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## **“I AM A WOMAN”: THE BODY AS BACKGROUND IN *THE SECOND SEX***

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The third paragraph of *The Second Sex*, covering only two pages in the French text, is a landmark in feminist thought.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning Beauvoir starts by declaring “I am a woman,” at the end she affirms for the first time that woman is the Other. How does she get from a declaration about herself to a general claim about all women? And in what way do these claims answer the question about what a woman is? This is how she begins:

The very act of stating the problem at once suggests to me a first answer.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that I raise it. A man would never think of writing a book on the specific [*singulière*] situation of males in the human race.<sup>3</sup> But if I want to define myself, I must first of all declare: “I am a woman”; this truth is the background from which all further claims will stand out [*cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s’enlèvera toute autre affirmation*].<sup>4</sup> A man never begins by affirming that he is [*par se poser comme*] an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man goes without saying. (SS xxi; DSa 14)

Some feminist theorists would probably feel that Beauvoir here turns her back on the real problem. Perhaps, they might say, she unconsciously realizes that the very fact of uttering the question “What is a woman?” is to condemn oneself to metaphysical essentialism. Since she does not wish to take up an essentialist position, the argument might go, she abandons the terrain of

theory for that of autobiography: confession takes the place of analysis. This is why, they might say, Beauvoir never succeeds in *theorizing* sexual difference, as opposed to simply gathering more or less positivist information about it. Needless to say, I think this is to leap to conclusions, and fairly predictable conclusions at that. I want to suggest instead that if we allow ourselves to be patient with this passage, it will emerge as the cornerstone of a truly original effort to think beyond the narrow choice between theory and autobiography, beyond the dichotomy between the first and the third person that irks so many contemporary critics, and, not least, beyond the opposition between essentialism and nominalism.

This passage is offered as a response to the question “What is a woman?” The first thing Beauvoir does is to investigate the speech act of the original question. Who is likely to ask what a woman is? In what situation would they ask such a question? Her first discovery is that sexual difference manifests itself in her very interest in the question. (She has, after all, just declared that it is enough to go for a walk with one’s eyes open to discover that men and women have different interests.) The composition of the passage is strikingly symmetrical. Twice a statement about herself is countered by a sentence about what a man would do or say (*I* raise the question; *a man* would never ask; *I* must declare; *a man* never begins). The structure produces a strong contrast: not, as one might have expected, between “woman” and “man,” but between “I” and “man.”

Beauvoir here realizes that she is writing in a situation where, unlike male writers, she is forced to define herself as a sexed being; where she has no choice but to fill the empty shifter “I” with her sexual difference. The first “I” in the book (“I have hesitated for a long time to write a book on woman”) was casual. It took itself for granted, without any philosophical ado. This “I” (“I am a woman”; “I must define myself,” etc.) is showing signs of political and philosophical tension. In this sentence the idea that woman is the Other is already close. “But if I want to define myself, I must first of all declare: ‘I am a woman’; this truth is the background from which all further claims will stand out [*cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s’enlèvera toute autre affirmation*].”

The language here is crucial. In French *s'enlever sur un fond* is a somewhat unusual turn of phrase, particularly in this context. *Se détacher* would have been the more obvious choice, since *Le Petit Robert* defines it as "to appear clearly as if standing out against a background." In general, *détacher* always has connotations of visual separation, clarity, clear-cut contours, and so is often used about a color or shape set off against a different background color of some sort. If Beauvoir chooses to write *s'enlever* and not *se détacher*, it is presumably because she wishes to bring out a different nuance. Many of the most common meanings of *enlever* are obviously unsuitable for the context: Beauvoir does not appear to be thinking of kidnapping and ravishing, of stain-removing, or of something being taken away. One of the primary meanings of *enlever*, however, is "to lift upwards" (*en + lever*), and so *enlevure* has come to be a technical term for sculptural relief. In English "relief" may be used about visual as well as tactile effects (relief maps use colors and shading to indicate elevations and depressions); in French, however, *enlevure* is always tactile; an *enlevure* is something I should be able to feel in the dark. I do not mean to exaggerate the differences between these words: sculptural relief is visible too, and if I am in a landscape I could touch the church in the foreground as well as the trees in the background, yet the different sensory emphasis of these two words is obvious.

