

Telling different stories: Subjectivity and Feminist Identity Politics¹

By Josefina Echavarría Alvarez²

Introduction

This paper aims at showing how, through several feminist identity politics discourses, the notions of individual and collective selfhoods have been differently conceptualized in academic discussions. This movement of thought is not uni-directional. These discussions emerge in rhizomatic forms (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, pp. 3-25), as networks of meaning without a fixed order of hierarchies, which cannot be said to have a clear beginning and end and neither to emanate in response to a single event or particular theory of subjectivity and/or identity politics. What we face here is then much more of a conversation that does not follow a clear-cut path, as if it would be a matter of one theory being superseded by a more accurate or truthful one. They will be represented as partial explanations rather than all-encompassing ones, each trying to grasp what subjectivities could be in particular identity politics frameworks.

The wide definition of identity politics adopted here refers to social and political movements, which articulate their struggles for emancipation based on a collective notion of identity that, by naming their oppression, simultaneously derive shared attributes for those inside the collectivity in question. The multiplicity of identity politics has made this term signify “a loose collection of political projects that each articulate a collective with a distinctively different social location that has hitherto been neglected, erased, or suppressed” (Heyes 2007).

During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, varied identity politics groups dominated the political, social and cultural landscape and academic discussions. The nature and scope of these groups were highly dissimilar, ranging from U.S. Civil Rights movements, gay and lesbian liberation groups and Indigenous movements, to name just a few. They singled out how, because of a particular shared identity trait

¹ Paper presented at the Panel *Gender Theory, Subjectivity and Security*. International Studies Association, Annual Convention. San Francisco, 26 - 29 March 2008.

² Contact the author at josefina.echavarria {at} uibk.ac.at

of their members, these groups had been discriminated against, oppressed and marginalized (Heyes 2007). “Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination” (Heyes 2007).

Furthermore, beyond making visible the violence against identity politics members – as individuals and as collectivities – through vastly dissimilar strategies, identity politics groups demanded that their oppressive situation be transformed. “The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of ‘universal humankind’ on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect ‘in spite of’ one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different (Kruks 2001, p. 85 quoted in Heyes 2007).

From the above follows the importance of this particular debate on subjectivity and feminist identity politics is intimately intertwined with the concept of agency, since identity politics discourses aim at fostering social, political, cultural and economic transformations for their constituency. Therefore, the definition of who belongs to such a constituency and under which conditions becomes crucial for shaping the possibilities of building up solidarity and resistance that conditions the ways in which political agency and emancipatory action can be undertaken.

Within this framework, the intricate relationship between subjectivity and identity politics emerges. Is it necessary that members of oppressed groups share a common experience of discrimination for them to subsequently build up political coalitions for emancipation? In other words, is it necessary for the members of a particular identity politics group to share in advance some experience that qualifies them as valid constituents of a particular group and, therefore, authorizes them as valid subjects for enacting political emancipatory action? Especially regarding the question of feminism, these interrogations offer a wide range of answers and ways of posing these very same issues. For instance, is there an identity of women or a common experience of womanhood that accounts for constituting identity politics? Alternatively, from a different viewpoint, one could pose this question in opposite terms: how does the formation of identity politics

groups shape the very meaning of dissimilar experiences and sense of selves amongst women and – though immersed in differences –can still drive political solidarity amongst women?

In a few words, does the experience of the subject of feminist identity politics precede political action or is female subjectivity concomitantly (if not ex-post) produced by identity politics formations?

In this light, this review essay concerns itself with how the idea of the self has been thought and represented in feminist identity politics. Hence, such configurations of subjectivities are thought to be always in concert with others. They never pertain to the self by itself but always to a self embedded in a process in which “our interior lives inevitable seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience” (Mansfield 2000, p. 3). Therefore, the question of how identity politics discourses create subjectivities necessarily involves the definition of the subject of feminism’s relationship to the larger world.

Methodology

In order to shed some light on this topic, this piece adopts a genealogical methodological approach to feminist identity politics. Thus, it does not aim at untangling the dilemmas of how subjectivity is ‘truly’ formed, but it aims at presenting the complex issue of how the problematic of the subject has been addressed in seemingly dissimilar feminist identity politics discourses. This perspective does not aspire to make identity politics coherent in and of themselves, but it recognizes the inter-textual relations that are evident in feminist discussions about subjectivity. In other words, just as subjectivity is grasped in concert with others, so do several notions of feminist identity politics also act in concert with and in the face of others. There is then, no clear-cut separation between the different conversations, nor uniform or consistent discussion.

Considering this disclaimer, for the purposes of providing an overview of discussions for this essay, one could boldly narrow feminist identity discourses on the question of subjectivity revolving around two foci.

A first strand understands subjectivity as the result of the encounter between the inner self and its immediate familial environment. In this line of thinking, subjectivity is shaped along the crises produced by such encounters, generally with the parents, in which the sexed body recognizes itself as separate from the world and hence informs the conscious and unconscious split of the subject. Several identity politics discourses retake this notion of subjectivity for calling upon common experiences of oppression to further solidarity amongst feminist groups in order to promote political affiliations that strive for the emancipation of women. They are so mainly concerned with liberation from patriarchic structures.

A second wide strand has called into question the solidarity of women based on foundational categories of identity, criticizing the assumption of a pre-given natural selfhood that might automatically provide a common basis for emancipation. Such discourses on identity politics claim that it is necessary to debate the question of subjectivity as historically situated, de-centered, fragmented and non-unitary in order to compose solidarity movements based on political affinities, which could foster political coalitions for social transformation.

