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For a Saturated Intersectionality

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Intersectional times

Asking a question characteristic of some of the first gestures of intersectionality theory, Elizabeth Spelman elaborated a well-known critique of Simone de Beauvoir by asking, “just who does she think ‘we’ is?” (Spelman 1990, 57):¹

¹ The question is used as the sub-title to Spelman’s chapter on Beauvoir in *Inessential Woman* (Spelman 1990).

We can’t describe the sexism women are subject to without specifying their class; nor can we understand how sexism works without looking at its relation to class privilege. . . . this poses some very serious difficulties for her attempt to give a general account of woman. (Spelman 1990, 63)

Kathryn Gines’ critique of analogy belongs to the second time of intersectionality theory. Her paper “Comparative and Competing Frameworks of Oppression in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*,” adds to an important critical scrutiny of the analogies historically beloved by white feminists. These have included the once ubiquitous analogies between enslavement and the subordination of women to which Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott appealed (Gines 2010, 36), as did writers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Simone de Beauvoir. Gines is among those who have demonstrated how a white perspective is typically presupposed by “the use of racial oppression as an analogy for gender oppression.” Since, as Spelman once wrote, “half of the populations to whom [Beauvoir] compares women consist of women,” (Spelman 1990, 65) analogizing women to slaves falsely separates them so as to liken them, supposes they do not overlap, and occludes the experiences of enslaved women from the resulting analyses of femininity. “Like this analogy,” Gines suggests (analogizing the analogy), “historically white feminism has often ignored the ways in which black women experience sexist oppression differently because of the added burden of racism” (Gines 2010, 36).² In 1792, Mary

² Gines’ forthcoming “Simone de Beauvoir and the Race/Gender Analogy in *The Second Sex Revisited*,” contributes a further development in her ongoing project. Here she argues for a more precise distinction between Beauvoir’s analogical references to racism on the one hand, and to enslavement, on the other.

Wollstonecraft could declare with gusto, “I argue from analogy,” (Wollstonecraft 1995, 126, 285) whereas today a very wide range of contemporary feminist, political, and queer theorists have strenuously taken their leave from arguments from analogy.³

Spelman and Gines also share an interest in the way intentions that seem promising from an intersectionalist perspective can betray or sabotage themselves. For example, Gines points out in “Comparative and Competing Frameworks,” that Beauvoir “herself notes that it is a mistake to assimilate woman to the slave” (Gines 2014, 263). Spelman notes that Beauvoir offered “all the ingredients of a feminist account of women’s lives that would not conflate woman with a small group of women...namely white middle class heterosexual Christian woman. Yet de Beauvoir ends up producing an account which does just that” (Spelman 1990, 58). In her 2010 essay, when Gines makes mention of Gloria Steinem’s comparative analysis of the sexism directed at Hilary Clinton and the racism directed at Barack Obama, her point is that: “Steinem acknowledges ‘the caste systems of sex and race are interdependent and can only be uprooted together,’ [yet] her remarks throughout the piece do not reflect this understanding” (Gines 2010, 38). Here also is a methodological gesture vital to many insights of intersectionality theory: Gines directs our attention to the all-too-common gap between what is declared and what is actually reflected in one’s analysis.

Limited versus saturated intersectionality

Yet the many times of intersectionality theory have also included aversion to an overly extreme version of itself, an extremity sometimes associated with postmodernism (Garry

³ See, for example, Halley 2000, see also the Introduction to Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (revised 1999 edition) and “Merely Cultural,” Butler 1997, 269).

2011, 839).⁴ Consider the diagrammatic complexity Charles Mills proposes for the intersections of race and sex in “Intersecting Contracts.” He averts an exaggerated multiplication of axes of subordination, making reference to Mary Maynard’s concern that “so many forms of difference are created that it becomes impossible to analyze them in terms of inequality or power,” (Maynard 2001, 129, cited Mills 2007, 170). From this perspective, in other words, it isn’t self-evident that the intersectionality of gender and race is best analyzed through a simultaneous analysis of all the intersecting subordinations of sexuality, class, wealth, education, generation, and disability one could acknowledge.⁵ Some think this would veer towards an overly fragmented analysis, particularly if it weakens the ability to recognize inequality.

For this reason, it is important to hesitate before querying an omission in the intersections on which Gines concentrates in “Frameworks of Oppression,” (“the general woman Beauvoir describes is not a Black woman, a Jewish woman, a colonized woman or proletariat woman,” Gines 2014, 251) and in “Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy” (“of course this is a grossly simplified understanding of race and gender that still ignores other intersecting aspects of identities (including nationality, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, etc),” (Gines 2010 38). Both these summaries omit the important threshold of subordination mentioned by Audre Lorde (Lorde 1984, 115-6), and extensively by Beauvoir: aging.

