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## *Feminist Metaphilosophy*

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and Giovanna Miolli

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## *Feminist Metaphilosophy*

- 1 *Feminist Metaphilosophy: An Introduction*  
Valentina Bortolami and Giovanna Miolli
- 15 *Metaphilosophy: A What and A Why*  
Kristie Dotson
- 33 *¿Es posible una recuperación de la fenomenología desde la filosofía feminista?*  
Danila Suárez Tomé and Diana Maffía
- 51 *De la revuelta feminista, la historia y Julieta Kirkwood*  
Alejandra Castillo
- 67 *Philosophy, Feminism and the Popular Field in Latin America*  
Luciana Cadahia
- 89 *La cita feminista: Nelly Richard entre feminismos, crítica cultural y filosofía chilena*  
Karen Glavic

- 111 *On the Uses and Abuses of Doing Feminist Philosophy with Hegel*  
Rachel Falkenstern
- 133 *Come nottola al tramonto: ipotesi su metodo e scopo delle future filosofie femministe*  
Damiano Migliorini
- 159 *A New Ameliorative Approach to Moral Responsibility*  
Michelle Ciurria
- 183 *On the Metaphilosophical Implications of the Naturalism Question in Feminism*  
Valentina Bortolami
- 209 *Composting Contemporary Metaphilosophy with Feminist Philosophical Perspectives: Towards an Account of Philosophy's Concreteness*  
Giovanna Miolli

### ***Book Reviews***

- 241 A. Balzano, *Per farla finita con la famiglia. Dall'aborto alle parentele postumane*  
(Giovanna Miolli)
- 248 R.M. Carusi, *Lacan and Critical Feminism: Subjectivity, Sexuation, and Discourse*  
(Elena Tripaldi)

- 255 D. Ferreira da Silva, *A Dívida Impagável*  
(Aléxia Bretas)
- 261 J. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*  
(Anna Guerini)
- 268 A. Stone, *Being Born: Birth and Philosophy*  
(Silvia Locatelli)
- 275 F. Vergès, *The Wombs of Women*  
(Sabrina Morán and María Cecilia Padilla)



theories of the subject – which can find a reference in the autonomous and rational Cartesian and Kantian subject – but finding in these uncertainties and human finiteness the existential value of our being in the world.

This text undoubtedly succeeds in its aim, which is most likely the primary one of any properly philosophical reflection, especially from the perspective of a feminist philosopher such as Stone: to analyze philosophically an event – here, that of birth – to (1) make our existence authentic precisely because of its finiteness, vulnerability, and contingencies and (2) direct our relationship with reality in a responsible, communal, and shared way. In other words, this text breathes the possibility of reuniting philosophical thought and lived life.

(Silvia Locatelli)

FRANÇOISE VERGÈS, *The Wombs of Women. Race, Capital and Feminism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 155 (ISBN: 9781478009412).

Intersectionality and postcolonialism constitute two dimensions of third-wave feminism that have developed extensively during the first decades of the twenty-first century. Having overcome essentialist assumptions concerning race and gender, as well as the vindication of gender's priority over class and race, feminism has become plural, historically and geographically situated<sup>6</sup>. On the one hand, intersectionality sheds light on how the interaction between diverse dimensions of women's subjectivity is embodied in political institutions and power devices that reproduce the status quo and oppression. Forged by K. Crenshaw in 1989, this term refers to how black women have been invisibilized both by white feminist discourse and antiracist vindications focused on the violence and oppression suffered by black men. It finds in the interaction between gender and race the explanation behind black