Both tendencies deal differently with the question of how one becomes the subject of feminist identity politics. Some possible answers to this question will be briefly sketched in this essay. The first section deals with a review of classical literature on the topic, which considers the two above mentioned tendencies as main venues on how subjectivity has been conceived differently in feminist identity politics. Afterwards, some contemporary views on the treatment of the theme are offered.

Classical literature review

Because subjectivity in feminist identity politics is a debate that exceeds policed boundaries, the following division between psychoanalytically-inspired notions of subjectivity and anti-subjective subjectivities ought to be interpreted as schemas.

This schematic representation allows locating particular feminist contributions to this debate in an understandable framework.

Becoming a woman: breaking the patriarchal deal

As a starting point for the discussion the writings of Simone de Beauvoir (1908*-1986) need to be highlighted. In light of the at the time absent women's movement, this French activist sharpened political discussions with her work *The Second Sex*. Originally published in French in 1949 (2003), de Beauvoir's position concerning the topic at hand shed light on the intricate relationship between notions of subjectivity and identity politics. According to her (2003), emancipatory women's movements had not been set into place due to the fact that female subjectivity was construed as the "Other" of the absolute and normal subject man. For de Beauvoir (2003, p. 150) the sexes man and woman are construed concomitantly, yet not in a reciprocal way: "He is the subject - he is the Absolute - she is the Other." Woman, in contraposition to man, becomes a derivative and incidental subject from man.

Following Hegel's notions on recognition, de Beauvoir says that any self necessitates an "Other" identified as inessential to conceive himself as essential. Put differently, the self necessitates a co-constitutive "Other" that allows him to self-identify through difference to this "Other". The danger that this "Other" sets up a reciprocal claim is countered through diverse practices – such as "wars, festivals, trading treaties, and contests among tribes, nations and classes" (de Beauvoir 2003, p. 151) – thus depriving the "Other" of reciprocity.

To de Beauvoir (2003), in the case of the configuration of the subjectivity of women, it is not that man himself has established the "woman/Other" as inessential, but the submission of women is the very cause for men to be conceived as normative and essential subjects. Yet woman has not become the inessential because of her own failure, but because "women lack concrete means of organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit" (de Beauvoir 2003, p. 152).

At this point, the relationship that de Beauvoir (2003) establishes between subjectivity and identity politics is made explicit: historical events have made woman submit to man, yet sexual difference between the sexes – man and woman – is given by nature. This standpoint takes de Beauvoir to analyze woman's submission in the relationship to man. The bond that unites women amongst themselves, as opposed to the solidarity amongst members of other oppressed groups such as Jews, proletarians or "Negroes", is weaker than the strong bond that unites woman to her man-oppressor: "Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *mitsein*, and woman has not broken it" (de Beauvoir 2003, p. 152). In this way, de Beauvoir (2003, p. 153) argues that women's emancipation has not taken place because breaking away from her bond to man-the-sovereign, to refuse taking part in this deal, would imply for women "to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste".

From de Beauvoir's standpoint this particular conception of subjectivity, in which *one becomes a woman* by defining oneself as the inessential other (woman-the-*liege*) in difference to man-the absolute, is the reason for the absence of a movement that strives for the emancipation of women. Such emancipatory movement, becoming the essential in her own terms, would imply that woman suffers losing the advantages that submitting and becoming the Other provide her with, such as man's material protection and man's undertaking of the moral justification of woman's own existence (de Beauvoir 2003, p. 153).

From de Beauvoir's arguments one could establish that, though submissive because of historical events, women make up a group – based on their natural sexual difference – whose emancipation could be called into action only if they dared breaking the deal with men and thus risking to lose their advantages in the patriarchal heterosexual system.

Lesbians signal the end of the woman myth: women as class

By using as platform de Beauvoir's idea of becoming a woman, Monique Wittig (1935*-2003) draws a different conception of lesbian subjectivity and identity politics. Wittig (2003) [1992] argues that since women define themselves by

participating in heterosexual arrangements (such as woman-the-lichee in the face of man-the absolute), by resisting heterosexuality lesbians are not women (Wittig 2003, p. 159). By defining woman as a natural category, Wittig (2003, p. 159) claims that lesbians *per se* destroy the natural category of women, which ought to ground emancipatory women's movements as formulated by Simone de Beauvoir. To Wittig (2003), defining woman in her heterosexual relation to man – whether as oppressed in a patriarchic system or as emancipated in a matriarchic system – implies to nevertheless imprison the configuration of subjectivity in heterosexual arrangements. The fact that woman defines herself in relation to man, as belonging to him, *has* to make “a lesbian [...] be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society” (Wittig 2003, p. 159).

Lesbians hence, escape what Wittig (2003, p. 160) calls the ‘woman myth’, the myth formulated in early feminism that woman is unique and that disregards “history as a dynamic process which develops from a conflict of interests”. To this Wittig adds, “[b]y admitting that there is a ‘natural’ distinction between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that ‘men’ and ‘women’ have always existed and will always exist. Not only do we naturalise history, but also consequently we naturalise the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible (Wittig 1992, pp. 10-11 quoted in Mansfield 2000, p. 69).”

In this direction, for Wittig (2003, p. 160) both man and woman are social categories, not born out of nature, but out of (socio)political processes in which economy also plays a very important role. Women, not woman, constitute a class, but not in the Marxist sense of being incorporated into other economic-classes, an inclusion which erases women's individual identity as historical subjects whether by absorbing them into the proletariat or the bourgeois (Wittig 2003, pp. 160 – 161). For Wittig (2003, p. 161), women ought to constitute themselves first as an Identity – first, I fight for myself – in order to become individual historical subjects.

