

Creating racial justice and recognizing differences

A collective and urgent task

by DENISE COUTURE

MY INVOLVEMENT IN THE ORGANIZATION of the gathering *Creating Justice, Recognizing Differences* was motivated by a desire to participate in a movement of feminist interspirituality. I define the latter as the gathering of women of diverse spiritual and religious lineages in order to create deliberately a context of justice for each of them. These women are different regarding their spiritual actions, their relationship to each other and to the earth, their story of immigration, their link to Christianity, the colonial religion, and the narratives of their personal life. Each woman is also different from herself. I have first-hand experience of feminist interspirituality in the context of Quebec, and from my position as a white Christian academic theologian.

The organizing committee of the June 2005 gathering took a long time before reaching a consensus about the theme *Creating Justice, Recognizing Differences*, but it has been a very fruitful journey. During our preparation for the event, our understanding of the theme changed. We did not modify the title; nevertheless, we meant more precisely: *Creating **Racial** Justice, Recognizing Differences*. We articulated anti-racism, feminism, postcolonialism and spirituality, considering four locations: Aboriginal, Quebec, Canada, and Diaspora. We imagined the gathering to be an experience of (auto)education, learning how to create racial justice and to recognize differences, by sharing with others our practical and theoretical knowledge. In this sense, we can say that feminist interspirituality produces something new: a collective creation which is a locus of formation for everybody.

The consensual phrase, *Recognizing Differences*, is a political as well as a spiritual aim. It makes links between the struggles against racism and sexism. It demands that we cultivate and celebrate diversities at all levels of life, ecological and relational; to give value to differences, a way of being which counters the trend of a controlling society; to honour the multiple folds which constitute an existence even if they are paradoxical or contradictory.

It seems to me that this proposal is an urgent and collective task for this time. We learn it by practicing it. The word “difference” has been used so often and in so many contexts. At the June 2005 gathering, we used it in a specific sense. It does not follow the lines of the well-learned culture of pluralism and multiculturalism where each woman passes by the other, and in so doing confirms and reinforces the patterns of social domination. The gathering was an invitation to open ourselves to question, to change. The action of recognizing differences means a personal, political, and spiritual transformation.

One could understand interspirituality as the (auto)formation of interrelated subjectivities in a reciprocal education to new nonhegemonic relations (to others and to oneself), without certainty of success. The prefix *inter* of the term *interspirituality* originates from a grammatical derivation of the same prefix in the term *interreligious*. I suggest that when we import it in *interspirituality*, its meaning changes. It no longer signifies only a mutual encounter between people who represent different systems of thought and religious traditions. It indicates rather a central and political theme of our time: our relationship to others has to change and is already changing.

I would like to present three short reflections on this theme.

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We Would Live an In-between Time

There is an urgent need today to change hegemonic relations. We live with the cruel effects of power relations based on the repression of the others by the dominating Western male – “the Occidental Man” – including repression of his sexual other, the others of eurocentrism and imperialism, and the others of technoscience. Gayatri C. Spivak uses Jacques Derrida’s concept, the *teleopoiesis*, to speak about an appropriate action for this time, an action which consists of preparation of the conditions of the future. This means that we are changing the structures of relations while, at the same time, we cannot escape them. To describe this in-between time, Rosi Braidotti says that we inhabit “between the no longer and the not yet.” The “no longer” corresponds to what we do not want, the repression of the others which informs our (post)colonialist time; the “not yet” is our hope of another world that we are preparing in the midst of unjust relations.

The Locations and The Tasks Are Diverse :

Towards a Politics of Location

G. C. Spivak insists that women occupy different locations in the context of (post)colonialism. They have different needs and tasks. Their learnings about changing the relations to others are different. As a white Occidental woman, a university professor, Quebecer, and Christian, I have learned that one challenge is, for instance, to work against the Christian virtue of charity, that is to say against this benevolent openness to other women which implies interest and curiosity, but does not change the imperialistic logic of the relation to the other in myself. This attitude cannot create racial justice. On the contrary, it confirms a subordination.

