

TRANSGRESSING (NEW) FEMINISMS. TOWARDS A RETHINKING OF (IDENTITY) POLITICS

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Abstract:

Feminism encompasses such a wide range of cultural and ideological movements that one may rightfully ask: What is Feminism after all? Post-feminism, Girl Power feminism, Do-Me feminism, Queer feminism, Postcolonial feminism, Cyber feminism, "I'm not a feminist... but..." feminism, Third Wave feminism, postfeminist men, Libertarian feminism, illustrate prolific productions in feminist meanings that are multiple, contradictory, may overlap in their beliefs and other times deny one another. Some of these after-feminism movements have often been criticised of being anti-feminist, too commodified by a mainstream patriarchal media language, while others of being apolitical because of celebrating an indeterminate and intersectional subject. In this article I argue for a feminism that is able to be political while embracing an indeterminate and intersectional subject, by replacing identity politics which is exclusionary and perpetuates hierarchical thinking, with an activist politics that is not subject centred but object (policies and practices) centred. Accepting an epistemological position that challenges categorical thinking and embraces indeterminacy and contradiction, is not incompatible with political activism, it reveals in fact potentialities to change the way we think about politics and to rethink possibilities for changing oppressive mentalities. I explore therefore aspects of feminism's politics of representation and its struggle with defining its own subject on one hand and on the other hand I use my ethnographic field-work research on sexual and gender identity within a LGBT community in Belgium, in order to illustrate the lived-experience of the intersectional subject. By this means I don't want to create an antagonistic relation between representation and the lived-experience but show the complexity of their interdependency in the process of identity and self making. The non-categorical subject should no longer be disquieting, but become a new means of engaging politics. In this regard I draw on third wave political agenda as exemplary for integrating a feminist political agenda with an intersectional and contradictory subject.

Key Words: identity politics, intersectional subject, feminist activism, third-wave

This article is concerned with the epistemological and political dilemmas emerged within the western context of postmodern popular and academic feminist debates. Identity politics has represented a particular point of contention for post-feminist strands and created divisions of different cultural politics and epistemological standpoints. My research question investigates new feminisms' problematic relation with politics and brings into discussion new possibilities of

accommodating a deferred and intersectional subject with activism. Henceforth I first tackle cultural politics and the discursive reality of representations and draw on authors like Gill, Genz and Brabon, Mc Robbie to explore the victim feminism *versus* power feminism debate and postfeminist popular discourse on female empowerment. Arguing on the limitations of empowerment approach that favours a binary logic that merely reifies traditional power positions and gender categories, I bring into discussion an understanding of gender identities and selves as *intersectionally* constituted by (and constitutive of) other categories of difference like sex, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, age, disability that interlace with each other. I integrate Deleuzean *queering the queer* approach with phenomenological concepts such as embodiment and Bourdieu's *habitus* to illustrate an understanding of *intersectionality* and intersectional subject as lived experience. I therefore draw on my ethnographic fieldwork research on LGBT community in Leuven, Belgium to exemplify the contradictory ways gender and sexual identities are embodied and the manner masculinities and femininities are engendered with (and engender) acquired predispositions of class. The findings show the contradictory ways participants assume their *being gay* and yet *not being gay* at the same time. *Being gay* and yet *not being gay* disentangles categorical and representational thinking, legitimises the "unspecified" as a fruitful epistemological tool to think identity. People are both subjects and objects in the process of identity and self (un)making and their bodies are not only symbolic but also *agentic*. The more complex view on power as de-centred, contradictory and diffused reveals new potentialities for resistance and agency and destabilise traditional subject-object power relations. Within this new framework empowerment is reconfigured not through hierarchic relations but through horizontal inter-dependent connections and this is the way third-wave feminist agenda reconciles intersectional subject with political activism.

In a Hegelian perspective, the existential condition of producing humanity, hence growing identities is inherently dialectical as we first need to get self-alienated from the world, to "objectify" our selves -through creation of ideas, institutions, in order to gradually recognise ourselves and (re)define ourselves. Following Hegel and Simmel's dialectics on culture, Miller illustrates the condition of being at once both subjects and objects in the process of producing material and cultural things¹. Creating laws, institutions or material things provides resources to enhance our possibilities of being but at the same time it also provides the possibility of becoming oppressed

¹Daniel, Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010),42-79.

and alienated by the things we produce as they have a tendency to develop autonomous interest². From this viewpoint I hold that approaching identity groups/categories as inherently oppressive is as wrong as approaching them as inherently good. My aim is therefore not to treat feminism or post-feminist movements as institutions of "liberation" or regularization. Although to some extent they have been institutionalised, they function not only as instruments for justice or emancipation, but are also instrumentalized differently by different forces such as politics of consumption, politics of reproduction, media politics of representations, academia, nationalist politics, human rights, and so on. I will concentrate on the western context of popular and academic debates and practices regarding after-feminism movements and I will bring to a focus the issue of identity subject and political relevance of today's feminisms. Gender, like many other identity categories undergoes an "identity crisis". Lately, group identities come to produce more and more diversity within their groups to the extent that the subject might not be recognisable anymore and hence politically irrelevant. What I propose is to replace the dominant/minority model of identity politics with a new understanding of politics which is empowering both at the individual and collective level through the production of non-hierarchical and inter-dependent relationships of power. We need to get out of the comfortableness of social constructivist thinking, though nevertheless useful in understanding identity making, but not enough exploited. In the light of the social constructivist movements, minority identity groups could legitimise themselves and emancipate only by the "normalised turn" and positive reference towards the dominant category. Deaf is Beautiful, Gay Pride, Deaf Power, Girl Power might in fact be seen as "mere re-appropriations of a formerly derogatory discourse"³. Identities are indeed social and cultural constructions and vary historically and culturally but bodies are not only represented differently, they are lived differently and embody multiple practices and identities that are constitutive of selves. I find therefore useful to engage queer and Deleuzian frameworks on self together with phenomenological concept of embodiment as it brings the *corporealities* and emotions as analytical tools to think about gender and power relationships. I believe that feminism understood as a stable subject category might have reached a dead end. However, this should not be the case if we think of feminism as a dynamic, alternative model of thinking that is at ease with an unstable and intersectional subject. Moreover, its analytical approach should exceed antagonist paradigmatic relations of object-subject, female-male, passive - active. Assuming an epistemological position in which woman is not synonym for

