What Feminism?

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There is a new bridge in Paris: La Passerelle Simone de Beauvoir. I love this bridge. Almost as if in perfect harmony with its namesake, it joins the National Library with the Bercy Park, once a famous wine depot, still full of vineyards. Beauvoir would no doubt have loved the fact that the bridge joins the reading of books with the imbibing of spirits. Incorporating its etymological groundings in "passer" and "elles," the Simone de Beauvoir footbridge bounces, moves, spiraling along its various levels of passageways from side to side, up and down, within an undulating rhythm at times a little dizzying. For me, this multilayered, roller coaster passageway is an apt metaphor for what I want to invoke here. For what follows is less a formal theoretical or historical paper than a kind of extended rumination on a set of crossings, bouncing back and forth through

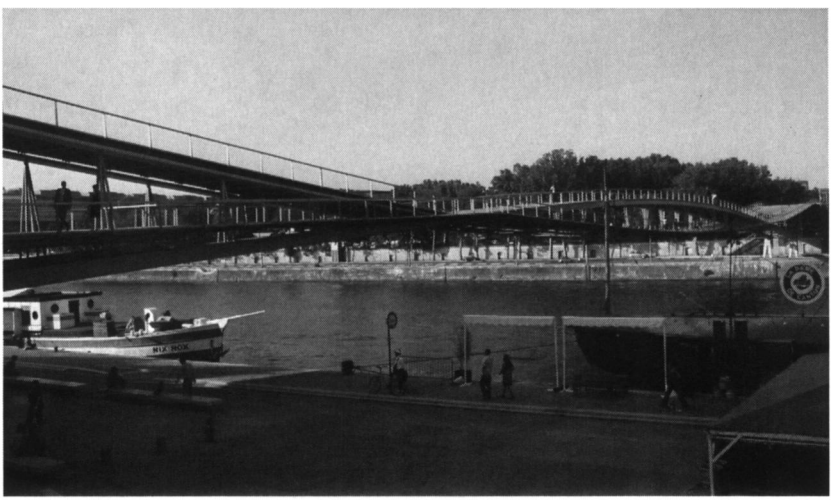

Photo by Alice Jardine, Paris, July 2010

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the readers of Beauvoir's feminism, among those readers that have been most important to me, including especially those I myself have been. At the same time that the "me" that follows is unstable, adapted, even mutated through time and space, it is also part of a strong historical narrative, and here acts as cipher, in close syncopation with the post-war history of feminist reading. My effort is not to posit a land-locked me, but rather to bridge voices, bridge years from the first hundred to the next, swaying across what Nancy Miller calls in her *But Enough About Me*, "a group biography," raising questions along the way about a certain shared intellectual history and its implications for those of us who still call ourselves feminists, but according to what feminism?[1]

My first group of readers of Beauvoirian feminisms shall, then, be represented by me, at the age of twelve, in Ohio in 1963. Beauvoir was not yet a self-described feminist and I was poor, with zero cultural capital, destined to get married, have a lot of kids, and pump gas or sell lingerie for the rest of my life. But for some reason, on my twelfth birthday, my mother gave me some of Beauvoir's books to read. I quickly devoured all of them, especially her memoirs. Like millions of other young girls, I wanted to *be* Beauvoir. I began comparing myself to her: When would I write my first novel? What country would I visit first? Most importantly, where would I find my Sartre?! I really wanted one! (That didn't work out so well, actually). I have come to realize that this early incarnation of myself as a reader of Beauvoir is a common one, a shared biographical pathway, one taken by young readers of Beauvoir all over the world, even today. For the twelve-year-old me, Beauvoir's existentialist dream connected perfectly with the American dream of the postwar period: make something of yourself by making choices in good faith whatever your Situation.

My second group of readers shall be, yes, represented by me again, this time circa 1973. I was graduating from college. Like millions of other young women, I was politically radicalized by the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. The second wave Women's Movement was in full swing. I was devouring such writers as Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone. I had taken the first gender-based literature course at Ohio State: "Shakespeare's Sisters." But what I was most determined about was my Fulbright application to go to Paris after graduation for a year for one purpose and one purpose only: to meet Simone de Beauvoir. For some reason, the Fulbright Commission believed I would do it, and in the fall of 1973 I plucked up my courage and knocked on Beauvoir's door. I was scared, visibly shaking. I think I amused her.

