The Second Feminism
Commentary on Noëlle McAfee's "Two Feminisms"

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1. In the heyday of his existentialist phase, before the work of his lifelong partner Simone de Beauvoir turned him away from idealism and political quietism and toward materialism and political activism, Jean-Paul Sartre was tempted to think that the material conditions in which a person finds himself are never inherently oppressive. On the view Sartre spells out in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), what a human being makes of what life throws at him is ultimately up to him.. Consider, for example, this stunning commentary, published when Hitler's torture and mass murdering campaigns were reaching a pinnacle, on what it means to "be" a Jew:

"A Jew is not a Jew *first* in order to be *subsequently* ashamed or proud; it is his pride of being a Jew, his shame, or his indifference which will reveal to him his being-a-Jew; and this being-a-Jew is nothing outside the free manner of adopting it" (677).[1]

You might be tempted to think that captors who deem that a man is a Jew, imprison him in a concentration camp, torture him, and provide him with no reason to hope for release are, to say the very least, oppressors. Not so, according to Sartre. For this prisoner's experience, though *ordered* around his circumstances, is *constituted* by his attitude toward those circumstances; and this attitude, or consciousness, is entirely free. We "assume" our circumstances, Sartre said; and in so doing we make of them what we will. Sometimes we assume them in "bad faith," which is to say that we tell ourselves lies about what is going on. We are addicted to cigarettes but refuse to call ourselves smokers. We say that we "are" waiters, as though the fact of waiting on tables day in and day out constitutes a fixed and secure identity. We insinuate to underlings that they ought to torture prisoners and then rationalize that we're not responsible because we didn't give flat-out orders.[2] But the worst kind of bad faith comes when we imagine that we are trapped, that we have no choice about how to construe—to articulate—what is going on. Concepts give each individual the means, always, to found the world anew.

The enormous political advance that Simone de Beauvoir made in her appropriation of the theoretical framework of *Being and Nothingness* in *The Second Sex* (1949), the book that jump-started the kind of feminism that Noëlle McAfee rejects in "Two Feminisms," is epitomized in her decisive rejection of Sartre's voluntarism.[3] If women are in bad faith, Beauvoir thought, it's because in a world in which they are economically hamstrung their very survival often depends on suppressing whatever incipient idiosyncratic yearnings or aspirations they might have and making themselves over into creatures who can attract and hold men (or else who are

forced to labor at life-threateningly low wages). To fail to acknowledge that situations such as inevitable economic dependence are inherently painful and life-draining, Beauvoir thought, constitutes a failure of moral perception on the part of people who are lucky enough not to confront oppression in their own lives. Beauvoir did not imagine that women's lives, or their experiences of their lives, would change dramatically until women gained economic independence from men. This revolution would require a re-description of women's current situation and a vision of a transformed world that would instill in women—and, with luck, thoughtful men[4]—a desire for something better. The point of *The Second Sex* was to provide this re-description and vision. But Beauvoir also thought that the mere desire for a better world would not be enough. Writing in the wake of the Holocaust and at the beginning of the Cold War, she had no doubt that people who wanted the world to change would have to engage in a battle—an *agon*, if we must—in order for that independence to come about.

The point of *The Second Sex* was to present a normative *philosophical* picture of what it is to be a genuinely *human* being that would galvanize people to fight for a better world. Beauvoir concedes that women who are in a position to attach themselves to wealthy men and never have to venture out of their houses except to buy baubles and beads or soccer cleats and Halloween costumes are less likely to confront fear and failure and stress than women who must make, or choose to make, their own way in the world. *The Second Sex* shows us why the freedom to make one's way is ultimately even more attractive for a genuinely human being—that is, a being who has the means to be genuinely human—than the safety and creature comforts of economic dependency on men. She also makes it clear that this freedom depends on the freedom of others: that stopping short of a political fight for an economic system that actually left no child, or woman or man, behind would not be good enough. *The Second Sex* re-describes both

the world and the human being who dwells in it in ways that have in fact inspired ordinary women and men to insist on, and fight for, social changes—changes such as equitable pay for equitable work, sexual harassment standards and laws, and child-care programs. And there is no doubt that *The Second Sex* has done more, directly and through its legacy, than any other book of its kind—that is to say, any other philosophical text—to inspire ordinary human beings to seek liberation from the oppressions wrought by sexism.

