



The many futures of gender
Oral histories of feminist theory (2024), 1, 1–15
DOI:

The future politics must be more intersectional and decolonial

A conversation with Linda Martín Alcoff

Patricia Purtschert

About the many futures of gender

The aim of the project is to tell and reflect the different histories of feminist theory. To this end, conversations are held with protagonists who had and have a formative influence on feminist theories. In engaging with these scholars, we wish to delve deeper not only into the ideas and concepts that form the key basis of these theories but also to explore the historical contexts, collective thinking, political practices and historical controversies that enabled them at the time. The conversations bring forth exigent questions around power, inequality and violence, intersectionality, the relation of sex, gender and sexuality, or the critique of binary thinking. We discuss the contributions of feminism to analyzing and challenging significant differences other than gender, such as race, class, nationality, religion, and caste. The project is rooted in oral history and philosophical exchange. It has value for those of us interested in the history of feminist theory and in feminism as a resourceful way of challenging dominant knowledges and creating different ones.

Keywords

intersectionality, embodiment, positionality, indigenous feminisms, reproduction, liberation

Corresponding author

Patricia Purtschert, Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies, University of Bern
patricia.purtschert@unibe.ch

Cite this article

Purtschert, P. (2024). The future politics must be more intersectional and decolonial. A conversation with Linda Martín Alcoff. *The many futures of gender: Oral histories of feminist theory*, 1, 1-15. DOI

The future politics must be more intersectional and decolonial: A conversation with Linda Martín Alcoff

Patricia Purtschert

The following encounter with Linda Martín Alcoff took place during her stay at the University of Bern in October 2019. There she gave a talk on “Historical identities and realistic identity politics” as well as a workshop for graduate students on the same topic. We met at a café in the Old Town of Bern and jumped right into the discussion.

Patricia Purtschert: Linda Alcoff, thank you so much for finding time to have this conversation. Since “gender” was a key term for feminist theory in the past decade, I would like to start with this concept: Can you remember when you came across the term “gender” for the first time?

Linda Martín Alcoff: No, I remember questions of women’s liberation and feminism. Those were the terms we used in the 1960s, and I began to think of myself as a women’s liberationist when I was a teenager. Women’s liberation was a political struggle defined around a particular category—“woman.” We did not talk about it in terms of gender, which is interesting, right?

Was “feminism” a term that you used for yourself at the time?

Yes, but there was a whole struggle between bourgeois feminism, as we called it then, and more radical concepts of women’s liberation. In hindsight it seems clear that bourgeois feminism was not intersectional, as we would call it today, but the more radical versions of feminism had intersectional elements of class, race, and sexuality. One of the first things I did as an activist was to organize a panel for International Women’s Day, with three feminist speakers: a liberal, a socialist, and communist, who each gave alternative analyses about women’s liberation.

There were very heated debates at the time, just as there are today. Most of the people I knew were critical of bourgeois feminism. We supported reform efforts such as the Equal Rights Amendment but argued that it had to focus on working-class women and women of color. We knew that bourgeois feminism was not going to affect our lives in any real way.

Was the term “woman” contested at the time?

Yes, but was not in the way it is today. I went to school at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida, from 1973 to 1977. The university had a very strong lesbian community that was a driving force behind every initiative. Tallahassee had one of the first

feminist women's health centers in the country, and the university had a women's center on campus and organized events as well as consciousness-raising groups. The radical feminists included both lesbian and straight women. There had been fights, of course, but by the time I was there the movement was united. In terms of the category of "woman," I think we took Simone de Beauvoir's question "What is a woman?" as a question of what a woman should be allowed to do more than as an existential question.

Were you part of activist groups at this point in your life?

Yes. On campus, there were many activist groups that I was involved in. The Vietnam war was still going on when I started college, so I was involved in the anti-war movement and anti-imperialist organizations. These groups were not all white, but very much led by male students and male faculty. And so the feminist groups provided a different kind of space.

