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## THE FEMINIST AS OTHER<sup>1</sup>

SUSAN BORDO

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**Abstract:** Over the last twenty-five years, feminist theory has been at the forefront of cultural, disciplinary, and philosophical critique. Yet feminists continue to be represented as engaged in specialized projects of concern only to women or, at best, those interested in “gender issues.” I argue that this is not merely a bit of residual sexism, but a powerful conceptual map which keeps feminist scholarship, no matter how broad its concerns, located in the region of what Simone de Beauvoir called “the Other.” I expose, critique, and explore the consequences of this construction in several contemporary intellectual arenas.

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The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality, the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: ‘You think thus and so because you are a woman’; but I know that my only defense is to reply: ‘I think thus and so because it is true,’ thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: ‘And you think the contrary because you are a man,’ for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. . . . [T]here is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to several people who aided me in the research, conceptualization, and final preparation of this piece. Rachel Hertel, my research assistant at LeMoyne College, helped me compile the resources and discussed the project with me in its early stages. Edward Lee read and commented on the first, meandering and confused drafts, and helped me to see the ideas about feminism and Otherness at the center of it all. As I was writing the next draft, I heard Anna Antonopoulos speak at LeMoyne College; her talk was the source of several wonderful details, previously unknown to me, about how de Beauvoir has been philosophically marginalized, which enabled me to flesh out more fully (and colorfully) my argument concerning the construction of de Beauvoir as Other. Lynne Arnault read a later version (which had rebelliously begun to meander again!) as I was about to deliver it at the 1994 Eastern SWIP Conference (Binghamton, New York, April) and got me back on track, restoring my focus and providing invaluable advice on how to bring out and clarify my argument. For the final version, I thank Leslie Heywood for several astute observations and suggestions.

the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1974) H. M. Parshley, trans. Vintage Edition, xvii–xviii.

## I

As cultural critics, feminist theorists have produced powerful challenges: to dominant conceptions of human nature and political affiliation, to norms of scientific, philosophical and moral reason, to ideals of spirituality, to prevailing disciplinary identities and boundaries, to established historical narratives. Yet how often do we see feminist theorists listed alongside Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, Taylor, Kuhn, Fish, and so on, as critics and re-shapers of “The Disciplines,” “Science,” “Philosophy,” “Culture”? The answer is: rarely. More usually, we encounter a version of Edward Said’s formulation:

There are certainly new critical trends . . . great advances made in . . . humanistic interpretation . . . We *do* know more about the way cultures operate thanks to Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Stuart Hall; we know about how to examine a text in ways that Jacques Derrida, Hayden White, Frederic Jameson, and Stanley Fish have significantly expanded and altered; and thanks to feminists like Elaine Showalter, Germaine Greer, Helene Cixous, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Gayatri Spivak it is impossible to avoid or ignore the gender issues in the production and interpretation of art.<sup>2</sup>

So: Because of Barthes, Derrida et al, we “know more” about culture and texts; “Thanks to feminists,” we are unable to “avoid” or “ignore” gender. For my purposes in this paper, I don’t want to make too much of the construction of the European, male contribution as that of increasing *knowledge*, while feminists apparently have simply harrassed and harassed to the point where they cannot be “avoided” or “ignored.” I know that Said didn’t *really* mean to suggest that unfortunately reverberant contrast. Nor do I wish to emphasize, although I would point out, the inaccuracy of Said’s description of Gayatri Spivak, who is as much concerned with issues of race and class as with gender. What I *do* want to insist on, however, is the importance of Said’s juxtaposition of “gender” – what all feminists are concerned with, in his description – and the general interrogation of “culture” and “text” attributed to the men. The juxtaposition situates feminists as engaging in a specialized critique, one which cannot be ignored, perhaps, but one whose implications are contained, self-limiting, and of insufficient general

<sup>2</sup> *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia, 1991), pp. xiv, xv.

consequence to amount to a new knowledge of “the way culture operates.”

In this paper, I will argue that this construction is not merely an annoying bit of residual sexism, but a powerful conceptual map which keeps feminist scholarship, no matter how broad its concerns, located in the region of what Simone de Beauvoir called “the Other”. De Beauvoir argued that within the social world, there are those who occupy the unmarked position of the “essential,” the universal, the human, and those who are defined, reduced and marked by their (sexual, racial, religious) differences from that norm. The accomplishments of those who are so marked – of the *Other* – may not always be disdained; often, they will be appreciated, but always in their special and peripheral place, the place of their difference. Thus, there’s “History” and then there’s “Women’s History,” and “women’s history” – unlike military history, for example – is located outside what is imagined as “history” proper. There are the poststructuralist critiques of reason which are of “general” interest, and then there are the feminist critiques, of interest to those concerned with gender. Said’s juxtaposition of those writers who teach us “about the way culture operates” and those who make it “impossible to avoid or ignore gender issues” applauds the feminist – as Other.