<sup>6</sup> S. Gamble, *Feminism and Postfeminism*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

women's inequality and violent experiences<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, post-colonial theory condemns the ethnocentrism that has characterized hegemonic feminism and proposes to account for not only the cultural diversity that shapes women's different experiences of inequality – although this perspective can easily lead to progressive racism – but also the vestiges of coloniality in postcolonial societies, which are still struggling with their subordinate character<sup>8</sup>. Originally published in French under the title, *Le ventre des femmes, Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme* in 2017 by *La Fabrique*, *The Wombs of Women* constitutes a daring bet on the profoundization of the relationship between these two perspectives, synthesized in the proposal of a *decolonial feminism*. Françoise Vergès urges us to transcend the vindication of 'women's rights' and expand the feminist struggle to the horizons of social justice and emancipation, and against imperialism, racism, and capitalism. Changing the entire system is mandatory if we are to eradicate the coloniality of power<sup>9</sup>, and the forgotten history of the violence suffered by black women in Reunion Island is proof of this matter.

Françoise Vergès was born in Paris and raised in Reunion Island and Algeria. She studied journalism in Paris and political science and women's studies in California, where she went on to obtain her PhD in social sciences at Berkeley University. Her thesis, *Monsters and revolutionaries: colonial family romance and métissage*, concerns Reunion Island's political history – in which her family have been protagonists – and was published by Duke University Press in 1999. Since then, Vergès has published several books and articles concerning colonialism, slavery, racism, and feminism, both in French and English, from an interdisciplinary perspective. As a politically active feminist and one of the greatest French specialists in decolonial feminism, she has been named president of the

<sup>7</sup> K. Davis, *L'intersectionnalité, un mot à la mode. Ce qui fait le succès d'une théorie féministe*, «Les cahiers du CEDREF», XX, 2015. Available on: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cedref.827>.

<sup>8</sup> G.C. Spivak, *Crítica de la razón poscolonial*, Madrid, Akal, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> «The latter constituted itself through the naturalization of racial difference and the division of the world into North and South. A decolonial politics questions a republic that accumulates inequalities, discriminations, and policies of abandonment» (p. 8).

French committee for the memory and history of slavery in 2009, and she is currently president of the association *Décoloniser les arts*. In short, her biography and work are an expression of her commitment to the history and the present of Reunion Island and the struggles of black women as political subjects from a decolonial feminist perspective<sup>10</sup>.

In *The Wombs of Women*, Vergès takes up her extensive labor on the history of Reunion Island, deploying her journalistic and documentarist skills, as the reconstruction of the case is solely based on public records and articles, demonstrating that the crimes against Reunionese black women are not secret or hidden. In fact, although the history of Reunionese women who suffered reproductive violence constitutes the axis of this text, it works as a sort of excuse to put on the table the failures of French postcolonial republicanism, the limitations of second-wave French feminism, and the progressive racism running through both. What does the history of reproductive violence against black women in Reunion Island tell us about the French state, the Fifth Republic, and French feminism<sup>11</sup>? Why is it not a part of French historiography? The construction of this oblivion in French history prompts an analysis revealing the violence against black women's bodies since the colonial regime.

Vergès focuses on the brutalization of nonwhite women in Reunion Island in the 1970s by state-appointed medical professionals (doctors and nurses) through the performance of unwanted and forcible abortions and sterilizations. Despite being a local story, it is inscribed within a larger context of inequality between the French metropolis and the former colonial territories and, more largely, within a history of managing black women's bodies and wombs for the sake of capitalism in Third World countries: that is, of a racialized patriarchal, capitalist, and postcolonial structure of exploitation. Three axes traverse her study: 1) a decolonial feminism as the theoretical perspective from which the author highlights

<sup>10</sup> Her book *Un féminisme décolonial* (Paris, La Fabrique, 2019) synthesizes her theoretical perspective.

