

Women as Other? – Women and Other

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I Any Word?

“I mean no harm, so I can use any word I want. If others do not like what I say, it is their problem, not mine.” This was uttered by a male participant in a seminar about postcolonial feminism I took part in recently. Of course, he did not use “any word,” but a rather specific one that has been rightfully judged as an offensive and unacceptable designation for people with darker skin or African ancestry since I was a child. While the German word in question may not be quite as offensive as the infamous “N-word” in English, it is certainly dated and strongly tainted. Therefore, I immediately started wondering why someone of my age, at university, and with at least some sort of sensitization for the importance of language would talk as he did. I ultimately concluded that this behaviour was not necessarily born out of malice, but that it was rather lacking critical awareness and missing involvement (as a White European in the concerns of People of Colour, and also as a man in the concerns of women) that made the problem difficult to grasp for the speaker. Still, the fact that this happened in a seminar on feminism pushed me to think how the incident related to racist and sexist structures as well as common public perceptions of feminism. For many men (though not for all), feminism is something abstract, I suspect, because they do not directly and personally *feel* the problem of outdated language and discriminatory perspectives. Like the participant in the seminar, they might also mean no harm using sexist or racist expressions. Their honest ignorance, unfortunately, does not lessen the harm they cause.

Ignorance as an answer to the questions feminism poses is also not exclusive to men. Until recently, I did not call myself a feminist, either. I identified instead with somewhat vague concepts of humanism or gender equality, for I did not want to reduce others to gender categories. However, as I have learned more and more clearly, self-identification as a feminist is an act of communication, a public statement. It makes people hear and reflect on feminism more often than they otherwise would. Hopefully, such actions and processes will someday stop people from saying things by which they mean no harm, but which actually hurt, exclude, and discriminate against others. But this is an idealistic and vague notion in itself – and calls for much-needed elaboration.

The following text is an act of feminist declaration in the first-person voice, drawing on my own experiences as a White German woman and student of European

and particularly Francophone literatures and cultures. From this vantage point, the text offers an analysis of the conditions that make feminism necessary. I will call for action in three areas in particular: the integration of men into feminist thinking and activism; interventions in the medial representation of women; and greater consideration of women's stories and writing. A combination of academic theory with "the personal as the political," which is a valid motto in feminism and cultural studies in general, seems to me to constitute an authentic approach to the topic.

II

We Need More Male Feminists

Arguably, feminism was born in the streets. It is a child of political activity as well as of women's dissent with social, economic, and political structures that undermine their rights. Fighting injustice based on sexual discrimination, on patriarchal lines of reasoning, and on women's marginalization is the common goal of feminists. As intellectuals called for a more theoretical approach, women's studies and feminist literary theory, amongst other fields, have become established academic subjects.

However, neither street protest nor institution building are the work of female feminists alone. I would, in fact, assert that feminist activism can only be productive and broadly impactful when humans from all genders are integrated. To deny male allies, as perhaps the biggest non-traditional group, the possibility of participation in feminist concerns is bound to weaken, in the long term, all branches of feminist activity. As Alice Jardine already writes in 1987: "Feminist men. Male feminism. Is this but an exercise in oxymorons? Or perhaps a promising utopian vision? I think it depends on what men want."¹

Some people might see the need for the integration of men into feminism as self-evident and wonder why I highlight this point with such insistence. On the other hand, however, some feminists actively exclude men, often so that nobody could assume a dependence of feminism on men: a conclusion born out of understandable fear and full of bitter irony. Furthermore, why are we speaking of "men" and "women" as the only two possibilities? Why uphold, rather than overthrow, gender binaries in the first place? Male integration is part of a further process of integration that can potentially include everyone.

