

Risk

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Cultural critique emerges from the need to face the **entanglements** of the cultural and geopolitical risks and dangers which surround us. At the same time cultural critique in a globalized and neoliberal **world** has become a practice in which the inherent intertextuality of every symbolic act implies a willingness to account for unforeseen and uncontrollable effects. Critical inquiries therefore require an attitude or willingness to take a chance, to be challenging, to be risky – to be convincing whilst neither searching for the ultimate truth, nor striving for objectivity. Cultural critique is thus a balancing act by implication, an exercise in the praxis of negotiation, **response-ability** and accountability. This is particularly true for cultural critique which addresses feminist and postcolonial agendas. Since Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) foregrounded the issue that the first wave feminist struggle for first-class citizenship unavoidably included the risk of becoming complicit in the dark sides of that first class citizen's national histories (that is: imperialism, colonialism, and war) and since critical race and critical whiteness studies have elaborated on this kind of intersectional analysis *avant la lettre* ever since, the interrelatedness of these discourses can hardly be ignored again.

However, the almost innately claimed necessity of thinking through the interrelated legacies of raced and gendered

136 violence notwithstanding, the effective analysis of the raced and gendered entanglements of inclusion and exclusion at empirical, symbolical, and institutional levels is still easier to claim as a manifesto for cultural critique than to effectively enact. Practicing the feminist mantras of diversity, solidarity, and democracy has become an increasingly risky enterprise in a geopolitical context in which feminism is consequently framed as the combined achievement of Western post-World War II emancipatory narratives, cultural, and social developments and liberation movements. In the last two decades, feminist critique has been increasingly equated with the achievements and the core values of Western civilization whilst that same civilization is very reluctantly coming to terms with its different pre-World War II histories of violence, imperialism, and colonialism. As such, the feminist project now seems hijacked by both the neoliberal and the post-secular as well as emerging contemporary anti-Muslim discourse.

The task of twenty-first-century feminist and postcolonial cultural critique is therefore to face the risk that the achievements of the movement for women's liberation at large threaten to become disconnected from its initial manifestations of equality for all, understood as transnational solidarity. It has to think through the possible danger that the outcome of two feminist waves mainly serve neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, and racism and the concomitant individualization and marketing of the process of emancipation and social participation (Scott 2011). As Nancy Fraser suggests, this risk of female empowerment becoming the handmaiden of global neoliberal capitalism might have been implicated in the movement from the start. Virginia Woolf's brilliant first wave example notwithstanding, Western second wave feminist goals and strategies in the end seem to have been ambivalent and thus susceptible for two different elaborations. The initial, deeply political commitment to participatory democracy and social justice for all included goals which, in hindsight, simultaneously served the neoliberal vocabulary of

autonomy, choice, and meritocratic advancement (Fraser 2013). Contrary to the feminist postcolonial and post-socialist project, which situates the female subject as submitted to patriarchal, racist, and capitalist structures, neoliberal feminisms seem to promote participation in both capitalism and patriarchy and show a striking neglect for either structural or intersectional analysis.

Contemporary feminism is therefore at risk of being the servant of the neoliberal status quo and, in that process, helping to reduce subjects to economic actors, to servants of **capital**, encouraged to invest in their own individual liberation and autonomy instead of striving for social justice for all (Brown 2013). Further to this, when the neoliberal definition of freedom and emancipation happens to get framed as the achievement and even core value of Western civilization as is happening in populist political analysis, any feminist form of self reflexivity and critical thinking is in danger of being perceived as betraying one's own political or national community.

This is exactly what recently happened in the Netherlands when a young female daily newspaper journalist started a discussion concerning the deployment of half naked female bodies in lingerie advertisements displayed on billboards in the public space. She aimed to unravel the question of whether the use of non-stereotypical, nearly naked female bodies (i.e., non-white bodies, non skinny-bodies, bodies with scars) in commercials for ladies' underwear would serve the liberation of women. For that purpose, she interviewed women from several corners of the feminist enterprise in the Netherlands and reported their views.