As de Beauvoir recognized, gender is not the only cultural form of Otherness. I had a non-Jewish colleague who, having found out that I am Jewish, became unable to have a conversation with me that didn’t revolve around the brilliance, historical suffering, or sense of humor of “The Jewish People.” On one occasion, the conversation turned to our mutual love of Broadway show tunes. For a moment, I thought I would be spared; but then he piped: “And what did you think about *Fiddler on the Roof*? I bet you loved that one!” Every time black authors are quoted only for their views on race – expertise about “general” topics being reserved for white males, who are imagined to be without race and gender – the Otherness of the black is reproduced. On college campuses, the spectre of Otherness has dogged efforts to establish multicultural curricula, efforts which continually get represented *not* as an attempt to bring greater historical accuracy and breadth to a eurocentric curriculum, but as subordinating “general” educational ideals to the special needs and demands of particular groups.

Otherness thus has many faces. De Beauvoir’s insight, indeed, is probably the single most broadly, deeply and enduringly applicable insight of contemporary feminism. It has shaped numerous critical discourses – on race, colonialism, anti-semitism and heterosexism, for example. Yet ironically, (although perhaps predictably), de Beauvoir’s profound philosophical contribution itself fell victim to the dynamic that she describes. To begin with, a zoologist (rather than a philosopher) was chosen to do the English translation of *The Second Sex*. “*L’expérience*

*vecue*” – lived experience, a central category of phenomenological philosophy – was rendered as “woman’s life today.” Only men do philosophy; women are fit to write, if at all, about the facts of our own condition. This construction of *The Second Sex* pursued the book throughout the press’s marketing and the book’s subsequent critical reception. *Time* even headlined its review with the birth announcement: “Weight: 2¾ Lbs,”<sup>3</sup> in one brilliant – if unconscious – stroke associating the book with the materiality of the body, the heavy immanence that is woman – “weighed down by everything peculiar to [her],” as de Beauvoir puts it – and woman’s “natural” role of child-bearer. And so de Beauvoir, that most unnatural of creatures, a woman philosopher, was put in her rightful place. Today, admittedly, we are more apt to see *The Second Sex* as having theoretical and philosophical import, but only for feminism; its more general cultural influence remains unacknowledged. Thus, *The Second Sex*, generally remembered as a book “about women,” is consigned to play the role of gendered Other in our narratives of philosophical history. The truth of de Beauvoir’s insight becomes borne out, ironically, by the marginalization of de Beauvoir herself.

De Beauvoir was not the last feminist to suffer such marginalization. Said’s construction of the contemporary feminist as engaged in gender critique *rather* than general cultural critique, far from being anomalous, is typical of the role assigned feminism in our collective narratives of intellectual challenge and change. Consider, for example, the twentieth century conception of the body as socially constructed. Such notions, as I argue in *Unbearable Weight*<sup>4</sup>, owe much to feminism – not only to the scholarly writings of academic feminists, but to the more public challenge to biological determinism and essentialism which was raised by the activist feminism of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s – the demonstrations, the manifestos, the consciousness-raising sessions, the early, popular writings. At the center of “personal politics” was the conception of the body as profoundly shaped, both materially and representationally, by cultural ideology and “disciplinary” practice. It is Foucault, however, who is generally credited (perhaps with a backward nod to Marx) as the father of “the politics of the body”:

Another major deconstruction [of the old notion of “the body”] is in the area of sociopolitical thought. Although Karl Marx initiated this movement in the middle of the 19th century, it did not gain momentum until the last 20 years due to the work of the late Michel Foucault. Marx argued that a person’s economic class affected his or her experience and definition of “the body” . . . Foucault carried on these seminal arguments in his analysis of the body

<sup>3</sup> Anna Antonopoulos, “Simone de Beauvoir and the Difference of Translation,” *Institut Simone de Beauvoir Bulletin*, 14 (1994), pp. 99–101.

<sup>4</sup> Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. See especially pp. 15–42.

as the focal point for struggles over the shape of power. Population size, gender formation, the control of children and of those thought to be deviant from the society's ethics are major concerns of political organization – and all concentrate on the definition and shaping of the body. Moreover, the cultivation of the body is essential to the establishment of one's social role.<sup>5</sup>

Feminist theorists, too, have exalted the philosophical contribution of the father and imagined our feminist mothers as in a more primitive, naive association with the body. Linda Zerilli, for example, while crediting Foucault for having shown us “how the body has been historically disciplined,” describes Anglo-American feminism as holding an “essentialist” view of the body as an “archaic natural.”<sup>6</sup> In my own 1980 review of *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, I pointed out that Foucault's notion of a power that works not through negative prohibition but proliferatively, producing bodies and their materiality, was not itself new.<sup>7</sup> But I had in mind here Marcuse's notion, in *One-Dimensional Man*, of the “mobilization and administration of libido.” Not for a moment did I consider the relevance of the extensive feminist literature on the social construction and “deployment” of female sexuality, beauty and “femininity” – for example, the early work of Andrea Dworkin:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.* And of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one.