In 1988, your article "The identity crisis in feminist theory" was published in Signs.¹ In it, you discuss two strands of thought that were crucial at the time. You call them cultural feminism and poststructural feminism, and you worried about the tendency to essentialize the category of woman or gender on the one hand, and on the other hand about the tendency to lean towards nominalism, and to come up with a theory that is not able to theorize the body and its material experiences. Why did you write this piece?

I was getting my Ph.D. in philosophy at Brown University at the time, where I joined the Pembroke Center, which was a kind of feminist think tank. Its focus for the three years of my involvement was the "cultural construction of gender," and it was led by the historian Joan Scott. She brought an amazing grouping of leading feminist theorists and philosophers from around the world to speak at the Pembroke Center. Despite the diversity of speakers, the discussion was very much dominated by psychoanalytic and poststructuralist approaches. These had an uneasy alliance, of course, but those were the main theoretical sources. They were mostly Eurocentric, but the topics of discussion were broad, and we had many Caribbean, Latin American, and other critical race scholars including Maria Patricia Fernández-Kelly, Marnia Lazreg, and Patricia Hill Collins. Many launched a critique of bourgeois feminism that was familiar to me, but they also often criticized radical feminism and what was called at the time cultural feminism.

The critique centered on the concern about essentialism in regard to gender categories: It was this essentialism that led to the assumption that women are fundamentally different than men, that women in leadership would be less militarist, for example. There was also a whole discussion in literary theory in the 1980s about "reading as a woman" which attempted to dislodge essentialism about gender. Jacques Derrida was arguing the body did not determine whether you could or could not read as a woman. That makes a certain amount of sense, but I felt that Derrida's departure from materialism was too extreme.

¹ Linda Martín Alcoff, Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory (1988).

Still, I learned a lot from the ways in which psychoanalysis and literary theory were reading texts so differently. I was learning how to read a text symptomatically, as having multiple layers of meaning, and saying things that they are not saying explicitly. These are very important practices that were not taught in philosophy at the time.

Did your supervisors accept that you were part of the Pembroke Center?

Yes—I was lucky, because not all philosophy departments would have been supportive of this. My department allowed us to take two courses for credit outside of philosophy, and then I also audited some courses. And then I proposed the first feminist philosophy course at Brown and was allowed to teach it. Martha Nussbaum came to Brown by then. She was not teaching feminism at that point but supported the field. I worked with her, and she was on my Ph.D. committee. In 1987, she organized one of the first national conferences issues on gay identity, entitled “Homosexuality in history and culture.” This sounds old-fashioned now, but she brought all these incredible people like John Boswell and David Halperin. As a classicist, Martha knew a lot about the sexuality debates in relationship to ancient Greece and Rome. In this way, she helped to expand the discussions in academia about these issues.

In other words, “The identity crisis” refers to discussions that you knew from the Pembroke Center, radical feminism on the one hand, and the poststructuralist approach on the other hand. You seem to have had a certain feeling of uneasiness towards both ...

This became a two-line struggle, but I thought there was a position in the middle that was not being articulated. And that position had to address embodiment. I argued that bringing embodiment into the center of theory and politics did not entail an essentialist view. So I was very appreciative of what poststructuralism was doing, because in philosophy the idea of thinking about power in relationship to knowledge ...

... is not an issue at all?

No, it was unintelligible. People did not know what I was talking about. Poststructuralism brought the questions of power and knowledge to bear on questions of both metaphysics and epistemology. I started reading Michel Foucault’s work at this time. Derrida was not very helpful in regard to questions of the body, but Foucault was of course focused on bodies, even though a lot of what he and poststructuralism did was to critique phenomenology. And I was a phenomenologist! Before I came to Brown, I studied phenomenology and existentialism, and I found it a very useful approach for thinking about questions of embodiment in particular. Some of the poststructuralists completely misrepresented phenomenology as a foundationalist approach to experience, when it was really the reverse. Phenomenologists on the whole wanted to make the contingency of experience more visible through their method. Yet while I was at Brown, phenomenology was an anathema, and poststructuralism was king!