<sup>11</sup> As the author explains, the expression 'French feminism' was invented in Anglo-North American academy to designate a theoretical corpus centered mainly on Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig, however, we follow Vergès in using it to refer to the French feminists she criticizes (p. 113).

the persistence of colonial capitalist structures of power and black women's exploitation; 2) the necessity of writing another French national history to give place to these stories and doom the universalism and assimilationism sustained on the colonialist idea of civilization that has persisted all along the postcolonial Fifth Republic; 3) a holistic critique of French national feminism – specifically the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) – deeply rooted in French republicanism, and the affirmation of the urgency to denationalize it and vindicate intersectionality. In this regard, Vergès affirms that the story of the wombs of black Reunionese women illustrates «connections between the republic and various processes of racialisation, between gender, sex, class and race» (p. 90). In this sense, to Vergès, the differences between biopolitics developed in the Hexagon and the DOM during the 1960s are proof not only of the existence of multiple temporalities and spatialities of French republican postcoloniality, but also of the sustained coloniality of power and, consequently, of «the absence or the failure of republicanism» (p. 118).

The book begins with a detailed description of the complaints of the 30 black women who reported the doctors' and nurses' crimes and progressively extends the scope inscribing these facts – and their oblivion – in the cartographies of postcolonial France and French feminism. In Vergès' words, «This study seeks not to add forgotten chapters to the history of France, but to question the very structure of the narrative» (p. 3). In Chapter 1, entitled *The Island of Doctor Moreau* after H.G. Wells's work of science fiction, Vergès presents her case study: the nonconsensual abortions and sterilizations performed at the Saint-Benoit clinic in Réunion Island in the 1970s. Relying on newspaper articles, public records, and judicial archives, the author provides a chronological account of the events from the onset of the investigation in June 1970, as well as a thorough description of the primary figures implicated in the case (such as doctors, nurses, and public officials) and of the victim's testimonies, featured for the most part in the Reunionese Communist Party newspaper, *Témoignages*. The three main points Vergès seeks to highlight are the brutality exerted against the bodies of black women, the misappropriation of public funds by the doctors and nurses managing the clinic through overbilling for procedures, and the ideological discourse behind these so-called birth control policies (which she delves into in Chapter 3 and 4). Vergès uses the testimonies to prove that women were not only

unaware of the procedures, but also harmed by them on a physical, emotional, and social level, since many were then rejected by their husbands and families. However, as she explains, they did not receive any reparations, and they were largely forgotten, while the doctors and their accomplices received mild consequences, mostly in the form of fines; in particular, Dr. Moreau, who had ordered the abortions, was never formally accused.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Vergès places this case study within the larger context of postcolonialism and capitalism, respectively. Chapter 2 describes the political, social, and cultural elements that characterized the relations between metropolitan France and the overseas departments (DOM) after the birth of the Fifth Republic and the elaboration of a new cartography, vocabulary, and ideology regarding the former colonies. Her aim is to demonstrate that the forced abortions and sterilizations were neither a remnant of the colonial past nor an isolated case of abuse of power, but part of the postcolonial ideology and policies of the French state. The discourse behind these policies is what Vergès calls the ‘rhetoric of impossible development’, according to which the primary obstacle to African development and modernization was overpopulation, caused by the ‘fault’ of Reunionese people – that is, of poor and black Reunioneses. This false rhetoric – which failed to account for the capitalist dependence which was the real cause of underdevelopment – was embraced not only in the Hexagon and by the mass of newly appointed civil servants coming from France, but also by a new Reunionese middle class of nonwhites and formerly poor whites (social workers, nurses) who, seeking assimilation and the French way of life, eventually supported the programs for reducing birth rates in the lower classes.

In Chapter 3, Vergès traces the beginning of the history of exploitation and management of black women’s bodies back to the colonial slave trade, «the first act of dispossession of women’s wombs» (p. 50), who became mere currency between men. Foregrounding the links between capitalism and the racialized international division of labor, Vergès explains how the rape and violence against black women’s bodies (sales, punishments, torture, and pornography) and the plundering of their wombs for the provision of a limitless labor force indicate that patriarchy, rather than being a universal phenomenon, is racialized. That both patriarchy and capitalism are racialized is made evident in the

implementation of sexual and reproductive policies in the overseas territories since 1945, when the discourse of overpopulation (fueled by the United States) became the crux of international politics. As this chapter illustrates, this discourse has served to justify the oppressive management of racialized women's reproduction and sexuality in Reunion Island and other overseas territories, a management that went hand in hand with the choice to not develop those territories, and maintaining a colonial society to keep them under control.

