept of *perisexism* to describe the ubiquitous discrimination against women in modern cultures (duCille).

As duBois cogently argues, the hierarchical ideas of (sexual) difference formulated by Plato and Aristotle continue to define relations of dominance and submission in philosophical discourse today. That is why, to this day, feminist theoreticians have difficulty finding the words to speak *woman* outside the male hegemonic, hierarchizing, philosophical discourse. As Drucilla Cornell puts it, borrowing from Marie Cardinal, the problem resides in not easily finding the “words to say it” (Cornell, “What Is Ethical Feminism”, 78).¹¹ Even as Cornell — alongside such eloquent western feminist theoreticians as Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, or Rosi Braidotti — is determined to find such words, I suggest her

⁹ Cf. Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*, esp. chapter 6, “What’s Fair?”

¹⁰ I am referring to the bell curve controversy following the publication of Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve*, in 1994.

¹¹ In this essay, Cornell summarizes her ideas of ethical feminism. Cf. Marie Cardinal, *Les mots pour le dire* (Paris: Grasset, 1975). Cornell refers to an English translation of Cardinal by Pat Goodheart, *Words to Say It* (France: Van Vactor and Goodheart, 1984), to which I have not had access.

job (our job), however difficult, may actually be much easier to accomplish than the task of overturning the age-old misogynous mentality that goes on rendering women objects of male indulgence in the culture at large. Indeed, I do submit that one task will not be accomplished without the other — which calls for the mutual engagement of theorization and activism.¹²

As a first step in her undertaking, Cornell proposes what she calls “ethical feminism”. Drawing heavily on psychoanalysis and deconstruction, especially Lacan and Derrida, to analyze the way in which social reality is engendered by unconscious fantasies, Cornell offers “ethical feminism” as a theory and a critique to change the laws of sexism that condition the lives of concrete women. The first and most important principle of ethical feminism is precisely to reject the negative, classical definition of women as *not-men*. Such a gesture means to suspend the various “fantasies of femininity” in the culture, denounce “gender hierarchy,” question “rigid gender identity,” open up the meaning of “referentiality,” and call for “a nonviolent relationship with the Other” (76). That Cornell insists in not denying “that there ‘are’ women” who suffer as objects of rape and sexual abuse may point to her anxiety about problems with her own notions of “referentiality”, “aprotropaic gesture” (77), and “nonviolent relationship with the Other” (78). All of these notions, indeed, may imply the imperceptible disappearance of women: referentiality, by so diluting the contours of women as distinct beings as to erase concrete women; the apotropaic gesture, by so diversifying the feminine within sexual difference as to render representation impossible; nonviolent relationship with the Other, by maintaining the notion of an Other that necessarily entails the opposite notion of the Same. Stuck with hegemonic Same and subordinate Other, the words simply to say “it” do not yet seem within Cornell’s grasp at all.

Perhaps no new words are needed, beyond the understanding that the language we supposedly have as our own to master rather masters us instead, and that we cannot but be always aware of this situation. Perhaps all we need is to keep fighting not just to eliminate the persistent misogyny in the culture at large but to change the resilient social conventions of male

¹² Activism implies a learning process and thus begins, to my mind, with example and pedagogy.

superiority and female inferiority that since the fourth century BCE refuse to stop prevailing in contemporary societies, no doubt also because women, for various reasons, may well be the very last human beings to yield the relative comfort of the *status quo* and willingly accept and adopt change. Just consider the numbers of women all over the world who refuse to report the many forms of overt and covert violence against them. Fear of the unknown no doubt gives us all pause, and vulnerable women most of all, especially as women continue to be routinely disbelieved and disrespected when reporting domestic violence or instances of rape. Too many specialists (Freud, Lacan) have told women that they are lack, fullness of being residing somewhere else. Too many structures of real and imaginative power have so intimidated women as to render them weakness itself. Hamlet's phrase — "Frailty, thy name is woman" — still carries today all possible senses of the word "frailty". How can women speak and be spoken of out of such negativity? I do not think Cornell's efforts in this essay, however brave, are good enough. To ask for "the truth of woman" (98) is to idealize women and find no truth at all. As she herself concedes, here Cornell "leaves us with no escape" (91).

