

DEPROVINCIALIZING AND DENATIONALIZING EUROPEAN FEMINISMS

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Abstract

To rethink European feminisms on an international scale requires a powerful theoretical reworking of space. It is a question of thinking the materiality of its borders not as something fixed, given once and for all, but on the contrary, as a dimension where the feminist struggles, the new subjectivations that come out of it, the changing gender relations, constantly reformulate and rebuild its limits, its borders.

Hence, the need to consider a geography capable of making space the object of a critical problematization, to show how this space - and its historicity - is affected in its geographical and cultural materiality by the postcolonial and decolonial feminist struggles.

In this talk I will focus on showing how "denationalizing European feminisms" following Dipesh Chakrabarty's invitation to provincializing Europe, means to interrogate genealogy, the very story of European feminisms, through this denationalization. If belonging to the women's movement does not require the blind adherence to a dogma or a definite and valid representation of all times, then re-politicizing European feminisms means inventing new ways of being together, by choosing according to which priorities and by what means to tinker with fragmentary theories, or even how "to move" to implement a plural and multilingual dialogue - in short, it is a question of imagining a radically international feminism.

To rethink European feminisms on an international scale requires a powerful reconceptualisation of space. To think the materiality of its borders – not as something fixed, given once and for all, but rather as a dimension where feminist struggles, the new subjectivations they entail and changing gender relations constantly reformulate and reconstruct its boundaries, its borders.

This explains the need to envisage a geography capable of critically problematising space, to show how this space – and its historicity – is affected in its geographical and cultural materiality by postcolonial and decolonial feminist

struggles. In this paper, I will focus on showing how «denationalizing European feminisms», following Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize Europe, means to question, through this denationalization, the genealogy, the very narrative of European feminisms. If belonging to the women's movement does not require blind adherence to a dogma or historically determined and valid representation, then re-politicising European feminisms means to invent unprecedented modes of being together, by choosing according to which priorities and by which means to patch fragmentary theories together, or how to «move» in order to open a plural, polyglot dialogue – in short, it is about imagining a radically international feminism.

As the philosopher and feminist Rada Ivekovic rightly maintains, the political and epistemological task of «undoing the national framework of knowledges¹» is essential.

To «move» and «decentre» our gaze become the general assumptions of all critical thinking, as geographical disparities and interruptions in time throughout the history of postcolonial societies challenge the universality of the categories of Western feminism, the meaning of differences (of gender, class, race) and their importance as a key issue for our political modernity. In this presentation, I propose to do so with regard to Western feminisms, by pointing out their limitations and opening them up to other feminist histories and temporalities. Other feminist stories need to be told. Feminism is, in fact, a travelling theory, it is and must be in motion, in a constant movement of displacement. Western feminist movements have had the tendency to produce a political subject – *We women* – that evens out the diverse experiences of sexism, turning the experience of being a woman into a stereotypical one.

As Elsa Dorlin states:

«The problem is not so much that the *We* expressed speaks abusively in the name of all women: the problem lies instead in the fact that this *We*

¹ Ivekovic R., «Introduction au numéro: Défaire le cadre national des savoirs. Karma, dharma et nation: une tentative de traduction», *Revue Asylan*, no. 10, July 2012-July 2014. <http://www.reseau-terra.eu/rubrique280.html>

that speaks addresses the Other women as if they were objects of discourse².»

This concern is at the heart of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's feminism without borders. It is, in fact, from the political urgency to form strategic coalitions, moving beyond barriers of class, race and nationality, that she raises the problem of *We, women* and criticises Western feminism.

I would now like to explore this «displaced figuration of the *third-world woman*», as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak³ calls it. To do so, I will concentrate on the reflections of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, still very little known in the Francophone world, and on the analyses by Françoise Vergès, focusing, in particular, on her latest work *Le ventre des femmes. Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme*.