I would like to remind all of my readers that we still live and act in coteries. If someone feels like "male feminism" is already evident and commonsensical, I will simply ask them to read just a few comments underneath any popular feminist posting on social media, listen to "common people" talk about the state of society at a local bus station, or question their relatives about whether they consider themselves feminists and why (or why not). This research would quickly reveal that the gender binary is alive and well. Cultural critics can easily lose sight of that fact, living in

¹ Alice Jardine, "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?" in *Men in Feminism*, edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Routledge, 2013), 59.

and working in highly progressive bubbles. But even in a self-reflexive academic milieu, men are still commonly excluded and exclude themselves from feminist discussion – not because they do not want to mix in “women’s business” (which would be a potentially discriminatory and sexist statement), but (likely with good intentions) because they feel they should concede spaces for women to talk without interference. Here, I detect a certain concern, which might alternatively be described as a certain male insecurity, with regards to gender questions and hierarchies in this second pattern of actions. A man, at the university and elsewhere, might not always feel entirely free to express his views within a feminist discursive space because his contribution could easily be written off due to his gender alone. This is a problem to be solved. Let me make myself clear: This is not a plea for more (White, cis) men’s rights. It is also not written to bemoan the relative marginalization of men in certain discourses and most certainly not intended to suggest that a supposed “backlash against masculinity” is the central sexist oppression we should concern ourselves with, as viral figures such as the Canadian psychologist Jordan B. Peterson have argued.² It is rather a plea for an education system that actively shows boys and men that they, too, are involved in feminist issues. If teachers, professors, supervisors, or parents tell them to hold back when it comes to feminism, they will learn that they are not supposed to be actors in such an environment. They will lose interest and the confidence to speak up in that matter. This is a step back for feminism and its ongoing fight for equality which no feminist should tolerate any further.

All of this is completely unrelated to the question of female dependence on men. Rather than creating yet another paradigm of hierarchy and imbalance of power to existing patriarchal structures, the integration of men constitutes a simple necessity, a practical step towards a more just society. The struggle for equal rights takes place in the real world, where real-life circumstances always have to be taken into consideration; consequently, it is necessary to engage the entire next generation in feminist concerns so that they may take up as much space in the discourse as possible.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in her famous TED talk and book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014): “We must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently.”³ Society can no longer be putting boys in a small cage of what Adichie calls “hard man”-masculinity. To escape it, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has further argued, we must “celebrate the female rather than deconstruct the male.”⁴ Only if men understand that feminism matters to them, too, we can avoid that gender equality is deemed “the women’s problem.”

This danger, and the necessity for “all [to] be feminists” can be connected to and illustrated by many powerful historical examples, such as that of Swiss women’s

² “Jordan B. Peterson,” *BBC News on YouTube*, 7 August 2018, web.

³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 10.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113.

suffrage.⁵ Switzerland is usually known as a strong and long-standing democracy that has its citizens directly involved in local and national politics alike. Still, and going directly against this extremely positive stereotype, women's suffrage at the federal level was not achieved in the country until 1971, making Switzerland one of the last European countries to give women full voting rights. But what was the reason? As is often the case, the answer is structural and connected to the traditional political structure of the Swiss state. In Switzerland, no parliament or constitution could grant women's suffrage directly or through a legal challenge, because each resolution first had to pass a referendum in which only men could vote. This is why an earlier attempt to extend voting rights to Swiss women in 1959 failed. It would seem that the majority of men who voted were simply not convinced that their wives, mothers, or daughters should be allowed to take part in politics equally. At this point, it would have been justified to turn to protest and the bemoaning of harmful patriarchal structures in society, telling Swiss men that their decision was indeed morally wrong and intensely damaging. Instead, the voting activists kept going with their initial campaign idea of raising public awareness constantly and peacefully, referring to human rights and to the federal constitution which guaranteed the legislative equality of all Swiss people, slowly winning over more and more voters. The strategy worked: Only twelve years after the failed 1959 effort, Swiss women finally attained their political independence and sovereignty via another referendum. Real change, in this example, was initiated by slowly and methodically convincing men that women's rights and real agency-equality were better for society, using democratic means and empathy.

