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A Reply to Critical Commentaries

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In “Comparative and Competing Frameworks of Oppression in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*” (Gines 2015), I problematize Beauvoir’s deployment of comparative and competing frameworks of oppression. At times she describes the woman, the Black, the Jew, the colonized and the proletariat in ways that suggest sexism, on the one hand, and racism, antisemitism, colonialism and classism, on the other

hand, are comparative systems of oppression.¹ But when pointing to key differences between women and other groups she sets up competing frameworks of oppression – privileging gender difference in ways that suggest woman’s subordination is a more significant or constitutive form of oppression than racism, antisemitism, colonialism and/or class oppression. Looking closely at *The Second Sex*, alongside select divergent secondary literature on Beauvoir’s analogical analyses of oppression in that text, I have observed that Beauvoir’s critics are keenly aware of the arguments in support of Beauvoir. However, some of her supporters maintain an epistemological standpoint of ignorance concerning certain limitations of her feminist philosophy. This article seeks to offer a corrective to some of the exclusive tendencies in Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy and the replications of these exclusions in existing scholarship on Beauvoir (and perhaps by extension in white feminist philosophy more generally). In reading the commentaries on my article, I find that Sabine Broeck, Stephanie Rivera Beruzz, and Penelope Deutscher are sympathetic with my article and Nancy Bauer takes my critiques of Beauvoir seriously (even if she does not agree with them). With this in mind, my reply to the critical commentaries will focus on the questions they pose that have implications for my article (as well as for my larger book project on Beauvoir).

Broeck notes that I am advancing “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

¹ I prefer to keep “Black” and “Blackness” and “anti-Black” racism capitalized in the same way as “African American” is capitalized, though I use Black rather than African American throughout because it is a more inclusive term. Also, I prefer to keep “white” in lowercase as an intended disruption of the norm (i.e., using either capitals or lowercase letters for both terms). This preference is applied to the text in my own voice, but not to quotes of other texts.

in which race, class and gender oppression *and* supremacy, respectively, are neither competitive nor comparatively situated, but intricately interdependent...” While Broeck dates Black feminist traditions of intersectionally oriented critiques back to Frances Beale in 1969, I trace these critiques back to Maria W. Stewart in 1831 (Gines 2011). The analyses, critiques, and activism of Black feminists in the U.S. can be mapped from Stewart in the nineteenth century into our own current moment in the twenty-first century with the #BlackLivesMatter movement (founded by self-identified Black queer women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi), as well as calls to #SayHerName and reminders that #BlackGirlsMatter. Over this span of almost two centuries, there has indeed been a “recurring, repeating, and exhausting urgency” of debates about race and gender oppression coupled with the “complete erasure of decades of Black feminist instruction and radical critique” of both white feminism and Black (masculinist) nationalism, as Broeck describes.

Although Broeck supports my critiques of Beauvoir and white feminism, she asks a very pointed question about Black men: “Can Black men be patriarchal?” Drawing from the work of Hortense Spillers and Frank Wilderson, Broeck asserts, “Black men have not been able, have not been interpellated to enter the binary economy of gender anymore than Black women have...” but to avoid misunderstanding she is careful to add that “there is an extended body of Black feminist knowledge detailing the phenomenology of Black male violence against Black women, on all kinds of levels...” Still, Broeck asks, “does this enactment of violence ever mean that the privilege of engenderment – as modern societies have known it – has accrued to Black men?” For me, Black male patriarchy is not contingent on the engenderment of Black men (and/or Black women). As bell hooks makes clear in her description of Beauvoir as a participant in patriarchy, “patriarchy has no gender” (hooks 2012). Yes, Black men can be patriarchal. Not only can Black men be patriarchal, but white women (and

women of color) can also accept, embrace, and deploy patriarchal thinking and behavior.

