

Why read female philosophers?

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abstract

The aim of this text is to offer a seemingly simple answer to the question, “Why do male philosophers need to read female philosophers?” Such simplicity is first problematized by the fact that the question assumes that philosophy is still primarily concerned with the male sex, thus denying a vast number of female philosophers who are not taken into account in the history of philosophy. Moreover, such an asymmetrical relationship implies a relationship of power and submission of female individuals that occurs not only in the social field, but also in the epistemological one. Without wishing to present a definitive answer to this question, the three male philosophers who wrote this text intend to give voice to some of these female thinkers in order to take their writing and thinking as examples of the relevance of the philosophy undertaken by women.

Key words: *Women; Women Philosophers; Deconstruction.*

Why read female philosophers?¹Dedicated to Carla Rodrigues, Dirce Solis, Fabiana Helena do Rosário, Ivoni Richter Reimer, Jocelina Borges, Jocília Borges (in memoriam), Josiane Borges, Karine Moraes, Magda Guadalupe, Maria Barcelos “de Exu Tranca Ruas” (in memoriam), Marga Engelbrecht (in memoriam), and Sebastiana

Borges

Behind the initial question that the title of this text raises are a few other questions

and exclamations that seem to require further thought before we enter into our speculations. First, we need to remember this as a matter of fact: there are female philosophers, and there always have been. As much as the noun of the philosophical task is always spelled in the masculine (*filósofo* in Portuguese) such grammatical violence marks the centuries of repression, concealment, and dishonesty surrounding the work of so many female philosophers throughout the history of philosophy, as demonstrated by the current and relevant studies of Ruth Hagenruber (though restricted to the western field of the history of philosophy), founder of the European Center for the Study of Women Philosophers and Scientists at Paderborn University.² For more information, see <https://historyofwomenphilosophers.org/ruth-hagenruber/>

So the first question is: why do we still think of philosophy as a male task? Many authors have already denounced, throughout the twentieth century—and even much earlier, if we consider Olympe de Gouges's³ In the same year that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen is written, Olympe de Gouges wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Citizen. Next, in a critique of the works of Rousseau, she wrote her own Social Contract proposing equality of partners in marriage. Owing to her feminist work and political criticism, she was guillotined in 1793 harsh criticism of French humanism—the hypocrisy of the masculine (and, by extension, the heterosexual, the cisgender, but also the Western, the white, the ruling classes, etc.) behind the alleged neutrality of the Universal. Thus, our first concern is to clearly engage with this question, remembering that this *is still a question today*.

Thus, as the group of people engaged in the task of philosophy is composed of people born

of both sexes, it is necessary to remember that, among these two biologically marked sexes, there is a group that, due to its genetic makeup, acquires certain privileges in our society. In this sense, in addition to denouncing its universality and its neutrality, it is necessary to point out that the pretense of gender and gender issues is more than epistemological, and is above all a political issue, since it masks the privilege of the power of one group of individuals over another group by way of belonging to a certain biological sex. However, we believe that even more is needed. If the group of individuals born and biologically determined as “women” seems to be an object of absurd disregard in the area of

philosophy⁴ An interesting reflection on the current situation in the reality of the Brazilian philosophical academy can be found in an article written by Carla Rodrigues for the ANPOF column

(<http://anpof.org/portal/index.php/en/comunidade/coluna-anpof/1033-a-filosofia-brasileira-na-o-e-feita-so-por-homens>). It is also important to point out, as Rodrigues does, the importance of the mapping undertaken by Carolina Araújo about the state of women in post-graduate programs in Brazilian philosophy departments

(http://anpof.org/portal/images/Documentos/ARAUJOCarolina_Artigo_2016.pdf, we believe that other factors, such as socioeconomic, ethnic-racial, and cultural markers, further aggravate this panorama with regard to sex and gender.

This is why the question “why read female philosophers?”, while fundamental, may seem rather vague. Nevertheless, this vagueness points to the multiplicity of other issues that come to us simply by asking the question. Moreover, the question carries with it a certain imperative addressed to male philosophers, indicating that it is necessary to read female philosophers. And such a “duty” must be thought of, as the critical thinkers that we are, under the logic of otherness. For it is not just moral coercion in the order of law, but an ethical appeal that calls for a change in the axes of thought, from the self to the other.