In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement . . . From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. It is vital to the economy, the major substance of male-female differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting and deodorizing herself. It is commonly and wrongly said that male transvestites through the use of makeup and costuming caricature the women they would become, but any real knowledge of the romantic ethos makes clear that these men have penetrated to the core experience of being a woman, a romanticized construct. (emphasis Dworkin's)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Don Hanlon Johnson, “The Body: Which One? Whose?,” *Whole Earth Review* (Summer 1989), pp. 4–8, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Zerilli, “Rememoration or War? French Feminist Narrative and the Politics of Self-Representation,” *Differences* 3.1 (1991), pp. 2–3.

<sup>7</sup> “Organized Sex,” *Cross Currents*, XXX(3), 1980, pp. 194–98.

<sup>8</sup> *Woman-Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974), pp. 113–114.

Is this “essentialism”? A view of the body as an “archaic natural”? Or is the collapsing of Dworkin *on* female bodies with Dworkin *as* a female body responsible for our inability to read her as the sophisticated theorist that she is? When I wrote my review of Foucault, I was working on a dissertation historically critiquing the duality of male mind/female body. Yet, like the zoologist who translated *The Second Sex*, I only expected “theory” from men. Moreover – and here my inability to move beyond these dualisms reveals itself more subtly – I was unable to recognize *embodied* theory when it was staring me in the face. For in Dworkin’s work, as in feminist writing of the sixties and seventies more generally, theory was rarely abstracted and elaborated, adorned with power jargon, and made into an object of fascination in itself; rather, theory made its appearance as it shaped the “matter” of the argument. Works that perform such abstraction and elaboration get taken much more seriously than works which do not. Dworkin, to make matters worse for herself, has consistently refused to tame and trim her own materiality, to enact the cultural control of the flesh – through normalizing diet, dress, and gestures – that would align her with disciplined “mind” rather than unruly body.

But, as de Beauvoir argues, no matter how we dress ourselves or our insights, we will almost always be mapped into the region of the Other. Thus, when feminists talk about the discipline of the body involved in the construction of femininity, it is read as having implications only for women and the “peculiarities” of their bodies. When Foucault, on the other hand, talks about the discipline of the body involved in the construction of the soldier, it is read as gender-neutral and broadly applicable. The soldier-body is no less gendered a norm, of course, than the body-as-decorative-object. But this is obscured because we view the woman’s body under the sign of her Otherness while regarding the male body – as de Beauvoir puts it – as in “direct and normal relation to the world.” The ironies engendered by this are dizzying. The male body becomes “The Body” proper (as in: “Foucault altered our understanding of the body”) while the female body remains marked by its difference (as in: “Feminism showed us the oppressiveness of femininity”). At the same time, however, the male body *as* male body disappears completely, *its* concrete specificity submerged in its collapse into the universal.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while men are the cultural theorists *of* the body, only women *have* bodies. Meanwhile, of course, the absent male body continues to operate illicitly as the (scientific, philosophical, medical) norm for all.

<sup>9</sup> I want to thank Leslie Heywood for this last point, made to me in personal communication.

## II

When we turn to cultural narratives about philosophical modernity and “postmodernity,” the ghettoization of feminist insight is even more striking. From de Beauvoir herself – the *first* philosopher, I would point out, to challenge the notion that there *is* one “human condition” which all persons share – to feminist critiques of modern science, to contemporary feminist skepticism over the continuity and unity of “identity,” feminist theorists have been at the forefront in challenging the presumed universality, neutrality, and unity of the modern “subject.” The challenge began with the specific exposure of gender, as feminists pointed out that “Man” really *is* man, albeit covertly. And as an embodied, en-gendered being, he could no longer be imagined to have an elevated, disinterested “God’s-Eye View” of Reality. Thus began the widespread questioning, throughout the disciplines, of the established paradigms of truth and method which had set the standards for philosophical and ethical reasoning, scientific rigor, literary and artistic values, historical narrative, and so on.

This questioning has hardly been the canon-bashing “assault on reason” that contemporary polemics make it out to be. With few exceptions, the point has been to reveal what dominant models have *excluded* rather than to attack the value of what they *have* offered. Yet, a sort of cultural castration anxiety continually converts any criticism of canonical thought into the spectre of Lorena-like academic feminists, widely lopping reason, logic, and Shakespeare right off at the quick. For those who suffer from this anxiety – and this includes women as well as men – there appear to be only two choices – phallocentrism or emasculation. But for many feminist critics of modernity (and I include myself here), de-throning the king is *not* equivalent to cutting his head off. Rather, sharing power is what it’s all about.