Chapter 4 delves into the highly racialized population control policies implemented by the French state and legitimized by the discourse of impossible development: birth control and migration. Vergès reveals the double narrative behind both policies. Although regulating women's bodies was the objective both in France and the overseas departments, it was not practiced in the same manner in both places: while pro-birth policies were employed in France, where abortion was criminalized and penalized (which did not end abortions but put women at risk), not only were contraception policies and campaigns launched, but abortions and sterilizations were also imposed in the overseas department, which also put women at risk. A similar logic was applied to migration practices: While the French were invited to settle in the DOM, their inhabitants were 'invited' to leave and to take up the least-skilled and worst-paid types of labor. That is, rather than training people locally, the government brought more *zoreys* (white French people) and with them a «postcolonial racism» (p. 77). The asymmetry in this relation was blatant: While the French in the DOM enjoyed economic and social privileges, migrants in France not only lived under terrible conditions, but were victims of racism and isolation. One of the most deplorable practices was the forced migration of children, such as the «children of Creuse», which were taken from impoverished families without consent and sent to deserted places in the Hexagon, where they «faced racism, forced labor and physical and sexual violence» (p. 80). Only recently, in 2014, was this abuse of power recognized by the state, who finally accepted moral responsibility. What the state never admitted, though, is that their diagnosis and policies were not only class-biased, but also racialized.

Chapter 5 constitutes a fierce critique of the French feminist movements in the 1970s, who, adopting the cartography of republican coloniality, remained indifferent to racial and postcolonial questions, as

well as an attempt to understand the causes of this blindness. How was the scandal of the forced abortions in the DOM not at the center of the MLF's struggles concerning contraception and abortion? How could such a radical movement fail to notice «the existence of a racialized state patriarchy *within* the republic» (p. 8)? Why could they not integrate the role of colonialism into their analysis of women's oppression or the rights of women? Vergès delineates how French feminists had several opportunities to open their eyes but did not. The rape and trial of Djamila Boupacha (defended by Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir) in 1961 and 1962 (which made clear that rape has always been a gendered and racialized weapon of destruction), the numerous films and documentaries criticizing French neocolonialism, the books and articles from the United States translated into French, as well as the testimonies of the Reunionese women published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and texts by black women such as Awa Thiam, were all known. However, none of these publications led the MLF to reflect. Articulating their struggles in terms of class and gender, they universalized their situation to all women, erasing the particular experiences of black women. By failing to analyze the racial foundations of the capitalism and patriarchy they attacked, white feminist missed the opportunity to create «a 'second wave' that would have been anchored in political racism» (p. 112).

Capitalism, postcolonialism, feminism, and republicanism are all the topics that Vergès masterfully strings together in this powerful book. In fact, one of the strengths of this work is how from the study of one particular case, the author deploys a sharp criticism against them all. Above all, the study of reproductive violence against black Reunionese women and their forgotten complaints illustrates the intersection between race, (post) colonialism, republicanism and white feminism. Furthermore, the current relevance of the topic is outstanding: recently, numerous cases of reproductive violence against native women have been revealed both in North (in Canada) and South America (Bolivia and Peru). In this work, decolonial feminism proves once again its heuristic value not only to study the Global South, but also to address the most central theoretical and normative concern of feminist scholarship: the recognition of differences between women.

Vergès' is a book of obliged and necessary reading that constitutes a fundamental contribution to the development of a decolonial feminism

and of a historiography that includes black women's struggles. «Above all», as Vergès puts it, «this study means to pay homage to the thirty Reunionese women who, in 1970, lodged a complaint and testified against white men in power» (p. 9).

(Sabrina Morán and María Cecilia Padilla)