The image Beauvoir has in mind is now available. The fact that she is a woman is the truth which constitutes the background from which all further claims will stand out in relief, she writes. There are two facts here: first, it is a fact that she is a woman, second, it is a fact that whenever she wants to define herself, she is obliged to draw attention to the first fact. Beauvoir considers the fact of being a woman as the background against which the woman's speech acts stand out. The word "claim" or "assertion" (*affirmation*) indicates that she is speaking about her own intellectual undertaking: to write a book about women. Like all other acts, my speech acts define me, an existentialist would say. If I am a woman, my claims are inevitably going to be taken to stand out from the background of my sex. This means that, however hard I try to define myself through what I am saying and doing

(through my self-assertions), my interlocutors will try to reduce my assertions to my sex. My struggle for existence will be met by their insistence on essence. I take Beauvoir to experience a sense of consternation at this discovery, to strongly wish for things to be otherwise.

There is a further complication in the sentence. In French, the verb is in the simple future tense (*s'enlèvera*). The published English translation uses the word *must*: "on this truth must be based all further discussion," Parshley writes. This could give the impression that Beauvoir thinks that this is a desirable state of affairs, perhaps even that she thinks that the fact of being a woman always *ought* or *should* be taken into account. But Parshley here overlooks some common nuances of the French future tense. "Tu ne sortiras pas" usually carries connotations such as "you are not allowed to go out," or "I predict that you will not manage to get yourself out of the house." There is often a nuance of command, i.e. of being subjected to someone else's power, or of inescapable destiny ("under no circumstances will you be able to escape this fate"). Beauvoir is not in fact saying that the background of sex *must* be kept in mind whenever a woman speaks, nor is she saying that it *ought* to be or *should* be kept in mind: she is saying that it *will* be kept in mind whether the woman likes it or not, and whether it is relevant or irrelevant to whatever she is asserting. In other words, the meaning of the sentence is that whenever a woman speaks, there is no way the fact of her sex is *not* going to be taken into account.

This is contrasted to the situation of human males, who will not automatically be taken to speak against the background of a sexed-male-body whenever they open their mouths. As Nancy Bauer has shown, just by saying that she is a woman, Beauvoir indicates that she rejects the Cartesian body/mind split:

It turns out . . . that the first thing Beauvoir has to say about herself is that she is a woman. This means that unlike Descartes Beauvoir begins with a fundamental investment in the significance of her body, so that her thinking will not be able to accommodate a Cartesian mind-body split. Furthermore, since her inquiry is rooted

in a sense of herself as being an instance of the generic concept “woman” a certain Cartesian threat of solipsism is avoided from the start: to call herself a woman is to start with the idea that other beings like her exist—that is, other beings who are called, or call themselves, women. (60)

Beauvoir writes: “A man never begins by affirming that he is an individual of a certain sex; that he is a man goes without saying.” What is being begun here is a piece of writing, most probably a philosophical essay. Beauvoir is claiming that because she is a woman and not a man everything she says (“asserts” or “claims”) in *The Second Sex* is going to be related to the fact that she has a female body. The reception of her book in France certainly proved her point.<sup>5</sup>

But there is more. For Beauvoir’s sentence “But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: ‘I am a woman’; this truth is the background from which all further claims will stand out,” sets up a strong intertextual link to a passage in the preface to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Perception is not the science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background [*fond*] from which all acts stand out [*se détachent*], and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perception. (x–xi)

Merleau-Ponty writes this in a context where he wants to explain that the body gives us our perceptions, and that without perceptions there is no world. The body is at once what we are and the medium through which we are able to have a world. Speaking of bodily perception Merleau-Ponty uses the same imagery of foreground and background as Beauvoir when she speaks of the fact of having a female body. For Merleau-Ponty the body is the necessary background for everything I do, and everything I do has the perceiving body as its obvious presupposition. This background is something like a general (not particular or indi-

vidualized) condition enabling human agency and subjectivity to come into being. By speaking of background and foreground Merleau-Ponty means to warn against scientific or positivist reductionism. A background is not the meaning or essence of whatever takes place in the foreground: the natural processes of the body cannot in themselves explain the acts and thoughts of human beings. On the other hand, the specific background that the body is cannot be thought away or denied, or presumed to have no effects on the foreground. Against Kantian idealism and scientific positivism, Merleau-Ponty sets phenomenological materialism, one might say.<sup>6</sup>

To consider the body as a background is to allow that its importance for our projects and sense of identity is variable. Merleau-Ponty's visual metaphor (*se détacher*) makes me think of theater and of landscapes. In a play, the background—the backdrop—is sometimes crucial to the understanding of the actors' words and gestures, whereas at other times a relentless focus on the background would be quite misplaced. Let us imagine a building placed against a dramatic landscape. If it is the building I wish to study, the landscape is a simple background to which I need pay no attention at all. If it is the landscape, however, the building may either be considered as a part of it, or be disregarded. The background is always there, but its meaning is far from given.

