

# SIGN



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## Comments and Reply

### Comment on Felski's "The Doxa of Difference": Working through Sexual Difference

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Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. "Epistemology" is about knowing the difference.  
—Haraway 1991, 249

I would like to start with a word of thanks for the seriousness and the concern with which questions related to sexual difference are raised in Rita Felski's article (in this issue). I would also like to thank *Signs* for giving me the chance to elucidate my theoretical position.<sup>1</sup>

My response starts with an observation, which is meant not pedantically but rather for clarity. This debate about difference and diversity is made difficult by problems of conceptual and cultural translation and adaptation of the terms. Thus, Felski's rendition of the debate on sexual difference is for me symptomatic of North American readings of philosophies of difference; they form an integral part of a complex set of interrelations, which Donna Stanton (1980) has rightly defined as the "Trans-Atlantic dis-connection." In order to engage in a serious dialogue with each other, therefore, Felski and I need to make some readjustments in terms of our respective contexts.

As a first example of this kind of difficulty, let me take up Felski's notion of the "prestige of high theory" (4). I would argue that on this point a serious case of dissonance has emerged between Europe and the United States, especially on the issue of the political utility of poststructuralism and sexual difference. From a Continental perspective, it seems at best surprising to state that the only theory that enjoys academic prestige is post-structuralism and sexual difference; Felski also assumes that black and post-colonial theories have no prestige or do not count as "high" theory. This situation may well be the case in American academia, but it does not apply

<sup>1</sup> All my thanks also to the staff seminar of the Women's Studies Department at Utrecht University for their useful comments.

to European academic debates, where — the Trans-Atlantic dis-connection being what it is — these theories share in the prestige of all that is imported into Europe from the United States.

Poststructuralism and sexual difference are generally perceived in the Continental tradition to be a radical answer to the decline of modernism, marxism, and postmarxist ideology. They represent an attempt to redefine leftist politics after the historical failure of Marxist-Leninism. Cornel West (1994) has pointed out the importance of assessing the American reception of poststructuralism and deconstruction, which has become associated with an ahistorical and depoliticized formalism, or with an insidious form of neo-universalism.

What I would stress therefore is that in European academia, the movement of thought known as poststructuralism, far from being the prestigious site of high theory — as it seems to be in the United States — has remained a marginal and radical “wing,” with barely any institutional pull. Thus, the work of Irigaray, Cixous, Lacan, Deluze, Derrida, and others, which may appear as dominant from an American academic perspective, is far from being so from a European standpoint.

Consider, for instance, the fact that none of the leading figures of this theoretical generation have achieved their desired institutional success.<sup>2</sup> The situation of feminist academics is even more dramatic: Irigaray has *never* held a tenured teaching position in any institution, and Cixous teaches in a secondary, underprivileged university. This makes their agendas anything but prestigious and influential, but it has the advantage of freeing them for political activity. For instance, Irigaray works extensively as a political advisor to the European Left, especially the Social Democratic parties. Cixous has been active in various areas of cultural action and more recently has worked on antiracism and resistance to anti-immigration laws.

I should also point to the low influence exercised by poststructuralism in European social and human sciences outside France, which can also be attributed to the decreasing influence of French language and culture within the European Union.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, American social and political

<sup>2</sup> Derrida was refused chairs at the University of Nanterre, the Sorbonne, and the Collège de France; Irigaray has not held a teaching position since she was sacked by Lacan in 1974; Deluze, Lyotard, and Cixous went on teaching at Vincennes/Saint Denis, a university whose degrees are not officially recognized by the French Education Ministry and that is consequently very marginal to the whole French system. Most of the men, however, hold regular jobs in well-endowed, mostly West Coast, universities in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> I have developed this analysis more fully in an essay called “Uneasy Transitions” (Braidotti 1997). See also Wekker and Braidotti 1996.

theories enjoy both prestige and institutional support. A survey conducted on behalf of the European Union by the European Network for Women's Studies has shown the extent to which European women's studies is dominated by topics, themes, and teaching material originating in North America (Braidotti, de Dreu, and Ramnath, in press). It is even true that in a great number of European countries, women's studies courses are institutionally located under “American studies.”

