



Book Review

Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy. Edited by Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010).

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Book Review

Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy. Edited by Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 266 pp.

“Lift every voice and sing” the black national anthem enjoins us. *Convergences*—a collection of philosophical articles interrupting and interrogating white male philosophical traditions, black male traditions in critical race theory, and white feminist intellectual traditions that have silenced Black feminist and Womanist thought—presents a multiplicity of voices. Yet the multiplicity on display in *Convergences* shares a commonality identified by Donna-Dale Marcano in her essay “The Difference that Difference Makes: Black Feminism and Philosophy,” namely, a concern for justice.

That we can hear such commonality in the midst of the multiplicity proposed in *Convergences* is no mere accident. The editors knew or believed—perhaps from their understanding of the connections between Continental philosophy, Black feminist theory, Womanist theory, and lived experience, as well as from their *actual* communication with black women, and some non-black women—that certain themes and issues would rise to the top, as surely as cream... Well, we won’t employ metaphors of cream rising in coffee here.

Let’s just say that the problem of justice, shaping the thought of the contributors, permeates every chapter, while serving as a kind of protean kernel for the growth of three identifiable themes: first, how continental philosophy and black feminist thought might expand and develop so that each can (re)articulate the concerns of the other; second, the ways in which continental philosophy sets limitations on diversity and on inclusivity across that diversity; and third, how canonical resources, within and outside feminism, may inhibit or fail to address the possibility of black feminist philosophy.

While *Convergences* might be viewed through the lens of its three constitutive themes, this anthology can also be understood via three significant facets of its adherence to multiple voices: Invocation of felt voices, Inter-textual voices in communication, and, Voices not often heard.

Diane Perpich's "Black Feminism, Poststructuralism, and the Contested Character of Experience" well illustrates the *invocation of a felt voice*. Perpich invokes the voice of Paula Moya, author of *Learning From Experience*, to contest ideas expressed by Joan Scott, who, in her piece "Experience," argues, by invoking Foucauldian theory, against using "appeals to experience as the bedrock from which social theory can be elaborated" (14). Scott warns that even when such appeals come from the dominant society's "others," they can naturalize difference and thereby support dominant discourses. "Here was this essay," Moya wrote, "telling me that basically, any account I could give of my own experience would be complicit with the dominant order of things. It made me furious" (cited by Perpich, 14).

Creating rhetorical space that enables Moya's anger to be felt, Perpich allows us to engage with Moya's lived experience, her feminist politics, and her feminist philosophy through a quasi-physical relationship with Moya. Personally, I find it quite useful to get a sense of how a person *lives* the wrongness of some particular theory in her body. I suspect that Perpich wants readers to hear (feel) Moya's voice so that we might sympathize with it, even if we do not agree with Moya's view. I suspect that Perpich sympathizes (perhaps empathizes) with Moya's anger, although, as her defense of Scott and, hence, of Foucault reveals, she believes that Scott and Foucault have a lot to offer Moya. It may be that Perpich's invitation of sympathy for Moya's lived experience incites the reader to *take care*—as has Perpich—to search for what might be salvaged from Moya's *voice of experience* to support our epistemic endeavors. Such a strategy reminds us that in philosophical discussion we are not merely trafficking in ideas. We are in dialogue with people. By searching for responses to *people* as well as ideas, we might just gain a way of looking at things that would otherwise not have come into our purview.

Inter-textual voices in communication is also present in all of the contributions, without exception. Marcano, for example, observes that when social constructivism engages with theories of sex and gender ambiguities are illuminated, revealed exclusions force inclusion, and category boundaries expand. By contrast, when social constructivism encounters theories of race, the discursive field becomes depleted of conceptual resources, to the point that race ceases to exist altogether. Marcano's broader goal, however, seems to be to force a conversation between traditional Western philosophical discourse and philosophy as practiced by black women philosophers. Allegedly, philosophy speaks to the universal. But how can black women's particularity access the universal when its particularity supposedly renders it incapable of reaching beyond itself? Marcano's subtle treatment of this complex issue invites the reader to grapple with it.

In "Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy", Kathryn Gines brings Richard Wright, Sartre and Beauvoir into communication, in the

process revealing how Wright's understanding of race and racism influenced Sartre's and Beauvoir's philosophical theories on race and gender. Gines further explains how Sartre's and Beauvoir's accounts of race and gender were impoverished because they ignored black feminist theory, which would have allowed them to introduce "the drawbacks and advantages of race and gender intersectionality into their philosophical frameworks" (44). Along the way, Gines provides a brief but much needed history lesson, reminding the reader that when Gloria Steinem asserts that "Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot, and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women," (38) Steinem neglects to mention "the white terrorist violence that prevented *both black men and black women from exercising their right to vote and other political rights even after they attained them legally*" (38, emphasis added). Thus, we have Sartre and Beauvoir ignoring black feminist thought and the condition of black women, which they certainly weren't going to get from Wright! Further, we must contend with prominent white feminists continuing to produce discourses that ignore basic facts of black history in the United States, and yet believe themselves well-equipped to analyze sex and gender. Gines' history lesson interrupts this sustained effort to construct ignorance around the ways in which sexes and genders (plural!) were created via racial constructions.

