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## THE MYTH OF EUROPA: EUROPE'S UNIVERSALITY IN THE FACE OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

### ABSTRACT

The myth of Europa, which consists of the rapture of Europa by Zeus disguised as a bull, her rape, and the birth of three sons founding civilizations, is one of the most represented mythological scenes in Western Art, but it has also been the object of study of European philosophers.<sup>1</sup> These philosophical discussions on the myth of Europa reveal Europe as a universalizable space, the space of politics par excellence. The central argument of the article is that the depiction of Europe as transcendence and universalizability can only occur through the repression of the movement of rape. Bringing (a feminist) attention to this movement simultaneously uncovers the patriarchal-colonial visions of politics that are sustained by a depiction of rape as irrelevant, desirable, or justified, but also puts forward alternative imaginaries of Europe carried by a depiction of Europa's rape as a lived experience of suffering. The article concludes by sketching three pledges for a feminist political philosophy of Europe, one that brings attention to the material-bodily character of discourses on and about Europe, the need for intersectional feminist methodologies and visual-political transfers, and the responsibility to craft nonhegemonic images and imaginaries of Europe.

**Keywords:** myth of Europa, sexual difference, phenomenology, feminism, coloniality

<sup>1</sup> R. Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept*, Stanford 2009; D. Guénoun, Ch. Irizarry, *About Europe: Philosophical Hypotheses*, Stanford 2013.

## THE MYTH OF EUROPA AND THE POLITICS OF DEPICTING EUROPE

The myth of Europa, like any myth, tells multiple, overlapping stories,<sup>2</sup> but the stories intersect on the following events: Europa, daughter of Agenor (King of Tyr, in Phoenicia), while picking flowers on the shore with her maids,<sup>3</sup> is abducted by Zeus disguised as a white bull. Zeus takes her, through the sea, to the virgin island of Crete. He rapes her, and out of this sexual coercion are born three children, each founding important civilizations: Minos, Rhadamantys, and Sarpedon. All three will also, after their death, become the judges of the Underworld. In addition, Europa's three brothers are sent by Agenor to find her. None finds her, but in this process, each founds a civilization – Cadmus, in particular, founds Thebes, bringing the Phoenician alphabet to the Hellenic world.

The myth of Europa is one of the most popular icons of mythology<sup>4</sup> – the richness of its themes and the potential for impressive pictorial representation have made it a motif amongst painters and poets. More surprisingly, the myth has also inspired prominent philosophers of Europe,<sup>5</sup> who have seen in the figure of Europa the (pre-)figuration of the idea of Europe. The myth of Europa, then, has been used to present discourses on Europe – discourses that we can find even in its institutional form at the heart of the European Union: Europa appears on banknotes,<sup>6</sup> and takes center stage at the European Parliament in Strasbourg,<sup>7</sup> a gift from Crete to the European Parliament in 2005. What philosophical-political discourses is the myth of Europa the support of, and what, if any, assumptions do they work with?

The myth is structured around three spaces that are ontologically distinct from each other: the meadow, the sea, and Crete, giving rise to three distinct movements, understood as three displacements in Europa's journey: rapture,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by G.C. Macaulay, edited by D. Lateiner, New York 2004; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Ch. Martin, New York 2004; Moschus, *Europa*, edited by M. Campbell, New York 1991.

<sup>3</sup> In some versions, as Moschus, Europa dreams the previous night that two continents in the form of two women, Libya and an unnamed one, attempt to each take the Phoenician Princess to their shore.

<sup>4</sup> P. Dethurens, "Europe, lieu-fantasme. Le mythe d'Europe dans l'histoire de l'art," in S. Gherva, F. Rosset (eds), *Lieux d'Europe*, Paris 2008, pp. 1-21.

<sup>5</sup> e.g., R. Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task*; D. Guénoun, Ch. Irizarry, *About Europe*.

<sup>6</sup> Detail of a 20 euros bank note, *The Face of Europa*, circulated in 2015, <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/euro/banknotes/europa/html/index.en.html>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Sculpture gifted by Crete to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 2005, *The Removal of Europa*, <https://www.strasbourg-europe.eu/l-europe-a-strasbourg/a-la-decouverte-de-l-europe-artistique/>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>8</sup> In this article, I privilege the term rapture, although 'abduction' is used in philosophical writings about the myth of Europa. 'Rapture' represents a more equivocal term, which encompasses two important dimensions of the myth of Europa. From the latin 'raptus,' it refers both to a process of transport, of being carried away, but also of rape. This ambiguity is then largely used in aesthetic representations, which overwhelmingly title their depictions of the myth as 'rpto' in Spanish, 'ratto' in Italian, 'rapt' in

rape,<sup>9</sup> and childbirth. It is, first, a story of rapture or abduction, of being torn away from the native land, which leads Europa to found another locus of politics through childbirth. This theme has been heavily explored in philosophical and aesthetic representations of the myth. Europe has been read, following the myth of Europa, as the non-territorialized community, as the political space par excellence: it is a community able to escape its particularity in order to ground the political, and, with it, justice. Europe, in this hegemonic reading, is the universalizable community: free from any single territory and capable of ceaseless transcendence. However, it is also, and necessarily so, a story of rape, conceived as a lived and bodily experience of suffering and violence.

This article argues that the movement of *rape* represents a stumbling block to discourses and representations of Europe as a universal or universalizable space. Indeed, the universalistic discourses on Europe departing from the figure of Europa can only take place if they repress the second movement, rape, either by disregarding it as a relevant experience, reading it through its (re)productive consequences – childbirth – or by rendering this violence necessary and desirable. On the contrary, a reading of the myth of Europa which takes Europa's rape as a bodily experience of violence and suffering, as feminist scholarship has insisted on,<sup>10</sup> reveals conceptualizations of Europe that radically challenge the patriarchal and colonial underpinnings of a discourse of Europe as universalizable.

This article works within three (methodological) boundaries. First, I am concerned with philosophical-political discourses of Europe, rather than with a socio-historical account of how the myth has been depicted throughout time. I connect discourses and representations that are historically and spatially diverse, but that, I contend, belong to the same regime of discourse, a patriarchal-colonial discourse on Europe. Second, the discourses that I am concerned with are specifically modern discourses. I do not engage with ancient depictions of the myth of Europa, as the philosophical-political discourses that this article begins with (through Guénoun and Gasché) rest on Modern assumptions and representations. An attention to ancient depictions would divert the attention away from discourses and towards interpretations, falling back into a socio-historical, rather than philosophical, analysis. Thirdly, this article is situated within the very philosophy of Europe that it grapples with, using mimicry as a feminist methodology<sup>11</sup> to uncover both the unthought of the philosophy of Europe and enrich it by contending with this unthought.

I begin by exposing the philosophical-political thesis of Europe as a universal space through the reading of the myth of Europa, by examining Gasché's and Guénoun's

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French, 'Raub' in German. Finally, one can witness the echoes of the word 'rapture' with other mythological foundations of (sexual) violence, such as the Rape of Sabine Women.

