

Coming to knowledge, coming to politics.
A reflection on feminist practices from the NextGENDERation network¹

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ABSTRACT: Starting from the dispute centered around ‘positivity of politics’ and ‘negativity of theory’, as it took place on the mailing list of the NextGENDERation—a European network of students and researchers in women’s studies—we investigate the ways in which the split between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ is among the key mechanisms that demarcate the knowledge production along the lines of race and gender. As generations of feminists have pointed out, the dismissal of the knowledges of ‘Others’—women and ethnic peoples—as theory, and the relegation of these knowledges to the category of ‘description’, maintains a sexual and racial division of labour in favour of white (male) intellectuals, and ultimately preserves the existing social relations of domination. We argue that the affirmation of feminist practices, and perhaps its re-politicization, cannot afford to pass through the negation of theory. Instead, we urge, in the light of NextGENDERation's feminist intervention at the European Social Forum in Florence, for a recuperation of feminist, antiracist and queer genealogies which would allow for new forms of feminist subjectivities on the one hand, and the furthering of feminisms as oppositional projects on the other.

In every generation action frees our dreams
Adrienne Rich

A desire to create a space where it is possible to share theoretical reflections on the embodied power relations – of patriarchy and hetero/sexism, and the way they intersect with racism and economic inequalities – shaping our lives at this moment in time and space, inspired the project of setting up a network of women’s studies students.² NextGENDERation became the name of a network of students and researchers with an interest in women’s studies, gender studies, or feminist theory, both located in and outside of academia. As the network was focused on, but not limited to, the European context, a mailing list, set up in 1998, provided a first collective space, in which to disseminate information and engage in the difficult process of articulating politics starting from our common interest in women’s studies, and informed by the differences of our languages, locations, political positions, and their particular histories.

¹ We thank María Puig de la Bellacasa, for her magic in this text.

² From the very beginning of the network, ‘women studies’ was understood in its generic sense, referring to fields of study that, in English, are named Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, and Feminist Studies or feminist theory, and have various others names in other languages. We have equally always understood women’s studies in an inclusive sense, referring to various types of theoretical interests and reflections related to feminism, whether they take place within universities, women’s associations, or elsewhere. In this essay, we use the capitalised Women’s Studies when specifically referring to Women’s Studies programmes in an academic context.

The subject/s of theory

Among the first discussions to emerge on the mailing list, was a dispute on the difficulties of combining theory and activism. This engagement with an old and vexed question, that is never really settled, and precisely in its unsettlement enables the generation of new political and theoretical impulses, spoke of the kinds of feminist re-articulations that NextGENDERation looked for. In this context, it struck us particularly that most of the interventions in this discussion turned their back on theory in general, and feminist theory in particular. There was a general sense that Women's Studies was about "theory for theory's sake," and not theory, as it was formulated, "for a movement, or for applying it to my life, and relating it to my mother's real life as a woman living and breathing in a very sexist society." Other mails expressed concerns about "feminist theory's tendency to wander off into never-never land." Very little of the "high brow theory studied had any impact on the lives of real women dealing with real issues of violence in their lives," somebody argued. "I do not think much of the things that come out of the discipline is really theory meant for activist use," another young woman commented. Moreover, one intervention made an allusion to "a kind of conspiracy keeping activists ineffectively tied up in theoretical debates, rather than just doing." The description of Women's Studies as "a space were you live outside the problem" seemed to some up the image that many of the angry young women's studies students had of their 'discipline.'

Throughout this contemporary re-articulation of the question of theory and praxis in a feminist context, we became aware of a historically very new subject prominently involved in the debate: a generation of students those journey into feminism started with an academic training in Women's Studies. While these students would sometimes take up Women's Studies as they would any other academic subject, their political interest in feminism was often subsequently developed through feminist theory texts and discussions in the classrooms. The interventions on the mailing list indeed testified to the particular political expectations students continue to have of Women's Studies. The emergence itself of this new subject is indicative of the transformations feminist struggles made in academia, bringing about the development of accredited Women's Studies courses, programs, and degrees. While we cannot emphasise enough that this development is very uneven in Europe – with many countries where women's studies/Women's Studies has hardly gained any academic recognition – and that it remains fragile, it is equally important to affirm feminist transformations that have been made, and new subjectivities that emerged with these transformations. Moreover, the emergence of a new subject is particularly significant in terms of a multiplication of the known genealogy of Women's Studies as a field of systematic theoretical activity emerging out of the feminist struggles in the 1970s. This multiplication turns women's studies/Women's Studies even more into a meeting place of subjects with very different personal genealogies of how they came to feminist knowledges/politics. For the field of women's studies/Women's Studies, these differences imply a continuous tackling of the question *what do we want our theories to do?* For these new subjects that become feminists through feminist courses, Women's Studies effectively becomes a starting point for (feminist) politicisation.