In such a context, I would like to recommend that scholars such as Felski make an effort to resist generalizations. I also think they should stop using nationalistic systems of indexation for feminist theories according to their alleged geopolitical origins. This is an inaccurate and reductive way of establishing feminist debates, and it enacts a sort of marketing of ideas that I deeply resist. (“French” feminism was invented the same way, much to the distress of some of the French feminists themselves.)

Even the suggestion — made explicitly by Felski — that thinkers such as Grosz, Cornell, and myself can be conveniently placed in a “second generation” of sexual difference intellectuals, who can then be arranged according to geopolitical distinctions that cover three of the main continents, is objectionable. In my view, we qualify much more readily for the title of nomadic intellectuals, who move in and out of several cultures, political traditions, and languages: we are perfect examples of hybridity and cross-culturalism. Moreover, we all resist systematically the nationalistic metaphors that so often dominate social and political theoretical debates.

In “Post-modern Blackness” (1990), bell hooks points out the paradoxical fact that, given that high theory has become identified with European imports in American debates, it is crucial for black women to get involved in these debates, so as to challenge their Eurocentric bias. What I want to add to this is that this Eurocentric bias emerges when the American receptions of these traveling theories fail to question the aims of their appropriation. In other words, not all that comes from Europe need be Eurocentric, although that bias is written into most American academic adaptations of European social and political theories.

### Difference and diversity

Having located the question of sexual difference, I now elaborate on a few theoretical points in response to Felski's article. I focus on her concern that sexual difference may be a self-referential, utopian, monolithic, and therefore universalistic category that eliminates or obscures other differences, notably those of race and ethnicity.

My standpoint on this is simple: sexual difference is primarily a political and intellectual strategy, not a philosophy. Neither *dogma* nor dominant *doxa*, it emerged mostly out of the political practice of Continental feminism in the 1970s as an attempt to move beyond some of the aporias and the dead ends of equality-minded, marxist-based feminism.

As a *praxis*, sexual difference is based explicitly and self-consciously on a number of paradoxes, which are related to the historical contradictions faced by female feminists at the turn of the century, in the global economy. The key terms here are *paradoxes* and *contradictions*. Let me expand on this.

Sexual difference is based on one theoretical and practical paradox: it simultaneously produces and destabilizes the category "woman." This paradoxical reliance on and deconstruction of the female subject fuel the entire political project of contemporary feminism. Working in a broader historical perspective, Joan Scott argues that "the need both to accept and to refuse 'sexual difference' was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history" (1996, 3-4).

In my work, I have embedded this paradox within the specific crisis of Western philosophical modernity. I do think that the feminist political project coincides with modernity itself, that is, the moment of loss of the naturalistic paradigm and the emergence of the modern notion of individuality. It also has to do with the investment in the scientific *ratio* and its technological potential.<sup>4</sup> Feminists thus have a double task: on the one hand, they partake in the crisis of classical subjectivity, and they challenge more particularly the equation of individuality with masculinity. On the other hand, they stress the need for a sex-specific redefinition of the subject in such a way as to empower women (by which I refer to the paradoxical entity defined above).

I would speak consequently of sexual difference as a theory that rests on and exploits a number of constitutive contradictions, the answer to which cannot be formal in a logical sense, but practical in the sense of pointing to a solution in the "doing." That particular activity is political practice. Teresa de Lauretis (1990; see also Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990) speaks of an "essential difference" between Woman as the classical object of masculine representation and real-life women who are engaged in the project of dismantling the icon, both socially and sexually. Pursuing that further, I have argued that this "essential" difference establishes the groundwork for the contradiction that both links and separates feminists from Woman/woman. The hiatus between, on the one hand, the feminine as the classical "difference" of phallogocentrism and, on the other, the para-

doxical difference simultaneously claimed and critiqued by feminists fuels the political project of feminism.

By limiting her reading of sexual difference to rather formal elements of analysis (inner consistency, etc.), Felski misses the point altogether: in my work there is *no question* of autonomous or authentic femininity, as Felski suggests. Feminist affirmation and empowerment of sexual difference indeed go hand in hand with the rejection not only of essentialist identities but also of the dialectics of negation as the logic in the constitution of the subject. For sexual difference theory, resting indeed on the "linguistic turn" but pushing it to its extreme, one "speaks as" a woman, although the subject woman is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory experiences — also known as signifying markers. These multiple "differences within" can and must be analyzed in terms of power relations: they constitute overlapping variables that cut across any monolithic understanding of the subject: class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, lifestyle, sexual preferences. In other words, one "speaks as" a woman in order to be empowered politically to act as one, according to the terms of the paradox outlined above. It is a way of acknowledging an identity that can then be put to the task of its own emancipation. The political gesture consists in situating oneself at the crest of the contradictions that are constitutive of the social and symbolic position of women and to activate them toward the destabilization of the socio-symbolic system and especially of the asymmetrical power relations that sustain it.