Is it really, as Martha Nussbaum has charged<sup>10</sup>, a wholesale “assault on reason” to suggest that Western notions of rationality have developed around the exclusion of qualities associated with the feminine, or with “ways of knowing” developed by women in the domains allotted to them? Or is the elaboration and reconstruction of “reason,” engaged in by male philosophers from Aristotle and Hegel to James, Dewey and Whitehead, off limits to women? Perhaps the problem is that feminists, unlike these male reformers of “reason,” have invoked a suppressed or unacknowledged *feminine* alterity as a way into criticism and reconstruction of dominant forms. So, for example, Iris Young’s study of pregnant embodiment suggests that pregnancy may make uniquely available (although it does not guarantee) a very

<sup>10</sup> “Feminists and Philosophy,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 20, 1994, pp. 59–63.

different experience of the relationship between mind and body, inner and outer, self and other than that presumed by Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and other architects of the modernist subject.<sup>11</sup> Young's point, it should be emphasized, is not to glorify pregnancy but to interrogate the modernist model, to force it to confront its particularity and its limitations. Similarly, Sara Ruddick develops the notion of "maternal thinking"<sup>12</sup> not in celebration of a distinctively and exclusively female mode of rationality *or* in order to "assault" and abandon traditional concepts of reason, but to diagnose and remedy what they lack.

There is no denying, however, that feminism has contributed to – although it hardly is solely responsible for – a generalized cultural skepticism about claims to knowledge and truth, particularly when they stake out applicability to the whole of human history and experience. This is not the place to sort out the insights and excesses of this skepticism, which takes many forms and is the product of many forces. Clearly, however, it was historically inevitable that centuries of universalizing talk about "human beings" and "human nature" would become suspect, and that new questions would begin to be asked. Just *who* is being described? Who does not fit in? What elements of human experience are foregrounded? Which neglected? Set in motion by gender critique, the "subject" had in fact begun a shattering "great fall," and many now believe that it can never be put together again.

Some contemporary feminists, in the tradition of both Hume and various Eastern conceptions, question even the unity and stability of identity in the individual. In distinction to Humean and Eastern conceptions, however, recent feminist conceptions complicate the question of personal identity with a new understanding of the diverse and mutable elements that make up our *social* identity, as in Maria Lugones' influential piece on the "world-travelling" subject:

I think that most of us who are outside the mainstream of, for example, the U.S. dominant construction or organization of life, are 'world-travelers' as a matter of necessity and of survival. It seems to me that inhabiting more than one 'world' at the same time and 'traveling' between 'worlds' is part and parcel of our experience and our situation. One can be at the same time in a 'world' that constructs one as stereotypically Latin, for example, and in a 'world' that constructs one as Latin. Being stereotypically Latin and being simply Latin are different simultaneous constructions of person that are part of different 'worlds' . . .

The shift from being one person to being a different person is what I call 'travel.' This shift may not be willful or even conscious . . . [I]t is not a matter of acting. One does not pose as someone else, one does not pretend to be, for

<sup>11</sup> "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* (January 1984), pp. 45–62.

<sup>12</sup> *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

example, someone of a different personality or character or someone who uses space or language differently than the other person. Rather one is someone who has that personality or character or uses space and language in that particular way. The 'one' here does not refer to some underlying 'I.' One does not *experience* any underlying 'I.'<sup>13</sup>

I will refer to these ideas again later in this paper. For now, I only want to point out how rarely Lugones', and other feminist critiques of personhood and identity are represented as originary "postmodern" moments. No, it is Derrida who "deconstructs the 'I'"; Lugones represents the Other who stands outside the "I," the "difference" of the Latina living in Western culture. And when "the end of the regime of Man," "the death of the Subject," and so forth are described as comprising a turning point, crisis, or "postmodern moment" of general cultural significance, feminism is constructed – even by feminists such as Pamela McCallum – as a grateful "little sister" rather than generative "mother" of the transformation:

There can be no doubt that the theorizing of those writers who have defined the postmodern movement – Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rotry, among others – has produced a number of arguments which offer a substantial challenge to the assumptions of traditional Western philosophy . . . [e.g.] that human reason is homogeneous and universal, unaffected by the specific experiences of the individual knower; . . . that knowledge is generated from a free play of the intelligence and is not bound up with or implicated in forms of power and systems of domination.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning feminism's relation to these challenges, McCallum suggests that feminists would surely "give assent" to them because they support a critique of male bias in philosophy; she then raises the question as to whether or not feminists should "appropriate" postmodernism. Here we have yet another cultural re-working of the "Adam gave birth to Eve" fantasy, in which the questioning of the universality and neutrality of philosophical reason *precedes* rather than is *produced* by feminism. McCallum does not seem to recognize that feminist epistemologists such as Sandra Harding were questioning the presumptions of Western philosophy before *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* appeared, or that numerous feminists were exploring knowledge as "implicated in forms of power and systems of domination" at the same time as

<sup>13</sup> p. 11–12, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, number 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 3–20.

<sup>14</sup> p. 431, Pamela McCallum, "The Construction of Knowledge and Epistemologies of Marked Subjectivities," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol 61, Number 4, Summer 1992.

Foucault was developing his ideas. In McCallum's characterization, the broad, general, theoretical challenges to culture originate with Rorty and Foucault; feminism "gives assent." The originary contribution of feminism is constructed as the more limited critique of exposing sexism and masculinism in philosophical traditions.

