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ARTICLE

Can Intersectionality Save Us? Phallogocentric Feminisms and the Desire for Identity

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Abstract

This paper engages with a series of recent literatures that examine how feminist and queer movements have become agents of nationalism, neoliberalism, and global wars. I argue that, while the critique of intersectionality has attempted to curtail the reproductions of such violence within feminism, it too has not been able to resist cooptations into nationalist and capitalist forms of power. Developing an epistemological critique of intersectionality, I arrive at an analysis of identity politics as an elemental identification with phallic power that erases the feminine. Building on the works of Elizabeth Grosz, Wendy Brown, and Luce Irigaray, I suggest that at the core of such feminist alliances with domination lies an unresolved relation to feminine desire as the desire for a non-identitarian politics.

> . . . to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us . . .
> (Michel Foucault)

Why do certain forms of feminism tend to ally with racist, nationalist, and capitalist forms of oppression? This question bears witness to a history as old as the history of feminism itself. Not simply because feminism has never been a monolithic endeavor, but also because power has an appropriative tendency. Stemming from the margins, the witnessing, testifying, and diagnoses of critical race and postcolonial feminisms has been indispensable in developing intersectional frameworks of subjectivity that account for the multiple and integrated ways in which the lived experience of women on the margins is constituted. Intersectionality has informed a dominant current in addressing the failures of single-axis feminism, largely occupied by white heterosexual bourgeois women. However, intersectionality too has not been entirely effective at preventing its cooptation into the discourse of power. Whether reduced to neoliberal transactional

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schemes for institutional image-productions, or involved in the internal regulation of what it means to be a marginalized woman of color, intersectional subjectivities too have increasingly arrived at an impasse in resisting assimilation into structures of domination.

Mapping the epistemological underpinnings of identity politics in contemporary feminist struggles, this paper begins by outlining how liberal feminism has merged into nationalist and capitalist structures. I then study how intersectionality emerged as a critical discourse against such femonationalist and femocapitalist configurations, opening a horizon for radical feminist alternatives, and I examine whether or not intersectional identity politics has been able to uphold this promise. Drawing on the important critical literature that has characterized certain conglomerations of intersectional feminism with existing power structures, the question that I pursue is not simply one of how intersectional subjectivities have been appropriated into power. Rather it is: what, if any, are the common desires between an intersectional identity politics and a femonationalist and femocapitalist identity politics that lend themselves to discourses of power? I contend that, unlike what critiques of intersectionality generally claim, the relationship between feminism and power is not simply one of appropriation, cooptation, or "elite capture," to borrow Olufemi Taiwo's phrase (2022). Despite the categorical deviation of contemporary identity politics from what was originally intended by the term, that is for Black women "to be recognized as human" as put forth by the Combahee River Collective (1997), and despite the indispensable analysis of intersectional forms of oppression, I argue that identity politics presuppose an automatic and unexamined epistemological move from the structure of political injury to the structure of political subjectivity. It is this move from oppression to identity that I find to be structurally situated within masculinist desire and therefore to be constitutive limitations of identity politics, particularly within feminist theory.

Engaging with the work of Elizabeth Grosz and Wendy Brown on this the question of political identity formation, I show that the turn from oppression to identity is built upon an underlying desire for unfreedom. Inquiring into the source of this desire, I propose a reconsideration of the largely overlooked French feminist contributions in feminist psychoanalysis, particularly in the work of Luce Irigaray, for her theorization of the plastering regimentations of phallic power and her critique of the introjection of master discourses in feminism. Irigaray reminds us that the analysis of phallogocentrism as the privileged metaphysical position of masculine, visible, unified, and identifiable presence conditions the dominant desire for power through identity. My inquiry shows that, whether such identities take the form of national, neoliberal, or intersectional productions, beneath all such manifestations there lies an identification with the phallus as the driving force, perhaps the constituting power, of identity politics.

Intersectionality, thus, if it is to move beyond the frame of identity, must reground itself in the epistemological critique of phallogocentrism. Feminist psychoanalysis teaches us that another desire than the desire to have or to be the phallus is possible through a recovery of the relation to the maternal, even if, or precisely because, it is unrepresentable in the history of "man's" language. Pursuing this other desire in the critical politics of intersectionality, I find that "succeeding" feminisms in the field of power have not only utilized the master's tools, but have incorporated the master into their very identities. In this sense, thinking of Audre Lorde's famous question "Can the master's tools dismantle the master's house?" we can add an amendment that what

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seems to be at stake is not the master's tools *per se*, since tools still indicate an alienation from the master, but rather it is a devouring of and becoming master himself, herself.

1. The wounds of femo-nationalism and femo-capitalism

Let us begin with sketching some scenes in which feminist and queer politics have been noted to join forces consciously or unconsciously with alt-right and neoliberal violence. The trajectory is of course not new. The work of Black feminist scholars such as Audre Lorde and Angela Davis in the 1980s, or perhaps even much before then, already with Sojourner Truth's monumental "Ain't I a woman" in late nineteenth century, set the stage for critiques of feminist violence, in this case white feminism's participation in violence against Black bodies (Lorde 1984; Davis 1983). In the twenty-first century, in the aftermath of that wretched invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, postcolonial feminist scholars such as Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod were writing of the utilization of liberal feminist discourses in the services of what we knew then and witness now to be the disastrous campaign for exporting "freedom"—campaigns that once faced with their historical outcomes (the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011 leading to the rise of ISIS in 2013, and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 handing the country to the Taliban), speak much more of a desire to export "unfreedom" than "freedom." Thinking psychoanalytically, we must inquire into the internally unfree character that "liberal" feminism seeks to project outward onto the racial other.