Sexual difference brings into representation the play of multiple differences that structure the subject: these are neither harmonious nor homogeneous, but rather internally differentiated and potentially contradictory. Therefore, sexual difference forces us to think of the simultaneity of potentially contradictory social, discursive, and symbolic effects.

The term *women* may no longer suffice to describe the post-Woman subject who is activated against the grain of phallogocentric femininity. I have even drawn long lists of the many alternative forms of naming that feminists have created in the past ten years for the "subject of feminism." The sheer amount and diversity of the terminology (womanist/cyborg/Black/postcolonial/lesbian/queer/nomadic/women divine, etc.) also confirm the point I am making: that sexual difference can be understood only in terms of multiple differences.

If I have used the term *nomadism* to describe how sexual difference works (I do wonder why Felski has chosen to ignore this aspect of my work), it is precisely because I want to emphasize the dynamic and internally differentiated structure of difference. Sexual difference is not a

<sup>4</sup> I have explored this complex issue in *Patterns of Dissonance* (Braidotti 1991).

metaphysical claim to a unitary and sweeping vision of subjectivity, but rather a recognition of their mutually shaping, yet internally contradictory, coexistence of asymmetrical power relations that are predicated along the very axes that shape that subjectivity: sexuality, ethnicity and "race," class, age, and others.

Politically, this means that the terms of possible feminist political coalitions are not to be sought in the categories of "sameness"—be it sisterhood, the "second sex," or some other commonality of oppression. The political focus is shifted instead toward a politics of coalition based on the conformation of differences among women. Here, issues of race and ethnicity and—especially in Europe—of national identity, nationalism, and religion are of the greatest importance. In this regard, sexual difference can be seen as a critique of emancipationism, or equality-minded feminism.

In contrast to Beauvoir's Hegelian optimism about the possible reversal of the balance of power between the two poles of the sexual dialectics—the masculine and the feminine—Irigaray and other sexual difference theorists argue that the terms of this opposition are *not* reversible, either conceptually or politically.<sup>5</sup> The phallogocentric system constructs its terms in a dissymmetrical power relation, that is, that such terms carry built-in structural inequalities. These cannot be compensated by any direct means: only a change of the overall structure would allow for change. In other words, feminists cannot simply claim or posit radical otherness as a way out of the dialectics of sex. Given the structure of femininity as a site that is systematically constructed as devalued, the political strategy consists in working on the margins of "ex-centricity" that women enjoy from the phallogocentric system. This engenders the strategy of mimesis, to which I will return.

Sexual difference as a political practice is constructed in a non-Hegelian framework whereby identity is not postulated in dialectical opposition to a necessarily devalorized other. There is no negativity involved: rather, it rests on the working through of many differences between, among, and within women. As I have often argued, I see "differences among women" as being constitutive of the category of sexual difference and not exterior or antithetical to it (Braidotti 1994; see also Frye 1996).

### Difference and the crisis of European humanism

Contrary to Felski's claim that sexual difference contributes to concealing issues of ethnicity and multiculturalism and therefore to perpetuating the

power and discourse of the Same, I would argue that both "mainstream" and feminist theorists of difference have contributed to laying bare the Christian, white, Euro-centered core of phallogocentrism. In undoing the logic of negation that structures dialectical thought, they have also disassembled the geopolitical specificity of Western discourses and especially of philosophy. Theirs is the philosophical generation that, in proclaiming the "death of Man," also marked the implosion of the crisis of European humanism.

This project of in-depth critique of humanism is an attempt to disengage difference from negativity. Do keep in mind the fact that the notion of "difference" goes to the heart of the European history of philosophy. As a foundational concept, it has been colonized by hierarchical and exclusionary ways of thinking; as such it has played a constitutive role in European fascism and colonialism. It is a concept that functions as a pseudo-universal, predicating its monological unity in a set of binary oppositions—such as male/female, white/black, active/passive—that posit asymmetrical power relations between its terms. Because the history of difference in Europe has been one of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications, it is a notion for which critical intellectuals since the poststructuralists have chosen to make themselves accountable.