2. Noëlle McAfee is no Sartrean voluntarist. But her position shares with Sartre's the worrisome claim that just changing how we conceptualize the world is enough to change it materially and that we shouldn't kid ourselves into thinking that an important part of our problem is that some people have more power than others and use that power in bad ways. McAfee argues that what keeps women in the position of "second-class citizens" are "deep structures" constituted by "signs and symbols" (2005, 144). We are oppressed not by human beings, but by "the sociosymbolic system" (142); "nefarious actors do not run the scene" (145) But now the problem is not, à la Sartre, that as individuals we're thinking about things the wrong way; it's that we haven't been concentrating on getting other people to think about them in new ways. It follows from McAfee's view that feminists should not work to replace the current nefarious occupants of the White House with leaders who will commit themselves to bringing about economic and social parity for women and other systematically oppressed people or materially supporting those citizens who are struggling to survive or taking responsibility in concrete ways for the disaster in Iraq. Rather, the "fundamental political task for feminists" is to "[attend] to sociosymbolic structures and processes and the ways in which these formulate 'the feminine'" (146). And

"the hope of a political activist, feminist or otherwise, is to intervene in the way that signs are deployed" (145).

McAfee's argument for this view is that the old kind of politics is a "politics of exclusion." The idea seems to be that the first kind of feminism is trapped in a zero-sum game: when you win something for your side, you take it away from the other side.[5] And even when feminists win a fight—say, the right to work at a job historically reserved for men—they risk winning something for some women at the cost of rendering other women even more oppressed. "Sometimes," McAfee writes, "freedom from one oppression leads to a wholly new one (just as my ability to be a mother and a philosophy professor rests upon my economic privilege to pay others much less than I make per hour to care for my children)" (142). According to the logic of McAfee's argument, the problem is not that we still have a long way to go in fighting oppression—that the situation McAfee describes gives the lie to the idea that we ought to celebrate living in a "post-feminist" era and underscores just how much work remains to be done. The problem, rather, is that we've failed to intervene in the way that signs are deployed.

What could this mean? McAfee in her essay gives us three examples that gesture toward an answer, and all of them are problematic in different, and therefore eye-opening, ways.

3. First, there is "the way Madonna inverted the trappings of femininity." Though we never get a story about what "inversion" means here, I take it that McAfee means that Madonna's exploitation of the traditional signifiers of feminine beauty led to the critical reconsideration of the value of these signifiers in a way that has ameliorated women's lives. (In plain English: Madonna showed us how women could use traditional feminine sexiness as a way of gaining

social and personal power.) But is this really true? It seems to me that Madonna in fact was the poster child of the movement, now in its heyday, that says that a powerful woman is a woman who knows how to turn on (but not necessarily deign to satisfy) a man. Feminism for Madonna is all about living on the sexual edge, in the company of gay men who exalt in your camp femininity and straight men whose tongues are hanging out of their mouths and, recently, straight women who are "daring" enough to make out with you on national TV—inevitably to the delight of many millions of men. Far from "inverting" the trappings of femininity, Madonna, deliberately or not, paved the way for *Girls Gone Wild*. Let us grant, for argument's sake, that this is progress. It remains the case that it was accomplished by Madonna's *drowning in* the trappings of femininity, not inverting them.

This is perhaps the place to note that there is a curious lacuna in McAfee's piece: nary a word about Judith Butler, who is, or at least used to be, the queen of the sign-redeployment-movement. (I say "used to" because in the writing that she has done in the wake of 9/11 and the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions Butler seems to have turned from the linguistic toward the material. See her books *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005).[6]) Butler was less interested in Madonna types and more in the way that transvestite men used the trappings of femininity to subvert the "common sense" ideas that (1) gender is something we have, rather than something we perform and (2) there are only two genders and what makes you one or the other is whether you have a penis or not. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), which has been by far the most influential book when it comes to feminist *academics* (as opposed to the wider audience of women that Beauvoir understood herself to be addressing), Butler at times seems to suggest that the way to release us from the hold of gender norms is for individuals to perform gender in unexpected and subversive ways. When a man dresses in drag, he "troubles"

the gender norm of femininity and thereby helps expose its status as a norm, rather than an intractable fact about how a "normal" presents herself or himself in the world.

