

Reading Awa Thiam's *La parole aux Nègresses* through the Lens of Feminisms and English Language Hegemony

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Awa Thiam's pioneering analysis of women's oppression that identified the interlocking systems of race, class, and sex has been ignored in mainstream Western feminism. As a result, African women, as producers of knowledge in feminism, have been seriously overlooked.
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Résumé

Dans cet article, je fais valoir que l'analyse d'avant-garde de l'oppression de la femme, par Awa Thiam, qui a permis de cerner les systèmes entrelacés de la race, de la classe et du sexe, a été négligée dans le féminisme occidental. Par conséquent, les femmes africaines, comme productrices de connaissances en matière de féminisme, ont été grandement oubliées.
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La parole aux Nègresses was published in France in 1978 by a sociologist of Senegalese origin, Awa Thiam. She was the first African woman to publicly denounce excision, infibulation,¹ and polygamy and to break the silence about this taboo (Kesteloot 2001, 281; d'Almeida 1994, 34). By publicly questioning these practices, she was betraying "tribal secrets." Groups respond negatively when one of their own publicly discusses aspects of their culture, especially related to significant cultural values. Doing so is interpreted as betrayal (Bourdieu 1984, 15-16). Thiam's contribution to this topic has been recognized, but her analysis of African women's subjection to three interlocking systems of oppression—sexism, racism, and class—has not. With her book, she was, in fact, the first scholar to produce an analysis of African women's situation that went beyond the binary opposition of tradition/colonization-modernity to shed light on how patriarchy is embedded in both structures. Furthermore, she pointed out the racism and classism inherent to colonization and how, in conjunction with sexism, they impacted African women's situation. Thiam argued that it is necessary to fight against these systems of oppression simultaneously and not prioritize any one of them.

I argue that *La parole aux Nègresses* was well received in Western feminist milieus—francophone as well as anglophone—when it appeared, primarily because its subject, the female body, was then one of the central preoccupations of mainstream Western feminism. I also show that Thiam's argument about the interlocking nature of African women's triple oppression was passed over in silence. Despite subsequent recognition of the multiplicity of systems of oppression and their intersectionality in feminist discourse, Thiam's contribution to this analysis remains ignored.
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¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) regroups excision and infibulation in a category of female genital mutilation, which it defined as "all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons" (2008, 4).

feminism declares itself more and more inclusive, the persistence of this lack of recognition is, in my view, a sign of the lack of importance feminism gives to voices which come from the margins of English language hegemony. Western feminism acknowledges Africa as a place of excision, infibulation, and polygamy, but not of knowledge production.

To support my argument, I deploy a historical and sociological perspective that situates *La parole aux Nègresses* in the context in which it appeared and analyzes how it has been received in relation to feminist theorizing over time. In doing so, I rely primarily on postcolonial feminist discourse of inclusion and diversity. I take up three points: the first examines *La parole aux Nègresses* in relation to second wave feminist discourses dominant at the time of its publication; the second situates *La parole aux Nègresses* in relation to the concept of intersectionality in feminist studies; my third point examines English language hegemony in feminist spaces and discusses the lack of attention given to marginal voices—that of Thiam, in particular. Feminist critics need to pay attention to the overwhelming predominance of English and to the invisibility or absence of acknowledgement of work in other languages.

***La parole aux Nègresses* at the Crossroads of Mainstream Feminist Second Wave Discourse**

When *La parole aux Nègresses* was published, mainstream feminist discourse was based mainly on the principle of the universality of patriarchy and considered sexism as the most important form of subjugation (e.g. Millett 1970). Many feminist approaches focused on marriage, the family, and women's bodies, and in particular, women's mastery of their bodies and its corollaries—maternity, contraception, and abortion (Descaries and Corbeil 2002, 13-50).