I think we—critical intellectuals based in Europe—consequently need to *think through* difference, through its imbrication with violence and power, its complicity with totalitarian practices and fascist interpretations. To become accountable for such a history requires means of revisiting it, acknowledging it, and understanding the complicity between "difference" and "exclusion" in the European mind-set. This is a deconstructivist strategy that consists in rereading difference in such a way as to dislodge it from its disastrous history: it is like a repeated attempt at purging this notion of its most poisonous aspects, to sever its links with power and domination. The mimetic strategy de-essentializes differences and reduces them to processes by which power and/as discourse are produced. The aim of this deconstructive process is to disengage difference from its traditional attributes, so that to be "other-than" may stop meaning "being-less-than."

This task is made all the more urgent and necessary in the historical moment known as postmodernity, which, read in terms of the crisis of European humanism, coincides with the shift of geopolitical power away from the North Atlantic in favor of the Pacific Rim and especially Southeast Asia. Gayatri Spivak (1992) raises the suspicion that the many discourses about the "crisis" of Western humanism and more specifically post-structuralist philosophy may actually reassert some universalistic posturing

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Braidotti with Butler 1994.

under the pretense of specific, localized, or diffuse intellectual subject-positions.

My line on this is quite different. I think that this shift in geopolitical power becomes both confirmed and theorized in philosophies of difference in terms of the decline of the Euro-centered logocentric system. Philosophers such as Deleuze (1978), Derrida (1997), and Cacciari (1994) have provided critical accounts of the decline of European hegemony. They argue that what makes European philosophical culture so perniciously effective is that it has been announcing its own death for more than one hundred years. Especially since the apocalyptic trinity of modernity—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—the West has been thinking through the historical inevitability and the logical possibility of its own decline.

Instead of plunging into nostalgia, it is to the credit of poststructuralists that they take the opportunity of this crisis to challenge the power of logocentric discourse. Especially Derrida and Deleuze denounce the ethnocentric Western habit that consists in passing off Europe as the center of the world, confining everyone else to a huge periphery. They do so by providing an in-depth critique of how the classical notion of “difference” is complicitous with negation and exclusion. They also offer positive counter-practices of difference as something other than “being-less-than.” Both “mainstream” and feminist philosophers of difference concentrate their critique on the vision of the subject that constitutes the Norm (the Same). Deleuze summarizes Him effectively as “masculine; white; heterosexual; urbanized; speaker-of-a-standard-language; property-owning; rationalist” (1978, 154). This vision of subjectivity is the poststructuralists’ main target of criticism.

On this point, I agree with Cornel West that there is a convergence between the discourse of the “crisis” of the West within poststructuralism and the postcolonial deconstruction of imperial whiteness (1994, 125). They share a common focus that does not erase the dissymmetries between the respective positions but rather lays the grounds for the possibility of an alliance between them. Anthony Appiah (1991) reminds us of the need *not* to confuse the “post” of postcoloniality with the “post” of poststructuralism but to respect instead their specific historical locations. Moreover, feminists are in a very good position to know that the deconstruction of sexism and racism does *not* automatically entail their downfall. Speaking as a feminist antiracist poststructuralist, however, I also wish to stress both the convergence of these lines of critique and their necessary intersection over the issue of political subjectivity, identity, and sexual difference.

In the specific case of the critique of European ethnocentrism, I think a poststructuralist feminist perspective leads us to discuss quite seriously the grounds on which we domesticate European identity. Identity is not under-

stood as a foundational issue, based on fixed, God-given essences—of the biological, psychic, or historical kind. On the contrary, identity is taken as being constructed in the very gesture that posits it as the anchoring point for certain social and discursive practices. Consequently, the question is no longer the essentialist one—What is national or ethnic identity?—but rather a critical and genealogical one: How is it constructed? by whom? under what conditions? for which aims? As Stuart Hall (1992) put it: Who is entitled to claim an ethnic or national identity? who has the right to claim that legacy, to speak on its behalf and turn it into a policy-making platform? This interrogation results in the myths of essentialized identity being exposed and exploded into questions related to entitlement and agency that rotate around the issue of cultural identity.

