

Commentary on the presentations by  
Dr. Kathryn Sophia Belle and Ms. Mickaëlle Provost

Beauvoir Webinar Series II: Beauvoir, Sexism, and Racism

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Good morning, or good evening, as the case may be, depending on where you are in the world. Before anything else, I would like to thank the International Simone de Beauvoir Society, especially the organizers of this webinar, for their hard work and for inviting me to share my thoughts on the presentations of Dr. Kathryn Sophia Belle and Ms. Mickaëlle Provost. I would also like to thank Dr. Belle and Ms. Provost for their illuminating discussion of our topic, as well as their relevant published writings on which I have based much of the commentary that follows.

The intersection between race and gender, and the phenomenology of oppression, are matters that have also preoccupied me in my work as a feminist philosopher. Thus, I find plenty of resonances between Black feminist philosophy and Filipino feminist philosophy, which is still in its nascent stages and is spotlighted in the “Women in Philosophy” issue of *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*.

Like many women in philosophy coming into feminist consciousness, I had Simone de Beauvoir as one of my intellectual heroes (if not *the* hero). Back in my undergraduate days, *The Second Sex* in its English translation by H.M. Parshley practically had the status of a sacred text to me. Like Beauvoir, I had the privilege of access to higher education, and the financial means to sustain a life of the mind. Like Beauvoir, I felt Othered in the androcentric and misogynistic discipline of philosophy.

But here the similarities stopped, or so I learned as I delved deeper into the situation of women in the Philippines. My country has a long history of colonization: three centuries by Spain, half a century by the United States, and several years by the Japanese during World War II. Our situation today as a country located in the Global South, or the so-called Third World, bears out the effects of this colonial history. The intellectual language of the majority of our elites is American English, and our educational system follows that of the U.S. They say that every Filipino has a relative living in the U.S., and that the Filipino Dream is the American Dream. Our neocolonial relationship with the U.S. has led directly to an economic fiasco arising from over two decades of neoliberal economic globalization policies. Today, more than a quarter of our population falls below the lower middle income poverty line of \$3.20 per day. Our external debt stands at \$73.2 billion, and just servicing the annual interest on this debt takes up almost 10 percent of the national budget. The typical lot of the Filipino woman is to be a low-wage worker in

the manufacturing industry, or a migrant laborer – usually a housekeeper or caregiver. If she is a local domestic worker, she may have also been employed by another Filipina, who herself has gone abroad to work in the care industry, for significantly higher pay, ceding her original care responsibilities to the next poorer woman in the so-called “global care chain” (dela Cruz 2020, 133-134).

In an essay about the phenomenology of the raced and gendered body, Marcano (2014, 67) writes,

... the representation of the philosopher’s body, and thus who does philosophy, is always tied to White men. This representation of the philosopher and the philosopher’s body often goes unnoticed, because philosophy is often understood as a way of thinking or a way of being in the world that transcends race and gender.

As a single, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual, and cis-gendered Filipino woman, I have found that there are many ways to be embodied. In a world of power relations that cut across categories of identity and domains of life, the various inequalities that we experience interact and develop together (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016, 2). Thus, I particularly appreciate Dr. Belle’s incisive critique of the race/gender analogy in the works of both Sartre and Beauvoir.

Simons (1999, 176-178) identifies two main ways that the writer Richard Wright influenced Beauvoir’s thinking: The first concerns his concept of the oppressed Other, and the second concerns his phenomenological approach to the study of oppression. Beauvoir would adopt both ideas, applying them in her analysis of gendered experience. However, Dr. Belle shows that, in the comparison of racial oppression to gender oppression in *The Second Sex*, “Black” is actually coded male and “woman” is coded white. As a result, Black feminist philosophers experience double exclusion in Beauvoir’s paradigm, once among white feminists and once among Black male philosophers. These two groups achieve common ground, to the exclusion of women of color (Gines 2010, 38). In a more recent article which revisits the topic, Dr. Belle writes,

Beauvoir identifies similarities in the motives and strategies of oppression and then proceeds in a way that presumes these oppressions are separated and/or separable. But this is not the case for Black women, Jewish women, colonized women, and/or proletarian women within the groups to whom Beauvoir compares the situation of the (white) “woman.” (Gines 2017, 49)

For all that Beauvoir pioneered the feminist philosophical critique of gender, she must also be read not just as a feminist intellectual, but as a feminist *colonial* intellectual (Nya 2019, xviii). She was blind to the intersectionality of race and gender. This is evident in her self-identified “White guilt complex” in her dealings with Djamila Boupacha, a

member of the Algerian National Liberation Front who was raped and tortured by French soldiers, and whom Beauvoir defended in print but hesitated to meet in person. This blindness is evident also in her problematic woman/slave analogy in *The Second Sex*. She adopted Hegel's notion of the master-slave dialectic, as well as referred to women's enslavement to the reproductive function. However, as Dr. Belle notes, "women slaves or enslaved women are largely disregarded in Beauvoir's analysis" (Gines 2014, 263).