A recent lecture by Cornell, easily accessible online, shows her engaging in further efforts to deepen and strengthen the concept of ethical feminism, first, by elaborating on the ideas of nonviolent relation to the other and cultural inter-translation and reciprocity she borrows from Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler; and second, by resorting to the African philosophy of uBuntu. (Cornell, "Rethinking Ethical Feminism").¹³ In her talk, Cornell explicitly refers to Butler's notion of precarious life to reconfigure the relationship with the Other as always shaped by responsibility and obligation, particularly when (as Butler puts it in a book written right in the midst of the security hysteria in the US after 9/11/2001) the Other is constituted "by others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know" (Butler, *Precarious Life* xii).¹⁴ Cornell also invokes Spivak's denunciation of the dehumanization of certain human beings, such as "the third-world [female] subject," who are not

¹³ On African philosophy and uBuntu ethics, see Ramose.

¹⁴ See also Butler's *Frames of War* esp. the introduction, "Precarious Life, Grievable Life".

recognized as human by hegemonic representations and therefore are not heard — nor can they speak (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”). Spivak, whose mother tongue is Bengali and is a fine translator herself, has written extensively on cultural translation and the politics of translation, though the exchange between Butler and herself about the language of the nation is also pertinent to the translatability (or untranslatability) of being, culture, and politics (Butler/Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State?*).¹⁵ More recently, the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos on intercultural translation provides a much broader understanding of cultural intercommunication, wary of hierarchization under the rubric of caring, differing and sharing, and thus capable of favoring interactions and strengthening alliances among various social movements fighting against capitalism, colonialism, sexism and heterosexism, and for social and cognitive justice, human dignity or human decency. (Santos, “Intercultural Translation”).

In any case, by revisiting her “ethical feminism” with Spivak and Butler, Cornell has more productively situated feminist struggles in the context of struggles not just about the subordination of women but the broader ethical and political struggles against racism, capitalism, neo-colonialism, and imperial domination. The more innovative, though to my mind also more problematic, aspect of her more recent work on ethical feminism concerns her use of uBuntu philosophy. As the director of the uBuntu project in South Africa, Cornell became evidently attracted to a humanist, African philosophy that stresses the values of community and interconnectedness, hospitality and warmth towards strangers, collaborative work and sharing of prosperity, freedom uncoupled from responsibility and obligation, care and forgiveness, and mutual tolerance. Not favoring “tolerance” myself (see below), for “mutual tolerance” I would read “mutual translation”. Cornell does a good job at translating uBuntu ethics into the struggle to stop the process of othering and overturn hegemonic institutions that deny the meaning of anyone as fully human. I have no argument with this. What puzzles me, however, is Cornell’s silencing of a major characteristic of uBuntu philosophy: deference to hierarchy. At the top of the uBuntu hierarchy that decides what is good are either the

¹⁵ See also Spivak, “The Politics of Translation” and “Translation as Culture”.

ancestors, traditional healers like sangomas, elders, parents, or *men*. Never *women*, unless they are sangomas. Cornell's fascination with the fluidity and performativity of being she culls from the African stories of inter — and trans-sexuality she weaves into her lecture is quite understandable. It does sound like “queering,” or at least Butler's sexual “performativity,” come true (Butler, *Gender Trouble*).¹⁶ However, from my perspective, the emphasis given to hierarchy in uBuntu philosophy suggests dangerously that tolerance (of difference) may have the pejorative meaning I once ascribed to the concept, when I insisted that you only really tolerate what is intolerable. (Ramalho, “Tolerância — Não!”). I think Cornell needs to address this problem seriously, particularly in view of the recent testimony, mentioned above, about “sub-human women” and “out-of-control men” in South African culture (Tutu). Not to mention the virulent heterocentrism that has been responsible for several cases of “corrective rape” of lesbians in South Africa.

To my mind, Drucilla Cornell's reformulation of ethical feminism from the viewpoint of uBuntu philosophy is no more than an approach to the larger problem of the pervasive discrimination against women in general in global modernity. Other non-western philosophies, those, for example, developed among indigenous peoples in Latin America for ages, such as the quechua concept of *sumak kawsay/buen viver* (actually inscribed in the Constitutions of Ecuador [2008] and Bolivia [2009]), are equally inspiring. But what I learn from beautiful descriptions of *sumak kawsay* as living well, that is to say, of living in harmony with nature, fellow beings and other cultures, and enjoying a wholesome earth, water, and air, leaves me preoccupied with the role ascribed to women in the community. In the documentary conducted by César Rodríguez Garavito in 2012 on the Sarayouku case about oil extractivism without previous public consultation in Ecuador not one single woman is heard (*Sumak Kawsay*).¹⁷ No wonder indigenous women have been coming forefront to fight for equity. A powerful movement is *Mujeres Creando*, in Bolivia, whose significant slogan points to the inevitable interconnectedness of feminist

¹⁶ For a first approach to queer theory, see Lauretis.