<sup>9</sup> This definition of rape is intentionally not juridical, as juridical definitions of rape have varied across time and space and prevents the feminist scholar to give one universal definition of rape. Instead, this article focuses on a definition of rape as lived experience, which involves suffering and violence. I am here contending that rape, including in imaginaries and images, is never a morally neutral concept.

<sup>10</sup> e.g., A. Phillips, *Our Bodies, Whose Property?*, Princeton 2013.

<sup>11</sup> e.g., L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London 1993.

renditions of the myth, which echo phenomenological understandings of a distinctly European politics – a thesis that disregards the rape of Europa as a relevant philosophical-political experience (section 1). I then consider how the movement of the rape of Europa has been used, depicted, and justified in aesthetic and philosophical representations. These representations repress rape as either desirable, erotic, and aesthetic, or as justified by its portentous (re)productive consequences. Expelling the violence of rape from the sphere of the political enables a discourse that is at once patriarchal, making Europa a peripheral subject of the political, and colonial, making Europa the image of an expansive universalism (section 2). I finish by considering alternative representations of the rape of Europa, that picture it as a bodily experience of suffering and feminist agency, including in its ambiguities. These representations, in turn, radically challenge the self-understanding of Europe as a universalizable space and provide other visualizations of a (feminist) political philosophy of Europe, as bodily, intersectional, and nonhegemonic imaginaries (section 3).

## SECTION 1. EUROPA'S TEARING AWAY: EUROPE AS THE UNIVERSALIZABLE SPACE OF POLITICS

The first movement in the narration of the myth of Europa appears as the most spectacular element. Europa, in this movement, is abducted by Zeus disguised as a bull and taken away from her homeland, Phoenicia (actual Lebanon), towards the immensity of the sea and the unknown territory of Crete. It has been beautifully described by storytellers of Europa. Read Horace's *Odes*, for instance: *Now in the dim night/she sees nothing but stars and waves./And as soon as she touches Crete,/powerful with its hundred cities, she exclaims:/"O Father! I who have lost the name of daughter,/overcome by frenzy, filial/affection foundered!/Whence and whither have I come?/A single death is too mild for a virgin's guilt.*<sup>12</sup>

The language is eloquent and conveys a powerful sense of distress and uncertainty towards the horizon. Ovid's depiction of the scene is as spectacular as Horace's, and even adds a covert sensual dimension to this rapture – a dimension we shall come back to –: *the princess dares to sit upon his back/not knowing who it is that she has mounted,/and he begins to set out from dry land,/a few steps on false feet into the shallows,/then further out and further to the middle/of the great sea he carries off his booty;/she trembles as she sees the shore receding/and holds the creature's horn in her right hand/and with the other clings to his broad back,/her garments streaming in the wind behind her.*<sup>13</sup>

This first movement of tearing away has been at the center of philosophical interpretations of the myth of Europa, especially in the emerging field of philosophy of Europe. Rodolphe Gasché and Denis Guénoun each begin their respective books on the

<sup>12</sup> Horace, *The Complete Odes and Satires of Horace*, trans. and edited by S. Alexander, Princeton 1999, Ode III, xxvii.

<sup>13</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses...*, § 1190-1200.

idea of Europe by referring to the myth of Europa as the (pre-)figuration of key conceptual themes of Europe. Both will draw different consequences out of this prefiguration, but the starting point reveals striking similarities in the figure of Europe.

In *About Europe: Philosophical Hypotheses*, Denis Guénoun suggests that *Europe is not the proper name of a land mass but the name of the abduction, of being torn away from a native land and of the crossing toward an unknown country in the west*.<sup>14</sup> Europe then represents the ‘passage to Europe’,<sup>15</sup> a constant movement towards the exterior. This is Guénoun’s first hypothesis: ‘*Europe*’ is one of the names of the return to the universal, which is to say, of the universal as a figure.<sup>16</sup> Europe, therefore, is first characterized by an expansion to the foreign, outside itself, carrying the ‘project of a world’.<sup>17</sup> We will come back to Guénoun’s further qualification of the myth, but it suffices to say that, in introducing the idea of Europe, the myth prefigures for him a drive towards transcendence, and a return to the *universal*.

Gasché, in *Europe, or the Infinite Task*, reads the myth of Europa in similar terms. He argues that the myth of Europa, and more specifically this moment of being torn away from a native land to an unknown land shows the structural transcendence of cultural particularity that characterizes the idea of Europe. Let us quote him at length: *The name itself names Europe’s origin in a movement of departure from everything native. It also establishes what the “essence” of Europe is: a relentless uprootedness that is always glancing far into the distance, being always already ahead of itself with the other. It is never a static and determined identity first, one that would subsequently open itself to the other – one whose remainders would prevent its full exposure. As a name, Europe then designates “nothing” but an originary separation from the native, a fundamental openness to the world, and an originary transcendence toward what it is not*.<sup>18</sup>

Gasché adds that this ‘originary separation from the native’ is the condition for Europe not to have a fixed identity, a particular identity that would be rooted in territories, cultures, or spiritualities. Europe, simply put, is the infinite movement towards its own exteriority and is thus a ‘universal idea’.<sup>19</sup> Europa’s body carries this movement towards the universal: its only noteworthy bodily characteristic is that it is a body that moves towards the unknown. Europe, therefore, is a territory outside of or beyond itself, characterized by the impossibility of having an identity to itself (a ‘relentless uprootedness’), which ‘sets itself apart from everything else’.<sup>20</sup> The myth of Europa thus exposes the European space as a unique philosophical space which repeatedly and in(de)nitely detaches itself from itself, in a ceaseless movement of transcendence towards the unknown. To the extent that this movement is

<sup>14</sup> D. Guénoun, Ch. Irizarry, *About Europe...*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> R. Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task...*, p. 14, emphasis mine.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

characterized by detachment, it is universal instead of being limited to a certain people: it welcomes all those who can abstract themselves from tradition in order to strive for what is not yet.