Moreover, to produce a true and accurate map of the insurrectionary feminists, I will show how the reflections of Mohanty and Vergès echo, come into dialogue with those of Audre Lorde, Françoise Collin, bell hooks, Amina Mana and Awa Thiam.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Decolonizing *We, women*

Mohanty, heiress of Indian feminism, was one of the first to conceptualise the Orientalist tendencies of Western feminist thought. However, her definition of Western feminism does not consist in reifying it into an ahistorical monolithic bloc, but questioning instead what she terms «writings... [that] discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women⁴.»

Now, for Mohanty the problem is not so much the *We* expressed in the name of all women; the problem lies instead in the fact that this *We* that speaks

² Dorlin E., «Vers une épistémologie des résistances», in Elsa Dorlin (dir.), *Sexe, Race, Classe. Pour une épistémologie de la domination*, Actuel Marx Confrontation, Paris, Puf, 2009, p. 10.

³ Spivak G. C., *Les subalternes peuvent-elles parler?*, Paris, Amsterdam, 2009, p. 89.

⁴ Mohanty C. T., «Sous le regard de l'Occident: recherche féministe et discours colonial», in Elsa Dorlin (dir.), *Sexe, Race, Classe. Pour une épistémologie de la domination*, Actuel Marx Confrontation, Paris, Puf, 2009, p. 150.

addresses other women as if they were objects of discourse - namely, women in the third world.

Mohanty draws attention to the fact that terms such as 'third world' and 'first world' are very problematic: both because they suggest oversimplified similarities between the countries they refer to and because they reinforce the existing economic, cultural and ideological hierarchies that this terminology evokes. Therefore, she uses the term 'third world' with full awareness of the problems it poses, using it critically.

In her seminal article published for the first time in 1984, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, she shows, first of all, how the term 'colonization' always implies a relation of structural domination and the – discursive or political – suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.

In 2003, she writes *"Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles*⁵, where she re-examines her work published seventeen years earlier, explaining the historical context of the time and the need to now update her goal and its political significance. In 1986 she had denounced the hegemonic practices of Western feminism, which made use of an assumed universalism to consolidate forms of discursive colonization of women in the third world. These women were reduced to victims of male violence, victims of the colonial process, victims of familial structures or religious beliefs and, consequently, considered objects and viewed as such. So, her purpose was to analyse the way Western feminists produced this singular, monolithic subject: the third world woman. Her definition of the term 'colonization' was a discursive one, i.e. showing how analytical categories adopting feminist issues as their main point of reference, just as they were formulated in the United States and Western Europe, enable a certain mode of appropriation and codification of scholarship and knowledge about women in the third world.

⁵ Mohanty C. T., «Sous les yeux de l'Occident revisité: La solidarité féministe par les luttes anticapitalistes», in Christine Verschuur (dir.), *Genre, post-colonialisme et diversité des mouvements des femmes*, n. 7, 2010, Paris, l'Harmattan, pp. 203-214.

Feminist scholarship, she maintained, as in fact all scholarship, is not only a production of knowledge about a particular subject; it is a discursive practice with direct political impact insofar as it has a purpose and defends an ideology.

Her critique fell upon three assumptions that underlie Western feminist discourse on women in the third world, though it also applies to anyone else using these analytical strategies. In other words, her critique addressed any discourse that sets up its authorial subjects as the implicit referent, as a standard allowing them to encode and represent others.

This is where power is exercised in discourse. I will now show you the three assumptions: 1) the first concerns the strategic location or specific situation of the category 'women' in the context of analysis. To postulate the category «women» as an already constituted, coherent group, without taking into account class or race specificities, implies a notion of gender difference or even patriarchy that is both universal and cross-cultural; 2) the second is the uncritical way of showing «evidence» of universality and cross-cultural validity; 3) the third is that the first two necessarily imply a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women.

In short, she shows five different ways in which Western feminist discourse on women in the third world uses the category of analysis 'women' to construct the group 'third world women': 1) women as victims of male violence; 2) women as universally dependent on men; 3) women as victims of the colonial process; 4) women as victims of familial systems; and 5) women as victims of religious ideologies.

