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Philosophies of Difference: Nature, Racism, and Sexuate Difference

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Reviewed by Laura Roberts, 2020

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Quote:

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It seems important to begin by noting that the inspiration for the volume *Philosophies of Difference: Nature, Racism, and Sexuate Difference* originated in the Melbourne Philosophies of Difference seminars, established in 2016 by the editors with the aim of providing a space for scholars to engage with topics that are too often overlooked by the dominant traditions of Western philosophical thought. This edited collection is thus an important record of some of the work performed in the public forum of the Melbourne

seminars, and each contribution to the volume seeks, in various ways, to engage philosophically with the concept of difference in relation to questions of sexuate difference, racism, nature, and decoloniality. Furthermore, the diverse and original perspectives included in this carefully curated collection, which extends beyond the original seminars, demonstrates the success of the editors' aims to challenge the white male hegemony of "Western" philosophy, and to give space to overlooked intellectual viewpoints within this tradition. This collection reflects an awareness of the diversity of feminist philosophical perspectives and makes a significant contribution to feminist philosophy as well as to critical race philosophy. Contributions include an interview with Elizabeth Grosz on her recent work in onto-ethics, two novel readings of Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexuate difference, an excellent philosophical engagement with antiracist activism, as well as chapters exploring the notion of difference in relation to questions of vegetal ontologies, racism, nature, and poetry.

In this brief review it is impossible to do justice to the multiple chapters and diverse perspectives in this collection, so I focus on two chapters that stand out due to their insightful and thought-provoking philosophical engagement with multiple strands of the overarching theme of *Philosophies of Difference*. These are Stephen Seely's "Irigaray between God and the Indians: Sexuate Difference, Decoloniality, and the Politics of Ontology" and Helen Ngo's "Simulating the Lived Experience of Racism and Islamophobia: On 'Embodied Empathy' and Political Tourism."

In his illuminating article, Seely makes connections among the logic of Heidegger's thinking on planetary technicity, Irigaray's philosophy of sexuate difference, and the "coloniality of Being" to argue that we cannot attempt any decolonial project without also "thinking through the question of sexuate difference" (43). Seely writes, "I follow Luce Irigaray, who has amply

demonstrated that Western metaphysics--the metaphysics that gives rise to coloniality and planetary technicity--originates in an oblivion of sexuate difference" (44). The way in which Seely connects Irigaray's project with decolonial theory is timely and resonates with the arguments I make in my book *Irigaray and Politics* (Roberts 2019). Making these connections explicit generates opportunities for more nuanced responses to critics of Irigaray's philosophy who argue that the primacy of sexuate difference ignores other differences of, for example, race.

Through a quite long and sometimes winding road, Seely lays out his argument. Beginning with an outline of Heidegger's notion of "planetary technicity" (42), which Seely describes as "the positioning of all that is as resources in a universal standing reserve to be ordered and arranged by technical-scientific rationality" (42), he goes on to unpack the connections among the logic of Heidegger's planetary technicity, the global death project, and the logic of coloniality. In his discussion of the global death project, Seely makes connections between the claims of Indigenous activists and Irigaray's call for an ontology of life (44). He then situates Heidegger's notion of planetary technicity within the history of the "coloniality of Being." In doing so, Seely's work enables readers to understand planetary technicity as a "form of western imperialism" (49), as "the ontology of the so-called modern globalised world" (45), and, through a discussion of the "coloniality of Being," Seely argues that we ought to understand that Heidegger's planetary technicity "is the ontology of coloniality as well as modernity" (49). Heidegger's diagnosis of planetary technicity is thus tied to the logic of coloniality and is seen as contributing to the global death project.