But, as the Madonna example indicates, what a performance ends up doing is a function not of the performer's intentions, nor, invariably, of the receptivity of individual audience members. What determines the nature of the performance is largely the nature of the milieu in which it is undertaken. A man who goes to pick up his child at school while wearing a dress may indeed trouble gender norms in a milieu in which there is already a sturdy tolerance for non-heterosexist ways of being in the world. But the same man in a different milieu risks *entrenching* such norms, not to mention putting himself in harm's way. The differences among milieus is of course partly a function of the way that people who inhabit them conceptualize what is going on. But it stretches plausibility to imagine that modes of conceptualization are not closely tied to the material conditions under which these inhabitants live and labor.   No amount of redeployment of signs—say, through academic discourse or even the mass media—is going to persuade a man that he ought to dress in drag in public for political purposes if he has no reason to believe that there will be material support for such a decision.   By "material support" I mean laws and their enforcement, money for consciousness-raising mass media spots, teacher sensitivity training, and so on—in other words, resources that people who want change must wrest from people in power who are committed to preserving traditional gender norms.

But let us suppose that I am wrong about this and that intervening in the way signs are deployed is enough to effect social change. There remains the problem that on McAfee's view, as, notoriously, on the early Butler's, it is hard to see how people who wish to defy the status quo could ever come to exist. The question that Butler has never been able to answer head-on is the same one that McAfee invites, namely:

If "we are not the holders of signs and symbols; they hold us," and if "there is no self prior to its formation in a sociohistorical world" (143),[7] then how can there be any theoretical room for an kind of autonomous *self* at all? Who exactly is doing all the performing? If we're all just nodes constituted by the signifier, then whence comes even our desire to change the way things are, let alone the necessary agency to will change? The usual answer to these questions is quasi-Freudian: the system is in imperfect, and sometimes the reigning signs and symbols fail to get a complete grasp on us. But if this is true, then it seems that we have to provide a naturalistic explanation for why some people wish to unmask and fight oppression: they just happen to be "defective" specimens.   And we have to give up the idea that there's anything inherently bad about being oppressed—in which case we put ourselves in the same boat, even if we adopt McAfee's point of view, as her zero-sum agonists.

4. McAfee's second example of sign-redeploying concerns the Guerrilla Girls, who, McAfee says, "unmasked the masculine bias of the art world." But the poster campaigns of the GGs over the last twenty-plus years have depended crucially not on their redeployment of signs but on their largely unprecedented deployment of *facts*. Let us take a brief look at an example from their work, one that at first glance may look to confirm McAfee's claims.

I have hanging in my office a movie poster that, in 2001, the Guerrilla Girls plastered all over Hollywood.[8] The poster advertises a faux film called *The Birth of Feminism* and features an image of three scantily clad Hollywood stars standing together in sexually provocative poses and holding a banner that stretches across their pelvic areas that proclaims, "Equality Now!" The stars are identified as follows "Pamela Anderson as Gloria Steinem"; "Halle Berry as Flo Kennedy";

"Catherine Zeta-Jones as Bella Abzug." The credits at the bottom reveal in small print that the movie is produced, directed, written, and put to music by Jerry Bruckheimer, Oliver Stone, Joe Ezterhas, and Eminem.

You might be tempted to think that the photographs of these three actresses are best described as redeployed symbols. The poster uses the images not to reinforce Hollywood stereotypes of female beauty and sexiness but to emphasize how profoundly un-feminist these stereotypes are. But isn't it the case that a certain viewer of this poster is primed to see it not as questioning stereotypes of female sexiness but as *making fun of* feminists—the ugly, old, strident, overly serious, uptight, un-sexy women who don't care about pleasure? Such a viewer might think that what's funny about the poster is the idea that Catherine Zeta-Jones could play a loud-mouthed hag. He might not construe Bruckheimer and the others as four of the most notorious misogynists in contemporary Hollywood. Indeed, the poster is likely to work as the Guerrilla Girls intended it to only for someone who is already worried about sexism and sex stereotypes.