Building on colonial legacies of empire organizing itself around "white men saving brown women from brown men" in the concise words of Gayatri Spivak, anti-war feminists showed how liberal feminism, whether embodied by white or expat brown feminists, has not opted to reach beyond imperial tropes (Spivak 2010, 48). This critique found a new assemblage and language in Jasbir Puar's introduction of the term "homonationalism" marking how liberated sexuality as well, along the categories of sex, race, and class, becomes a kernel of imperial domination in the US national imaginary (2007, 114–67). In 2003, the same year that homosexuality is decriminalized in the US in SCOTUS case *Lawrence v. Texas*, the US et al. invade Iraq, and somehow the grotesque images of torture stemming from Abu-Ghraib are analyzed as particularly offensive to Muslims, because Islam—allegedly—has no taste for homosexuality: homosexual rights begin to directly act as cover for sado-politics.[1] Needless to say, homonationalism is not reducible to this scene and manifests in an array of practices, from Israeli pink-washing as justification for the occupation of Palestine, all the way to the Euro-American pro-war human-rights industry—never mind the catalogue of contradictions. The term has also found new terrains of reference within queer Indigenous studies. As Jodi Byrd remarked a decade later, in 2013, on the tenth anniversary of *Lawrence v. Texas,* the supreme court issues three new rulings:

> On June 25, the justices handed down their ruling in *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder* and in the process effectively dismantled key protections in sections 4–5 of the Voting Rights Amendment of 1965. On the same day, and with the same 5–4 majority, the court attacked tribal sovereignty and the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 in *Adoptive Couple v. Baby Girl*. The following day, the court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996 as a violation of the Fifth Amendment in *United States v. Windsor* and decide that proponents of California's Proposition 8 to ban gay marriage had no grounds to appeal the district court's ruling. (Byrd 2017)

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Protections of voting rights for racial minorities are dismantled; parental rights for Indigenous fathers are attacked; gay marriage is recognized. Byrd goes on to analyze the alignment of such decisions as a continuation of the privileging of (neo)liberal rights as an apparatus of biopower organizing the regulation of bodies. The incorporation of homosexual family life into heteropatriarchal structures, where rich white couples are recognized as the best suited guardians of children, entails, in a series of concurrent gestures, the dispossession of Indigenous families from their children as well as the dispossession of minorities from voting rights.

More recently in what I'm positing to be newer waves of analyses of feminist violence, Sara Farris has introduced the term femonationalism to designate the convergence of alt-right, neoliberal, and feminist politics in the Islamophobic political culture of Europe, particularly in Italy, France, and the Netherlands. Farris's claim is that the stubborn colonial and orientalist tropes of the Muslim man as oppressor and the Muslim woman as victim offer a double ideological and economic occasion for alliance between these groups (alt-right, neoliberal, and feminist) that otherwise were expected to work against one another. On the one hand, the image of the oppressed Muslim woman offers an uncanny occasion for alt-right agendas to embrace women and LGBTQ rights as an affirmation of white supremacy. On the other hand, it institutes a precarious and low-paid domestic care workforce as well as disciplinary re-education mechanisms through civic integration programs that "uncover" Muslim women as "redeemable" and "useful," while maintaining the position of the Muslim man as "enemy" (Farris 2017). Femonationalism thus produces the trope of white supremacist ideology materialized in neoliberal exploitation of a new reproductive labor force.

Finally, Nancy Fraser has traced the move from second-wave to third-wave feminism as one that has unwittingly resulted in the commodification of feminism, expanded the exploitation of women's labor in both domestic and public spheres, and deferred state and international governmental responsibility onto private corporations, non-profit institutions, and NGOs, dissolving public accountability and reach (Fraser 2013a). I propose that, following the work of Puar and Farris, we can term Fraser's analysis of feminism becoming the "handmaiden" of capital as femocapitalism, adding that similar to femo- and homonationalism, femocapitalism here operates not simply by fabricating feminism into an object of capitalist production but as constitutive of neoliberal practices of privatization and individuation (Fraser 2013c). Fraser has diagnosed this shift to be a result of the focus on politics of recognition at the cost of a politics of redistribution, and has called for a "two-dimensional approach to gender justice" that encompasses both redistribution and recognition (Fraser 2013b).

2. The intersectional promise

Most of the literature on femonationalism and femocapitalism engages in the fundamental groundwork of mapping the terrains of critique and the discursive and material conditions of such feminist currents of violence: that the subject of abstract liberal "rights," particularly in the context of gender and sexuality, emerges at the expense of the Other (black, brown, Indigenous, or poor populations). When it comes to the question of "the why" of such feminist violence, the focus has predominantly been on the missing analysis of intersectionality (with the exception of Puar's work). Famously put forth by Kimberle Crenshaw's seminal work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminism's focus on gender alone foregoes how structures of oppression co-constitute one another through race, class, sexuality, and other situational marks of

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living bodies, thus calling for "an account of multiple grounds of identity" (Crenshaw 1991). In this sense, although Fraser does not use the term, I read "the two-dimensional approach of recognition and redistribution" as an intersectional configuration with an emphasis on class. The claim that the experience of women of color is systemically erased under anti-discrimination laws that focus on gender alone, and that the epistemic reduction of identity to a singular category of subjectivity, that of gender, is bound to reproduce exclusion seems simple enough. Except that some 30 years later, various critical engagements with the politics of intersectionality have shown not only that the intersections of identity have been absorbed into structures of domination, for instance when Taiwo writes of "The Humans of CIA" recruitment videos reaching out to minorities, including queer and Indigenous peoples (Taiwo 2022, 10). But also that, as the frame of intersectionality has modeled itself upon the liberal subject of rights, the concept has obtained a formal recognition of subjugated identities, emptying the project of identity from substantial engagement with the humanity of marginalized woman and reproducing their exclusions in much more inaccessible ways.