Sometimes, this construction will involve serious mis-readings of feminist work. My own book on Descartes, for example, discusses the "masculine" nature of seventeenth century science only in the last of its six chapters, and mentions Nancy Chodorow's ideas about gender difference just twice, once precisely in order to *distinguish* my use of developmental categories from Chodorow's. Yet the book is frequently read, by critics and sympathizers alike, as an application of Chodorow. It is worth quoting a description from the introduction to my book, and then a recent characterization, in order to illuminate more sharply just what is involved in the kinds of mis-readings feminist work is prey to:

My use of developmental theory focuses, not on gender difference, but on very general categories – individuation, separation anxiety, object permanence – in an attempt to explore their relevance to existential and epistemological changes brought about by the dissolution of the organic, finite, maternal universe of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In an important sense the separate self, conscious of itself and of its own distinctness from a world 'outside' it, is born in the Cartesian era. It is a psychological birth – of 'inwardness,' of 'subjectivity,' of 'locatedness' in time and space – generating new anxieties and, ultimately, new strategies for maintaining equilibrium in an utterly changed and alien world.<sup>15</sup>

*The Flight to Objectivity*, then, attempts to locate the work of Descartes and the Cartesian view of the self in the context of a general cultural transformation, the "birth of modernity." As to Chodorow's ideas about gender difference, I indicate in *Flight* that I consider her work suggestive, and potentially applicable to understanding changes that took place during the Enlightenment. But I stress that such historical application has yet to be made, and is certainly not attempted in the pages of my own book. Yet, here is how my argument was recently described by Margaret Atherton:

*The Flight to Objectivity* makes heavy use of categories of contemporary feminist theory, especially those provided by Evelyn Fox Keller and Nancy Chodorow, to illuminate Descartes' theory, as [*Bordo*] believes it affects women. (emphasis mine)<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *The Flight To Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 1987), pp. 6–7.

<sup>16</sup> p. 45, *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, Vol 92, No 2, Fall 1993), emphasis added.

Elsewhere, Atherton repeats the idea; the point of my argument, she insists, is to show how Descartes' arguments have "given rise to a decline in the status of women."<sup>17</sup> Now to suggest, as I do, that the birth of modernity has a significant gender dimension – in separation of the self from the maternal universe of the middle ages and Renaissance – is hardly equivalent to an argument about the effects of Cartesianism "on women." To read the text in this way is, rather, to view it through the template of gender-duality. Under that template, the name "Chodorow" (whose work focuses on developmental differences between males and females, and has been charged with "essentializing" those differences) claims the imagination of the reader and simply won't let go. The result, unfortunately, is that "women's difference" becomes re-inscribed as a marking of the text, which becomes a work about the exclusion of women rather than about a transformation in the philosophical conception of self and world.

The feminist whose work has perhaps suffered most from such inscriptions is Carol Gilligan. Now, Gilligan appears on the face of it, of all contemporary feminists, to have most been given her due, to have achieved a *central* place on the intellectual landscape, even to have been recognized and celebrated outside the boundaries of academia. It might seem, moreover, as though any marking of *In A Different Voice* as about "women's difference" is the fault (or intent) of the work itself, as the title alone might suggest. This reading of Gilligan is only partially accurate, however. To be sure, the book's contrast between two modes of moral reasoning is articulated in terms of gender difference. Thus, according to Gilligan, the privileging of abstract argument over assessments of particular, concrete situations is grounded in a "blueprint" of human interaction that is more characteristic of males than females. Because the "male" blueprint is atomistic, collisions between individuals are viewed as invitations to disaster, and must be rigorously guarded against – by abstract notions of "personhood" and "rights", among other things, which define clear boundaries around the individual and protect against collision. Women's blueprint, on the other hand, (as Gilligan argued) is relational. Here, the chief danger (what "disturbs the universe," if you will) is the fracturing of attachment, and the moral imperative is to restore human connection by a careful assessment of how to responsibly "mend" the fractures occurring in particular, concrete situations.

You will notice that I have not mentioned the word "care" in the foregoing description – which I will come to shortly. For now, I would emphasize that while Gilligan's critique is articulated in terms of gender difference, it would be a serious mistake to see its implications as "only"

<sup>17</sup> p. 20, "Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason," in Louise Antony and Carlotta Witt, *A Mind of One's Own* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), pp. 19–34.

involving gender. In the introduction to *In A Different Voice*, she writes that the chief aim of the book is to “highlight a distinction between two modes of thought . . . rather than to represent a generalization about either sex.” She stresses that the articulation of women’s perspective is not an end in itself, but propaedeutic to recognition of “a limitation in the conception of human condition.”<sup>18</sup> For “once women are inserted into the picture,” as Seyla Benhabib astutely points out:

. . . be it as objects of social-scientific research or as subjects conducting the inquiry, established paradigms are unsettled. The definition of the *object domain* of a research paradigm, its units of measurement, its method of verification, the alleged neutrality of its theoretical terminology, and the claims to universality of its models and metaphors are all thrown into question.<sup>19</sup>