I submit that the Guerrilla Girls were well aware of this possibility—which is probably why much of the other work in their campaign to expose the anti-women attitudes that reign in Hollywood aligns uncanny images with statements of fact. Take, for example, "The Anatomically Correct Oscar Billboard," which showcases an image of an Oscar statuette featuring a snow-white, pudgy, hairy man. Underneath the headline, the billboard reads, "He's white & male, just like the guys who win!" It also tells us that no woman has ever won the Best Director award; that 94 percent of writing awards have gone to men; and that only 3 percent of acting awards have gone to people of color. What *might* make someone who has never worried about Hollywood sexism or racism rethink his views is not the image alone; were the billboard to include only the headline and the image, someone inclined to naysay

might find it merely polemical or propagandistic. But if it's true that Academy Award winners are overwhelmingly white men—and the numbers are there to be checked—then the *fact* that white men run Hollywood becomes screamingly obvious (even to those people who don't or won't regard this fact as a problem).[9]

The "Birth of Hollywood" poster, then, shows us the Guerrilla Girls taking a risk. For the poster allows a viewer to see the image of the three actresses *not* as a redeployment but as a *celebration* of their familiar hyperfemininity. The success of the poster, when it succeeds, is to be attributed not to the subversion of certain oppressive sociosymbolic structures but to its drawing attention to the fact that people who don't give a hoot about women's lives run Hollywood and that the women who collude with them appear happy about their own exploitation.

Finally, there's the example that Butler not only popularized but helped to instantiate: the way that "the gay liberation movement used the derogatory term 'queer' to gain power" (144). This example, alone among the three, is apt for McAfee's purposes. But, crucially, the public appropriation of the term "queer" by gay men didn't come out of nowhere. People did not wake up one morning and decide to engage in a bit of subversive resignification. In fact, expressions of gay pride using redeployed signs would have been unthinkable in the absence of at least two concrete events of watershed importance for gay men, namely, what happened at Stonewall in 1969 and the devastation of AIDS in the 1980s. Among themselves, gay men had used "queer" self-referentially long before they outed the concept.[10] The material and psychic suffering inflicted on gay men, and the anger this suffering evoked, paved the way for gay men's taking the risk of *publicly* expressing solidarity, self-esteem, and hope.

The point I'm trying to make in my analysis of these three examples is not so much that sign redeployment is a tricky and often risky business, though of course that's true. The point is that the success or failure of this strategy is profoundly dependent on the material conditions that (1) spawn it (in the case of "queer"); (2) legitimize it (in the Guerrilla Girls case); and (3) determine the terms of its reception (in the Madonna case).

5. Let me conclude by returning to the irony that I was hinting at in the opening paragraphs of this essay. The best example that feminist academics have of a philosophical book that has profoundly changed things for the better for women (and not just women academics) is *The Second Sex*, a book that offered a philosophical vision of full personhood grounded in a real-life sense of the material struggles that must ensue in order to effect political change. McAfee in her essay is urging us to join the group of feminist academics who insist that feminist politics must take the form of attempting to reorganize social semiotic space—in other words, of attending to, and attempting to change, the way that signs and symbols are used. But when you step back and look at the material conditions of the writing that McAfee admires and urges us to emulate—that of Kristeva, Irigaray, Oliver, Cornell, and so forth—you see that the social semiotic space in which it could hope to have any effect is alarmingly small: feminist academics are mostly in the position to persuade only *each other*.

I have expressed some skepticism about the claim that McAfee's examples of good political interventions in the world are best described as successful sign-redeployment. But even if I am wrong about that, it is surely the case that whatever oppression-relieving effects the actions of Madonna, the Guerrilla Girls, and activist gay men have had

are a function of their addressing *the world*, not just people who have PhDs. McAfee on several occasions speaks approvingly of the work of Dewey. But Dewey lived in an age, far unlike ours, in which philosophers labored in conditions that allowed them, even encouraged them, to be public intellectuals. These days, in order to survive in the academy, philosophers are obliged to pretend that what they are doing is in its rudiments the work of science: we are doing *research* (not just sitting at our desks trying to dope things out, in part by reflecting on what other doper-outers have written); we are making progress and getting *results* (despite there having been precisely no convergence among philosophers in the last two-plus millennia that is best explained by the claim that "we've gotten it right"); and we are publicizing these results (in journals that, no matter how influential or exclusive, are read almost exclusively by the people who publish in them). Among other unfortunate effects, the material conditions of our work demand that we confine ourselves, for the most part, to a narrow, jargon-filled lexicon (whether it be of the analytic or continental variety), the very esotericism of which allows us to imagine that we are doing something important and of substance. In other words, the material conditions of being an academic almost guarantee that our work will be politically effete.