¹⁷ <http://vimeo.com/53761269> (accessed 13 March 2013).

struggles: *no se puede descolonizar sin despatriarcalizar* [you can't decolonize without depatriarchalizing] (*Mujeres creando*). The Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meetings as well call for feminist struggles not in isolation, rather commensurate with the infinite variety of experiences of oppression in the world. Particularly noteworthy is the Declaration of the Indigenous Women, presented at the 11th Meeting (Mexico, 2009), firmly contesting hegemonic Eurocentric feminism and eloquently voicing the singularity and specificity of their being women under multiple forms of oppression, including male oppression. The Combahee River Collective comes to mind. In the 1970s, in the United States, African American and lesbian women began confronting dominant feminist theories with notions of diversity and varieties of oppression, including class, race, and (hetero)sexual oppression. The classical document is the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977).

Is it possible to decouple difference from hierarchy? Is it possible to think difference positively, particularly as concerns sexual difference? Rosi Braidotti has devoted all her work to thinking difference in a positive way, that is to say, beyond the negative connotations that the concept came to carry in the western culture, and free as well of the constraining, hierarchical binarisms that go on structuring our society (man/woman, master/servant, culture/nature, mind/body, human/animal). The article entitled "Becoming-Woman: Rethinking the Positivity of Difference" best synthesizes her ideas on the subject. Braidotti's thinking has many affinities with Nietzsche-inspired poststructuralist philosophers (continental philosophers, in American parlance) who do indeed put in question the Cartesian subject, without, however, rethinking positively the problem of difference and, in particular, the problem of sexual difference.¹⁸ With the exception of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze (with or without Felix Guattari) has been a major inspiration for Braidotti. Deleuze's critique of Freudian and Lacanian phallogocentrism, together with his notions of molecular fluidity of being and constant becoming-self, contributed to overcoming the lack of symmetry Braidotti sensed between the hegemonic philo-

¹⁸ Cf. *Who Comes after the Subject* and Braidotti's *Patterns of Dissonance*, both published in 1991.

sophical discourse (the *master's discourse*, is Braidotti's formulation) about an integral subject and absolute and universal knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other, feminism as a philosophy that conceives of the subject as multiple, nomadic inter-subjectivities, and of knowledge as an infinite variety of knowledges, open to infinite interchange and mutual translation. Sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos's postcolonial notion of ecologies of knowledges cannot help but come to mind again (Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking"; "A Postcolonial Conception of Citizenship").

Drawing on Deleuze, Braidotti questions the hegemonic conception of the subject — as *sedentary, major, and molar* — and conceives of it as *nomadic, minor, and molecular*, a feminist epistemological project that again is very similar to Santos's conceptions of knowledge-as-emancipation (from "colonialism" to "solidarity") as opposed to knowledge-as-regulation (from "chaos" to "order") (Santos, *A crítica da razão indolente* 53-110). If Santos truly valorizes indigenous minority knowledges by calling for intercultural translation, Braidotti rejects poststructuralist philosophy's use of the image of woman-as-minority as a metaphor of its questioning of hegemonic philosophy but not as a thinking subject of philosophy. Braidotti's essays on the becoming-woman of philosophy never fail to insist on the positive reconceptualization of difference. A gesture to overturn the culture's age-old idea of being woman/being inferior, so eloquently analyzed by Denise Riley in "Am I That Name?", Braidotti's becoming-woman may actually be understood as a Deleuzian revision of Simone de Beauvoir's "on le devient" (Riley; Beauvoir). Where Braidotti parts from Deleuze is on the ultimate value ascribed to the concept of difference itself. Whereas Deleuze's fluid becoming-self points to an ideal society in which all difference, including sexual difference, has been eliminated, Braidotti follows Luce Irigaray's "ethics of sexual difference" by insisting that the dissolution of sexed identities is "both theoretically and historically dangerous for women" (Braidotti, "Becoming Woman" 395; Irigaray). In Deleuze, becoming-woman is part of becoming-minority, becoming-molecular, becoming-nomadic, thus a radical rejection of logocentrism (Deleuze). Braidotti follows Deleuze/Guattari this far, but the total erasure of differences, including sexual difference, entails the disappearance of concrete, socially and historically situated human beings and their legitimate struggles and aspirations, in the case in point, the disappearance of

concrete women in a society far from free of the crassest forms of misogyny and sexual oppression. Acknowledging sexual difference means, therefore, according to Braidotti, recognizing women as free, independent and autonomous human subjects, on a par with men, hence ready to fight for and claim their rights, no matter how hostile the environment. She thus rejects the concept (or, in her own words, *non concept*) of gender, favored and canonized by the American historian Joan Scott for very specific reasons related to the academic situation in the United States at the time.¹⁹

