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Noëlle McAfee considers two sorts of feminism: agonistic and semiotic. Agonistic feminism supposes that gender differences precede the context of oppression and views liberation projects as efforts to free these preexisting identities from their circumstances.[1] Semiotic feminism, in contrast, holds that gendered identities are the products of complex histories of interaction. Rather than preexisting, such identities are dynamic and emergent. Liberation projects do not seek to free an original or authentic identity that has been oppressed, but rather to "reconstitute the public sphere" to become one where identities formed in the context of oppression can be transformed. Agonistic feminism is rejected by McAfee because it does not change the problematic structures of the society in which it operates. It seeks instead to reverse the established relation so that women are not only freed but become dominant and "create a new hegemony" (142). While such feminism may include the idea that dominance by women will bring about a more humane society, the fundamental circumstances remain of pre-existing identities seeking and deserving freedom in the face of other identities that are (at least when in power) oppressive.

Agonistic feminism and its politics are mistaken because they "presuppose that one's interests precede one's entrance into politics and that politics is the arena in which one acts to maximize one's own given set of interests" (143). From McAfee's pragmatist and Hegelian standpoint, "there is no self prior to its formation in a sociohistorical world" (143). If we grant that selves are social and so connected to the development of others, McAfee concludes "there is no exclusion of the other without some dissolution of oneself" (143). By seeking to maintain a social order where some are excluded, those in power "dissolve" themselves as well. Agonistic feminism is therefore wrong in its presuppositions and self-defeating in its program of action.

While McAfee does not focus on the reasons one might adopt agnostic feminism, it is useful to recognize that the view is, at least in part, a response to the experience of exclusion and oppression comparable to the racial politics proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois in his early (1897) essay "On the Conservation of Races." Just as agonistic feminists accept the antecedent reality of gendered identities, Du Bois affirmed the reality of racial identities prior to the experience of race prejudice. For Du Bois, this recognition of "real" races affirmed two key ideas. First, races are not simply products of oppression such that the end of oppression also means the end of race. African peoples, for example, are not who they are solely because of slavery and economic exploitation, but rather are the product of a combination of history, language, common

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physical characteristics, and a shared vision of the future (Du Bois 1897, 817). The "nature" of a particular race may be, in part, a product of a history of oppression, but it also involves interests, talents, and character that precede the oppression or have meaning beyond the context of oppression in which they developed. Second, recognition of the antecedent existence of races or racial characters leads to recognition of the potential value of different races through distinctive contributions to humanity as a whole. Even as races are transformed by history, they preserve a distinctive "nature" that can, and, in light of potential contributions, ought to be conserved in the present world. Oppression of races, therefore, does not "make" races; rather oppression blocks the realization of racial "gifts" which will serve to better all.[2]

Du Bois' argument is not intended to be an abstraction based on world-historical politics, but one that gives meaning to the experience of exclusion, of "being a problem," in a way that goes beyond oppression to a future of self-realization (Du Bois 1903, 363). To exhaust the notion of self in the history of oppression alone suggests that the end of oppression means the end of oneself. The presence of an identity whose existence is independent of the oppression gives one something to recover and a framework for the transformation of one's self and the world. Du Bois held that races are formative for selves and so the elimination of racism not only does not require the elimination of races, it depends upon their conservation. Agonistic feminist politics, like Du Boisian racial politics, can be seen as a response to the experience of oppression that affirms a preexisting identity that gives meaning and purpose to the process of liberation.

One might argue from the perspective of agonistic feminism that McAfee's quick dismissal of the idea of a pre-existing self—or, more sympathetically, an identity that pre-exists the circumstances of oppression—seems to set aside a crucial range of women's experience. On the contrary, the pragmatist notion of self suggested by McAfee is one that must take seriously the sorts of experience that ground agonistic feminism (and comparable racial politics as well). How this can be done is well illustrated in the work of Mary Parker Follett in her important (and neglected) work, *Creative Experience*. Follett, an independent scholar and labor mediator in the first third of the 20th century, sought to challenge the idea that conflict in the workplace and in society as a whole could only be solved by domination or compromise. She argued that such a limited view of solutions was based upon a misunderstanding of the nature of subjects and their interests. Instead of viewing individuals as pre-existing identities that come into relations, she argued that identities are fundamentally relational. "In human relations," she said, "this is obvious: I never react to you but to you-plus-me; or to be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you-plus-me. 'I' can never influence 'you' because you have already influenced me; that is, in the very process of meeting, by the very process of meeting, we both become something different" (1924, 62-3). Agonistic feminists, in recognizing the experience of oppression, attempt to identify a subject that can ground activism. If Follett and McAfee are right, this attempt can only fail. Even the process of recognizing oppression becomes part of a dynamic situation: "My response," Follett argues, "is not to a crystallized product of the past, static for the moment of meeting; while I am behaving, the environment is changing because of my behaving, and my behavior is a response to the new situation which I, in part, have created" (1924, 64). McAfee's alternative feminism is not setting aside the grounding experiences of women but rather recognizing their role in generating the need for change in the environment.[3]

McAfee's alternative to feminism framed by conflict, then, can be seen as a response to conflict that offers alternative modes of action. These other modes are themselves to be understood through the resources of Charles S. Peirce's

theory of signs. On this view, selves are signs that call for interpretation in terms of the relations that connect them with a past, afford their present capacities, and frame their potential for future action. These relations are also signs of practices, habits, and institutions that make up the meaning of oneself. Just as selves are relational, so too are habits, practices, and institutional structures and, like selves, they too are subject to interpretation and change. McAfee concludes "we can see how the world is permeated by these 'signs' of ourselves—or sometimes our selves are occluded by their exclusions from the public sphere—and that this world of signs demands interpretation" (144). Practically, semiotic feminism recognizes that women and men, the power relations that constrain them, their histories and futures are all contained within "a common sociosymbolic field." This recognition of commonality leads semiotic feminism to point action away from conflict and toward "interventions into what we all share" (145).