The political phenomenon that is the European Union amplifies these issues: insofar as the European integration project seals the decline of the individual nation states and their regrouping into a federation, it intensifies the question of entitlement to citizenship. The question can then be raised: Can one be European *and* black or Muslim? Paul Gilroy’s work (1987) on being a black British subject is indicative of the problem of citizenship and blackness emerging as contested issues. The corollary of this phenomenon is also, however, the emergence of whiteness as a critical category.

Ruth Frankenberg argues that structured invisibility has been the very source of the power of whiteness and has contributed greatly to confusing it with normality (1994, 6). One of the radical implications of the project of the European Union is the possibility of embedding and embodying whiteness, therefore giving a specific location, and consequently historical embeddedness or memory, to whites. Finally, it can racialize our location, which is quite a feat because, until recently in Europe, only white supremacists, Nazi-skins, and other fascists actually had a theory about qualities that are inherent to white people. Like all fascists, they are biological and cultural essentialists.

In this regard, my own strategy as a citizen of the European Union is to claim European identity as a site of historical contradictions and to experience it as the political necessity to turn it into spaces of critical resistance to hegemonic identities of all kinds. My own choice to rework whiteness in the era of postmodernity is, first, to situate it, denaturalize it, and to embody it and embed it and, second, to nomadize it or to destabilize it, to undo its hegemonic hold. Being a nomadic European subject means to be in transit but sufficiently anchored to a historical position to accept responsibility for it.

I want to argue that the radical theories of difference that have emerged in European philosophy and especially the practice of sexual difference contribute to a critical deconstruction of the dominant Eurocentric and

of pejoration. This process entails a critique of the ways in which European philosophy contributed to the structured invisibility of the ethnocentrism of white Europeans. It thus pursued a metaphysical illusion of self-representation that concretely resulted in the disembodied and disembodyed pursuit of "purity," "objectivity," and "neutrality" as ideals. Philosophy is made especially accountable for the ways in which it contributed both to theorize hierarchical differences and to disqualify large sectors of the population (the many "others") from the exercise of discursive power.

True enough, "race" does not play a central role in these theories of difference, except in the specific case of imperialism, but cultural identity, ethnicity, nationalism, and religion do, as do colonialism, fascism, and anti-Semitism. I have argued therefore that the poststructuralists' critique of the processes by which, in European philosophy, difference has been essentialized, naturalized, and turned into a mark of pejoration echoes the calls for radical embodiment of whiteness and for accountability by whites for their own racialized privileges. I also want to argue that this is not a sufficient but a necessary condition for a dialogue between the poststructuralists and the postcolonial and multicultural perspectives that have emerged especially but not exclusively in feminism.

#### Mimesis

To these considerations, I would like to add some concrete points of strategy. These points aim to illustrate the political project outlined above. The political subject for sexual difference is not the willful liberal bourgeois subject but rather the so-called split subject, which is far from having been accepted by established European academics. I want to suggest that the resistance to psychoanalytic politics is a result of this vision of the subject clashing with one of the classical assumptions of the philosophical and social sciences, namely, a humanistic vision of the subject as coinciding with his/her consciousness. Butler and Scott (1994) have suggested that another reason for the resistance to the poststructuralist vision of subjectivity is that it arouses the fear of loss of cognitive mastery in those who are comforted by the illusion of possessing it. Let me spell out the defining features of this particular vision of subjectivity.

#### Beyond the rationalist subject

Sexual difference shares with poststructuralism the critique of the identification of subjectivity with consciousness. It does so by analyzing the latter in terms of a set of power relations that construct the subject but that are blurred and concealed under humanistic rhetoric. What is at stake politi-

cally in this is the need to practice feminist subjectivity in such a way as to allow for this inner multiplicity, which is also a way to resist the rationalist pull toward the closure of fixed identity.

I would like to add to this another, equally challenging insight: in order to practice this open-ended politics of subjectivity, language can no longer be seen as a *means* of communication. It rather functions as the ontological foundation of one's subjectivity. Much ink has been spilled over the word *ontology* in recent feminist theory. I do not think we should let that big word (*ontology*) go to our heads. Why not leave it instead where it belongs in poststructuralist philosophy: as the marker of a foundational site that, being linguistic and historical, is neither one nor forever, but differentiated and differential, partial and in process, not fixed. As such, ontology frames the field of possible political action and a politics of resistance and affirmation.

