SUMMARY

In this dissertation I present the work of Nigerian feminist sociologist, Oyèrònké Oyèwùmí, as a decolonising force having the power to disrupt sub-Saharan African philosophy, Western feminist thought and discourses on African decolonisation in highly significant and surprising ways.

Sub-Saharan African feminist voices have been largely absent from philosophical discourse in the Western and African worlds, but also from global western feminist debates and the discourses on the decolonisation of Africa. This has been explained in African scholarship to be due to the fact that the two struggles that Africa feminism has pledged allegiance to, namely on the one hand, the liberation of African people from colonialism, neocolonialism and racism and, on the other hand, the empowerment of African women, are often construed as two logical opposites on account of the fact that feminism is regarded as a recolonising force that is alien to Africa. In this sense African feminism’s fight for the rights of African women is commonly made out to be ‘unAfrican.’ African feminist voices are therefore excluded from, and understood in opposition to, African intellectual discourses that centre indigenous and decolonising knowledges. At the same time, on the other hand, on account of the fact that Western feminism still often unthinkingly applies Western conceptual frameworks to African contexts and thereby erases African knowledges and realities, African feminists most often formulate their feminist theories outside of or independent of Western feminist theory. Their allegiance to the struggle of the decolonisation of Africa therefore keeps African feminists outside of global feminist debates, while, at the same time, their commitment to bettering the plight of women, leads to their exclusion from many systems of African knowledge production that centre indigenous or decolonising knowledges. Moreover, African philosophy is still mostly a masculinist venture and does not engage with issues of gender and accordingly African feminists mostly choose other disciplines within which to express themselves. African feminism and African philosophy are therefore to a large extent regarded to be two mutually exclusive domains of knowledge.

In this dissertation I show how Oyèwùmí, as African feminist, who is rendered inaudible and invisible in the dominant processes and sites of sub-Saharan knowledge production and Western feminism, occupies a unique epistemological position that is rich in resources to subvert, rupture and enrich these dominant systems of knowledge. I make this argument by placing Oyèwùmí in dialogue with sub-Saharan African philosophy and with Belgian feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray.

In Chapter One, ‘Gender and difference in the work of Oyèwùmí’, I start my philosophical reading of Oyèwùmí’s work by providing a detailed overview of her main arguments and by offering a critical discussion of her position. Oyèwùmí famously argues that gender was created in Yorùbá society through the intertwined processes of colonial rule in Nigeria, the translation of Yorùbá into English and the continued dominance of Western knowledge production. Accordingly, gender was not an organising principle in precolonial Yorùbá society and ‘woman’ as a social category did not exist. The gender duality of Western thought is for Oyèwùmí inevitably oppressive in so far as it is embedded in a range of hierarchical dichotomies beginning with mind/body, but including also culture/nature and public/private,
among many others, in terms of which the second and inferior terms are mapped onto the feminine, making of it the negative of the masculine who represents rational subjectivity. In contrast to the colonial/modern gender system, Oyewumi claims bodily differences did not translate into social and ontological hierarchies. Accordingly, the shared fact of having a female body therefore did not automatically lead to women forming one class and occupying the same positions. Persons were classified into social groups depending on the roles they took up in society and the kind of people they were, and these things were not determined by sexual body type. Oyewumi thus posits a world in which bodily differences exist without implying hierarchy. In this order society is organised on the basis of the non-dichotomous and fluid concept of seniority. I read Oyeuwmi’s work to suggest that in precolonial Yoruba society, subjectivity was construed in plural and dynamic ways and gender did not translate into dichotomy or hierarchy. Woman, as a static being determined by her body, confined to certain positions in society and defined as the natural, passive, material negative to the category of man (to which culture, the active and the mind are attributed), did not exist.

I also defend Oyewumi against critics who argue that she essentialises Yoruba society by understanding it in opposition to or completely outside of Western reality. However, I argue that her insistence on Yoruba difference is necessary for the Yoruba world to emerge as a world in its own right, rather than being reduced to an insignificant subplot of western history. In other words, I argue that by asserting the radical difference of the Yoruba world, she subverts the universality that the West claims to represent and thereby attempts to displace the West as/at the centre of history.