It is precisely this 'relentless uprootedness' which allows the political to be founded. Structuring discourses of the foundation of the political in Europe, especially in phenomenology, have conceptualized the birth of the political as a radical uprootedness and critique from tradition, a community (of philosophers) that interrogates community. These discourses are, not incidentally for Edmund Husserl and Jan Patočka, discourses about the origin of Europe in Greece. Husserl, in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, argues that the Greeks discover a new attitude, the 'theoretical attitude'.<sup>21</sup> This theoretical attitude is a fundamentally ethical and political attitude, because it consists in, for Husserl, the *universal critique of all life and life-goals, all cultural products and systems*.<sup>22</sup> The capacity for certain individuals to practise a theoretical attitude toward their tradition allows them to *revolutioniz[e] the whole culture* towards 'infinite tasks',<sup>23</sup> escaping the finitude of living particular communities. Likewise, Jan Patočka, in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*<sup>24</sup> and *Plato and Europe*,<sup>25</sup> describes political life in the following way:

*Political life as life in an urgent time, (...), this constant vigilance is at the same time a permanent uprootedness, lack of foundation. Here, life does not stand on the firm ground of generative community, it is not backed by the dark earth, but only by darkness, that is, it is ever confronted by its finitude and the permanent precariousness of life.*<sup>26</sup>

*This is that singular thing about Europe: as I told you, only in Europe was philosophy born in this way, in the awakening of man out of tradition into the presence of the universe, only in Europe, or better said, in what was the embryo of Europe–Greece.*<sup>27</sup>

Both citations show the remarkable proximity between the themes of the first movement of the myth of Europa – transcendence towards the absolutely foreign, uprootedness – and the structure of European politics according to these authors: a radically universalizable politics or a radical politics of universality. Europe is not characterized by a specific culture; or rather, the specific Greek culture already immediately tends towards a universal culture: it represents the community (of philosophers) that lives in its uprootedness, in its de-territorialization, in its de-communalization. Europe is the spiritual community of those torn away from their native lands, and the figure of Europa exemplifies and embodies this universalizable movement.

<sup>21</sup> E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, Evanston 1970, p. 285.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>24</sup> J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. by E.V. Kohák, edited by J. Dodd, Chicago 1996.

<sup>25</sup> J. Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. by P. Lom, Stanford 2002.

<sup>26</sup> J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History...*, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> J. Patočka, *Plato and Europe...*, p. 88.

These images of transcendence, traveling, discovery, adventure, have been heavily represented in aesthetic depictions of the myth of Europa. Three significant examples of these depictions can be respectively found in Crete's gift to the European Parliament, interestingly called *The removal of Europa*,<sup>28</sup> in Moreau's *L'enlèvement d'Europe*,<sup>29</sup> and in Valloton's *L'enlèvement d'Europe*.<sup>30</sup> First, the sculpture representing the abduction of Europa at the European Parliament in Strasbourg<sup>31</sup> shows a determined, joyous, and adventurous Europa: her hands, instead of gripping the bull's horn, are free, her hair floating in the wind. The bull seems non-threatening, and his tail is phallically turned towards Europa, foreshadowing their sexual union. Europa is in control of her uprootedness. In Moreau's painting<sup>32</sup> – which we will complicate later on –, Europa appears as serene and in control of her destiny. She faces the viewer, and solidly guides the bull, which becomes a mere **means** of navigation, instead of the initiator of the abduction.<sup>33</sup> Finally, in Valloton's *L'enlèvement d'Europe*.<sup>34</sup> Europa's face is not seen, but her bodily position suggests that she is in control and willing to be taken at sea. The horizon is blurred, unclear, but no sign of distress is to be found in the painting. The painting expresses the uncertainty of adventure as quite literally harmless.

In these visualizations of the political through the myth of Europa, it seems that the only movement that matters philosophically and politically is the abduction as the tearing which causes a space to open – the space between the homely and the unhomely. This space is precisely the space of the political, that is, of the universalizable attitude of self-critique, of 'looking-in.'<sup>35</sup> This opening seems intrinsically desirable and is not qualified as a violent process, i.e., as a process of coercion by the philosophers of Europe. Bodily and sexual characteristics are not what primarily matters here: those representations are solely concerned with the movement performed by the body itself, as if Europa represented a universal bodily experience of transcendence.

However, it soon becomes clear that the story does not and cannot stop at the mere bodily movement of transcendence. Denis Guénoun, in the opening of *About Europe: Philosophical Hypotheses*, recognizes that the abduction is followed by a rape, but immediately rationalizes it: *Europē did dream of an abduction, away from her native land, toward a foreign and unknown destination. But though it may have been "forceful," this abduction did not violate her: Europe was pulled away and did not resist. (...) To be snatched*

<sup>28</sup> Sculpture gifted by Crete to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 2005...

<sup>29</sup> Gustave Moreau, *L'enlèvement d'Europe* ou *Jupiter et Europe*, oil on canvas, 1868, <https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/50410000226>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>30</sup> Félix Valloton, *L'enlèvement d'Europe*, oil on canvas, 1908, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Enl%C3%A8vement\\_d%27Europe\\_\(Valloton\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Enl%C3%A8vement_d%27Europe_(Valloton)), 10 January 2026.

<sup>31</sup> Sculpture gifted by Crete to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 2005...

<sup>32</sup> Gustave Moreau, *L'enlèvement d'Europe* ou *Jupiter et Europe*...

<sup>33</sup> P. Dethurens, "Europe, lieu-fantasma..."

<sup>34</sup> Félix Valloton, *L'enlèvement d'Europe*, oil on canvas, 1908, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Enl%C3%A8vement\\_d%27Europe\\_\(Valloton\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Enl%C3%A8vement_d%27Europe_(Valloton)), 10 January 2026.

<sup>35</sup> J. Patočka, *Plato and Europe*..., p. 88.

*away from her native land is Europe's desire, something she longingly and passionately covets. Her desire comes as a surprise and frightens her— but it carries her away.*<sup>36</sup>

Let us break this fragment of discourse in two moments. First, Guénoun argues that abduction and rape are inextricably linked. The two movements are weaved together: Zeus abducts Europa in order to 'seduce' her, which translates into her rape. The 'relentless uprootedness' is accompanied in the myth of Europa by the rape: the immediate consequence of uprootedness is sexual violence. A discourse on rapture, then, to be complete, must take rape into account, as the other face of the abduction, both etymologically and narratively. However, Guénoun, by privileging the word 'abduction', deflates the meaning of sexual violence: it allows him to immediately argue that 'this abduction did not violate her'. The abduction, instead, was an expression of her secret longing, of her desire to be abducted, which ultimately neutralizes violence, in order to only retain this movement. What if Guénoun is mistaken in projecting desire and hence the irrelevance of violence in this dyad of rape and rapture? If we challenge this interpretation of the rapture of Europa as untouched by the violence of rape, do we also challenge the vision of politics as desirable transcendence, uprootedness, and universalizability? My contention is that a feminist reading of the myth of Europa renders inoperant a philosophical-political reading of the myth of Europa which disregards rape as a neutral movement, untouched by political significance. This political significance has been considered in a number of aesthetic representations of the myth, especially from the Renaissance onwards – let us consider how they have affected visions of the political in Europe.

## SECTION 2. EUROPA'S RAPE: PATRIARCHAL-COLONIAL VISIONS OF POLITICS

Unlike phenomenologists of Europe, painters, artists, and writers have sought to depict the rape of Europa and have considered it a crucial movement in the story of the figure of Europa. However, images are never neutral – the canonical visions of rape that have been made available by artists prove to be political, too, and convey, as I hope to show, a patriarchal-colonial image of politics. Indeed, major aesthetic representations since the Renaissance have depicted the horizon of rape as either erotic, making (sexual) violence desirable, or as necessary, justifying (sexual) violence through its politically (re) productive benefits. In this section, I examine these different depictions of rape and unveil the visions of politics that they perform. In an almost invisible shift, the movement of tearing away becomes a movement of expansion and territoriality, either through patriarchal (the territoriality over Europa's body) or colonial (the European conquest of new territories) motifs. Europe's universal movement of transcendence becomes an expansive universalism.