I had recently read her 1972 interview with Alice Schwartzer, "La Femme Revoltée," where she came out as a feminist and acknowledged that the feminist revolution just might have to precede the socialist one.[2] She had signed the "Manifeste des 343" [343 women admitting to having had an abortion, thereby exposing themselves to criminal prosecution] in 1971.[3] I asked her about her transformation and she answered with patience and good will, with calm bemusement. With her guidance, I went on to discover feminist activism at endless meetings at Maubert Mutualité and at smaller meetings where I sat

mutely, enraptured by the possibilities. What became clear to me then was that Beauvoir was not talking only or even mainly about women. She was talking about changing the world that trapped women, among others, in powerless, meaningless lives. She said at least two very radical things to me, ideas that I have never given up on. She explained: first, that we are all both universal and singular/particular at the same time; and second, that "feminism is [only] one way of attacking society as it now exists. Therefore, it's a revolutionary movement ... which is different from the class struggle movement, the proletarian movement, but which is a movement that must be leftist. By that I mean at the extreme left, a movement working to overthrow the whole society. Besides, *if women really did have complete equality with men, society would be completely overturned [bouleversée].*"[4]

My third group of readers is historically determinant, still represented by me, but this time, in the theoretically explosive year of 1979. I was a feminist graduate student moving from sure to unsure about what Beauvoir had said to me a few years before. Primarily, this was because over the course of those few years, I had discovered, along with millions of others, with great excitement and hope, High French Poststructuralism. This epistemological revolution was primarily filtered, in my case, through the work and presence of Julia Kristeva. I was her research assistant at Columbia University and was also translating her work for English-speaking readers. As soon as I could, I returned to Paris to talk to Beauvoir about all of it: about Kristeva, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Cixous. But I was to be disappointed. Beauvoir rejected all of it. Period. All of it. This entire body of new work was, at its best, a capitulation to capitalism, said she. On the topic of post-existentialist thought, Beauvoir was fiercely judgmental, disdainful. I was stunned, disappointed. Kristeva slowly replaced Beauvoir in my feminist toolbox. Although I certainly did not want a Sollers, I was fascinated by Kristeva in many of the same ways I had been fascinated by Beauvoir. Kristeva to my mind was now right. And Beauvoir was wrong. At the time, I could have never imagined that almost thirty years later, in 2008, it would be Kristeva who would found the prestigious *Prix Simone de Beauvoir*, which "recognizes the exceptional work and actions of women and men who, in the spirit of this feminist icon, contribute to the freedom of women throughout the world."[5]

My fourth group of readers is settled around 1986 and is represented by me as a young assistant professor at Harvard. My friend and mentor, Susan Suleiman, published what I then thought was my intellectual farewell to Beauvoir: an article entitled "Death Sentences."[6] This was a comparison of Beauvoir's representation of her mother's death in *A Very Easy Death* with her description of Sartre's death in *Adieux*.[7] I argued, using psychoanalytic feminist theory, that Sartre had functioned as an undifferentiated phallic mother fantasy for Beauvoir, rendering the theoretical exploration of sexual difference impossible in her work. As it turned out, that article was my only goodbye. On 14 April 1986, I was locked in a Leningrad hotel room because of Reagan's

bombing of Libya. I was unable to go out of the hotel room, let alone travel back to Paris for Beauvoir's funeral.

My fifth and last group of readers is now truly *readers*, a large and diverse group which, since 1986, has been made up of largely *professional readers*, in the radical plural, a very collective if contestatory "we," no longer able to be represented by "me," even as a demographic cipher for others. On the one hand, all of us post-1986 readers have probably been trying, each in our own ways, to ignore all the negative testimony, when not hateful gossip, about Beauvoir, especially as her letters and diaries have been published over the last twenty years, and as biographies from Deirdre Bair's *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (1990) to Danièle Sallenave's *Castor de Guerre* (2008), have laid out for us Beauvoir's often abject dependence on Sartre, her hidden, often denied and/or cynical sexual games with younger women.[8] We have skimmed Bianca Lamblin's *A Disgraceful Affair* and Hazel Rowley's *Tête-à-Tête*.[9] We have taken most often silent notice of individual journalistic swipes at Beauvoir. At around the time of the centennial, for example, Antoinette Fouque was as hostile as ever on the topic of Beauvoir: "Feminists have chosen Beauvoir as a sacred cow, a little like Kadhafi's amazones, they surround her with vigilance. ... In the end, Beauvoir was a *normalienne* who, her whole life, never stopped trying to pass the *agrégation*."[10]

On the other hand, even as the press has attacked Beauvoir ever more loudly as authoritarian, calculating, manipulative, etc., I and most others in several feminist generations have been turning since the mid-1980s to some new pathways, some new bridges twisting and turning in new political winds and at new levels of complexity. I am talking about at least two generations of feminists, mostly trained as philosophers, who have been moving forward, stepping off from the threshold of Beauvoir's work. These are numerous, complex thinkers who offer different epistemological directions onto new levels of passageways, pitching to move out of the current messy world in which we live. They all freely and frequently acknowledge their debt to Beauvoir even as they explore different intellectual pathways away from her thinking. For example:

1. The *Social Theorist Feminists*: For instance, Susan Buck Morss, a political philosopher, has, among other things, been taking on the end of utopian, especially revolutionary thinking in the twentieth century and the reconsideration of universal history in the twenty-first.[11] Or Drucilla Cornell, a professor of law, women's studies, and political science who, among other things, is attempting to think through newly feminist pathways to new definitions of freedom.[12] Or Leslie Salzinger, the sociologist, who, starting from the observation that basically all humans on the floor of the stock market exchange are men, has been drawing new and startling connections between conventional masculinity and the possible demise of advanced market capitalism, all the while unearthing new and tangled relationships between gender and economic globalization.[13]

2. The *Postcolonial/Transnational Feminist Philosophers* who, while they might agree that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," *do not* agree with Beauvoir that "in all known societies, woman has always been looked upon as the other."[14] They argue instead that most Western feminists, starting with Beauvoir, are working from within "modernity" and are therefore embedded in ethnocentric notions of modernity's goals: gender equality and development. Even for established North American thinkers like Chandra Mohanty, Western feminists share the position of the traditional Western male subject, *othering* other women, from within a paradigm of developmental thinking, conceiving of third world women as "*particularly* oppressed."[15] These transnational theorists see Beauvoir as having founded that lineage of thinking, as having urged women to move from imminence to transcendence, to get rid of the female body seen as a handicap because of reproduction. By remaining within an ethnocentric universalism, Beauvoirian feminists, it is argued, ignore, for example, alternative kinship models where gender is not the main factor but, rather, where *seniority* is determinant or *motherhood* is the most prized form of identity, no matter what else is different or the same.[16]

3. The *Poststructuralist Inspired Feminist Philosophers*, a rather large group, who all agree with Beauvoir about one thing at the very least: traditional femininity has been and remains a serious pathology. They—we—have all agreed with Beauvoir that if women's situation in the world changed radically, the world would change radically as well. Among these mostly mid-career philosophers, I would include:

- Rosi Braidotti, whose Deleuzian-nuanced tales of becoming take radically new pathways of nomadic desire in a transnational context.[17]
- Kelly Oliver, whose most recent book on Iraq, *Women as Weapons of War*, is part of her effort to move beyond the recognition model of subjectivity, linking conventional, recognizable femininity to violence and war.[18]
- Elizabeth Grosz, who has been attempting to develop "new histories for a feminist future" by arguing that "the past contains the resources to much more than the present."[19]
- Toril Moi, who has undertaken a massive revival of Beauvoir's thinking, using her work as a tool for digging us out of the essentialist/constructivist impasse, thinking the body in situations as an alternative altogether to thinking the body through sex/gender arrangements.[20]
- Teresa Brennan, who is the feminist philosopher whose work I am closest to and, strangely enough, whose work I think Beauvoir would have liked the most. In order to explain briefly why, I need to emphasize Brennan's crossing of Beauvoir's radical insight that if the situation of women changed, the whole world would be *bouleversé* with poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory. Brennan did this in order

> to argue in a new direction: that the historical formation of normative femininity and the seemingly endless energetic exploitation at work between men and women are intrinsically linked. Brennan argued that in order to become subjects and act upon the world, men (and increasingly women) have resorted to "unloading," projecting all negative affects and aggressions upon some "other" in such a way that the process of positioning that "other" to acquiesce to the projection has historically required the formation of a normative femininity: the normal (read: pathological) state of Womanhood. Women have largely been forced to accept passively that projection in exchange for two very important things: recognition (identity, i.e., Mrs. somebody) and security (protection). Brennan asked: What if feminism has been largely the rejection of that projection, allowing many women to begin to dump Western femininity's historically negative effects on our intellectual curiosity. What happens as women's demands for recognition and their needs for security undergo radical historical and geographical transformation in the twenty-first century?

Brennan went further and argued that the "foundational fantasy" she described on the psychical level has triggered over time a more general social psychosis which is now predominant and threatening the entire globe, dividing the world into the "servers" and the "served." The central character in this drama of social psychosis is the ego, an ego that is just as social and collective as the psychosis it underpins. The "ego's era" began in the Western seventeenth-century and continues today, but its processes have accelerated and expanded right along with technology and capital. In fact, sexual difference (at the core of the foundational fantasy) has been over time homogenized across race, religion, and class, flipping over into a worldwide, historically unprecedented division between the shapers and the shaped, the aggressors and the pacified. We all get caught up in this generalized psychosis no matter how hard we resist because now, in part because of feminism, we all want to be subjects. The value and energy of nature and its space is attacked through us in the name of technology and its time. Brennan was just beginning to outline how this deathly process might be reversed when she was killed, ironically, by an anonymous speeding car.[21]