I believe that the process of slowly persuading men through activism and debate, utilizing patience rather than violence or anger, is still a pragmatic and valid method that works in many other areas of social justice too. This might not be a popular opinion these days, but it is demonstrably true. To provide another example: The majority of academic chairs at universities – positions of high societal esteem – are traditionally occupied by men, and it is up to established chairs to appoint women to such offices. This discrepancy is documented in many personal stories, as well as different forms of media such as the 2021 television series *The Chair*, which portrays the difficulties an intersectional woman has to face within the academy.⁶ The prestigious German newspaper *Die Zeit* recently published a survey on the gender division concerning departmental chairs in German universities in its weekly magazine: The results show that still only one quarter of these positions are held by women, reasoning that powerful men would rather promote other men than women.⁷

⁵ See Andrea Maihofer, "Die Geschichte des Frauenstimmrechts – Verdrängtes Unrecht?" in *50 Jahre Frauenstimmrecht: 25 Frauen über Demokratie, Macht und Gleichberechtigung*, edited by Isabel Rohner and Irène Schächli (Zürich: Limmat, 2020), 17–30.

⁶ *The Chair*, created by Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman (United States: Netflix, 2021).

⁷ Friederike Milbradt, "Professorinnen," *ZEITMagazin Online*, 15 August 2018, web.

It is no different in politics: As of April 2022, taking into account all countries in the world, there are still no more than 27 female heads of state.⁸ While gender equality may be heavily discussed in global politics and while organizations like UNESCO create gender related chairs to develop more equality,⁹ many leading feminists and their propositions remain completely unknown throughout wide areas of the world, especially in culturally conservative countries where women's rights are much less secure than men's. Here, women alone cannot influence decision-making processes forcefully enough to create real, tangible change. Look only as far as Turkey, where an organization that wishes to inhibit femicides and take them to court is currently being impeached and forced to dissolve after having been judged to be hostile to the idea of the traditional nuclear family.¹⁰ The situation of women's rights in Turkey is in rather stark contrast with the Switzerland of today, despite Swiss women's historical struggles to achieve voting rights. The comparison shows a complicated, yet encouraging truth: Patriarchy is not dead, but no longer do all men necessarily agree with it. Societies in which debates about women's rights are prominent in the public space have been remarkably better at implementing those rights than societies in which they are not. This leaves only one obvious conclusion: Public opinion matters, and it matters a whole lot. Men cannot be ignored as a large part of this public. Hence, to achieve global cultural change, more and more men must be persuaded to acknowledge the equal rights of women.

III

We Need to Rethink Media Representations

There is, however, an essential first step that needs to come before persuasion: namely, consideration of representational dynamics. Fortunately, the analysis of representation already has a long tradition within cultural studies. Spivak, for instance, unravels the meaning of representation in detail and distinguishes between two types of representation: "speaking of" (*darstellen*) and "speaking for" (*vertreten*).¹¹ Both are a part of the silencing apparatus, "beyond [which] is where oppressed subjects speak, act and know *for themselves*."¹² In consequence, not all women (as well as other marginalized subjects) are able to speak up for themselves.

Representations are a part of the "whole way of life" which Raymond Williams famously defines as culture.¹³ Culture produces and reproduces representations, e.g., through national or religious traditions and the media (books, movies,

⁸ "World Population Review," *Worldpopulationreview.com*, 2022, web.

⁹ "Gender-related UNESCO Chairs and Networks," *UNESCO*, 16 September 2020, web.

¹⁰ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, "Turkish Women," *Balkan Insight*, 14 April 2022, web.

¹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 275–276.

¹² *Ibid.*, 276. Emphasis in the original.