What seems interesting to analyse is how Mohanty identifies a colonialist move in Western feminist scholarship and, as a result, its political consequences. To advance the idea of a common struggle of all women in the third world, regardless of their class or culture, against a general oppression (essentially stemming from the group in power, i.e. men) implies the assumption of what in the 1980s Michel Foucault called the 'juridico-discursive model of power', whose main features are: an insistence on the rule (which determines a binary system) and a uniformity of the apparatus functioning at different levels.

As, in turn, Françoise Collin, a Belgian feminist and philosopher, founder of the first feminist journal in the French language in 1973 – *Les Cahiers du Grif* (feminist research and information group) – also always insisted, the commonality of oppression does not suffice on its own, since this oppression does not take the same forms across different cultures and periods in time. This concept should be constantly reactivated, re-examined and readjusted to specific, historical and contingent circumstances.

Oppression, in the strictest sense of the term – namely, that of the materiality of practices – always intimately touches each woman in a singular way.

Audre Lorde, one of the leading figures of the struggles of black feminists and lesbians in the 1980s, also points out in *Sister Outsider*:

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. [...] Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences... [...] today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age⁶.

The crux of the problem lies in this initial assumption that women form a group or homogeneous category («the oppressed»). What happens when this assumption of «women as an oppressed group» is used in Western feminist literature about third world women? This is where Mohanty locates the colonialist move, which I believe is interesting to analyse. By comparing the representation of women in the third world with Western feminists' self-presentation in the same context, we see, Monhanty tells us, that only Western feminists become the true «subjects» of this counter-history.

Third world women, in turn, never rise above the debilitating generality of their object status. From this it follows that, by applying the idea of a homogeneous category of women to women in the third world, we colonize and appropriate the

⁶ Lorde A., *Sister Outsider. Sur la poésie, l'érotisme, le racisme, le sexisme...*, Genève, Editions Mamamélis, 2003, pp. 76, 126-127.

pluralities simultaneously experienced by different groups of women within their social class and ethnic group; in the end, we rob them of their historical and political power to act.

In other words, Western feminist discourse, based on the assumption that women form a coherent and already constituted group, placed within kinship, legal and other structures, defines third world women as subjects outside of social relations, instead of studying the way women are constituted as women through these very structures.

Legal, economic, religious and familial structures are treated as having to be judged according to Western standards.

By defining these structures as «underdeveloped» or «developing» and by placing women within these structures, we produce an implicit image of the average third world woman.

We see the 'oppressed woman' becoming the 'oppressed third world woman'. The category 'oppressed woman' is created, according to Mohanty, by only taking into account gender difference, whereas the category 'oppressed third world woman' has an additional attribute – «third world difference».

'Third world difference' implies a paternalistic attitude towards women in the third world. 'Third world women' as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as religious (i.e. not progressive), family-focused (i.e. traditional) and lacking in legal knowledge (i.e. they do not know they have rights).

This is how «third world difference» is produced. All we do is reinforce the assumption that the third world is still lagging behind the first world. This mode of analysis, Mohanty maintains, by homogenising and systematising the experiences of different groups of women in these countries, erases all marginal modes and experiences and reinforces Western cultural imperialism. The comparison between the self-presentation of Western feminists and their representation of third world women is telling. Without the 'third world woman', the particular self-presentation of Western women would be problematic. bell

hooks, the African American feminist and a colleague of Mohanty's, also looks closely at the limitations of Western feminism, particularly with regard to the interplay between the social relations of class, race and gender within the «patriarchal, racist, capitalist and imperialist» American society. hooks stresses the extent to which feminist theories, developed in the United States by white women, reflect their own class and race values. «...when 'women' were talked about – she tells us – the experience of white women was universalized to stand for all female experience⁷». As Nassira Hedjerassi rightly asserts in her preface to the French edition of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, much work needs to be done on deconstructing the category 'woman', in order to show that gender is not the only factor influencing the construction of 'women'. And we could add: neither is it the only factor contributing to their oppression within a system that is phallographic, patriarchal, imperialist and capitalist.