I'm thinking here particularly of the work of Jennifer C. Nash in *Black feminism reimagined* (2019), which has carefully traced intersectionality's role as a legitimating flag for the predominantly white liberal status quo of Women's Studies in the US academy, calling on Black women (and increasing women of color) to perform the service of alleviating the field from its monolithic appearance, but failing to enter into an affective relation with the materiality of Black women's bodies, the complexities of their experience, and the horizons of their intellectual production. The result, on the other end, Nash outlines, has been an entrapment of Black feminism into a "defensiveness" and a "territoriality" that exhausts its resources on tracking this violence and reclaiming intersectionality based on its original intentions, locking the intellectual labor of women of color in some variation of "diversity management."[2]

Theoretically, this failure of intersectionality had been anticipated in the post-structuralist and new-materialist debates on identity in the 1990s and the 2000s. Here we must inquire into intersectional and marginalized feminisms' self-defeating complicity in the expulsion of theory from the social sciences in the turn towards identity. How is it that the lengthy critical debates on identity and difference are not "included" in considerations of the framework of intersectionality?[3] The question of exclusion in the formation of subjectivity demands an epistemological examination which, in a first reading, gives itself away in what we may understand to be a two-dimensional formulation of intersectionality, even as it seeks to expand the analysis of identity from single-axis to multi-axis frames. In this sense, the very intelligibility of identity through the domain of "axes" or (interacting) "sections" begs the question of the problem of reduction: how can complex psychosocial modalities of existence be reduced and represented by lines of categorical containment such as axes or (inter)sections? If it is, indeed, the project of biopower to organize the population into reductive sections or intersections, why does a claim to emancipation position its politics within these very categories?

The operation of this reduction was outlined in a lecture by Elizabeth Grosz in 2007, as she argued that, first, it is the reduction of politics to categories of representation that necessarily fails to relate to "the event" (yes, the term has a loaded history but bear with me here), the materiality and the reality of the event as that which is uncategorizable, unpredictable, incalculable, and therefore unrepresentable (Grosz 2010). In this sense, as we have known since *Gender trouble,* the very category of "woman" insofar as it is a category, is in a crisis of representation, continually and still, obsessing over "who counts

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as woman" and regulating this referent (Butler 1990). Thus, the multiplication of the categories of identity (say queer working-class Muslim woman) cannot be generative of a qualitative change regarding that which it represents, but only functions through a linear additive principle, leading to a seriality destined to lose signification. This should be familiar to us for instance in the serial growth of the LGBTQAI inventory eventually settling at a +.[4] Something becomes senseless in the compulsively repetitive attempt to capture the unrepresentable and can finally overcome the desire for *ad infinitum* naming only through the + sign that signifies the extension of the unsignifiable.

Second, Grosz argued, this schema limits both epistemology and politics to the position of the subject. The proliferation of literature of subjects giving accounts of what it means to live their lives as themselves in a world in which we are less and less interested in hearing the other, the other as other and not as yet another representation of the self, puts the subject of feminism in a double bind. On the one hand, (and this is something that we also know from Freud), the subject is unknowable to itself. Consciousness is only a minute part of our existence and we cannot really know ourselves but through the other, if at all. For Grosz (following Hegel), this other is that of the labor we exert upon the world through which we can learn something about ourselves. Thus, the claim of the subject to self-knowledge creates the trap of the scarcely satisfiable demand for the recognition of me rather than my work. And here, we can begin to see why, despite the formal recognition of black feminist identity in Nash's analysis, the black feminist complaint is the non-recognition of their work: the very intersectional category of working-class woman of color as an identity position serves as a ruse or a misrepresentation of the material work that is produced. On the other hand, Grosz continues, such demand for the constant narrations of the self impedes feminism from narrating the world, cornering the subject in allotted slots of self-determination while conceding the territories of science, philosophy, politics, and so forth to masculinism.

In this sense, Fraser's claim that redistribution must be pursued alongside recognition overlooks the possibility that it is not simply a forgetting of redistribution in the name of identity politics that has conditioned femocapitalism. Rather something in the structure of modern identity constructions tends to carve out and empty the materialities of existence. Thus, the two "dimensions" of justice to which Fraser alludes demand a mutual exclusivity, a two-dimensional approach masking the call of a single logic seeking to resolve the other through its own means: whether by reducing class to yet another category in need of recognition, or by reducing other categories such as race and gender to an account of redistribution.

