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Gender is power in situated practices: Notes on entanglements

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Introduction

These notes offer some speculations on the impacts of gender and feminist theory on activisms and politics, including public policies. Speculation seems to be almost inappropriate in this era of evidence-based knowledge, a new name for positivism. Since we are dealing with theoretical and political subjects, our inquiry here will take the shape of speculation on the limits of gender and sex in situated practices and knowledges. How is it possible to consider gender and not recognize in the analysis the shapes that race has given to gender? Or the materiality that class relations impose on considering gender? But also how can we understand race without using gender as a possible locus of intersected racialization? Or class, for that matter? Here, I am considering ideas on gender theories and how they impact upon activism and social policies, revealing the pitfalls and traps of liberal state feminism. The first section maps and signals some proposals focusing on the idea that gender is constituted as materiality and not as a social construction. Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity is employed to show how matter and signification are used in this process of creating gendered subjects, who perform, repeat and thus generate the effects of gender that are naturalized as sex.

In the second section, I draw upon intersectionality and its uses to show how some forms of feminism – such as liberal state feminism and neoliberal feminisms – are depoliticizing the concept by transforming it into a methodology. I argue here that such uses of intersectionality are misguided in the sense that they promote a vision of this epistemology as being only a methodological and statistical artefact. Intersectionality is part of a project of social change that includes politics and the ethics of social justice and collective struggle to eradicate discrimination that provide scaffolding to one another. I use examples from the European Institute for Gender Equality, showing how this combination of liberal feminism and state feminism – I am hyphenating both together into liberal-state feminism here in its Euro form – creates the perfect conditions for depoliticizing intersectionality. They appropriate a way of thinking that is characteristic of and present in black feminist thought (Collins and Bilge, 2016), in order to tame it within the Eurocentric white feminist practice – liberal, colonial, carceral and classist. There is also a vital need to figure deaths – social, de facto and symbolic – besides biopolitics and in the field of necropower (Mbembe, 2019) in order to

understand the effects of these matrices of power, such as racism. Abolition feminism (no connection with TERF abolitionists) is expanding notions of justice, rethinking the relation with security forces and showing the connection between carceral systems and slavery. It is of great importance to rethink feminisms from these perspectives if we are to reimagine and remake the antropocenic/capitolecenic world (Haraway, 2016).

In the last section, some feminist efforts are highlighted to illustrate the tensions between these variegated forms of feminism. I focus on examples that are based on the struggle of intersectional feminisms for global social justice and on feminisms that are invested in expanding the notion of care. The need for an explicitly situated intersectionality using social positions and matrices of power is emphasized, drawing upon the work of Nira Yuval-Davis (2015).

Expanding a radical notion of care that can be universalized and not only viewed as something done by women, is the focus of recent work developed by the Care Collective (2020) and Lynne Segal (2023), among others. This way of thinking about the expansion of care as a mandate for collective struggles is founded on the idea of a shared vulnerability (Butler, 2015) that can be used for political action and to build coalitions. These vulnerabilities are personal and global, pertaining to micro, meso and macro levels of care, and require us to expand our notions of politics. On the other hand, using intersectionality to focus on entanglements, implies for instance looking at racism (and gender), not from the perspective of (psychosocial) prejudice or from a single institutional take. Racism also allows the state to be violent, and this mandate of violence is widespread within societies. Gender is also understood as a fundamental part of this structure of domination, being both used by and using racism and racialisation. Therefore, it is vital to think these entanglements through matrices of power.

1. Gender is not socially constructed: Gender matters

This essay seeks to provide a view on gender as a situated practice, using the epistemology of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) as a viewpoint on feminist theory that challenges universalist and single-issue explanations. These universalist views reinforce sexual difference as the means by which gender becomes installed at the heart of contemporary societies. They also tend to reinforce an individualistic vision of gender: each individual *has* a gender and such gender is homologous to sex (as criticized by Amâncio and Oliveira, 2006). Despite its social constitution, gender is viewed as being simultaneously a property of the individual being, a descriptor of population (e.g.: men, women) and an identity or a form of identification for the

subject and for the intelligibility of that subject within the social world. The multipurpose nature of gender, framed in discrete categories that are to be used by the general population, makes it more difficult to extricate from its several meanings and effects in the context of societies that are very oriented around the cisnormative (Ansara and Hegarty, 2012) and heteronormative (Warner, 1993 logic of Western concepts of gender.

The complexity of these categories is partially explored in questionnaires and scales that provide answer options that depict highly charged political categories of women and men as though they are natural and obvious descriptions of the population. Quantitative methods aimed at producing quick and undetailed views of certain social and economic aspects frame it dualistically: male and female, or women and men. Needless to say, these views generate an opacity around categories such as trans*, non-binary and other forms of gender expression. But the mere inclusion of other options in the list of answers does not include the nuances and possible resignifications that social groups, societies and experiences of gender bring to these categories. Therefore there are limits to the statistics and to the production of scientific proof using only quantitative methods.