<sup>36</sup> D. Guénoun, Ch. Irizarry, *About Europe...*, p. 17.

## Rape as an erotic experience

The majority of the visual representations of the myth of Europe depict Europa right after she is abducted and right before her rape. This myth is therefore considered in the aesthetic realm as a *sexual* myth, that is, a myth in which the sexual dimension plays a crucial role. In particular, the contrast between the 'sheer sexuality of Europe-woman' and the 'animality of the bull', symbolizing primeval masculinity,<sup>37</sup> has been very productive for artists. However, the depiction of this couple, archetypal of the European representation of sexual difference (woman-passivity, man-activity; woman-humanity, man-animality...), has coincided with a clear political sexual differentiation. In cases that can be considered canonical, Europa's rape is described as an erotic, rather than as a violent enterprise; it is an event that Europa desires, although it looks like she does not. Recall Ovid's largely erotic depiction of a terrified Europa: *she trembles as she sees the shore receding/and holds the creature's horn in her right hand/and with the other clings to his broad back,/her garments streaming in the wind behind her.*<sup>38</sup>

André Chénier, an 18<sup>th</sup> century French poet, suggests the same inextricability of rape and sexual desire, making rape the sexual act *par excellence*, enabling Europa to become a true woman: *He says: "here is the shore." The hours, in this place/Have prepared her bed... He raises as a God./Detaches the beautiful foreigner's waistband./And the Virgin in his arms becomes wife and mother. (my emphasis)*<sup>39</sup>

To cite but one final example, Herodotus, in his *Histories*, attempts to rationalize the myth of Europa, including the event of her rape: *Now they say that in their [the Persians, whom the bull represents, according to Herodotus] judgment, though it is wrong to abduct women by force, it is folly to take vengeance for their rape, and the wise course is to pay no regard when they have been abducted, since it is evident that they would never be abducted if they were not themselves willing to go.*<sup>40</sup>

It is therefore clear, from these examples, that the violence of rape is underplayed by the patriarchal trope that women in fact secretly desire rape, an extremely pernicious aspect of representations of sexual violence.<sup>41</sup> These stories of the rape of Europa as an erotic enterprise have also been heavily represented in paintings. One cannot cite all these erotic depictions of the rape, but let us look closely at some of the most important ones. In Veronese's *Il ratto d'Europa*,<sup>42</sup> Europa, her breast bare, in a movement of abandonment, appears about to lose her innocence. The painting follows the

<sup>37</sup> B. Klocek di Biasio, B. Michalski, "The Myth of Europe in Art and European Identities. The Divided Memory of Europe – Will Europe Succumb to Disintegration?," *Politeja*, vol. 13, no. 44 (2016), p. 106.

<sup>38</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses...*, § 1200.

<sup>39</sup> The translation is my own. The full poem in French can be found here: <http://www.ipoesie.org/l-enlèvement-d-europe>.

<sup>40</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories...*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> H. Morales, *Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2007, p. 87.

<sup>42</sup> Veronese, *Il ratto d'Europa*, oil on canvas, 1580, <https://www.visitmuve.it/capolavoro/paolo-veronese-il-ratto-di-europa/>, 10 January 2026.

different movements of Europa's travel<sup>43</sup> and exposes the gradual detachment of Europa from her virgin maidens, towards her new status, as a woman, a mother, and a queen. The same motif can be found in Boucher's *L'enlèvement d'Europe*,<sup>44</sup> which depicts an extremely serene and once again, bare-breasted Europa before what awaits her. She is here also surrounded by her virgin maidens, whom Boucher painted with facial expressions of frivolity and amusement. Rape, therefore, acts as a ritual that symbolizes the honor bestowed upon Europa to become a queen, chosen by a man-god-bull. The climax of these suggestions is laid bare, however, in Titian's *Rapto de Europa*.<sup>45</sup> The main focus of the painting is Europa's body,<sup>46</sup> whose thighs are situated in the middle of the frame, suggesting the viewer to slide his gaze towards Europa's intimate parts, the *center* of the myth. Remarkably, this depiction of Europa's body is absolutely foreign both to Titian's other depictions of women, and to Renaissance's aesthetic norms to depict sexual difference. Europa, on the contrary, *functions outside the boundaries of usual female constraints. She is vastly more than a mere damsel in distress. Simply put, she is too much woman, too much sex, for one canvas to contain.*<sup>47</sup> What Roe suggests here is that Europa embodies sexual difference *par excellence*, the pure objectification of woman's body and its necessary voluntary surrender: Europa did not fight when her rape happened, *ergo* she is also living it as a desirable, albeit violent, experience. Titian's painting is impressive, extremely articulate, and one of the most popular and acclaimed that he produced. It manages, worryingly, to render rape aesthetically pleasing, a sublime visual experience. This is what Duncan, a feminist art historian, precisely denounces in *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History: The equation of female sexual experience with surrender and victimization is so familiar in what our culture designates as erotic art and so sanctioned by both popular and high cultural traditions, that one hardly stops to think it odd.*<sup>48</sup>

The eroticization of rape, one of the most violent bodily experiences one could suffer from, is then **one** image of this second movement of the myth of Europa, the image of violence as a desirable process. Let us now turn to a second hegemonic image of the rape of Europa, before analyzing the political underpinnings that they rest on: one that acknowledges the violence, but immediately justifies it with regards to its reproductive consequences.

<sup>43</sup> M. Wintle, *Europa and the Bull, Europe, and European Studies: Visual Images as Historical Source Material*, Amsterdam 2004, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> François Boucher, *L'enlèvement d'Europe*, oil on canvas, 1747, <https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/000PE000189>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>45</sup> Titian, *El rapto de Europa*, oil on canvas, 1559-1562, <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/collection/10978>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>46</sup> C. Roe, "Titian's Rape of Europa: The Posture of The Pose," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2005), p. 97.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> C. Duncan, *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History*, Cambridge 1993, p. 112.

## Rape as a (re)productive experience

I signalled earlier that the three movements – rapture, rape, and childbirth – are intricately woven together. If rape has been considered as an erotic act *per se*, it has also been read through the third movement, childbirth. Let us recall that from Europa's abduction, her brother Cadmus is propelled to look for her around the earth. The oracle of Delphi tells him to stop his quest and instead found a city.<sup>49</sup> He founds Thebes, bringing the Phoenician alphabet, and with it, writing, to the Hellenic world – considered as the birth of civilization as such. From Europa's rape, three sons are born: Minos, Rhadamantys, and Sarpedon. All three will come to carry extraordinary lives as powerful kings and, in the afterlife, as judges of the Underworld (one cannot but note, here too, the inextricability of justice and politics, as in Patočka's philosophical proposition). The rape of Europa, then, is instrumental to civilization, and thus intrinsically useful: it serves to produce and to birth civilizations altogether. Europa becomes a motherland,<sup>50</sup> allowing the European continent to become the (re-productive) space of civilization. This reading of rape and abduction as moments of change is a commonplace in mythology,<sup>51</sup> but enables a distinctive discourse on Europe as the foundation of civilization through this myth.