¹³ Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 4, 8, and 14.

television, newspapers, and advertisements). Roland Barthes examines cultural phenomena and representation in his writings, as demonstrated in essays such as “Novels and Children” (1957). Barthes here shows how a photograph of female writers and the respective commentary published in the weekly magazine *Elle* put into readers’ minds the idea of women as a “a remarkable zoological species [that] brings forth, pell-mell, novels and children.”¹⁴ What Barthes observed regarding *Elle* and the powerful “myths” of everyday life in the 1950s still holds true today: The magazine “says to women: you are worth just as much as men; and to men: your women will never be anything but women.”¹⁵

The standard woman represented in film and advertisement is a happy woman who effortlessly juggles having a job and raising equally happy children at the same time and naturally corresponds to the Western norms of beauty as well. This is a woman who can scarcely be real and who should be “murdered,” as French-Moroccan writer Leïla Slimani provocatively suggested at the opening of the 2021 internationales literaturfestival berlin, generally abbreviated as ilb or referred to in English translation as international literature festival berlin, Slimani, who won the Prix Goncourt with her novel *Chanson Douce* in 2016 (published as *Lullaby* in the UK and *The Perfect Nanny* in the US), problematizes this sort of representation – not only because it sets aspirational limits to and piles everyday obligations onto the real women who watch and compare themselves with what they see but also because it provides false imaginations and expectations for heteronormative men, who will, even if only subconsciously, look for women resembling this impossible idea.¹⁶ At this point, once again, a personal experience asserts itself: A boy in one of my history lessons in high school was asked by our teacher to describe a historical picture. He observed: “In this picture, we can see women, and also normal people.” I do not believe that this young man actually believes now or believed then what his response implied: that women are a special subcategory of people, and that people are principally assumed to be male. But the anecdote certainly shows how heavily young people reproduce given representations, and how they subconsciously integrate such stances into their personal way of thinking and living if they are not taught ways of reflecting on them.

With that knowledge, why are popular media still predominantly interested in representing what could be called the “weak woman,” the “sexed object-woman,” or the stereotypically “perfect woman”? While these stereotypes still make up the majority of characters shown in popular culture, there is also already change on the way. New ways of representing women are continually gaining traction, specifically in movies, series, and books. Certainly, by now, everyone knows stories that (re)-present a heroine with psychological depth and character development. An often-mentioned example in modern young adult fiction is Katniss Everdeen of *The*

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ Leïla Slimani, “Eröffnung,” 21. *Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin*, YouTube, 8 September 2021, web. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German and French are my own.

Hunger Games book series by Suzanne Collins (2008-2010), drawing on older blueprints such as *Jane Eyre* in by Charlotte Brontë's eponymously titled classic novel (1847) or Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).¹⁷ Yet, as mentioned before, many successful movies and series still do not come close to doing this, as the "Bechdel test" illustrates.¹⁸ Although the test, originally proposed by and named after comic artist Alison Bechdel in her series *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–2008), is not strictly scientific, it methodically reveals how clichés and fixed role models spread through the entire film industry. Try its three main questions on your own favourite movie: Are there two female characters with a name? If there are, do they talk to each other? If they do, is it about a different topic than "men"? The Bechdel test does not always work (there are highly misogynist movies that pass it, as well as the other way round), but it can serve as a broad guideline and an impressive illustration of just how problematic the representation of women by the film industry still is. And although the test might not be the ultimate tool to measure female empowerment in the media, it provides interesting insights with regard to gender privilege. Try its questions for men. Are there movies that do not pass? One would have to wander far into obscurity to find more than a handful of films that do not easily fulfil all three criteria. Meanwhile, famous movies like *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) all fail the test for women. Even movies with women as main characters, such as the highly acclaimed *La La Land* (2016), do not pass. This is why I call for more diverse stories, the recognition of intersectionality, and resistance against the dominant episteme. A recent, positive example is the 2020 movie *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao, that not only aces the Bechdel test with flying colours, but also gets around to presenting women with strong personalities who also have deep conversations with each other.¹⁹ The film's Oscar wins (for best film, direction, and best actress in a leading role among other honours) are a step into a decidedly better direction concerning gender representations in the movie industry.

IV

We Need to Read More Female Authors and Listen More Attentively to Women's Stories

Despite a recent wave of reasonably successful attempts at introducing complex female main characters into classic stories and franchises, one fact must never be forgotten: Looking at the bigger picture, we can only circumvent bad or wrong

¹⁷ See, for example, Terry H. Watkins, "What to Read When Trying to Figure Out Who You Are," *The Rumpus*, 26 October 2018, web.