In public policy, and especially in the diagnosis of the various layers of institutional barriers to gender equality or mainstreaming, the reliance on statistical methods and body count is widespread. While I am not totally denying the relevance of using these body counts, they are usually an impoverished way of understanding the modalities of gender variations and of the way in which gender comes to signify a form of social norms that guide the process of intelligibility. So, in a sense, the portrait they offer is based on the assumptions that gender is a property of the individual, that gender as a descriptor (of a population) is an indicator of the gender dynamics and that these indicators never change. Looking from another angle, these conceptualizations are used as truth regimes of gender and gender experiences. Frequently, politics, and especially public policies, reinforce such views. Take this example from the European Institute for Gender Equality EIGE) and its glossary (via its website) of terminology:

> Sex refers to the biological characteristics which define humans as female or male. These sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive as there are individuals who possess both, but these characteristics tend to differentiate humans as males and females. (EIGE, 2016)

Here, again, we see sexual dimorphism taken as the basis for a biological nature of quasi-gender. Males and females are deemed to be such based on biological characteristics. This

impoverished vision of sex was already being contested by the biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling in her 1985 (!) *Myths of Gender* (Fausto-Sterling, 1985). In a more recent book, Fausto-Sterling (2012) discusses sex as having several layers. Distinguishing between chromosomal sex, foetal gonadal sex, foetal hormonal sex, internal reproductive sex and genital sex, she points out that these are layers of sex that do not always coincide. In addition, during development, other layers are added, including pubertal hormonal sex and pubertal morphological sex. But, more importantly, gender comes into play and signifies these different layers (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Back to the EIGE definitions:

> Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/ time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Other important criteria for socio-cultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age. (EIGE, 2016)

Again, the option chosen is to embrace a (weak) constructionist-driven and impoverished vision of gender. If we employ Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) work to rethink what gender does in the social world, this definition is at best a bad description of gender. In this section, I use Butler's work on gender performativity in a text from 1993, *Bodies that matter*, in order to show that a conception of gender performativity could help to improve political usages of gender and the deployment of gender in public policies.

Gender can be viewed from two different perspectives. We can go all the way back to Spinoza's philosophy (2007) to understand that power (yes, gender is always associated with power) is not only power of command. In Antonio Negri's (2013) reading of Spinoza's philosophy, power can best be described as dual-layered: the power to command, to subordinate, to be obeyed (*potestas*) and the power of potency (*potentia*), in relation to the world and to a possible action. A good example of the power of resistance would be Bartlebly, the scrivener, the eponymous character in a story by Hermann Melville, as described in

Agamben's (1999) shrewd essay, in which the character of Bartleby refuses to act, invoking the principle of preferring not to. This injunction is the pure potency of Bartleby's action in the world. He could have, if he had not preferred otherwise. This is a power associated with the *conatus*, the inclination to persevere in oneself. Butler's (1990) work on performativity discusses gender from both perspectives: compliance with gender norms, which could be associated with a more *potestas* dimension of gender, and the critical revisitations of such norms more associated with a dimension of gender we could conceive as *potentia*. But why would this discussion between philosophy, literature and gender studies help improve EIGE's definition?

Sex, for Butler (1993), is a regulatory ideal whose materialization takes place via highly regulated practices, producing the very body it is said to describe through the reiteration of the norm. It is not by chance that the child becomes invested as an object of extreme concern for conservatives. The child becomes an object of social ventriloquism for the conservatives speaking on behalf of the child's best interests (Butler, 2004) – confounded with their own views, of course. The domain of children's gender is highly valued by gender conservatives, with their mandate of protecting children from gender. The child is at once a symbol and a proof that biology rules supreme, but highly protected and regulated so that sex does its work. However, the work of sex is always already gender because, without the intelligibility of gender norms, that work would not be read as sex.

These highly regulated practices are also the focus of trans-exclusionary forms of feminism, with the boundary work done by these feminists serving the purpose of policing and controlling the borders of the category of woman (Hines, 2020). This policing of gender reveals the extreme anxiety provoked by expressions of gender that do not fit these policed and regulated practices. That these feminists end up doing the same dirty job that gender conservatives do says a lot about their political praxis. Old stories of political allegiances between anti-porn radical feminists and conservatives in the name of fighting pornography (Dymock, 2018) have scarred the movement and should provide a compelling warning. Reviving the old ghost of 'love your enemy', meaning men here, as the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1981) would say, they are ready to do the same with a confessed enemy: the conservatives. This time the alliance is with transphobic and openly antifeminist groups that use the idea of the ideology of gender to attack trans populations and feminists alike (Thurlow, 2022). These are the conservatives who have always been foes to feminism. Still, trans hate speech seems to unite these strange companions.