Nevertheless, according to bell hooks, these efforts to deconstruct the category 'woman' led to: «a profound revolution in feminist thought⁸». In Françoise Vergès's words, we ought to take into account that patriarchy is racial, that we cannot deny the privileges of white women during slavery or colonialism and that we cannot universalise all female experience based on the experience of white Western women. Mohanty is one of the first to criticise the construction and use of categories such as «third world women» as a singular, monolithic subject. Mohanty, bell hooks and Audre Lorde therefore all reach the same conclusion regarding the limitations of Western feminism for analysing the different and multiple experiences of women. If we move from the United States to Africa, we find that Awa Thiam reaches the same conclusion. In *La parole aux négresses*, this Senegalese anthropologist and feminist states:

«...the plight of the Black woman is very different from that of her White or Yellow sisters... Where Black women have to combat colonialism and

⁷ B. Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, London, Routledge, 1994, pp. 120-121.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 63.

neocolonialism, capitalism and the patriarchal system, European women only have to fight against capitalism and patriarchy⁹»

In fact, due to this hegemonism and the racist, classist implications of the term 'feminism', along with the stereotypes it conveys, the relevance of the term *feminism* in Africa was challenged by many who refused to accept this Western import and imposition. From the early 1980s, the Nigerian feminist Amina Mana, as Nassira Hedjerassi recalls in the preface to bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, criticised these hegemonic feminist readings by coining the term *imperial feminism* to signify the historical participation, however denied or unquestioned, of white women in the colonial and racial domination of black populations, even at the height of their struggle for their own liberation as women. What Amina Mana has to say on the silence of white women during the colonial catastrophe can also be found if we now move to the island of Réunion, more precisely in June 1970.

Françoise Vergès. Remapping a mutilated geography of the women of Réunion

In her latest book, *Le ventre des femmes. Féminisme, capitalisme, racialisation*, Françoise Vergès shows us how in June 1970 a scandal broke in the island of Réunion: apparently thousands of unauthorised abortions were performed by doctors who claimed they were carrying out harmless operations in order to be reimbursed by the social security. Many women filed a complaint, although they were barely heard. During the trial, the accused declared they had been indirectly encouraged by the state's anti-natalist policies put in place in the overseas departments and directly encouraged by the state representatives on the island, when, as we know – these were the 1970s – contraception and abortion were criminalised and harshly repressed in France. Due to this criminalisation alone, a million women risked their lives every year by having abortions in deplorable conditions.

⁹ Thiam A., *La parole aux négresses*, Paris, Denoel, 1978, p. 76.

The contradiction is only apparent. Vergès shows how the same control over the bodies of women is targeted in France and the overseas departments. However, it is not practised the same way in both places. One of the many reasons for the strength and power of this book – as Vergès herself says – is:

«[...] To introduce dissonant voices in the narrative of Western feminism, since women overseas – whether they are slaves, engaged or colonized – barely exist in the studies of Western feminists, who treat them as victims of various oppressions but never as people whose singular words will challenge a universalism that masks a particularism¹⁰.»

However, what is more, she shows very clearly how the commonality of oppression does not suffice on its own, since this oppression does not appear in the same forms across different cultures and periods in time.

This is why this concept, as we saw when looking at the positions of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, bell hooks, Françoise Collin, Audre Lorde, Awa Thiam and Amina Mana, ought to be constantly reactivated, re-examined and readjusted to specific, historical and contingent circumstances.

The idea of a shared oppression prevents us from grasping the differences between the types of oppression experienced and Vergès's analysis of the blindness of the MLF (the French Women's Liberation Movement) shows it very clearly.

In this regard, she states:

«The MLF feminists do not take into account the part played by racial patriarchy or French imperialism. By neglecting what slavery and colonialism brought to white supremacy – and, therefore, to white women – this radical 1970s feminism contributes to the fabrication of oblivion¹¹.»