3. Where does "I" come from?

What is this "something" in the structure of identity that resists being in touch with the material becoming of bodies, psyches, and interactions and that in this resistance manages to exchange the actuality of equality with that of a formal recognition? In 1993, Wendy Brown offered a crucial analysis of how the structure of "politicized identity" resists freedom: in keeping latent the conflict between the particular and the universal, liberal rights discourses abstract the particularities of the individual into a categorical "we" that recodifies and recolonizes difference, strengthening already existing power relations. Why, then, do "we" desire to partake in this "we"? There are legal and economic gains to be sure, but freedom is thwarted if not entirely canceled in this path. Turning to Nietzsche's *ressentiment* to offer a psychosocial account of the desire for

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recognition, Brown inquires into the possibility that the legal framework of recognition is manifested in a modern subjectivity that does not simply cease to desire freedom but "loathes freedom."[5] Unfreedom comes from the law, and emancipation through identity imagines itself as being incorporated into the law—let us note here that intersectionality emerged as a juridical critique of single-axis anti-discrimination laws. This, for Brown, "is symptomatic of a feature of politicized identity's *desire* within liberal-bureaucratic regimes, its foreclosure of its own freedom, its impulse to inscribe in the law and in other political registers its historical and present pain rather than conjure an imagined future of power to make itself" (1995, 66). The fixation on a liberal identity subject that will be the agent of recognition fundamentally endorses a liberal system of "freedoms" (rights based on recognitions) that will never deliver freedom. Here, the structure of identity is no longer only at the risk of appropriation but seems to suggest an understanding of freedom through the desire for being appropriated. As if the only access to power is through identifying with it.

The working of this desire has to do with what Nietzsche (1989) theorized as the moralizing reaction to being located within a situation of weakness. As Brown reads, the liberal subject finds himself powerless in the face of the global contingencies of post-industrial society, the desacralization of life, and the disintegration of communities (1995, 68–69). To this we can add the more particular powerlessness of intersectional oppressions. But the liberal assumption of self-making fails to address this powerlessness, relaunching the self as a political agent within this very position, defending the territories of this identity as morally superior and externalizing the pain of this failure onto others—typically even more injured, more powerless others. At stake is a "deadening" of the subject by its self-identification through an impotent mode of reaction against outside forces and breeding resentment. Can we read what Nash calls the "defensiveness" and "territoriality" of feminists of color trapped in a reactionary mode to institutional appropriations in these terms?

So how are we to part from this self-defeating bind of identity? Brown offers a rather swift set of conclusions. Nietzsche's solution to the problem of *ressentiment,* Brown tells us, might have to do with the idea of active forgetting that Nietzsche puts forth in his writings on history (1997): to willfully forget historical trauma in order to be released from the weight of its pain; that is, neither to repress nor to deny it, but also not to maintain an attachment to the wound in forming an identity constituted by it. The problem is that such forgetting can only be possible if the event of injury has ceased to inflict itself, systematically and randomly. Brown cites Patricia Williams here as one testimony to the incessant and insidious violence against women of color, making the work of forgetting nearly impossible.[6] Turning away from Nietzsche, Brown ends the paper with some hypothetical suggestions that when reread some three decades later, in my view, themselves seem symptomatic of a certain naïvety of the intellectual climate of the 1990s:

> For if I am right about the problematic of pain installed at the heart of many contemporary contradictory demands for political recognition, all that such pain may long for—more than revenge—is the chance to be heard into a certain release, recognized into self-overcoming, incited into possibilities for triumphing over, and hence losing, itself. (Brown 1995, 74)

And a bit later, she posits: "What if we sought to supplement the language of 'I am'—with its defensive closure on identity, its insistence on the fixity of position, its equation

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of social with moral positioning—with the language of 'I want this for us'?" (Brown 1995, 75).

Given the historical advantage of revisiting this text, we can see how the demand "to be heard" has itself been reduced to a cosmetic procedure offering itself as an appearance of symbolic acknowledgment unyielding to the material manifestation of change. To pursue this in the particular instances of femonationalism and femocaptialism that I have been tracking here, the replacement of the claim of being, "I am," with that of the desire of the "I" for the collective "we" ("I want this for us"), resonates more with an appropriation of differences within the collective for the imposition of the will of the "I." That is, a speaking in the name of others, which itself has not been devoid of ideological and material histories of oppression.[7]

So, we have seen that while the Nietzschean explication of *ressentiment* may be useful in understanding how the desire for a restrained form of recognition manifests itself, when it comes to the question of how we can free ourselves from the bind of liberal subjectivity, we are at a loss. Neither Nietzsche's advice of overcoming our injuries through active forgetting, nor Brown's recommendations of hearing the unheard or desiring for the collective, have been able to provide a path for us through the appropriative impasse of identity.

4. The forgotten call of feminist psychoanalysis

I would like to linger on this term, desire, that Brown employed: "politicized identity's *desire* within liberal-bureaucratic regimes [for the] foreclosure of its own freedom." Whose desire is this? Whose political identity is the desiring model? Is this the only available desire in dealing with injury? At a first glance and speaking from our contemporary situation in identity politics, we read this desire to belong to the liberal subject; it is a historically specific form of desire intricately linked with the very forms of power (self-regulating discursive and economic power) that our late modern condition has developed and enveloped. However, both Nietzsche and Foucault have argued that, far from being contained in modernity, this desire for unfreedom has deep roots in a Christian tradition that identifies (with) suffering as a moral virtue, a suffering that is to be both inflicted and endured by the subject himself (and here we can cite the critique of the Christian ascetic practices in Nietzsche or that of the confession of Foucault). Pain that is self-administered through the faculty of guilt by and to the subject lies at the heart of *ressentiment:* He who affirms his primordial guilt and suffers for it identifies himself as morally superior to the Other who does not suffer. This is all to say that the resentful desire for unfreedom bears a structural element in its relation to injury, one that is not limited to a historically specific liberal modernity.[8]