The same is true of SWERFs (Sex Worker-Exclusionary Radical Feminists – although perhaps the qualification 'radical' is not necessary here, since these feminists are very connected with liberal state feminisms, but I will leave it there, while noting this), who follow suit concerning the rights of sex workers, based on what they expound as a scale of human dignity for middle-class white Euro and Anglo women. Most working-class women would not be able to fit such a scale, since not only do many people have jobs that do not satisfy them, but their work is exploited by capitalism and hence very badly paid. Not only do SWERFs police the borders of human dignity, but they also expect the police and security forces to provide protection to sex workers while enforcing the law. In countries such as Sweden, Norway, Iceland, France, Ireland, Northern Ireland and Canada, the laws criminalizing the clients of sex work are in fact contributing to the active exploitation of sex workers, because the demand does not go away and, in fact, sex work provides paid work for migrant and other vulnerable populations who would have numerous problems in seeking permission to enter their host country due to work visa issues (Stabile, 2000). The criminalization of clients has led to the hiding of sex work from view, it has allowed police persecution targeting clients but with sex workers as collateral, and has been detrimental to the security and health of sex workers. In addition, the fact that it becomes more dangerous for clients has decreased the prices of sex work, impoverishing already vulnerable populations, who are now exposed to greater jeopardy in order to provide their services. Amnesty International (2016, p. 6) has declared:

> Amnesty International considers that to protect the rights of sex workers, it is necessary not only to repeal laws which criminalize the sale of sex, but also to repeal those which make the buying of sex from consenting adults or the organization of sex work (such as prohibitions on renting premises for sex work) a criminal offence. Such laws force sex workers to operate covertly in ways that compromise their safety, prohibit actions that sex workers take to maximize their safety, and serve to deny sex workers support or protection from government officials. They therefore undermine a range of sex workers' human rights, including their rights to security of person, housing and health.

Alongside Amnesty International (2016), the Global Commission of HIV and the law (2012) has expressed reservations to the adoption of any forms of criminalization as harmful for the sex worker. Moreover, the Lancet has devoted an editorial (Lancet, 2023) to the debate in European Parliament encouraging the criminalisation of clients allover the EU, whitout considering the health of sex workers. This criminalization implies a higher exposition of sex

workers to sexually transmitted infections and HIV and contributes to their exclusion from health, legal, economic and other social services, as expressed by the Lancet (2023) editorial. The positions of SWERFs constitute class warfare, and indeed are xenophobic and racist since so many migrants and BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) populations resort to sex work as a way to earn a living, especially on arrival to the host country, and are thus disproportionally affected by these regulations, created in the name of women's rights. This class warfare weaponry is in the hands of white middle-class feminists, who are in a better position to influence laws and social policies, keeping sex-work-related crimes in the civil codes. This is, of course, the effect of gender morality intertwined with gender norms, making the lives of both sex workers and trans populations even more vulnerable.

This shows that even (some) feminists are involved in this work of using gender norms to make the lives of women and other populations even more vulnerable, under the banner of women's rights. This femonationalism (Farris, 2017) can also be seen as an attack on a possible democracy of gender based not on abstract, reified and white middle-class ideas of gender equality, but on an actual, fully-fledged democracy of gender, which seeks a politics of interdependence and shared vulnerabilities. Following Lynne Segal's (2023) proposal for a 'lean on me' politics based on radical care and an admission of shared vulnerability and interdependence, these are absolutely vital if we are to overcome these situations, keeping sex workers and trans people out of the hands of the police, or of a repressive state committed to deportation and to getting rid of these populations, and of feminists who, under the banner of women's rights, help to increase their stigmatization.

These carceral forms of feminism are not the feminisms that interest me. Rather, I seek to focus on radical care feminisms, and feminism and anti-racist movements fighting incarceration (Davis et al., 2022), which is a prolongation of slavery and forced labour by other means. Nonetheless, some other feminists still indulge in helping the police to incarcerate more migrants, sex workers and racialized populations. These state-complicit feminisms, such as neoliberal forms of feminism (Rottenberg, 2020), SWERFs and TERFs, as well as much of state feminism and liberal feminism, are part of the problem of biopolitics and necropolitics. And certainly they are part of the gender border patrol.

Returning to the conceptualization of sex, we saw that sex is not simply a construction, but rather the materialization of norms and their regulatory effects, producing the very bodies they are said to describe. It is through the process of being sexed (by gender as a grid of intelligibility) that subjectivity/subjection is constituted. 'In this sense, the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the "human"' (Butler, 1993, p. 7).

Therefore, both the version of the willing subject who selects and chooses which gender they wish to be, and the version of a construction of gender that impedes any agency in the process, are to be discarded. These are conditions of cultural possibility of materialization that allow the possible resignifications and failed performances of gender – from the point of view of compliance with the norm. So thinking about gender as a construction fails to grasp the full extent of the effects of performativity, how matrices of power constitute certain sexed bodies, making them possible culturally. The sex-worker body, the trans body, the multitude of monsters engendered by the resignifications of gender norms, are more transparent to the structures of discourse, technology and norms from which they become possible. These bodies all belong to a constitutive outside marked as abject. Social movements, however, have been struggling to produce a sort of resignification of gender norms in order to be intelligible and possess political agency. As Susan Stryker (1994, p. 251) points out eloquently:

> for we have done the hard work of constituting ourselves on our own terms, against the natural order. Though we forego the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth.