¹⁸ See, for example, Scott Selisker, "The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Character Networks," *New Literary History* 46.3 (2015): 505–506.

¹⁹ *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao (United States: Searchlight Pictures, 2020). Compare also the *Bechdel Test Movie List* website, 18 February 2021, web.

representations by creating new ones from an entirely new point of view. This is doubly true for mandatory reading, outside of the private enjoyment of books or movies. Therefore, the educational system must integrate alternative stories, and with them new norms and representations, into their curricula. My own experience shall again serve to highlight why the current state of the literary canon is untenable: A few months before my high school graduation, one of my female schoolmates asked me why there were no “real” literary works by women. I was willing to contradict her, but when she asked me to name some famous female authors who wrote books as revered as the important (male) classics, I was unable to offer more than two or three names. The traditional literary canon is dominated by male writers, and everyone knows it. That influences not only schools, but also institutions of higher education. In the case of my native Germany, I still detect a huge gap in representation when I take a look at mandatory academic reading lists. For instance, the representative reading list of the Freie Universität Berlin (Free University Berlin), proposed by a male professor, counts 32 twentieth-century novels by male and two by female authors, and the distribution is similar or worse for earlier centuries or other genres.²⁰ This is not a uniquely German phenomenon. Jane Tompkins shows similar tendencies within American Studies in her book *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1986) and denounces the “absence of women’s writing from the standard American literature curriculum” as an “exclusionary practice.”²¹

Somehow, though, a slow development towards a greater gender balance in the canon is taking place. Coming back to my previous example, in autumn 2021, two contemporary female authors, Yasmina Reza and Marie NDiaje, were added to the French literature reading list at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU).²² This might seem a minor improvement, but seen in context it is much more than that: Small steps like these are no longer isolated phenomena. At German universities, in cultural studies, literature, or other humanities’ courses, students now read and discuss gender issues, sexual discrimination, and concepts like “women’s literature.” For instance, I myself participated in a seminar concerning female and male perceptions in German literature around 1800, which can be seen as the beginnings of publicly visible women’s writing and publishing in Germany. Participating in the course was extremely revealing, offering insights into historical continuances and today’s perception of gender roles.

Writing is a form of empowerment. Kouamé Adou states that “the exclusion of women from writing in patriarchal African societies [has] contributed to maintain them in subjugation” and that today “challenging gender hierarchies through

²⁰ “Leseliste Neuere Germanistik.” *Neuere Deutsche Literatur/Prof. Dr. Peter-André Alt*, Freie Universität Berlin, n.d., web.

²¹ Jane Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), xiv.

²² “Prüfungskanon für die schriftliche Klausur im Bayerischen Staatsexamen Französisch, Italienisch und Spanisch (Teilgebiet Literaturwissenschaft) – gültig ab dem Prüfungstermin Herbst 2023.” *Romanistik*, Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, web.

writing” takes place and becomes a means of social empowerment.²³ Writing gives a voice to women, especially to those who cannot speak in public because of political suppression and persecution. The phenomenon of “muting” is doubly interesting, as it means to make somebody silent, but also to (technically) turn the volume down. This leads to so-called “tokenism,” which means that one lets marginalized groups speak, but without really listening to what they are saying.²⁴ A similar occurrence in a parallel marginalized group might be better known, namely “rainbow washing” in the LGBTQIA+ and lately especially trans discourses, which ultimately has the same effect: A dominant group *pretends* to be tolerant and ready to integrate marginalized people to fill quotas and make themselves or their product look better but does nothing to actually and tangibly improve the marginalized people’s rights or living situations within society.