It is here, in the milieu of the structure of desire, that I think the work of feminist psychoanalysis, particularly the early work of Luce Irigaray is of paramount value, a work that has itself been rendered to a certain forgetting—and we will return to the source of the desire to forget and its relation to un/freedom. For Irigaray, the structure of the subject's desire reaches even further than the Christian tradition, given that the universal subject of philosophy in the Western canon has always been Man (Irigaray 1974, 133). In her careful reading of canon from Socrates to Nietzsche, this masculine subjectivity reveals itself as one that has been constituted again and again, upon the negation, erasure, and appropriation of the feminine. Her extensive interpretations show that the critique of phallogocentrism—a critique that is absent in categories of

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intersectionality—refers not only to the primacy of the phallus as *the* signifier of desire in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, but also that phallic desire reveals itself in the double movement of the expulsion and the appropriation of the feminine Other throughout the history of ideas. For Irigaray, phallogocentrism originates in man's disavowed relation with the primal other, the maternal-feminine. In the Oedipal story, the father holds the instrument that, through the threat of castration, bars the little boy from desiring his mother. The boy identifies with the phallic figure of the law, the father, and will come to possess his own phallus as a substitute for his lost maternal attachment.[9] In this scene, the little girl and thus feminine sexuality is only an aberration of masculine desire resulting in various feminine "pathologies."[10] Irigaray's thorough critique of this "blind spot" on female sexuality is not the object of my study here.[11] Rather, it is in Irigaray's philosophical readings that we find that, through the history of the subject, the various conceptions of an autonomous identity have only been upheld through the forgetting of maternal origins. Identity, as we have inherited from the Western canon, is always already masculine for it is formed by ejecting feminine difference outside of "culture" and incorporating maternal beginnings into the identity of the self-same masculine subject.[12]

To unpack this dense set of premises, let us turn to Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche's *ressentiment.* Irigaray explores how, despite differentiating himself from the desire for unfreedom and in his turn to forgetting and overcoming, Nietzsche's thoughts are bound to a superiority he finds in his powerlessness. And given that this incapacity has to do with a maternal ability, the Other who will be summoned to compensate for his condition of impotence will be woman. In *The Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche,* a text written in the form of a love letter to him, she writes:

> To overcome the impossible of your desire-that is surely your last hour's desire. Giving birth to such and such a production, or such and such a child is a summary of your history. But to give birth to your desire itself, that is your final thought. To be incapable of doing it, that is your highest ressentiment. For you either make works that fit your desire, or you make desire itself into your work. But how will you find the material to produce such a child? (Irigaray 1991, 34)

Nietzsche's ideal subjectivity, we may recall, is the willing "I" who overcomes the injuries whirled at him—rather than resentfully identifying with them—in an upward movement to become a higher man, not a subject trapped in the categories of his oppression, but one who eternally creates and recreates himself. Irigaray is interpreting the very desire for creation and becoming as a desire that Nietzsche would like to birth, moving away from the unfree desire of *ressentiment* which *he* inherits from *his* culture, but famously associates with woman.[13] Irigaray questions the possibility of this delivery, for in both steps (resentment and creation), the other is absent and negated. Birthing, after all, is an act that involves the other. Signified as "material," Irigaray marks the association between the otherwise unsignifiable other, the matter, and the maternal force in the face of which Nietzsche feels powerless. Speaking to his anxiety that *she*, the other, holds "the power of creation over [him]," Irigaray continues:

> And that the other has given you what escapes your creation is the source of your highest ressentiment. How to bring the gift of life, that is the question you ponder upon your mountain top. How to be unique and gather all sources into the self. And you rise ever higher, believing that fertility can only come down from the sky!

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> That is your incredible naivete, o man of the mountain peaks, neglectful of other landscapes. (1991, 42)

The freedom that stems from forgetting, from turning away and moving above the ground of our beginning, is the kind of freedom that turns desire itself into work, rather than one that allows the materiality of creation to surge through. Desire becomes detached from its maternal source, its work becoming the very suppression of its own condition of possibility, a covering over of what Elizabeth Grosz called "the event" through the imposition of identity—whether as being or becoming.

It is thus not simply a question of a particular situation—such as the ongoing violence against black and brown lives—in which forgetting becomes an inadequate path for breaking with the bonds of "wounded attachments," as Brown suggested. In fact, Nietzsche's forgetting is always already a manifestation of an ongoing violence against woman: "How deep into forgetting you must dig to find the memory of a place where I had not yet entered your horizon," writes Irigaray (1991, 31). The "I" that forms himself through rendering sexual difference to oblivion is a masculine subject whose desire is sustained through the appropriation of the desire of she who he seeks to erase and reproduce. The aesthetic desire for freedom (in creation) finds itself in a repetition of the very feminine erasure that constituted the moral desire for unfreedom (identifying with suffering). Whether we understand politicized identity as one stemming from the insistence on injury or one of forgetting, the operative desire of identity is the phallic negation of the feminine. A sameness echoes through the structure of identity even as it moves from a fixed singular being to a multiple and rising becoming. A sameness that has to do with a masculine desire for disavowing our material dependence upon the uncategorizable other. In this sense, any attempt at overcoming the hallowed position of politicized identity must entail some reparative relation to the maternal-feminine.

5. Searching for woman in identity politics

Identity, then, reveals itself as a form of phallic organization of desire in the face of injury, whether it is erected upon pain or in its forgetting. In this section, I trace how the liberal feminist streams femonationalism, femonationalism, and increasingly intersectionality, have found refuge from a condition of powerlessness through assuming phallic identification as a form of power.