The denaturalization of gender offered by feminist and queer critique has been fundamental:

> Indeed, I would argue that it is a critique without which feminism loses its democratizing potential through refusing to engage – take stock of, and become transformed by – the exclusions which put it into play. (Butler, 1993, p. 29)

This citation from Butler makes a lot of sense even now in a world where some feminists, impervious to queer and trans critique, still dream of a feminism of women born women where trans women are not welcome. They do not realize how lethal such cis-supremacy dreams are for trans women, undoing them as women and exposing their mark of vulnerability when not even women support their existence as women. This hallmark of transphobic genocide, of making these bodies yet more unintelligible within the system of gender norms, means that liberal and state feminism are silent in their complicity with the overkill of transpeople, especially trans women. Berenice Bento (2016) talks about transfeminicide as a part of feminicide.

This is also evident in the harm done directly to sex workers by feminists who advocate for the abolition of sex work. This further stigmatizes their work as undignified when so many working-class people face jobs that are very badly paid and deeply exploited. There is no serious attempt to reverse this situation. SWERFs positions and the laws inspired by them have had a huge impact on the health (The Lancet, 2023) and well-being of sex workers, by forcing them to deal with the police, foreign office and incarceration, by persecuting their clients, and by turning their way of making a living into a illegal affair. SWERFs have directly harmed these women in the name of women's rights.

The performativity of gender implies other politics, other strategies of intervention in the political. Transforming gender norms is not simply a matter of abolishing them by decree or changing them. Norms are always instantiations of power, right from the start. This means they are more a theory of use than a theory of antagonizing power. Remembering Spinoza (Oliveira, 2016), power is not only command, but also potency. But potency is implicated in power. Therefore:

> Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (Butler, 1993, 241)

This is a theory of action that is not concerned with purity, but rather with producing certain effects. It is an act of affirmative sabotage (Spivak, 2012), by turning power against itself, the example being Fanon (2017) using Hegel's master and slave dialetics against Europe in the context of African decolonization: 'Fanon's lesson was that you use what the masters have developed and turn it around in the interests of those who have been enslaved or colonized' (Spivak, 2014, p. 61). So it is no longer an idea of a passive construction, but rather a strong idea of a performativity and materialization of gender in our bodies and in our social and cultural lives. Insisting upon the simple construction of gender keeps gender depoliticized, and without the vital resources needed for social change.

2- Gender is not a single-issue subject: Intersectionality and hyphenation

The work undertaken by black feminists, positioning intersectionality as a fundamental paradigm for research on gender studies, is pivotal for understanding the new political and scientific paradigms that have been developed for studying and thinking about discrimination and privilege. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (2008) is very useful here, because it perceives intersectionality from the perspective of power relations. Black feminist thought has been pivotal in never avoiding studying how power operates in the interstices of categories. These are not monolithic or discrete categories, but rather porous and diffracted, to use Haraway's (2004) conceptualization. This rethinking of categories is vital, positioning the interplay between them as fundamental to understanding the dynamics of discrimination. Therefore, intersectionality is key to understanding how multiple forms of discrimination interact and generate specific effects on specific social positions:

> Intersectionality as an analytic tool examines how power relations are intertwined and mutually constructing. Race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, ethnicity, nation, religion, and age are categories of analysis, terms that reference important social divisions. But they are also categories that gain meaning from power relations of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation. (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 7)

That is, intersectionality is an analytics of power that explores how social categories acquire meaning from power dynamics that are related to structural elements within societies. The work on structural racism (Almeida, 2019), for instance, shows that racism is at the core of contemporary societies and is an integral part of rising social inequalities. Another very good definition of racism links it to State structures: 'Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerabilities to premature (social, civil and/or corporeal) death' (Gilmore, 2007, p. 247). This link between the various forms of death promoted by racism make it an integral part of necropolitics. It is more than the right to kill – as Foucauldian biopolitics already includes that – being the right to promote social death, enslavement and various forms of political violence (Mbembe, 2019). An example would, of course, be the enslaved Africans brought to the Americas during the European Expansion period, but contemporary forms of necropolitics also include several forms of apartheid, the mitigation of social benefits leaving populations subjected to different forms of deprivation and impoverishment, the settler colonization of Palestine and the politics of maiming and generating injured populations (see Puar, 2017), the widespread

incarceration of black populations and the criminalization of poverty, among many other examples. These are some of the examples of necropolitics that need to be rethought in the light of intersectional complexity.

These connections contradict the depoliticization of intersectionality used as a methodology. Its usage as a category of analysis requires paying attention to the ways in which these power relations give meaning and materiality to these forms of discrimination and social differentiation. Therefore, when discussing intersectionality, this stance of critical praxis needs to be addressed. Failing to do so provides results oriented by a logic of additive discrimination, or simple interactive discrimination. The logic of intersectionality is analytical and political: it is not a simple methodology of putting data together in order to extract patterns of co-occurrence or simple multiple and connected forms of discrimination. It is an analytics of power relations based on relationality, complexity and context; it is concerned with social justice and reveals the multiple enmeshed components of social inequalities (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). This form of thinking/action stems from the black feminist and abolitionist organizations that trained activists and intellectuals who understood the interconnectedness and interdependence of the power structures they were trying to analyse and subvert as black women.