Beauvoir's tactile metaphor has slightly different connotations. The relief on a sculpture may be admired for its own sake, but it is usually quite difficult to focus on the relief without paying any attention to the sculpture it is a part of. The case of the sculpture produces a more integral unity between foreground and background than the case of the backdrop on a stage, or the landscape behind an Italian church. The difference in metaphors signals a difference in emphasis. Choosing *s'enlever* rather than *se détacher*, Beauvoir deliberately uses an image that makes it somewhat more difficult to focus on the foreground without taking the background into account than Merleau-Ponty's *se détacher*. Her metaphor takes sexism into account; Merleau-Ponty's does not. By seeing the sexed body as a background which the woman is *obliged* to foreground whenever she is asked

to define herself, Beauvoir indicates that for a woman living under patriarchy, the body is a far more inescapable fact than it is for a man. Whatever the woman says, she will have her body—her female sex—taken into account. We should note that this may or may not be what the woman wants. By thinking in terms of foreground and background Beauvoir avoids implying that women's words can be reduced to their bodies.

Elsewhere I discuss Beauvoir's understanding of the body as a situation, as a fundamental part of lived experience.<sup>7</sup> What is the difference between the body understood as a situation and the body understood as background? In Beauvoir's sentence, the body considered as a background is represented as a body perceived by the Other. The presence of the Other is implied in the attempt to define oneself (one rarely finds it necessary to declare "I am a woman" to oneself), and it is explicitly there in the claim that this act of definition is the result of submission to an external obligation. The concept of situation also presupposes that there are others in the world and that we interact with them. But it is not a concept that applies exclusively to the body. The body is a situation, but so is the fact of going to high school, or being married. The body as a situation is the body as experienced by the human subject, the body as interwoven with the projects of that subject. Perceived as a general background for my existence, on the other hand, the body precedes and enables perception and experience. While the body as situation presupposes agency in the subject, the body as background enables such agency to come into being. At least this is the impression I get from reading Merleau-Ponty. It seems to me that Beauvoir in this sentence uses the idea of the body as a background a little differently, that she quite consciously chooses to imagine the acting and situated body as a background. This becomes quite clear when she goes on to discuss the "assertions" coming from the woman involved in an abstract discussion with a man. The actual, physical female body sitting there at the café table discussing philosophy is both a situation for the woman who is talking, and a background to her words for the man who is talking to her.

The same expression—to stand out in relief from a background—also turns up in the introduction to the second volume



of *The Second Sex*, entitled “L’expérience vécue” (“Lived Experience”). In this brief text Beauvoir writes that women are starting to assert their independence. This does not happen without difficulty, however, for “virile prestige” is far from extinct. In order to understand what it means to modern women to assert their independence, it is important to study “women’s traditional destiny.” Then she finishes the introduction as follows:

I shall seek to describe how woman learns her condition, how she experiences it, in what kind of universe she is confined, what forms of escape she is allowed to have. Only then will we understand what problems arise for women who, inheriting a heavy past, strive to forge a new future. When I use the words “woman,” “feminine” or “female,”<sup>8</sup> I evidently refer to no archetype, no changeless essence; after most of my claims [*mes affirmations*] the reader should understand “in the present state of education and custom.” The point here is not to proclaim eternal truths, but rather to describe the common background [*fond*] from which every particular female existence stands out [*sur lequel s’enlève toute existence féminine singulière*].<sup>9</sup> (*SS* xxxvi; *DSb* 9)

The second volume of *The Second Sex* is divided into four main sections entitled “Formation,” “Situation,” “Justifications,” and “Towards Liberation.” This volume has given rise to much criticism, usually on the grounds that Beauvoir generalizes from an unrepresentative sample, that she takes the French experiences of her mother’s generation and those of her own to be representative of women everywhere. It is also often assumed that she thinks that the situations she describes are such that no woman can transcend them. Thus her critique of motherhood or bourgeois marriage is often taken to mean that no individual woman could ever realize herself as an authentically free person within these institutions. If this were the case, Beauvoir would be an extreme determinist. On the other hand it has also been assumed that Beauvoir is a radical voluntarist, an idealist who thinks that women, just by an act of will, can throw off the sexist yoke and realize themselves, that they have only themselves to blame if

they fail to rid themselves of their bad faith. If this were the case, Beauvoir would have no reason to claim that institutions and ideology (“myths”) oppress women.