Can you give an example of how these theoretical differences played out at the time?

I remember listening to Judy Butler's draft of *Gender trouble* when she spoke at the Pembroke Center and asking her questions about how her analysis of the linguistic body applied to rape. At the time, I was an anti-rape activist, and I often used this issue as a kind of touchstone for the adequacy of theoretical approaches. Feminist phenomenologists were beginning to attend to the specific conditions of female experience, such as pregnancy, breastfeeding, and also rape. Yet poststructuralists put the emphasis on language over embodied experience, as did Judy.

I also wanted to de-naturalize rape: The activist movement had to struggle against the idea that being "rapeable" was the natural condition of women. Men are of course just as "rapeable," but there are differences. For women, rape involves the possibility of pregnancy, and that is quite significant. That can be a motivation for rape, and it adds to the difficulty and trauma that rape victims experience. So I believed we needed a theoretical approach that would denaturalize embodiment and yet recognize the significance of bodily differences.²

And you asked Judith Butler these questions because you thought that her account of gender was not able to deal with the question of how rape affects women differently from men?

I did not think it was, and I had some good conversations with her about this. She takes it up a little bit in her book on Antigone,³ but her account gives too much power to language, from my point of view. She wrote her next book, *Bodies that matter*,⁴ to answer some of the concerns that people had with *Gender trouble*,⁵ but she continued to skirt issues of real embodied experiences and stay at the level of representations of bodies. She goes right up to the edge of thinking about bodies, and then retreats. So, I felt unsatisfied with her account, which was becoming very influential at the time and it obviously still is. The problem is that the poststructuralist approach she and others developed made the body just an empty signifier that played no role in the construction of meanings.

In your article, you talk about positionality because the positioned body is the place from which we develop agency or resistance.

Positionality was an attempt to think about a material condition that is dynamic, variable, and inherently social but serves as the location that affects what we can know. The body is

² Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and resistance: Understanding the complexities of sexual violation* (2018).

³ Judith Butler, *Antigone's claim: Kinship between life and death* (2000).

⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex* (1993).

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble* (1990).

always within a social world and social relations. But what is the role of the body in what I can know? What is the role of my social context in what I can know? The phenomenological insight that these issues are not separable is really useful here.

Ofentimes, you prefer the term “sexed identity” over the term “gender.” Why?

Well, all of these concepts have limitations, as we know as philosophers ... I think it was easier for people to think about gender as a linguistic term because that is where the concept arises, from the gendering of terms. But we have to think about more than language, and the term sexed identity helps to move away from the over-emphasis on language.

So talking about sexed identities helps you to bring back the body into the picture?

Yes.

You also use gender as an adjective, like in “gendered” identities, or “gendered” positions.

Yes. This brings me back to the other influence I had at Brown, the influential feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling. I was always interested in the philosophy of science, and social analyses of science were strong in regard to biology. I was also beginning to think that the feminist fear that giving any attention to the body and biology would be endangering determinism was becoming out of date. And Anne Fausto-Sterling’s work was really showing this, by showing that the body is much more fluid and variable than had been assumed. That there is a flexibility, plasticity, changeability, inherent in human bodies, and of course technology can make many changes as well. So I began to think we needed a feminist theory that will be able to bring in biological analysis.

And while biology was used as a “straw man” in some feminist writing, as a science that seemingly always relies on gender binaries, Anne Fausto-Sterling shows that biologists can come to very similar conclusions to poststructuralist philosophers.

Yes, she did a great piece recently for the *New York Times*.⁶ About how many people believe that if you go all the way down to the basic formation of the body starting in the embryo, at some point you will find there is a binary. Her answer is “no,” there is no binary, there are different options that can develop at each stage of the development of the fetus, so you cannot get a binary, you can get a multiplicity. And this is why there is such diversity in our biological embodiment in relation to sexual characteristics. Natalie Angier’s book on this is also quite useful to show that secondary, or visible, sexual

⁶ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Why sex is not binary* (2018).

characteristics do not in fact correlate in any determinate way to reproductive capacities or even differences at the hormonal level.⁷

That brings me to another question that seems crucial to me: What is the cornerstone of sexual difference, if there is one at all? In Visible identities,⁸ you write that the “objective basis of sex categories is in differential relationship to reproductive capacity, between men and women” (153). And you make it very clear that you are not talking about what cultures or societies make of these capacities, but about a difference on the corporeal level. Would you still say that?