Horace, in his *Odes*, ends his narration of the myth of Europa by Venus's praise of Europa's crucial position: *Venus stood by, treacherously smiling,/and her son,/with bow unbent. "Refrain!" said she,/when her mirth had sufficiently subsided,/"Refrain from this anger and passionate railing./This odious bull/shall soon present his horns to you that you/might shatter them. You do not know you have/become the wife of Jove invincible./Stop sobbing!/Learn to sustain your great fortune/with dignity! Soon a part of the world/shall bear your name.*<sup>52</sup>

Two elements are worth noting. First, Venus recognizes the pain that Europa is experiencing, both at the prospect of her abduction and the uncertainty that she is feeling with respect to what awaits her, both geographically and sexually. There is little doubt that the abduction and the rape to come are a violent experience for Europa. However, on the other hand, Venus represses this experience by justifying it through the honor granted to Europa: *a part of the world/shall bear your name*. Europa will suffer, but she will also found the continent that will be at the vanguard of civilization.

<sup>49</sup> R. Graves, *Les mythes grecs*, trans. by M. Hafez, Paris 2002, p. 435.

<sup>50</sup> B. Challand, C. Bottici (eds), "Myths of Europe," in *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory, and Identity*, Cambridge 2013, p. 105. many scholars emphasize the symbolic and emotional deficit inherent in the construction of Europe. European citizens do not feel attached to European institutions, which are often perceived as part of a gray, Brussels bureaucracy. For some, this is the inevitable result of a process of political integration, understood as the spillover effect of economic imperatives; for others, it is the consequence of the abandonment of a truly federalist project in the early 1970s. Subsequently, the EU became a "regulatory state" (Majone 1996)

<sup>51</sup> H. Morales, *Classical Mythology...*, p. 87.

<sup>52</sup> Horace, *The Complete Odes and Satires of Horace...*

André Chénier, in his poem, also insists on the possibilities that the rape of Europa opens for civilizations. Jupiter reassures an extremely distressed Europa: *Crete, famous island, is the shore which awaits./It has even nourished me. And there, too, your destiny/ Promises great kings to you, sons of our union.* (Translation is my own).

There is, thus, a striking similarity between the territoriality over Europa's body as a territory that can be conquered and the territoriality of Europe as a continent, which can be founded, but which can also conquer in its turn. Europa as a territory has to be displaced and taken in order to found a new space, the European space. Rape is a necessary step towards Europa's transformative journey (from virgin to mother), but more importantly, towards the continent's future. Europa's body is the instrument, the vessel of politics, of displacement and thus of foundation of the political altogether. She has to perform this movement, this originary suspension, for Europe as the continent of civilization to emerge. Rape, here too, is recognized as violence, but is immediately repressed in the name of something more important: the political, mainly embodied by the masculine figures of Cadmus, Minos, Sarpedon, and Rhadamantys. Europa, too, becomes queen, but it is Zeus who confers her this status. Sexual difference, here again, is encoded in the following terms: Europa-woman prepares and grounds the political but is not its founder. Sons and brothers owe this political space to Europa's suffering, but this suffering is not what matters – the sons and brothers, do.

### **Patriarchal-colonial visions of the political: sexual difference and Europe's universalism**

Close attention to the movement of rape within the myth of Europa, therefore, expands the initial qualification of Europe as transcendence that Gasché and Guénoun were proposing. Rape reveals not only transcendence as a political act, but transcendence as a violent political act, and immediately rationalizes it or represses it by expelling violence from the center of the political. (Sexual) violence is not taken as its own phenomenon, but rather as either the desirable corollary or the necessary foundation of politics. Because Europa's body is the site of violence, she becomes, in the same movement, a corollary of the political or its foundation, but not its subject. Europa, as a feminine figure, is rendered irrelevant: either her body is a vessel or it is a desirable territory, but she remains a peripheral subject of the political. This is what Luce Irigaray means by sexual difference: 'Woman' is the 'remainder'<sup>53</sup> of Western philosophical and political categories. 'Woman' *represents a place, but becomes a thing.*<sup>54</sup> She occupies a liminal philosophical position: she founds the political but is rendered irrelevant as soon as the political subject is founded. This movement is exposed by the myth of Europa: the rape of Europa, and its consequence (motherhood), is the *cause of the self-cause of man*,<sup>55</sup> the

<sup>53</sup> L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference...*, p. 10. For a full development of Irigaray's dialectical critique of Western patriarchal Modernity through Woman as a remainder, see L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by G.C. Gill, Ithaca 1985.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

political. 'Woman' is rendered invisible twice: by the repression of her violent experience, and by her forgetting, her dissolution as the 'envelope', the 'container'<sup>56</sup> of the political.

Reading the rape of Europa as desirable and as useful, then, is a patriarchal tale of the repression of 'Woman' out of the political sphere. Europa is a gendered subject: she is defined and portrayed by her sexual qualities and by her reproductive capacity. However, in aesthetic representations and discourses of the rape of Europa, rape exceeds its primary, patriarchal function. It serves as a political tool of violence, as an image of violence. 'Woman', therefore, is more than the empirical reality of patriarchalism: it functions as the oppressed term of the political. This hypothesis is exemplified in aesthetic depictions of the myth of Europa, which, by encoding sexual difference, thereby encode *political violence in Europe* or *as Europe*, especially in its colonial form. This makes the images of Europa a material demonstration of María Lugones' thesis that coloniality and gender form indeed a system.<sup>57</sup> The Myth of Europa hints at the constitution of representations and practices of sexual difference as necessarily interlinked with the imposition of colonial violence as a system of power. As Lugones points out, this system of power itself creates *another* gender system for colonised bodies<sup>58</sup> – a system which is invisible in reading the Myth of Europa, which only renders visible the white body of Europa. Europa, in this sense, acts as a metonymy *both* – and this must be held together – for the process of colonisation (the exercise of violence *onto* other bodies) and for patriarchal domination (the exercise of violence *on* her body). Let us take three aesthetic examples of the substitutability that Europa's body enables: Titian's *Rapto de Europa*,<sup>59</sup> Rembrandt's *The abduction of Europa*,<sup>60</sup> and Moreau's *L'enlèvement d'Europe*.<sup>61</sup> Titian's painting is the culmination of his famous *poesie*, its 'seal',<sup>62</sup> a series representing scenes of mythology. The *poesie* were dedicated to Felipe II, King of Spain between 1556 and 1598, at the heart of the Spanish colonization, genocide, and conquest of the Americas. The motif of travel, migration, and transcendence, represented in the movement of the abduction, is clearly appealing for Titian. However, Titian's choice is not to paint solely Europa's abduction as movement, but, as I argued earlier, Europa's abduction is an inherently erotic and sexually charged experience. She is represented in a position of total sexuality and abandonment. How, then, can we read this eroticization of rape through the context of this painting? My hypothesis is that a substitutability occurs in the figure of Europa: she is the embodiment of a violence that,

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> M. Lugones, "Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System", *Hypatia*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2007), pp. 186-219.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>59</sup> Titian, *El rapto de Europa*...

