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## Book Review Essay: The Future of Difference: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism and Feminism

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***Book Review Essay: The Future of Difference: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism and Feminism***<sup>1</sup>

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Feminist sociologists Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa open Chapter 1 of *The Future of Difference* with an apt question that echoes across the rest of the book: “Can’t you *see* what’s before you? (2020, p. 1). Before long, they make the complexity of answering such a question quite clear. The topic of discussion is the discourse surrounding the events of New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne, Germany, a night that “stands for a tectonic shift in Germany’s social fabric” (2020, p. 3). In the early days of 2016, women who participated in Cologne’s public celebrations began to report several incidents of theft, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, some of them by groups of men. By January 4<sup>th</sup>, the perpetrators were described by German national media and the police as “foreign” or “Arab” or “North African” in origin. In the ensuing outcry, Hark and Villa argue that a particular narrative quickly took hold: one that was characterized by racist and essentializing notions of Muslim men, and by extension, of Islam as a whole. Migrants as a group were implied to be responsible for sexual violence in Germany and there were calls by prominent conservative political figures—domestically and internationally—to close the borders and implement stricter immigration/asylum policies to prevent the “Islamification” of Europe.

As noted in the preface, Hark and Villa’s intentions here are not to provide a detailed summary of the events of the night, and those looking for such a summary are advised to seek other sources. Rather, they are concerned with what Cologne has come to signify in the public and political imagination, namely, the so-called barbarity of the “sex-starved” Muslim man and the perceived “failure” of European asylum policy (2020, p. 60). They are also troubled by the mobilization of feminism in the service of populist and nationalist rhetoric that demonizes migrants and Muslims. Over the course of several chapters, Hark and Villa carefully unpack the role that Cologne has played and continues to play in a “series of highly effective ideological operations—mainly objectifications of difference—which now serve to shore up social hierarchies in Germany” (2020, p. 7). In their view, Cologne was used to organize and reinforce existing essentializations of “the other,” re-positioning Muslims as backward, uncivilized and (sexually) violent threats to national security, while elevating whiteness and the West as implicitly feminist, enlightened and tolerant (to a fault) in comparison. These homogenized representations of “us” and “them” were discursively hardened and taken up as ontologically self-evident. Hark and Villa closely examine how differences are constructed, ossified and maintained via images and discourse and ultimately argue for vigilant resistance against polarized, vague and undifferentiated articulations of difference. They see *feminist* resistance as particularly crucial in the wake of “femonationalist”

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<sup>1</sup> Hark, S. and Villa, P-L. (2020). *The Future of Difference: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism and Feminism*. London, England: Verso Books.

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arguments rooted in the dehumanization, homogenization, and domination over “the other,” pointing to the urgent need to extricate feminism from its complicities in nationalist projects of domination (2020, p. 92).

In addressing the components of *The Future of Difference*, Chapter 1 takes a theoretical dive into how Cologne has come to represent more than the sum of its parts. Hark and Villa set the familiar post-structuralist and Foucauldian stage where meaning is ascribed to things via discourse, and where the production of knowledge about a certain “truth” is ongoing and itself embedded within social, cultural and political relations of power (2020, p. 2). The “fact” of Cologne has thus been brought into being via a combination of “media attention, political interpellation, cultural, religious, governmental and other interpretations, police actions [...] and much, much more,” (2020, p. 8). Understanding the underlying mechanisms of this production and the kind of world that it generates in turn is one of the central aims of the book.

Particular attention is paid to how the “fact” of Cologne—with its assigned meanings and alleged “truths”—has poured back into “the social reservoir of knowledge” in Germany and elsewhere, redrawing lines of citizenship and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, and of domination and subordination (2020, p. 9). The key to much of their early analysis is Hedwig Dohm’s concept of *Versämtlichung*: a discursive project through which we “construct, ossify, and maintain imaginary others” (2020, p. 10). *Versämtlichung* is referenced often as Hark and Villa explain how “differences are anchored, made meaningful and roped into everyday political life,” in the service of dominant groups and cultures and at the expense of marginalized and dominated “others” (2020, p. 17).

Chapter 2 takes us through the narrative that emerged in the wake of Cologne. “Muslim perpetrators” were quickly presented as an existential terrorist threat to the German state, closely bound up with “morally virulent ‘us and them’ distinction[s]” and the “(re)activation of a racially charged everyday ‘common sense’” (2020, p. 25). Hark and Villa outline how dichotomizing racist Manichaeic “truths” were discursively produced, reproduced and re-affirmed in the days following Cologne, emboldened by the “ethnicization of sexism” and “reflexive Eurocentrism,” which worked together to shore up the image of Muslim men as dangerous, unpredictable and sexually incontinent while framing Western men as inherently feminist and singularly capable of self-control (2020, p. 32).

Chapter 3 is concerned primarily with the world that is produced out of the image of Cologne. Following Judith Butler’s inquiries into the question of who has access to the category of “human,” Hark and Villa ask: who does this emergent post-Cologne world paint as monstrous and deviant? Who does it make you care about and relate to? Who does it make you hate and alienate? And perhaps most crucially: whose interests does such a world serve, and to what end? They do not pose the final question, though they allude to some of the answers. Images are by their nature referential, and so the world that is produced out of the image of Cologne is one that has already been partially constructed by other images and worlds preceding it (2020, p. 53). This construction appears to be as old as Western colonial thought: a familiar fantasy wherein the White/Anglo/German woman is “the embodiment of culture, of nation, and of Western civilization,” while the Brown/Black/Muslim/migrant man is allegedly the “savage” antagonist who threatens the purity of the white woman and in so doing threatens “civilization” (2020, p. 54).