Yes. I still hold that view, although I want to clarify: I think that it is important to understand why ideas and practices around gender developed in every culture. There are very different ideas and they are not all binary. But why did some ideas about what we now call gender develop in every culture? It is because of the division of biological reproduction in which you have some people who impregnate and people who are pregnant. You cannot use this difference to explain the oppression of women, you cannot use it to explain the division of labor between men and women as it currently exists, you cannot use it to explain misogyny. Because in some cultures, pregnant bodies are honored and seen as strong. And in others, they are seen as weak. It does not explain the meanings attached to reproduction, but it explains the fact that we give meaning to this division.

Every culture feels a need to develop some interpretation of this division of labor. Plus it is a binary division, which is worrisome because it can mislead people about the actual diversity of embodiments, but I think that we can avoid the noxious effects of exclusive binaries in a couple of different ways. One is to look at the multiplicity of bodies and see that the category of those who are able to become pregnant does not include all women, does not include women across our life span and so on. And the same goes for men. The mistake is to believe that the reproductive role explains everything we need to know about gender, or that it will produce a uniform set of ideas about gender. So we are talking about something complicated.

Also, I started to do work in the early 1990s on indigenous feminism. And discovered that for at least some indigenous communities, there was a division of labor with distinct types of work that men and women do. However, there was not a division of political power; there was not a differential amount of political power between men and women. Which is very interesting, because in the West, the two go together: Women do different work, because women are thought to be different kinds of beings and they are said to be less rational and less able to contribute to public deliberations over weighty matters. But in some indigenous communities they had a division of social roles that did not translate into political oppression. You can find this idea in various places, in Papua New Guinea, in Latin America, or in North America for example.

⁷ Natalie Angier, *Woman: An intimate geography* (2000).

⁸ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self* (2005).

That reminds me of Oyeronke Oyewumi's argument that in certain Nigerian societies, at least historically, age was way more relevant than gender for the political order of things.⁹

Yes, but I think she overplays that a little bit. Age is quite important, but it is not clear that it replaces gender in the way she sometimes suggests. There is a lot of debate among Nigerian and Yoruba theorists on her claim. The philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu has a slightly different argument,¹⁰ but she also shows the fluidity, variability, and dynamism of gender. Gender changes in its meanings, its associated practices, and also its significance, but that does not imply that it disappears. And there are societies that have gender-based social roles, and yet do not have gender oppression.

Even with gender-based roles, societies can have more than two recognized identities, in which that we might call trans people have their own specific role to play. To me, that is really interesting, that you can have a cultural meaning system that plays a lot with two terms, and yet, it understands that these two terms like “Sun” and “Moon” can be combined and are not determined by bodily morphology. I think what it shows is that gender eliminativism is not the only way to achieve liberation.

But I also want to stress that a theory of sex difference that drops reproduction out is just not plausible. We can bring reproduction in without gender determinism or binaries. The physiological aspects of reproduction are key areas of oppression and social control, and make use of gender ideologies. The mistake is in thinking that we have to downplay reproduction as a way to avoid deterministic theories of gender.

But why do we need to talk about “gendered” differences if we talk about the possibility to reproduce? And how helpful are the terms “woman” and “man” in relation to these reproductive capacities? Trans perspectives have shown that one cannot tie the ability to give birth back to women easily the way it has usually been done in feminist and also in lesbian- and queer contexts. Because there are pregnant men and nonbinary people who breastfeed. We can differentiate between people who can be pregnant and people who can inseminate. But that is not the same as men and women.

