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THE FEMINIST ‘SUCCESSOR SCIENCE PROJECT’ AS A TRANSNATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how the attempt by feminist epistemologies to overcome the impasse between objectivity and relativism has led to various formulations of the concept of ‘location’ and to the standpoint theory. As a result, the political project of a transnational community of interpreters fostered by transnational feminism can be seen as deriving from such enduring process.

Keywords: feminist epistemology, politics of location, traveling theory, communities of affiliation, transnational feminism.

INTRODUCTION: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTION WITHIN FEMINISM

The epistemological question has spanned the entire history of feminist thought, weaving together a variety of disciplines and depending on other debates within feminist theory, including the crucial one about the meaning of sexual difference in the development of subjectivity.

Like a red thread through feminist history, the epistemological question, which had been kept carefully hidden in the pants hem of Liberal Feminism, was later used by Second Wave Feminists to make flamboyant skirts. More recently, Gender Theorists have considered it as what bastes the very folds of the body, as if it were possible to make it and unmake it in countless other styles.

Leaving metaphors aside, while Liberal Feminism claimed the participation of women in the public sphere and in the production of knowledge but didn’t dare to directly discuss the order and the assumptions of these latter, Second Wave Feminists overtly rejected both the social order and the inherited categories of knowledge.

Facing an equality that was exclusively political but by no means philosophical (Lonzi, 1974), Second Wave Feminists developed a strongly critical attitude towards Western philosophical and epistemological traditions and, in order to give an account of reality from the perspective of women's everyday-life experience, they drew on the notion of 'difference' as the starting point for reviewing the traditional categories of thought.

Influenced by poststructuralism, Black Feminism and Postcolonial Feminism, the knowledge production of Gender Theorists has been critical of the polarity between equality and difference and has identified the body as a place and a tool for the production of a transformative knowledge.

Whereas the feminist critique of Western epistemology has unmasked the gender of the subject of universal knowledge, Black and Postcolonial Feminists have also pointed out 'his' whiteness. Women and/or postcolonial subjects have thus determined a substantial redefinition of epistemology, both with respect to its assumptions as well as to its disciplinary boundaries: traditionally regarded as apart from scientific knowledge production, ethics and politics have become part of the feminist epistemological discourse.

FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AS A 'SUCCESSOR SCIENCE PROJECT'

Feminist epistemology enquires into how gender takes part in knowledge production. According to Sandra Harding (1986), attempts to develop a separate feminist theory of knowledge dates back to the 70s and were mainly due to the sense of frustration of women scientists and biologists, who had tried to 'add' women and gender to their disciplinary fields without any success. This marked the beginning of a proliferation of theoretical writings that challenged the classical conception of epistemology, questioning the neutrality of knowledge and its supposed universal validity.

Although criticisms on the foundations of Western philosophical discourse and scientific knowledge were already present in the early writings of both Second Wave Anglo-Saxon and Continental Feminists, the elaboration of a feminist theory of knowledge has to be considered as a later event. In this sense, the end of the 70s marked a turning point within feminism towards a broader theoretical and philosophical production: theory was seen not only as the most exclusive tool of patriarchal supremacy, but also as a contested place where power was generated and regenerated (Cavarero and Restaino, 2009). In particular, Western epistemology was considered as a construction that produces answers to a kind of questions an androcentric society has about nature and social life (Harding, 1991): a construction based on hierarchical disciplinary boundaries as 'enclosures' corresponding to the

patriarchal order. This awareness has paved the way for a radical epistemology, whose main method consists in crossing disciplinary borders with explicitly 'archaeological' and 'genealogical' purposes (Braidotti, 1991).

Describing the science project envisioned by feminists, Haraway writes:

Feminists have stakes in a successor science project that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflective relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions. In traditional philosophical categories, the issue is ethics and politics perhaps more than epistemology. (1991: 187)

Far from seeking the goal of value-neutrality, the "successor science project" described by Haraway aims at including areas traditionally separate from classical epistemology, such as those of ethics and politics. Moreover it explicitly addresses issues of power relationships among subjects, while also aiming at producing a knowledge able to account for such inequalities. But where does such a different formulation of epistemology stem from? And how can a science project also entail questions of politics and ethics?

It is possible to argue that feminist theory undertakes an investigation not only on the object but also on the subject of traditional knowledge, recognizing both as implicitly gendered. Such recognition is fraught with consequences, since it marks the crisis of self-legitimation of the universal Cartesian subject which has to be considered as the hallmark of postmodern societies (Lyotard, 1979). In other words, the development of a feminist theory of knowledge coincides with and contributes to the so-called 'crisis' of modern thought, in relation to which the 'woman question' appears since its beginning as a symptom of anxiety. Rosi Braidotti argues that starting from Nietzsche and passing by all the major European philosophers, this question has accompanied the decline and the crisis of the classical conception of human subjectivity. In line with this, postmodernity is marked by "the return of the 'Others' of modernity: woman, the sexual Other of man, the ethnic or native, the Other of the Eurocentric subject and the natural or the earth, the Other of the techno culture" (Braidotti, 2002: 117).