In this line of thinking, Wittig's arguments have important consequences for feminist identity politics. Woman, which in de Beauvoir's writings shares the common experience of her female sex as a natural fact, is now made plural and then split between heterosexuals and lesbians. Monique Wittig so calls for a configuration of identity politics in which women acquire plural subjectivities and, from their appropriation of identity can then make class claims based on their sexual problems, once meant to be circumscribed to the private sphere. Lesbians hence mark the category of 'women' in its economic and political grain at the same time that lesbians necessarily point to the non-natural identity of women.

Debating the split subject and its implications for feminist identity politics

When considering the way in which subjectivity has been articulated in feminist identity politics discourses, psychoanalytical accounts of the self – whether as reconstitution or critique of psychoanalysis – has been one of the major sources of inspiration to call on movements of solidarity amongst women. Broadly speaking, psychoanalysis assumes that there is an interior life that, although it is particularly shaped by encounters between the child and her immediate familial encounter (generally the parents), bonds the collectivity women. Such bonding allows the configuration of subjectivities with common traits and, hence, enables articulating common claims for emancipation of the collective subject “women”.

Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are two prominent figures in the feminist psychoanalytic debate on women's subjectivity and their approaches have seemingly different consequences for conceiving feminist identity politics. In the following section, a short review of Irigaray and Kristeva's viewpoints is presented as a way of highlighting some of the crucial arguments that dominated the discussions on feminist identity politics during the decade of the eighties. Both authors take as point of departure the masculine construction of subjectivity from which female subjectivity is derived in both Freud and Lacan's writings. Irigaray and Kristeva, in disparate forms, underline the inadequacy of masculine psychoanalytic frameworks to explain female subjectivity and, therefore, gender altogether (Mansfield 2000, p. 79).

The plural sex: female imaginary and the search for common interests

Luce Irigaray's main argument concerns how, differently from a masculine subjectivity in search for a non-fulfillable unity, visibility, coherence and singularity, female subjectivity emerges from her plural autoerotic sex and, transposing Lacanian imaginaries, woman's female imaginary would then seek difference and not (masculine) singularity. The inadequacy of traditional masculine psychoanalytical accounts, consequently, finds its origin in the ways in which female sexuality "has always been theorized within masculine parameters" (Irigaray 1998, p. 549).

In her well-known contribution "This sex which is not one" originally published in 1977, Irigaray (1998, p. 549) argues that woman's fate as lack, atrophy or penis envy – as it was formulated by Freud and many others – seems foreign to her sexual pleasure. "[...] a woman touches herself by and within herself directly, without mediation, and before any distinction between activity and passivity is possible" (Irigaray 1998, p. 550). From woman's constant touching of her sex, which is not one and neither two, *she is nor one neither two* (Irigaray 1998, p. 551). This geography of woman's pleasure, for Irigaray (1998, p. 552), makes woman a plural subject, made up of multiple differences, "more complex, more subtle, than is imagined".

Reappropriating psychoanalytical accounts of the self, Irigaray proposes an alternative – female – imaginary that, just like in Lacan's theories, is constituted as the order of language. Since the woman's sex and desire is fragmentary, the machinery of language is different for woman. When contradictory words "seem a little crazy to the logic of reason, and inaudible for him who listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance [...] One must listen to her differently in order to hear an 'other meaning' which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized (Irigaray 1998, p. 553)."

Nonetheless, in a masculine-phallographic economy woman has not been able to unfold her sex, desire and language. "For woman is traditionally use-value for man,

exchange-value among men. Merchandise, then” (Irigaray 1998, p. 554). Her price is determined by male-subjects “according to the standard of their work and their need-desire” (Irigaray 1998, p. 554) and, therefore, she is an object of transaction in an established commercial system.

For Irigaray (1998, p. 555), consequently, no matter how radical a project of woman’s liberation might appear, it will not suffice to liberate woman’s desire. To her, “neither political theory nor political practice has yet resolved nor sufficiently taken into account this historical problem” and although “Marxism has announced its importance [...] women are not, strictly speaking, a class and their dispersion in several classes makes their political struggle complex and their demands sometimes contradictory” (Irigaray 1998, p. 555). Hence, Irigaray calls attention to how, even if women took indispensable steps to “escape their proletarianization on the trade market” - like silently going on strike, avoiding men long enough to learn to defend their desire by their speech and so on - “if their goal is to reverse the existing order [...] history would simply repeat itself and return to phallogocentrism, where neither women’s sex, their imaginary, nor their language can exist” (Irigaray 1998, p. 555).

Irigaray’s conceptualization of the female sex, desire, language and imaginary, so defines female subjectivity differently than male’s, providing a stable platform from which women can recognize their common and plural sex and so constitute a collectivity. To Irigaray (1998), women are not to be understood as a class, as Wittig (2003) argues, because of their belonging to different socio-economic classes that draw women to making different and often contradictory claims. Women’s identity politics, for Irigaray, are so based on a common (autoerotic yet submitted) sex, but their interests – necessary for political action and mobilization – are dispersed, since women’s identity is intersected with their belonging to different classes and their inability for creating a stable female imaginary.

“Irigaray is at pains to point out, however, that what we are dealing with here is not some naturally occurring essence of the female. Indeed, since the feminine stands against identity and definition, it is important not to allow her insights to

petrify into fixed and predictive categories, insisting on what women are and should be everywhere” (Mansfield 2000, p. 72).