McAfee argues that "the feminist task" (and not just for academics) is to "raise to consciousness" the truth about certain "fundamental myths" (144). To sum up my point here in a slogan: consciousness-raising needs to start at home. For those of us who imagine that philosophy has a place in the public world—which is to say, that philosophy as it stands can be transformed into something better than what it is now—the first task is to take a good hard look at exactly what *our own words* are doing (or not doing), how our own "sociosymbolic system" actually functions. I think that we will see that the very idea that such a system, if "system" even turns out to be the right concept, could in and of itself be

the source of oppression is deeply implausible. The system is itself a function of, for example, the way that money circulates in universities. It depends on our ignoring facts about who does and doesn't get jobs; about the conditions under which genuine, serious, creative thinking is most likely to take place; about the value, which gets measured and meted out in material terms, of cleverness and conformity over genuine originality and insight. These are, I hope I needn't point out, issues of the first importance to feminists.

If this essay were a talk, this is the juncture at which someone might chide me for engaging only in a negative critique, rather than proposing a "positive program." Once philosophers have acknowledged and despaired over the material conditions that shape their labor, how exactly are they supposed to proceed? I doubt that you will be surprised to learn that my response to this objection would be to hand my interlocutor a copy of *The Second Sex*.

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[1] In the same section of the book Sartre claims more generally: "There is no absolute point of view which one can adopt so as to compare different situations; each person realizes only one situation—*his own*" (703).

[2] Indeed, Sartre often writes as though we're always in bad faith, insofar as we over-congratulate ourselves for our courage and lucidity on those rare occasions in which we find the strength to look the truth in the eye.

[3] Sartre's attachment to voluntarism, and thus to the theoretical framework of *Being and Nothingness*, began to erode earlier than the publication of *The Second Sex*. My point here is that if we put Sartre's and Beauvoir's magnum opuses side by side, we see that, far from pledging allegiance to Sartre's theoretical framework, Beauvoir dramatically transformed it, in large part by rejecting the idea that whether or not a person is oppressed turns significantly on whether how she construes her situation. In other words, Beauvoir understood "oppression" to be through and through a political concept. We see the roots of this view in her *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), but it is not until *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir is systematically thinking about personhood through the lens of the question of what a woman is, that the view comes fully into its own. For a defense of these claims, see my 2001, especially chapters 4 and 5.

[4] Part of Beauvoir's story is about the way that sexism constrains men, too, albeit in ways that tend to be less enervating than those that comparably situated women experience.

[5] McAfee groups agonistic feminism with feminist separatism, insofar as, she claims, adherents of both subscribe fundamentally to "a politics of exclusion." But it strikes me that the sort of exclusion involved is significantly different for each strategy. I interpret McAfee to be worried that agonistic feminism strives for circumstances that do not diminish the amount of oppression in the world—that, in other words, agonistic feminism is *morally* suspicious. It's not clear from McAfee's essay, however, what exactly is worrisome about feminist separatism. McAfee doesn't say so, but it would appear that the problem with girls' taking their marbles away from the boys and playing by themselves is that retreating from other people in one's *polis* is *not nice*, which I fear is one way of saying: not ladylike. I myself do not see a viable solution in separatism to what ails women (and men). But this is mostly because separatism hasn't worked, even as a stopgap political strategy, not because there's something inherently bad about the sort of "exclusion" it demands.

[6] For an interesting discussion of Butler's turn, see Mann 2006.

[7] McAfee attributes the latter claim to Hegel. On my reading, however, this is not an apt way to epitomize his view. See my 2001, chapter 3.

[8] You can see this image and other GG images I discuss below at <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/latest/film.shtml>.

[9] I cannot resist mentioning in this context the report on the status of women in the profession of philosophy that Sally Haslanger delivered at the Central Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association in April of 2007. In addition to describing and discussing the various ways that women philosophers are made to feel uncomfortable in the profession, Haslanger adduced certain surprising facts in this report—for example, that only 12 percent of the authors in seven of the most highly regarded journals in the profession from 2002 to 2007 were women. (The *Wikipedia* entry on "Women in Philosophy" provides various US government estimates of the number of women in the profession; apparently, upwards of three-fourths of professional philosophers are men.) Haslangers' report produced a flurry of blogging, much of it by professional male philosophers, and some of it of course skeptical or defensive—a flurry that, alas, was not provoked by the substantive claims, arguments, and visions that are to be found in the mountain of feminist philosophical writings published in "lesser" journals.

[10] One might also compare the use of the N-word within the Black community with its public deployment in hip-hop.