² Miller, *Stuff*, 61

³ Lennard, Davis, "The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism. On disability as an Unstable Category" in *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard, J. D. (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 231

gender, nor even for sex should not make feminist political activism irrelevant, but only change the critical perspective towards the ways situations of abuse or discrimination occur. Feminism, as a necessary means of keeping political consciousness awake, needs to reinvent its epistemology through an alternative way of understanding connections.

As theoretical and cultural practice, feminism develops in a western context that regards gender as biologically determined, hence sex-specific and dual. Therefore the notion of woman overlaps with gender, sex and social roles. Liberal feminism accused the social practices and discursive fields of sexism and proposed a sisterhood ethics that claims for equal rights in the economic, political and social aspects of public life. The formal achievement of these rights didn't satisfy radical feminists who believed that the deep rooted patriarchal structures won't be demolished by fighting against sexism only, but fighting against *phallogocentrism* as well. The shift moved from equality to difference in the attempt of reinventing the concept of woman by women themselves, against what they considered to be men's expectations towards women. The matrix of exploitations was believed to lay in man's power over women, in sexuality and family. Radical feminism shifted the realm of politics from public into the private ("The personal is political"), but at the same time they operated with a traditional understanding of politics and, as Lloyd remarks, they didn't realize that their own account of the subject was in itself a *political* construction⁴. While rightfully claiming a common experience of oppression and injustice, feminisms were engaging a politics that assumed a unitary and univocal experience and identity. The problem with identity categories is not only that they assume a subject as pre-existing identity category (instead of co-emerging with it) but it also employs a situated hegemonic discourse that concerns in this case, the western white middle class heterosexual. Hegemonic paradigms of thinking identities need to be challenged and identities, as Lloyd argues, need to be treated as political effects rather than prior to political activity⁵.

It is difficult and probably deceiving to try and find a consensus in defining post-feminism, as there are multiple understandings and employments of it, different expressions and contradictory standpoints. However, it is not difficult to notice that all the after-feminist movements are highly critical towards feminism's identity subject. The historical and cultural context of the development of post-feminism coincides with the after 80's and early 90's decades when western generations of women benefited from women's movement by having access to

4 Moya, Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics. Feminism, Power&Politics* (London, Sage Publications, 2005), 4

5 Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics*, 14

employment, education, combining work with family, men's involvement in domestic work and child rearing⁶. While liberal feminism became irrelevant for the new generations that take their rights for granted, radical feminism was imputed for its anti-feminine, anti-sexual and anti-male attitude⁷. The "victimization" position was considered by postfeminists like Naomi Wolf⁸ empirically false and detrimental for women as it reifies stereotypical views on women as powerless and feeble while denying their agency, autonomy and potential for social power: "second wave feminism has pushed institutions too far in the difference direction, codling women instead of allowing them to flourish or flounder on their own merits"⁹. Efforts were directed against a politics of "victim feminism" in an attempt to replace politicisation or "institutionalisation of the personal" with a politics of "liberalisation of the personal" and self-empowering. By supporting liberalization of pornography and prostitution market, early 90s postfeminists (represented mostly by the Women's Freedom Network), were in fact opposing stigmatisation of women's sexual pleasure and standardization of conformity in what regards sex that can be "good" or "bad" for women¹⁰. It is the particular space of sexuality and femininity that is being reclaimed by "power feminism", not as a site of oppression but one of power and control.

Postfeminist expressions in media and advertising articulate a popular discourse in which politics of emancipation conflates with the consumerist politics and capitalist ideology of individualism, narcissism and self-worth culture. The intermingling of feminist principles with consumerist principles is most evident in power feminism trends like Girl Power and Chick-Lit that are highly (self)commodified adopting stereotypical hetero-normative notions of femininities that feature Barbie Doll look, glamorous make-up and pink, girly outfits. Being sexy and fashionable, "Girlyies" and "Chicks" promote a feminism that should be fun, celebrating female friendship and emancipation of women as desirable and desiring subjects. Power feminism's limitation of female agency to body building and adornment and power to material accumulation and freedom of

6 Pamela, Aronson, "Feminists or 'Postfeminists'?. Young Women Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations" in *GENDER & SOCIETY*, Vol. 17, No. 6, December (2003), 903-922

7 Stéphanie, Genz and Benjamin, Brabon, *Post-feminism. Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2009) ; Angela, Mc Robbie. *The Aftermath of Feminism. Gender, Culture and social Change*, (London: Sage Publications, 2010); Carisa, Showden, "What's Political about the New Feminisms?" in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 166-198