One final preliminary remark concerns the impossibility of answering the question we have raised. The question “why is it necessary to read female philosophers?”, as it is a true question, can never be answered definitively, because facing its aporetic character is not only to respect it in epistemological terms, but also to think, in political terms, there will always be a clash of power and the issue must be returned to, respecting its strength, its context, and its uniqueness. And it is in this sense that we, three male philosophers, begin to

answer the question in the only way we believe possible: respecting its impossibility, each of us will try to answer the question in his own way, by discussing one or more female philosophers, pondering how each one, in her own way, helps us to ask the question that guides us here, echoing not only the imperative of urgency but also that of aporia and respect for uniqueness.



Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Nah Dove | Illustration: Juliana
Barbosa

II

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he need for this essay arises out of the recognition that, in philosophy and the

human sciences, men's speech and writing predominate, and this predominance implies the maintenance of a phallogentrism that excludes women from the field of thought. In this sense, much more than just being necessary, recognizing, learning, and reading female philosophers is a matter of doing justice to those who, for millennia, have been excluded from the field of philosophy. An important issue to emphasize in this text, in addition to the consideration of the importance and necessity for female philosophers to be effectively read, is the need to end and decentralize the oppression and violence of phallic and sexist thoughts and practices that exclude other types of knowledge, among them, feminine knowledge and practices. It is not enough to read and know these philosophers; we must also undo and decentralize our misogyny. However, this work has no intention of conceptually deepening or developing the thinking of these philosophies, but rather of highlighting these philosophers, so that more men, as well as women, can understand the importance, sophistication, and potency of these philosophies.

They destabilize the most classic and (almost always) conservative thoughts and, with their different styles, offer the most diverse approaches, and do justice in positioning themselves as different, and in some cases as entirely distinct, for their transgressive, revolutionary, and inventive character. We do not intend to talk of all existing and active philosophies, as some of them are, historically, forgotten. We will highlight some, but we will not fail to recognize how much we can learn from the many others, many of them classics in philosophy, which have their unquestionable relevance and have proven to be a true wound to the narcissism of the patriarchal dominance of philosophy, such as: Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, Nancy Fraser, Lélia Gonzáles, Angela Davis, Marilena Chaui, Judith Butler, Dirce Solis, Beatriz Nascimento, Grada Kilomba, Helena Theodoro, Nisia Floresta, Olgaria Matos, Luisa Mahin, among many others.

In this vein, reading and listening to Djamila Ribeiro offers questions and clues to be traced in this trajectory of near-responses, aiding us in our thoughts about the relationship between racism and sexism. First and foremost, we welcome the demand that all philosophers examine all situations and conditions of oppression, such as racism, sexism, gender, etc, whether black or white, transgender or cisgender, woman or man, non-binary or binary etc, without any claim of neutrality in occupying their respective place of speech. First of all, let us be aware that all discourse is part of a place, condition, and situation.

Recognizing one's own place of speech, and recognizing that every aspect of human uniqueness has a place of speech, is the initial step in understanding the differences and inequalities that mark each person, as well as listening to the call for structural change and engaging in the struggle for a society that welcomes all people in their differences. The act of demanding structural changes to society resonates with the request of the university — and this is the point from which we depart: *philosophy*. Changing, soliciting, and shaking philosophy occurs when philosophical neutrality is abandoned, since the philosopher's insistence on impersonality masks the privileged place of western-white-cis-man.

We start from deconstruction and advocate for the criticism of the concept of man as defined by western philosophers in order to undertake the inversion and displacement of the place of each biologically marked binary pair. In this sense, we think that the act of simply not recognizing their difference in relation to white women and black men is insufficient for

the emancipation of black women. We welcome the story of Djamila Ribeiro, and we think that by identification (not as a construction of an identity), she is able to tell the story of many black women in highlighting the importance of thinking about to what extent her struggle is similar to and different from the history of white women, and in pointing out that the category “women” is insufficient for meeting the demands of black women.

Ribeiro’s trajectory, which made her family so proud, did not prevent the little girl from feeling the effects of racism that characterize Brazilian society structurally and daily. She realized that the teachers did not expect her to know the answers to the questions addressed to the class; she was ashamed to be called on only when the class covered the history of slavery and someone pointed her out as the granddaughter of slaves; she overheard boys who did not want to pair with her in class her because she was black; she heard jokes about her hair and skin color. The whole situation produced a sense of inadequacy, the perception of non-belonging to Brazilian society. And as for belonging to Brazilian society, Ribeiro relates in her book *Estrangeira no próprio país* (“Stranger in my own country”) that many white-skinned Brazilians, though they have only one white parent, can travel across the country without being recognized as black. However, if they travel to European countries, they will notice their non-whiteness — their black heritage — and perhaps realize how much dark-skinned or black-skinned people understand, every day, that they are foreigners in their own country.