Writing enhances the articulation and formulation of subjectivities and identities, which are needed for agency. Just like Adou, Slimani, to once again reference her opening speech to the ilb in 2021, promotes literature and writing as spaces of emancipation, and books as weapons.²⁵ According to her, “the path to emancipation for every woman consists in part of refusing to correspond to the models offered to us in childhood.”²⁶ To do that, we need more official spaces and platforms for women to speak up and to communicate their perspectives on the world and life. For this to happen universally, everyone needs to have a voice, including those women from countries and cultures that almost no one is paying any attention to. Therefore, to empower a more diverse and complete set of active female voices, we need to dislocate the status of the role model from the global West. We need to decentralize our narratives, because nothing can ever be central but by force of defining a marginal Other.²⁷ In this spirit, Adichie has not just called for a broader education, but also warned of the danger in the “single story”: If we know only one perspective on things, we will claim it as the only and full truth.²⁸

Of course, alternative stories do not simply fall into our laps. Often, we actively have to look for them. Many female authors, scientists, doctors, politicians, and other public or professional figures are unknown in spite of their achievements, because they are or were women standing in the shadow of their male colleagues. A prominent example that has been dragged to the cultural forefront in recent years is the unacknowledged contribution made by Black women to NASA’s Apollo and

²³ Kouamé Adou, “Écriture et pouvoir: femmes écrivains comme voix majeures en Afrique contemporaine,” *Dialogos* 21 (2020): 30–31.

²⁴ See Ina Kerner, *Feminismus, Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und Postkoloniale Kritik: Eine Analyse von Grundkonzepten des Gender-and-Development Ansatzes* (Hamburg: LIT, 1999), 55.

²⁵ See Slimani, “Eröffnung.” See also Adou, “Écriture et pouvoir,” 34.

²⁶ Slimani, “Eröffnung.”

²⁷ See Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, edited by Sarah Harasym (London/New York: Routledge, 1990), 40. See also Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 283.

²⁸ See, in addition to the book publication, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” *TED Global*, 21 July 2009, web.

Mercury missions, as it is dramatized by the movie *Hidden Figures*, based on a book of the same title by Margot Lee Shetterly (2016).²⁹ Despite their grand achievements, the three African-American women Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson remained largely unknown in their times. They are receiving due attention only now, more than five decades after the fact.

V

We Need to Understand the Importance of Intersectionality and In-Betweenness for the Feminist Movement

These “hidden figures” point to another important topic in feminism. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s text “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989) is credited with developing the concept of so-called “intersectionality analysis.” Highlighting the structural discrimination of Women of Colour in US-American jurisdiction, Crenshaw demands a reworking of anti-racist and feminist strategies, so that they are no longer simply added to each other, but seen and understood in their entanglement.³⁰

While not using the specific term, Spivak also offers a framework for understanding intersectionality across cultures. In particular, her work connects the suppression of women to the term “subaltern.”³¹ According to historian Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Study Group, who laid the groundwork for this kind of analysis, subalterns are defined *ex negativo*: as those who are not the elite.³² The higher group can be taken to consist of the hegemonic elite, or – in an expansion of the original class-based understanding of the subaltern in the thinking of Guha and, before him, Antonio Gramsci – of the male gender. Other genders become the object of “othering,” downgraded by their non-belonging. Women who are part of a discriminated group and/or minority are (at the minimum) doubly hidden by the intersections of what can be termed “subalterning” structures: They are People of Colour *and* women, economic subalterns *and* women, queer people *and* women, and so on. This entanglement of oppressive forces and separated identities serves to reduce women’s solidarity because their belonging is distributed across different groups, and they might not see womanhood as their strongest identification.³³

Spivak asks: “With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?”³⁴ She concludes that free speech is not possible for the subaltern because “[t]here is no

²⁹ *Hidden Figures*, directed by Theodore Melfi (United States: Fox 2000 Pictures, 2016).

³⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 1.

³¹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 287 and 294–295.

³² Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 8.

³³ See Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 148, and Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 295.