Having grasped at the historical opportunity to radically question Western scientific thought, however, feminists have a different aim from thinkers who merely state the crisis of the modern subject. They are not simply interested in deconstructing the traditional subject of knowledge: their aim is promoting a positive process of

subjectification of woman. Thus, feminist epistemology turns out to be a political project aimed at redefining women as subjects of an alternative form of knowledge. Whereas some feminists envisage this historic moment as an opportunity to move to a phase of authoritative statement, abandoning all forms of nostalgia (Braidotti, 2002), others speak in a less triumphant tone and rather highlight the difficulties that the same feminist epistemological project faces:

I, and others, started out wanting a strong tool for deconstructing the truth claims of hostile science by showing the radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions, and we end up with a kind of epistemological electro-shock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder. (Haraway, 1991: 186)

SUBJECT, OBJECT AND KNOWLEDGE OUTSIDE BINARY THINKING

Generally, it is possible to define epistemology as an account on the subject of knowledge, the object of study and the relationship that develops between them. As regards feminist epistemology, it is necessary to clarify how the debate around this triad has constantly fluctuated between the denial of an all-encompassing realism and the risk of a paralyzing postmodern relativism.

In this paragraph, I focus on the instability behind the same terms ‘subject’, ‘object’ and ‘knowledge’ within the feminist debate on epistemology, as well as on the issues at stake behind the same definition of ‘gender’ in relation to ‘sex’.

Subsequent to the feminist critique of the homosocial construction of science (Irigaray, 1989; Donini, 2000; Cavarero and Restaino, 2009), feminists are left with the following questions:

- 1) Who can be subject of knowledge? Or, better, what does legitimate certain subjects of knowledge over others?
- 2) What can be known? What does legitimize knowledge production? What defines objectivity?
- 3) “Can there be a disinterested knowledge in a society that is deeply stratified by gender, class, race?” (Harding, 1991: 110).

These deeply intertwined questions will lead to a profound redefinition of the terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ and knowledge. In an article published in 1989 – titled *The Gender/Science System: Or, Is Sex to Gender as Nature Is to Science?* – Evelyn Fox Keller explores the problematic relation between sex and gender in parallel with the

equally problematic relation between nature and science. The article touches upon issues such as the social construction of woman as the 'other' of the subject of knowledge, the instability behind the categories of gender and science, the question of the primacy of gender as heuristic tool over others. According to Keller (1989), the scientific discourse has included women in its sight as object of investigation, but has excluded them from its practice. In the last century, the main strategy used by women seeking entrance to the homosocial world of science "has been premised on the repudiation of gender as a significant variable for scientific productivity" (Keller, 1989: 39): equality was therefore possible as long as any difference was silenced.

Keller focuses on this paradox, drawing a parallel between feminist studies and science studies. As feminist studies emerge with the distinction between sex and gender, contemporary science studies emerge with the "realization that science can never be a 'mirror of nature'" (Keller, 1989: 37). In other words, both feminist studies and science studies emerge respectively on the assumption that "gender is not to be defined by sex nor science by nature" (*ibidem*: 38). The ensuing question is: how are they respectively to be defined then?

The answers to this question have an immediate consequence to the same definitions of both subject and object of knowledge within feminist epistemology. In fact, how can we have a theory of subjectivity and, thus, an accountable subject of knowledge if we are not able to clearly define the relationship between sex and gender?

It is worth noticing that the attempt to redefine the relationship between gender and sex is immediately linked to the production of a 'successor science' (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1991). In fact, once rejected the neutrality of the classical subject of knowledge, the possibility of a 'successor science' necessarily presupposes a new theory of subjectivity. The feminist epistemological debate is thus intertwined with the feminist polyphonic debate on woman subjectivity, which, as Keller (1989: 38) denounces, seems to have been leaning "toward biological determinism or toward infinite plasticity". On the other side, if science is not a mirror of nature, how can we define knowledge if it doesn't immediately conflate with its object (i.e. nature)? In other words, what is knowledge and what can be known?

Keller (1989) emphasizes that the categories of 'gender' and 'science' have come into being taking distance and differentiating themselves from their respectively complementary categories of 'sex' and 'nature'. It is possible to argue that the construction of both 'gender' and 'science' has followed a 'binary scheme', whereas sex is equated to nature and gender to science. According to the feminist critic of science, the same relationship between subject and object of knowledge has traditionally

followed a “binary logic” (Irigaray, 1989). To this regard, it is worth noticing that one of the feminist aims has been to change the negative and oppressive meaning around the notion of ‘difference’ within the dialectic Self/Other. In a way, dealing with the European theoretical tradition from a feminist perspective cannot but imply dealing with the dialectic between sameness and difference within European history (Braidotti, 2002), where to be different has meant to be worthless and has justified relations of domination and exclusion outside and inside the continent. In fact, rather than being understood in relational terms, difference has been ‘essentialized’. With regard to feminist epistemology, such awareness has various implications. It warns on the need to change the oppressive relationship between subject and object of knowledge as constructed by the gendered binary system underpinning Western scientific discourse. Moreover, it calls for a definition of the same relationship between gender and sex outside of a binary mode.