Gilligan’s work has been extensively criticized by other feminists for “essentializing” a historically located, class and race-biased construction of female “difference.” And it is true that the book fails to raise questions about the generalizability of her findings, which were based on a limited and fairly homogeneous sample. The limits of her sample might have been taken, as Jane Martin points out, as calling for further research into the wider applicability of her hypothesis; instead, she was charged with racism and classism, and it was implied – without argument or demonstration – that the “different voice” was uniquely white and middle-class.<sup>20</sup> Arguably, the point here was not so much to challenge Gilligan’s findings, as to expose and protest (and not only in Gilligan’s work, of course) the unselfconscious slippage from white feminist experiences to universalizing talk about “women’s ways of knowing.” But, whatever their justice or injustice *vis-à-vis* Gilligan’s empirical generalizations or as a more generalized protest against bias in feminist research, such criticisms miss an important dimension of her work.

What such criticisms overlook is Gilligan’s heuristic use of gender alterity to expose the universalist pretensions of dominant norms and to envision alternatives. In terms of this aim, whether or not the proposed gender “difference” derives from biology or from socially constructed roles, whether it adequately reflects the situations of all women or an ethnically or class-specific construction of gender – these are not key issues. What gender difference here affords (as ethnic and other cultural differences can afford, as well) is a “way into” cultural critique. In terms

<sup>18</sup> *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> p. 178, *The Situated Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (N.Y.: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Jane Roland Martin, “Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Traps,” *Signs*, Vol. 19, #3, Spring 1994, pp. 630–657, p. 652.

of this potential, it is not surprising that a number of important feminist theorists, Benhabib among them, have used Gilligan's insights to mount a critique of the possessive individualism of liberalism, the autonomous, "unencumbered self" presumed in the ontological blueprint identified by Gilligan as the dominant (rather than "different") mode.

These cultural applications of Gilligan's work may be well-known to feminist philosophers. But when a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* surveyed academic work arguing for more relational, less "rights"-dominated models of the person and the state<sup>21</sup>, neither Gilligan herself nor Carole Pateman, Susan Moller Okin, Virginia Held, Iris Young, Nancy Fraser, Drucilla Cornell, or Seyla Benhabib were mentioned. This effacement of the general, cultural critique implicit in Gilligan's work and explicitly carried out in the work of numerous feminist political theorists is manifest, as well, in philosophy textbooks. A revised, 1994 edition of *Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives on Perennial Issues*,<sup>22</sup> for example, features a section on "State and Society." In that section, feminist political theory is represented by a piece by Alison Jaggar on "Political Philosophies of Women's Liberation" (emphasis added). "State and Society" *could* have included, in addition to Jaggar's very valuable piece, one of the many excellent feminist critiques of political liberalism. But the section was not conceptualized to allow for this. The presentation and argumentation regarding general political categories – "democracy," "libertarianism," "socialism," and "liberalism" – is reserved in the section for the "gender-neutral" (as it is presumed) scrutiny of four (male) non-feminists; the role of the feminist philosopher, on the other hand, is to represent the "difference" of women's situation.

What Gilligan's work *has* been publicly associated with, not surprisingly, is precisely that "difference" – the so-called "ethic of care." To some degree, this association has been facilitated by Gilligan herself. She tries to make it clear that she is *not* arguing that women are moral angels while men are unconcerned with helping others; her argument, rather (as I noted earlier) is that women and men have different ways of conceiving of "help," based on their different conceptions of what constitutes danger. But Gilligan's efforts to avoid re-inscribing a new version of the nineteenth century vision of woman-as-ministering-angel were hampered by her unfortunate choice of the term "ethic of care" to describe the female moral imperative. The suggestion that men do *not* "care" as much as women is immediately (and inaccurately) evoked. Moreover, the obvious and important connections to be made to the

<sup>21</sup> "Point of View: Clinton and the Promise of Communitarianism", p. A52, December 2, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Eds. E. D. Klemke, A. David Kline, and Robert Holinger (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

critique of the classical liberal model of the person become obscured. Unfortunately, the “ethic of care” swiftly became *the* category through which Gilligan’s work was socially defined, reducing the transformative potential of women’s “difference” to the familiar notion that we need more women to provide warmth and nurture in the workplace.

The fault, however, is not entirely Gilligan’s – as I hope this paper is helping to make clear. In a culture shaped by gender-dualities, there is a powerful inclination to “read” feminist work as re-inscribing those dualities. So, for example, Sara Ruddick’s concept of “maternal thinking,” despite Ruddick’s strong and clear underscoring that she is describing an ideal suggested by a particular kind of parenting *practice* (it’s thus not a contradiction in terms for a man to be a “maternal thinker”), continually gets read as “essentializing” a distinctively female perspective. More subtly and pervasively, as I have been arguing throughout this paper, feminist theory swims up-stream against powerful currents whenever it threatens to assume the mantle of *general* cultural critique rather than simply advocate for the greater inclusion or representation of women and their “differences.”