Feminists as female subjects are not rationalistic entities but a multiplicity split within itself. Each feminist subject is multiple, discontinuous, and internally contradictory. It is linked to a set of social conditions through imaginary or mediated relations, which are both constituted by and constitutive of language. Consequently, the project of changing female subjectivity in the social and the symbolic realms requires in-depth changes that defy both willful emancipationism and utopian revolutions. The affirmation of positive difference is not as simple as a voluntaristic switch of identification. I prefer to describe the project as the patient and often painful process of "working things through."

This means that the emphasis on sexual difference does not necessarily imply a monopoly position, nor does it lead to some sort of neo-universalism. It is rather a radical form of materialism that embeds the subject in his/her specific set of power formations and demands accountability for them. It is about *specific* intellectuals working in situated settings. It is a radical form of politics of location that uses psychoanalysis—Irigaray and not Lacan—as a political weapon.

The unconscious marks the fundamental noncoincidence of the self with his/her consciousness: it is a guarantee of nonclosure. Identity, therefore, is a set of interactions with material and symbolic conditions mediated through language and representation. This implies that no social relations, and certainly not class, race, or gender, are immune from imaginary constructions that differ significantly from one subject to the other. One's interaction with the very locations that structure one's subjectivity—class, race, ethnicity—are not direct but mediated; that is, they contain a sizable "imaginary" component. This nonrationalistic vision of the subject aims at providing a more adequate understanding of contemporary subjectivity; it

stresses that there is no unmediated relation to sex, gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, religion, or any other variable. In fact, identity is but a constant process of negotiation among diverse and potentially contradictory variables, which intersect and overlap incessantly. Any one of them can be the hegemonic one for some period of time, but their structure being relational, they constantly shift in relation to each other. As a matter of fact, the singularity of the self, far from being grounded in conventional humanistic assumptions about *the* individual, is paradoxically guaranteed by one's imaginary play with identifications that escape willful control.

The political issue for feminists is how to maintain the openness or non-closure of this vision of the subject while asserting the political will and necessity of alternative social views of female subjectivity. The power of synthesis of an "I" that would guarantee sovereignty over the inner complexities is a mere grammatical fiction that, far from solving the problem, ends up making it worse by projecting over it the illusion of unity or substance. The politics of difference instead borrow from psychoanalysis the profoundly sober — albeit frightening — prospect of a subject whose unity is merely illusory and whose truth resides in the play of the differences, the paradoxes, and the contradictions within oneself.

#### **The subversive power of repetition**

The political strategy generated by the practice of sexual difference is *mimesis*, or strategic repetition. This strategy is so central to all sexual difference theorists regardless of their generational or geopolitical location that I am surprised to see that Felksi ignores it. Mimesis is a process of inner disentanglement that both precedes and is made possible by a political engagement with processes of social transformation. It is a form of deliberate and self-conscious repetition — mimesis as affirmative gesture — that gives sexual difference its political sting.

Sexual difference as a strategy of empowerment is a form of mimesis insofar as it activates subjects who are conscious of and accountable for the paradox of being both caught inside a symbolic code and deeply opposed to it. Insofar as this paradox is constitutive of feminism, as I argued earlier, it forms the foundation for a radical politics of resistance. This position neither requires the counterassertion of oppositional identities ("Woman" as the future of mankind), nor does it essentialize difference into a new universal.

This strategically enforced form of repetition also acts on one's unconscious identifications with the very identity that one has already rejected at the level of willful political choice. Thus, female feminists single out as the target of their critique the material and symbolic institution of femininity.

Each female feminist, however, is linked to such an institution — albeit by negation — through imaginary relations, which are mediated through language and representation and as such escape rational control. The choreographed repetitions of mimesis, in other words, dislodge the feminist subject from the site of culturally coded Woman. Like all social and symbolic institutions, this Woman (as the Other of the Same) functions like a magnet that draws real-life women in, through both conscious and unconscious interpellations. Insofar as the unfolding of the cultural code is an integral part of the process of construction of one's identity, I argue that mimetic repetition mobilizes and shifts the expectations of femininity as dictated also by unconscious interpellations.<sup>6</sup>

This is an important point, which I connect to the necessity of keeping distinct the levels of conscious volition from that of unconscious desire. I think that the imaginary identifications that constitute the unconscious types of interpellations by which identity unfolds are not only deep and powerful but also unpredictable. They help in following the cultural codes, but they also fuel possible forms of resistance. In fact, the unconscious understood as a guarantee of nonclosure of identity functions primarily through unpredictability and resistance. It can allow, for instance, for forms of nonadherence by women to the social codes of Womanhood as defined in phallogocentrism, in the sense of a deep disidentification, a sort of psychic and symbolic disobedience.