Claire Colebrook (2004) traces the binary distinction between sex and gender back to the anti-metaphysical tendency of modern thought, which, refusing what cannot be known and verified, has shifted the focus on evidence and materiality. Consequently, the emphasis on science and observation has led to a growing awareness of the subject as observer and knower. According to Colebrook, such a shift from a world of forms, in which man was placed, to a realm of observable and quantifiable matter has had two main consequences. In the first place, if matter is the basis of reality, with forms as effect of observation, it is then possible to think of sex as the matter of each individual, which might, or not, be determined by gender. Secondly, once matter is conceived as pre-linguistic and ‘without meaning’, it is then possible to think of subject as the starting point from which matter is known and ordered: from ‘man’ as an animal among others within a hierarchy of forms, we move to the ‘Subject’ who is able to represent and quantify matter. The theory of the subject differs from previous theories about man as an animal in the cosmos with his own nature: now ‘He’ is nothing more than his ability to perceive and represent the world (the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*).

This has major political consequences, since it implies that in the name of the individual’s ability to reason all subjects should relate to each other equally. The old political order based on differences among men by God’s will is now replaced by a new political order based on equality among individuals in front of nature. However, since the binary opposition between nature and culture is one of the ways hierarchies between men and women have been mostly expressed (Donini, 2000), the modern principle of equality, although being extremely revolutionary for men, turns out to be radically conservative for women. Such a paradox is inscribed in the same historical

origin of the egalitarian model which denies differences between men, but leaves aside sexual difference (Cavarero and Restaino, 2009).

If 'woman' has been constructed as the 'Other' of the scientific discourse, not only as different, but also as binarily opposed to the legitimate subject of knowledge, it means that no knowledge has ever been formulated from the perspective of woman's life and experience. Furthermore, the same apparently transparent category of 'woman' has to be considered as unreliable, since resulting from a long standing patriarchal tradition which has silenced women as subjects of knowledge. As Harding (1991: 69) states: "the subject of knowledge – the individual and the historically located social community whose unexamined beliefs its members are likely to hold 'unknowingly' [become] part of the object of Knowledge".

Deprived of the very category of 'woman' itself, feminists linger on categories such as those of body, experience, location and power relations. The development of a theory of knowledge based on experience will open the way to a profound rethinking of the same concept of 'objectivity' which, as Donini (2000) stresses, is so central and yet so little discussed in science. Because of their experience, Black Feminists in the U.S. warn about the risk of giving priority to the category of gender over other axes of subjectification, such as those of race or class among others. In other words, they focus on the 'politics of knowledge' inquiring the status among disciplines and categories: why should gender as analytical category be considered different from, perhaps even prior to, categories of race, class, etc.? And in turn, "is science substantively different from other social structures or interest group?" (Keller, 1989: 38).

AGAINST "THE DEADLY SAMENESS OF ABSTRACTION":¹ THE POLITICS OF LOCATION

In *Whose knowledge? Whose Science?*, Harding (1991) explains how most scientists have regarded the feminist perspective as political and in this sense against scientific reason and observation. In fact, while Western science believes in the existence of a trans-historical universal truth, knowable by applying scientific methods of objectivity and rationality, feminists insist on the partial nature of objectivity reclaiming the role of the body as a site of knowledge. Although not denying science in itself, they reject a knowledge based on the belief of a division between nature and culture, on the supposed existence of a sort of 'external truth', on "the separation of information from meaning" which results from moving objects of study from their contexts (Hill Collins, 1991: 205). In order to challenge the apparently "impersonal, objective, value-free facts" (Harding, 1991: 105) that natural social science pretends to produce, feminists

¹ I owe this expression to Adrienne Rich (1987: 221).

reclaim an epistemology that takes into account the concept of 'location' as the starting point for the development of a critical thinking. The feminist epistemic practice of addressing the 'politics of location' can be considered in fact as one of the epistemological foundations of feminist theory and particularly of feminist epistemology. Since its beginning, reflections on the concept of 'location' have aimed at fostering accountability for how feminists know and act within the place they inhabit, reproduce and transform.

I argue that such a practice has strong resonances with the practice of self-narration which was so central in the early years of Second Wave Feminism. As the politics of location originates from the necessity to develop an accountable and transformative knowledge consistent with life, in a similar way, the early Second Wave Feminists' focus on self-narration has to be seen as a central political practice aiming at redefining woman subjectivity outside of a patriarchal culture. Far more than being a narcissistic attitude then, such a technique was adopted by women who were trying to deconstruct and re-signify sexual difference both individually as well as collectively. Telling their own lives, women were also reclaiming words that up to then had been meant to silence them. In this sense, it is possible to argue that, by lingering on the gap between their experience and the lack of words to name it, feminists have soon recognized language as a 'site of power', thus anticipating the future that such a concept would have had in the academy.