By analysing excision, infibulation, and polygamy as practices that enable men to control women's bodies, Thiam (1978) situated herself in mainstream feminist discourse (100). She subscribed to the idea of the universality of women's oppression, affirming that there also exists "[a] common denominator for women: phallocratic violence. It is that violence which makes you believe that you are nothing without the other... the one who detains the phallus" (168). Thiam also emphasized that men and women are in "an antagonistic relationship of dominant to dominated" (19). Based on

an ethnographic study that drew on the radical feminist platform, especially that of materialist feminism, Thiam analyzed the practices of excision, infibulation, and polygamy by presenting the voices of Black African women from Mali, Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Senegal.² Because of its pioneering character, Thiam's work has been widely cited in the francophone literature (Kesteloot 2001, 281; d'Almeida 1994, 34). Nevertheless, some critics, especially from Africa, have blamed Thiam for her mimicry of Western feminists and for cultural transgression (Kesteloot 2001, 281; Griffins 2011, 5; Duncan 2013, 185). Despite this hostile reaction, it is true that by publicly exposing these practices in a subversive manner, Thiam opened the path for African women who have subsequently produced numerous publications about women's situation in a tone they had never before dared to use (Mouralis 1994, 21-17; Hitchcock 2000, 23). Irène Assiba d'Almeida (1994) points out that by breaking the silence on this "taboo" subject with her book, Thiam challenged African women writers who then responded by publishing poems, novels, and essays (34). Furthermore, Lilvan Kesteloot (2001) argues that the book was appreciated not only because of its subject, but also because of the subversive tone of Thiam's discourse (28).

La parole aux Nègresses had attracted the attention of anglophone readers even before it was translated into English in 1986. For example, in 1979, the Hosken Report identified *La parole aux Nègresses* as undoubtedly the most important document dealing with the practices of excision and infibulation in Africa (Hosken 1979, 1-3). It quoted several passages directly from Thiam's work to demonstrate the pertinence of these practices: "(Awa Thiam) says: It pure and simply represents a most overt control of female sexuality by the phallocratic system" (5).

Similarly, Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem (1980) referenced Thiam's book in an article on genital mutilation, published in *Ms. Magazine* in 1980. They included the book among their recommended readings and drew readers' attention to the universality of patriarchy: "Warning: These words are painful to read. They describe facts of life as far away as our most fearful imagination and as close as any denial of women's sex....."

² By interviewing women from many African countries where FGM was practiced, Thiam intended to expose a common African women's situation.

ual freedom” (65). Morgan and Steinem then elaborated on women’s common situation in a far more specific manner:

To readers for whom such customs come as horrifying news it is vital that we immediately recognize the connection between these patriarchal practices and our own. They are different in scope, but not in kind. (66)

The subtitle and the above extract from *Ms.* enable us to understand the importance of the subject to Western feminist discourse as well as to observe the ethnocentrism at the heart of Western feminism.

The 1986 English translation of *La Parole aux Nègresses*, titled *Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, has also been very successful. It has frequently been cited in anglophone literature, albeit almost exclusively by Africanists, and especially during the last decade with the rapid growth of sexuality studies (Tamale 2011). Despite this acknowledgement, Thiam’s argument about the interlocking systems of oppression in the experience of African women has not attracted much commentary. This is surprising since Black feminists³ and feminists of color⁴ in the United States were criticising racism in the feminist movement and discussing the multiplicity of overlapping relationships of oppression at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s (Falquet 2006; Haase-Dubosc and Lal 2006).

***La parole aux Nègresses* and Intersectionality: An Invisible History in Feminist Studies**

The term “intersectionality,” first used by Black feminist lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, has proven to be one of the most important theoretical contributions to feminist studies (McCall 2005, 6; Mann 2012, x). Crenshaw has been given credit for having introduced the concept, and other Black feminists and feminists of colour have been recognized for attending to the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. While Thiam discussed the multiplicity of the relations of oppression of sex, race, and class in African women’s experience in *La parole aux Nègresses* already in 1978, it is rarely mentioned in feminist writings, and her contribution to

³ I use the term “Black feminists” to refer to African American feminists in the United States who are descendants of Black ancestors.

⁴ I use the term of “feminists of color” to refer to feminists who belong to other ethnic groups and who are not descendants of Whites.

this subject has been ignored. In an effort to reveal why Thiam’s contribution has remained invisible, I examine the trajectory of the discourse on the intersectionality of gender, class, and race in feminist studies.