And as the author alerts us in *Homens brancos podem protagonizar a luta feminista e antirracista* (“White men can be protagonists in the feminist and anti-racist struggle”), she explains the urgency of a new paradigm to be observed by white men (the text’s intended audience) and also by black women and men (readers) who understand the urgency and the importance of the unity of all people in the fight against inequalities. To ally with black women is not to turn them into the object of research or discursive content, or to stand as a spokesperson for their claims. The alliance that black women defend is the construction of the possibility of new trajectories, especially that white men, white women, and black men can share and contribute to in the construction of spaces and places led by black women, that they may recognize that black women have a rich and potent repertoire to share with all those who wish to listen.

And in this path of welcome and listening, as Ribeiro writes in *Feminismo negro para um novo marco regulatório* ("Black Feminism for a New Regulatory Framework"), only the breaking of the silencing imposed on them will allow for the overturning of the subordination imposed on black women — the *other* of the white woman, the *other* of the black man, the *other* of the white man or, in other words, the *total other*. And in heeding this warning, it is also up to the black men who fight racism, the white women who fight sexism, and the white men who fight classism, to hear the voices of these women who frame the intersectionality of these struggles. Unity in the struggle for a new regulatory framework is only achieved when the agenda is shifted to address the demands of those who suffer the most oppression, those who know that the autonomy of a collectiveness will only occur when all are welcomed in their differences and in their diversity.

The black philosopher Gislene dos Santos, in her classic book *A invenção do ser negro* ("The Invention of being Black"), already shows us how much, in European Modernity, the invention of blackness emerged as a reflection of a being that would need to be more original and, therefore, pure, to serve as a universal model, namely the European white man. Santos deconstructs the myth of gender and the universal race. This movement can be found in the work of many authors who make it possible to discuss both patriarchy in philosophy and colonialism in thought. Therefore, what she and many other authors will enable us to see is a true transformation of a certain kind of straight, erect, thinking that does not know how to work and learn with other kinds of thinking, which comes through difference, deviation, from the margins, transversal to that which is predominant in a classical structure of hierarchical thought.

In her essay *Pode o subalterno falar?* ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"), Indian philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions the place of the subordinated by presenting how much, in the history of the West, a predominant type of thinking has subordinated certain social and ethnic groups, and among these groups, above all, women, associating the violence of subordination with the epistemic violence produced by Western thought. What Spivak calls epistemic violence is, for black philosopher Sueli Carneiro, *epistemicide*. Spivak, Carneiro, and others reveal a whole logic of subordination, one that acts as historically established truth, but one that is in fact one of the greatest myths ever established as truth by the Western European white man and his white mythology.

The philosopher bell hooks⁵ Pseudonym of the writer and activist Gloria Jean Watkins, who following the imperative of emaiusculação [the intersection of capital letters and masculine thought] (as indicated by Derrida), demanded that her name be written without masculine and capital letters. For more, see <https://blogs.stlawu.edu/evfall15/2015/11/17/bell-hooks-and-derrida/> also operates in her texts by way of displacement, but prefers to name it "transgression." In her book "Teaching to Transgress," the African American philosopher presents herself as a true teacher in giving us a beautiful lesson in transgression. Concerned with anti-racism, sexism, and all kinds of oppression of minorities, bell hooks, in enthusiastic and potent thinking, leads the reader in this movement of transgressing against that which is given and prevalent. In this sense, bell hooks works radically with the displacement of hierarchies, which begin, above all, in the classroom. Concerned with liberating practices, bell hooks thinks of a free and happy life as a horizon and, for this, the author makes no effort wield practices and discourses that have oppression as their end.

Philosopher Nah Dove brings us another possibility for action and thinking beyond patriarchalism (and beyond answers limited to class struggle, often cast by some political theorists). Nah Dove promotes an Afrocentric criticism by bringing a feminine approach to criticize Marxism as the only model for answering political questions, arguing it ends up producing sexist movements in its way of interpreting reality. Among many others that could be discussed here, we also mention the Nigerian philosopher Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who offers two lessons that seem fundamental to us. They are: that everyone should be feminist; and that a "single story" often excludes many other histories and narratives, among them, the stories of women. Given this, we would like to call upon other philosophers who work through the medium of art, promoting transgressive feminine thought: Leci Brandão, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Black Pearl Jovelina, Clarice Lispector, Cecilia Meireles, Tarsila do Amaral, Conceição Evaristo, Clementina de Jesus, among so many others.