Within femonationalism it is a feminist identification with the cultural/ethnic "superiority" of European liberal values and the projection of this relation of superiority onto the relations between the Muslim man and the Muslim woman. It's important to highlight that the distribution of this narcissism takes different forms in various contexts. For instance, Mehammed Amadeus Mack has shown that, in France, those of Arab and Muslim descent of both genders living in the French *banlieues* are cast as protypes of "virility"—masculine attributes of toughness, assertiveness, and aggression, sexualized and reaching across genders (2017, 7). This characterization of the other relies upon a French national identity that conceives its "superiority" in the traditionally "feminine" attributes of passivity, seduction, shame, and softness. Whereas in the US, as indicated by Puar's research on homonationalism, we saw that rather than assigning an aura of masculine virility to the Muslim population, entire cultures protesting against the tortures of Abu-Ghraib are reduced to an inferior, effeminate position of being penetrated and blamed for their own victimhood, in the context of an American national identity of inflated militarized machismo. In this sense, an interesting divergence occurs

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between and within the particular content of European and US superiority: "European values" tend to produce a feminized position as (morally) superior if (materially) vulnerable; while "American values" identify with typically masculine roles of penetration (invasion both at the military level as well as invasion of bodies as is symptomatic of Abu-Ghraib), and feminizing of the other. This politicized gender binary is further replicated in domestic politics, with alt-right parties assuming the assertive masculine role and their neoliberal counterparts assuming the negated *oikos*-bound feminine position. Absent from the binary is the desire of the feminine other, the third term that Irigaray has called "the other woman," a femininity that has yet to find its place within the history of the (masculine) gender binary.[14]

Despite recognizing an intersectional frame of oppression (particularly the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality) within the nation, Farris primarily analyzes the distribution of such cultures of superiority through the "nationalist" logic—as is implied by the term "femonationalism." I would like to unpack the first theoretical step she takes in diagnosing the problem of alt-right feminism through nationalism. Farris sets up the latter against theories of "populist" reason, particularly that of Ernesto Laclau's, which relies upon a Schmittian construction of politics within the friend/enemy distinction. Farris proposes that the identification of Muslim man as enemy and Muslim woman as victim does not operate on the Schimttian formulation because of the involvement of women. She cites Jacques Derrida, for whom Schmitt's conception of the political is decisively a "desert" in which "no woman is in sight" (Farris 2017, 66, quoting Derrida 1997, 155–57). The friend/enemy metaphor upon which much of Laclau's theory of populism gravitates, according to Farris, sketches the field of politics as that of muscular and antagonistic war amongst men and only men. Insofar as femonationalism follows a politics in which women, and feminist women at that, are its actors, Farris argues that the formalistic approach of populist reason through a masculinist understanding of politics as enmity is insufficient to understand it (Farris 2017, 62–66).

Alternatively, she proposes nationalism as a political project embedded in gender relations. The nation as the feminized, maternal, formless, and natural body, in need of masculine-paternal organization and protection of the State that paradoxically relegates women to marginalized roles of reproduction in the name of the collective, is an all too familiar trope that limitedly explains femonationalism. The intersection of class, race, and sexuality take this analysis further: Farris looks at reproductive policies in the Netherlands, Italy, and France, where on the one hand Muslim women are assimilated into the labor force in order to provide care work for reproduction and the elderly. On the other hand, the European anxieties of "who" is reproducing leads to the decided curbing of non-"native" reproductive rates and the incentivization of white reproduction (Farris 2017, 67–72). Finally, Farris notes the "sexualization of racism" and the "racialization of sexism," wherein both the perceived threat of Muslim men and the victimhood of the women are of a (hetero-)sexualized nature, relying on sexual metaphors and desires of domination and humiliation (2017, 73–77).

It becomes striking that, in all steps of this argument, what seems to be a common problematic at stake is an appropriated play of sexual difference, but the term remains absent. When delving deeper into the question of what the nation signifies, we find that at its core the homogeneous national imaginary and the racist legacies of colonialism (two sides of the same coin), in effect and in cause, cannot function without the trope of an archaic gender binary with its catalogue of gendered tropes; a binary that is itself constituted in the Western trajectory through the masculine, patriarchal imaginary. The nation, as we know from Benedict Anderson's indispensable study of it, is an imagined

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community that fulfills the dream of continuity in the face of human mortality (Anderson 1983, 11). It ensures that despite the fact of death the name of the living will go on to exist eternally, under the signifier that properly relates the masculine imaginary of the maternal to an origin, erasing and appropriating the body of the mother in the name of the nation, protecting it through the law of the paternal state, bringing together the formulation of nation-state.

It is here that we must interject with Farris missing the reach of Derrida's critique of Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction as a logic of "absolute hostility" from which woman is absent. Derrida is not simply referring to the absence of biological females or deserted gender roles in Schmitt's theory of politics.[15] Rather, read within the larger context of Derrida's critique of phallogocentrism, Schimtt's "desert" refers primarily to the absence of the feminine, a decisive symptom of which is his strikingly pervasive silence on woman.[16] The issue at hand for us is not so much whether the theory of populism or that of nationalism provides the best frame of analysis. Rather, at stake is the structure that enables either of these frames of reference (people or nation) as a form of political identity, a structure founded upon the elimination and cooptation of sexual difference. The nation devours the maternal and reproduces it as a gender role in the service of a politics of enmity. It follows that the mere presence of women in nationalism is not enough reason to conclude that nationalism does not embody the friend/enemy logic. Both categories of nation and people, as their histories and rationalities testify, have also been constituted through relations of absolute hostility. The mere appearance of "woman" as understood through the masculinist fantasy of the "eternal feminine," cannot in any way account for the (re)presentation of women. In other words, I contend that within nationalism, too, woman, as that which is unsignifiable by the binary, remains absent, even if she appears in her ascribed gendered/racialized roles, even if she claims this appearance as feminist. Femonationalism operates in racism and classism, but most elementally it is founded upon a misogynist expulsion and enslavement of woman in her differentiated desire—including of the white bourgeois heterosexual woman. An injury that the latter can only defer onto working-class migrant men and women of color, for she has been cut off from the grounds of her desire through the phallic identity of the nation. Prior to the categories of race and class, it is woman who is ironically erased in femonationalism.