Subjects of abjection: motherly politics

At this point of the discussion it is relevant to bring in Julia Kristeva’s (1941*) divergent accounts of subjectivity and its implications for identity politics. During the decade of the 1980s and in a clear distinction to Irigaray’s proposal of an equally valid female imaginary yet also re-creating female psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva puts forward the notion of *subjects of abjection*. Using as backbone the psychoanalytical thesis that there is a conscious repression of material in the unconsciousness, Kristeva argues that such process of repression is never fully finalized or completed as far as there is always a remnant of material that cannot be clearly subsumed into either the conscious or the unconscious (Kristeva quoted in Mansfield 2000, p. 80). For Kristeva, this incomplete repression enables the process of abjection as made up of that material which cannot be completely stabilized, making impossible the configuration of a stable subjectivity – the promise of Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalysis.

To Kristeva, the outburst of unconscious material will therefore not be occasional, but the very substance of a subject that imagines itself as the hypothetical inside of a container “whose walls are permeable” (Mansfield 2000, p. 81). This permeability, to Kristeva, so creates an always present anxiety in the subject, who “never feels itself to be ordered and knowable [...] always under threat, in an unresolved state that is exciting as well as dangerous”, in Kristeva’s words, “as tempting as it is condemned” (Kristeva quoted in Mansfield 2000, p. 81).

Precisely both this temptation and condemnation allow grasping how the process of abjection marks the subject in its striving for completion. The ‘I’ pictures itself with imaginary bodily boundaries that ought to separate it from the outside, with borders and frontiers that ought to mark the differentiation between inside and outside. Yet this clear and proper body is constantly being challenged in its finitude by its own physical fluids – like urine, menstrual blood and semen, amongst others – that permanently disrupt the imagined and tight self. The

condemnation of these fluids, like their repulsion for instance, is for Kristeva “evidence of our violent attempts to strengthen the subjectivity – or, more accurately, the ‘defensive position’, which is all we have of subjectivity” (Mansfield 2000, 83).

Such a defensive position is then, to Kristeva, much more a process than a structure. She takes this process of trying to fix an image of a coherent subject to be the one the subject constantly struggles with/against, as is evidenced in the very physical repulsion felt by crossing boundaries of the own body. This repulsion is replicated in further bodily, metaphorical and abstract abjections into an ambiguous, dangerous, scary yet tempting position regarding systems of order, identity and law that cross lines, whose frontiers are not clearly marked and which remain ambivalent, causing a high amount of anxiety (Kristeva 1982, p. 4 in Mansfield 2000, pp, 83 – 85). This anxiety points at our desire for an orderly and stable subjectivity and, simultaneously, at the temptation to fall out of an orderly terrain, making our defensive position (subjectivity) both a ground to hold on to yet also a burden that prevents us from being outside of policed systems.

The gender politics that Julia Kristeva’s devises out of her theory of subjectivity are intimately connected to femininity, specifically with the maternal, as far as abjection is most clearly lived and experienced by the separation from the mother’s body. Henceforth, this once-connection with the maternal that subjects experience and then – once the separation between baby and mother takes place – gets forever lost, turns into abjected material. This abjection represents both the commitment to subjectivity and “a simultaneous subversion of that subjectivity’s wholeness and completion by an impulse to fragmentation, ambiguity and ambivalence that is connected with the maternal” (Kristeva 1982, p. 6 quoted in Mansfield 2000, p. 89). In other words, though the subject might be constantly summoned by the symbolic order that promises a stable subjectivity, the abjected material cannot be overcome, it will always thrill and threaten the systems of order, truth and law, representing ambiguity, contingency and fragmentation connected with the maternal.

The parallel made by Kristeva between the feminine and the maternal, which seems to reduce femininity to abjected motherhood, is highly criticized for mirroring the absorption that patriarchal accounts of the self have also made in this very direction of rejection of the female in psychoanalysis. Secondly, the automatic interpretation of femininity with motherhood is based on the assumption that female's (biological) sex has a corresponding expression in their sexual desire, sexual behavior and heterosexual reproduction. Other feminist authors criticize these assumptions by pointing at the shortcomings that this economy presents for building up identity politics coalitions, leaving aside those who do not comply with such a model.

Black women: Black feminist thought and the politics of knowledge

At the bottom of these argumentations, the notion of intersectionality of identity categories such as sex, class, nationality and race, resonate with profound theoretical and political consequences on feminist theorists on subjectivity and identity politics. Summarized shortly, intersectionality refers to the recognition of how any identity category (be it woman, black, middle-class, heterosexual, and so on) fails to be exhaustive for representing subjectivity (Butler 1995). In this direction, the term intersectionality calls attention to the fact that the subject is always located in multiple identity positions that imperfectly speak for idealized identity categories.

Intersectionality has been extensively discussed in feminist theories, most prominently inspired by Patricia Hill Collins' (1948*) chief arguments about the unique standpoint that African-American women enjoy and which, by virtue of their situatedness, are unique when compared to non-black women or black males (1989). Collins (1989, pp. 750-756) affirms that the conditions of oppression of black women take material shape in their economic, social and political status, which – simultaneously – subordinate the knowledge and impede African-American women to access dominant positions of power, constituting black feminist thought in and of itself.

From this standpoint, closely related to black women's experience³ that shape their subjectivities to make them a unique group, Hill Collins establishes a direct relationship to what identity politics can generate at the political level to legitimate the knowledge claims of black feminist thought. In her words, "First, Black feminist thought must be validated by ordinary African-American women [...] Second, if it is to establish its legitimacy, Black feminist thought also must be accepted by the community of Black women scholars. [...] Third, Black feminist thought within academia must be prepared to confront Eurocentric masculinist political and epistemological requirements" (Collins 1989, pp. 771, 772).