8 Carisa, Showden's reference to Wolf's *Fire with Fire* in "What's Political about the New Feminisms?" in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 171

9 Showden, *What's political?*, 171

10 Ibidem, 170

purchase, reveals a "free market feminism"¹¹ (Weelehan in Genz, Brabon 2009: 80), a consumer culture rather than an activist one in which women's liberation transformed in hedonistic and narcissist consumption of "identities". In the context of late capitalism, acquiring goods and lifestyles are practices constitutive of selves and identities, when the difference between living and buying is becoming smaller and smaller¹² and "body/self has become primarily a performing self of appearance, display and impression management"¹³. Popular post-feminism was criticised of lacking any feminist content, being anti-feminist, depoliticised, individualised and maintaining traditional patriarchal sexist views. Adoption of "girlhood" as a state of being is also being criticised as it denotes infantile, submissive, easy-to-control femaleness and dismissal of a more complex adult subjectivity¹⁴. On the other hand, critics like Genz, Brabon¹⁵ and Gill¹⁶ tend to have a more nuanced approach that embraces the contradictory character of power feminism when analysing media products such as *Ally Mc Beal*, *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones*. Liberal feminist ideals are assimilated and taken for granted by postfeminists, as women are almost always depicted as independent and having successful careers. Although there is a strong incentive towards being physically attractive, achieving desirability is being done for one's self and not for men, as it is about being confident with one's self and not displaying dependence on men's approval:

"In this modernised neoliberal version of femininity it is absolutely imperative that one's sexual and dating practices (however traditional, old-fashioned or in-egalitarian they may be-involving strict adherence to rules, rationing oneself and not displaying any needs!) be presented as freely chosen."¹⁷

Nevertheless the entanglement of postfeminist discourses with the neo-liberal individualist discourse is very much contradictory. The emphasis on autonomy and pleasure-seeking in relationships converges with the omnipresent romance stories that convey the taken for granted

11 Weelehan in Stéphanie, Genz and Benjamin, Brabon, *Post-feminism. Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2009), 80

12 John, Comaroff John and Jean, Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*(The University of Chicago Press, 2009)

13 Thomas, Csordas, "Introduction: the Body as Representation and Being-in-the-world," in *Embodiment and Experience. The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* edited by Csordas T. (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2

14 Showden, *What's political?*, 176-177

15 Genz and Brabon, *Post-feminism*, 90-91

16 Rosalind, Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2007), 259-260

17 Gill, *Gender*, 261

assumption that women are not complete without men. The eternal search for “Mr Right” seems to reveal that the real accomplishment for women is to get married.

A highly sexualised version of power feminism, Do-Me feminism, also referred to as “porno-chic”, “bimbo feminism”¹⁸ emerged as one of the sexualisation mainstreaming effects of media. According to Gill, in the context of proliferation of erotic depictions of girls, women and to a lesser extend men, there is a shift from 'sexual objectification' to sexual 'subjectification'¹⁹. Do-Me feminism emphasizes on female subject as a desiring subject and equals power with sex. Sexual empowerment becomes an important part in women's emancipation and strive for autonomy and control over their bodies and sexuality. Do-Me feminists' re-appropriations of patriarchal images of women as sex objects is an attempt to reverse traditional sexual power relations. Women adopt the role of agents in making their bodies sexually attractive, hence becoming sexual subjects instead of being passive objects of male gaze. The subjectification – objectification paradigm is a particular point of contention in regard to power feminists' endorsement of agency. Prototypes of sexually empowered women are the protagonists from *Sex and the City*. They show that women can seek pleasure only for themselves, they can have sex without committing to a serious relationship and they indulge in being sexy not to satisfy men but to feel empowered over them. The dissatisfaction with this kind of “agency” is that it operates on traditional understandings of sexiness and patriarchal expectations and reasoning. Showden sees the adoption of “male gaze” by female themselves as ironically self-objectifying and objectifying other women since it doesn't propose new models of sexual gratification²⁰. Sexual subjectification is perceived by Gill as a more deeper form of exploitation than objectification, one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalise within a disciplinary regime that allows constructing ourselves a kind of subjectivity that resembles heterosexual male fantasy²¹.

A beautiful account on how feminist principles are adversely fused with consumerist politics affirmed in postfeminist discourse, concerns McRobbie's²² approach on what she calls “post-feminist disorders” and how they are being covered by the media. Focusing on pathologies

18Genz and Brabon, *Post-feminism*, 91

19Gill, *Gender*, 258

20Showden, *What's political?*, 176

21Gill, *Gender*, 258

22Angela, Mc Robbie. *The Aftermath of Feminism. Gender, Culture and social Change*,(London: Sage Publications, 2010)