This is a good question. I am thinking here of Talia Mae Bettcher, who advocates for an expansive meaning of the word “woman” to include a variety of bodily shapes without restriction to biological capacity or secondary sexual characteristics.¹¹ I think that makes a lot of sense. However, I do not know whether it entirely displaces the question of reproductive capacity as the reason why we had this category in the first place. And I think it is interesting that we have not enough work on secondary sexual characteristics.

⁹ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses* (1997).

¹⁰ Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu, *Family matters: Feminist concepts in African philosophy of culture* (2006).

¹¹ Talia Mae Bettcher, *Trans women and the meaning of “woman”* (2013).

A friend of mine, Raja Halwani, who works in queer approaches to the philosophy of sex and love, has written on secondary sexual characteristics, because he thinks this has been underplayed as an aspect of desire, and I think this is true.¹² Secondary sexual characteristics are also assumed to be signs of reproductive capacity, though they are not always reliable signs of this, but we have to tell some kind of plausible story about why they are associated with attractiveness. But obviously, they could be mixed in all kinds of ways, so I just think we have to tell a more complicated story.

I agree, I do not think dropping the question is the way to go. But I do think that the trans perspective opens up new and interesting questions about the relation between bodies and reproductivity. Which forces us to rethink certain connections that seemed natural, even in critical feminist accounts.

Yes, the future is very open-ended in terms of embodied capacities and experiences. And trans theories are addressing not just embodiment but lived experience. Robin Dembroff has recently critiqued certain accounts of trans identity that are based solely on interiority, a lived sense of one's identity.¹³ They argue that we need a more social and relational account of trans identities to understand how they operate in social worlds. I think that Robin's on to something with this because I do think that identity is always social and relational, rather than simply internal, either physiologically or subjectively.

I use "identity" often because it is a useful term to cover a broad array of kinds: Race, ethnicity, gender, and sex are the main ones I have looked at, but I also study disability, age, and so forth. I think one of the big mistakes is to think that we can develop a singular approach to a theory of identity that covers all of these aspects. That is the problem, for example, with psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic approaches tend to portray all identity formations in the same way through the relationship with the ego to its imagined self and so forth. And I think that is a mistake. We need to think about how these categories of identity may work in different ways, with different effects and genealogies, especially because they are all intersectional. This means that different aspects of our social identities help to constitute other aspects: Our race or gender changes in relationship to the other elements and to one's situation or concrete location. But we also need to be open to the possibility that all forms of social identity do not operate in the same way.

Disability, race, and gender have different histories, different practices, and different ideologies, they are contested differently and maybe have different liberatory futures. We need to be open to the possibility that liberation—I know it is an old-fashioned word—but what liberation is in one domain may not be what people think liberation will be in another domain. We all have quite specific genealogies. I am an immigrant from Latin America, I grew up in the United States during the Civil Rights movement, I am half Latina and half white, and my mother's family is poor. So, I worked factory jobs, I did not reach the middle class until I was 32, when I got my first professor job. I had two children when I

¹² Raja Halwani, *Sexual orientation, sex, and gender* (2020).

¹³ Robin Dembroff, *Real talk on the metaphysics of gender* (2018).

started school. And my husband was working at a factory. This is all to say that to me, class was not theoretical, it was a lived experience affected by my experience as female, immigrant, and an ethnic minority. And I was out of school for a while, I quit school to join the revolution ...

For how long did you join the revolution?

Three years, not very long. I hope I am still part of the revolutionary movement but I went back to school because I found I was a lousy organizer. I went to Florida State, I dropped out of high school, and got married right after I turned 17. But I really wanted to go to college, and in the 1970s, briefly, there was significant financial support from the government for low-income students, so we did not have to go into debt. University tuition was much lower: We paid 175 dollars a term, which I know is hard to translate but it was *very* cheap. I had no support from my family for college, but I was able to work my way through and had every job under the sun. I never did sex work but some forms of female labor are like sex work, almost.