Braidotti's feminist theory is grounded on a non-sexist theory of the subject. In *Nomadic Subjects*, she actually defines sexual difference as a nomadic political project, that is to say, "a new figuration of subjectivity [understood] in a multidifferentiated nonhierarchical way".²⁰ In this book, Braidotti engages in a reconfiguration of difference explicitly away from the terrible use that was made of the term in European fascism, when difference meant inferiority to be eliminated in the camps, and offers the Deleuzian concept of nomadism as a new form of nonhierarchical subjectivity. Difference is thus viewed by Braidotti as positivity in its complexity and multiplicity of being-in-relation, and sexual difference, as equitable, nonhierarchical commerce between the sexes. More recently, Braidotti has argued for a sustainable world, in which the distinction between life as a social form (*bios*) and life as a natural force (*zoe*) no longer makes sense, and rather calls for endurance, "in the double sense," as she puts it, "of learning to last in time, but also to put up and live with pain and suffering". I appreciate Braidotti's concern with the philosopher's imperative to pursue social change, in-depth transformation, and an ethics of endurance and sustainability, no less because "critical and creative thinkers and activists

¹⁹ As Scott explains in a somewhat disregarded passage of her much quoted essay, the term "gender", as a theoretical and analytical category, served to legitimize the discipline of Women's Studies in the academy. At the end of the twentieth century in the United States, Feminist Studies sounded too political and Women's Studies not scholarly enough. Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", in *The American Historical Review*, 91.5 (Dec 1986) 1053-1075. Cf. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 150; see also Braidotti, "The Uses and Abuses of the Sex/Gender Distinction in European Feminist Practices", 285-307.

²⁰ Esp. chapter VIII, "Sexual Difference as a Nomadic Political Project".

who pursue change have often experienced the limits or the boundaries like open wounds or scars” (*Transpositions* 268). But I am more concerned with women who, because they have been always hierarchically associated with *zoe*, hence reduced to “a mere biological function and deprived of political and ethical relevance” (270), continue to be treated like secondrate people in the culture. Traffic of women across geographies has always been rampant, and little girls, often still mere babies, have always been molested by members of their own family both in “less advanced” and in “more advanced” societies. Could it be a good sign that patriarchy is now beginning to pay attention to the monstrosity? I wonder if J’s Hava/Eve was really entitled to boast of her creation of a human *man*, supposedly more sophisticated than Yahweh’s original “earthling” shaped “from clay”.

Origin is not the issue; the learning process and consciousness raising are. For being knows difference, but not hierarchy.

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ABSTRACT**Difference and Hierarchy Revisited by Feminism**

Drawing heavily on the work of classicist Page duBois, which eloquently explains the emergence, in ancient Greece, of hierarchy and of what is still understood today as the great chain of being (*scala naturae*: male, female, slave, barbarian, animal), this paper analyzes the age-old negative connotations of the concept of difference in western culture, considers the reinvention of difference as “positive” by Rosi Braidotti (after Deleuze & Guattari), and reassesses the efforts of several other feminist philosophers (e.g. Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Drucilla Cornell) to counter Lacan on the impossibility of “speaking women” beyond the dominant (male) philosophical discourse. Or, to paraphrase Marie Cardinal, their efforts to find “les mots pour le dire”.

KEYWORDS

Women; Difference; Hierarchy; Sexism; Feminism

RESUMO**Diferença e hierarquia revisitadas pelo feminismo**

Com base na obra da classicista Page duBois, que eloquentemente explica o aparecimento, na Grécia antiga, da hierarquia e daquilo que ainda hoje é entendido como a grande cadeia do ser (*scala naturae*: homem, mulher, escravo, bárbaro, animal), este ensaio debruça-se sobre as velhas conotações negativas do conceito de diferença na cultura ocidental, pondera a reinvenção da diferença como “positiva” por Rosi Braidotti (na pegada de Deleuze & Guattari) e reconsidera os esforços de várias filósofas feministas (e.g. Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Drucilla Cornell) para negar a impossibilidade lacaniana de “falar mulheres” independentemente do discurso filosófico dominante (masculino). Ou, parafraseando Marie Cardinal, os esforços destas feministas contemporâneas para encontrar “les mots pour le dire”.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Mulheres; Diferença; Hierarquia; Sexismo; Feminismo