The play between foreground and background proposed by Beauvoir avoids reductionism and essentialism (the individual woman in the foreground cannot be reduced to the general historical situation which is her background) while still enabling us to grasp the historical factors that influence and shape the choices of individual women. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir tries to produce a historical analysis of women’s condition. A historical analysis cannot be all-inclusive or universal in the sense of reaching a level of abstraction that might hold for all women in all countries at all times. In order to have any analytic and historical power at all it needs to be specific and particular. Even if we think that Beauvoir is wrong to deal with women “in the present state of education and custom [in France],” all we could do to correct her would be to propose that she deal with some other group instead. Since no such group is going to be more or less universal than any other, this would not make the analysis more or less representative of women’s condition than the one Beauvoir proposes.

Beauvoir does not attempt to describe or predict what any individual woman will make of the conditions in which she is brought up. Her own life was extremely unusual for a woman in mid-century France, yet she fully believed that it was informed and shaped by the traditional background she describes in *The Second Sex*. Describing her discovery of patriarchal mythology, she writes: “it was a revelation to me: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men, and I hadn’t reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy” (*FC* 103; *FCa* 136). Beauvoir’s fundamental understanding of subjectivity is based on the assumption that we continuously make something of what the world makes of us. The “background” she is describing and analyzing in the second volume of *The Second Sex* tells us what the world wants to make of women. She also includes many case studies and innumerable examples in which she shows what women, responding to this situation, make of what the world

makes of them. The very fact that Beauvoir quite often dwells on exceptional women demonstrates that she does not take her description of the general historical and social background to be invalidated when she moves the focus to a specific case in the foreground, however exceptional it might be.

Finally, Beauvoir's sentence—"this truth is the background ..."—allows for two different political interpretations. On the one hand, she may be taken to mean that in a sexist society (such as Paris in 1949) a woman's claims will always be heard with reference to her body, but that in a non-sexist society this will no longer be the case. On the other hand, however, she may be saying that although sexism insists on reading a woman's books against the background of her sex, in a non-sexist society the same thing will happen to men as well. Here, in a nutshell, we find encapsulated the feminist conflict between a certain understanding of equality and a certain understanding of difference. Is Beauvoir saying that the aim of feminism is to make sexual difference irrelevant, that we should all be treated just as the human beings we are? Or is she saying that the aim of feminism is to show that sexual difference is relevant at all times and in every social and personal situation?<sup>10</sup>

First, it is crucial to note that Beauvoir's sentence refuses to embrace either interpretation. There is no sign that what she *really* means is one or the other. Second, it appears that neither interpretation corresponds to the logic of Beauvoir's text. For the first interpretation (that sexual difference is irrelevant) sounds like an echo of the humanist nominalism she explicitly rejected just one page earlier: "Clearly, no woman can without bad faith pretend to be situated beyond her sex." The second interpretation (that sexual difference is always of fundamental importance) is no more convincing, for it makes sexual difference appear absolute (or essential) by assuming that there can be no situation in which it is *not* a significant factor, and this is a view that clashes with the existentialist belief that existence precedes essence.

By thinking of the body as a background, Beauvoir avoids both interpretations. To say that the sexed body is the inevitable background for all our acts, is at once to claim that it is always a *potential* source of meaning, and to *deny* that it always holds the

key to the meaning of a woman's acts. Sculptural relief cannot always be understood by referring it back to the surface from which it stands out. Sometimes we need to understand the relief itself; at other times we want to consider how the relief affects the sculpture as a whole, and vice versa. In yet other cases, we want to see the whole sculpture as part of some larger context. In short, the sex of a body is always there, but it is not always the most important fact about that body. The dying body or the body in pain is not necessarily grasped primarily in terms of sexual difference. If I am trying to learn Chinese, this is evidently an act that I undertake on the background of my sexed body, but the relevance of saying so is not always obvious. If, on the other hand, I am trying to get pregnant, this is a project that certainly foregrounds my sexed body. More complex cases will arise from women's participation in different sports, or in other physical activities.