associated almost exclusively with women like anorexia, bulimia and on self-destructive behaviours like cutting, alcohol and drug addiction, low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, Mc Robbie is interested in "female psychopathology" as culturally and socially produced, and how media representations of women as mad, depressed, or self-destructive intertwine feminism. Women's eating disorders increased with the emergence of consumer culture and the social pressures of success and perfectibility that shape female body under social expectations of beauty and self-control. They mirror the contradictory capitalist ideology discourses that embody a slender ideal while aggressively encouraging excessive desire and consumption. Bodies are therefore women's means of expressing hostility, resistance towards gender pressures and sexuality expectations²³. In media, expressions of "post-feminist disorders" are becoming more and more titillated and accepted as normal and even glamorised as a sort of feminist rage. Employing Butler's concepts of masquerade and melancholia, Mc Robbie illustrates the paradox of 'illegible rage" of women's emancipation referring to a certain genre of fashion images and celebrities like Amy Winehouse as being part of institutionalisation of melancholia. The genre of fashion images on focus, depicts models with "stick thin legs and arms", "flat chests", "flat tummy", "barely a hint of breasts", "narrow boyish hip", "large eyes and sculptured face" who display psychic disturbance, loss, reverie, dejection, boredom, turmoil, self-absorption-attitudes that are being glamourised by magazines like Prada , Vogue and attractive for middle class women²⁴. The kind of feminism that prevails this imaginary is translated in female subject's self sufficiency, her "asexual femininity", that seems to address a women's fashion self-contained world and not men's desire. There are no patriarchal signifiers, no sense of inferiority, as there is an exhibited indifference towards male approval, and patriarchal codes of desire²⁵. This indifference to phallus lack and the transgression of heteronormativity is not after all, liberating, but psychologically damaging because of the refusal of (male)love. This non-normative sexual desire and the absent signifier of phallogocentric power leads, in psychoanalytical terms, to what Butler names, gender melancholia. Resistance expressed in aloofness, coldness and reluctance to embrace domesticity can be produced (it seems) only through the loss of object of desire, the refusal of love, which is substituted with gender masquerade, "the fetishist fashion items and objects, thus ensuring that in this women only sphere, things do not get

²³Erica, Reischer and Kathryn, Koo "The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World" in Annual Review of Anthropology, 33, (2004), 301

²⁴Mc Robbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*,93-122

²⁵ibidem, 102

out of control"²⁶. Drawing on Rabine, Mc Robbie illustrates that this withdrawal from the Symbolic order does not entail a radical reconfiguration of gender -hierarchy. Trapped in the melancholia state women don't have the means to challenge the Symbolic, but remained confined to a "lesbian gaze "that encourage women to consume voyeuristically the images of other wome²⁷ under the same Symbolic terms in which she can reflect upon herself only as object²⁸ in an ambivalent attitude in which she struggles for emancipation while at the same time hating herself for having rejected the (male) love. What Mc Robbie finds nevertheless, disquieting is the way popular culture normalises and predicates gender melancholia as a sort of surrogate feminism that encourages women to recognise themselves within these terms. Analysing public exposure of female pain and self-loathing like in pro anorexia blogs, Amy Winehouse's website and Tracey Emin's work as artist, she concludes that a woman as an artist is in effect more acceptable when she expresses anger against herself than when her anger is about sexual injustice and violence³⁰.

Thus far, critical accounts on postfeminist popular discourse convey a very depressing prospect. It seems that no matter what we do we can't escape the patriarchal structures of reference. Are we then forever doomed to not be able to make more of ourselves than grow subjectivities that are schizophrenically divided between subjectifying and objectifying means of relating to others? Is subjectivisation of "the Other" a false illusion of what in effect constitutes self objectification? At the level of popular discourse women are either sex-objects or sexually empowered by "hedonistic female phallicism"³¹, either dependent on men's approval or disdainful to it, while at the same time longing for it. By any means, feminism's engagement and limitation to a dichotomic framework that opposes femininity-masculinity, woman-man, heterosexual-homosexual under tensioned relations of object-subject, victimisation-empowerment and sameness-difference is not productive enough to capture and understand the complexity of ambiguity, ambivalence, paradox, indeterminacy that mark the process of self-(un)making and identity (un)making. Undoubtedly and fortunately, the frame of binary thinking we like so much to hang on is after all, only a frame - a frame that is produced and reproduces itself perfectly within a marketing discourse that can reach its target only through exploiting emotional appeal and

26Ibidem, 101

27Fuss in Ibidem, 106

28Ibidem, 102

30Ibidem, 122

31Ibidem, 2

stereotypical paradigms. Consumption industry finds in assimilationist identity politics of minorities such as women, disabled people or non-heterosexuals, a prolific niche for marketing goods. There is an interdependence between consumption industry that use identity politics for economic advantages and identity groups' politics to gain positive visibility and acceptance as empowered, abled or normal. The reversed discourse on emancipation is not challenging patriarchy, ableness or hetero-normativity hegemony, but it only reiterates the same hierarchic structures of power under the identity politics of sameness that re-appropriates the logic of a binary thinking in which the reference is always the powerful, abled, white, western, middle-class man. On the other hand, constant proliferation of identities within group identities reflects also the market politics' exploitation of the ex-centric and fragmentary nature of selves, satisfying narcissistic desires and the drive for always becoming something else, while fixing these new identities through consumption. Although reproduction of new identities within the media feeds on hegemonic structures of hierarchic thinking, it also creates potentialities for new codifications. The possibilities for the negotiation of new meanings may be subversive even if it registers a hegemonic frame of reference. Metrosexual looks is an evident proof of the influence and mainstreaming of effeminate gay style and fashion on the heterosexual man. There are certainly men who reject metrosexual style but those who assimilate it, are surely not confused by their sexual orientation but incorporate new meanings of beauty and sexiness that are no longer only feminine attributes but become means of empowering and being (or claiming to be) a successful man. New negotiations of femininity and masculinity blur gender boundaries under the contemporary ideology that equals beauty with morality and self-control. Gender attributes are changing over the history. Nowadays, femininity and female beauty adopt masculine attributes such as thinness and muscularity. Reischer notes that the late twentieth-century America is the first cultural moment in which muscles, a physical attribute once antithetical to femininity, have become associated with the body beautiful and meaningfully, this moment coincides with the major transformation in women's social position³². Genz and Brabon's³³ account on masculinity crisis reflects on new types of masculinities like The New Man and the Metrosexual that are highly commodified, narcissistic, pro-feminist, anti-sexist and sexually ambivalent. The New Lad is resistant to fashion, doesn't parade "a desired male body"³⁴ but displays retro-sexism and ironical misogyny. These contradictory versions depict "the postfeminist man", the result of conglomeration of conflicting and contradictory masculinities,