³⁴ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 285.

space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak.”³⁵ Spivak addresses the immense problem that women often fail to perceive themselves as subalterns.³⁶ A true sense for equality and independence can only be found in spaces and places in which girls are taught that they should have the same opportunities as their brothers, and in which they are then actually given these opportunities. Where this is not possible, the next best thing is to show where equality does not yet exist and explore ways of pushing for it. Consciousness about one’s situation is the clue for getting out of it; it is the first step to self-liberation. A woman who has freed herself from ineffability does no longer belong to that unrepresented group of subaltern women; she has already taken distance to her subalternity.

Of course, women’s possibilities and needs vary depending on a country’s geographical situation, culture, political system, economy, or religion. It would be naïve to close one’s eyes to the fact that we do not start from the same base (i.e., the same set of rights, the same possibilities of free speech and development, the same educational as well as economic resources). One woman is not necessarily able to speak for her “sister.” She may speak in favour of her goals, but this again is a form of representation that takes away the other woman’s voice. This is what the Francophone writer Assia Djebar powerfully highlights in her short story collection *Femmes d’Alger Dans Leur Appartement* (1980): “Ne pas prétendre ‘parler pour,’ ou pire ‘parler sur,’ à peine parler *près de*, et si possible *tout contre*.” This translates to: “Without pretending to ‘speak for,’ or worse ‘speak of,’ hardly speaking *close to*, and, if possible, *alongside*.”³⁷

In her recent article “Femme ou femme africaine?” (2017), Lucy Mushita adds further nuance by describing the phenomenon of in-betweenness, which often occurs together with intersectionality. Only when an African woman comes to France (in Mushita’s example, although the destination could arguably be any other non-African country as well), she defines herself as African, meaning someone who is different from the French.³⁸ Defined in this manner, she does not belong to the country she lives in now, and neither does she belong to the country she came from. Obsolete historical images still determine the perception of African women in Europe and thereby reduce them to particular social roles.³⁹ A woman who feels in-between, as Mushita writes, is not standing in her proper place. She cannot live to her full potential. She cannot yet take the step of becoming a subject in both of the worlds she inhabits. To connect this discussion with subalternity, and by implication intersectionality, as reflected on by Spivak: The transformation from subaltern mute to speaking subject is one of Spivak’s most important demands.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid., 307.

³⁶ Ibid., 296.

³⁷ Assia Djebar, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement. Nouvelles* (Paris: Edition des Femmes, 1980), 8. Emphases in the original.

³⁸ Lucy Mushita, “Femme ou femme africaine?” In *Penser et écrire l’Afrique aujourd’hui*, edited by Alain Mabanckou (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 2017), 197.

³⁹ Ibid., 198–199.

⁴⁰ See Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 112, and “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 295 and 300.

VI

We Need to Overcome Given Thoughts, Traditional Rules, and the Status of the Episteme

Gender inequality is a long-standing, historical phenomenon. Thus, only a rigorous review of colonial and postcolonial history can lead to a deeper understanding of it. Colonization itself was initially presented as a project of liberating the “uneducated” non-Europeans from their individual, cultural, social, and religious “ignorance.” As the Indian philosopher and theorist Raghavan Iyer observes, European thinking around 1800 was deeply influenced by a “Peter Pan theory” that attributed an everlasting childhood to colonized peoples.⁴¹ Intellectuals like Victor Hugo supported colonial expansion and perceived the exploitation, oppression, and cruelty that came with it as mere epiphenomena to the given improvement.⁴²