I think I became a radical when I was 12. Because I knew that the American Dream was a lie. The people who work the hardest make the least money and I saw that firsthand with my family. So the theory of intersectionality was very useful to put all this into a theoretical frame. I was never drawn to middle-class forms of feminism. My feminism was always in radical class-based and anti-racist movements. I thought about becoming a professor but in my senior year in college my two favorite Marxist professors were fired for their political activism, so I began to feel that the academy was not going to be a place where I could be anything other than an “armchair Marxist.”

That was when you decided to quit?

Yes, I quit, before I finished my degree. I did anti-Klan organizing, among other things. The notoriously racist Ku Klux Klan was growing in the South, and I worked with groups who were trying to reach out to white working-class people to oppose the Klan. I did all kinds of organizing ... but you know, some people are very good organizers and I was not. And I found myself thinking still about philosophical questions, and I also felt that philosophy needs people like me.

Rightly so.

I have heard many people say that when they took their first philosophy class, they felt instantly at home. I took my first philosophy class as a freshman and I felt like: “Is this the best they can do?!” We read Hannah Arendt’s ranked distinction between labor and work, Edmund Burke’s reflections on the revolution in France, and Pascal’s approach to religious belief, and I found their arguments totally unpersuasive, and I could argue why. In short, I had an oppositional view towards philosophy. But my department in college had three Marxists, and one of them was from Argentina and was teaching courses on the

philosophy of the urban guerilla, and the texts of anti-colonialist revolutions in Latin America as well as around the world. This taught me that philosophy could be a space where we could develop and debate the ideas and strategies for the movement.

These discussions opened philosophy up as a space you want to be in?

Yes. Movements of liberation always needed a philosophical stance, to raise questions about their theoretical assumptions, and to debate the kind of change we want.

So, after three years of doing the revolution, you decided to go back ...?

... and make the revolution within philosophy. From then on, a lot of my activism has been inside the field, within the discipline of philosophy.

Let us go back to the question of identity. You say that “identity” is a term that you cannot universalize, you cannot have a universal theory of identity that works for every place and time—it is psychoanalysis’s error to believe so. According to you, identity is a concept that helps us think how different aspects of our social lives come together and shape the ways in which we can act or the ways in which we are oppressed by different power regimes. In other words, identity is an open concept, and I think it is very beautiful how you keep exploring identity without closing the definition of the term.¹⁴ In the end, we do not have a final definition of identity, the term rather becomes a space that allows us to think through questions of subjectivity, power and the social.

That is a very good interpretation of what I was trying to say. I thought at one point that I could build a bridge between the work in the history of Western philosophy on the metaphysical problem of identity and this new work on social identities. But I finally gave that up—there is just no connection. Social identities are not indiscernible, and everyone who shares a social identity does not have to share some central defining qualities. Social identities are so much more variable and fluid, since you can occupy sort of one identity in one location and another in another location. The metaphysical tradition was not helpful and in fact was just obstructionist, and it continues to adversely affect some of the work on social identity by insisting on the need for necessary and sufficient conditions outside of context.

The fluidity of identity is one important aspect. Another one that you elaborate in your work is the different meanings that identity takes on for us: We need identities for political struggles, but beyond that, there might be an attachment to places and people and histories through identity. And that is different from just being strategic. Using “woman” as a strategic term in order to do feminist work is different from me having an attachment to

¹⁴ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Identity* (2021).

being a woman. And I have such an attachment, even though a lot of the things people attribute to “woman” are horrible. Sometimes I ask myself why I would not give up calling myself a woman and I realize that I have a certain investment in the term—which probably has to do with its connection to feminist struggles.

And maybe history? History of experience?

... yes, and a desire to claim this term, for me and other people who are excluded from many dominant comprehensions of it. And that has to do with history, with being part of a feminist history that taught me how to make these claims.

Yes. It is often very much about a relationship to our mothers and grandmothers. I have relationships to men in my family too that are very emotional, but you have a certain relationship to mothers and grandmothers often, a closeness, the things you were taught, learning, sometimes a battle with them more than with others over how you are going to be in the world. And shared experiences of difficult abortions, sexual violence, gender oppression.