Racialized feminist scholars in the United States—African American, Chicano, and Asian American—have elaborated a critique of Western feminism (Davis 1981; hooks 1981, 1984; Lorde 1984; Lugones and Spelman 1999; Mann 2012, 160) by denouncing the racism at the heart of the feminist movement and reproaching it for being preoccupied mostly with the bourgeois White women’s situation. Moreover, just as anti-racist feminists have subscribed to the reality of the multiplicity of systems of oppression (hooks 1984; Davis 1981), they have also contested the idea that women constitute a homogeneous group (Mohanty 1995; Lugones and Spelman 1999). Chandra Mohanty (2003) has questioned the practice of viewing third world women on the basis of the category “woman” abstracted from any geographic, historic, and cultural contexts. These feminists, who have critiqued the discourse of “otherness” and called for acknowledgement of difference and inclusion of diversity, are today included in more recent movements such as postcolonial feminism. While Black feminism preceded it, Chris Weedon (1999) subsumes Black feminism under postcolonial feminism, which she defines as a composite movement that includes women of Black ancestry, women who identify as belonging to a minority who are not descendants of Whites, and women born in formerly colonized nations living in the West (158-159). I call attention to Black feminism because Black feminists are considered to be the first to have prompted feminists to think about the articulation of multiple systems of oppression by race, class, and gender in order to analyze the situation of Black and racialized women in the United States.

I situate Awa Thiam among the Black feminists of the 1970s, because she is also one of the early scholars to criticize racism in Western feminism and shed light on the interlocking system of women’s oppression by race, class, and sex. In order to articulate her analysis, Thiam devoted the third section of her book to “Feminism and Revolution,” focusing on the colonial and postcolonial period. It is important to mention here that no writing is produced in a vacuum. As an educated African woman, Thiam knew the history of colonization and slavery and their impact on Black people; she

knew the history of Western feminism as well. Before turning attention to the situation of African women, she critiqued feminism. In particular, she questioned Kate Millet's argument about the rape of women, which Millet compared to the lynching of Blacks (1986, 154). Thiam (1978) affirmed that, "[i]n fact, they [Black women] find themselves ignored by the very women [White feminists] who claim to be fighting for the liberation of all women" (155). By criticizing Millet's argument, Thiam openly exposed the racism in Western feminism in that period. Exceptionally, and relatively recently, Jules Falquet, Emmanuelle Lada, and Aude Rabaud (2006) have given her some credit for this insight when they identify her with others as being among the first racialized feminists to have criticized racism in the feminist movement.

Despite her critique, Thiam (1986) declared her solidarity with all women regardless of race:

Solidarity among women must be understood to mean that all women, irrespective of race or class, be they Black, Yellow or White, hardworking housewives or middle-class employees, non-proletarian or lumpen-proletariat, are exploited by the patriarchal system...As women, we offer ourselves as the sisters of all oppressed women. Whether this sisterhood is accepted or not, it is there. It is offered. Those to whom it is offered will do with it what they will. (132)

Referring to Thiam's argument on solidarity, Bronwyn Winter (2011) states that, "Thiam revolutionizes the global relationship of feminist sisterhood and solidarity. Contrary to the Western-centered feminist practices of offering solidarity to 'Third World' women in an often materialistic albeit well-meaning way, Thiam positions African feminists as creators of sisterhood and solidarity as much as they are receivers of them" (620-621). It is pertinent to mention here that Thiam's call for solidarity is based on the claim of the universal oppression of all women as a homogenous group. Later feminists would critique this idea precisely because it is based on the essentialist identity of women and denies the differences between women's experiences (Mohanty 2003, 110-115).

It seems to me that, in offering her solidarity, Thiam left herself open to the possibility of arguing that White women do not accept entering into this relationship with Black women spontaneously. She pointed out that only a minority of White women—feminists—are

in solidarity with Black women, and she suspected a kind of condescension in this relationship:

And we are not talking about those militants who reckon that they can show their solidarity with other women by being subservient towards them. The last thing that such an attitude can achieve is the liberation of women. (1986, 133)

Even when written in a spirit of solidarity, such condescending attitudes seem to characterise the writings of certain Western feminists. Such an interpretation can be made of a text written by Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1991), for example. Drawing on particular examples from the Kikuyu and the Gussi ethnic groups, Mathieu attempted "to evaluate the *limitations of the conscience* that women put up with" (154). She explained that among these limitations are: "the men who control the woman (husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, uncles with diverse modalities according to the societies) [and who are] a veritable screen...in her conscience" (165). Mathieu argued, in fact, that these women are not conscious of their oppression because they are blinded by men's domination:

The oppressed (women's) denial of their own oppression is not astonishing if one knows (but to know this you have to be on the other side of the fence) that it is quite insupportable and traumatising to identify oneself as oppressed (219).