And what of femocapitalism? How does capital become a phallic signifier for feminism? Within femocapitalism, the operation of identity appears as that which takes over the space of class analysis and material redistribution. Fraser, paradoxically for a socialist feminist, attributes this to trends of postmodern thought on the left rather than to material conditions (2013c, 172–74). There are, of course, the economic changes of neoliberal capital consolidations that have played their constitutive part in the privileging of liberal rights regimes and vice versa. But beneath the quarrel between discourse and economy, I would like to stay with the question of desire as that which informs our feminist "dreams" of independence and emancipation. It seems that, in femocapitalism, we are foremost facing a feminist identification with the neoliberal fantasy of individual work, discipline, and private progress that sustains the refrain from redistribution. So, in Fraser's terms, the feminist demand for equality in the labor force, and the divergence of feminist politics from the public sector onto private corporations, non-profits, and NGOs, signals an identification of women as a class with the assumed empowerment in privatized labor (Fraser 2013a, 2013c). The most accessible psychosocial paradigm of identity that we can refer to here is the American dream (in which America, as "the land of [economic] opportunity" functions as a sign for

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capital) that individual hard work will result in success, whether economically or politically. Feminism (and not simply American feminism) must have identified with this dream on some level to forego redistribution.

And who is the subject of this dream? On the one hand, feminism detaches itself from the male breadwinner or at the political level, from the paternal state. Wendy Brown's "Finding the man in the state" is a crucial mapping of this separation, in which she delineates how the welfare-state takes the place of the male breadwinner and by the same token engages in intrusive and protectionist policies regarding the subjects of its welfare, by and large women and women of color (Brown 1995, 166–97). On the other hand, the liberal feminist position encouraging economic independence for women internalizes and the place of the detached master signifier, whether as household breadwinners, or in high-income corporate positions, or in funding distributions of non-profits and NGOs. The subject of the American dream following the exchange logic of the market now undergoes a series of substitutions: the fantasy of the "self-made man" is first replaced by the next of kin, the "self-made" white bourgeois woman, and then further by other others: women of color, queer, trans, disabled persons, etc.

We see here the truth that the phallic object of capital can be delinked from masculine subjectivity while still retaining the phallic role of gaining autonomy through exploitation and achieving growth through the appropriation of otherness. Except that in this chain of substitutions something, some fulfilment from the original fantasy, remains missing: women's labor has increased and public welfare has decreased. According to the relentless logic of exchange, with each round of future substitutions of this phallic position the well-being of all involved will decrease accordingly. In psychoanalytic terms, it seems that the investment in phallic power has remained, but since its object is no longer there, it is as if each replacement will be a less perfect copy, there only to sustain a lost attachment. Here, intersectional identity too will be folded in to justify yet another set of straight substitutions, preventing the material labor of difference to impress upon the world from any place outside of an aspiration for such phallic recognition of identity. Difference can only desire equality with the phallus, whatever its current edifice may be, nation, capital, or biopolitical rights. In demanding equality with the phallic position, difference is reduced to sameness and feminism, even as it accumulates intersectional variations, remains committed to reproducing the identical masculine desire of possession and erasure. Feminine desire remains absent, through and through.

It is in this sense that we can read Nash's remark of "the specter of the 'white heterosexual man' *as intersectional subject* haunting intersectional originalism interpretive practices" (2019, 76). By "intersectional originalism" she is referring to a discourse that seeks to "evaluate" and "rescue" Crenshaw's work from its "gentrifying" interpretations or appropriations, situating and returning the agency of intersectionality to its original truth (Nash 2019, 61). Here Nash highlights another mechanism in this intersectional claim to origins, that of forgetting: "Intersectional originalism is an exercise in forgetting," she writes, describing this originalism's "simultaneous investment in questions of how power shapes academic life and its disinvestment in how the context of the 'corporate university' has shaped intersectionality's relatively easy institutionalization within the American university" (2019, 66). In addition to the market conditions of the neoliberal university, Nash also argues that the much celebrated "travel" of the intersectional analytic globally rests on otherwise ignored feminist conversations on how concepts developed in the Global North assume a universal character (2019, 68). The coloniality of knowledge here becomes another

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structural condition that is overlooked in the incorporated power of the analytics of intersectionality. Further, Nash extensively develops how the carving out of a space for Black feminism also develops into the forgetting of intersectionality's appearance through the stage of transnational feminism, and the imbricated history of what she calls the "twin analytics" (2019, 85).