Aiming at being illustrative rather than exhaustive, I will now present some of the reformulations that the concept of 'politics of location' has undergone over the last thirty years, starting from the one by the North American poet, writer and feminist activist Adrienne Rich, who first coined the concept in the mid-80s. At the age of fifty, reflecting on her life as a feminist intellectual and activist and interrogating her personal and socio-structural location, Rich reconsiders the statement made by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* (*apud* Rich, 1987: 211): "As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world." She realizes that such a statement does not allow her to be accountable in particular as regards her whiteness in the context of a larger feminist politics and international power relations. Back from her travel to Nicaragua and reflecting on her North American location, Rich realizes that "a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist [she is] created and trying to create" (*ibidem*: 212). Positioning herself in time and space, Rich recognizes the privilege as well as the partiality of her location. This warns her to reduce the temptation of "grandiose assertions" and to abandon the illusion of "knowing" for all women around the globe. The practice of addressing the politics of location is thus based on the recognition that by speaking

from a position of recognized specificity, feminists are less likely to generalize and speak about all women. Focusing on a politics of location is thus a way to “interrupt the reproduction of values and behaviors that get repeated generation after generation” (*ibidem*: 225). Being a way to take critical distance from the subject position that we are historically expected to inhabit, Rich regarded such a practice as a tool for creating a feminist movement that ‘de-westernizes’ itself and that doesn’t homogenize itself through the expression of a single voice.

Following these considerations, Caren Kaplan (1994) argues that the politics of location has expanded the ground of what counts as theory and who can be considered as theorist by deconstructing the hegemonic use of the world ‘woman’ within Western feminism and its privileged position of whiteness. According to South Asian born postcolonial theorist Chandra Mohanty (1995: 75), “the universality of gender oppression is problematic, based as it is on the assumption that the category of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible”. Thus, in order to address the multiplicity and dynamism of locations that a postcolonial feminist inhabits at any given moment, and the self-definitions and modes of knowledge that arise from them, Mohanty proposes a modified practice of the politics of location that takes into consideration “the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries which provides the ground for political definition and self-definition” (*apud* Kaplan, 1994: 137).

African-American feminist writer bell hooks imagines the politics of location as a dialectic space between oppression and resistance, as a space “where we begin the process of revision”, not a static home or a center, but a process of moving “beyond boundaries” (bell hooks, 1990: 151). For bell hooks, a location is a theoretical space and a space of oppositional agency that she calls the ‘margin’. The margin is both a site of oppression and a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. Speaking of the pain of having been made ‘Other’ and confronting silences and inarticulateness within herself, hooks’ personal struggle concerns naming “that location from which [she has] come to voice that space of [her] theorising” (*apud* Kaplan, 1994: 143).

African American theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1991) distinguishes between two modes of knowing: one located in the body and the space it occupies, the other passing beyond it. Here Hill Collins refers to the privileged position of the Afro-American woman as “outsider within”. Being at the same time outside and inside a culture is what allowed African-Americans to resist repression and develop their knowledge. In particular, Hill Collins (1991: 208), referring to “a core African value system” as a characterizing element of black experience, draws a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. According to Hill Collins (*ibidem*), “knowledge without wisdom

is adequate for the powerful but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate”. Moreover, for black women “new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals” (Hill Collins, 1991: 212). As a result, connectedness rather than isolation creates knowledge and allows developing an ethic of personal accountability that is the final dimension of an alternative epistemology.

At the core of these different interpretations of the concept of location, there is a different way of interpreting experience itself. It seems that, through the practice of telling their own lives as well as naming their own location, these theorists have regarded ‘experience’ neither as a plain category nor as “the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built” (Scott, 1991: 777). Rather, experience itself has to be considered as socially constructed and entailing issues of ‘vision’, language, subjectivity, history and social relations. In fact, as Joan Scott argues (*ibidem*: 778), “the evidence of experience reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems”. For this reason, taking experience as a site of knowledge presupposes a critical analyses “of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation [...], its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, [...] its notions of subjects, origin, and cause” (*ibidem*). Scott’s invitation to historicize experience as well as the identities that produces draws further attention on the subject of knowledge, which has to be conceived as historically constructed:

we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. (Scott, 1991: 779)

In this perspective, women’s experience doesn’t have to be considered as the origin of feminist knowledge, but rather that which women seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced.

FROM THE POLITICS OF LOCATION TO THE POLITICS OF ENGAGEMENT: THE STANDPOINT THEORY

The feminist ‘standpoint theory’ argues that knowledge is socially situated and claims that research directed by social values and political agenda produces preferable empirical and theoretical results. The approach of the standpoint theory originates in the belief that “human activity, or ‘material life’, not only structures but sets limits on human understanding” (Harding, 1991: 120) and is based on the assumption that social locations systematically shape and limit what we know. There are clearly points of

connection between the politics of location and the feminist standpoint theory. In fact, the epistemic practice of addressing the social locations with respect to ensuing knowledge claims, which is at the core of the politics of location, is also crucial for standpoint theorists. However, according to the standpoint theory, addressing one's social location is not enough to reach a standpoint, since a standpoint is achieved through a collective awareness of the workings of the ideological system and the resulting development of an oppositional knowledge. As Wylie states:

standpoint theory is concerned not just with the epistemic effects of social locations but both with the effects and the emancipatory potential of standpoints that are struggled for, achieved, by epistemic agents who are critically aware of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and authorized. (2003: 31)

In this sense, as Sandra Harding argues (1991: 127), "a standpoint it is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement". Harding also reminds us (1993: 53) that standpoint theory originates from "Hegel's reflections on what can be known about the master/slave relationship from the standpoint of the slave's life". In a gender perspective, this means that men's ruling position in society results in "partial and perverse understanding", "whereas women's subjugated position provides the possibility of a more complete and less perverse understandings" (Harding, 1986: 26). Thus, according to standpoint theory, marginalized positions have an 'epistemic privilege' in analyzing the dominant power structure: by collectively achieving an oppositional standpoint through political self-consciousness, they can generate more objective or less false and distorted accounts of the social world (Hill Collins, 1991).