Similar patronizing attitudes are reproduced in "women and development" studies which categorize African women as liberal feminists who advocate the Women in Development (WID) approach, because it does not question the structural causes of women's oppression as understood in the West (Stamp 1990, 18). Huguette Dagenais (1992) corroborates such categorizations when she mentions that African women scholars are still at the stage of making reformist claims, while Western feminists have already done this. Dagenais cites the quest for formal equality before the law, improvement in health and education conditions, and employment equity (170). By situating African women at a lower level that Western women have already overcome, these comparisons uphold Westerners as the "the norm of reference." In a feminist discourse that upholds the ideal of solidarity, this type of judgement, reminiscent of the evolutionary model of civilization that sustains colonial ideology, is the form of solidarity

that Thiam condemned. Is there not condescension of a certain kind in the concluding line of Benoîte Groult's preface when she stated that, "Awa Thiam's book bears witness to this feminine misery. It is a refusal, still timid and often confused (Thiam 1978, viii)?"

I argue that Benoîte Groult's patronizing comment is similar to the question that is often addressed to African women scholars: who are the "African women" they are speaking about? Let us pose this question in the context of Thiam's book. She interviewed middle-class, educated women dwelling in towns or villages, married, divorced, or single. She concluded that all of them have a "deplorable life" and are subjugated to African men (1978, 114). Using an example of Algeria, Thiam criticized traditions and customs, which in her own terms were "either too rigid for change or have not yet been adapted" to the present time (115). There is no doubt that even though she distinguished the category of African women, Thiam shared the idea of the universality of patriarchy. She made it clear by concluding that the African women she interviewed were subjected to patriarchal customs and traditions. While V. Y. Mudimbe (1994) deplors the fact that Thiam missed the opportunity to engage with these traditions and customs in a more critical way (120-121), other African women writers have responded with an abundant literature on African women (d'Almeida 1994). I should emphasize that being colonized and socialized as African women anchors the experience of being marginalized and allows African women scholars to develop an African feminist standpoint from which they are able to speak in the name of African women.

It is relevant to review some essential ideas, which Thiam (1986) mentioned in describing African women's situation during the colonization and in post-colonial times. She stated that:

During the colonial period the African woman suffered a double domination, a double enslavement. She was not only subjected to the colonial, but she was also subjected to the colonized African male. After this period, she faced ever greater problems: She is still under the yoke of males: father, brother, husband... Surely the true status of Black African women was identical to that of the Afro-American or Caribbean woman in the days of slavery. She, like them, had to comply with the sexual whims of her White master who, having appropriated her lands had become omnipotent in her very home... Like her Black brother, she suffers from the damaging aftermath of colonialism and the crimes of colonials. But her sufferings are greater than

those of men, for she is not only faced with White racism, the exploitation of her race by the colonial, but also the domination that men, Black as well as White, exercise over her, by virtue of the patriarchal system in which both live.

Because she is a colonized person, she is obliged to work for the colonial, just as the Black male is. She is exploited as a unit of production. What is more, she is the cheapest form of labour for the colonial, by virtue of both her colour and her sex. Badly paid by the colonial, she is also underpaid in comparison with men. Therefore she is exploited not only as a Black, but also because she is a woman. But which of these comes first?...

Both colonial and patriarchal systems decree that a Black woman's work is worth less than that of the Black male. This is translated into concrete terms in the wage structure, in the importance attached to her, as well as in every other field. Her value as a commodity only goes up for the colonist when he sees her as an object of sexual satisfaction. (And how!)