Intersectionality and the politics of identity

Though clearly drawing on these discussions on location, knowledge and epistemology, the coinage of the term Intersectionality⁴ is commonly attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1959*) "Mapping the Margins" (2003), originally published in 1991. Crenshaw (2003) problematizes the intersections between race and gender as identity categories that cannot be separated yet that in the organization of identity politics have been left aside as intragroup differences for the sake of group unity.

According to Crenshaw (2003, p. 175), identity politics enter in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice, which treat identity categories (such as race and gender) "as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize these who are different". In this sense, to Crenshaw (2003) the problem of identity politics is that it fails to recognize intragroup differences. "Moreover, ignoring difference *within* groups, contributes to tension *among* groups" which "bears on efforts to politicize violence against women" (Crenshaw 2003, p.175). As such, "[...] when the practices expound identity as 'woman' or 'person of color' as an either/or proposition, they relegate

³ Women experiences, what they entail individually and collectively, psychologically and politically, have been extensively researched and discussed in feminist theory. For a very good overview on this debate see Scott 1992.

⁴ For further discussions on Intersectionality see the Special Issue on Intersectionality by the European Journal of Women's Studies (Phoenix & Pattynama 2006). For a discussion on different methodological approaches, inspired in complexity, which offer tools for intersectional analyses, see Leslie McCall (2005).

the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling” (Crenshaw 2003, p. 175).

Crenshaw shows that intersectionality is “a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identities and the ongoing necessity of group politics” (Crenshaw 2003, pp. 190, 191). Furthermore, Crenshaw (2003, p. 191) embraces the socially constructed character of the categories of race and gender to underscore how power invests identity categories with values that foster and create social hierarchies. According to Crenshaw, “the location of women of colour at the intersection of race and gender makes their experiences structurally and ‘qualitatively different than that of white women’ [...]. Gender, race and class are conceptualized as systems of domination, oppression and marginalization that determine or structure identities” (Prins 2006, p. 279).

For Crenshaw (2003, p. 191), this “thinking about the way in which power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others” is a highly politically relevant project that “attempts to unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways in which those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them”.

In this line of argumentation, Crenshaw’s critique to the blindness of differences amongst members of identity politics groups is combined with an emancipatory call for social power to delineate difference as “the source of social empowerment and reconstruction” (Crenshaw 2003, p. 175). As such, Crenshaw’s proposal of intersectionality connects concepts of subjectivity with identity politics under a new light. She claims that by problematizing the power relationships amongst subordinated and dominant peoples and groups, identity politics can be a site where to exercise critical resistance strategies for disempowered groups means “to occupy and defend a politics of social location” (Crenshaw 2003, p. 191).

Anti-subjectivity and feminist identity politics:

Concerning who belongs to feminist identity politics groups, and up to which extent, debates on postmodernism shaped feminist discussions during the late eighties and the beginning of the nineties.

Fractured cyborg-identities and the politics of affinity

The work of techno-feminist Donna Haraway (1944*) marks an important point in these discussion. With her 1985 contribution “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1991), Haraway put forward the question of the subject of feminism by recurring to the ironic political myth of the cyborg in an effort to provide a pleasurable alternative of imagination for a social-feminism that had fallen short when arguing binding feminist identity politics by a common women’s experience (Mansfield 2000, p. 160). Haraway (1991) insisted that at the end of the twentieth century feminist preoccupations with race, class and sexual orientation necessitated to recognize a type of subjectivity that no longer aspired to complete wholeness, but which embraced blurred boundaries and hybridity.

For Haraway, the cyborg serves as the political myth for hybrid beings, non-naturalist modes of “imagining a world without gender” (Haraway 1991, p. 150) which signals three crucial boundary breakdowns. The first boundary break is that between human and animal, in so far as “many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures” (Haraway 1991, p. 152). Such a transgression by the cyborg signals a “disturbingly and pleasurable tight coupling” (Haraway 1991, p. 152). The second boundary breakthrough signaled by the cyborg is that between animal-human (organism) and machine, since “late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed [...]. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway 1991, p. 152). And the latter brings us to the last boundary breaking which the cyborg heralds: the transgression between physical and non-physical (Haraway 1991, p. 153).

For Haraway (1991, p. 154), the transgressed boundaries that the cyborg myth represents challenge the premises of most American socialists and feminists that

claim a deepened dualism between “mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices”. In this light, the political form that Haraway (1991, p. 155) envisions for feminist identity politics would be possible by the fission in the name of affinity, “related not by blood but by choice”.

This last remark highlights how, for Haraway (1991, p. 155) the myth of the cyborg, as an ironic political myth of subjectivity, is closely related to political action and emancipatory feminist identity politics. Naming one’s feminism by a single adjective, says Haraway (1991, p. 155), has become difficult since the consciousness of the exclusion through its naming is acute and so, in the face of “contradictory, partial, and strategic” identities which cannot be summoned as any sort of essential unity to bond feminists, Haraway proposes the alternative of coalitional politics through affinity. She argues: “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female which is itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. [...] Painful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention among women) along every possible fault line has made the concept of *woman* elusive, an excuse for the matrix of women’s domination of each other. [...] But there has also been a growing recognition of another response through coalition – affinity, not identity” (Haraway 1991, p. 155).