It follows from Beauvoir's analysis that in some situations the fact of sex will be less important than the fact of class or race; in other situations it will not. There can be no question of giving *one* of these factors general, overarching priority. The old debates about whether class-based exploitation or sex-based oppression are "primary," never yielded a convincing answer. They were in fact doomed to failure precisely because they sought a general answer, one that would establish the correct hierarchy of oppressions once and for all. One does not get out of this problem, incidentally, by denying that there are hierarchies of oppression. In Spain in 1936, for example, it was more important for Republicans of both sexes to fight against fascism than against sexism (this is not to say that the Spanish Republicans were not sexist). In other cases there may be no hierarchy: fighting for women's right to education may be as useful for socialism as it is for feminism. In yet other cases, sex will be the dominant form of oppression, hierarchically more important than class-based oppression. This is surely the case in Afghanistan, where women without male family members die because the Taliban will not allow them to see a doctor without a brother or a husband present.

I take Beauvoir to be saying that women's oppression consists in the compulsory foregrounding of the female body at all times, whether it is relevant or irrelevant to the task at hand. But sexism also consists in preventing women from foregrounding the female body when they want it to be significant. (A Beauvoirean feminist would be critical of anti-sex and anti-pornography feminism.) In a scene of flirtation or seduction, for example, a woman may want to foreground her body. Thus Françoise in *L'invitée* (*She Came to Stay*) intensely wants Gerbert to notice her sexed body, to notice her as a woman. On the other hand, it can be annoying and painful to be interpellated as a sexed body when one is immersed in a project that has nothing to do with one's sex. The same logic holds for the raced body. To be cast as a representative of one's race when one is immersed in a project in which this is an entirely irrelevant element, can be deeply painful and humiliating. A cartoon that appeared in the *New Yorker* is a perfect illustration of the point:



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Frantz Fanon brilliantly captures the sense of fragmentation and dislocation that arises from the experience of being reduced to one's raced body against one's will. In a passage in *Black Skin, White Masks* he describes walking down the street in a French city, passing a white woman and her little daughter on his way. I quote the scene at length because it so perfectly conveys Fanon's pain and alienation, his sense that the gaze of the white man im-

prisons him in his subjectivity, a subjectivity that is reduced to the fact of his black skin:

“Look, a Negro!” It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

“Look, a Negro!” It was true. It amused me.

“Look, a Negro!” The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.

[. . .]

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho” good eatin’.

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together. (112–13)

There are situations in which we freely choose to be recognized as sexed or raced bodies, where that recognition is exactly what we need and want. Identity politics starts with such identity-affirming situations, but unfortunately goes on to base a general politics on them, thus forgetting that there are other situations in which we do not want to be defined by our sexed and raced bodies, situations in which we wish that body to be no

more than the insignificant background to our main activity. As we are about to see, Beauvoir herself gives a marvelous example of just such a situation when she discusses the case of an abstract conversation where a man says to her: "you say that because you are a woman." Although this experience may be far less painful for the intellectual woman than the experience of racism was for Fanon, the juxtaposition of the two situations reveal that similar mechanisms of oppression are at work in the encounter between the raced and the sexed body and the Other.<sup>11</sup>

I am tempted to say: in certain situations I want to be considered as an intellectual, and not as an intellectual woman. Yet I do not say it. For this statement is not exactly right. I now realize that there is something in our language that makes it exceptionally hard to express what I do wish to say. It is far too easy to take my original impulse (to call myself an intellectual, rather than an intellectual woman) to mean that in some situations I wish to *deny* that I am a woman, and so to accuse me of being one of the humanist nominalists pretending to be situated beyond my sex. But I do not wish to claim that my body does not exist, or that I am not a woman. Beauvoir helps me to put it more clearly: in certain situations I wish my female body to be considered as the insignificant background of my claims or acts. This is not the same thing as to say that I wish my body to disappear or to be transformed into a male body. My wish does not represent an attempt to escape my particularity, to be considered as a neuter, or as some kind of universalized human being. It represents, rather, a wish to deny that the fact of being a woman is of any particular relevance to my understanding of trigonometry or my capacity to compose symphonies or think ethically.