Where the European woman complains of being doubly oppressed, the Black woman of Africa suffers a threefold oppression: by virtue of her sex, she is dominated by man in a patriarchal society; by virtue of her class she is at the mercy of capitalist exploitation; by virtue of her race she suffers from the appropriation of her country by colonial or neo-colonial powers. Sexism, racism, class division: three plagues. (114-118)

The focus on the colonial and postcolonial periods, taking into account the exploitation of the labour force and especially the use of women as cheap labour, gave Thiam the framework to describe triple oppression by race, sex, and class. She arrived at this conclusion by referring to the exploitation of African women as a productive force in the colonial context and comparing the wage of women to that of men. In fact, the introduction of the cash crop under colonization resulted in the increased exploitation of women, for example in the Belgian Congo, where under the formula of *Homme Adule Valide* (HAV)—Adult and Valid—only men as supposedly adult and valid were permitted to cultivate cash crops under the colonial rule of compulsory cultivation. Yet in reality, it was their wives who did the work, because it was their duty under the gender division of labour according to the custom. However, it was the men who were paid (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985, 150). The exploitation of women as cheap labor is even more transparent in the current context of globalisation with the delocalisation of multinational corporations.

This triple oppression extends into the postcolonial period, because of the imperialism of the capitalist system, since African independence is only a fiction, as Thiam affirmed.

In addition, to emphasize the interconnections of the systems of oppression, Thiam (1986) argued that one must view the battle of all the systems of oppression in a simultaneous way:

We are not concerned here with the problem of the liberation of Black women in terms of priorities, because two aspects of the Black African woman's struggle are closely linked: the struggle for effective economic and political independence and the struggle for the recognition of and respect for the rights and duties of men and women of all races.

The one must not exclude the other. Ideally both struggles should be waged simultaneously...In order to succeed, the Black African feminist movement must set its sights on eradicating these three plagues from society. (115, 118, 119)

Thiam distinguished between African liberation and the liberation of African women. In so doing, she questioned the basis of men's and women's solidarity in national liberation movements. Therefore, Thiam contradicted Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) view that women are united with the men of their community and that men and women must join together to confront colonialism and neo-colonialism (Thiam 1978, 184).

Awa Thiam's argument about the multiple relations of oppression by race, sex, and class for the purpose of analyzing the situation of African women is a pioneering work. This was even truer at the time it was published, because the question of interlocking oppressions was still at the margins of mainstream feminist discourse. Previous analyses of African women's status—often produced by male ethnologists who referred to a colonial archive—opposed tradition to modernity, generally underlined the benefits of colonization, and did not deal with African women's social conditions by failing to interrogate the intersections of race, sex, and class. By making the simultaneity of systems of domination apparent, Thiam has contributed to the understanding of women's oppression in its diversity and complexity. It can be argued here that she also opened up the conversation about the diversity of the situation of women and the fact that women do not constitute a homogenous group.

In making her analysis, Thiam, who synthesized the French, British, and American literature, constantly referred to the experiences of African colonized women and Afro-American and Caribbean women during slavery. Perusal of her bibliography, which includes writings by the major feminists of that period such as Shulamith Firestone, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Sheila Rowbotham, T. Grace Atkinson, Benoîte Groult, Simone de Beauvoir, and Angela Davis, shows unequivocally that Thiam was well informed about feminism as well as about the history of racism in the United States.

One does find some parallels between Thiam's analysis and the one developed by Black feminists in the United States during the same period (Winter 2011, 620). Thiam challenged White Western feminists' ethnocentrism at the same time as African American women were doing so, and in words very similar to theirs. Bronwyn Winter (2011) points this out as she recognizes that Thiam situated herself within an international context (620). Two things suggest, however, that Thiam developed her analysis independently. First, nothing in Thiam's bibliography indicates that she knew about the Combahee River Collective's argument, which was also marginalized at that time, and second, nothing in her bibliography indicates that she was aware of any literature coming from the West that referred to interlocking systems of oppression.⁵

The Combahee River Collective (CRC)—the radical branch of Black feminism in the United States—has been recognized as having produced the earliest theorization of the interlocking systems of oppression (Falquet 2006; Cole 2009). In its statement of April 1977, the Collective presented a discourse that I venture to identify as similar to that of Awa Thiam, by showing that it is necessary to conceptualize sexism and racism simultaneously to analyze the situation of Black American women. The feminists of the Combahee River Collective identified four systems of oppression—race, class, sex, and heterosexuality—and took a stand against separating and prioritizing struggles against each type of oppression. Moreover, they presented the argument that there are multiple differences between

⁵ At that time, French sociologist Colette Guillaumin argued that racism and sexism proceed from the same mechanisms. This does not mean, however, that Guillaumin was denouncing racism at the heart of feminism. See Guillaumin 1992.

women, even at the heart of Black feminism (Falquet 2006).