What becomes apparent in such efforts to return to the original meaning of intersectionality and thereby establish it as an origin, is the forgetting of the very grounds from which intersectionality emerged on the one hand, and the forgetting of the colonial and corporate infrastructure which the discourse internalized on the other hand. At stake in this forgetting, leading the discourse to the problems of "territoriality" and "defensiveness" that Nash outlines, is not simply a passive victim that has been the object of appropriation. Rather, at work is the desire of a subject who identifies with institutional and epistemological power. Having turned to Irigaray, it should resonate for us that such modes of forgetting are symptomatic of the process of phallic identification: the insistence on identity based on injury also entails a forgetting of the most vulnerable and unstable parts of the new subject. The knowledge/power of intersectionality here serves as another phallic signifier, like nation or capital, having expelled otherness outside itself. Similar to the structures of identity in femonationalism and femocapitalism, intersectionality, too, insofar as it is producing a new subject of power grounded in the lived experience of intersectional wounds, risks identifying with and assuming the position of the phallic master. This does *not* encompass the discourse of intersectionality as a critical analysis. Intersectionality has done crucial work in interrupting these otherwise singular master discourses and in clarifying the multiplicity and interdependence of various structures of power and oppression. However, when it establishes itself as political identity it is bound to identify with power: to make itself recognizable within a structure that entails the erasure of maternal-feminine beginnings, the appropriation of difference, and the guarding of its establishment through territoriality and defensiveness. Unless, that is, it cultivates a desire otherwise than phallic power.

6. Beginning from another desire

When Wendy Brown wrote of *ressentiment* as the foundation of politicized identity, she emphasized with Nietzsche that what is required is an aspiration to power rather than a solidification of the impotent position of the wounded "I." In the analysis of femonationalism and femocapitalism, I have been thinking about two questions. What do we do with wounds? And to what power do we aspire, when it is phallic power that has been doing the wounding? The two questions tend to follow one another circularly: how can we tend wounds without power and how can we strive for a power that wounds? It seems to me that intersectionality has been able to identify the complications of some of our wounds, but in this very act of identification, it has risked aspiring to a structure of power for which only one pattern of identifications is legible. To tend these wounds, then, seems unreachable without at once desiring another power, another desire, a desire that must begin with a differential relation to wounds, a differentiated path of loss, rather than its solidification into the position of the "I." For the path that consolidates loss into identity, and substitutes it with the self or the other, is one that we have inherited and digested from the legacy of "man."

When feminism finds itself aligned with alt-right, neoliberal, or disciplinary violence, what is missing in feminist thinking is the feminine. The thinking of sexual difference as that which can only understand the self in relation to a lost (m)other, having always

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already originated from a position of non-identity, is most necessary in devising another relation to loss. It has been my intention to make a case that the limitation of feminist identity politics, despite the latter's situatedness at the intersections of race, class, and sexuality, is that it most primarily, against its own conscious recognitions, desires phallic power. To overcome this desire, we cannot solely insist on the intersectional productions of subjectivity. Rather, at a much more elemental level, what is needed is a reparative bond with the maternal contributions of sexual difference as another political beginning.

Notes

1 For a historical study of homosexuality in a Muslim culture, see Najmabadi 2005.

2 Nash 2019. See also Puar 2012; Umut et al. 2011.

3 The discussions have been extensive including in the works of Judith Butler, William Conolly, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhahba, and others engaging the work of Jacques Derrida's critique of the primacy of identity in the history of philosophy. Given the limitations of this paper, I would like to recapitulate the arguments of Wendy Brown and Elizabeth Grosz who offer more direct analyses of the politics of identity within a feminist/intersectional context.

4 For an interesting discussion of how the + as a sign of the unrepresentable signifies the feminine see Žižek 2016.

5 Brown is challenging Foucault's notion of the inevitability of resistance in the milieu of power via Nietzsche's analysis of the aggression that freedom attracts once suppressed and denied, hinting that modes of resistance that seek to expel the other from the self in the formation of identity, function by securing unfreedom. See "Wounded attachments," in Brown 1995, footnote 17.

6 See Williams 1992. Today we have plenty more resources for the study of this. From Saidiya Hartman (1997), to BLM protests on the ground.

7 The title of Sara Farris's book, *In the name of women,* begins with this cooptation of an "I" speaking for the collective—a problem of representation with which we have been familiar since Butler's *Gender trouble.*

8 It might be interesting to note that Nietzsche develops his notion of forgetting precisely in a philosophical gesture against historicity. See Nietzsche 1997.

9 Jacques Lacan famously defines the phallus as the signifier of maternal lack: that which turns what the mother does not have into meaning. For an argument on the phallus as not the signifier of what the mother lacks, but rather the signifier of the mother that the subject lacks, see Shohadaei 2023.

10 For instance, see Freud 1964.

11 See "The blind spot of an old dream of symmetry," in Irigaray 1974.

12 See for instance, Irigaray, "Plato's Hystera," in Irigarary 1974. I would also venture here that Sylvia Wynter's important work on the "coloniality of being" carefully genealogizing the relegation of Indigenous populations of Africa and the Americas to the base position of bestiality under modern doctrines of humanism, is precisely another manifestation of such masculine desire to erase and appropriate its maternal origin. See Wynter 2003.

13 For instance, "Being able to suffer is the least thing: weak women and even slaves often attain mastery in that." Nietzsche, *Ecce homo,* §325.

14 In a poignant response to the critique of essentialism against Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz reminds us that for Irigaray sexual differences speaks of a futurity of "that which has yet to take place." See Grosz 2005, 175. For a through discussion of the question of essentialism, see "The time of essence," in Shohadaei 2023.

15 Here we can cite one of Schmitt's seminal texts, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, in which the female Hecuba in her gendered role as mother is compared to Hamlet by Schmitt, where he argues that, unlike Hamlet, she is able to carry out her act of vengeance (against the murderer of her kin). But for Schmitt (contra Freud), this ability is not a matter of sexual difference and is rather a question of her historico-political situation. Schmitt 2009, 11–31. Derrida "grants" this appearance of woman in Schmitt along with another reference. See Derrida 1997, 155–57.

16 For Derrida's introduction of the term phallogocentrism, see Derrida 1975.

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