Aging must be added to the alterities we include among Beauvoir’s concerns: those of colonization, racism, and class, in

⁴ Garry speaks to the widespread preference in the literature for “safe and useful” frameworks of intersectionality, “without dangerous implications of gender proliferation or theory fragmentation” (Garry 2011, 844).

⁵ To the contrary, Garry, who speaks for a version which is inclusive but “modest”, (826) proposes a number of models which avoid fragmentation and excessive proliferation: these include Wittgensteinian family resemblance, and a “roundabout” model proposed as an alternative to Crenshaw’s traffic intersection model of discrimination (Garry 2011, 831-2).

addition to sex.⁶ But Beauvoir's 1970 work, *Old Age*, also made evident that aging was more than the "plus one" to this list. Her extensive considerations of aging, here and earlier, allow a reconsideration of the analogical and comparative accounts of subordination she sometimes favors. *Old Age* proposed an answer to a question posed in *The Second Sex's* conclusion: what might constitute a new basis for fraternity between the sexes? In *Old Age* Beauvoir described every human subject as the "dwelling-place of our own future old age" (Beauvoir 1977, 4). Beauvoir's emphasis on the differentiations effected by these transformations undid more successfully the "general" account of woman, though it did so by also veering towards a different generality. Beauvoir associated aging with an always-impending transformation, and so with a singular alterity inhabiting every human, and an additional sense in which humans share the lived experience of becoming other within their lifetime. This is also to share or anticipate the experience of transformation towards a social category of sub-humanity, as Beauvoir described the association of aging with an abject alterity.

In published essays and ongoing work, Gines has challenged the capacity of Beauvoir's work to think the intersectionality of race and gender. She has asked how well it provides a space for the representation of "black women (and other women of color) alongside the black men and white women situated in these frameworks" (Gines 2010, 44). My question to this project is whether it could include in its scope the intersectionality of alterities specific to Beauvoir's discussions of aging? Here are some further queries to which this could lead.

If Spelman's question, "just who does [Beauvoir] think 'we' is?" meets with the answer, "tacitly middle class, tacitly white," what age is tacitly presupposed by Beauvoir's "we"? In

⁶ See Spelman's *Inessential Woman* on Beauvoir's consideration of class and racism. (Spelman omits a discussion of Beauvoir's work on age and aging but the latter would fit her analysis well).

theoretical and fictional work, Beauvoir emphasizes the differences between the four year old, the pre-pubescent and pubescent adolescent, the young woman, the young married woman, a middle aged woman, a menopausal woman, a woman in advanced years. However, and notwithstanding a number of references to cultural differences, again Beauvoir often presupposes these are the differentiated experiences of white middle class women and girls. So Gines' work on Beauvoir has much to offer a re-reading of *Old Age*.

Intersectionality and aging

For, on the one hand, Beauvoir's considerations of aging lead her towards a more systematic fragmentation (broached in *The Second Sex*, *Old Age*, fiction, narratives, autobiography) of identity, including gendered identity. As I have elsewhere suggested, there is, for Beauvoir, no sex without age and no age without sex. But on the other hand, the phenomenon described by Gines repeats in Beauvoir's consideration of aging. *The Second Sex* does discuss aging intermittently, including some important passages on menopause and the experience of some women with grown children. *Old Age* foregrounds men's experience of old age. But both works omit an extended analysis of women's old age, nor are the experiences of women of color (already largely occluded) considered from the perspective of age differentials, the alterity of aging, and generational difference.

Moreover, Gines' analysis would quickly identify Beauvoir's more extended analyses of masculinity in her 1970 work as further occluding questions of race. The importance of age and generational difference (generational transmission, the relative economic worth of those of reproductive age, intersections of reproduction and property) to the relations of slavery and colonialism are also lost from Beauvoir's discussion.

In short, Gines' work offers a perspective we can importantly direct not only at *Old Age*, but also at a phenomenon more generally apparent in Beauvoir's work. Beauvoir frequently describes the intersections of sex with age, as when she describes the capacity of adolescent girls for class- and age-based cruelty. To do so is to differentiate the "bloc"-like reference to women also characterized by Spelman. But the way in which Beauvoir does so tends to re-establish a bloc, as when Beauvoir breaks down the category "women" by instituting a new bloc: "adolescent girls." The same point could be made of Beauvoir's references in *Old Age* to men who retire. Beauvoir offers an important contribution to the analysis of alterity and aging when she describes the different relationships to male gender norms of young, middle-aged, and retiring men. This is also a contribution to the intersectionality of age and sex since only the interlocking sex of age and age of sex could explain the catastrophic aspects Beauvoir identified in the retirement (so to speak) of masculinity.