Sharing the CRC's argument, bell hooks (1984) also called for considering race, gender, and class to analyze the situation of Black women in the United States. But, such a discourse coming from the margin—to use bell hooks' term—collided with mainstream feminism. hooks (2000) affirmed in the second edition of her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, that “[a]t that time mainstream feminists simply ignored this work and any other feminist theory that was perceived as ‘too critical’ or ‘too radical’” (xiii). Alluding to the interlocking systems of sexual, racial, and class oppression, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) instead used the concept of the “matrix of oppressions.” Subsequently, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 2005) proposed the concept of intersectionality to analyze the interlocking of the systems of oppression stemming from the experiences of women of colour who are victims of conjugal violence with the American judicial system. She wished to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the American judiciary in addressing these women's needs.

When tracing the genealogy of intersectionality in feminist studies, it is Crenshaw who has, since then, often been named as the person who originated the concept. Sirma Bilge (2009) points out, for example, that intersectionality, as used by Crenshaw, brought out the interaction of the relations of oppression as much in the production as in the reproduction of the inequalities at the heart of societies (70). It is in this aspect that Crenshaw was innovative.

Minna Salami (2012) has recently recognized that Awa Thiam made an important contribution by describing the triple oppression of African women. Moreover, it is true, as Christine Eyene (2008) notices, that Thiam synthesized the positions of mainstream feminism, those of Black American women, and those of African women. But as Sylvia Tamale (2011) observes, “A. Thiam is a feminist *tour de force* and very poorly known both within the continent's feminist archives and beyond” (87).

The Paradox of Feminist Discourse: Inclusion, Marginalisation and English- Language Hegemony

Contemporary feminist discourse on inclusion and diversity emanates from postcolonial and anti-racist feminists who contest the idea of women's homogeneity as a group

(Spivak 1992; hooks 1999, 295; hooks 2000, 44-67; Lugones and Spelman 1999, 474-486; Mohanty 1995, 259-263; Mohanty 2003; Lorde 1984). It is necessary to point out that these feminists have produced their discourse in English and from their location at the centre, especially from the centre's margin. As bell hooks (1984) put it, “To be in the margin is to be part of the Whole but outside the main body” (preface). But, in order to be heard, their discourse must be embraced by “the main body,” that is, the mainstream feminists who are in a privileged position conferring on them an authority that allows them to legitimate or disregard voices coming from the margin.

In remarks made in response to the publication of *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, bell hooks (2000) illustrated these processes that legitimate the voices of those who are at the margin by those who are in a position to speak in the name of “others” in the feminist milieu. She pointed out that,

As a visionary work *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* was presented to a feminist world that was not yet ready for it. Slowly, as more feminist thinkers (particularly white women) accepted looking at gender from the perspective of race, sex and class, this work began to receive the attention it merited. (xiii)

An interesting parallel can be made here with Awa Thiam. It is relevant therefore to situate Thiam at the time of the publication of her book, considering feminism's politics of location: location as space/geography (physical, intellectual, and cultural) and location as status (hierarchy). An educated African woman, Thiam was located in Paris when she published her book. She was in a privileged position, but at the same time, being colonized, she was at the margin in terms of her status. She published her book from the centre's margin. Her denouncement of excision and infibulation suited feminist discourse on the universality of patriarchy, while supporting ethnocentric views of Africa. French feminist journalist Benoîte Groult endorsed her despite her patronizing attitude. In the USA, Fran Hosken (1979) as well as Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem (1980) also praised her book.