If one encounters the others according to a kind white Christian charity, one remains the same. One proceeds by assimilating new data within a familiar structure. At first glance, this may appear as a generous receptivity. But, in

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G. C. Spivak connects (neo)colonialism to imperialism. Currently, they occur in the international division of work as well as in the social domination of ethnic groups as a result of immigration to Western countries. According to the structures of colonialism, the colonized persons are “in fact previously unscripted”. One does not acknowledge the proper language of the other and its specific complexity. The Westerner knows that he is not transparent to himself. If one follows the logic of imperialism, one does not recognize this non-transparency on the side of the colonized people. The Westerner, on his side, is inscribed. He can compel his understanding over the other: women, ethnic others, the earth.

We call this time (post)colonialist in the sense that the sociocultural and linguistic structures that we inhabit consist in the imposition of a “proper” (Occidental) logic on the unscripted other. But we know that this is happening, and we try to resist this deadly logic. This is why G. C. Spivak places the prefix (post) in parenthesis: paradoxically, we are after – and, at the same time, we are not after – colonialism. As in feminism, the (post)colonialist view locates the emerging subjects in a time of in-between in which these subjects experiment new ways of being and acting. We are changing the sexist and imperialist logic of relations, in diversity. This is one way of living and breathing for women today. This happened for a few days at the gathering *Creating Justice, Recognizing Differences*.

fact, it is based on a logic by which one superimposes how and what she already knows on the other. This is the definition of colonialism, according to G. C. Spivak: the superimposition of a proper logic on the unscripted other. This does not question the quality of listening to the other, but the structure of openness.

For those of us who are white Occidental women, G. C. Spivak says our privileges are our losses. A (post)colonialist critique questions our well-learned virtues. Thus the openness of a white Christian woman to the *other* women does not suffice to create racial justice, because it is a duplication of the Christian virtue of charity (love your neighbour), with new information inserted in an already existing structure of thought. We call this way of thinking (post)colonialism. As white women, we need to be in a process of change, to be conscious of it, and to find ways to talk about it with the *others*. We need to be active, not passive, while attentively listening.

How could we transform the benevolent Christian openness? What could become new ways of connectedness? One answer to these questions is the feminist proposal of a politics of location. Such a location is explicitly situated within the web of (post)colonialist relations of domination. It functions as a place of consciousness-raising, produced deliberately and collectively, which moves; where there is an attempt at articulating diverse positions. One woman

does not define the other, but works on defining her proper location (personal, geopolitical, postcolonial, theoretical) in relation with others. I was motivated by the gathering *Creating Justice, Recognizing Differences*, to propose a (post)colonial analysis of *la Dieu chrétienne* in the context of Quebec (see page 16).

A Limit to Racial and Spiritual Diversity

We give much value to racial and spiritual diversity. My own reflection reinforces this. As a matter of fact, it is important, in this in-between time, to construct new models of relations across the transversality of diversities. I want to point out a limit to this quest of difference. The differences are multiple. Women differ with regard to race, religion and spirituality, but also regarding personal character and ability to work as a team. In an interspiritual feminist group, I think that we must assure a minimum of agreement on the understanding of feminism, (post)colonialism, spiritual

practices, and teamwork. When women work to create racial justice, they participate in a difficult, complex, and worthwhile journey. In my opinion, they have to work with shared joy that is based on a number of previous agreements. Finally, a group chooses which differences are the most important for a particular project. Differences are everywhere. The representation of spiritual diversity is not the only criteria for creating racial justice.

Conclusion

G. C. Spivak speaks about a specific type of action which occurs when we say, “I cannot *not* engage myself...”. This action precedes theory. It interrupts academic logic. Feminist interspirituality is such an experience for me. “I cannot *not*” involve myself in this hopeful movement. It is a way of breathing in a (post)colonialist time. It helps me learn which academic questions are the most important for our time. I have just begun this work.

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“Wade in the water, wade in the water, children
Wade in the water, God’s gonna trouble the water”:

The full gatherings provided a focus for the Montreal event, for singing, dancing, listening, laughing, working and playing.

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