Ever since feminism became part of public life, some women writers and painters (and so on) have felt that feminism is an ideology that locks women up in their particularized female subjectivity. Opposing such versions of feminism, they have refused to be called "women writers" and "women painters." Feminists have usually agreed that there is something anti-feminist about such a refusal to call oneself a woman, often responding by accusing such women of being male-identified and sadly lacking in solidarity with their sex. But the fact is that

women are right to refuse attempts to make their subjectivity out to be coextensive with their femininity. We have no reason to accept attempts to imprison us in our "femininity," whether such attempts originate in sexist or in feminist thought. The problem arises when some women assume that the only way to escape imprisonment in one's sex is to deny that sex altogether, and so actually give in to temptation to say: "I am a writer, not a woman writer." In this way they only manage to foreground their claim to universality at the cost of sacrificing their femininity (here the word simply means their "femaleness"). They forget, a Beauvoirian might say, that the sexed body is both a background and a situation, and as such not a phenomenon that can simply be disavowed.

For I also wish to acknowledge that I probably do read Kant or Kierkegaard in ways I would not have done had I been a man. Yet the fact that I read as the woman I am is no reason to deprive me of my right to be considered an intellectual. *Must* I always refer to myself as an "intellectual woman"? Men who read Kant and Kierkegaard in ways they would not have done had they been women, usually refer to themselves as intellectuals or philosophers, not as "intellectual men" or "male philosophers." This fact does not lead people to accuse them of denying or repressing their masculinity, or to consider them "female-identified." In sexist ideology, men can be self-evidently male and self-evidently intellectual at the same time. This is why the phrase "an intellectual man" sounds quite odd whereas "an intellectual woman" sounds quite normal. Beauvoir's feminist goal is to produce a society in which women will gain access to the universal *as women*, not as fake men nor as some impossibly neutered beings.

In a sexist society women often find themselves in situations where they are obliged to make a "choice" between being imprisoned in their femininity or having to disavow it altogether. That sexist ideologies and practices produce this alienating split in women's subjectivity is Beauvoir's most fundamental point in *The Second Sex*. For her, both alternatives are equally sexist and equally alienating. Because male subjectivity is not "hailed"



("interpellated") in this way, this alienating "choice" in fact defines women's situation under patriarchy. So insidious is this ideology that much feminist theory, whether willingly or not, has ended up espousing one alternative or the other. The amount of time feminists have spent worrying about women's "equality" or "difference" is a symptom of the success of this ideological trap. A genuinely feminist position would refuse either option, and insist, rather, that women should not have to choose between calling themselves women and calling themselves writers (or intellectuals, or painters, or composers). It remains an important feminist task to show that this way of thinking of female subjectivity produces an impossible ideological dilemma for women. By now I hope it is obvious that when I refuse to accept the terms of this "choice," then it does not follow that I really wish to be a man.

To put this differently: it does not go without saying that what a woman does or says is always expressive of "the woman in her." Yet at the same time, it is undoubtedly true that whatever a woman does or says is done by a woman. It is because both claims are true that we get so confused about what "femininity" actually means. What is admirable about Beauvoir's understanding of what a woman is, is precisely her capacity to convey this doubleness without reducing it to one or the other of its components, without acquiescing in it, and also without choosing one of the two equally unsatisfactory theories of what a woman is ("a woman is just a human being" *versus* "a woman is always just a woman").

By considering the body as a background Beauvoir at once affirms that sexual difference is a fact of fundamental philosophical and social importance *and* that it is not necessarily the most important fact about a human being. Because she pictures the sexed body as the phenomenological background (not the content, essence, or meaning) against which a woman's choices and acts will be foregrounded, these are not contradictory claims. As I go on to show in Chapter 2 of *What is a Woman?*, Beauvoir's formulation also reveals that her fundamental feminist project is to find a way of thinking about sexual difference which

steers clear of the Scylla of having to eliminate her sexed subjectivity and the Charybdis of finding herself imprisoned in it.



## Abbreviations

For references to books written by Simone de Beauvoir, the following abbreviations have been used (the editions used are those listed under “Works Cited”):

<i>DSa</i>	<i>Le deuxième sexe</i> , vol i
<i>DSb</i>	<i>Le deuxième sexe</i> , vol ii
<i>FC</i>	<i>Force of Circumstance</i>
<i>FCa</i>	<i>La force des choses</i> , vol i
<i>FCb</i>	<i>La force des choses</i> , vol ii
<i>SS</i>	<i>The Second Sex</i>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay is an edited excerpt from Chapter 2 in my book *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*, published by OUP in 1999. Chapter 2 is called “‘I Am a Woman’: The Personal and the Philosophical.”