Nonetheless, for Nya (2019, xxiii), "Beauvoir's inter-subjective ethics can, in part, work as a substitute for lack of intersectional analysis in her philosophy." There is also Deutscher's (2008, 137) contention that Beauvoir's analysis of women's life stages presents a view of *becoming* that can potentially counter the separability of race and sex in her framework:

... a becoming is not just an accumulated sedimentation of consistent meanings, but is also an accumulated fracturing by plural identifications with different fields of identity, identification, and subordination, themselves involving plural and fractured temporalities. (Deutscher 2008, 152)

To illustrate this in more concrete terms,

Beauvoir reworked the model of moving backward and forward from one state to another as "subject" and "object." We may be "subject" as a distinguished aged man, and "object" as an aged man. We may be "valued" as man, and "devalued" as old. We may be simultaneously valued and devalued as "old." We may be imbued with a sense of being female *and* white, male *and* black. (Deutscher 2008, 154)

The phenomenon of interlocking oppressions, ably addressed by intersectionality studies, is also borne out by Filipino feminist philosophy. In my own study of the three waves of Filipino feminist thought, published in the anthology *Feminista: Gender, Race and Class in the Philippines*, which I co-edited with my colleague Dr. Jeane Peracullo, I narrate the story of Clemencia Lopez, a Filipino woman who dialogued with her American counterparts on the occasion of the annual gathering of the New England Woman Suffrage Association in 1902. (At the time, the Philippines was a colony of the United States. Clemencia had gone to America to petition for the release of her brothers, who worked closely with the Anti-Imperialist League and who were imprisoned for their political activities.) Clemencia was invited to address the Association specifically to present a Filipino woman's perspective. What I found most striking in her speech is her observation that she and her audience (the American suffragists) "are both striving for the same object—you for the right to take part in national life; we for the right to have a national life to take part in" (Dela Cruz 2011, 25, quoting Lopez). Thus, she points to women's common goal of equality and social justice, while at the same time reminding

other women to—in today’s parlance—check their privilege. Unlike her American counterparts, Clemencia cannot afford to focus solely on the issue of gender oppression, as it is intertwined with her experience of colonial and racial oppression. All of these oppressions need to be addressed for her to achieve justice.

The work of Filipino-American poet Luisa Igloria similarly illustrates the Filipino woman’s dilemma, particularly in her piece entitled “Juan Luna’s Revolver.” The title of the poem names a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Filipino painter who produced what is probably the best known Filipino painting, the *Spolarium*, a depiction of a fallen gladiator which allegorizes the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. In light of Luna’s artistic greatness, the fact that he had murdered his wife and mother-in-law in a fit of jealousy barely rates a footnote in historical accounts. The incident itself has been downplayed to serve the agenda of demonstrating that the Philippines had produced a great artist, never mind he had brutalized women. The poem by Igloria is ostensibly about the racial discrimination experienced by people of color, and the irony of their crimes being pardoned precisely because they are perceived to be incapable of reason, and therefore subhuman. However, the silent subtext that runs through the poem is the injustice suffered by Luna’s women victims, forgotten in the narrative of Filipino nationalism.

Fittingly, I hope, I shall end by reciting this poem, which comes from the pen of my most admired fellow Filipina poet, a poem that reminds us of the inextricability of race and gender:

*Genius has no country, genius bursts forth everywhere, is like light and air –  
The patrimony of all, cosmopolitan as space, as life, as God.*

—Jose Rizal, on Juan Luna

Juan Luna’s Revolver

could well be the subtitle of an opera  
performed to a mostly well-heeled crowd  
in Manila’s National Museum

--among the audience, the great-grandniece  
of the famous painter’s murdered wife.  
The latter’s name was Paz (meaning peace,

that dream of living without fear of arousing  
violence when confronted by the strange or  
uncanny, or that which seems to bear

little resemblance to ourselves). Looking  
at pictures of compatriots  
abroad in the nineteenth century, why

should we think everything was profiteroles,  
white gloves, silk ties, salon conversation,  
*bellas artes*? Bumping into the Filipino,

a woman on the streets of Madrid regards  
his Malay features and exclaims, *But how well  
you speak Spanish (lo posea tanto como yo)!*

It's said the painter's *mestiza* wife  
and mother-in-law paid for more than half  
the rent of his studio and apartments.

Yet one September in Paris, in 1892,  
he barged into the bedroom  
and shot them both: his wife, on suspicion of

an amorous liaison with a Frenchman  
(possibly taller, possibly better endowed,  
though he himself was said to have wondered

how it could be, given that Paz was *not  
especially attractive*); his mother-  
in-law, her brains marbling the mantel,

because she valiantly tried to stop him.  
All accounts thereafter become the Petri  
dish for gossip: his trial in a French court,

his conviction of *nothing more  
than a crime of passion*. His return to  
the motherland after seventeen years;

his arrest and pardon for alleged  
complicity in the revolution  
against Spain. The desultory

paintings after, that critics say never again  
approach the scale of that mural the world  
admired in Barcelona: a pair of bodies,

bloodied and dragged through Roman columns  
from the arena. Searching the internet for more  
on Paz and her mother, I stumble on

news reports of one other Juan Luna,  
Mexican-born *family man* who grew up  
in Palatine, Illinois: with his

high school friend he burst into Brown's Chicken  
one January day in 1993,  
killing everyone they found there.

They fled, perhaps spent the night in the woods  
where small creatures scrape their limbs together  
to make this sound that often passes for music.

Juan Luna the painter was pardoned  
and ordered to pay one franc each  
to his victims' immediate relatives,

because of an obscure French law which explained  
that native people, very primitive people,  
have this tendency to run amok.

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