However, for an intersectional framework, this position of black women means paying attention to how gender and race never act alone or in pure forms, they are always signified and materialized by power relations in specific contexts. Therefore a focus on social positions seems to be very useful for understanding how intersectionality works. It is not so much about identity, as about social positions (Hill Collins and Birge, 2016) that are focused on structural intelligibilities within social categories. How people are read and treated according to these categories is always a matter of context. Also, contextual and situational backgrounds offer the possibility of understanding the grounding of such a position. Subject positions inside these categories are vital for understanding the positions occupied inside the discourses that constitute and give materiality to these positions.

Firstly, categories like woman, black or Asian seem to be too broad and single-issue for an intersectional analysis. Intersected categories are more useful for understanding this overlapping and co-constituted effect, such as black women, or indigenous non-binary, among others. We could draw from the work of Chicanas such as Gloria Anzaldúa, with her focus on mestiza consciousness, to also understand the historicity and contextualization of categories that tells difficult stories to single-issue

movements. Anzaldúa explored the stories of mestizas such as Malintzin, who was stuck between two countries and two cultures during the Spanish invasion, bringing competing narratives of betrayal to ethno-nationalism and of the emancipation of her need to create her own space and worldview. Therefore social intelligibilities sometimes offer subject positions that, while seeming paradoxical, nonetheless acquire sense in the lived reality of such cultures and landscapes. Anzaldúa (1987, p. 276) calls these in-between spaces:

> Nepantla, which is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing.

The experiences of liminality and becoming that Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) discusses reveal another important aspect of intersectionality. This third space, if we use Homi Bhabba's (2004) concept, is a new space of negotiation, fluidity and change when cultures collide and encounter each other. Each person inside this space is a hybrid within these spaces of collision, and therefore is a singularity. These ideas flowing from postcolonial scholarship are very important for understanding the promise of intersectionality, since it is a theory that shares with these ideas a need to understand the in-between spaces and liminality. The reduction of intersectionality to identity politics hides from view the promises that the concept can offer if seen from a theoretical and political perspective. In my view, intersectionality offers the possibility of thinking with and about the intertwined effects of multiple categories/matrices of privilege and oppression working at the same time. Subject positions are influenced asymmetrically by these effects, depending on the context. But intersectionality also offers the possibility of thinking and producing knowledge about experiences of liminality, such as the figure of the Malintzin, or the figure of the diasporic black woman, or the North African refugees on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, making it a new underwater cemetery at the gates of fortress Europe.

This focus on the lived and singular experience of the effects of several forms of death – social, civil and corporeal – in the context of necropolitics was the target of the analysis undertaken by Saadya Hartman (2008) in her essay, *Venus in Two Acts*. How can one tell the story of two young enslaved black girls killed aboard a slave ship, one of whom is almost totally absent from the archives? Of course, her enslaved name, Venus, suggests sexualization, implying that she was aboard as a sexual treat for sailors and officers at a time when rape and sexual violence, including homicide, was customary in such places. The descriptions of torture,

violence and cruelty are very difficult to read, let alone imagine. The archives also contain the white people's views on slavery, and it is therefore impossible to use them to get a glimpse of the experiences of the enslaved amidst such horrors. This is the stuff of horror movies, but it was nonetheless lived by targets of necropolitics. Enslavement belongs to this list of horrors, and to conceive and imagine the lives of these two girls marked for death, and then dead, but not from the position of the white male gaze, from elsewhere, was the task of Saadya Hartman (2008, p. 12, emphasis in original):

> The intent of this practice is not to *give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death – social and corporeal death – and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.

This work of trying to uncover an unrecoverable past, of telling about the experience of functioning in the realm of death, aboard a slave ship where cruelty and slaughter are served daily, is the work of critical fabulation, of trying to create a disruptive narrative:

> However, the *history* of black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing. (Hartman, 2008, p. 13, emphasis in original)

This haunting, this possibility of offering counter-histories as a project of bringing in the dead, ancestors and zombies who live in the space of necropolitics, is vital if we are to understand what Avery Gordon (2008) presents as the effects of haunting: ghosts that are present by dint of their very absence produce social effects. Such is the case with Venus. Hartman's critical fabulation, although necessarily a failure as Hartman reflects upon it, produced the effect of making Venus present by the very awareness of her absence. This does not, of course, bring the dead back to life, but it does manage in some sense to mark their absence as an effect. The stories of so many people, positioned in this shadowy realm of necropolitics, need to be at least narrated in some sense in order to make visible the mechanisms and processes that marked them for death. In my view, this is a very good example of how intersectional thought can lead

us to think between and with these categories of race, gender and enslavement. This can enable us to understand, not only their social positions, but also the need for counter-stories and counter-histories for these subject positions of those marked for death, in the sense of a history that tells more about the oppressed, not only the victorious (Benjamin, 2003).

What is preventing us from seeing the potential of intersectionality is this methodological sense, which seems to have reduced intersectionality and black feminist tradition to issues of indicators and body counts. Intersectionality demands a philosophical and political background because it is a way of telling more complex stories of political economy, commodification, bodies and corpses that can be used for producing and demanding social change. Intersectionality can be a cogent way to make these stories, experiences and counter-histories heard, and thus could be seen as a way of training the imagination for epistemological performance (Spivak, 2012). These multiple stories are complex and cannot be reduced to only one matrix of power operating. They imply that several combinations are at stake here, and that they produce effects that are synergistic, not only multiple. By this, I mean that combined matrices of power will produce effects that are not additive, since intersectionality is not an addition of forces.