Even today, European museums still display essentially “looted” art without adequate comments on its history, cultural surroundings, and traditional meanings. Take the writings of Götz Aly, a German historian and journalist, who criticizes the methods of exhibition in the Ethnological Museum at the Humboldt-Forum in Berlin. The Forum – which houses museums, cultural initiatives, foundations, and university-affiliated projects – is named after Alexander von Humboldt who is famous for studying the non-Western world in the course of an Enlightenment project that was, to put it lightly, not always respectful of the non-West. Zooming in on the Ethnological Museum, a certain will for taking steps in the right direction can be identified in the museum’s mission statement in which its diversity and cooperation, its openness for discussion and opposition, and its knowledge of the importance of “questioning structural inequalities” as well as the possibility of the project’s failure are emphasized.⁴³ However, observers such as Aly still note systemic issues, e.g. that the presentation within the museum tends to focus on material qualities such as the objects’ lengths and heights instead of developing a less art-focused, but ethnological approach by indicating the objects’ backgrounds like the way they came to Europe and, if available, their original cultural meanings. Aly, in this sense, documents how cultural objects were snatched from their original geographic and cultural contexts and how colonists plundered villages in punitive expeditions.⁴⁴ These facts are being concealed in the exhibitions as they are currently constituted. Aly criticizes that the exhibited objects are dislocated from their historical and cultural contexts and that, still today, dialogue between the institutions in Berlin and the groups to whom the objects culturally belong is rare.

⁴¹ Raghavan Iyer, “The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe,” in *The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe*, edited by Raghavan Iyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 15–16.

⁴² Edward Ousselin, “Victor Hugo’s European Utopia,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 34.1/2 (2005 – 2006): 33.

⁴³ Humboldt Forum, “Mission Statement,” n.d., web.

⁴⁴ Götz Aly, Bénédicte Savoy, and Nana Oforiatta Ayim, “Decolonizing Worlds: Raub – Beute – Kunst,” Live-Talk, *Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin*, 14 September 2021. See Götz Aly, *Das Prachtboot: Wie Deutsche die Kunstschatze der Südsee raubten* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2021).

Another voice highlighting and speaking out against neocolonialist dynamics in European museums belongs to Nana Oforiatta Ayim. The Ghanaian writer and art historian denounces the proclaimed universality of the British Museum, which presents the whole of Africa in one hall in the cellar, ignoring Africa's geographical variety and the incredible diversity of its cultures.⁴⁵ Criticisms like these might be powerful enough to set change in motion.

Literature, the arts and scholarship created a distorted image of the Global South that still influences Western views in the present day. Within this falsifying framework, non-Western women are persistently reduced to their bodies, which come to be sexualized.⁴⁶ Mushita names paintings such as Eugène Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* (1834; generally translated as *Women of Algiers*) and Jacques Majorelle's *Modèle nu, allongé* (1931–1932; generally translated as *Nude Reclining Model*) and explains why they are distorting representations of their supposed subjects. She does this by pointing out logical inconsistencies such as not presenting children among the women in societies in which that would be normal or depriving women of their clothes without any obvious reason.⁴⁷ To change such patterns of representation, Western intellectuals must no longer hold the power to award or deny somebody their own episteme. The superior system of power, nourished by the intellectual's slow epistemic violence, makes the marginalized or subalterns speechless.⁴⁸ Likewise, the label "Third World Woman" still stands for a limit to knowledge.⁴⁹ We need to get rid of such prejudices, and of the "single story" in our minds, if we want to have a chance to overcome this untenable situation.⁵⁰

In the process of addressing these dynamics, we need to be cautious about terminology. Epistemic violence starts where careless labelling begins. Such care, for example, needs to be taken in the language used for describing individuals of for ratifying "the way things are": from the unequal distribution of students in fields deemed compatible with "motherhood" as compared to those favouring careerism via gender gaps in election participation to the enduring arbitrary divisions within simple, everyday fields such as children's toys.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Lucy Mushita, "Femme ou femme africaine?" 200.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁸ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 280–281.

⁴⁹ Mark Sanders and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Live Theory* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 78.

⁵⁰ Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."

⁵¹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 53–55.

VII

Conclusion

To my mind, feminism and equity are about everyday decisions all people constantly make, irrespective of their gender. It is influenced by the stories we tell, the actions we repeat, and the structures of representation and argument we are constantly reproducing. Apart from political subversion or systemic transgression, cultural means and our language are the devices with the highest impact on our way of living. I am calling for words that do no harm; I am calling for self-engagement and for cooperation extending beyond the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, nation, and culture; I am calling for the subversion of obsolete concepts and representations; I am calling for agency and articulation concerning the matter of women's rights.