<sup>60</sup> Rembrandt, *The abduction of Europa*, oil on single oak panel, 1632, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103QS8>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>61</sup> Gustave Moreau, *L'enlèvement d'Europe ou Jupiter et Europe*...

<sup>62</sup> A. Georgievska-Shine, "Titian, 'Europa', and the Seal of the 'Poesie,'" *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 28, no. 56 (2007), pp. 177-185.

because it is desired, should not be taken seriously. Representing the rape as violent instead of erotic would have propelled an entirely different discourse of Europa, one that contends with the violence of the colonization process, which Titian does not put forward. Colonial and patriarchal justifications thus concentrate in Europa's body, in her capacity to represent violence and its immediate invisibilization. Rembrandt's painting exhibits the same colonial motifs.<sup>63</sup> His painting is inspired by Titian,<sup>64</sup> and his patron, Jacques Specx, was also an agent of colonization: as one of the most important Dutch merchants of his time, he founded and directed the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Dutch Company of Oriental Indias). Rembrandt's choice and rendition of the theme, reflects his patron's identity: Europa is dressed in traditional, civilized, decent Dutch clothes and is taken away towards the sea, which built Jacques Specx's career. The scene that Rembrandt describes is peaceful: no trace of violence in this journey, but the serenity of Europe's confidence in the bull, which, through a curious metonymy, becomes Europe as a political-colonial subject. Finally, Moreau's *L'enlèvement d'Europe* is displayed the same year as the Universal Exhibition in Paris, in 1867. The 1867 Exhibition celebrates Europe's triumph in the world, especially through its powerful means of navigation. Jupiter the bull (which actually resembles a centaur) appears as precisely Europa's vessel. Europa's serenity that we were describing earlier takes a new face: it is the face of Europe's triumph in its colonial expansion – a triumph reflected in the clear Orientalist tone of the painting.<sup>65</sup>

The movement of transcendence, which Guénoun and Gasché identify with Europe's drive towards worldhood, becomes, in both historical and aesthetic circumstances, a colonial project, in an imperceptible shift. It is a transcendence that does not acknowledge its inner violence by repressing Europa's body, and therefore gives way to erotic or harmless depictions of European patriarchy and colonialism. Here is Europa's substitutability, then: 'Woman' refers to the denial of the experience of the oppressed term, may it be in the gendered subject or the colonial subject. Europa's face, therefore, is multiple, overlapping, and contradictory: it represents at once the body on which violence is exercised (patriarchal politics) and the vessel of this violence (colonial politics). An attention to sexual difference shows that the seemingly universal movement of transcendence representing Europe has to be problematized: if we take the violence of rape seriously, this transcendence appears as a necessarily violent experience, a violence that Europe as a political space has performed, but also that subjects have experienced. Depicting transcendence as violence, then, enables us to uncover both Europe's violence, but also violence in Europe, opening the way to another (feminist) political philosophy of Europe.

<sup>63</sup> Rembrandt, *The abduction of Europa...*

<sup>64</sup> M. Wintle, *Europa and the Bull, Europe, and European Studies...*, p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> P. Dethurens, "Europe, lieu-fantôme. Le mythe d'Europe dans l'histoire de l'art..."

### SECTION 3. EUROPA'S FACES: MULTIPLYING VISIONS OF THE POLITICAL

What if we, as contemporary interpreters of the myth, decide not to indulge in patriarchal representations of rape, either as a desirable or as a necessary experience? What does it mean, to represent rape today, and to use a story of rape as a cultural symbol of Europe and of the European Union? Which political intuitions do alternative representations of the rape of Europa give us? This section argues that representing rape as a lived experience of suffering opens the door to a critique of domination in Europe without justifying or rationalising violence, hence giving space for new (feminist) subjectivities to emerge. This, in turn, provides the basis for a feminist political philosophy of Europe as an embodied, intersectional, and nonhegemonic pledge.

#### Rape as a lived experience: critiquing European violence

Rape, in feminist scholarship, is documented as one of the most visceral experiences of suffering.<sup>66</sup> The aim of this article is not to contend that there is one universal experience of rape, a single definition that encompasses what sexual violence is across cultures and across time.<sup>67</sup> However, one cannot deny that any experience of sexual violence, whether it qualifies juridically as 'rape' or not, involves a degree of suffering, and that this experience has been heavily gendered across History, and especially so in modernity. The various interpretations and representations of the myth of Europa have tended to either repress the violence part of the story, or to depict it on patriarchal terms. Titian's *El Rapto de Europa* provides a clear example of it: the look on Europa's face is terrified of what is to come, showing that she clearly anticipates coercion, and that Titian recognizes the primal foundation of the political on violence. However, this violence is sublimated, rather than acting as an acknowledgment of Europa's bodily experience.

Alternatively, some representations of the myth of Europa, especially contemporary ones, have sought to depict the violence contained in the myth of Europa. Primal violence figures at the center of these representations, and not incidentally, those representations carry strong political messages. Let us take two examples of this. First, the German artist of Jewish descent Max Beckmann paints in 1933, the year the Nazis officially come into power, *Der Raub der Europa*.<sup>68</sup> There is no doubt that the event is of a profound violence for Europa: her body is in a position of suffering, her face clearly shows her distress. The bull, instead of being white and innocent, is brown – a distinctly Fascist color – and his expression, unlike those of the bulls depicted in Boucher, Titian, and so on, leaves no doubt about his intentions. Europa wears a yellow bracelet on

<sup>66</sup> A. Phillips, *Our Bodies, Whose Property?....*, p. 36; J. Bourke, "A Deed of the Darkest Violence": Rape and the Emergence of Sadism in Australian Psychiatry, 1920-1950'.