Using intersectional framings as a larger epistemological project, I employ the term hyphenation (Oliveira, 2014) – the process of connecting two different words, making them count as one – to debate the ways in which knowledges connect. A good example would be queer(-)feminism, which links both knowledge-practices, working together as strands of both feminism and queer theory. These connections between knowledges involve the transference of ways of thinking, political praxis and methodological practices, which are transferred from one body of knowledge to others. This connector is a good textual metaphor for the crossings and encounters between knowledges, encounters that cause these knowledges to merge and converge. These are permutations in bodies of knowledge that lead to very relevant and combined advances in our understanding of complex and multi-layered ways of building knowledges that are able to resist. The best example is black feminist thought. As affirmed by Patricia Hill Collins (2008), the intellectual efforts of African American and other women of African descent have been directed towards social change, via producing and reproducing subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 1980). These knowledges are a direct result of a compromise with social justice by a group that has been systematically oppressed at the crossroads of race, gender and class, but also sexual orientation, age and functional diversity, among others (Hill Collins, 2008). The very idea of African American or Afropean women is intersectional.

These forms of subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980), to use the Foucauldian concept, have been deauthorized, delegitimized and deemed irrelevant for a long time. However, as shown repeatedly, these are the knowledges that are providing a haven for ideas and policies that can inscribe radical change into everyday politics. Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Miners and Beth Richie (2022) aptly demonstrate within the framework of abolitionist feminism the need to think feminism and abolition together. The abolitionist feminism project that they are collectively producing requires vital changes such as the abolition of prisons and incarceration, restorative justice instead of prison sentences, defunding the police and investing in communities' self-governance. This project has been fuelled by the racist executions of black women and men in the United States, including George Floyd, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd and many others. This is the US context, but the disproportionate rate of incarceration of black people and police violence against them occurs worldwide. Marielle Franco comes to mind, as an example of a black women who was executed as a councilwoman for Rio de Janeiro. No doubt a political assassination of a Brazilian, lesbian, favela dweller, woman, black and working class, Marielle had her political action and her life cut short. Nonetheless, her vision is kept alive, marking an absence that still produces effects, a ghostly matter, a haunting (Gordon, 2007).

This leads us to also question the way in which the depoliticization of intersectionality is being used to contain its effects. I am thinking here about the merely statistical use of intersectionality as an indicator. The EIGE's (2016) definition of an intersectional gender approach is: 'Social research method in which gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and other social differences are simultaneously analysed'. Note how the lexicon of intersectionality is reduced socially, politically and analytically. In a nutshell, it is impoverished.

For Gayatri Spivak (2013, p. 118): 'to lexicalize is to separate a linguistic item from its appropriate grammatical system into the conventions of another grammar'.So, to lexicalize intersectionality in the glossary of liberal state Eurofeminism means taking any critical edge that can promote social change or that can resemble any remote feature of the original proposals. We have been witnessing the use of this procedure to tame or restrain the more radical proposals made within intersectional or black feminist thought. This containment strategy to make intersectionality palatable for liberal feminist discourse is, from my perspective, a strategy of depoliticization. State liberal European feminism has framed intersectionality in terms of an idea of merely adding other variables to illustrate complexity. But if we take a look at their ideas on gender equality, there is really no place for intersectional considerations. The EIGE (2016) definition of gender equality states:

This refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women's issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development.

Gender equality is defined without any concerns about the situatedness of inequality. Actors are women and men. Sexual dimorphism is stressed and highlighted and the binaries of gender are expressed as European policy. This definition does not include any concerns about specific subject positions, and it is destined to fail, because it does not acknowledge any effects of overlapping, cross-cutting or interactional effects of the specific ways in which gender is shaped by other categories, such as race, class, sexuality, migratory status or functional diversity, among many others. This leaves the majority of the people it claims to represent outside this vexed way of representing 'women'. Of course, not taking into account the situatedness of any of the intersections (Yuval-Davis, 2015), implies not accounting at all for hyphenation processes and, therefore, voices outside the liberal framework are neither represented nor able to reframe these policies. In the lexicon of positivist-oriented science, the dialectics of liberal-state-oriented feminism at the EU level has found a perfect way to represent the inexorable path towards progress and equality by focusing on statistics and quantitative assessments. They have transformed intersectional positions into indicators.

These assessments focus on groups of women who are already inside the system, and never on the women who show that the system needs to change. For instance, in the statistics on gender equality in universities, women in the cleaning sector are generally ignored. In most EU countries, these women are mostly not white, they are working class and usually less qualified. Their presence could tarnish the statistics that demonstrate European progress in gender equality within universities. In addition, their service is subcontracted, so they become even more invisible due to their contract status. But it is precisely these women for whom intersectionality was created, to politicize their presence in society and to reflect upon the shortcomings of a liberal notion of gender equality, that most of the time, ignoring race and class, treats gender equality as a privilege of the few, not the many.