³²Reischer and Koo, *The Body Beautiful*, 313

³³Genz and Brabon, *Post-feminism*, 138-150

³⁴Ibidem, 139

negotiating the impact of feminism on his identity and his troubling relation with the ghost of hegemonic masculinity as he tries to reconcile the threat he poses to himself and the social systems he tries to uphold³⁵. If we still want to cling to the dualist framework of object-subject or oppressed -empowered we might try to figure out whether men are objectified, or just in a process of subjectification competing along with women for power, or we may be prone to analyse the patriarchal authority underneath male effeminacy, or on contrary, that of women. It goes without saying that this kind of approach is narrow and detrimental as it reifies hierarchic power relations, identity categories and in this case, the relation between sex, gender and sexuality as being essential. Moreover, it is impotent in dealing with the paradox, the contradictory, the ambivalence, when in fact these are mere *techniques of the self* in negotiating meanings of power that intersect different dimensions of identification. Therefore we should be more optimistic on the potentialities that humour, paradox, irony, ambivalence, sarcasm, contradiction offer in terms of identifications, detachment and resistance. We should also be more confident in the critical capacity of the audience and explore the lived experience and the intricacies of embodying codes of meanings.

The commodified version of power feminism in postfeminist popular culture confirmed to entangle and not to challenge gender and hetero-normative categorisations. It was criticised for being apolitical- as its misinterpretation of "the personal is political"³⁶ reduced agency to the freedom of "I can choose to do whatever I want" and for its individualism and indifference towards categories of race, ethnicity, disability, class and age (other than youth). Many of these criticisms come from different strands of post-feminisms that engage with multiculturalist, postcolonial, de-constructivist poststructuralist frameworks. Intersections of feminism with antifoundationalist postmodern discourses has enabled a dynamic, multivalent and also conflicting dialogues that proved to be fruitful in reconfiguring the feminist epistemological standpoint. In this sense, post-feminism can be understood as "feminism's coming of age", a self-reflexive and self-critical turn³⁷ that condemns feminism's western centric, and hetero-normative standpoint and adopts pluralisation and de-stabilisation of subject as critical tools in fighting against modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frames. Black feminists like Corby, Bell Hooks, Ramazonoglu insist on the cultural and historical specificity of notions of sexuality, gender , patriarchy and on the relation

35Ibidem, 143

36Showden, *What's political?*, 178

37Yetman and Brooks in Ann, Brooks, *Post-feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)

between feminism and colonialism. Oyêwùmí, for instance, has an excellent account on the differences in cultural logic between western social categories that are biologically determined and classified according to "one's anatomy" and the many African societies in which categories of "wife" and "husband" or any kinship relations are not sex or sexually specific and social order requires a different map than a gender one³⁸. Post-structuralist frameworks that destabilise a unitary coherent subject, logo centrism and binary logic appealed to postfeminists like Theresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Anne Yeatman, Linda Nicholson, or Spivak who also fed on Foucauldian understandings of power in their exploration on the construction of gender and sexuality, their political dynamics, and the intersectional and multiple dimension of oppression. The engagement of feminism with queer theories are particularly valuable and best illustrated by Butler's framework on gender performativity and melancholia and build up on queering the relation between sex, gender and sexuality, resisting tendencies of categorisation and essentialising identities in reference to gender and sexual practices. Nonetheless, the engrossment with postmodernist analytical approach, as elevated and fascinating it can be, is also disquieting. The dismissal of subject category and postmodernist individuation limits possibilities for feminist politics and emancipation. Hence feminist theory seems to become irrelevant in an epistemological context in which identities are indeterminate, arbitrary and fluid. Paradoxically, the enthusiasm which the celebration of difference and the deconstructing of totalising and essentialist discourses might bring, leaves us high and dry in its abstract and obscure language that reveals the bad seeds of oppression and discrimination, but nothing more. There is also the concern of some critics that the multitude of difference and plurivocal stands might encourage cultural relativism and political passivity, apathy and indifference⁴⁰.

The apparently irreconcilable relation between feminist politics and postmodern deconstructivism needs to be reconsidered in a manner that does not exclude the necessity of political awareness and activism in regard to women, nor does it discard a significant and valuable theoretical framework such as post-structuralism, but holds on both and reworks their limitations. Concerning the dilemma of identity politics, Butler emphasizes that asserting a reality of homosexuality or of a certain gender is something different than insisting that there are lives that are worthy of protection⁴¹. Claiming a gender or sexual reality denies the freedom of unfixing the

39Oyèrónké, Oyêwùmí, ed. *African Gender Studies. A Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 1-1

