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Comments on Gines

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Let me say first how deeply honored and grateful I am by being included in this productive and overdue debate even though I am not a trained philosopher. Actually, the work I have been doing on Beauvoir and others has required me to stray far away from my own discipline proper, African-American Studies. It would not have been possible without the work of Black feminist theoreticians Toni Cade Bambara, the Combahee River Collective, the editors Hull, Bell Scott and

Smith of 1982's *But Some Of Us Are Brave*, Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Saidyia Hartman, and the intellectual labor by pioneering Black feminist philosophers like Kathryn herself and others, assembled in the breadth and depth of publications emerging out of the *Collegium of Black Women Philosophers*. To all these leading activist intellectuals and scholars I have turned again and again and have learned my thinking from them; they have been my mentors – if not in person, then very much in spirit - to enable me to push towards a white-on-white project critical of gender, and of white gender studies, of which my Beauvoir article is one crucial part.

Obviously, Gines' analysis of Beauvoir's classic conducts a compelling argument. The way I read her intervention, she moves forward an intersectionally oriented critique of *The Second Sex* from the very point of view suppressed in Beauvoir's thinking: it is the Black woman's structural position which enables a perspective on all women in which race, class and gender oppression *and* supremacy, respectively, are neither competitive, nor comparatively situated, but intricately interdependent – a point which Black feminists have been making ever since Fran Beale's pioneering manifesto in 1969, which has been echoed decades ago by many texts like Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* from 1970, and the Combahee River Collective's pamphlet of 1977 running through to these day and age's blogs like Alexis Pauline Gumbs' <http://www.alexispauline.com/apgblog/>.

The recurring, repeating and exhausting urgency of this debate, and of a white feminist reckoning with Black women's labor, has been driven home in popular culture just some time ago with the enormous success of the anti-Black movie *The Help*, which to me is most flawed politically and intellectually (among a lot of its other problems) by its complete erasure of decades of Black feminist instruction and radical critique of, and endlessly patient negotiation with white feminist and gender studies; instead it presents Black women as voiceless

virgin beings in need of white teaching, consciousness-raising and salvation, thus aggressively turning (post)civil rights history on its head.

To engage in this ongoing political and popular debate to which, in my view that I assume Kathryn and I share (and which Beauvoir would have endorsed herself), philosophy must be beholden if it is not to remain in its ivory tower, let me make a few suggestions.

As Kathryn amply demonstrates, one of Beauvoir's misconceptions is to figure women's oppression (in the universalizing sense of generic women) as absolute – meaning all women are oppressed by all men, categorically – without addressing the extent to which an acknowledgement of particularities and differences among women would impact her specific theory of women's predicament, and women's liberation. I want to push this point somewhat further by asking: can Black men be patriarchal?

If the alignment of human social being in Western modern societies has been split along lines of gender, and if we consider that very split a construction tout court which pertains to, and is conditioned on one's human-ness in the first place, Black men have not been able, have not been interpellated to enter into the binary economy of gender anymore than Black women have, as Hortense Spillers and Frank Wilderson have argued. Just to avoid misunderstandings: of course, there is an extended body of Black feminist knowledge detailing the phenomenology of Black male violence against Black women, on all possible kinds of levels, but does this enactment of violence ever mean that the privilege of engenderment – as modern societies have known it – has accrued to Black men? (Following Spillers, Black women do not inhabit it, as the afterlife of slavery descendancy of un-human fleshness overwrites their existence.) Thus, given the dehumanization of Black being by white anti-Blackness, no such patriarchally

inflected power position, no clearly hierarchical binary division, neither on the performative nor on the structural level, has underwritten the existence of Black men and the relations between Black men and Black women. (Let alone relations to white women).

I am making this point to tease out a more pronounced critique of Beauvoir's stance vis-à-vis anti-Blackness. Her analysis has no more acute understanding of Black men, than it has of Black women, precisely because she has no understanding of, as Césaire and others have called it, the thingification of Black being, of the politics, cultures and histories of *enslavism* (Broeck 2014), which structurally excluded Black life forms (a term borrowed from Walcott) from the regime of the human. To me, the crucial problem with *The Second Sex* is its deployment of the Hegelian binary – which has installed a Western white philosophical train of thought that knows “slavery” only as a hefty metaphor for states of white oppression and has remained agnotologically innocent of the enslavement trade and of Western modernity as a regime of slavery.

Therefore, as a further response to Gines' reading, I want to make a point that I have thought about for some time now, but have not been able to articulate clearly for lack of interlocution. This is to reconsider the framework of ‘racial difference’. The term functions as the post 1980's gender studies' key-trope in reaction to Black feminist interventions, as a term analogous to ‘sexual difference’ which in turn evolved into a quasi naturalized given since its first deployment in the era of US ethnic, anti-sexist multiculturalism-powered diversity claims. Vis-à-vis the ubiquitous power of “difference” as a term that has set the debates for the last 25 years, the problem for me with, for example Beauvoir's difficulty to acknowledge Black women's agency, is not that she does not understand differences among women, but that she does not acknowledge enslavism (see Broeck 2015), which would entail seeing anti-Blackness as a constitutive feature of white societies. Black

female being –in that perspective –structurally does not range as “different from” white women, but as not human in the first place. (Broeck 2008)

Black social and civil death (not a metaphor, in view of the trajectory from Trayvon Martin through Ferguson to the Charleston’s massacres in June 2015), to hint at Patterson’s by now notorious term, constitutes a challenge to white thinking much more exacting than the worn paradigm of “difference”. The abjection of Black life forms in the ongoing afterlife of transatlantic enslavement, as Saidiya Hartman has so poignantly pointed out, has created Blackness, and Black people as a group of “sentient beings” (see Wilderson) outside of the realm of humanity, characterized by the structural absence of intra-human relationality, and thus by the structural *evacuation from human difference*.

So the problem I see as critical in Beauvoir’s feminism is that she does not even try to go where Fanon – who was her immediate and known contemporary – would have taken her: the white man is because the Black is not. Structurally speaking, in this anti-Black power, white woman is included ever since she has successfully fought for not being treated as a ‘slave.’ To acknowledge that Black epistemic point would have not permitted Beauvoir to speak about ‘women’ in the universalizing sense, thus conveniently erasing Black women as the negligible particular. It would have not permitted a use of ‘slavery’ as helpful and self-empowering metaphor for white women. And it would have required a letting go of the assumption that racism is a problem pertaining to Black people and as such is, at best, usable (fungible!, to use Hartman’s term) for demonstrative reasons as a parallel to sexism— instead of having to reckon with white women’s racist power *over Black people*. Beauvoir, in my contention, was instrumental for ‘(white) women’s lib’ – but that very, and undoubted (by me) philosophical advance has constituted its own mode of anti-Black abjection. To realize that, would have exploded the

notion of white feminism, based as it was on ‘women’s’ absolute powerlessness and lack, at the moment of its conception.

So, I am very interested in how Kathryn would respond to this point of white-on-white questioning: To me—an outsider, mind you, to philosophy departments –reading Beauvoir as philosopher does not need defense. To grant her crucial epistemic importance and leverage for feminism is beyond doubt. In terms of a critical re-reading of gender theory’s genealogy, however, we need to concern ourselves with the white supremacist power position Beauvoir’s philosophy has strengthened in effect, making the human subject and its modern and postmodern reign fully inhabitable for white women: over and against black women and men.

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