Haraway (1991, pp. 155, 156) turns to the work of Chela Sandoval (2000) to highlight how the myth of the cyborg – as a new subjectivity – offers a political platform for positive change. ‘Women of color’ are the new political voice Haraway (1991, p. 156) pursues to underscore how, because they have been marginalized both by white-liberal feminists and by male racial politics, ‘women of color’ represent – not an identity but – a sea of differences which constitute a group by what Sandoval (2000) calls *oppositional consciousness*. As Sandoval (2000, p. 42) argues, the social movement ‘U.S. third world feminism’ was a “new form of historical consciousness [...] [that] provided access to a different way of

conceptualizing not just feminist consciousness but oppositional activity in general: it comprised a formulation capable of aligning U.S. movements for social justice not only with each other, but with global movements toward decolonization.” The membership to the group ‘women of color’ as political force has been forged by “conscious appropriation by negation” (Haraway 1991, p. 156). ‘Women of color’, as category, has been built upon the “disorderly polyphony emerging from decolonization” (Haraway 1991, p. 156).

Both for Haraway (1991) and for Sandoval (2000) the notion of oppositional consciousness, of building up feminist identity politics through difference, in search of political affinity and not of essential unity, were characteristics of the so-called postmodern condition of the 1990s. These postmodern realities of fractured, partial and contradictory identities, could account for the construction of differentiated politically and historically conscious subjectivities and enable political action. Chela Sandoval (2000) even proposed a global oppositional consciousness that unites diverse social movements around the globe, profiting from their negated identity and forming coalitions without regards for national or ethnic boundaries.

Weak subjectivities and utopian thinking

Yet, for other authors, like Seyla Benhabib (1950*), postmodernism was neither a conceptual nor a political ally for feminist identity politics. Benhabib (1995, p. 29) argued that a “certain version of postmodernism [strong theses of postmodernism] is not only incompatible with but would undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women”.

Benhabib bases her reading of strong postmodernism and its critique of its implications for the elimination of emancipatory feminist identity politics on Jane Flax’s “Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West” (1990). By using Flax’s arguments as foundations, Benhabib (1995, pp. 18-29) draws on three main tenets of strong postmodern theses and offers her own counter-proposals of weak postmodern theses.

In this direction, Benhabib characterizes postmodernism by three main theses: the death of man, the death of history and the death of metaphysics. First, “the death of man, understood as the death of the autonomous, self-reflective subject, capable of acting on principle” (Benhabib 1995, p. 29), “eliminates the idea of subjectivity altogether” and, “[b]y so doing, it eliminates those ideals of autonomy, reflexivity, and accountability which are necessary to the idea of historical change” (Nicholson 1995, p. 3).

Secondly, postmodernism is characterized by “the death of history, understood as the severance of the epistemic interest in history of struggling groups in constructing their past narratives” (Benhabib 1995, p. 29). The death of history would then imply, to Benhabib, the negation of the very idea of emancipation, claiming, “[w]e cannot replace monocausal and essentialist narratives of history with an attitude towards historical narrative which is merely pragmatic and fallibilistic” because such “an attitude emulates the problematic perspectives of ‘value free’ social science” and so “eliminates the ideal of emancipation from social analysis” (Nicholson 1995, p. 3).

Thirdly, Benhabib (1995, p. 29) characterizes strong postmodernism by “the death of metaphysics, understood as the impossibility of criticizing or legitimizing institutions, practices, and traditions other than through the immanent appeal to the self-legitimation of “small narratives””. For Benhabib, this last death implies the elimination of philosophy, necessary to access higher-order principles that provide normative orientation for conflictive situations in any culture (Nicholson 1995, p. 3).

Consequently, the postmodern strong theses of the deaths of man, history and metaphysics, to Benhabib (1995, p. 29), undermine “the feminist commitment to women’s agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women’s own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender ‘in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity””. In other words, for her, strong postmodernism ultimately displaces

critical theory understood as “theory which examines present conditions from the perspective of utopian visions” (Nicholson 1995, p. 3).

Thus, from Benhabib’s perspective, a notion of subjectivity that abandons an autonomous, self-reflective subject and declares the death of man, history and metaphysics is incompatible with a notion of feminist identity politics that calls for emancipation. For Benhabib (1995, p. 30), feminist identity politics necessitate utopian thinking as a practical-moral imperative, as a regulative principle of hope for the wholly other (*das ganz Andere*) that enable morality and radical transformation. In this line of thinking, Benhabib’s weak proposal of postmodern subjectivity speaks for an autonomous self who – though endowed with fluid ego boundaries – is capable of agency and accountability.

Performing subjects: the contingent foundations of identity politics

This relationship between subjectivity and identity politics within postmodern accounts of the self is turned upside down by Judith Butler (1956*) who made a break in feminist theory with her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 1999). One of Butler’s main tenets is that feminist identity politics movements “tend to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken” (Butler 1999, p. 181). On the contrary, Butler’s (1999, p. 181) “argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed”. In other words, to Butler there is no need to account for a pre-defined established identity of the subject of feminism – like woman or women – but identity politics can be mobilized and political action can be taken on the basis of an open-ended subjectivity. Such coalitions would be bound by the very politics of identity politics, which shall not be restricted to subject categorizations made in advance but that ought to be negotiated considering the analytical and political contextualization of a particular coalition.

This relationship between the subject of feminism and identity politics is put forward by Butler in the face of her critique of how, until the end of the 1980s, from her perspective the question of feminist identity politics had only been taken

up by accounts of subjectivity that reduced the notion of “woman” or “women” to a stable, presumed universal unity of the subject of feminism (Butler 1999, p. 7). On the contrary, for Butler, gender identity and the gendered body are performative.

That gender identity is performative implies, in summary, that the acts, gestures and desires that are said to be the expression of a gender interiority or core, “are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. [...] [This] suggests that it [the gendered body] has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality [...] [and] that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the ‘integrity’ of the subject (Butler 1999, p. 136).”