Is that what you meant by history?

Yes, in terms of gender. In terms of race, it is different, although this too is gendered. But in terms of race and ethnicity it is more often about concerning one’s relationship to large events of history like the Holocaust, slavery, genocide or colonization, forced displacement, and so on, that affect individual families in so many ways, consciously and unconsciously, and that are part of group identities. To say that I am not going to consider myself Latina anymore, what does that mean? It means that history has nothing to do with me, I disavow its importance, but it has an ongoing importance for me.

And there is the history of transnational relationships ... I am from Central America, which is like being from Vietnam in relationship to the United States. The U.S. mercilessly bombed the region in an effort to maintain political and economic control; Panama was a colony since it gained independence from Colombia, and it still is a neo-colony of the United States. These connections are part of my family history and of the way I react to things, part of why I see certain things the way I do.

Would you say that about gender, too?

Yes. There are many choices that we make of how and what, and there are new choices that are made available to us through social movements and technologies. But not everything about gender is chosen. We do not choose if we can get pregnant when we are raped. There are aspects that are chosen, and aspects that are not.

Gender was introduced in order to help us think through questions of coercion and choice, structure and agency. What do you think gender helped us understand?

In the 90s, there were different challenges to gender. The theoretical ones that Judy Butler was developing were in relationship to and in conversation with social movements. Every LGBT committee in every town in the United States had internal disagreements about gay and lesbian versus bi and trans, what the activist priorities were going to be and who was going to be included, and these played out in national venues as well such as at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. These debates should be credited for challenging certain assumptions about the obviousness of categories of "woman" and "man," beyond the academy. And there continues to be ongoing struggle over these questions.

Yes. I am thinking of the recent debate about Rebecca Tuvel's article "In defense of transracialism"¹⁵ in the feminist journal Hypatia.

Yes. That article did hit a collective nerve. Although in truth, the essay raised a good question for discussion: If we think that there is fluidity in regard to some forms of identity, does that apply to others? But the piece was not sound, and shows the limitations of taking generalist approaches to social identities of different kinds. Tuvel supported Rachel Dolezal's attempt to change her racial identity by making an analogy between Dolezal's prior experience as a white woman, who did not experience racism, and trans women who, she claimed, do not experience oppression until they transition. But the situation is not analogous because trans folks do experience gender oppression before they transition, and this is generally why they transition. The analogy does not work.

And why would you say that Tuvel raised an interesting question?

Because I think it is a question that larger publics were curious about. Like: We are accepting fluidity in relation to gender, what does that mean for race and ethnicity?

You mean that it could be a job for us feminist philosophers to take up this question, and point out that and why the analogy does not work?

Yes, that is what we could do as feminist philosophers.

Plus the paper brought up a lot of questions around positionality: Who writes from which perspective about whom? The question of who can talk about whom.

Well, it is not a coincidence of course that the best trans philosophy being written is by trans folks. This is not hard to explain because good theory about many subjects requires a wealth of experience. But sometimes it is also the case that people who do not have a given experience can learn a great deal about it. In regard to race, of course, all people are racialized, but all racial experiences are not similar, and one needs to study this, especially

¹⁵ Rebecca Tuvel, In defense of transracialism (2017).

its history.¹⁶ And literature is also very important because it can help to portray inner lives. So diverse groups can learn and contribute to these discussions even if they do not have the identities.

But certainly in the beginning of a field, and we are still in the beginning of feminism and critical race philosophy and certainly trans philosophy, it is going to be people with the experience that will make the most theoretical breakthroughs. That should not be used as an excuse to disengage or sit on the sidelines, allowing people to say: “Well, I’m not whatever. So I’ll let you guys hash it out.” These questions affect all of us. The trans issue obviously affects how we think about gender, and will no doubt change the way gender is understood in profound ways.

It makes us “cis” for example, something we had not “been” before.