<sup>67</sup> M. Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*, London–New York 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Max Beckmann, *Der Raub der Europa*, watercolor, 1933, <https://www.eao-otzenhausen.de/en/die-akademie/kunst-und-kultur/pinakotheek/die-idee-europa/01-max-beckmann>, 10 January 2026.

her arm, symbol of Jewish oppression. As Dethurens comments, this painting is set in no place – instead, Europa’s body is the place of struggle and suffering,<sup>69</sup> a territoriality that is yet to be conquered by the bull. As we see, this painting expresses a profound political concern for the violence perpetrated – and to come – by the Nazis, and the choice of the rape of Europa enables Beckmann to express this political concern. Violence cannot be erotic, or justified, to express such things – it has to be blatant, and Europa’s suffering embodies it. A second example: Themis Veleni, in her article “The ‘in-between’ element of the Europa and the Bull myth: responses by contemporary Greek artists (2002-2018) to the myth’s politicisation by the EU”,<sup>70</sup> presents different contemporary Greek depictions of the Eurozone crisis and the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. Here again, Greek artists use the myth of Europa to represent the politically induced suffering of austerity and people on the move, and this violence, once again, is blatantly exposed. For instance, a painting by Alekos Levidis takes Valloton’s tranquil painting of the *Abduction of Europa*,<sup>71</sup> which depicted transcendence towards the unknown, and politicises it.<sup>72</sup> Europa’s gaze toward the horizon becomes a gaze that denies the suffering happening all around her: climate change (and the recent Greek floods make this painting even more concerning), the drowning of thousands of people at sea, and perhaps, too, the demise of a civilization that had always thought of itself as the vanguard of the world. Through this painting, the artist radically challenges any reading of the myth of Europe as a simple story of travel: Europa’s status of a happy ‘migrant’ (or colonizer), is contrasted with forced migration and her ignorance of it.

From these two examples (but there are more<sup>73</sup>), it is clear that the tone has changed from previous depictions of the myth of Europa. My contention is that representing the rape of Europa as an experience of suffering opens the possibility of rethinking the political discourses around the figure of Europe. These representations describe another vision of Europe, one in which violence *is* part of the political, and is at the heart of Europe’s experiences as a continent. The story of Europa, therefore, cannot only be a story of foundation, of displacement, and of happy transcendence. It is also a story of violence, and representing this story enables discourses that critique European domination, may it be towards women’s bodies, migrants and people on the move, or any oppressed minority, as in Beckmann’s painting.

<sup>69</sup> P. Dethurens, “Europe, lieu-fantôme. Le mythe d’Europe dans l’histoire de l’art...”

<sup>70</sup> T. Veleni, “The ‘in-between’ Element of the Europa and the Bull Myth: Responses by Contemporary Greek Artists (2002-2018) to the Myth’s Politicisation by the EU,” *Image & Text*, no. 36 (2022), pp. 1-25.

<sup>71</sup> Félix Valloton, *L’enlèvement d’Europe...*

<sup>72</sup> Alekos Levidis, *The Abduction of Europa*, oil on canvas, 2015-2018. Source: Veleni, Themis. “The ‘in-between’ Element of the Europa and the Bull Myth: Responses by Contemporary Greek Artists (2002-2018) to the Myth’s Politicisation by the EU,” *Image & Text*, no. 36 (2022), pp. 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2022/n36a18>.

<sup>73</sup> One could also refer to Max Ernst’s *Europe after the Rain II* (1942), which depicts a post-World War II Europe as a *non-place*.

## Imagining Europa's agency

In the same movement, this critique of domination, which contends with the bodily violence exercised against subjects, allows these subjects to have agency. Feminist depictions of the myth of Europa in the last fifty years have been proposing other images of Europa. Let us take, here again, two examples. First, *Huguette's Mirror*, by Carol Rama,<sup>74</sup> depicts a triumphant Europa on the bull's back. She stands up on the bull's back and takes more space than the bull – she is, in fact, the center of the painting. Her body resembles the Prehistoric Venuses, and her eyes are wide open. The painting of the myth of Europa by an artist such as Carol Rama, who has been known for her visceral, sexual, bleak, and resolutely feminist depictions of life, makes of Europa an especially powerful symbol. Paul Preciado, who curated an exhibition dedicated to Carol Rama at the MACBA in Barcelona in 2014, writes that *Carol Rama's images exceed the framework of Modernity's sexual intelligibility* (translation my own).<sup>75</sup> The political power of this sexual, upfront, and voluntary Europa most definitely challenges passive representations of the rape of Europa and enables another gendered subjectivity to come forth. A second example: the 2021 exhibition on “Titian: Women, Myth and Power” at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum also invited artists in residency, Mary Reid Kelley and Paul Kelley,<sup>76</sup> to provide their interpretation of the myth of Europa. The result is striking: it is a nine-minute surrealist film giving a voice to Europa's lived experience, both as someone towards whom violence is exercised, but also as a subject capable of reflexivity, autonomy, and political action – especially in the colonial legacy that the figure of Europe embodies. Subjects are ambiguous, and this is what the film has sought to express, according to Jenni Sorkin, in an essay accompanying the exhibition: *The video is set in the Fenway Court of the Gardner Museum, meticulously remodelled by Patrick Kelley as a burned-out, dystopian warzone, a post-human landscape graffitied with the words “LET GO LET GO LET GO” (...). That message is twofold: it is aimed at Europa's plight as the hapless victim of Jupiter, (...), and also addresses her allegorical role in the entrenched colonial histories that she represents.*<sup>77</sup>

Here are some of the sentences that she utters:

*Is this some kind of an inquest? said Europa, testily. I'm actually a lawyer, said Europa, briefly. (...)*

<sup>74</sup> Carol Rama, *Huguette's Mirror*, oil on canvas, 1983, <https://www.schirn.de/en/press/carol-rama/>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>75</sup> P. Preciado, ‘Carol Rama for ever (2/2)’, *Peau de Rat* (blog), 27 May 2013, at <https://archive-magazine.jeudepaume.org/blogs/beatrizpreciado/2013/05/27/carol-rama-for-ever-suite-et-fin/index.html>, 29 December 2025.

<sup>76</sup> Mary Reid Kelley and Paul Kelley, *The Rape of Europa*, film, 2021, <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/mary-reid-kelley-patrick-kelley-rape-europa-gallery-guide>, 10 January 2026.

<sup>77</sup> *Mary Reid Kelley & Patrick Kelley: The Rape of Europa Gallery Guide*, at <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/mary-reid-kelley-patrick-kelley-rape-europa-gallery-guide>, 29 December 2025.

*What about me, said Europa, Eurocentrically. /I don't want to be a mom, Europa muttered. (...)*

*"I AM A VICTEM", Europa butchered. (...)*<sup>78</sup>

These representations, of violence and of feminist subjectivity, but also of ambiguity, agency, and accountability, open up a new reflection for a (feminist) political philosophy of Europe, one that radically challenges simplistic, universalistic representations of Europe inferred from the myth of Europa.