Again, one might argue in response to this alternative feminism that it has the effect of overriding differences in favor of what is shared. Recalling Du Bois' racial politics, such a view has the potential to lose what diverse groups (communities, classes, genders and even races) might be able to contribute in light of their history and experience of exclusion. McAfee lends weight to the criticism when she observes "there is no *outside* the system, no we/they dichotomy that the oppression model supposes" (145). The first clause, that there is no outside, is true in an important way for pragmatists like Peirce. To claim otherwise, affirms that something exists outside the sociohistorical system in which identities develop. Just as there are no identities before interaction, Peirce and the other pragmatists argue that there are also no essences, substances, or principles. Our ability to interpret signs is contained within the world in which we live. There is no outside, or at least no relevant outside. However, McAfee's second clause, that there is "no we/they dichotomy" appears to set aside the possibility of incommensurable differences that may be associated with the experience of oppression and exclusion. While this semiotic feminism recognizes differences, it also accepts the idea that there is a "common public sphere" that appears to encompass the poles of a binary relation and does the situating (145). This common sphere makes critical interventions possible because there is something common across the differences in terms of which criticism can be carried out. While this seems to be the case in some contexts of oppression, in other cases interpretation is called for because there is *no* common public sphere. Interpretation in cases like these (for example, the conflict between indigenous peoples and those who would colonize their lands, the conflict between religious traditions in which the interpretive framework excludes participation by outsiders) begins in the face of sharp, apparently impassable division. Here, one might argue, rather than drawing on an encompassing larger common sphere, interpretation emerges on a middle ground defined by the local conditions of the conflict.

In fact, the idea of an environing common sphere or symbolic field might be seen as a particular answer to certain kinds of oppression in which gender differences, for example, are interpreted as a binary that is the product of a particular cultural history. In other cases, a conflict might be interpreted as a division so sharp that those on one side remain permanently excluded from the experiences and meanings of the other. In this case, resolution of conflicts will involve the emergence of something new that can bridge the divisions. Du Bois presents his experience as one in which racial differences are, in part, within the same symbolic field, but are not exhausted by it. The idea of the "gifts" of black folk marks something outside the structure of oppression that can play a role in making a new middle ground. McAfee might also have this sort of relation in mind when she talks about

"women who intervene" by coming "at these poles from the margins of the field" (145). When faced with incommensurable differences, the margins emerge between the poles, in what Gloria Anzaldúa names the "borderlands," the space between (1999). The emergent middle ground becomes both a mark of sharp division and the potential for unification.

At issue is the nature of dichotomies.[4] McAfee takes them as opposite ends of a single line, emphasizing the continuity of the extremes. Dichotomous genders are products of one symbolic system and so can be challenged by challenging the system that involves them both. From the perspective of experience like that of Du Bois and perhaps of agonistic feminists, however, dichotomies can be seen as the products of certain kinds of interaction that are a matter of both continuity and discontinuity. As such, the sides of the divide have the character of being at once part of the same symbolic field and, at the same time, of being unrelated. They are at odds in a certain kind of relation that both separates and unifies.[5] "Reality," as Follett observed, "is in the relating, in the activity-between" (1924, 54). The focus is not on either "we" and "they" in themselves or on the common sphere that contains them, but on the process that makes for the division and connection—the activity-between.

McAfee is right when she observes that exclusion affects the one who excludes, but such effects are neither necessarily bad nor only divisive. Semiotic feminism, with this broader understanding of dichotomies, can both recognize that differences can be sharp and long-lasting, and recognize that such differences are not unbridgeable but instead provide a context for an emergent middle ground. In short, the experiences of *agon* are not set aside in a semiotic feminism but become part of a process of transformation. From the perspective of Follett's approach, the process of conflict and resolution recognizes the validity of dichotomy but concludes that "when we are watching an activity [of conflict and resolution] we are watching not parts in relation to a whole or whole in relation to parts, we are watching a whole-a-making" (1924, 102). McAfee, like Follett, sets out to find a better way to respond to a history of oppression and exclusion. By recognizing both the character and necessity of division as well as connection, semiotic feminism has the potential to recognize women's experience and distinct identities while also fostering a shared world in which the meaning of those identities is transformed.

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[1] McAfee suggests that liberal feminism shares the same basic commitments as agonistic feminism, but differs in that the process of liberation is a matter of "barter" and not struggle. See p. 143.

[2] See "Of Sorrow Songs" (Du Bois 1903, 531ff.) for an example of the idea of racial gifts.

[3] It is worth noting that Du Bois' early "nationalist" view of race is transformed later in his career to a view that places race among human differences that come and go but are, as differences, essential to human identity and liberation. His collection of essays, *Darkwater* (1920), in particular, recognizes the intimate connection of race, class and gender, not as essential natures but as the product of particular histories. While these identities each make a contribution to social transformation, they are dynamic identities that may be joined by others or transformed into new identities over time.

[4] See Val Plumwood 2002.

[5] This is the idea of a continuum that is central to much pragmatist theory. See Peirce 1992 for an extended discussion of this idea.