In Chapter Two, ‘Oyewumi and the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought’, I relate Oyewumi’s work to the sub-Saharan tradition of African philosophy. I argue specifically that the work of Oyewumi could be read to share core metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan African philosophical tradition, even though she does not state this explicitly. Many sub-Saharan African philosophers have been formulating and exploring what is argued to be the relational or communalistic, fluid and non-dichotomous metaphysics underpinning sub-Saharan African cultures and thought. These philosophers assert in different ways and with regard to many different sub-Saharan African cultures the existence of a fluid, relational and non-dichotomous worldsense where identity is not constituted antagonistically, but relationally. I interpret Oyewumi’s gendertheory to be embedded in such a relational construction of the subject and the world. In other words, when she asserts the ‘ungenderedness’ of the precolonial Yoruba world, I understand her to base this on her understanding of subjectivity as deeply relational, fluid and non-dichotomous and therefore not reducible to the strict, essentialised, hierarchical and stable gender dyad of the colonial/modern gender system. Reading Oyewumi’s work as sharing certain central metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan philosophers working on relationality in sub-Saharan African societies, makes it possible to develop Oyewumi’s thought in dialogue with this tradition and yields new insights on her position. It highlights that her rejection of gender as indigenous Yoruba category has to do with her understanding of how the subject is constructed. As a feminist position that reflects the same indigenous ‘African’ metaphysical assumptions that are explored in sub-Saharan African philosophy, her work bridges the rift between firstly, African culture and feminism, and secondly, between African philosophy and African feminism. However, I also show how Oyewumi’s theory poses certain powerful challenges to the implicitly masculine
In Chapter Three, ‘African feminism as decolonising force’, I make the central argument of this dissertation, namely that African feminist philosophy has the potential to be a key decolonising force in African societies of today. I argue that the work of Oyèwùmí highlights how the imposition of Western gender systems on Yorùbá society played a central role in the workings of colonial power. She shows how gender is not just one of the areas of life affected by colonialism, but that colonial power operated and effected its domination through the imposition of certain constructions of gender just as it operated through the imposition of certain constructions of race. Oyèwùmí argues that the process of the racialisation of the ‘natives’ was inseparable from the creation of woman. I use the work of Argentinian feminist philosopher María Lugones to make the argument that this could be interpreted to mean that the hierarchical categories of man and woman are a creation of colonial modernity which is regarded as a mark of being human which the ‘native’ had to internalise in his struggle to become ‘civilised’ or to be recognised as a human being by the coloniser. Subjectification under colonial rule therefore required the adoption of the hierarchical man/woman dichotomy as it existed in the colonial/modern gender system. The absence of this hierarchical gender relationship among the precolonial Yorùbá rendered them barbaric in terms of colonial logic. The implication of this is that transforming the gender systems in sub-Saharan African societies is a crucial step in decolonising these societies and that sub-Saharan African feminism thus has an important role to play in the process of decolonisation of Africa. Oyèwùmí’s work shows that the racialisation and inferiorisation of the ‘native’ cannot be fully grasped and appreciated if the role of sexualisation as central aspect to the logic of colonialism is ignored. On this basis I argue that the work of Oyèwùmí offers a deep critique of the discourses pitting women’s emancipation against African culture in so far as she links her African feminist project directly to a dislodging of western power structures in Africa. Her work underscores the necessity of further feminist projects revealing, analysing and resisting the ways in which gender structures, dynamics and constructions serve coloniality in African societies.

In Chapter Four, ‘Irigaray and Oyèwùmí in dialogue about the sacrificial metaphysics of the western symbolic order’, I ask what a dialogue between Oyèwùmí and Irigaray can produce. I explore in more detail and through the lens of the work of Luce Irigaray the charges leveled by Oyèwùmí against Western society and thought and the gender dynamics that flow therefrom. Similar to Oyèwùmí, Irigaray criticises Western culture for forgetting sexual difference. She argues that in Western society the seemingly ‘neutral’ position of gender equality can be said to be modeled on an idealised masculine subjectivity, and requires that women denounce that which makes them different from men. This means that man sets the standard for sex equality, and that equality includes occupying a similar position to man. Irigaray is interested in the symbolic structures in which this order is founded. She shows how the inequality that women suffer on socio-political levels in Western society is rooted in a specific metaphysical or symbolic system that underpins society. Irigaray’s in depth analysis from a western feminist perspective supports the claims of Oyèwùmí and deepens our understanding of her criticism of the colonial/modern gender system. The overlaps between Irigaray and Oyèwùmí flow from the fact that both of them are trying to articulate a position or envision a reality beyond Western metaphysics. However, I show how Oyèwùmí ’s work calls attention to the ways in which Irigaray’s
arguments sometimes remain enmeshed in the logic of the Western symbolic, despite her attempts to escape it. I make this argument specifically with regard to the themes of subjectivity, and the relation between gender and race in the sacrificial logic of western metaphysics.

In Chapter Five, ‘Motherhood’, I explore the theme of motherhood in the work of Oyèwùmí in light of the arguments that I made in the previous chapters. I show how, in the work of Oyèwùmí, the mother is a figure through which the dichotomies central to the colonial/modern gender system and dominant western thought (body/mind, immanence/transcendence, nature/culture etc.) are deconstructed in striking and powerful ways. I interpret and theorise Oyèwùmí’s understanding of motherhood against the backdrop of sub-Saharan philosophy on relationality and in dialogue with Irigaray. By putting Irigaray and Oyèwùmí in dialogue, I show how on the one hand, Irigaray’s nuanced philosophical analysis of motherhood again helps one to understand the significance and strength of Oyèwùmí’s work on a metaphysical level. On the other hand, I argue that Oyèwùmí’s work is more concrete and at the same time more radical than Irigaray’s work and raises interesting questions with regard to the work of Irigaray. I also argue that precolonial Yorùbá motherhood, as theorised by Oyèwùmí, is a powerful notion that poses challenges to western feminism, to sub-Saharan African philosophy and to oppressive constructions of motherhood in African cultures. Lastly, I argue that precolonial Yorùbá motherhood as theorised by Oyèwùmí is a concept that has the potential to contribute to the struggle of decolonisation in African societies in so far as it has the potential to undermine the sacrificial and oppressive logic of colonial modernity at its foundations.