Moving forward: Dimensioning the social and the political

These notes, using either theoretical and political forms of thinking about gender and feminism, or examples of the contingency of social situations, converge on the need to fight for better material conditions of existence within the frame of a wider struggle against neoliberal rationalities in economic policy, with an understanding of situated intersections that not only extend beyond economics but come to signify these economic policies. This implies that only considering material conditions may not be enough without taking further measures to think about the contingency of social situations. Two examples are offered below: the first is domains of situated intersectionality as proposed by Nira Yuval-Davis (2015), and the second is recent work on the expansion of care provision as radical politics, by Lynne Segal (2023) and the Care Collective (2020).

Yuval-Davis (2015) describes four domains that it can be helpful to consider when tackling a situated intersectional form of thinking about this contingency. One is the state domain and its borders. The ways in which states operate – locally, nationally, regionally and supra-nationality – is a crucial part of thinking about these entanglements. The level of legitimacy of governance, the ways in which social and political actors are figured in state action and the wide range of effects this has on people living in a territory, are some of the concerns of this domain. The second domain relates to zoning:

> the boundaries of the multi-scalar zones in which differential levels of different kinds of economic, social, cultural and political resources are produced, reproduced and are distributed (or not) to the people living within these boundaries. (Yuval-Davis, 2015, p. 98)

Another domain to consider has to do with different forms of belonging to political or social projects (citizenship, religions, nationalism and others). The last domain pertains to structures of reproduction – social, biological and symbolic – such as gender, generation and local communities, among others. All these levels are permeated by social inequalities, different forms of social capital and different ways of enhancing or diminishing social inequalities. It is interesting to take these levels into consideration because they presuppose different scales, temporalities and locations, either social, geographical or even geopolitical.

Yuval-Davis (2015) proposes a situated intersectionality, largely focused on social inequalities and their distribution. This effort to move beyond identity and contemplating social structures seems very promising in order to reveal how combinations of situated knowledges

are useful for understanding the interplay between structural forms of power relations and the more diffused power that extends everywhere in societies. Thinking about power implies considering the various ways in which it works and controls, constituting either a more dynamic or a more structural way, or even both at the same time. This leads to important dialogues between these approaches, namely a more discursive one with a more structural approach. Focusing on the possibilities offered by such dialogues, intersectionality viewed from this situated perspective may be useful in offering a description that is more nuanced, does not focus entirely on class like classic Marxist approaches, but can offer analytics that bring these different facets together to incorporate the complex interplay between various axes of power relations.

Therefore, this idea of intersectionality as a fundamental analytical tool to understand complex, multilayered axes of oppression and privilege, which are nonetheless located in specific geospatial temporalities, implies going much further than a vision based strictly on identity politics. Understanding the politics of location is fundamental here.

The work on care is of central importance in this vision. Care provision is not only limited to the sphere of reproduction, but can be viewed in a more universal way. The work produced by The Care Collective (2020), consisting of Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg and Lynne Segal, is based on a critique of the carelessness regimes that have been implemented via neoliberal austerity regimes and within a context of hard-right dystopian vision. As shown by Segal (2023), this tragedy that has been inflicted on the working class and the more underprivileged sectors of society is based on an erosion of care provision, which is attacked by the media using misogynistic metaphors such as the nanny state. This has successfully created a politics of carelessness, entire regimes of it. The privatization of care provision under a minimal State neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2015), the constant threat to the budgets for healthcare, welfare, culture and education, along with the austerity logics applied to these sectors, have increasingly jeopardized the public care provision once available to everyone. Therefore, an important struggle for the universality of care provision needs to be incorporated into social movements and into radical democratic politics. An acknowledgement of the interdependence between humans, between humans and other, non-human actors, and with the environment is a basic condition for understanding the importance of care at this stage.

Butler (2015) claimed that shared vulnerability is a possible sign of coalition, a shared interdependence of our frailty as bodies. This performativity of the body as political, as the site for shared weaknesses, but also an opportunity for shared political alliances, is inspired by the

claims of disability studies, which have been vocal in claiming interdependence as a universal for humans. Indeed, human life without care would be utterly impossible, and the lack of attention given to care can only be justified by a gendered division of labour that treats care as an intrinsic quality of women, who are destined to provide it.

Lynne Segal (2023), addressing the issue of this interdependence, argues that it is crucial to consider how certain figures, such as mothers, people with disabilities, social movements for radical democracy, the elderly, politics and involvement in local communities are important to teach people how to 'lean on me', rather than to 'lean in', the title of a book by a social media executive, to which Segal alludes in her title. Instead of adapting and moving forward in a world where this careless regime threatens even the planet we share, this mandate for universal care as a right and a condition to move, emphasizes the relevance of care and being cared for at all levels. It brings the body back to the centre of political action, a body that is viable only through certain conditions of existence and relationality (Butler, 2015).