It is worth noticing that many standpoint theorists have warned of the danger of sustaining *tout court* that the position of subjugation is a privileged position to access 'truth'. In fact, such a simplified perspective can lead to an essentialist belief in the validity of minority positions simply because they are minority, as if the production of knowledge is simply a one-to-one relationship between the subject and its social location. The idea of a standpoint as a simple reflection of social location not only denies the relational nature of knowledge, but it also doesn't explain why the interpretation of a subjugated subject can represent a threat to the dominant reading of reality.

Concerning this, I argue that, in the passage from experience to knowledge, the role of "situated imagination" (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002) should be acknowledged.

As Donna Haraway puts it:

Subjugation is not grounds for an ontology; it might be a visual clue. Vision requires instrument of vision; an optic is a politics of positioning. Instruments of vision mediate standpoints; there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated [...] Positioning is therefore, the key practice grounding Knowledge organized around the imaginary vision as so much Western scientific and philosophic discourse is organized. (1991: 195)

The interpretation of the experience lived by a subject can thus be considered as an 'imaginative location' from which the subject grounds her/his knowledge. Far from being misunderstood as 'pure fantasy', situated imagination has to be recognized as a re-appropriation on behalf of a subject of specific discursive formations, in the attempt to re-negotiate her/his position through a modification of their meaning. Therefore imagining can create the premises for something desirable to happen, directing changes while also contributing to a renewal of the collective imaginary because of the relational nature of knowledge. As Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002: 324) state, "situated imagination should neither be rejected nor celebrated", rather its crucial role in the knowledge process should be acknowledged, because of its double bond to both the corporeal and the social dimension, which allows to incorporate emotions in the intellectual process. On a political level, asserting knowledge as a situated imaginative interpretation of reality allows to expand the ground of what counts as theory and who can be considered a theorist, while also opening the way to the possibility of imagining new individual as well as collective identities out of the experiences and relative knowledge which characterizes one's subject position.

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROJECT

The need to take into account power relations among knowledge, disciplines and analytical categories is at the core of the debate on 'transnational feminism'. In this paragraph, I argue that feminist transnationalism can be primarily defined as a political project of epistemological renewal which has taken off from the acknowledgment of the unreliability of the same category 'woman'.

In the last three decades and a half, feminists have been toying with the idea of a worldwide alliance among women. The 70s idea of an international sisterhood gave rise, particularly since the publication of Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global* in 1984, to a debate that has involved numerous feminists. Following the genealogy of this debate it is possible to recognize the almost paradigmatic shift that occurred in feminist

theory between the 70s and 90s: most feminist critique took distance from a modernist theoretical framework in favor of a constructivist perspective and a theorization of the concept of difference(s) as a critical category. As Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (1992) explain more fully, this shift was essential due to three major factors:

- 1) black women's critique of the racist and ethnocentric assumptions of white feminism;
- 2) the revaluation of the concept of difference, above all sexual difference;
- 3) the appropriation and development of poststructuralist and postmodernist ideas by feminists.

In light of all these considerations, it became evident that the idea(l) of a worldwide alliance among women was a complex challenge. In particular, being mainly an imaginary product of Western feminists – either academicians or activists – the project of a global alliance could not avoid addressing the risks of:

- 1) promoting an alliance among women on the basis of the essentialist belief that women all over the world share the same experience because of being women;
- 2) spreading Western feminism by Western middle-class women as a new form of cultural colonialism;
- 3) supporting a homogenizing universalism in the attempt to create common policies.

In the attempt to avoid these risks, antiracist and postcolonial feminist scholars (Enloe, 1989; Mohanty, 1988 and 2002; Alexander, 2005; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Wekker, 1995) have criticized the notion of 'global feminism' as a category unable to address the existing unequal global relations which shape women's lives in different settings. In its place they have proposed to elaborate on the notion of 'transnational feminism'. While recognizing power relationships and differences among women, transnational feminism doesn't give up the idea of forging alliance among women located differently. Thus the questions that keep transnational feminism busy are: how is it possible to create an alliance among women located differently? What kind of alliance would that be? In other words, "how can we build collectivity in difference?" (Braidotti, 1994: 99).