In other words, for Butler (1995) the foundations of a stable subject of feminism are contingent and ought to be debated. “[T]o establish in advance that any theory of politics requires a subject, needs from the start to presume its subject” are premises that “seek to secure a contingent formation of politics that requires that these notions remain unproblematized features of its own definition” (Butler 1995, p. 35). As such, feminist identity politics draw on a stable subject – the subject of feminism – in order to preclude the problematization of the exclusion and foreclosing of subjects who do not fit into the categories of feminist identity politics, in other words, who are not authorized to be the foundation of feminist identity politics.

In a position clearly differentiated from that of Benhabib’s (1995), Butler (1995, p. 39) argues that to criticize the subject of feminism by politically scrutinizing the power relations through which it is formed “is *not* the advent of a nihilistic relativism incapable of furnishing norms, but, rather, the very precondition of a politically engaged critique”. Her concerns are then directed at questioning how the subject of feminism comes into being as a valid political subject: a position necessitates a certain authorizing power that cannot be contained by stating that

the “I” is situated⁵. For Butler (1995, p. 42), the “I” is constituted by the very positions it enacts, which go well beyond merely theoretical products and are “fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements, those matrices of power and discourse that produce me as a viable “subject”.”

This discussion on the constitution of the authorized subject of feminism – how the “I” is formed through exclusionary moves – is for Butler crucial for comprehending the notion of agency, as “*always and only a political prerogative*” (Butler 1995, p. 46) taking us directly to the relationship between subjectivity and identity politics. To her, since agency cannot be taken for granted as an a priori guarantee, and “if the subject is constituted by power” implies that “the subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanism of power, but which is power’s own possibility of being reworked” (Butler 1995, p. 47).

It would be then, from Butler’s perspective, impossible for the subject of feminism to separate itself from the power relationships that claim to be oppressive (violent), because the subject is already a result and a temporary product of those very same relationships. Echoing Michel Foucault’s notion of subjectivity, there would be no way of resisting or inducing emancipatory change from outside the power relationships that constitute the subject of feminism. In short, power produces the subjects and, as such, there is no resistance outside power.

Butler (1995) so argues that her position does not imply to wipe out the subject of feminism altogether, but to be aware that any foundational notion of women creates its own contestation by those subjects who are excluded and foreclosed by the constitution of this category. Her point is, moreover, that such contestations ought to be prized and are the “permanent risk of the process of democratization” (Butler 1995, p. 51) of feminist identity politics.

⁵ This specific debate has been condensed in the edited volume *Feminist Contentions* (Benhabib et al. 1995), in which the punctual discussions about subjectivity and identity politics extend beyond the limits of this essay and also include other important authors such as Nancy Fraser and Drucilla Cornell.

In this line of thinking, for Butler (1995, p. 50) “any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that this guarantee of solidarity is required *in advance*, will necessarily produce factionalization, and that “identity” as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. [I]f feminism presupposes that “women” designate an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. [...] To deconstruct the subject of feminism is [...] to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear.”

Nomadic subjects and ethical politics

By so engaging with the problematic of how to deal with a non-unitary subject of feminism that could be the foundation for emancipatory politics, Rosi Braidotti (1954*) takes on the problematization of a non-stable subjectivity from a different angle, counter-proposing the notion of subjects who fall within apparent exclusionary categories (Braidotti 2006, 60). Braidotti’s (1994, 2006) proposal is the concept of *nomadic subjects* as qualitative multiplicities characteristic of late forms of capitalism.

Braidotti’s nomadic subjects are a way for re-thinking female subjectivity as figurations, referring “to a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallogentric vision of the subject”, as “a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity”. Such a redefinition of subjectivity implies for Braidotti (1994, p. 3) “a new form of materialism” that emphasizes “the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject”.

For Braidotti the question of how this nomadic subjectivity shapes and is shaped by feminist identity politics revolves around the notion of nomadic consciousness. To Braidotti (1994, p. 31), nomadic consciousness “combines features that are usually perceived as opposing, namely the possession of a sense of identity that

rests not on fixity but on contingency. [...] [It] combines coherence with mobility [...] [and] aims to rethink the unity of the subject, without reference to humanistic beliefs, without dualistic oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new set of intensive and often intransitive transitions". Such feminist projects ought to be "affirmed by women in the confrontation of their multiple differences of class, age, lifestyle, and sexual preference" (Braidotti 1994, p. 30).

The nomadic subject, consequently, in Braidotti's (1994, p. 4) terms, concerns how "axes of differentiation such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age and others intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity". She calls this nomadic subjectivity-in-becoming "the affirmation of the unalterably positive structure of difference, meant as a multiple and complex process of transformation, a flux of multiple becomings, the play of complexity, or the principle of not-One" (Braidotti 2006, p. 145). From Braidotti's (2006, p. 127) view, such nomadic subjectivity ought to trace transversal interconnections through her three fundamental ecologies: "that of the environment, that of the *socius*, and that of the psyche".

From this follows that nomadic subjects can only be grasped in their interactions, always in relations with and through others, they would not exist as terms in and of themselves. Nomadic subjects then entail making the subject into "transversal and interconnecting entities, defined in terms of common propensities [...] intelligent matter, shared by affectivity" (Braidotti 2006, p. 148). The figure of the nomadic subject, to Braidotti, will be unified by a continuing power, not as fragmented spatially such as the poststructuralist subject.