Exactly. This is because every identity is relational. So we do not really have an excuse to refuse to engage on the grounds of being on the sidelines. Which means we need a space for debate, asking questions, criticism, disagreement. Because a respectful engagement with people different from yourselves cannot be a simple and thoughtless acceptance. For one thing, because trans folks do not agree among themselves, neither do feminists, or critical race philosophers, so you cannot simply say: “Well, I’m going to follow them.” Who are you going to follow?

And where does the space for these discussions exist? I ask because currently in Western Europe, very distorted accounts of identity politics, political correctness, and censorship are created, which tend to silence all kind of critical voices.

These debates are huge in the United States as well, and used by conservatives to attack every social movement for change. The Tuvel controversy was particularly used as an example of dictatorial politics. In reality, though, it was just a very bad paper that deserved criticism. The focus on civility is a covert weapon used to critique the idea that identities matter to knowledge. So the people who want us to be civil to each other all the time are often saying “And it doesn’t matter if you are a cis person saying this or not.” But it does matter.

Imagine if you had a theoretical discussion about immigration ethics that went on for decades, with varying theories developed and debated, yet not a single immigrant participated. We do not have to imagine this: It was the norm in academic work until very recently. And the truth is, certain issues were not taken to merit theoretical analysis, such as racism and colonialism. There is a healthy debate among activists about issues of discursive tactics and strategies. Some today argue for a “call-in culture” in which we need to bring people along, have a conversation, figure things out. Movements are always going to generate different views about what are productive tactics and strategies. But demands for “civility” as an absolute good will always be used to demonize radicals, but radicals do

¹⁶ Linda Martín Alcoff, *The future of whiteness* (2015).

need to think like organizers, with a constant focus on enlarging and not merely consolidating the base. Also, I think in the future politics must be more intersectional and decolonial, which makes solidarity even more challenging.

Do you think certain discussions have become more intersectional because things have become more intertwined? Or do we understand it better, and have things always been so intertwined?

The public sphere, and the increasing diversification of the public sphere, is going to push the academy to think about multiple forms of oppression. Identities and oppressions have always been intertwined, but the academy has been such a rarefied space that those groups who were theorizing multiplicity were always on the outside. There are great forces trying to push us out again or silence us or buy us off. But I believe they will lose. There are just too many of us.

Thank you so much, Linda, for this conversation.

The conversation took place on October 3, 2019 in Bern.

Disclaimer for content

The author(s) would like to acknowledge that this copy is approved for publication under the Creative Commons license (CCBY).

The future politics must be intersectional and decolonial © 2024 by Patricia Purtschert is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Vanessa Näf for transcription, Anukriti Dixit for proofreading and referencing, and Fiona Little for further copy-editing and referencing.

References

- Alcoff, L. M. (1988). Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13(3), 405-436.
- Alcoff, L. M. (2005). *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self*. Oxford University Press.
- Alcoff, L. M. (2015). *The future of whiteness*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Alcoff, L. M. (2018). *Rape and resistance: Understanding the complexities of sexual violation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Alcoff, L. M. (2021). Identity. In K. Q. Hall & Ásta (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of feminist philosophy* (pp. 339-349). Oxford University Press.
- Angier, N. (2000). *Woman: An intimate geography*. Anchor Books.
- Bettcher, T. M. (2013). Trans women and the meaning of “woman.” In N. Power, R. Halwani, & A. Soble (Eds.), *The philosophy of sex: Contemporary readings* (6th ed., pp. 233-250). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2000). *Antigone’s claim: Kinship between life and death*. Columbia University Press.
- Dembroff, R. (2018). Real talk on the metaphysics of gender. *Philosophical Topics*, 46(2), 21-50.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2018, October 25). Why sex is not binary. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/opinion/sex-biology-binary.html>
- Halwani, R. (2020, January 5). Sexual orientation, sex, and gender. *1000 word philosophy*.
<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2020/01/05/sexual-orientation/>
- Nzegwu, N. U. (2012). *Family matters: Feminist concepts in African philosophy of culture*. SUNY Press.
- Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Tuvel, R. (2017). In defense of transracialism. *Hypatia*, 32(2), 263-278.