Now, before this absolute debarment, Vergès affirms we should look instead into the inescapable, undeniable fact that sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual

¹⁰ Vergès F., *Le ventre des femmes. Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme*. Paris, Albin, Michel, p. 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

oppression cannot be separated from racism, colonialism, slavery and capitalist exploitation. Her view evidences in the critique of this oblivion a certain relation between feminism and a form of temporality that I find, first and foremost, in Walter Benjamin's thoughts.

This form of temporality helps us grasp a set of relations between feminism and the geopolitical space where its political impact is greatest. It is, in fact, an «interrupted temporality», politically reactivated within a space made of displacements, hiatuses, ruptures, but also reunion, confrontation, interaction and, above all, resistance to the constantly eluded traps of power.

What lies at the heart of this question is how to think feminism from its insurgent, heterogeneous pluralism, within a wider geopolitical space issuing from the colonial experience and, therefore, racially segmented. And, from here, we could also return to Mohanty's statements analysed above. Statements aimed at producing a feminist map of the insurrectionary thoughts rooted in the need to de-Westernize the world or, as Vergès puts it, to «develop a global, cross-cultural connected history, rather than the national history of the French colonies¹².»

This is also in line with the task of «denationalizing feminism» in order to better re-politicise it, as Vergès maintains, following Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize Europe – i.e. to question, through this denationalisation, the genealogy, the very narrative of French feminism and the plural European feminisms.

According to this view, to be a feminist, to live a feminist life, means above all to take an interest in the multiple experiences of subordination that give a central place to the way race is gendered, the way gender is racialised and, finally, to the way these movements are connected to the persistence and the social and political transformation of multiple geographical spaces.

If belonging to the women's movement does not require blind adherence to a dogma or historically determined and valid representation, then re-politicising

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

feminism means to invent unprecedented modes of being together, by choosing according to which priorities and by which means to patch fragmentary theories together, or how to «move» in order to open a plural, polyglot dialogue – in short, it is about imagining a decolonial feminism.

Feminism is not an engagement that can be suspended when it is not convenient. However, this does not mean that feminists always agree on what to engage in or on the forms and strategies their engagement should assume. The work of Vergès helps us, in this sense, to re-elaborate, to reinvent what Benjamin called 'political messianism'. The form of temporality to be highlighted is not an interrupted temporality (i.e. one that refers back to a time that is neither linear nor homogeneous); instead, it is a time made of ruptures, hiatuses, interruptions. The irruptive, explosive, revelatory power – or, as Benjamin called it, the messianic power – was entirely bestowed upon the future by Western modernity. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, he said: «To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was". It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger¹³.»

Vergès's book shows us the redemptive power of the past in action; without it, no insurrectionary politics is possible. In other words, it seems that, where Vergès rescues the forced abortions in Réunion from the oblivion of history, we see what Benjamin said about reinventing the past crop up: «Only by reinventing the past can we restore to it its irruptive and redemptive power¹⁴.»

In fact, the redemptive power of the past lies in this possibility of unexpectedly emerging as a political source of nonconformity. It is about fighting for another concept of the past, a past revived by the suffering and oppression caused by slavery and colonialism.

This epistemological and political attitude thereby seems to tally with that of Françoise Collin, who states that: without movement, there is no liberation. Therefore, in order to imagine and produce new insurrectionary maps, we need to move our gaze and decentre it. To constantly set our thinking and daily

¹³ BENJAMIN W., *Sur le concept d'histoire, Thèse VI*, Paris, Puf, 2001, p. 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

practices and political strategies in motion. At the beginning of the last chapter of *Repolitiser le féminisme*, Vergès states: «one of the unavoidable strategies of liberation movements is to make the history of the oppressed, the forgotten, the marginalised women re-emerge in order to question the dominant narratives and break with their linearity¹⁵.»

Once again, Benjamin's dotted presence comes to mind. As we know, he observed that:

«...there is a secret protocol [Verabredung: also appointment] between the generations of the past and that of our own. For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a *weak* messianic power, on which the past has a claim¹⁶.»