I read these works, along with the work of Wendy Brown (2015), as an important attempt to break with the mandate of neoliberalism so well expressed in the obscene observation of Margaret Thatcher: 'There is no such thing as society. Only individuals and their families.' It is obscene because it does not recognize the network of hands that made such individuals and such families viable, that cared for them and were cared for by them. It is obscene because it condemns citizens to a carelessness regime, where everything is turned into a resource. This model of thinking is shared by many, under corporate greed and State connivence in the destruction of the commons, privatized under the name of profit of shareholders (Segal, 2023).

This bleak situation can, however, provide the foundations for life-affirming struggles. The struggle for climate justice and against the social mandate of the capitalocene (Moore, 2015) – cheap nature and a right to exploit it – is another good example of bodies organizing by using our interdependence and need to care and to be cared for the very planet that we live on (Haraway, 2016). Thinking with these movements is vital, as is thinking with Black Lives Matter, feminist and queer collectives, the people with disability movement, trans and sex workers' movements and radical democracy groups. Theory can help us to understand the mapping and the cartographies of action, but the strategies and tactics used by these movements are the dynamics of the different ways in which these questions can be reframed and transformed into practice.

A feminist movement and theory that is centred only on essentialist views of gender fails to understand gender itself. As I hope to have shown in this text, a narrowly focused view

of gender does not include other matrices of power, where gender is used to constitute specific subject positions. This porosity of gender to other categories is very well expressed in the concept of intersectionality, and specifically the idea of situated intersectionality presented by Nira Yuval-Davis (2015). Gender is then a gender that is never gender alone, a gender that is enacted by other axes of power. This conception of discrimination also implies that public policies should not focus only on single issues, but also on multiple intersections, as we have shown (Malfrán and de Oliveira, 2020), by applying intersectional lenses to understand the effects of Cuban social policies on medically assisted reproduction and trans citizenship. So intersectionality can make a relevant contribution to understanding gender not only in scholarly production but also in the definition, formulation and analysis of concrete public policies.

To conclude, I would like to revisit critical race studies, whose inquiry makes us think of racism as:

> a relentless daily fact of life in American society, and the ideology of racism and white supremacy are ingrained in the political and legal structures so as to be nearly unrecognizable. Racism is a constant, not aberrant, occurrence in American society. (Cummings, 2013, p. 108)

I do not think this is only a case of American exceptionalism, but a more general problem observed in Western societies. This is a logic followed by liberal democracies founded on colonization, empire and white supremacy when confronted with their own racism or other inequalities, and treat those problems as aberrations, bias or a distorted way of understanding reality. This logic of a few bad apples in the basket fails to recognize the racist foundations of the state, the inherent logic of the mass incarceration of black people as a continuation of servitude and slavery, and the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities to racialized people. Liberal democracies understand racism as an individual problem, something resembling a lack of consciousness or biased and prejudiced individual expressions. As Sílvio Almeida (2019) explains, under this conception of individualistic racism, the problem lies in individuals who are racists, and such racism could be eradicated by sanctions in civil codes. However, this lack of recognition of its social aspects leads to a belief that racism can be fought simply by educating people and punishing racist actions. This vision of remedial, short-term responses does not acknowledge that racism is widespread, present in both explicit and implicit ways, interlinked with other inequalities and common in Western societies. Racism, as Foucault puts it in a brief lesson on the topic at the College de France, is not an issue of

discrimination, of ideology, or of prejudice, it is a necessary condition and justification for the State to inflict violence on the population. Foucault describes in the transition from the 18th to the 19th centuries, a change from the anatomo-politics of the human body – from which the division into a dual model of sexes ensues (see Laqueur, 1990) – to what he calls the biopolitics of the human race. That is:

> Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die. (Foucault, 2008, p. 247)

Racism enters the stage as a state mechanism of power by setting conditions and justifications for letting people die. It makes a separation between populations worth preserving and others that should be eradicated, based on discourses of the appropriation of evolutionism and racial theories. In fact, racialization, the political grammar of colonization, was at work here. Foucault uses the example of Nazism to understand the logics of racism as a State mechanism. But, in the case of Europe, many other countries also had this racism of state as a mandate and operated through this to exterminate the colonized, or any groups for that matter, who refused European domination. Whether in Africa, the Americas, Oceania or Asia, the repertoire of European colonial racism saw States participating in the extermination of indigenous populations, who were wiped out, brutalized, expropriated and enslaved (Lindqvist, 1996).

This racial capitalism (Sweeney, 2021) introduced by European countries includes racialization, but also gendering, as vital mechanisms. Gender needs to be considered as part of these systems of domination. Rather than looking at gender as a naturalized form of difference and segmentation of a population, thinking about the political economy of gender requires a similar shift to the one that Critical Race Studies performed on race. Taking gender from a field of individual identities, group membership or even social construction, thinking on gender becomes another way to reiterate power over bodies, people and populations. This view of gender as simultaneously material and an operation of power, at both micro and macro levels, implies a critique of the visions that occlude these workings of power, such as the liberal state feminism of the European Union, so eloquently expressed in the definitions, policies and framing of Euro gender equality. Additionally, treating gender as a single issue fails to think about or address the intricate ways in which gender connects, refigures and is refigured by other mechanisms of power and becomes inscribed in the state and in social life. In my view,

gender is a situated materialization of power, enmeshed with and propelled/inhibited by other matrices of power.

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