The article then moves to engage more deeply with Irigaray's reading of Heidegger. As Seely concludes this section, he notes that for Irigaray, the "death project of technicity originates in

the oblivion of sexuate difference" and "it is accomplished through the ontological annihilation of birth and sexuate difference that enables the entire cosmos to be moulded isomorphically with (Western) Man's imaginary and desires (themselves often unconscious)" (61). This is why, following Irigaray, Seely argues that we need to recognize that "life is the unthought condition of Western metaphysics" and the only possible challenge to planetary technicity is to think through the question of sexuate difference and recognize an ontology of life (62). He then turns to the response of the Kogi people of Colombia to the global death project of technicity. Seely argues the Kogi people offer a sexuate response to the global death project that resonates with the reading of Irigaray that Seely has provided in the chapter (62). In bringing together Heidegger's thinking on technicity, Irigaray's thinking on the ontology of life, and decolonial critiques of modernity, Seely provides a convincing argument that no decolonial project is possible without "also thinking the question of sexuate difference" (43).

Helen Ngo's chapter, "Simulating the Lived Experience of Racism and Islamophobia: On 'Embodied Empathy' and Political Tourism," is an excellent contribution to the volume. It is an accessible philosophical critique of particular performances of antiracist solidarity. Ngo describes two examples of antiracist solidarity: a smartphone app called "Everyday Racism" that produces simulated experiences of racism; and World Hijab Day, an event that invites non-Muslim and non-hijabi Muslim women "to don a hijab for a day" (108). Ngo takes issue with the idea that "antiracist solidarity can be generated through a simulated experience of racism" (108) and instead argues that antiracist solidarity ought to begin with empathetic listening. Building on her book *The Habits of Racism*, Ngo clearly explains why (Ngo 2016). Before launching her critique, however, she first explains that these two examples of acts of solidarity do get one thing correct: lived experiences of racism matter. And, though Ngo

argues that these experiences are continuous with the broader structures of racism, these antiracist acts of solidarity in the form of a smartphone app or the wearing of a hijab for a day are also harmful. They are harmful because they give only a thin account of racism; they fail to recognize the ways in which racist acts and microaggressions are felt deeply in "one's sense of body, self, and place in the world" (111). Moreover, these examples fail to recognize how important context is in experiences of racism. Ngo illustrates how the "Everyday Racism" app makes a harmful assumption that users of the app are interchangeable. She explains that we do not "all stand on equal epistemic footing when it comes to reading and interpreting expressions of racism" (113). She notes that the "depth of racism is one that is felt viscerally" (114); an app does not allow for this context and assumes users "are each equally qualified and adept at identifying racism in its many guises, despite their own different lived histories of and intimate acquaintance with racism--or the lack thereof" (115). The second point Ngo makes is that the app or the wearing of a hijab for a day misses the fact that racism endures; racism works through a series of repeated occurrences from which one cannot escape (115). As such, these acts of solidarity also trivialize experiences of racism (116). Ngo concludes that the logic that understands the problem of racism as attributable to ignorance justifies or promotes these simulated experiences of racism in order to attempt to overcome racism but, as she points out, this is problematic as it moves too quickly, "closing over the space of ignorance and its potential to direct whites toward a more generative mode of anti-racist solidarity" (116). She argues that a more productive act of antiracist solidarity would be to remain in the uncomfortable "place of unknowing" and to cultivate empathetic listening. Ngo's work delivers an astute critical analysis of the habits and harms of racism, and through a critique of these examples of antiracist activism, she demonstrates the necessity of philosophical analysis that takes seriously the lived experiences of racism.

These chapters are just two examples of the insightful and thoughtful interventions the contributors to this edited collection make to the hegemony of "Western" philosophy. In bringing together these diverse chapters from different perspectives, the editors succeed in their aim to contribute to alternative discourses that counter the dominant hegemonic whiteness and maleness of "Western" philosophy. The collection is full of fresh insights on new and old philosophical themes; I encourage you to take a look.

References

Ngo, Helen. 2016. *The habits of racism: A phenomenology of racism and racialized embodiment*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

Roberts, Laura. 2019. *Irigaray and politics: A critical introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.