Thus, repetition or strategy mimesis is the process of revisiting and consuming the old, both within and without. What counts as "the old" here is the established definition of the feminine as "the Other of the Same." Mimesis is a process of constant renegotiation of the forms and the contents of female identity, a sort of inner erosion of the feminine by women who are aware of their own implication with that which they attempt to deconstruct. The purpose of this mimetic exercise is not the futility of deconstruction for its own sake but rather the political project of breaking down old social and mental habits and forms of identification. I could summarize this pictorially in the process of peeling off one after the other the successive layers of feminine signification that have been inscribed on our body, in the psychic recesses and the internalized folds of our experience.

#### **To make a difference**

Sexual difference as a political practice aims at *making a difference* by opening up the margins of resistance to the dominant views of femininity.

<sup>6</sup> With thanks to Carolyn Allen.



Mimesis is a careful use of repetitions that confirms feminists in their paradoxical relation to femininity but also empowers the subversive distance that these women entertain from the same femininity. Crucial to this political process is the fact that the quest for alternative forms of social representation of women requires the mimetic revisitation and reabsorptions of the established forms of representation of the post-Woman female feminist subjects (for whom the term *woman* no longer need apply). Feminism is the strategy that consists in redefining a social imaginary related to women; it is the strategy of working through the layers of sedimented meanings and significations surrounding the female subject. It activates the imaginary as a social and political force.

Let us keep in mind that the difference at stake here is not the "other" of phallogocentrism (which is conceptualized in function of and in relation to a masculine center). Under the heading of "the double syntax," Irigaray (1983, 1985) differentiates this type of otherness (the difference of Woman from Man, also called "the Other of the Same") from what I would call the differences among women (the difference of real-life women from Woman as institution and representation; this is also known as "the other of the Other").

#### **Difference as multiple differences**

Sexual difference claims a political subjectivity that is not based on the willful affirmation of radical otherness, as Felski suggests. The politics of sexual difference is a praxis that consists in activating real-life women's difference from the way difference has been institutionalized in the phallogocentric system as a site of devalued otherness. This praxis rests on a margin of disidentification, that is, of nonbelonging to phallogocentrism, but it is a margin significant enough to open the space to a feminist subject position. The practice of sexual difference rests on the confrontation of multiple differences among but also within women.

In this view, feminist politics consists in activating and disengaging the terms of its constitutive paradox, deconstructing the very term *woman* that gives feminism its political ontology. Thus, when sexual difference feminists speak of positive affirmation of the feminine difference, they have in mind a form of empowerment of those spaces of resistance to the reified image of femininity ("the Other of the Same"), which would disengage her from her ancestral obligation both to reflect and to sustain her master's voice.

Insofar as this political project, in European culture, coincides historically with the decline of classical humanism, it also opens up spaces for

alliances or "conversations" between sexual difference and the other axes of differentiation that constitute subjectivity. Mimesis has to do with inner multiplicities or multiple differences: not only does it *not* exclude them, but, on the contrary, it reveals their mutual interdependence and makes it possible and necessary to set them in a dialogue with each other. Sexual difference neither excludes nor synthesizes all other differences, but it historically and conceptually functions in European critical theory as the privileged signifier of difference. Privileged, however, does *not* mean exclusive: in my work, I connect nomadic subjectivity with the political feminist strategy of asserting sexual difference as affirmative mimesis. Mimesis as strategy repetition is also made up of borrowing and lending across cultural, disciplinary, and other boundaries. Consequently, I think that Felski's defense of hybridity, which I share entirely, would profit from and not be antithetical to the strategy of mimetic repetition that is so central to sexual difference.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Political sensibilities**

The play of multiple differences in the framework of a theory of subjectivity where embodiment and sexuality are central is indeed a major point of distinction between European and American thinking about sexual difference. In my understanding, sexual difference is primary insofar as sexuality is a central axis of subjectification. But it is not exclusive, nor is it all encompassing.