40Genz and Brabon, *Post-feminism*, 32

41Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, New York and London, 2004), 15

self and the possibilities of actualisation of the self. Butler and other queer theoreticians are not claiming anti-identity politics in the sense of positing against the idea of identity itself. One cannot be a self without being recognised and recognising himself without relating to norms, but a queer politics is one that celebrates not *difference from* but *difference in itself* and recognition of *difference* as a mode of being. This concept of difference integrates in fact Derrida's difference and Deleuze's iterative difference. Queer is then, not an identity but a way of becoming. The problem with queer and deconstructivist theories in general is, as theoreticians like Seidman⁴², Gamson⁴³ notice, the underestimation of the institutional and material context of discursive power as well as the critical negativist position of deconstructing group empowerment by being *anti-*, *non-*, without bringing productive and effective epistemological strategies, but merely stating issues. I propose therefore, engaging queer theories with phenomenological concepts of embodiment and being-in-the-world in order to get closer to the reality of our bodies and the lived experience of gender and power relations. Many postfeminists have been preoccupied with a re-conceptualisation of feminist politics that can be efficient and accommodate the postmodern multiple, deferred, performative, destabilised, intersectional subject. Traditional approach on politics as inherently related to subject, is challenged and new theoretical configurations of politics demonstrate that there is no need for a unitary stable subject to guarantee its politics. Lloyd envisions politics as a "dense web of variable power relations", "perpetually opened to reconfiguration", historically conditioned in its performative invocation of political rationalities, and always entangling identity through interplay and tension⁴⁴. Drawing on Deleuze, Braidotti articulates "affirmative feminism" and engages a politics of-*in becoming* that reveals the potentialities in the creating process of becoming beyond gender⁴⁵. Harris' "politics of undecidability" or Butler's politics of discomfort imply that there are no rules for resistance or subversion, but provisional decisions invested with power relations⁴⁶. An approach that I feel sympathetic with is Gill and Brabon's examination of power and contradictions and Patricia Mann's "micropolitics" that describes the individual as conflicted and capable of

42Steven, Seidman, "Deconstructing queer theory, or the under-theorization of the social and ethical" in *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, edited by Nicholson, Linda and Siedman S. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 116-141

43Joshua, Gamson, Joshua. and Dawne, Moon, *The Sociology of Sexuality: Queer and Beyond*, Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 30. (2004) 47-64

44Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics*, 15

45Mc Robbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 159-163

46Genz and Brabon, *Post-feminism*, 40

integrating diverse desires through creatively reconfiguring his practices and relationships⁴⁷. What I suggest and integrate as models to think feminist politics is the above mentioned micropolitics exploration on ambivalence and contradiction of the intersectional subject and the third wave coalition politics.

In what follows I draw on phenomenologist understanding of identity and self making and queer theory so as to challenge the understanding of politics as applicable only for a coherent unitary collective subject. I address therefore the lived-experience dimension of negotiating different identity categories and power relations as contingent, contextual and intersectional. Theories on body and phenomenology challenge Cartesian dualism and subject-object antagonistic relation. We all *have* and we all *are* a body, our body is both subject and object: "Our lives are not always lived in objectified bodies, for our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that end in objectification (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Csordas 1990, 1993, 1994), and the play between pre-objective and objectified bodies within our own culture is precisely what is at issue in many of the contemporary critiques"⁴⁸. Phenomenology brings the flesh and emotions as new analytical tools to think about self and identity, going beyond discourse and symbol, to a deeper pre-symbolic level of metaphors and associations that embody the domain of everyday life: the way we think, the way we feel, the way we eat, walk, or socialise. Therefore embodiment takes place not by means of a represented body, but at the level of *bodiliness*, of body as *presence*, as perceptual experience that materialises our encounter with the world and make us engage in the *life-world*⁴⁹. The phenomenological body is a body which is no longer seen only as objectified, constituted by society, but also as producing social reality, being constitutive of society. Hence we get a perspective of "existence", "lived experience" and embodiment in terms of the existential condition of culture and self, as the phenomenologist Merleu-Ponty stated⁵⁰. In this line of reasoning, queer theory on gender as performative, appears limited and determinist, as strictly engaged with representation and text. On the other hand, new queer concepts emerge within a phenomenological framework: *queering the queer* refers to the possibility of going beyond the signifier, the representational thought and engage in a queerness of thinking that refuses to work

47Ibidem, 4&, 172

48Thomas, Csordas, "Introduction: the Body as Representation and Being-in-the-world," in *Embodiment and Experience. The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* edited by Csordas T. (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7

49Michael, Jackson, "Introduction: Phenomenology, Radical Empiricism and Anthropological Critique", in *Things as they are : New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* edited by Jakson, M., (Indiana University Press. 1996), 8-9

50Csordas, *Introduction*, 11

with identities but with “real bodies”, “real matter” as one becomes “gay” not with representations but with desire⁵¹. In the same line of thought, Colebrook illustrates a deleuzian queer framework that contrasts with butlerian iterative repetition. Deleuze’s model of repetition does not exhaust the potentiality of being as “relations do not follow from self-sufficient terms” but from a “positive virtual plane, a pure past which is actualized in each encounter” on the basis of affects and sensations that constantly produce the “terms which are repeated and the difference established in each of them”⁵². Hence a focus on micro-level and locatedness of the queer body in terms of energies, affects, movements, brings a more positive and dynamic view on the possibilities of being-in-the world and more, it makes room for a new understanding of determinist-agency relation. I therefore find phenomenology and Colebrook’s engagement with Deleuze in *queering* the way we *think*, highly effective in dealing with the causal nexus produced by categorical thinking and object-subject approach on performativity.