### **About Europe: three feminist philosophical hypotheses**

These representations complicate the philosophical discourses on Europe that were introduced at the beginning of this article. Can Europe still be represented as a universalizable space and as an originary movement of transcendence, simply through the movement of Europa tearing away from her homeland? Can Europe still be represented as the foundation of politics and justice, simply through the movement of Europa as bearing children? I contend that coming to terms with the violence of the second movement, the rape of Europe, puts these discourses in crisis. It is the repression of rape as a violent bodily experience, either through its eroticization or its consequentialist justification, that enables the discourse of the universal experience of transcendence or the 'tearing away' of Europa to become a colonial discourse of expansion. This is made clear in the repression of violence in Titian's and Rembrandt's paintings, and in Beckmann's exposition of the violence of Nazi expansion throughout Europe. Likewise, it is the repression of rape through productive childbirth that enables the discourse of 'tearing away' to become a discourse of the foundation of universal politics, while simultaneously obscuring the exclusion of 'Woman' from the meaningful participation in the political and in justice. If one wishes to read the idea of Europe through the myth of Europa, then, as Gasché and Guénoun propose, one has to contend with its inner violence, and the ways in which aesthetic representations of the myth have acted as supports to discourses of justification of violence in European history. In conclusion, I want to sketch out three hypotheses for a feminist political philosophy of Europe, that the myth of Europa uncovers: (a) a feminist political philosophy of Europe will be a bodily philosophy, concerned with how discourses are inhabited, lived, and performed by bodies; (b) this bodily philosophy would have to be intersectional, concerned with visual and political transfers, as chains of equivalence; and (c) this intersectionality would necessitate a diversification of images of Europe.

First, a feminist reading of the myth of Europa attempts to politicise this discourse of Europe as a universalizable space and questions it from Europa's body. Unveiling the importance of Europa's bodily experience in the myth of Europa uncovers Europe's 'universality' of politics, justice, and de-territorialization as a particular universality, one that represses the identities it needs. For instance, the becoming-expansion of the movement of tearing away – Europa's abduction – has to be contended through the

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

bodily violence exercised against Europa. Taking this bodily suffering seriously, instead of justifying it through its benefits (bringing civilization, for instance), or through its desirability and aestheticization, enables another image of Europe to come forth, one in which violence is at the heart of politics, has to be contended with, and critiqued. This violence is exercised towards subjects of the political. This means that these subjects are always particularized within social structures, may they be gendered, racialized, or colonial. Therefore, to avoid any universalistic claim on the idea of Europe, a feminist political philosophy of Europe can start from this: the lived experiences of bodies. The idea that bodies are the site of politics,<sup>79</sup> can be a guiding frame for a feminist philosophy of Europe, the importance of which is made clear in the rape of Europa.

Secondly, the feminist analysis of the myth of Europa has shown the inadequacy of reading the rape of Europa only through its gendered dimension. Patriarchal politics are uncovered in reading the rape of Europa carefully, but other dimensions have appeared as well, most notably the colonial imaginaries and justifications at stake in mobilizing the rape of Europa through its consequences and aestheticizations. The different aesthetic representations, such as Titian's, Rembrandt's, but also Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley's, show that visual transfers occur between political questions. Europa's body is the site of politics in different, sometimes conflicting ways: it can represent colonial suffering or colonial justification; a patriarchal retelling of rape or a feminist coming to terms with its violence; and above all, every representation of the myth of Europa suggests a vision of (embodied) politics: her position, her agency, reflect either political assumptions or political choices, but images cannot be considered neutral. Therefore, a feminist political philosophy of Europe would have to consider Europa as a gendered subject, amongst other things. This means that sexual difference – the political attention to the heritage of differentiation of the terms 'woman' and 'man' in Europe –, rather than a tool uncovering only feminist questions, is actually a feminist methodology that provides a valuable point of entry unto other political questions, such as race and coloniality in the case of the myth of Europa. Sexual difference is therefore sexual difference-amongst-other-things, where *being a part should be incompatible with belonging in every part*,<sup>80</sup> and therefore preventing the reification of any identities. I relate this to Mouffe's idea of chains of equivalence as political strategies:<sup>81</sup> oppressed terms and experiences, through visual and experiential transfers, can form another political praxis, rooted in the recognition of multiple identities within a political strategy of non-domination.

Thirdly, this intersectional methodology, which considers identities as fragmented, overlapping, sometimes incompatible, leads to a third necessity: the diversification of images, discourses, and voices, related to Europe. These images, counter-discourses,

<sup>79</sup> e.g., M. Foucault, *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, New York 2003; J. Butler, *Precarious Life the Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London 2006; R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed., New York 2011.

<sup>80</sup> J. Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, Bloomington 1992, p. 82.

<sup>81</sup> C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, Abingdon–New York 2005.

voices, always exist, but they are marginalized, rendered invisible, repressed, and oppressed in philosophical-political discussions of Europe. For example, Carol Rama's rendition of the myth of Europa is much less famous than Titian's *Europa*, but Rama's rendition balances Titian's depiction and radically questions it. A feminist political philosophy of Europe, therefore, should work towards the visibilization both of oppressive structures and of counter-discourses on these oppressive structures. Denouncing the rape of Europa as eroticized and justified in the history of art would go hand in hand with the crafting of alternative images and imaginaries of Europe/a, contending both with the violent processes at stake and the possibilities of imagining other bodies, other subjects, as *Europa*. This, I believe, is in line with philosophical discussions of myths and images of Europe: there is not one image of Europe (as a universalistic space, as the space of the political, as the cradle of civilization, or even as a feminist space of emancipation) – but there are images that respond to and contest each other (like Vallotton's and Levidis', or Titian's and Mary Reid Kelley and Paul Kelley's), and that communicate with each other in and on this contested space. The myth of Europa, and the political-philosophical intuitions that we derive from it, should not be univocal, and therefore should not be hegemonic. It allows the commentator on the idea of Europe, and therefore also of the images of Europe, to remain at a critical distance from a particular formation of a European imaginary, to not take any for granted. Europe should, instead, remain the space of contesting interpretations – the only possibility of keeping Europe as a political space, through its difference-in-itself.<sup>82</sup>

## CONCLUSION. NEW SYMBOLS FOR AN OLD CONTINENT

This article has explored the repression of the movement of the rape of Europa in the myth. Starting from a hegemonic discourse on Europa-Europe, which infers, from the myth, Europe as a universalizable space of transcendence, and hence as the universal space of justice and the political, the article has brought to visibility the political question of the rape of Europa. The depiction of the rapture of Europa has coincided, in its aesthetic representations with an invisibilization of the violence of rape as a lived, gendered experience. This aesthetic invisibilization has enabled a discourse justifying violence in European politics, especially in the colonial experience, either as a desirable or as a necessary movement. Instead, contending, through a feminist lens, with the violence of rape, enables us to put forth another link between violence and politics in the European space, which cannot justify violence, and hence simultaneously becomes a critique of domination and the possibility to imagine other subjects of the political. Those counter-images of Europe then give rise to responsibilities when one wishes to think about Europe in specifically feminist political-philosophical terms. The myth of Europa obliges the feminist philosopher of Europe to respond to exigencies of grounding philosophical-political discourses in the materiality of bodies, of bringing attention

<sup>82</sup> J. Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe...*, p. 24.

to the intersectional, multiple bodies of the political, and hence of multiplying images and discourses about Europe, creating other imaginaries, and keeping those imaginaries open to their transformations, metamorphoses, and endless interpretations. Myths, as any (hi)story, should not be monogenealogies,<sup>83</sup> but should instead keep philosophical discourses open to their own uncertainties and endless contestations.

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