Moreover, at this point of the discussion the embodiment of subjectivity resurfaces again in Braidotti's argument. "The latitudinal and longitudinal forces that structure the subject have limits of sustainability. By latitudinal forces Deleuze means the affects that a subject is capable of, following the degrees of intensity or potency: how intensely they run. By longitude is meant the span of extension: how far they can go. Sustainability is about how much of it a subject can take" (Braidotti 2006, p. 156). And such a threshold of sustainability gets fixed by a "radically

immanent intensive body [as] an assemblage of forces, or flows, of intensities and passions that solidify in space, and consolidate in time, within the singular configuration commonly known as an ‘individual’ self” (Braidotti 2006, p. 157). You know when a threshold of sustainability has been reached because your body tells “you if and when you have reached a threshold or a limit. The warning can take the form of falling ill, or it can take other somatic manifestations, like fear, anxiety, or a sense of insecurity” (Braidotti 2006, pp. 158, 159).

It is then bodily manifestations – the materialization of nomadic subjectivity –, which account for the principles of ethics that Braidotti singles out as an enlarged notion of individual who encloses a “structural sense of interconnection between the singular self and the environment or totality in which it is embodied” (Braidotti 2006, p. 160). To sum it up, “[t]he subject is a spatio-temporal compound that frames the boundaries of processes of becoming. This works by transforming negative into positive passions through the power of an act of an understanding that is no longer indexed upon a phallogocentric set of standards, but its rather nomadic and affective. [As such,] Becoming is an intransitive process: it is not about becoming anything in particular. Inter-relations occur on the basis of affinity, in a pragmatic mode of random attraction” (Braidotti 2006, p. 163).

In agreement with Judith Butler’s contingent foundations of feminism (Butler 1995), Braidotti (1994, p. 35) states that from a nomadic perspective “the political is a form of intervention that acts simultaneously on the discursive and the material registers of subjectivity; thus it has to do with the ability to draw multiple connections. What is political is precisely this awareness of the fractured, intrinsically power-based constitution of the subject and the active quest for possibilities of resistance to hegemonic formations”.

Final comments

These last remarks on nomadic subjects ought not to be taken as the final contemporary feminist account of subjectivity and identity politics. The movement of this paper, as mentioned in the introductory chapters, is trapped by the limits of a coherent academic presentation. Yet this in no way implies a progressive

movement in terms of the content related argumentations of the authors mentioned and their views on the topic. The fact that they have been presented schematically – as much as aimed for picturing the conversations and discussions in a non-linear form – should not be confused with a tree-like structure that enjoys clear beginnings, branches and the fruits of it as the culminating point. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari (2005, p. 7) again, feminist accounts of subjectivity and identity politics are interconnected in rhizomatic ways, ceaselessly establishing connections without a center and periphery or a direct causal relation. Feminist debates on what is subjectivity, who counts as the subject of feminism and which shape identity politics do (or should) take, is still a matter of contestation in a plural horizon of discussions that continue until this very moment.

References

Benhabib, S. (1995) *Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance*. In: Benhabib, S. et. al. (eds.) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Routledge, New York, pp. 17-34.

Benhabib, S. et. al. (eds.) (1995) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Routledge, New York.

Braidotti, R. (1994) *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press, New York.

Braidotti, R. (2006) *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Polity, Cambridge.

Butler, J. (1995) *Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the question of "Postmodernism"*. In: Benhabib, S. et. al. (eds.) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Routledge, New York, pp. 35-57.

Butler, J. (1999) [1990] *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York.

Collins, P.H. (1989) The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14 (4), pp. 745-773.

Crenshaw, K. (2003) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color. In: Martin, A. & E. Mendieta (eds.) *Identities. Race, Class, Gender and Nationality*. Blackwell, Padstow, pp. 175-200.

De Beauvoir, S. (2003) [1952] Introduction. The Second Sex. In: Martin, A. & E. Mendieta (eds.) *Identities. Race, Class, Gender and Nationality*. Blackwell, Padstow, pp. 149-157.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (2005) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London.

Flax, J. (1990) *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Oxford.

Haraway, D. (1991) A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. Free Association Books, London, pp. 149-181.

Heyes, C. (2007) "Identity Politics". In: Zalta, E.N. (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 Edition). At <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/identity-politics/>.

Irigaray, L. (1998) [1977] This sex which is not one. In: Baker, R.B., Winger, K.J., Elliston F.A. *Philosophy and Sex*. Prometheus Books, New York, pp. 549-555.

Mansfield, N. (2000) *Subjectivity: Theories of the self from Freud to Haraway*. New York University Press, New York.

McCall, L. (2005) The Complexity of Intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30 (31), pp. 1771-1800.

Nicholson, L. (1995) Introduction. In: Benhabib, S. et. al. (eds.) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Routledge, New York, pp. 1-16.

Phoenix A. & P. Pattynama (eds.) (2006) Intersectionality. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13 (3).

Prins, B. (2006) Narrative Accounts of Origins: A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13, pp. 277-290.

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

Scott, J.W. (1992) Experience. In: Butler, J. & J.W. Scott (eds.): *Feminists theorize the political*. Routledge, New York.

Wittig, M. (2003) [1992] One is not born a woman. In: Martin, A. & E. Mendieta (eds.) Blackwell Publishing *Identities. Race, Class, Gender and Nationality*. Blackwell, Padstow, pp. 158-162.

Online Resources

Routledge Reference Resources online. At <http://www.reference.routledge.com>
Though it requires a subscription, this online library offers cross-referenced content published in works by Routledge. In close relation to the topic of this review essay, see especially the following entries: "Identity Politics"; and "Gender and Politics".

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. At <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

Closely related to the themes of this review essay, the regularly updated encyclopedia entries provide an overview of the different subjects, mapping the terrains of discussion in academic circles and offering useful online links and bibliographical references to the original works cited. See especially the entries on “Identity Politics” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/identity-politics/>); and “Feminist Perspectives on the Self” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2007/entries/feminism-self/>)