In other words, to practice sexual difference, one must have a flair for these complexities: a sort of political culture of difference is needed as a support mechanism for what would otherwise be only an intimate project of transformation. This kind of politics assumes, in fact, a complex and split subject who does *not* coincide with his or her conscious self. In this framework, the embodied self plays a particularly important role as the site where subjects are constituted morphologically and socially. The "body" is a crossroads of social and symbolic relations of which sexuality (and sexed identity) is a major axis, but not the only one.

Please keep in mind that for the feminism of sexual difference sexuality as a social and symbolic institution is the main term of reference, as opposed to the Anglo-American "sex-gender" distinction. This seems to me indicative of major differences between Continental European and

<sup>7</sup> I thank Cris van der Hoek for her insightful comments on this and on other parts of this comment.

American philosophical traditions, which are obviously related to larger cultural historical issues. I think feminist scholars involved in the transatlantic dialogue should take at least some of these larger issues into account, especially when it comes to theories of language and consciousness.

I would link the emphasis on sexual difference as a primary—although not exclusive—axis to the importance of sexuality in Continental social and political theory as a whole and to feminism in particular. This aspect has too long a history for me to trace it here, but let me highlight a couple of points that are specially relevant for this discussion.

First, European feminism did not experience anything like the “sex wars” that raged through the U.S. movement, causing not only endless polemics but also vehement polarizations. In my reading, these “sex wars” resulted in a discursive division of labor that is characteristic of contemporary American feminist theory: on the one hand, feminism concentrates on the notion of “gender,” in the ubiquitous binary *sex/gender* couple. On the other hand, sexuality found a nurturing humus in the queer theory movement, which contributes to the critique of “gender” in terms of its heterosexism.

It is of the greatest importance to the transatlantic dialogue on sexual difference to remember that such distinctions, and the organization of discursive and political labor they engender, do *not* apply to Continental feminism.

Which takes me to my second point: European social and political theories have inherited from classical structuralism, notably Levi-Straussian anthropology and structural linguistics, a political theory of sexuality. The primacy of human sexuality as a mythological system, that is, as a political economy, runs through all of the 1950s social theory and enters feminism through the new materialist psychoanalysis of the Lacanians.

As a result, European feminists such as Irigaray traditionally work with a notion of sexuality that encompasses both material and symbolic elements: it is an institution in the materialist and the imaginary sense of the term. Psychoanalysis plays a role in this tradition by providing a materialist theory of the sexual subject and, after the Lacanian intervention, a politics of subjectivity in the framework of advanced capitalism. The dissymmetry between this and the American renditions of the debate could not be greater.

## Conclusion

My point is by now clear: sexual difference is neither an unproblematic nor an autonomous category; it is the name we give to a process by which diverse differences intersect and are activated alongside or against each other. It is the process by which subjectivity functions and should be the process by which an adequate form of politics is posited for it.

To illustrate this politics, I would like to take the (I hope) classical feminist axiom “woman is a subject inscribed in power via class, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation” and activate it as a set of inner differences that go on multiplying themselves. As in Gertrude Stein’s operatic prose, the logocentric gravitational pulls of the sentences would implode under the strain of the repetition: “Woman is a subject is inscribed in in is power is via is of is class is age is race is ethnicity is sexual is orientation is . . .” and so on indefinitely.

What matters ultimately to the politics of sexual difference is repetition. This is the recurrence of the process by which the verb “to be”—which has given phallogocentrism its fundamental ontology—starts whirling off its phallogocentric base. In this de-motion “Being” gets dislodged from its fundamentalist pedestal and loses the dogmatic authority of its essentialist predicates, to expose at last the multiple “differences within.” Being thus becomes activated as a force whose function is to stitch together the different moments it enacts but that it does not encompass. The metaphysical weight of Being is reduced to a mere shifter: it drops the pretense of essential continuity on which it erected its imperialist power of signification, to return each subject to the specific multiplicity of one’s singularity.

Is this utopian? Only in the sense of the kind of ethical and political drive or longing without which no transformative project can ever get started. In this regard, sexual difference is a hopeful commitment to change, in that it marks an intellectual and affective investment in the desirability of change. Another name for this is political passion.

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