In this way, the book by Vergès seems to connect two aims: on the one hand, to do justice to the women who were forced to have abortions, bearing witness to their story; and, on the other hand, through that very story, to develop a new feminist, decolonial map – not, as she says «by adding chapters to the national history, but by questioning the framework and denationalizing it¹⁷.»

This move is in fact essential, considering that even the choice made by the MLF to symbolically elect the Arc de Triomphe as its place of birth is not insignificant. As she states:

«Their gesture also outlines the space of their struggle: the Hexagon and the nation and the temporality of the national history [...]. By choosing this place, this group of women proposes a geography and temporality that do not erase women but that, nevertheless, continue to erase non-white presence¹⁸.»

¹⁵ Vergès F., *Le ventre des femmes*, *op. cit.*, p. 213 [In French: «une des stratégies incontournables des mouvements d'émancipation consiste à faire resurgir l'histoire des opprimé-e-s, des oublié-e-s, des marginalisé-e-s pour questionner les récits dominants et rompre leur linéarité»].

¹⁶ Benjamin W., *Sur le concept d'histoire*, *Thèse II*, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Vergès F., *Le ventre des femmes*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

In this way, it actually becomes possible to, among other things, crack the linear, cumulative history by tracking its discontinuities and seeing, through this gesture, as Vergès says in the afterword to *Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai. Entretiens avec Aimé Césaire*, that «history cannot be linear, for colonial history made exile and displacement its organising principles¹⁹».

That is why it is important to reapproach the Benjaminian question of temporality, though this time by inscribing it within a feminist, decolonial framework. It is within this framework that we should criticise a linear and theologically-oriented concept of history, where the *continuum* of time would actually serve to continuously reaffirm the subalternity of a given number of subjects - in this case, racialised women or, to use Vergès's words, «the forgotten of the forgotten». From this angle, to re-politicise feminism means to reconnect this form of interrupted temporality to multiple places geographically marked by the superimposition of gender, race and class inequalities. However, for the same reasons, to re-question the temporality that is, among other things, the subject matter of *ventre des femmes*, also seems to invoke a subsequent and logical passage, i.e.: the feminist problematisation of the concept of space, which should be understood both as the framework of experience for diverse struggles and the decolonial horizon of their possible recomposition. As Vergès points out in this regard:

«Decoloniality is a space of enunciation, not of origin or geography. It draws counter-geographies, in the knowledge that republican postcoloniality produced a mutilated geography – the centrepiece of the apparatus of oblivion²⁰.»

Conclusion. Interrupted temporality, new insurrectionary maps

To rethink the space of feminist struggles as a product of a complex interplay (slavery/colonialism/imperialism) is today a task of undeniable strategic

¹⁹ Vergès F., postface à Aimé Césaire. *Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai. Entretiens avec Françoise Vergès*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2005, p. 85.

²⁰ Vergès F., *Le ventre des femmes, op. cit.*, p. 219.

importance. In the context of a decolonial feminism, this means to do away with the idea that the space of the West continues to be «the» spatial and geopolitical condition for the possibility of those feminist discourses and practices that belong to our present: there are many other relations and stories to be told in a space that should be mapped according to multiple experiences of feminism. This means to move away from a Western feminism that claims to be universal, to imagine new feminist maps that cross the different struggles of women and thus rewrite the history of women's liberation struggles, based on other time periods and territories. It also means to think together an interrupted temporality and a space made of displacements, hiatuses, ruptures, but also reunion, confrontation, interaction and, above all, resistance to the constantly eluded traps of power. For, as Awa Thiam wrote, and with this I will conclude:

«WE MUST. Actively resist all plans. Actively resist. Effectively resist. All oppression. Wherever it's from – at all times. Only multiple voices. Multiple resistances. Multiple sums of desires to change. A countless sum of good will. The will to live something else might change the current face of the world. [...] The strength will lie in the multiple voices, people, consciences determined to radically change all social structures that at this point in time have crumbled; otherwise, it will not be²¹.»

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²¹ Thiam A., *La parole aux négresses, op.cit.*, p. 13.

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