This section of their work invites my first round of critique. Aside from brief mentions of Edward Said and a discussion of Frantz Fanon's foundational *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), there is a lack of theoretical engagement with prominent post-colonial scholars (such as Said, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Gayatri Spivak), many of whom have at length written about the dehumanizing, imperialist and orientalist constructions of the Third World "other" in relation to the deified Western subject. Said's fleeting appearances are puzzling given the central explanatory role that the concept of othering occupies in the book.

Hark and Villa conclude that the totalizing discursive world borne of Cologne is comfortably in line with hegemonic, racist, Islamophobic and imperialist ways of knowing and seeing. Where does this colonial binary leave us? What are its real-world consequences, for instance in terms of foreign policy and militarist interventions in the Middle East? While domestic policy consequences are discussed, other materially grounded lines of inquiry—particularly in relation to militarism—are sparse. A chapter or a section specifically focusing on such questions would have, in my view, served to ground the more theoretical work and render visible the myriad connections that exist between discursive forms of othering and imperial violence.

One consequence of othering that Hark and Villa mention is the erasure of intra-community discussions. They call back to this in Chapter 4 via Sineb El Masrar, who elaborates on the tricky "balancing act" she must engage in as a Muslim feminist, caught between contributing to the negative stereotypes associated with Islam on the one hand and "defend[ing] Muslims against any and all criticisms" and thereby garnering unwanted praise from conservative Islamic groups on the other (2020, p. 97). This is a welcome and interesting perspective that adds a lot of value in terms of illuminating the stakes associated with failing to resist totalizing representations. The problem of "othering and ruling" here connects to a serious and well documented epistemic issue: belonging to cultures that have been othered through dominant racist discourses can leave one in a position of having to either engage in self-censorship and testimonial smothering or accept that by voicing criticism one may be putting members of one's own community (including oneself) at increased risk of harm. Hark and Villa's call to recognize and resist discursive othering would only be strengthened by devoting more space to the testimonies of Muslim women engaged in difficult critical work in their communities.

Chapter 4 deals with the response of some German feminists to the events at Cologne, particularly Alice Schwarzer, the editor in chief of *EMMA*, a longstanding German feminist magazine. Hark and Villa argue that Schwarzer utilized "the sound of othering" to bolster Islamophobia under the guise of feminist critique (2020, p. 79). Rather than denounce her as not *really* a feminist, Hark and Villa suggest that feminism itself has always been pluralistic. They argue: "we must extricate feminism from its deep entanglement with the colonial legacy (of othering that which is 'foreign') [...] this also means freeing it from its complicity with the politics of securitization, discipline and carcerality, and ending its promotion of xenophobic and exclusionary border regimes" (2020, p. 82). Considering how to embark on such a project of detoxification, Hark and Villa posit that "we must shun every possible complicity with racist and sexist discourses" and resist militarization alongside "neoliberal processes of dehumanization and dispossession" (2020, p. 98-99). An obvious question left unexplored is whether decolonization is, in a word, possible given the long history of feminist alliances with White supremacist interests against the interests of women of

color. Alice Walker's concept of Womanism comes to mind here as an alternative to feminisms that refuse to center race and racism and take seriously the issues of multiply marginalized women (Walker, 1983). It would have been interesting to see Hark and Villa consider some of the proposed answers to an age-old question in feminist spaces.

A final critique is related to an issue that is particularly pronounced in Chapter 4 and concerns the intended audience of this book. While the discussion throughout is always interesting, nuanced, and committed to practicing what it preaches in terms of self-reflexivity, some of the conclusions drawn may ultimately not be novel for Muslim feminists, especially those living in Germany. In addition, the machinations of how racialized populations are often persistently othered through a combination of nationalist and racist colonial discourses will likely be familiar ground for those who are well-versed in critical race and post-colonial theory. This leads me to believe that the book seeks to function primarily (though not exclusively) as a call to action for White (German) feminists, urging them to examine their own complicities and to reject the racist, nationalist, imperialist and militarist associations that implicate them (and by extension their feminism) in the oppression of others. If I am correct about this, I am curious as to why Hark and Villa refrained from naming their audience. Greater clarity in this regard might have avoided certain sections of the text on collective responsibility—which one can grasp as referring to a specific *kind* of German, a specific kind of woman, academic, journalist, politician (i.e., white, culturally Christian)—from coming off as though it is inadvertently obfuscating the role of White supremacy in this issue. Moreover, the ascription of ongoing responsibility seemingly equitably—or rather, vaguely, via undifferentiated terms like “we”—when the resulting harm of othering and Islamophobia is inequitably distributed, may leave some readers unsatisfied.

The question of responsibility comes up once again in the closing chapter. Hark and Villa advise us to think through difference *differently*, and to resist polarizing populist rhetoric in favor of an ethos that “pursues the virtues of nuance and de-escalation” (134). It is fitting, therefore, that Chapter 5 is in the form of a dialogue between Hark and Villa, providing a refreshing change of pace from the reference-rich format of the rest of the book. Written exclusively for the English translation, Hark and Villa take up some of the criticisms they received when the German version of their book was published in 2017. Their earnest discussion is thought provoking and deals with some of their uncertainties in relation to how we may begin to live up to the decidedly ambitious project of detoxifying feminism from its racist and imperialist entanglements.

*The Future of Difference* is no doubt a sorely needed contribution to the polarizing discourse surrounding Cologne. The English translation will also challenge feminists outside of Germany to interrogate our complicities in racism, Western imperialism, Islamophobia, and various forms of racialized othering. Ultimately, *The Future of Difference* renders a little more visible a possible future that is more just, less hateful, less divided—though no less dynamic and heterogenous—on the other side of the current oppositional political landscapes within which many of us unfortunately live.

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