Neither Groult, Hosken, nor *Ms. Magazine* mentioned Thiam's specific approach to the analysis of infibulation and excision, despite the fact that Thiam placed greater emphasis on showing how racism and

class division go together with sexism in African women's experience. The subject she took up placed her at the margin of mainstream feminist discourse. Because they ignored this aspect of her work, Benoîte Groult, Fran Hosken, Robin Morgan, and Gloria Steinem—the first ones who supported Awa Thiam in francophone and anglophone milieus—disregarded and silenced her voice.

This erasure is all the more flagrant, given that the sub-title of the English translation of Thiam's book—*Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* (1986)—calls upon, if not at least awakens, curiosity about how Thiam conceived of feminism and the oppression of African women. If the feminists at the centre—whether at its periphery or not—had validated Thiam's argument, she would have been taken in hand by those who had the power to speak in the name of "others" and her contribution would have emerged from the margins. One can question here the essence of the feminist struggle and the quest for equality for all.

The silence about Awa Thiam's contribution bears witness to the hierarchical relations that cross the feminist universe, especially in the world of feminist knowledge production. It is even more obvious when the ability of African women scholars to speak about African women is being questioned. Questions of legitimacy to speak on behalf of others are never posed to White Africanists. It reveals hierarchy and patronizing attitudes towards African women scholars in feminist studies, while denying them the capability of producing knowledge for and by African women. Initially, most knowledge about African women was produced by male ethnologists. However, certain female ethnologists and feminists (Mathieu 1991), motivated by the desire to rectify this masculine reading, reproduced the same stereotypes (131-148). Ayesha Imam and Amina Mama enumerate these as:

The docile, obedient, village woman, custodian of culture; the simple peasant grinding millet outside the productive life of the community; the matriarch of the shrine and market place; the corrupt urban prostitute: these are the stereotypes of much of Africanist, Western feminist and male scholarship on African women, such as it is. (1994: 82, cited in Boeku-Betts and Njambi [2005, 124])

Homogenization of African women both denies their diversity and leads to the disregard of their contribution to knowledge production in general as well as in fem-

inist studies. As Josephine Boeku-Betts and Wairimù Ngarùiya Njambi (2005) state,

other troubling elements that we have encountered in some women's studies discourses involve the virtual exclusion or absence of African women as knowledge producers in relation to feminism. In such discourses African women are typically represented only as victims of oppressive and unchanging traditional practices. (122)

The marginalization of Thiam's contribution can also be explained in relation to English language hegemony in the production of feminist knowledge. This is why, with respect to the subject of the intersectionality of oppression, Black feminists have been upheld for their innovative analysis of the situation of Black and racialized women, while Thiam's point of view about African women, which was produced in the French language, has fallen into oblivion.

Language is incontestably a site of power relations, even at the heart of the feminist movement. Francine Descarries and Laetitia Déchaufour (2006) make English language hegemony particularly obvious in relation to the concept of gender and to the restrictive and selective interpretations a good number of English language feminists have produced about French feminism. Their interpretations obliterate the diverse and plural nature of feminist perspectives constructed outside the anglophone milieu. Notably, the gender concept has been introduced into the social sciences and humanities through English feminist literature. It has become widespread as an inevitable category of analysis, particularly in the field of feminist studies, at the risk of diminishing the range of theoretical reflections more critical of the relations of sex elaborated in the French language (Descarries and Déchaufour 2006). Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) and Ifi Amadiume (1987, 1997) have pointed out the inadequacy of the gender concept for the analysis of women's situation in the African context. Oyěwùmí argues that seniority, not gender, is the most important structure that determines power relations between individuals for the Yoruba; she concurs with Amadiume that motherhood is a basis of women's identity and a foundation of women's power. It is not my intention here to open that debate, but one should question how the idea of the trap of motherhood applies to African women.

Language thus establishes a barrier to the circulation and interpretation of ideas produced at the

margin in the feminist universe as proven in the case of Awa Thiam's contribution. Descarries and Déchaufour (2006) illustrate this fact in the semi-absence of bibliographic references in other languages, or translated from English in English texts, by drawing upon the examples of *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* (2000), edited by Lorraine Code and published by Routledge as well as *Contemporary Feminist Theories* (1998), edited by Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones.