LOCATING TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM

As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994) explain clearly in their introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies*, the question of transnational feminism is inscribed in discourses of modernism and postmodernism and particularly in the acknowledgment of the continuity as well as discontinuity between these two. In fact, although transnational feminism originates from a critique of the universalistic assumptions behind the modernist idea of global sisterhood, it questions neither the necessity nor the possibility of global alliances between women. What transnational feminism

questions – of the modernist idea of global sisterhood – is the fact that such an alliance could be ‘naturally’ and immediately found among women of different locations on the basis of their supposed common experience as women. In line with a postmodern perspective, although rejecting its potentially relativistic drifts, transnational feminism recognizes that acknowledging and valorizing differences among women’s experiences is the only possible starting point to avoid the replication of a Eurocentric politics. In order to avoid another colonial enterprise in the name of Feminism, a transnational feminist politics needs to take distance from a modernist framework and its legacy in “colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formation that wittingly or unwittingly lead to the oppression and exploitation of many women” (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994: 2). In this sense, it seems clear that the difficulty of transnational feminism, but also its challenge, is how to promote a worldwide alliance among women not haunted by the specter of Western imperialism. To this purpose any possible discursive continuity between the political project underpinning transnational feminism and modernity needs to be recognized and examined and critical category of thought need to be unchained from old paradigms. As Kaplan (1994: 134) states:

The claiming of a world space for women raises temporal questions as well as spatial consideration, question of history as well as place. Can such claims be imagined outside the conceptual parameters of modernity?

The accomplishment of such a project seems to depend mostly on the ability to analyze and take distance from inherited categories of thought generated by modernity’s historical and spatial contingencies which are possibly expressive of Eurocentric standpoints. In this perspective, I argue that the discursive as well as ‘meta-discursive’ nature of transnational feminism is unequivocally manifest: transnational feminism needs to rethink politics in post-modern time through an analysis of inherited categories of thought and through the production of new concepts or a new discourse able to account for multiple conditions and claims.

Looking at transnational feminism as a discursive formation willing to expand allows us to understand more easily which are the issues at stake in it and where its potentialities and its risks lay. Moreover it facilitates the task to address more clearly questions about who is speaking, when, from which location, and to trace back what is the origin of discourses within transnational feminism and whose standpoints they represent.

Transnational feminism, both as a political project and theoretical approach, originates from a strong critique of modernity and its ‘monological’ imaginary, which

from Enlightenment onwards has supported, through the institutionalization of cultural and political formations, the propagation of 'supposedly universally valid' categories of thought; the latter proving just functional to authorize Eurocentric-hierarchically-gendered-and-racialized systems.

With the intention of discarding this Western line of thought, imposed outside Europe in the past through colonization and today overly reproduced through the propagation of global neo-imperialist liberal projects, transnational feminism has benefited from the reflections of various black and postcolonial feminists, particularly on issues of difference among women and feminist epistemologies. Indeed, since the first aim of transnational feminism is forging alliances among subjects differently located through the development of a new discourse able to account for multiple conditions and claims, transnational feminism cannot set aside a critique of Western epistemology as a necessary premise. In this sense, Kaplan's invitation to raise "temporal questions as well as spatial consideration outside the conceptual parameters of modernity" means firstly "decentering the center" (Harding and Narayan, 2000), realizing the partiality of one's own location and admitting the existence of thousands of centers of episteme.

As one among other centers of knowledge production, transnational feminism cannot avoid undergoing the feminist epistemological scrutiny that reveals its being mainly an academic discourse. In other words, transnational feminism needs to acknowledge that the theoretical framework on which it relates, originates mainly from *Western* academia, an institution that has proven very often incapable of accounting for the continuous changes in the life's conditions of people outside academia, and that is definitely connoted in terms of race, class and gender. As a further evidence of this I would remark that Grewal and Kaplan (1994: 3) notice, for example, that the discourse of postmodernism as one of the main theoretical branches of transnational feminism has been expressed in the West primarily as an aesthetic or cultural debate rather than a political one: "such debates ignore the radical changes in global economical structure that have occurred since the middle of this century." As bell hooks comments referring to postmodernism:

It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse that talks the most about heterogeneity [...] still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. (1990: 25)

In its desire to promote an alliance among women around the globe, transnational feminism has to acknowledge both its power and its limits derived from being mainly a

Western academic discourse. This implies that transnational feminism has to verify the accessibility of its project for other women around the globe but also that it has to acknowledge the necessity to adopt a language that doesn't leave out women with different experiences. In order to do that, the academic discourse of transnational feminism has to pay attention to, and enter in contact with, different languages and social realities. In other words, transnational feminism has to take into consideration the knowledge productions of those women who have more often been objects of study of Western feminists (Mohanty, 1988 and 2002).

Kaplan (1994) invites Western feminists to investigate the reason and the need of their desire of forging alliances with women across national borders rather than first engaging with other women at home. In fact, confronting different standpoints within the same social context could be a useful exercise to truly start addressing the issue of differences among women on axes of differentiations less evident than the one of national belonging. In light of these considerations it becomes clear that the first step to forge alliances across national borders passes through a multiplication of questions related to how to forge alliances across racial, ethnical, cultural, sexual, economical, religious borders as well as across different citizenship status and working conditions. To this purpose, the aim and modality of transnational feminism should be directed to forge alliances across the historical intersections between different forms of women's movements, and thus to learn about the ways in which social, economic, and political structures of race, sexuality, gender and class, shape and inform feminist practices with the intent to develop consistent feminist transnational standpoints.