In order to get more concrete, I will briefly illustrate how I integrated phenomenology and queer theories with the data I gathered doing ethnographic research on a LGBT community in Leuven, Belgium for a period of one year. My research question concerned the means LGBT people relate to gender identity, the gay stereotypes that are popular in mass-media, and how these identities and understandings of femininities and masculinities are more or less embodied. This research is based on participant observation data collection, a qualitative research method which implies spending time with participants, creating relationships of familiarity based on honesty and trust, getting involved in their daily practices and being committed to their community. As instruments of collecting data I made use of informal interviews, casual conversations, semi-structured interviews, direct observation, a short-survey, self-reflection, field-notes and a recorder. Facebook, chat rooms, LGBT websites, blogs, or magazines were important tools to stay in contact with the participants and also to experience the imaginary of “being gay”. Being a young female, a foreign student and not speaking the local language influenced in a certain way the social dynamics, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. The interviews and conversations were held in English and most of the participants were opened and felt confident with speaking English. During the fieldwork I took part in LGBT local activities and meetings, and moreover, I tried to map their

51Chrysanty, Nigianni, and Merl, Storr, “Introduction. So as to Know “Us” Better Deleuze and Queer Theory: Two Authors, One Concept” in *Deleuze and Queer Theory* edited by Nigianni, C. and Storr M. (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1-10

52Claire, Colebrooke “On the Very Possibility of Queer Theory” in *Deleuze and Queer Theory* edited by Nigianni C. and Storr M. (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 16

places of belonging, their everyday social life, the places they like to spend time whether gay or non-gay bars and clubs. The encounters with the participants were varied in age and nationality and encompassed different ranges of group involvement, from people actively involved in the local LGBT organisations, to those who randomly frequent the leisure gay places, and those who simply reject being part of the gay scene and community. The diversity of fieldwork encounters was marked by the tension of *being gay* and yet *not being gay* expressed by many participants. There is a complex and contrasting relation between *being gay* as a verb (denoting sexual preference) and *being gay* as a noun (denoting group identity) or an adjective (denoting a (life)style). This tension between ways of *being gay* in regard to identities and selves is quite often illustrated in reactions like *I'm Dirk, I'm not bisexual Dirk, 49*), *I'm not lesbian, I'm myself* (Solvita, 35). The negotiations of "who I am" register a certain dynamics at the level of dispositions and practices. Bourdieu's elaboration on *habitus* proves useful for understanding the subject as inter-sectional not at the representational and discursive level, but at the level of embodiment. He states that the *rationale of practices* offers the capacity of engendering thoughts, perceptions and actions that take place at the level of most insignificant acts like dressing, physical and verbal manners which is contextual⁵³. Gendered and sexualised meanings are embodied in a certain habitus in which the individual has the capacity of interpreting and assuming qualities among a variety of predispositions.

Following this line of reasoning and grounded on my fieldwork data I argue that class intersects with gender and sexual identity at the level of aesthetics, fashion, taste, appearance, lifestyle by means of acquired predispositions. Hetero-normative meanings of femininities and masculinities are not simply reversed in a homo-normative discourse but are constantly challenged, dissolved and re-shaped, changed, fluid and situational. The constant negotiation of meanings of gender, class and sexual identity makes one feel *a bit transvestite* (Roelofje 23), accepting only a certain degree of effeminacy (Dries 26), or being only temporary flamboyant (Geert 36). More than this, the body is not only a powerful symbolic medium but is also agentic and participates in the creation of meaning⁵⁴ through daily gestures, ways of walking, codes of dressing, lifestyles that are genuinely combined. These are distinctions of class which reveal their unstable and protean character and challenge the idea of a fix meaning of class identity. For some of the participants effeminacy is embodied as empowering as it enacts taste, or high standard of living as for other gay participants, class distinction is embodied as intellectual depth, masculinity, seriousness, more

⁵³Pierre, Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge University Press. 1997), 72-9

⁵⁴Reischer and Koo, *The Body Beautiful*, 331

down to earth attitude. Glamour is another expression of class, enacted by transvestites or drag queens, a code that "marks a middle-class respectability transposed into the sexual body" a way of exceeding the boring present existence, that gives agency and strength by the projection of desirability⁵⁵. Enactments of lesbian expressions mark visibility among dykes, feminine or androgynous styles. Unlike the case of gay men, gay women don't seem to be as socially segregated in terms of lifestyle and not that pressed by gender dualities. However most of the women that I met enjoy femininity and don't like masculine lesbians even though some of them encoded masculine looks. For them femininity means beauty, not understood through commercial heterosexual standards of coquette, fashionable or sexy image, but defined by a certain kind of sensibility, a means of feeling and communication. For Tine (29y) bisexuality is part of her alternative way of being and as transgressing conventionalities of both hetero-normative and homo-normative codes. Androgyny is merely a middle class distinction than "the working class butch femme"⁵⁶ yet class and gender distinctions within sexual identities expressions of habitus are situational and negotiated. Gay stereotypes and identities are fictions that are more or less necessary in creating meanings and making sense of one self as well as they are more or less embodied. They support dominant heterosexual discourses and at the same time they are the very means of subverting and resisting hegemonic discourses. In real life they don't exist as such, as fixed categories, but circulate as codes embedded with other markers of difference that play out difference within difference within markers of habitus and spatiality. *Being gay* and yet *not being gay*, disentangles categorical and representational thinking embraced by group identities while it legitimises the "unspecified" as a fruitful analytic tool in dealing with understanding of an intersectionality of subject construction.