<sup>2</sup> “L'énoncé même du problème me suggère aussitôt une première réponse” (14). There are several translation problems here. The first and most common meaning of *énoncé* is *énonciation* or *déclaration*. Yet the expression *l'énoncé du problème* usually means the terms, or the exact formulation, of a problem. Linguistically, after Benveniste, *l'énoncé* has come to mean the statement as opposed to *l'énonciation*, the utterance, the act of making the statement. Given that Benveniste only published this distinction after 1949, it is probably not relevant

here. For once I agree with Parshley, and opt for the most common meaning, namely “the act of saying or declaring something.”

Parshley translates *une première réponse* as “a preliminary answer.” I don’t think the answer given here is preliminary in the sense of being a preface or a preamble to a more substantial answer to come. Rather, I think it is the first of two answers of equal weight. (The second answer given in this paragraph to “What is a woman?” is “Woman is the Other.”)

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir writes: “la situation singulière qu’occupent dans l’humanité les mâles” (14). At this point she inserts a footnote stating that the Kinsey report only deals with male sexual behavior, which is something else entirely.

<sup>4</sup> I will return to the translation of this significant phrase.

<sup>5</sup> Summarizing the reception of *The Second Sex* in *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir writes: “Unsatisfied, frigid, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even a clandestine mother . . . But that even [François] Mauriac joined in! He wrote to one of the contributors to *Les Temps Modernes*: ‘Your boss’s vagina no longer has any secrets for me’” (197; *FCa* 260–1).

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s and Beauvoir’s critique of scientism and positivism, see Ch. 1 in *What is a Woman?*

<sup>7</sup> I discuss this at length in Ch. 1 of *What is a Woman?*

<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir writes: *les mots “femme” ou “féminin.”* In order to stress that the French *féminin* can refer to sex as well as to gender, I have chosen to translate it as “feminine or female.” See Ch. 1 in *What is a Woman?* for a thorough discussion of sex, gender, and *The Second Sex*.

<sup>9</sup> Compare H. M. Parshley’s translation: “It is not our concern here to proclaim eternal verities, but rather to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence.”

<sup>10</sup> There are strong parallels between this claim and the idea that “location” is always relevant for the understanding of every speech act. I want to stress that I am not trying to *deny* that sex or location are always relevant: I am, rather, trying to shift the argument towards a different question, namely the question of when (under what circumstances) it is worth while *saying something* about sex or location.

<sup>11</sup> I am not claiming that Fanon and Beauvoir understand racism and sexism in exactly parallel terms. For a brief comparison of the two writers, see Ch. 8 of my *Simone de Beauvoir*.

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*in French Cultural Production*



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April 16–18, 1999

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,  
*Le Quart Livre*

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## CONTENTS

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Acknowledgments .....	v
“I am a Woman”: The Body as Background in <i>The Second Sex</i> .....	1
<b><i>Toril Moi</i></b>	
Response to Toril Moi .....	20
<b><i>Lynn Hunt</i></b>	
Response to Toril Moi .....	23
<b><i>Malina Stefanovska</i></b>	
The Devil in Drag: Moral Injunction or Social Leaven?... 30	
<b><i>Tili Boon</i></b>	
Ethics Beyond the Body: Descartes and Heidegger in Emmanuel Levinas’s <i>Totality and Infinity</i> .....	43
<b><i>Ethan Kleinberg</i></b>	
Incarnating Decadence: Reading Des Esseintes’s Bodies .....	56
<b><i>Wanda Klee</i></b>	
Body, Blindness, and Re-Memory: The Struggle for a Post-Colonial Understanding of Identity.....	69
<b><i>Anne-Lancaster Badders</i></b>	

La blessure dans l'œuvre de Serge Doubrovsky .....	78
<i>Elizabeth Molkou</i>	
Bodies of Knowledge in Two Old French Fabliaux .....	91
<i>Natalie Muñoz</i>	
Esprits animaux ou Esprit bête tout court?.....	99
<i>Marie-Christine McCarthy</i>	
Conference Program.....	112
Call for Papers .....	116
Ordering Information.....	117