4. The *Queer/Trans Readers*: Here the pathology of femininity finds one of its clearest formulations in the work of queer theorist Judith Butler and her challenge to Beauvoir's mind/body dualism. For feminist queer theorists, the body in Western thought, most especially in Beauvoir's thought, is constantly disavowed and, at the same time, projected onto women.[22] For transfeminist theorists like Susan Stryker it is necessary to go even further and not queer, but hyper-queer the prefix *trans*, in order to emphasize the spatial passageways of *connection* and *circulation* between the macro- and the micro-political, troubling all identity recognitions, not just sexual but also others, including nation

and citizenship. Transthinking challenges identity-based feminism through critical crossings of categorical territories. Transfeminists want to build a "transgender continuum on which so-called male-born men and female-born women can find themselves building political connections with those whose gender is more obviously outside society's narrow 'frame' of the normal."[23]

So where do all of these readers and readings leave us? On what side of the river? Half way across the bridge? Should we jump? On which level of crossing, through which passageways, upper or lower, central or peripheral, should we go? These questions leave this reader, here and now, contemplating a "Hers" column written by Deirdre Bair, published in 1990 in the *New York Times*: "Do as She Said, Not as She Did."[24] I guess I want to say, by way of conclusion, that in my *personal* reading narrative, I forgive Beauvoir. I want to affirm that I am still in awe of the life she lived and wrote, the courage with which she actively thought her own experience no matter how occasionally unsettling or bizarre. And in my *public* narrative, I want to agree with Deirdre Bair that it was not up to Beauvoir to get it all right as she was living and writing. But, rather, that it is up to us to continue moving along the collective pathways she opened for us, in a way that will not only change gender and sex arrangements for the better, but change the world for the better, profoundly, deeply, widely, and long term. Radically.

What feminism? I don't think that we can return to Beauvoir's feminism, but I know that we can collectively take her multiple pathways forward to address the now obviously gendered deep structures of our current, more than sobering global crises:

- the disfunctionality of the global north versus the global south standoff, resulting in violent, seemingly endless wars;
- the deep crisis if not collapse of neoliberal capitalism;
- severe climate change and its geographically uneven socioeconomic tragedies;
- even, I would argue, the struggle to protect the humanities and the arts in a technofrenetic world that values neither.

In the meantime, I plan to go bounce around on the Passerelle Simone de Beauvoir very soon, with a glass of wine and a good book, while I continue to ponder all of these difficult feminist passageways to the future.

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views on Women, Writing, and Politics in Post-68 France, and, most recently, *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan*. Her new book project is *Visions of Catastrophe: The 21st Century 1950's Style.*

Notes

1. Nancy K. Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
2. Alice Schwartzer, "La Femme Revoltée," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 14 February 1972.
3. The "Manifeste des 343," first appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 5 April 1971.
4. Alice Jardine, "Interview with Simone de Beauvoir," first published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, 2 (Winter 1979): 224-36. Italics mine.
5. See, for example: http://prixsimonedebeauvoir.blogspot.com/2009/01/english-simone-de-beauvoir-prize-for.html
6. Alice Jardine, "Death Sentences," in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
7. Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965). Originally published in French by Gallimard (1964). *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Originally published in French by Gallimard (1981).
8. Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990); Danièle Sallenave, *Castor de Guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).
9. Bianca Lamblin, *A Disgraceful Affair* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996). Published in French as *Mémoires d'une jeune fille dérangée* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 1993). Hazel Rowley, *Tête-à-Tête: The Tumultuous Lives and Loves of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).
10. Antoinette Fouque, quoted by Aude Lancelin in "La deuxième vie du 'Deuxième Sexe,'" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 3 January 2008.
11. See, for example, Susan Buck Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002) or *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).
12. See, for example, Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
13. See, for example, Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
14. Signe Arnfred, "Preface" to "Simone de Beauvoir in Africa: 'Woman = The Second Sex?' Issues of African Feminist Thought," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2, 1 (2002).
15. See, for example, Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
16. See, for example, Kate Crehan, *The Fractured Community: Landscapes of Power and Gender in Rural Zambia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Oyéròǹké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
17. See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2006).

18. Kelly Oliver, *Women As Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
19. See, for example, Elizabeth Grosz, "Histories of a Feminist Future," *Signs: Journal of Women and Society* 25, 4 (2000), 1019.
20. See, for example, Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of An Intellectual Woman* (London: Blackwell, 1994).
21. For an expanded version of this short summary, see my "A Surplus of Living Attention: Celebrating the Life and Ideas of Teresa Brennan," in *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan,* ed. Alice A. Jardine, Shannon Lundeen, and Kelly Oliver (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).
22. For an introduction, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
23. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, eds., "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" in their special issue, "Trans-," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, 3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 2008), 20.
24. Deirdre Bair, "Do as She Said, Not as She Did," *New York Times*, 18 November 1990.