In turn, on an academic level, transnational feminism should opt for a methodology, that, as Gloria Wekker (2004: 495), suggests, takes distance from the biases of western academic methodology in favor of a "interdisciplinary, intersectional, reflexive perspective as well as a relational approach", that allows to link histories of colonialism and postcolonialism, and theories of nationalism and globalization.

COMMUNITIES OF AFFILIATION

Searching for a proper and valuable model of community for its political project, transnational feminism has particularly benefited from the reflections inspired by Edward Said's articles "Traveling Theory" (1983) and "Travelling Theory Revisited" (2001a). In these latter, while examining the way in which certain theories have been travelling in diverse settings in the course of time and observing their transformations, Said draws particular attention to the potentiality of theory to create communities of 'affiliation'.

In his first article "Traveling Theory", Said reflects on the consequences of a theory that travels:

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. [...] Having said that, however, one should go on to specify the kinds of movements that are possible [...]. Such movements into a new environment are never unimpeded. It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates an account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas. (1983: 226)

According to Said, the changes that theory may come across with, after it has traveled, are different. While in his first article "Traveling Theory", Said (1983: 436) sustains that "the force of a theory comes from being directly connected to and organically provoked by real historical circumstances" and that "later versions of theory cannot replicate its original power", in "Traveling Theory Revisited" Said (2001a: 436) recognizes the possibility of an alternative mode of traveling theory that developed away from its original formulation, but instead of becoming domesticated "flames out, so to speak, restates and reaffirms its own inherent tension by moving to another site". Said names this type of re-interpreted theory "transgressive theory". Then he goes on providing two examples of transgressive theory. The first is the reinterpretation of Lukács' theory of reification by Adorno in his *Philosophie der neuen Musik* in 1948. The second is the reinterpretation of Lukács' theory of reification by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. What is important to underline here is that, although the differences between these two authors and between these two works in terms of time, contents and intents are evident, Said considers possible to address both Fanon and Adorno as belonging to a same community. He writes:

One would not, could not, want to assimilate Viennese twelve-tone music to the Algerian resistance to French colonialism: the disparities are too grotesque even to articulate. But in both situations, each so profoundly and concretely felt by Adorno and Fanon respectively, is the fascinating Lukácsian figure, present both as traveling theory and as intransigent practice. To speak here only of borrowing and adaptation is not adequate. There is in particular an intellectual, and perhaps moral, community of a remarkable kind, affiliation in the deepest and most interesting sense of the word. (Said, 2001a: 436)

These two authors and their respective theories are not assimilable to each other: they write in two different periods, from two different locations, they are concerned with two different disciplines. Nevertheless they are in ‘communication’, although indirectly, through the theory of Lukács. What links them is that when facing the same concept, they both felt impelled to answer it through their interpretation; they both recognized and felt compelled to interpret the same signs which triggered their imagination. Then, Adorno and Fanon interpreted them according to their own experience, contextual situation and “situated imagination” (Stoezler and Yuval-Davis, 2002). In other words, they both interpreted Lukács theory of reification each from their own ‘socio-emotional’ location. In this sense, the ‘moral community’ envisioned by Said is a ‘community of interpreters’, linked per affinity by their critical capacity to change and adapt a theory; to engage in an “intransigent practice” of re-interpretation that is almost an act of creation.

In the light of these considerations, it becomes possible now trying to imagine the kind of community theorized by Said and describing the features of a transnational community for affiliation. Not based on modernist discursive formations such as those of national belonging, identity, class and race, this community-model contemplates the idea of difference among its members, but most importantly it contemplates the idea that each member would interpret the same theory according to her/his location. Such a community is grounded on the epistemological autonomy of each of its members and promotes a conversational model of interactions. Moreover such a model is based on the awareness of the impossibility of any theory to account for everything in existence. Thus theory appears as a tool that needs always to be tested and whose dependence on the social context and experience of the subjects needs to be constantly acknowledged.

THE POLITICS OF RECEPTION AS A POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The possibilities that traveling concepts create transnational communities of ‘affiliation’ are not at all limited to the circulation of literary or philosophical theories. On the contrary, this has become a founding feature of contemporary society as it is easily confirmable in the existence of diverse forms of affiliation, such as those evoked by late capitalist global marketing or those resulting from the free circulation of ideas through the global media networks. The latter, in particular, have radically reconfigured the relationships between elite and popular culture and have created the possibility of a heavy investment in mass mediated forms of political affiliation (Woodhull, 2003).

In an article titled “History, Literature, and Geography”, it is the same Said who presents the complexity of the contemporary situation. Reflecting on the reconfiguration

of the relationships between elite and popular culture and the consequent proliferations of different standpoints he writes:

[We face today] a new geographical consciousness of a de-centered or multiply-centered world, a world no longer sealed within watertight compartments of art of culture or history, but mixed, mixed up, varied, complicated by the new difficult mobility of migrations, the new independent state [...] the concept of literature has been expanded beyond texts to the general category of culture to include the mass media and journalism, film, video, rock and folk music, each of which contains its own completely dissonant history of dissent protest, and resistance, such as the history of students movements, or women's history, or the history of subaltern classes and people. (Said, 2001b: 471)