### III

In *Fire With Fire*, Naomi Wolf argues that in recent years a massive “genderquake” has occurred, sinking patriarchy into “deeper and deeper eclipse.”<sup>23</sup> In the wake of this quake, she argues, it’s time for women to stop complaining and start exercising our newly developed muscle. In the words of the Nike ad that she offers as a symbol of what she calls “power feminism,” women need to stop whining and “*just do it.*”

But Wolf is mistaken if she believes that the ability of women to “just do it” is itself evidence that patriarchy is in eclipse. Feminist philosophy is a case in point, and a particularly powerful and troubling one. As critics of Western culture, feminist philosophers have been “just doing it” for some time. Yet, as I have argued, we remain the Other in the self-conception of our discipline, in intellectual history generally, and even in narratives about the very changes that we brought about. To point this out is not to “whine” about how feminists have been “victimized” by their marginalization in cultural narratives, or to make feminists into the heroines of a revised, “feminized” cultural history. Frequently nowadays, feminist criticism is presented in such terms – by the popular media and by medial feminists like Wolf, Roiphe, Paglia and Sommers. But the depiction of feminist criticism as “victim feminism” assumes, as Freud assumed in asking his famous question,

<sup>23</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the Twenty-First Century* (N.Y.: Random House, 1993), p. 11.

that if women want something, it can only be for their sex, it can only be as the Other. This has been especially frustrating for those of us who have been drawn to feminist philosophy precisely for the vantage point it provides from which to analyze, evaluate, and participate in the transformation of *culture*.

In terms of this aim, it is imperative that we resist the ghettoization of feminist insight – e.g. at conferences, in anthologies, in the curriculum – and insist that feminist philosophy be read *as* cultural critique. More precisely, we need to insist that “gender theory” be read *for* the cultural critique that is implicated in it. This is no easy task. It demands vigilance – precisely because the struggle is not over *inclusion* (the liberal measure of female “power,” assumed by Wolf, Sommers and others) but over the cultural *meaning* of that inclusion. To make this distinction clear, let me provide an example. Several years back, I attended a national working conference on “The Responsibilities of Philosophers.” The only feminist philosopher in my small group session, I had talked at length about the history of philosophy, about how inadequate was any understanding of the Western philosophical tradition which did not examine the racism and sexism that have been elements in many philosophical conceptions of human nature and reason. To do so, I emphasized, is not about trashing Western philosophical traditions, but about bringing the study of philosophy down from the timeless heavens and into the bodies of historical human beings. Later, at the plenary session, my participation was reported as consisting of the suggestion that “we need to pay much more attention to hiring women and minorities.”

The salient point here is not that I wasn’t listened to, but that what was “heard” had been converted from cultural critique to simple advocacy for the “rights” of the Other. Constructed as advocacy for the “rights” of the Other, my remarks no longer impinged on the philosophical methods or identities of the men in my group. They could continue to exalt (and teach) the “Man of Reason” as the disembodied Subject of philosophical history, while presumably letting the women and minorities that they would hire take care of “gender and race.” Thus, the insights of feminist philosophy are kept “in their place,” where they make no claim on “philosophy proper.” The voices of “difference” are permitted to speak, and business continues to go on as usual. So, for example, it becomes perfectly possible for a philosopher to assign Gilligan for a special class session on “Women and Morality,” while continuing unselfconsciously and without remark to organize discussion around highly abstract and uncontextualized case studies.

In the case of more “postmodern” critiques, it has made an enormous philosophical difference that contemporary intellectuals have largely learned their lessons from the post-structuralist fathers rather than the feminist mothers. Freud’s allegory of the Primal tribe, which murders

the patriarch only to nostalgically institutionalize and reproduce the conditions of his reign, is interesting to think about here. The “fathers” of postmodernism are, after all, also the *sons* of Enlightenment Man, the inheritors of both his privileges and his blind-spots. They may be eager to prove their own manhood through rebellion against his rule. But do they know a different way of being?

Thus, while “Man” has been officially declared “dead,” like Freddy Kruger, he just keeps bouncing back. His pretensions and fantasies – the transcendence of the body, the drive toward separation from and domination over nature, the ambition to create an authoritative scientific or philosophical discourse, all of which have been extensively critiqued by feminist theory – have simply been re-cycled. The modern, Cartesian erasure of the body (“the view from nowhere”) has been traded, as I argue in *Unbearable Weight*, for a postmodern, Derridean version (the dream of being “everywhere”). The old model of man’s mind as the pinnacle of God’s creation has been replaced by the poststructuralist equivalent: human language as the ultimate architect and arbiter of reality. The analytic overseer of argument has been supplanted by the master of authoritative “theory.” And old forms of dominating and excluding others through professional jargon and obscurantism have merely been replaced by new forms of discursive elitism.