This is another context in which Beauvoir pursues the aim of differentiation (here, age differentiation) but only by generalizing the experiences of retiring men. Describing the shock of retirement, Beauvoir speaks to the loss, for men, of the authority and visibility they otherwise access in the public sphere. Unlike women, she claims that men are unprepared for this loss, for, compared to women, they lose a form of public authority not accessed by the wife traditionally responsible for the household. *Inessential Woman* identifies with bemusement this register in Beauvoir's earlier work: "Beauvoir's perceptiveness about class and race equality should make us wonder about her account of the 'man' as 'citizen' and 'producer' with economic independence," (Spelman 1990, 64). Read with Gines, Beauvoir's account is all the more implausible. Moreover, an attention to Beauvoir's work on aging highlights all the more the problems identified by Gines. Despite her engagement with the analyses of Richard Wright,

her later familiarity with Fanon, and Beauvoir's attention to ongoing inequalities in the wake of slavery and colonialism, she still manages, as late as 1970, to refer to the public sphere as a context in which "men" generally have authority to the point that being deemed "old," will deliver the shock of being rendered the other. Gines' work helps identify the default privilege in the assumption that men who retire are not already well-familiar with the shock of being othered. She reveals the faulty analysis and also the opportunity missed by Beauvoir to differentiate the intersecting relationships between aging and multiple alterities.

Intersectionality and Sabotage

Among the possibilities for understanding oscillations in which Beauvoir undoes her "general account of woman" through new differentiations of "men" and "women" (which in fact establish newly general accounts), Gines and Spelman have suggested that Beauvoir sabotages her own argument (Gines 2014, 263; Spelman 1990, 64). In her 2010 essay "Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy," Gines has contrasted Beauvoir with earlier women philosophers who offer promising resources to contemporary theorists of intersectionality, giving attention to the work of Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper is characterized as offering a "theoretically nuanced articulation of black women's intersectionality," (Gines 2010, 46). Gines turns to Cooper and other black feminist texts when taking a retrospective look at fore figures in the history of women philosophers. While her project could be described as one of recovery, her work more generally leads us to rethink the options of recovery versus sabotage.⁷ Could

⁷ Thinking in such stark terms may also lead to the conclusion that to study Beauvoir's analogies is either to support them, or to repudiate them. Surprisingly, Broeck attributes to *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir* (Deutscher 2008) the view that Beauvoir's analogies were "worthwhile, overdue", Broeck (2012, 168) but see the different viewpoint offered by Gines in "Simone de Beauvoir and the Race/Gender Analogy in *The Second Sex*

we reconsider the latter term – and in doing so, also reconsider the possible implication that Beauvoir’s oscillation in one direction undoes the oscillations in the other? And if so, how might this add to the range of possibilities for interpreting the work of Cooper? A more “saturated” direction of intersectional analysis might suit Gines’ ongoing interest in insights that are not realized by their own articulation.

One of the most intriguing routes Gines offers for approaching Cooper opens up all the more if the options of “sabotage” versus “theoretically nuanced articulation” can be reconsidered. Consider the possibility that Cooper’s commitments, including her rejection of exclusionary reasoning,⁸ are multi-faceted to the point Gines could ask in what ways Cooper’s work may also have established some understandings it did not fully reflect. As she has acknowledged, her re-readings of Cooper need not exclude critical scrutiny of Cooper’s positions on immigration, the hierarchies of peoples, or effeminacy, for example, nor of Cooper’s own analogies.⁹ To be sure, this kind of interrogation takes on a different stakes when directed at Beauvoir or at Cooper. The point is to discuss further, not to level such differences. Gines’ work opens up the possibility of further readings of Cooper using the rich formulation distinctively

Revisited.”

⁸ See for example Gines’ nuanced discussion of Cooper’s “Woman Versus the Indian,” in *Voice From the South*, in which Cooper commits to the principle, “woman should not even by inference, or for the sake of argument, seem to disparage the weak. For woman’s cause is the cause of the weak; and when all the weak shall have received their due consideration, the woman will have her ‘rights,’ and the Indian will have his rights, and the Negro will have his rights,” (Cooper 1998, 105, cited Gines 2010, 45. Gines offers a nuanced discussion of this and similar passages from Cooper.

⁹ Thanks to Gines who suggested these possibilities in question time during the first version of this exchange at a forum at the Department of Philosophy, Pennsylvania State University 23rd January 2015. My thanks to organizers Emily Grosholz and Kathryn T Gines for the invitation to respond to Gines at this forum.

developed by Gines to interrogate the variable ways in which a text can be said to “reflect its own understanding”

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