While it is important to criticise English language hegemony, it is also necessary to recognize that English space appears until now to have been much more open to inclusion and diversity than French space. Witness the gap in the diffusion of postcolonial critiques in anglophone and francophone worlds. In the Anglo-American environment, postcolonial relations tend to be apprehended in terms of hybridity, even if they prove to be controversial and are constantly negotiated, in comparison to the francophone milieu where they are generally translated as ruptured or fractured (Blanchard, Bancel, and Lemaire 2005; Vidal 2011). The holding of the Stasi Commission on secularism in France (*Le Monde* 2003) and of the Bouchard and Taylor commission in Quebec (a "commission of consultation on the practices of accommodation linked to cultural differences"—Rocher 2008)—to cite only two francophone spaces at the centre—eloquently illustrates the complexity and difficulties of the problems around the inclusion of diversity in the francophone context. The francophone feminist universe is not exempt from such hierarchical relations.

Indeed, in considering Awa Thiam's *La parole aux Nègresses*, it is relevant to ask whether mainstream francophone feminists recognize that Thiam, as early as the 1970s, elaborated her argument about intersectionality and that she has denounced racism in feminism. There are few bibliographic references to Thiam's work with respect to these aspects in francophone feminist publications.

In Conclusion

In revisiting Awa Thiam's *La parole aux Nègresses* through the lens of postcolonial feminist discourse and English language hegemony, my intent was to excavate Thiam's voice from silence by highlighting the processes that have resulted in the marginalization of her contribution to feminism and women's studies. In so doing,

my argument goes toward destabilizing the boundaries which marginalize "others" who are not located in positions of power in feminist and women's studies.

When Thiam published her book as an African woman living in France, she was located at the centre's margin, because her argument on the interlocking systems of oppression in the case of African women conflicted with *mainstream* feminist discourse, and she published in French. The ignorance of Thiam's theoretical contribution blatantly exposes hierarchies of knowledge production in the academic arena. It shows how colonialism continues to shape the academic milieu, especially in feminist studies, where African women continue to be perceived as those who cannot produce knowledge.

One would expect that this kind of hierarchy would become less obvious in the current period of globalization, with its new global configurations. Globalization indeed has occurred with its mixed space where the "local is in the global" and the "global in the local" to form a transnational chain of occurrence. It has blurred the cleavage of center/periphery or North/South, categorizations that are now obsolete. Some scholars advocate using terms other than "center/periphery," "Western/Third World," or "North/South" that shift attention to "quality of life as the criteria for distinguishing between social minorities and majorities" that characterize "the haves and have-nots" (Mohanty 2013, 539). For example, Mohanty (2013) points out that a focus on "quality of life," combined with the term "One-Third/Two-Thirds World," allows for greater attention to be paid "to the continuities as well as the discontinuities between the haves and have-nots within boundaries of nations and between nations and indigenous communities" (539). But that does not mean that the hierarchy has disappeared. In fact, the configuration of local/global and global/local has created a space where these two entities are interlocked and mutually constitute each other using English language as a medium to communicate. Despite the increase of transnational coalitions between women's organizations to resist globalization, the cleavage between languages, with English being in the hegemonic position, remains unshakable. The feminist sphere perpetuates this cleavage by continuing to give priority to the English language and disregarding the work produced at the margin, especially by those who do not use English.

Thus, despite efforts to “internationalize” and “transnationalize” curriculum, the scholarship that is the most valued in feminist studies is mainly produced in English, be it in local or global environments. To bridge the “local” and “global” in more effective and productive ways in women’s studies, Mohanty (2013) advocates a curriculum model that can bridge “local” and “global” women’s agency. She suggests “a comparative feminist studies” or “feminist solidarity” model as “the most useful and productive pedagogical strategies for cross-cultural feminist work,” because they are “based on the premise that the local and the global...exist simultaneously and constitute each other” (548) One needs to question, however, how feminist cross-cultural work can be achieved when the voices of feminist scholars at the margin remain marginalized and the English language is given hegemonic status. The politics of knowledge that bridges the “local” and the “global” in feminist studies needs to resist racism and be inclusive of the voices from the margin, in other languages, too.

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