Estamira | Ilustração: Juliana Barbosa

III

To write the “conclusion” of a text that, by its very task, should never be completed,

we can only begin (to end) by presenting ourselves through the questions that are most pressing in philosophical thought today — and by showing how much we have learned as philosophers to ask such questions (for we are only able to propose the questions, not knowing if we will ever have the competence — or the pretense, which we do not seek — to be able to answer them). There are, therefore, two small observations, and perhaps they are one in the same, with which we end this intertwined text: the first concerns what we might call “sexuality” or our surprise at the alleged “asexuality” of philosophy; the second concerns what we might call “coloniality” or our surprise at the supposed “colorlessness” of philosophy, and it is there, at the conclusion of this essay, that we will stop.

In 2014, Argentina was boiling with debate concerning same-sex marriage. What was shocking at the time was, in the face of [absolute] silence on the part of the Brazilian philosophical community, the commitment of our Argentine colleagues, all openly lesbian, to defend gay marriage from a philosophical point of view. In Brazil, a great friend and great philosopher presented us with a book by another philosopher that would deeply mark our position as intellectuals and help us initiate such reflections on the compromise between metaphysics and heteronormativity (or *cislogismo*, as we prefer to call it). The names of these two great women we refer to here are the Brazilian philosopher Carla Rodrigues and the Catalan philosopher Beatriz (now Paul) Preciado.

Carla Rodrigues is perhaps the philosopher we have learned the most from and the person we have read the most, marking, in addition to a unique friendship, an effective intellectual exchange. Everything we know about gender issues today, we learned directly or indirectly from Carla. And, like every gift worthy of the name, that is, when the dimension of the gift offered is not even known, the entry into the scene of Preciado's *Counter-sexual Manifesto* would have a mark not only on our intellectual trajectory but also our life. Preciado, then still Beatriz, writes of the place of the lesbian who undertakes a radical attempt to shake the

axis of heteronormativity that, in different ways, affects all bodies — men and women; straight, bi, and homosexual; cis or transgender, transsexuals and transvestites. Beatriz Preciado calls us to think upon, in a single stroke, the need for a return to the materiality of bodies and at the same time offers a radical critique of the idea of nature.

Preciado teaches us the transience of bodies and the stiff limits of any identity, and how thought must feed on these questions posed to our bodies. And it is no coincidence that, years later, Preciado would undertake his greatest philosophical experiment: *Testo Junkie*, in which the now author-in-transition Paul B. Preciado writes his philosophical impressions from his self-administering of testosterone. Preciado thus presents us with one of the greatest empiricist works of the last centuries. An important aspect to underline (since the reader could then object to why we are here talking about an author who is today a trans man) is that Paul B. Preciado, in his radical critique of identities, being one of the first trans philosophers, argues that, although his body performance is male, he would like to be referred to as a “female philosopher” when referring to his work, to mark a sexual difference and to show that being named a “female philosopher” is still above all a political task.

And it is with the philosopher Estamira that we close this text, letting her speak — she, woman, poor, black, psychiatric patient, who shows how much we men, white or black, cis or trans, straight or homosexual, have yet to learn (and so much) from these bodies that apparently have only one differential marker, the biological sex, but that present us with a philosophical experience written with the feminine article. And, perhaps, this is the only experience that can open philosophy to so many other differences, such that it may one day become a field of knowledge open to uniqueness, one that is plural and effectively democratic. This is our wish and the task we have taken up, we here who have signed this text and, sitting together, hear Estamira's voice echoing⁶ “A minha missão, além d’eu ser Estamira, é revelar a verdade, somente a verdade. Seja mentira, seja capturar a mentira e tacar na cara, ou então ensinar a mostrar o que eles não sabem, os inocentes... Eu, Estamira, sou a visão de cada um. Ninguém pode viver sem mim. Ninguém pode viver sem Estamira. E eu me orgulho e sinto tristeza por isso.” Estamira: fragmentos de um mundo em abismo. São Paulo: n -1. 2013, págs. 10 e 15.:

