

# Sexual Difference and Decolonization: Oyěwùmí and Irigaray in Dialogue about Western Culture

AZILLE COETZEE AND ANNEMIE HALSEMA

*In this article we aim to show the potential of cross-continental dialogues for a decolonizing feminism. We relate the work of one of the major critics of the Western metaphysical patriarchal order, Luce Irigaray, to the critique of the colonial/modern gender system by the Nigerian feminist scholar Oyěwùmí Oyěwùmí. Oyěwùmí's work is often rejected based on the argument that it is empirically wrong. We start by problematizing this line of thinking by providing an epistemological interpretation of Oyěwùmí's claims. We then draw Irigaray and Oyěwùmí into conversation, and show how this bolsters and helps to further illuminate and contextualize Oyěwùmí's critique of gender. But the dialogue between these thinkers also reveals significant limitations of Irigaray's philosophy, namely her presumption of the priority of sexual difference, its rigid duality, and her failure to take into account the inextricable intertwining of gender and race in the Western patriarchal order. Relating Irigaray's critique of Western culture's forgetting of sexual difference to Oyěwùmí's critique hence demonstrates to what extent Irigaray's philosophy remains typically Western and how she therefore fails to escape the paradigm that she is so critical of.*

---

The Indian feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty's famous essay "Under Western Eyes" opened the feminist debate on decolonization by criticizing Western feminism for constructing the categories of "third world woman" and "third world difference" that contribute to the oppression rather than the liberation or empowerment of women (Mohanty 1986). In a later reconsideration of this essay, she explains that it was not her aim to oppose first- and third-world feminism, nor to demonstrate the particularity of Western feminism, but rather to build "a noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders" (Mohanty 2002, 503). Since "Under Western Eyes," other non-Western and Western scholars alike have also criticized Western feminism for the way it universalizes the categories of woman and patriarchy (Butler 1990; Nzegwu

Hypatia vol. 33, no. 2 (Spring 2018) © by Hypatia, Inc.

1994, 2005; Lugones 2007). In this article, we continue this line of thought by drawing Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference into conversation with the work of the Nigerian feminist scholar Oyěróńké Oyěwùmí. In line with Mohanty, our aim is not to particularize the Western perspective, or to simply oppose it to a similarly particular African one, but to demonstrate the fertility of cross-cultural dialogues for feminist philosophy. We will show that Irigaray and Oyěwùmí in large part overlap in their critique of Western culture, but that Oyěwùmí's arguments also reveal the characteristically Western implications of Irigaray's philosophy.

Oyěróńké Oyěwùmí is one of the most famous and at the same time contested scholars in African feminist thought. Her book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Oyěwùmí 1997) offers a postcolonial feminist critique of Western dominance in African knowledge-production, focusing on gender relations in particular. She argues that gender is a colonial imposition in Yorùbá society, and a product of colonial rule in Nigeria that has led to a different construction of the subject and the world. In her latest book, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity*, she further develops her thesis of the colonial imposition of gender on Yorùbá society, suggesting that colonialism has subjugated and marginalized the local epistemes, in which the mother occupies a central position (Oyěwùmí 2016, 7).

Although *Invention of Women* won the American Sociological Association's 1998 Distinguished Book Award in the Gender and Sex category, the praise of Oyěwùmí's work seems always to have been overshadowed by the criticism. One of the main points of critique concerns the empirical veracity of her claims. Nigerian feminist philosopher Oyěróńké Olajubu argues, for instance, that Oyěwùmí's claim that gender was not an organizing principle in precolonial Yorùbá society is empirically wrong (Olajubu 2004). According to Olajubu, gender played a significant role in various levels of Yorùbá society.<sup>1</sup> Nigerian feminist scholar Amina Mama accuses Oyěwùmí of "inventing an imaginary precolonial community in which gender did not exist" (Mama 2001, 69).<sup>2</sup> In this article we develop an alternative reading of Oyěwùmí's work in which the epistemological value of her claims is highlighted and built upon. Our reading problematizes the way in which Oyěwùmí's work is often simply rejected by scholars on the basis of her erring on an empirical level. We argue that her work demonstrates that empirical data is always framed conceptually (section I). The implication is that one cannot reject her empirical claims without engaging with the conceptual points she is making, since the empirical and conceptual are explicitly mutually co-constitutive in her work.

Being trained in Western feminist philosophy ourselves, we are not only interested in the alternative conceptual framework that Oyěwùmí constructs from within Yorùbá reality, but especially in what this conceptual framework reveals about Western feminism. For this reason, we read Oyěwùmí's critique of the Western colonial system in relation to Luce Irigaray's critique of Western patriarchy (section II), thereby disclosing certain limitations of the latter's Western perspective. Irigaray's singular focus upon sexual difference and exclusion of other differences, such as race, has been under discussion before (Butler and Cornell 1998; Deutscher 2002; Stone

2006; Hom 2013). We contribute to this discussion by showing that bringing her into dialogue with Oyěwùmí helps to put into perspective her focus on embodiment and sexual difference as one that is characteristically Western in nature (section III).

#### I. OYĚWÙMÍ'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF WESTERN FEMINISM

In *The Invention of Women* Oyěwùmí argues that gender was created in Yorùbá society through the intertwined processes of colonial rule in Nigeria, the translation of Yorùbá into English, and the continued dominance of Western knowledge-production. Accordingly, gender was not an organizing principle in precolonial Yorùbá society, and “woman” as a social category did not exist. In the beginning of the book, Oyěwùmí makes it clear that her book is not about the “woman question” because that is an imported issue (and a specifically Western concept) that is not indigenous to the Yorùbá people (Oyěwùmí 1997, ix). Instead, she is interested in how “woman” came to exist in Yorùbá society and what the implications of this are. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, these claims have been harshly criticized by scholars such as Mama and Olajubu as empirically wrong or invalid (Mama 2001, 69; Olajubu 2004). Yet we argue that Oyěwùmí's approach is not an empirical one in which she aims to factually reconstruct the precolonial Yorùbá world, but an epistemological one. She describes her aim as follows:

This book is about the epistemological shift occasioned by the imposition of Western gender categories on Yorùbá discourse. Since there is a clear epistemological foundation to cultural knowledge, the first task of the study is to understand the epistemological basis of both Yorùbá and Western cultures. (Oyěwùmí 1997, ix)

Her interest is in what underlies knowledge of gender and specifically gender in the Yorùbá society. She suggests that the difference between gender relations in Yorùbá society and in Western society is not merely a superficial one, but one that concerns the very foundations of knowledge and the way in which the world as a whole is approached. In *The Invention of Women*, she explores in detail the conceptualization of the concept of “gender,” and in her latest book, *What Gender is Motherhood?*, she does so with regard to the concept of “mother.”

In *The Invention of Women*, Oyěwùmí challenges first the idea that “[t]here is an essential, universal category ‘woman’ that is characterized by the social uniformity of its members” and second, that “[t]he category ‘woman’ is precultural, fixed in historical time and cultural space in antithesis to another fixed category—‘man’” (Oyěwùmí 1997, xii). Oyěwùmí articulates the main difference between the indigenous Yorùbá and Western approaches to gender through the term “bio-logic” or “body reasoning,” which refers to the idea that “in Western societies, physical bodies are *always* social bodies” (xii). By that she means that societal hierarchies and structures are formed with reference to the kinds of bodies present, so that biology equals social destiny. According to Oyěwùmí, bodily differences constitute the primary basis for social

organization in Western society. She points out that this centrality of the body in Western society is surprising if one considers the history of Western thought in which the body is understood to be a nonessential part of the essentially rational and disembodied subject (3). Through colonial rule this logic was imposed on Yorùbá society.

Prior to colonial contact with the West, women in Yorùbá society did not form a preexisting group characterized by shared interests, desires, or social position. The shared fact of having a female body did not automatically lead to women forming one class and occupying the same positions. Persons were classified into social groups depending on the roles they took on in society and the kind of people they were. In this sense, in Yorùbá society one was not primarily a man or a woman, but rather a trader, hunter, cook, farmer, or ruler—all these identities being equally accessible to all subjects.

Similarly in later texts, Oyèwùmí describes the traditional Yorùbá family as non-gendered because kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated, and power centers within the family are diffused and not gender-specific. The fundamental organizing principle within the family is seniority, and therefore kinship categories encode seniority and not gender. In other words, there would be terms for older siblings and younger siblings, but not for male and female siblings (Oyèwùmí 2002, 5). Unlike sex, seniority as organizing principle is context-dependent and shifting; as a result, “no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all depends on who is present in any given situation” (Oyèwùmí 1997, 42). Accordingly, identity is fluid, relational, contextual, and shifting in Yorùbá society. Oyèwùmí explains that seniority, unlike gender, is only comprehensible as part of relationships, and accordingly, it is not “rigidly fixated on the body nor dichotomized” (42). Oyèwùmí thus interprets gender as it features in Western society and thought as an essentialist kind of organizing principle that fixes power relations and confines certain categories of people (women being the main example) to limited roles and spaces, whereas seniority as organizing principle supports much more dynamic, relational, and fluid identities and power structures.

In her new book *What Gender is Motherhood?* Oyèwùmí presents a similar argument with respect to the notion of “motherhood.” She argues that motherhood is one of the concepts or roles in the Western gender system that is the most loaded with gendered meanings; it is a “paradigmatic gender category” (Oyèwùmí 2016, 7), whereas in indigenous Yorùbá thought and culture it is ungendered. She argues that there is no masculine counterpart for Iya (mother) (52); in other words, Iya is a singular category that transcends the gender binary, that does not fit into one “side” of humanity. This is in contrast to the West, where “[t]he category mother is perceived to be embodied by women who are subordinated wives, weak, powerless, and relatively socially marginalized” (58). The Iya of the Yorùbá does not fit into this category, and “did not derive from notions of gender” (58).

Oyèwùmí uses her ethnographic description and sociological understanding of the precolonial Yorùbá society as the basis for making the philosophical argument that the dominant (Western) categories through which we understand the world are not universal, but culturally specific and therefore contingent. We read her not so much

as rejecting the existence of differently sexed bodies, but as arguing that unlike in Western thought and society, bodily differences did not translate into hierarchy in the precolonial Yorùbá culture. Central to her criticism of the Western approach to sexed bodies is, then, the assertion that in the West, “[d]ifference is expressed as degeneration” or as “a deviation from the original type” (Oyěwùmí 1997, 1). This is because “in the West, women/females are the Other, being defined in antithesis to men/males, who represent the norm” (33). It is this symbolic construction of bodily differences that did not exist in Yorùbá society; it is not that these bodily differences themselves were regarded to be absent.

When Oyěwùmí so vehemently rejects the existence of gender in precolonial Yorùbá society, she rejects “a construction of two categories in hierarchical relation to each other” (Oyěwùmí 1997, 39) based on the self/other distinction that is so central to Western metaphysics. Oyěwùmí thus sketches a vision of woman beyond what she regards as the limited and static place in the hierarchical gender dichotomy of Western thought where woman is defined only as a negative to man. Oyěwùmí implies that in this scheme there is no scope for woman to define herself, and accordingly, “woman” designates a homogeneous group with no space for internal differentiation. She announces that “it is a mistake to lump females together in a category called ‘women’ based on their anatomy, as if their anatomy defined their social roles” (160).

Importantly, Oyěwùmí argues that Western feminism builds on and reinforces this colonial creation of gender. She argues that the “body-reasoning” of the West is unwittingly adopted by Western feminism and then uncritically universalized. Despite its “radical local stance,” feminism “exhibits the same ethnocentric and imperialistic characteristics of the Western discourses it sought to subvert” (Oyěwùmí 1997, 13). In other words, despite Western feminism’s awareness of the dangers of universalizing discourses, and its attempts to situate its knowledges in concrete realities of embodied women, Oyěwùmí argues that it also makes itself guilty of projecting Western realities onto all societies.

Oyěwùmí makes this argument based on the way in which most feminist writings are rooted in the assumption of the universal existence of the category of “woman” (Oyěwùmí 1997, 15). She argues that by analyzing a society through a conceptual or metaphysical framework that assumes the existence of gender categories, one creates such categories in that society (xv). Western feminism’s inability to see beyond Western constructions of the social world results in its interpretation of all other cultures in ways that provide “evidence” for the universal existence of gender categories as they operate in the West (11).

To conclude, dismissing Oyěwùmí’s work based on the argument that her understanding of precolonial gender relations is empirically wrong disregards one of the primary philosophical insights offered by her work. Oyěwùmí strikingly illustrates how the empirical conclusions drawn by researchers are never purely empirical, but always shaped and structured by the conceptual schema that informs the research. Different empirical facts become visible and gain relevance depending on the particular concepts that are subscribed to. In other words, empirical data is never “concept-free.” It

is permeated with and shaped by conceptualization. Oyěwùmí's claims are therefore epistemological and pertain to the imposition of a conceptual gendered binary upon Yorùbá society and to the way in which Western feminism does not question the universality of gender. On this basis we do not think that her work can be dismissed simply on the basis of contesting factual evidence. The point is not that she denies the existence of embodied sexual difference in precolonial Yorùbá society, but that such differences are not embedded in hierarchy as they are in a Western framework.

What is more, as postcolonial feminist scholarship has been gaining momentum (Spivak 1988; Sharpe 1993; McClintock 1995; Sandoval 2000), more scholars from different parts of the world have been making the point that gender, as a system based on a binary and hierarchical division between man and woman, is a concept that is not indigenous to their cultures and was imposed on their societies through Western colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> The idea that gender as we know it is a construct of Western colonial modernity is therefore becoming more commonplace.<sup>4</sup> Powerful confirmation of this idea emerges from the work of the Nigerian philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu, who does not often refer to Oyěwùmí directly, but whose research on the Igbo resonates, on a general, philosophical level, with a lot of what Oyěwùmí is saying with regard to the Yorùbá. In her book *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* she argues for the existence of a radically different gender logic in the precolonial Igbo societies in Nigeria (Nzegwu 2006). We read Oyěwùmí's work similarly as a critique of the Western conceptual framework that is often uncritically and unthinkingly applied universally and through which empirical realities are approached, interpreted, and in fact *produced*.

By dismissing Oyěwùmí's work based on it being empirically wrong, without careful reflection on the theory she is formulating, one therefore disregards two of the powerful philosophical points that emerge from her work. First, empirical truths are shaped by epistemic frameworks. Accordingly there are no "neutral" facts that can disprove her theory.<sup>5</sup> And second, she is trying to articulate experiences that are not "legible" in the epistemic framework of Western modernity, and therefore it is easy to reject her findings too hastily.

## II. READING IRIGARAY'S CRITIQUE OF WESTERN CULTURE ALONGSIDE OYĚWÙMÍ'S

Luce Irigaray is one of the few philosophers to develop a critique of Western culture on a metaphysical basis in which its dichotomous logic with respect to gender is brought to light. She shows how Western modernity is deeply gendered, while at the same time excluding feminine difference. In this section we argue that her work exhibits the metaphysics of Western colonial patriarchy, and that reading Oyěwùmí with Irigaray's metaphysical analysis in mind can provide deeper insight into the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system on African societies. Irigaray's work illuminates the point that an erasure of sexual difference is central to colonial modernity's hierarchical and dichotomous approach to the world. Informing one's reading of Oyěwùmí's criticism of the colonial/modern gender system with Irigaray's

metaphysical critique of the Western symbolic order augments it with detailed and nuanced metaphysical explanations and arguments that support the points she is making.

Irigaray's critique of Western thinking entails an analysis of its logic of the One and erasure of difference: Western philosophy starts from a singular subject, the Western rational male (Irigaray 2001, 121), who reduces every other to a relation with himself (126). Irigaray's philosophy forms an alternative to this logic: her work aims at moving on to the "two which are really different" (129). In her early works, especially *Speculum of the Other Woman*, she develops the metaphysical foundation for this critique of the Western subject. She characterizes phallogocentric thinking as a symmetrical and vertical thinking that is teleologically directed toward the One (Irigaray 1985a, 244–45), and that leaves "the mother" or the feminine without face or form (307). This order represses what Irigaray calls "the maternal-feminine" (Irigaray 1993a, 84, 98, 143), which, as the unconscious of this order, is not completely left behind and forgotten but remains "present" in culture and discourse. The repressed maternal-feminine forms the substratum of the social order, culture, and language. One of the main consequences of the repression of the maternal-feminine is that discourse does not leave space for women to articulate themselves as women. "I am a being sexualized as feminine" cannot be articulated within patriarchal discourse (Irigaray 1985b, 148). Women do not have the opportunity to develop subject positions of their own, but are designated to the subject positions offered to them within patriarchal discourse. Another consequence of the repression of the maternal-feminine is that nature and the body are considered to be inferior to reason and the mind. "Patriarchy" is cut off from nature, and implies superimposing "a universe of language and symbols that has no roots in the flesh" (Irigaray 1993b, 16). Therefore, in a patriarchal order the bond with the body is severed.

Oyèwùmí's critique of Western thinking is strikingly similar to Irigaray's. She argues that Western subjectivity is modeled on the standard of the (white) man, and that the rational subject of modern colonial Western thought is an implicitly masculine and disembodied one, while inert materiality is projected onto all who are different and therefore considered "less than." She writes that in the history of Western thought, "the body is understood to be a non-essential part of the essentially rational and disembodied subject" and "embodiment is reserved for the Other" (Oyèwùmí 1997, 15). In Western thought one finds the "man of reason" and "the woman of the body," and these categories are oppositionally constructed (6). Moreover, difference is mapped onto the matter/spirit dichotomy, which Oyèwùmí connects to other dichotomies that play a central role in the colonial/modern gender system, namely material/spiritual and private/public. As a result, she argues that gender is an inevitably oppressive hierarchical dichotomy in which woman cannot be anything but the material negative to rational man.

Both Oyèwùmí and Irigaray criticize the oppositional understanding of the relationship between masculinity and femininity in Western culture, and the binaries associated therewith, such as mind and body, spirit and materiality. Oyèwùmí considers this opposition a typical Western construction that is imposed onto Yorùbá

society. Irigaray supports this claim and on a metaphysical level analyzes the erasure of sexual difference in Western culture that deprives women of the opportunity to develop subject positions of their own, and that also leaves men with a wretched identity. Irigaray therefore provides a detailed, philosophical analysis, from a Western feminist perspective and rooted in the history of Western philosophy, of the metaphysics of Western colonial patriarchy. Her arguments work to provide metaphysical grounding for Oyèwùmí's position from within the so-called belly of the beast.

### III. IRIGARAY'S WESTERN BIAS

Drawing Oyèwùmí and Irigaray into dialogue not only reveals the Western patriarchal metaphysics that underlies the colonial/modern gender system, but also the presuppositions of Western thinking that Irigaray remains entrapped in, and thus the blind spots in her philosophy of sexual difference. In this section, we demonstrate that reading Oyèwùmí and Irigaray together reveals three major difficulties in Irigaray's philosophy: 1. the assumption of the priority of sexual difference; 2. the rigid duality of sexual difference; and 3. the relationship between sexual difference and race.

#### THE PRIORITY OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Irigaray reformulates the universal of Western subjectivity to encompass sexual difference. She writes that "[t]he natural is at least two: male and female" (Irigaray 1996, 35):

Without doubt, the most appropriate content for the universal is sexual difference. Indeed, this content is both real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component for the universal. The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. (47)

Irigaray, in other words, reveals the current universal in the Western symbolic order as particular insofar as it represents only *one* of the two halves of the world, namely the masculine (see, for a similar critique, Braidotti 1992; Spivak 1992). Accordingly, she is trying to get away from a supposedly gender-neutral universal that is implicitly masculine by replacing it with a universal that is explicitly sexuated and represents both man and woman.

Even though their critiques of Western culture are strikingly similar, by opting for a sexuated universal, Irigaray seems to be doing exactly what Oyèwùmí criticizes Western feminism so harshly for. Oyèwùmí argues that despite trying to overcome and undermine the oppressing universalism of colonial modernity, Western feminism perpetuates it by universalizing the notion of gender, which she argues to be a modern Western cultural particular (Oyèwùmí 1997). Her work therefore problematizes one of the premises most central to Irigaray's work, namely that sexual difference is

universal and more fundamental than all other differences. Although Irigaray criticizes Western culture for forgetting sexual difference, she at the same time proves to be its heir in suggesting that sexual difference is the most important difference. Oyèwùmí's work suggests that Irigaray is, in that sense, guilty of European bias insofar as she is universalizing a particular (sexual difference) that represents only certain people. Where Irigaray is trying to create a universal that is not false, but that includes everyone (the two of sexual difference), she fails, insofar as sexual difference does not exist in this way in all cultures, and woman and man are therefore categories that do not in fact represent the whole of humanity. In other words, reading Oyèwùmí alongside Irigaray shows that the latter—even though she suggests sexual difference as an alternative for the sexual opposition central to Western culture—remains trapped in this culture by prioritizing one difference over all others.

#### THE RIGID DUALITY OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Central to Irigaray's work is a critique of the atomistic, disembodied subject of the Western symbolic order. In its place she develops an ethical and embodied notion of subjectivity. She describes this subject as a self that "always also remain[s] for the other" (Irigaray 1993a, 126). This embodied, ethical subject is not defined in opposition to the other, but stands open to otherness. The notion of "the negative," which Irigaray develops in *I Love to You*, shows how this subjectivity can come into existence. She explains that the notion of the negative has an important function as the limit imposed on us because of our gender: "you are not the whole, and I am not the whole" (Irigaray 1996, 103). Belonging to one's gender, for Irigaray, means "an acceptance of the limits of my gender and recognition of the irreducibility of the other" (13). Recognition of sexual difference as the negative, in other words, entails respecting the limitations of one's embodied identity and openness to the difference of the other gender. In this way, embodied, ethical subjects can come into existence.

In contrast to Irigaray, Oyèwùmí understands subjectivity as relational. Her analysis reveals in which respects Irigaray's ethical subjectivity rooted in recognition of the negative in sexual difference does not work to bring the subject in relation to the other, but rather isolates it. Oyèwùmí understands seniority, unlike gender, as relational (Oyèwùmí 2016, 10). For her, seniority is determined in interaction with others (insofar as one can be the oldest in one context and the youngest in another), whereas gender constitutes a pre-established and essentialist notion that clings to individual identity. She writes:

This seniority-based organization is dynamic, fluid, and egalitarian in that all members of the lineage have the opportunity to be senior or junior depending on the situation. The seniority-based categories are relational and do not draw attention to the body. This is very much unlike the gender or racial hierarchies, which are rigid, static, and exclusive in that they are permanently promoting one category over the other. (71)

Here Oyèwùmí explicitly contrasts the colonial/modern gender system with the Yorùbá seniority system. On the one hand, in the colonial/modern gender system, identity is static and determined with reference only to the self to the exclusion of others. In the Yorùbá seniority system, on the other hand, identity is relational, fluid, and dynamic. For Oyèwùmí the fixed relation between body and social hierarchies, such as gender (and race), is what renders identity static in the colonial/modern gender system. In contrast, the fluid and dynamic nature of the relational Yorùbá subject undermines any attempt to fix identity as man or woman. Because the subject is continuously (re)constituted in dynamic relations with others, it cannot be reduced to and contained on one side of the gender divide.

Moreover, the way in which Oyèwùmí posits the mother as representative of universal subjectivity for the Yorùbá suggests that the Yorùbá relational subject is first and foremost already and inevitably in relation with the (m)other. Oyèwùmí writes: “the *Iya* [mother] figure is representative of humanity—they are the archetypal human being from which all humans derive” (Oyèwùmí 2016, 62). Mother is a “category that encompasses all humanity because all humans derive from them” (122). She states explicitly that for the Yorùbá, motherhood is an “inclusive category” because mothers have male and female children, and mothers are therefore the “universal representatives of the human.” She writes:

In Yorùbá culture mothers are representative of humanity, ungendered. This Yorùbá conception is in stark contrast to the male-as-norm of the Western gendercentric model in which only men can represent universal human attributes. (Oyèwùmí 2011, 234)

Oyèwùmí hence understands the mother (a being with alterity at its center), as the alternative for the Western hegemonic subject that excludes the other. In her description of the importance of the connection with the mother in Yorùbá society, she is therefore presenting a subject that defies categorization within the fixed categories of man or woman. The self always already contains the other. And because the self is constituted in multiple relationships, it always is more than one thing at once. In other words, Oyèwùmí thinks in terms of a radically alternative notion of universal subjectivity where alterity is at the heart of subjectivity so that the subject is plural rather than unified and singular.

When Irigaray rethinks subjectivity in terms of the notion of the negative, she formulates an embodied ethics that forms an alternative for the hegemonic notions of ethics in the Western tradition, in which reason is central instead of the body. Thereby she repeats the “bio-logic” and body-reasoning that, according to Oyèwùmí, is so central to Western thinking. Irigaray, however, does not repeat the hierarchical, dichotomous opposition between man and woman that she regards to be innate in the Western patriarchal order. She shows throughout her work that she wants to create the possibility for each sex to define itself in a process of continuous becoming, without the one restricting the other’s becoming. Man and woman in Irigaray’s work also do not constitute two predetermined and predefined categories. Penelope Deutscher explains that Irigaray’s sexuated universal does not mean that she holds

men and women to have different subjectivities; she emphasizes that in Irigaray's work the ontological status of sexual difference is entirely left open so that it is an "open term" or "a pair of empty brackets." It is "an excluded possibility, some kind of femininity (open in content) that has never become culturally coherent or possible" (Deutscher 2002, 29). Elizabeth Grosz similarly explains that sexual difference is not based on existing properties, qualities, or characteristics of the two sexes, but is indeterminable and denotes "a difference that is always in the process of differentiating itself" (Grosz 2012, 72). For Irigaray, the two genders and the difference between them are therefore not two categories that are predetermined and closed off, but open categories of becoming.

Despite this open understanding of sexual difference, Oyěwùmí's work implies that a fluid and relational understanding of identity is not reconcilable with a rigid division of sexual identity into two. In other words, Oyěwùmí's work raises the question that if sexual identity is constituted in multiple dynamic and shifting relations with others who are different, why limit sexual identity to two exclusive and clearly delineated categories that are supposed to reflect "human nature" (Irigaray 1996, 35–42)? Would "human nature" not rather be multiple?

Another question that the notion of subjectivity found in Oyěwùmí's work raises with regard to Irigaray's negative in sexual difference is whether the way in which Irigaray divides or separates masculine and feminine subjectivity is not to the detriment of the mutual vulnerability and relationality between the sexes that a relational understanding of subjectivity implies. The way in which Oyěwùmí posits the mother as universal representative of the Yorùbá subject attests to a profound acknowledgment of exposedness and vulnerability of the relational subject *also* to its sexual other. Accordingly, the relational subject is not singular and unified in itself, and it does not have boundaries that separate it from what is other. Sexual otherness is not thought as antithetical to the self, but as part of the self because the self exists only in relation to the (m)other. Accordingly, the Yorùbá context as described and theorized by Oyěwùmí suggests that if one takes relational subjectivity seriously, the relation between differently sexuated subjects would be a relationship of profound interdependence, intersubjectivity, and vulnerability. This gets lost when Irigaray places an ontological divide between differently sexed subjects. Such an ontological divide precludes this kind of exposedness to the other insofar as it isolates the subject in its own sexuated identity. The Yorùbá context, as described by Oyěwùmí, raises the question of whether Irigaray, with her notion of sexual duality and her focus on the relationship of persons with their own sex, is not making too little of the alterity that opens the self to relationality with the other.

#### RACE AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Another limitation of Irigaray's theory that emerges when Irigaray and Oyěwùmí are drawn into conversation, has to do with the fact that Oyěwùmí's criticism of the colonial/modern gender system is fully embedded in her criticism of coloniality,

whereas Irigaray's criticism of the Western symbolic order isolates sexual difference from race and culture as the primary and most important issue. In *I Love to You*, Irigaray writes:

The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem. . . and the same goes for other cultural diversities—religious, economic, political ones. Sexual difference probably represents the most universal question we can address. Our era is faced with the task of dealing with this issue, because, across the whole world, there are, there are only, men and women. (Irigaray 1996, 47)

Irigaray holds sexual difference to be the difference that is more fundamental than all other differences. Racial and cultural differences are secondary to sexual difference, and the issue of the oppression of woman precedes all other forms of oppression. Grosz explains that, for Irigaray, sexual difference is an "ontological difference that is radically different from that of racial, ethnic, religious, class and other differences" (Grosz 2012, 73). Accordingly, for Irigaray these differences seem to be only social, whereas sexual difference is ontological and universal. Oyěwùmí's theory in this respect highlights a significant shortcoming of Irigaray's theory: she does not consider the possibility at all that race and gender can be categories that intersect and co-constitute each other.

Oyěwùmí refers explicitly to the way in which gender overlaps with other categories like race in the oppressive logic of the colonial/modern gender system. She explains that "Western discourse" is centered on a binary opposition between body and mind that is not only gendered, but also raced:

"Bodylessness" has been a precondition of rational thought. Women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor and all those who qualified for the label "different" in varying historical epochs have been considered to be the embodied, dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them. They are the Other and the Other is a body. (Oyěwùmí 1997, 3)

Oyěwùmí thus argues that the colonized and the African, like woman, are relegated to the margins of subjectivity by serving as the inert material foil for the subjectivity of the modern Western man of reason.

Reading Oyěwùmí, it becomes clear that the Western symbolic order is just as dependent on the exclusion and exploitation of the racial Other as it is on the exclusion and exploitation of the sexual Other. In colonial modernity, sex and race are interwoven in a way that places the colonized woman in a particularly problematic position in the sense that as woman *and* colonized she is doubly dismissed, and doubly rendered invisible, mute, and material. By isolating sex as *the* issue of our age (Irigaray 1993a, 5), and separating it from and prioritizing it over issues like race, Irigaray's analysis hence does not register the multiple levels of exclusion of the colonized woman. Her theory assumes that all women are in the same way erased by this order, and sexual difference is the only axis on which this logic operates. In this

regard, her analysis of the Western symbolic order lacks an awareness of the multiple power structures inherent in Western thinking.<sup>6</sup>

Irigaray in her later work has broadened her theory to apply to other differences. In *I Love to You* (1996), she clearly understood sexual difference to be prior to other differences. But in *Democracy Begins between Two* (2001), she claims that sexual difference can be a model for respecting other differences. When man and woman are able to respect each other, and hence recognize sexual difference, they perhaps could also respect other others (Irigaray 2001, 141). In the case of sexual difference, respecting the other gender implies acknowledging that we ourselves are limited, that is, if we respect the negative in sexual difference. The potential to apply Irigaray's theory of sexual difference to other differences, such as race, lies in the manner in which it promotes an acknowledgment of the finiteness that is inherent in being embodied.

Accordingly, the notion of the negative could present a route through which to approach not only sexual difference, but also other differences, like race, insofar as it constitutes a model for self-limitation on the basis of an acknowledgment of embodied difference (Halsema 2008, 76–77). By acknowledging the embodiment of the subject, and regarding embodied difference as relevant to subjectivity, the subject can also recognize the negative of *racial* difference and respect the racial other. Subjectivity is not only limited by sexual difference, but also by race, so that persons of all races must respect the limit of irreducible difference between them and persons of other races. This means that universal subjectivity cannot be modeled on one racial group. It also means that being of a certain skin color cannot be understood to make one more or less human.

However, even though Irigaray's notion of sexual difference can be read to apply also to other differences, her understanding of sexual difference as a model for respect for other differences does not adequately address the criticism raised earlier, namely that she does not engage with the way in which race and sexual difference are interwoven in the Western patriarchal order. The work of Oyěwùmí, but also that of Achille Mbembe (2001), makes clear that it is woman *and* the non-Western/African/colonized that are perceived as inferior. Subjectivity is defined with reference to masculinity *and* whiteness. The amorphous outside of discourse, subjectivity, and culture is feminine *and* black or non-Western. Like woman, the colonized or non-Western represents the inferior or negative side of the dichotomous hierarchies in terms of which difference is construed and the world is understood.

Insofar as Irigaray's theory of sexual difference aims to understand the subject as limited, it opens a space for difference to flourish and in principle offers a framework for the de-universalizing of white and Western subjectivity and for creating a space for racial difference to flourish. However, she fails to acknowledge the convergence of masculinity and whiteness in the model of identity, which needs to be overcome in order to enable a culture of alterity. Her work therefore shows no recognition or awareness of the idea that whiteness is not just one race or difference among others; it is, like masculinity, and overlapping with masculinity, *the* category that must be

dethroned and de-universalized or particularized to make space for the emergence of the other as a fully fledged subject.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF DECOLONIZING ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN AFRICAN AND WESTERN FEMINISM

In this article, we showed that Oyèwùmí's work does not simply entail an empirically contestable critique of Western colonialism. She rather aims at an epistemological critique of Western subjectivity that is imposed upon Yorùbá society through notions such as "gender." We showed that reading Irigaray's and Oyèwùmí's work alongside each other is mutually enriching in two senses: 1. Irigaray's metaphysical critique of Western culture's erasure of sexual difference confirms and bolsters the philosophical value, relevance, and import of Oyèwùmí's work. 2. Oyèwùmí's critique of the colonial/modern notion of gender reveals the blind spots in Irigaray's critique of the oppositional understanding of sexual difference in Western culture. Irigaray remains trapped within Western culture's oppositional logic, insofar as she posits sexual difference as prior to other differences, and as duality. She furthermore does not consider race and sexual difference as differences that are interwoven, but considers sexual difference as prior to all other difference, and as a model for engaging with other difference.

It is precisely a cross-continental dialogue between feminist scholars who write from different sides of the world and from different sides of Western colonial modernity that produces such mutually enriching, powerful, original insights. This shows that harnessing the differences in perspective between feminists of different geopolitical positioning is a more productive approach than particularizing or localizing each voice. Engaging two scholars like Irigaray and Oyèwùmí in cross-continental dialogue strengthens both their positions, activates their work in new, transformative ways, and opens a shared space for the emergence of a cross-continental, decolonizing feminism.

#### NOTES

1. Olajubu does, however, concede that gender was different from the Western understanding thereof insofar as gender conceptions were not limited to sexual anatomy, but were configured in a complex and fluid manner (Olajubu 2004, 42).

2. For other critiques, see Olupona 2002; Peel 2002; Bakare-Yusuf 2003; and Olajubu 2004. A prominent point in this regard is that Oyèwùmí relies heavily on a construct of a pure precolonial Africa in opposition to the West. The implication is that she not only disregards the way in which the West and Africa constitute each other, but also that she essentializes and fixes both sides of the dichotomy. For a detailed discussion of this problem, see Bakare-Yusuf 2003.

3. It is argued, for example, that before colonization, all Native American societies acknowledged three to five genders (see Jacobs, Wesley, and Lang 1997). See also Lugones 2007 for examples of feminist scholars who show that gender is a colonial imposition in various South American societies. Also, many precolonial Asian societies were characterized by gender pluralism that is not based on a binary division at all (Wieringa 2010).

4. In this article we understand the concept of modernity in the same way as it is understood by the Colonial/Modern Research Group. This group argues domination of others outside Europe, and the concomitant subalternization of knowledge and cultures of these other groups, to be a necessary dimension of modernity (Escobar 2007, 184). In this sense there is no modernity without coloniality (this term refers to ongoing colonial relations despite the formal ending of colonialism).

5. It can also be added that the data that is at stake is not the kind of information that can be conclusively proved or disproved insofar as it regards a precolonial society and a culture in which history and information was not recorded in a written form, but orally transmitted. All the information that we have about this society is constituted of different *reconstructions* by scholars that are based on different interpretations of different cultural products and narratives. It is therefore impossible to prove Oyèwùmí right or wrong once and for all.

6. See Braidotti 2002 for a notion of sexual difference that does take into account the play of multiple differences.

## REFERENCES

- Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 2003. "Yorùbás don't do gender": A critical review of Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's *The invention of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses*. *African Identities* 1 (1): 121–42.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 1992. On the female feminist subject, or: From "she-self" to "she-other." In *Beyond equality and difference: Citizenship, feminist politics and female subjectivity*, ed. Gisela Bock and Susan James. London: Routledge.
- . 2002. *Metamorphoses: Towards a materialist theory of becoming*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith, Drucilla Cornell, with Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz. 1998. The future of sexual difference: An interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell. *Diacritics* 28 (1): 19–42.
- Deutscher, Penelope. 2002. *A politics of impossible difference: The later work of Luce Irigaray*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2007. Worlds and knowledges otherwise. *Cultural Studies* 21 (2–3): 179–210.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2012. The nature of sexual difference. *Angelaki* 17 (2): 69–93.
- Halsema, Annemie. 2008. Phenomenology in the feminine: Irigaray's relationship to Merleau-Ponty. In *Intertwinings: Interdisciplinary encounters with Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Gail Weiss. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Hom, Sabrina L. 2013. Between races and generations: Materializing race and kinship in Moraga and Irigaray. *Hypatia* 28 (3): 419–35.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985a. *Speculum of the other woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- . 1985b. *This sex which is not one*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- . 1993a. *An ethics of sexual difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. New York: Continuum.
- . 1993b. *Sexes and genealogies*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1996. *I love to you: Sketch of a possible felicity in history*. Trans. Alison Martin. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. *Democracy begins between two*. Trans. Kirsteen Anderson. New York: Routledge.
- Jacobs, Sue-Ellen, Thomas Wesley, and Sabine Lang. 1997. *Two-spirit people: Native American gender identity, sexuality, and spirituality*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Lugones, María. 2007. Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system. *Hypatia* 22 (1): 186–209.
- Mama, Amina. 2001. Challenging subjects: Gender and power in African contexts (plenary address, Nordic Africa Institute Conference: ‘Beyond identity: Rethinking power in Africa’, Upsala, October 4–7). *African Sociological Review* 5 (2): 63–73.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*. New York: Routledge.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1986. Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2* 12 (3): 333–58.
- . 2002. “Under western eyes” revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles. *Signs* 28 (2): 499–535.
- Nzegwu, Nkiru. 1994. Gender equality in a dual-sex system: The case of Onitsha. *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 7 (1): 73–95.
- . 2005. Feminism and Africa: Impact and limits of the metaphysics of gender. In *A companion to African philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing.
- . 2006. *Family matters: Feminist concepts in African philosophy of culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Olajubu, Oyeronke. 2004. Seeing through a woman’s eye: Yorùbá religious tradition and gender relations. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (1): 41–60.
- Olupona, Jacob K. 2002. Imagining the power of the goddess: Gender in Yorùbá religious traditions and modernity. Lecture, Princeton University, Princeton.
- Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónké. 1997. *The invention of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2002. Conceptualizing gender: The Eurocentric foundations of feminist concepts and the challenge of African epistemologies. *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2 (1): 1–9.

- . 2011. *Gender epistemologies in Africa: Gendering traditions, spaces, social institutions, and identities*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- . 2016. *What gender is motherhood? Changing Yorùbá ideals of power, procreation, and identity in the age of modernity*. New York: Palgrave.
- Peel, John D. Y. 2002. Gender in Yorùbá religious change. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32 (2): 136–66.
- Sandoval, Chela. 2000. *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sharpe, Jenny. 1993. *Allegories of empire: The figure of woman in the colonial text*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. 1988. Can the subaltern speak? In *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Education.
- . 1992. French feminism revisited: Ethics and politics. In *Feminists theorize the political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge.
- Stone, Alison. 2006. *Luce Irigaray and the philosophy of sexual difference*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wieringa, Saskia E. 2010. Gender variance in Asia: Discursive contestations and legal implications. *Gender, Technology and Development* 14 (2): 143–72.