Anika Mann's article "Race and Feminist Standpoint Theory" takes up the intersectionality baton, bringing Patricia Hill Collins' views on intersectionality into communication with Sartre's discussion of an Us-Object vs. a We-Subject. Mann proceeds by engaging the understanding(s) that come out of the encounter between these two discourses to confront the following: Sonia Kruck's attack on the kind of identity politics Collins engages in; Nancy Harstock's attempts to develop a feminist standpoint, although Harstock had acknowledged that "her theoretical attempt to develop a feminist standpoint could render women of color invisible" (cited in Mann, 113); and Sandra Harding's departure from her own logic regarding situated knowledge, when she "instructs white Western feminists to closely align themselves to all women and says that 'doing so involves *reinventing ourselves as Other*'" (cited in Mann, 115). Mann states, breathing words of fire: "these white feminist critiques indicate that many white women do not yet fully comprehend the implications of their whiteness and make evident their limited understanding of their own situations as white women in a racially stratified society" (111). Here is one of those lifted voices whose tone I wish resounded more frequently in peer-reviewed journals, where white feminists (concerned with social justice and ethics of care) sit at the helm of the editorial boards. Their standpoint often fails to spot the ways in which womanly whiteness invents the Other it *needs* to imagine, while ignoring the black women it dare not see.

The last author I will consider in the category of *Inter-textual voices in communication* is Maria del Guadalupe Davidson. In “Rethinking Black Feminist Subjectivity” she discusses a problem concerning an inversion of values. More specifically, Davidson addresses the valorization of the concepts of difference and otherness in postmodern discourses that prompted Costas Douzinas to conclude “The other comes first. He or she is the condition of existence of language, or self, of the law. In the philosophy of alterity, the other can never be reduced to the self or the different to the same. The demand of the other that obliges me is the ‘essence’ of the ethics of alterity” (cited by Davidson, 123). But does this valorization of the other put the other on equal footing with the subject, as the postmodern inversion of values suggests? Davidson explores this matter through an encounter between Ann duCille’s understanding of the presentation of the Other *as first* and postmodern discourses, which have rewarded black women this dubious distinction.

Unfortunately, many of the pieces in *Convergences* fall under the third category, *voices not often heard*. One that stands out in my mind is Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s “L is for . . . : Longing and Becoming in *The L-Word’s* Racialized Erotic,” with its strategy of deploying Audre Lorde’s power of the erotic to show how the connection between identity and identification can be loosened so as to create an alliance potential of “how we imagine and theorize the subject through the movement across power lines” (91). A second such text is Tina Chanter’s “Antigone’s Other Legacy: Slavery and Colonialism in *Tegònni: An African Antigone*,” where Chanter discusses Antigone’s statement to Creon: “It was a brother, not a slave who died.” Chanter informs us that her account, which problematizes Antigone’s indifference to slaves, is not often heard, and she tells us why: Hegel’s discussion of *Antigone* in terms of a conflict between the ethical demands of family and those of the state has been privileged, to the exclusion of other discourses, by feminist commentary.

Convergences is a lovely title. Like intersectionality, it has a special ring to it. It’s neat; it’s efficient—to the point. Allegedly, *Convergences* is about points—points of intersection. I would say, however, that *Convergences* is more about the enfolding of discourses. A piece of fabric can fold in and over on itself or onto another piece of fabric. Voices can enfold onto each other. Enfolding *may* imply points of intersection, but intersection does not imply enfolding.

In her article, Davidson found the concept of *le pli* (the fold) useful in explaining black female subjectivity. I find *le pli* apt for capturing something as mired in depth, texture, and resonance as are black feminism and Continental philosophy in their encounters. Many times, one idea in *Convergences* (e.g. Perpich’s use of Scott and Foucault to question the role of experience in providing a foundation for knowledge) got folded into my reading of some other idea (e.g. Davidson’s insistence—via the concept of *le*

pli and duCille's notion of black women as sacred texts—on Black women authoring their own stories) in ways that enriched my understanding of both. I often came upon ideas I have thought about and written about—e.g., Lee's discussion in "Madness and Judiciousness" of what the perceived abjection of African-Americans means for how they and their testimony is received, or James' complex and subtle examination of the politics of aesthetic pleasure through the lenses of race and gender—and those ideas became enfolded into my own. *Convergences* is an anthology for women of color because it includes us, as one fold might include another. Moreover, its philosophical perspectives and discourses reveal, in their folds, some of the practices that have excluded black women philosophers.

In conclusion, I would say that the real beauty and irony of *Convergences* is that it succeeds precisely because the various authors unveil ways in which Black feminist thought, Womanist thought, and Continental thought fold in and onto each other to produce folds which, in turn, create new folds that impact the configuration of previous folds. This process speaks to a kind of becoming that emerges from a series of inter-related impacts one can never put one's finger on, because there is no precise place of intersection. I tip future readers to agree with me that *Convergences* succeeds so brilliantly because it never ends in points.

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