Thus, we see the unconscious reproduction of the “sins” of the (philosophical) fathers by poststructuralist sons not much closer than their fathers were to truly hearing the voice of women’s (or any other human) “difference.” As Jane Flax has put it:

Despite the rhetoric of “reading like a woman” or displacing “phallogentrism,” postmodernists are unaware of the deeply gendered nature of their own recounting and interpretations of the Western Story and the strategies they oppose to its master narratives. Postmodernists still honor Man as the sole author and principal character in these stories, even if this Man is dying, his time running out. They retell the contemporary history of the West in and through the stories of the three deaths – of Man, (his) History, and (his) metaphysics. Whatever women have done with and in all this (becoming past) time is “outside” by definition and according to the conventions of (their) story line. . . . [T]his absence or disappearance of concrete women and gender relations suggests the possibility that postmodernism is not only or simply opposed to phallogentrism but also may be “its latest ruse.”<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary feminists have not been immune to the re-cyclings of phallogentrism. Many of us may want to prove *our* manhood, too; it is,

<sup>24</sup> *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1990), pp. 214, 216.

after all, where academic “power” (and of course not only *academic* power) resides. Ignoring, dismissing, or denouncing whole generations of ambitious and imaginative feminist work (while remaining remarkably tolerant of the mistakes and omissions of male philosophers)<sup>25</sup>, some feminists have colluded in “the disappearance of women” of which Flax speaks.<sup>26</sup> In response, other feminists participate in their *own* disappearance. Sensing that general cultural critique is too risky, fearing charges of “essentialism,” racism, canon-bashing, and white-male trashing, we may try to protect ourselves by keeping ourselves small, tidy, and specific (or by not saying much of anything at all).

For some feminists, too, it appears as though any identification with women’s historical “differences” is equivalent to identification with victimhood and disempowerment.<sup>27</sup> For others, however, the “differences” of women’s experiences, racial and ethnic as well as gendered, remain a well-spring from which to draw cultural and philosophical critique, to imagine alternatives that are unavailable or muted in the histories that men have told about their experience. Consider, for example, two distinctive approaches to the cultural deconstruction of the “subject” represented by Derrida and Lugones. Derrida’s position is abstract and impersonal. “*I* do not select,” he has written. “The interpretations select themselves.” Here, while renouncing Cartesianism, Derrida perpetuates its controlling fiction that a person can negate the accidents of individual existence and speak with a purely philosophical voice.

In Maria Lugones’ critique, by contrast, the personal (and cultural) aspects of identity remain fully present, even as the unity and permanence of the self is challenged. Like Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “autobiography” of her constantly evolving identities of “skin, blood, heart,” Lugones’ account is vividly grounded in personal, often visceral experience. It stresses the concrete, social multiplicity rather than the abstract “disappearance” of the subject. The self is fractured because our social experience requires it of us – more from some than others; the

<sup>25</sup> See Martin (op. cit.) for an insightful discussion of this “discrepancy between our cordial treatment of the men’s theories and our punitive approach to the women’s” (p. 651).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Nussbaum (op. cit.), as well as the many discrediting attacks on feminist “essentialism” (see Martin [op. cit] for an excellent discussion of this). On the more popular front, Naomi Wolf gushes ecstatically about “the drama of women’s capturing male authority and power,” symbolized for her in the depiction, in commercial advertisements, of phallic objects “emerging . . . from *women’s* groins” (p. 29). Yet at the same time as she celebrates the cultural sprouting of the female phallus, she has no qualms about dismissing – without attending concretely to any of it – several decades of feminist writing.

<sup>27</sup> See my “Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Scepticism,” in *Unbearable Weight* for elaboration of this idea.

experience of “unity” of identity is nothing more than the privilege of being at home in the dominant culture, of feeling integrated within it. Nonetheless, the fractured self, who has been *forced* to learn to be a shape-shifter in foreign worlds, “as a matter of necessity and survival,” can teach important lessons about how to be a subject in playful, adaptable, non-imperialist modes.

My point here is not to insist that every philosopher adopt a more personal or anecdotal style. Rather, it is to insist that there is a philosophical issue at stake in the difference between Derrida and Lugones – two competing views of “the death of the subject,” if you will, reflecting the different “subjects” of history that each identifies with. This issue is effaced so long as only Derrida is viewed as speaking for “philosophy” and “culture,” while Lugones is taken to represent the voice of the Latina Other. If the rebellious sons had truly been listening to feminist voices – if they had been able to recognize feminist theory as not merely representing the “different” voice of Otherness but the authority of modes of being and knowing as historically pervasive if not as culturally dominant as their own – they might have been able to achieve a deeper understanding of phallogentrism and the subtle ways that it reproduces itself. If they had looked to a human history broader than their own, they might have been less ready to project the death of their own philosophical traditions onto all of culture. Within those traditions, the “self,” “man,” the author, subjectivity, took very particular forms by virtue of the experiences excluded from them. Those forms may indeed now be standing on rockier, less elevated ground than they once did. Nevertheless, other forms of being and knowing have been and continue to be available, waiting to be brought from the region of the Other, to join them on the central terrains of our culture.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A longer version of this paper appears in *Philosophy in a Different Voice*, edited by Janet Kourany, Princeton University Press, 1996.