The tension that spoke out of many interventions on the list – between the "positivity of politics" and the "negativity of theory", as Teresa de Lauretis phrases it – did raise the question of what happened with feminist theory in the 1990s, as women's studies, or feminism, becomes a 'discipline.' How did it happen, as Ellen Messer-Davidow asks in a US context, that a bold venture launched 30 years ago to transform academic and social

institutions was itself transformed by them? Her interrogation of academic feminism does not resonate in a similar way in a European context, where Women's Studies as a field of critical knowledge production cannot rely on a similar academic recognition. But the question does invite us, on the basis of our various experiences of women's studies, to look at the structuring effects of academic formats on our critical knowledges/politics. Feminists have understood all too well the power of academic institutions to *suppress*, Messer-Davidow notes, but we are only starting to understand the power these institutions could exercise by *letting us go forward* with our projects.³ She refers to the power of the academic disciplinary format, that, through a relay between institutionalisation and intellectualisation that disciplines academic-knowledge ventures, puts women's studies *genealogical impulse* at risk. This genealogical impulse, following Foucault's understanding of the notion, is a union of knowledges and local memories allowing us to establish a historical knowledge of feminist struggles and to make tactically use of this knowledge today.

However, the necessary re-affirmations of such a genealogical impulse, through which women's studies can continuously feed and unsettle Women's Studies, cannot afford, we believe, to pass through the negation of theory. Critical perspectives on the division between 'thinking' and 'doing', emphasising the embodied character of the production of theory, were taken further by feminists as they made the sexual division of labour between 'thinking' and 'doing' visible, and, by doing so, challenged the existing systems of oppression. Many feminists have analysed how "woman the knower", and its variations of "woman the scientist", "woman the theorist", have been construed as contradictions in terms. Such contradictions lead Evelyn Fox-Keller to explore the question of how much of the nature of science is bound up with the idea of masculinity, and what would it mean for science if it was otherwise.⁴ More recently, in her introduction to a book revisiting the matter of feminism and postmodernism, Sara Ahmed invokes the continuing "maleness of high theory" as one of the reasons why feminists became tired with the subject.⁵ What happened in the sexual division of labour between 'thinking' and 'doing', is that knowledge, reason, logic, analysis got sided with 'the male', in contrast to 'female' domains of experience, feeling, intuition. The rules of the academic disciplinary game ensured only certain ways of framing a subject, certain ways of speaking would 'pass' as theory, and feminist critiques showed how these rules were gendered. Too often, what women say is 'too messy' to pass as theory – the mess of crossing established borders of disciplines, or borders between what is theory on the one hand, and personal, political, descriptive or emotional on the other. Moreover, questions how such a division of labour – and its matching beliefs about supposedly male and female capacities, and knowable objects and knowing subjects – structure our economies of knowledge, have usually been evacuated outside the established fields of disciplinary study. Such questions have been put on the academic agenda by Women's Studies, that has been marked, along with its critical impulse, by the desire for other, transformative, knowledges; in other words, for a becoming woman of (transformative) knowledge.

Parallel with the analysis of the sexual distribution of labour, feminists have also offered a powerful criticism of knowledge production along the lines of race. The scholarship on the racial division of labour, largely a result of writings by Black and 'Third' World feminists, challenged the logic of the theory to expose the racism that exists at its core. Black

³ Messer-Davidow, Ellen. (2002). *Disciplining Feminism. From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴ Fox-Keller, Evelyn. (1985). *Reflections on Gender and Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁵ Ahmed, Sara. (1998). *Differences that Matter. Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*. Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

and ‘Third’ World feminists have shown that, while white male scholars are entitled to produce theory about themselves but also about everyone and anything else, oppressed groups have to struggle for their knowledge to be recognized as theory in the first place. The knowledge of ‘ethnic Others’ is authorized only when it remains within highly circumscribed thematic and territorial boundaries, such as for example their ‘own’ culture or/and nation, thus reducing the knowledge of ‘Others’ to the category of description and their status to that of local informants. To put it differently, within Western scholarship, the particularities of ‘ethnic Others’ tend to be regarded as practical examples for theoretical abstractions that remain un-self-reflectively connected to white places of enunciation.

Within the context of feminist knowledge economies, this implies not only a critique of white male intellectuals but also of white western feminists’ codification of scholarship along racialized lines. Barbara Christian and bell hooks, just to mention two names among a rich black women’s feminist scholarship, both expressed concern about the hegemony of deconstructivist theory and postmodernist critiques of the ‘subject’ in the US academic context.⁶ The “race for theory”, as Christian called it, purported by some feminist thinkers and the New Western Philosophers through the change of critical language and reinvention of theory, resulted once more in exclusion of peoples of colour’s writings in general and black women’s in particular, from the centre of theoretical debates, re-inscribed the social relations of domination, and upheld hierarchies of privilege in favour of white intellectuals⁷.

The theoretical contributions of ‘Third’ World feminists have brought new perspectives not only on the interrelatedness of race and entitlement to theory, but they have also advanced pivotal insights into the ways in which academic disciplinary format continues to purport the racialization of theoretical domains nowadays. In her investigation of the U.S. universities, Chela Sandoval has discerned what she calls an “apartheid of theoretical domains”: the sphere of ‘white male’ poststructuralist theory, Euro-American white feminist theory, and postcolonial and U.S. ‘Third’ World feminist theory⁸. This kind of division, Sandoval continues, points to intellectual colonialism namely to the ways in which knowledge and power are intertwined within a system that appropriates the knowledge of ‘Others’ (peoples of colour and women), circumscribes their contributions to the ‘appropriate’ category where these go under-utilized, and finally upholds an “apartheid of academic knowledges”, a dynamic absolutely central to the logic of late capitalism. Let us repeat, this division of theoretical domains is specific to the U.S. academy and it is obvious that it cannot be transposed as it is within French academia. However, what stays relevant for the French as well as European contexts, and needs to be addressed critically, is the perseverance of the division of intellectual labour between postcolonial/migrant, feminist and white male thinkers. We see this kind of critical work as an endeavour which could lead to articulations of projects capable of aligning these too often separate realms into new intellectual and political coalitions.

⁶ hooks, bell. (1990). “Postmodern Blackness”, in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Toronto: between the lines, 23-31.

⁷ Christian, Barbara (1987). “Race for Theory” in R. Davis and R. Schleifer (eds.) (1994). *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, New York: Longman, 123-131.

⁸ Sandoval, Chela. (2000). *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Missing links

As the NextGENDERation network developed over the years, the virtual interactions of the mailing list were complemented by real life meetings of various members of the network, in different contexts, ranging from informal meetings in homes, cafés, and the ‘corridors’ of larger feminist meetings, to a more manifest participation to feminist conferences, cyberfeminist working days, and public discussions on the state of contemporary feminism. While often we were being staged as ‘young feminists’, we came to understand how the notion of *generation* in the context of our network had much less to do with age, than with the multiplication of the different ways in which we come to feminism – its theories and its politics – and with the ‘generation’ of contemporary feminist (re-)articulations. A crucial point we continue to underscore in this respect, concerns the interlocking character of systems of oppression, along lines of race, gender and class, as well as the importance of the criticism of heterosexuality as it is being articulated by lesbian and queer subjects. Addressing heteronormativity and whiteness means not only challenging some of the basic categories upon which current feminist theoretical conceptualisations are organized, but also opening up possibilities for different forms of political struggle. Another point that increasingly informs our way of working, is a further distance from a representational model of doing politics, that university structures continue to endorse, in favour of a more contagious or ‘viral’ type of micropolitics. This coincided with a process of politicisation of the network that, at its outset, still had to invent how a common interest in women’s studies would translate/relate to the articulation of political positions.

What has increasingly led our engagement in the network, is the feeding or strengthening of women’s studies’ genealogical impulse, as just one part of the continuous feminist re-inventions or re-imaginings. This yearning was reflected in the desire of some of us to make a feminist intervention at the European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence last year. We imagined this involvement as a small, informal, and collective space of a workshop that would enable creative exchange among a variety of subjects who most of the times do not inhabit the same realms of feminist intervention. As the title of the workshop “Missing links: feminism and globalized resistance” shows, the wish to take part at the ESF emerged out of several concerns. One concern relates to what happens with our feminist genealogies, when all too easily theory and activism are kept separated, or all too often the mentioned multiple and differentiated embodied struggles are marginalized. This is where our search starts for new forms of feminist subjectivity, that reflect the embodied complexities we live and that struggle against being reduced simply to the notion of gender or sexual difference.

A search that might find new opportunities in the ‘movement of movements’ – characterized by the emergence of new subjects and alliances, and the leaving behind of reassuring organized identities – but only if our feminist yearnings also manage to transform the movement. Because we are equally concerned with the lack of feminist perspectives within ‘the movement of movements’ – a movement that leaves us wondering what happens to knowledges coming out of the struggles of multiple, but differentiated, subject positions related to sexual differences, ethnicities, and sexualities *as we know them today*, when they are collapsed in an undifferentiated concept of ‘the multitude’? A movement that all too easily forgets which embodied struggles generated crucial tools such as “the personal is the political”, the politics of everyday life and the politics of desire.⁹ It is perhaps in the

⁹ See the important reflection by Cristina Vega (2002) , Firenze, feminism, global resistance. Some (personal and shared) tips to go to Firenze, <http://nextgeneration.let.uu.nl/esf/> on this matter. “And tell me, my sweet friends, who if not feminists and queers of various kinds have put desire and pleasure at the center of politics? Who has

affirmation of the feminist, anti-racist and queer genealogies that inform so many of the practices and theories of the globalized resistances, and in the affirmation of new alliances and yearnings that refuse to play off oppressions one against the other, that new (feminist) subjectivities are created, able to sustain feminism's genealogical impulse as an oppositional project.

<http://nextgeneration.let.uu.nl>

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transformed the way of taking the street and bring the black block outfits back to their performative potential, who has been responsible for breaking the discontinuities, public-private, work-non work, etc. of traditional politics, who has reflected around the question of autonomy, horizontality and and and - more than the feminist movement? Who has brought the question of hybridity - sexual, ethnic... - into the scene if not the queer and anti-racist movements? Who has put their bodies against social death and invisibility more than those migrants activists that are locking themselves up in churches all over Europe?"