Addressing the issue of the representation of the female body in advertisements in a newspaper article meant that three "good old" feminist issues were put center stage at the same time and implicitly or explicitly also popped up in the online discussion following the publication of the article. In the first place, the overdetermined sign of the female nude as subject of feminist cultural critique became the subject of online and offline debates

138 again. In the second place, the campaign's alleged attempt to open up stereotypical representations of the female body as smooth, skinny, and white was recognized and pointed out as the problematization of the hegemonic beauty myth. Thirdly, the deployment of the female body as an object of exchange in a capital driven imagery has been central to the feminist agenda ever since Gayle Rubin's influential essay "Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" (1975) and triggered feminist public attention again. The controversy following the implicit re-entry of these topics into the contemporary feminist agenda not only served to provide an interesting insight in the mantras of both neoliberal feminist critique and radical feminist and postcolonial critical theories today; it also happened to brilliantly illustrate the fact that the mantras of neoliberal feminism risk being hijacked by populist and even ethnocentric discourses.

Please allow me to unravel this conundrum by analyzing the implications of liberal, radical and postcolonial feminist critique.

What Nancy Frazer would label as a neoliberal feminist take on the issue of the female nude unsurprisingly came down to the claim that it is every woman's free choice to be portrayed half naked on a billboard and it is everybody's free choice to resent this or not (see <http://stellingdames.nl/>). Self-proclaimed feminist women claimed it to be their right to wear miniskirts and/or to play with their sexuality and stated they were unprepared to give in on that acclaimed freedom of expression. Men who joined the debate repeated the mantra that Western civilization equates emancipation and liberation of women. Radical feminist critiques informed by, for example, the feminist analyses of Joan Scott and Frazer, immediately pointed at the fact that notwithstanding the laudable attempt to counter the stereotypical representation of female bodies and thus the attempt to deconstruct the racist and sexist beauty myth, the advertisements did not offer an alternative to the sexist tradition of deploying female bodies in order to stimulate consumerism. The essence of the radical feminist claim thus reads: white or black, skinny or not so

skinny, smooth or scarred, the female body in the imagery of so-called innovative advertisements is still serving as a **metaphor** for the circulation of capital. The postcolonial feminist's take on the matter concurred with the critique of radical feminism, emphasizing moreover the ethnocentrism of the Western compulsion to decorate the public space with images of naked female bodies and consequently claim this to be freedom of expression. They highlighted research exposing the phenomenon that the pornification of Western society inspires certain groups of women to increasingly cover themselves, not as a sign of religious commitment but rather as a sign of cultural critique (Buikema 2015). Postcolonial radical feminists emphasized the need for a new imagery that would be more fitting for a multicultural and post-sexist society (Smit 2015).

In the fierce online and offline discussions summarized above the good old feminist critique, that the framed image of a female body is an icon of Western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment (Nead 1992) was abundantly illustrated by both male and female participants in the debate. In particular in those posts which pushed the postcolonial link between feminism and multiculturalism in the context of the 2016 refugee crises, the online discussions got overtly violent and turned into torrents of hate mail aimed at the defenders of postcolonial feminism. The suggestion that alternatives to the pornification of Western culture ought to be considered, because this imagery might be unpleasant for both women and people with different cultural values, was equated with collaborating: "You are a disgrace to this country" was an often articulated comment to the postcolonial radical feminists who had made that argument. In such a polarized context it proved to be very hard to get back to the initial cornerstones and structural analysis of feminist theory without getting entangled in a heated controversy concerning the unconditional freedom of expression as the core value of Western civilization.

140 In light of this exemplary case, the challenge for twenty first century feminist and postcolonial critique is to develop and practice a form of critique which continues to truly connect the local and the global, the private and the public, the personal and the political, the empirical and the symbolical. To parry the risk of being perceived as a traitor of Western democratic practices when turning to structural analysis of the sexist and racist risks and dangers which are surrounding us, twenty first century feminist and postcolonial critique should embark on a return to the history of feminism and a re-location of the definitions of emancipation, liberation, and solidarity. Inspirational texts of first and second wave feminism – most notably Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* ([1949] 1989) and bell hooks’s *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), for example – already theorized liberation as a concept which not only referred to the individual but also to the simultaneous desire for a freedom for the other(s). This ethical-political second wave nuance – one geared towards justice for all rather than merely to equality and individual emancipation – needs to be reactivated and practiced in the context of twenty first century feminist critique and activism; what we need is a return to the envisioned futures of the past in order not to risk being disconnected from our rich and critical potential.

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