Yet, if from one side it is undeniable that today there is a proliferation of centers of knowledge production as well as a proliferation of languages and jargons, on the other side this proliferation is not void of power dynamics and does not necessarily correspond to an increase in the circulation of different standpoints. As Ernesto Laclau argues postmodernity is not a simple rejection of modernity; "rather, it involves a different modulation of its themes and categories, a greater proliferation of its language games" (*apud* Kaplan, 1996: 20). In fact, If from one side transnationalization of culture brings with it numerous possibilities for forging alliances and forms of resistance, from the other side, these same conditions also induce the proliferation of old power relationships under the guise of new. This is probably what Grewal and Kaplan (1994) mean when they refer to the idea of "scattered hegemonies" in their book on transnational feminist politic in postmodern time. Or what Jacqui Alexander refers to, when invites the reader to discard the modernist idea of time as linear and progressive, and to get acquainted, instead, with the idea of "a scrambled and palimpsestic time [...] with the premodern, the modern, the postmodern and the paramodern coexisting globally" (2005:190). In other words, with an idea of time in which new and old discursive formations not only coexist, but also conflate.

In this complicated scenario, feminists need to develop critical tools to decode old discursive formations under the guise of new and to react to the attempt on behalf of power formations to appropriate and tame words. As Rosi Braidotti states:

Feminists need to become fluent in a variety of styles and disciplinary angles and in many different dialects, jargons, languages, thereby relinquishing the image of sisterhood in the sense of a global similarity of all women qua second sex in favor

of the recognition and complexity of the semiotic and material conditions in which women operate. (1994:1)

Thus, the existence of a transnational feminism strictly depends on the feminists' capacity to see the limits of any theory or concept as well as to be receptive to the suggestions and influences of theories produced in different settings in the attempt to distinguish between commonalities and inconsistencies among women's needs and priorities. In other words, as Caren Kaplan (1994: 139) suggests, transnational feminism needs to elaborate on a specific "politics of reception".

The practice of a politics of reception is suggested by Kaplan to Western feminists with the aim of counteracting the direction of flows of concepts exclusively 'from the West to the rest' and to facilitate circulations of concepts according to patterns unpredicted by transnational power formations. The urge for a politics of reception originates from the awareness of the strictly interconnected material conditions of women in diverse parts of the world and from the recognition of the imbalance in the circulation of their standpoints. In this perspective, a politics of reception doesn't have to be considered, as 'a good practice' within an already established transnational feminist community, but as a practice which is functional to the construction of such a community. As Alison Jaggar (2000: 21) warns us, we have to reject "the temptation to imagine some transnational counterpublic, within which varying local interpretations of women's subordination receive final and authoritative adjudication". Rather, the political project behind a "politics of reception" should be intended as a project of continuous mutual and collective re-signification of concepts among all members of a transnational community also based on the acknowledgment of the past and present problematic and hierarchical relations among women and within feminism itself.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of a feminist theory of knowledge, which coincides with and contributes to the so-called 'crisis' of modern thought, has determined a substantial redefinition of classical epistemology. Under feminist scrutiny, the subject and the object of knowledge have disclosed their gendered nature, putting under discussion the existence of a universal truth. Investigating the historical origin of the egalitarian model, which denies differences between individuals but leaves aside 'sexual difference', the feminist critique of science has revealed that 'woman' has been constructed as binary opposed to the Cartesian subject. Consequently, feminist epistemology has turned out to be a political project aimed at promoting a positive process of redefinition of 'woman' as subject of an alternative form of knowledge. In this scenario, feminists' claims have

been formulated from the perspective of women's life and experience. In particular, the feminist rejection of postmodern relativism has led to the epistemic practice of addressing the 'politics of location' as a tool for producing more accountable or at least less distorted facts, while also going together with the attempt to develop standpoints through collective analysis of the workings of the ideological system on which social inequalities are based. The idea that, by collectively achieving an oppositional standpoint through political self-consciousness, feminists can generate more objective or less false and distorted accounts of the social world has reinforced the political project of a transnational alliance among women. In this sense, the political project behind transnational feminism can be regarded as a recovery of the main outcomes of the feminist epistemological debate. In fact, the accomplishment of such a project seems to depend mostly on the ability of communities of interpreters to rethink politics in postmodern time, through an analysis of inherited categories of thought and through the production of new concepts and discourses able to account for multiple conditions and claims. In other words, retaining the emancipatory project behind modernism, both feminist epistemology and transnational feminism are busy with the difficult task of accomplishing it through an acknowledgment of differences and inequalities among subject positions. With this aim in mind, transnational feminists who are busy building their communities of affiliation need to be aware of the danger of turning 'the feminist dream of a common language' into a nightmare, if they don't recognize the interdependence, and yet the inequality, among different women's lives and choices as well as their different experiences. This implies for transnational feminists being also able to acknowledge conflict, investigate their own privileged position and drop the search for a paralyzing totality. Coherently, as members of a community of interpreters, transnational feminists should not be seduced by fast consensus-creating signifiers but rather they should consider the epistemic and the ontology behind the terms adopted. This will allow transnational feminists to sharpen their critical tools, since it will avoid the risk of subsuming concepts derived by other historical circumstances emptying them of specificity as well as the risk of assuming meta-feminist positions which inevitably reproduce power relations and colonial legacies.

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