Bridging phenomenology and queer studies offers new analytical opportunities and a more refined perspective which apart from overcoming the danger of reifying categories, it allows new understandings of politics. Employing concepts such as *habitus*, embodiment and intersubjectivity enables an understanding of the subject as intersectional not only at the multiple discourses level of race, gender, politics, but at the level of lived experience as well. This complicates the relations between agency and determinism and offers creative potentialities for resistance and agency, while

⁵⁵Beverly Skeggs, "Ambivalent Femininities" in *The Body. A Reader* edited by Fraser M. and Greco M., (London: New York. 2005), 131-134

⁵⁶Alison, Rooke, "Navigating Embodied Lesbian Cultural Space: Toward a Lesbian Habitus" in *Space and Culture*, 10, (2007) 250

revealing power as de-centric, polycentric and ambiguous, contradictory and uncertain⁵⁷. Although this epistemological stand might look discouraging for a traditional way to approach feminist politics, third-wave feminism seems to make the best of it. Emerging as a political movement that criticizes the apolitical and consumerism version of post-feminism, third-wave feminism links to the second-wave activism and reconciles it with a hybrid, multiple and intersectional subject. Its agenda doesn't concern women identity nor is it interested in gender gap - although interested in women's issues, but it rather concerns multiple dimensions of oppression not only of women but interlaced within different axes of identification: "We know that what oppresses me might not oppress you, that what oppresses you might be something I participate in and that what oppresses me may be something that you participate in"⁵⁸ (Heywood, Drake 1997: 3). Much inspired by solidarity politics of Bell Hooks, third -wave addresses various genders, nationalities, races, ethnicities, classes fighting for equal rights and freedom not only for women but for all the oppressed categories⁵⁹. Following the second-wave line of reasoning that struggled against hegemonic structures of phallogocentrism third-wave engages to dismantle multiple structures of oppression and instead of opposing to it a single "victim" subject, bestows a hybrid identity and engages a politics of ambiguity in which the lines between oppressor-oppressed, subject-object, victim-empowered become problematic.

In popular culture, Riot Grrrls underground third-wave movement is not necessarily opposing Spice Girls type of Girl power, though it criticises it, but embodies the idea of contradiction as a way of being. Courtney Love, the punk-grunge rock musician, and a third -wave icon bridges victim feminism with power feminism, glamour with grunge, beauty with ugliness, responsibility and rebellion⁶⁰. Cultural politics is engaged together with "coalitions politics" to develop new ways of thinking that encourage solidarity, tolerance, acceptance of difference and civic engagement. A good example of activism in media culture, for instance, is Aimee Mullins⁶¹ who is a fashion model, celebrity, a champion runner, and double amputee. Possessing several pairs of artificial legs, of different height that help her enjoy different heights, Mullins over-exposes her

⁵⁷Steven, Van Wolputte, "Hang on to Your Self: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, (2004) 260

⁵⁸Leslie, Heywood, Jennifer, Drake, *Third Wave. Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press. 2003), 3

⁵⁹Heywood, Drake, *Third Wave*, 3

⁶⁰ Ibidem, 5

⁶¹<http://www.aimeemullins.com/>

fashionably adorned legs without hiding their artificial prosthetic nature, revealing different fabrics and never hiding her knee joints. She organises seminars in which she invites children to come and “stare” at her legs in her endeavour to challenge the negative embodied perception upon impairment as strange and ugly.

Third-wave “coalitions politics” has materialised in many activist projects of Third-wave Foundation that encompasses many groups of men and women, in anti-poverty projects, international human rights, access to education, internet, sexual education, employment that circumvent a feminist politics that takes gender as always the primary mode of analyses and patriarchy as the only site of oppression. The new approach on reconciliation of fragmentary identity with group politics and the reconfiguring of identities politics at the level of intersectionality and coalitions making is innovative, but its weakness as Showden remarks is that “it doesn't make more explicit how and why these issues are understood as feminist in addition to whatever else they may be”, “What's feminist about the new feminisms?”, Why isn't it called simply social justice activism?⁶². Claiming feminism while rejecting a feminist political epistemological standpoint might be one of the contradictions a third-waver will probably tell us to just get along with. Nonetheless it is important to reflect on the nature of this contradiction and ask ourselves why do we still need a movement that is called feminism while it concerns in fact everybody. If I have to imagine that third-wave feminism would call itself social justice activist movement instead of feminist movement, it will somehow make me less enthusiastic about it. I think the symbolic value of “feminist” is bigger than imagined and it has to do to with an approach that envisions the possibility of changing hierarchical structures of thinking from one of the vulnerable categories that acts towards all of the categories as equally vulnerable. To be engaged in fighting all kinds of injustice is more empowering, more politically conscious, and more efficient towards changing abusive structures of hierarchic mentalities instead of a self and ego-centred attitude that relates only in reference to a dominant category. The end of identity politics is not the end of feminism but a new step towards fighting sexism and racism by developing new modes of thinking that replace identity with identification and hierarchic ethics with what Davis Lennard calls a *dismodern body ethics*, that seems from my point of view, quite close to the third- wave standpoint:

“In a dismodernist mode, the ideal is not a hypostatization of the normal (that is, dominant) subject, but aims to create a new category based on the partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence. This is a very

⁶²Showden, *What's political?*, 188-190

different notion from subjectivity organized around wounded identities; rather, *all* humans are seen as wounded.[...]we are all disabled by injustice and oppression of various kinds. We are all nonstandard, and it is under that standard that we should be able to found the dismodernist ethic"¹⁶³.

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⁶³Lennard, Davis "The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism. On disability as an Unstable Category" in *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard, J. D (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.), 241

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