I do agree with Broeck that Beauvoir’s analysis “has no more acute understanding of Black men, than it has of Black women,” (despite the fact that Black men are named and Black women are not). Berruz makes a similar point in her comments, noting “the status of the black male...drops out of the framework of *The Second Sex*” and “the detriment found in the comparison between white women and black male slaves...requires more critical attention.” However, I disagree with Broeck’s implicit suggestion that Black men are without a “patriarchally inflected power position” and (therefore?) do not participate in patriarchy. We can look at historical examples of patriarchal condescension expressed by Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, and W.E.B. Du Bois in relationship to Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells Barnett (Gines 2010 and 2014b). We can also look at current examples of the myriad ways that Black social and civil death (not to mention epistemic violence and epistemic death) is impacting Black people along numerous intersections, not only Black males. I do not want to claim, as Berruz suggests, that the status of maleness is *always* a “status of privilege” and/or that “male bodies cannot be read as anything but dominating.” However, it is the case that a status of privilege and domination are possible for Black men, even with the “routine and repetitive status of black male death in our society.” This status of privilege is in part evidenced by the attention given to the impact of state violence and the deaths of Black men and the comparative inattention to the impact of state violence and the deaths of Black girls and women (notwithstanding their visibility as wives, mothers, and mourners of Black boys and men).

Beyond the question of patriarchy and privilege of Black men, Berruz raises several important issues with which I am in agreement. She rightly points out that while I mention the

erasure of women of color in *The Second Sex*, my examples of this erasure focus on erasures of Black women only. I focus on Black women in this article and earlier related publications; however, I use the more inclusive phrase “women of color” to signal the multiple erasures that are occurring in *The Second Sex*. In conference presentations and in the larger book project I examine problematic engagements with and erasures of Latinas as well as Jewish women, Asian women, Arab women and Native American women. Berruz argues that Latinas are rendered imperceptible in *The Second Sex* and I think this is correct, not only for Beauvoir’s use of the race/gender analogy (operating along a Black-white binary in which race is coded as Black men and gender as white women) but also throughout the entire text which offers no considerations of Latina identity, experience, and oppression.

Whereas Beruzz takes up the imperceptibility of Latinas, Penelope Deutscher takes up the absence of aging in my intersectional analysis in the article. Deutscher brings aging to the forefront of Beauvoir’s analysis of alterity, presenting it as a singular alterity inhabiting every human. My response, which Deutscher anticipates, is that we can and should think about aging as a form of alterity but aging must also be thought intersectionally. Experiences of aging and perceptions about aging would vary across other identity categories like race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, religion, culture, etc. My intersectionally oriented analysis can include in its scope Beauvoir’s discussions of aging, and as Deutscher points out, this analysis would also take seriously the ways that Beauvoir similarly erases women of color, along with questions of slavery and colonialism, while continuing to presuppose whiteness in her insights about women, girls, and age.

In addition to the issue of aging, Deutscher poses questions about recovery, theoretically nuanced articulations, and sabotage. Here she has in mind the recovery of Beauvoir by white feminists as well as my own recovery work on Anna

Julia Cooper. In my experience the work of recovering women thinkers – women of color and white women – is more likely to lead to sabotage than theoretically nuanced articulation (if/when these recovered figures are engaged by men of color and white men). So Beauvoir is more likely to be sabotaged than Jean-Paul Sartre and Cooper is more likely to be sabotaged than W.E.B. Du Bois. And in these cases, by sabotaged I mean either cast aside altogether and/or labeled in ways that allow for oversimplified readings or non-engagement of their theories.

Last, but not least, Nancy Bauer raises issues that are related to Deutscher’s questions about recovery, theoretically nuanced articulations, and sabotage. Bauer acknowledges that *The Second Sex* lacks “what we would call today an intersectional analysis of women’s condition” but she moves on quickly to other pernicious problems. Bauer asserts, “if Beauvoir’s shortcomings, parochialism, and insensitivity amount to the exploitation and abjection of Black women and men and the demeaning erasure of other groups to which she [Beauvoir] compares (white) women, then I [Bauer] can’t see a reason why anyone should read the book except heuristically, as a reminder of how easily, and dangerously, an author’s privilege can distort her perception of how things actually are in the world.” Bauer continues, “[i]f Gines’ Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* exploits the suffering of others to further the interests of white women, then it follows that by holding Beauvoir up as a model feminist thinker, I [Bauer], as a white woman, have been exploiting the suffering of others, and in particular Black women. And that would be a human failure of such proportions that I [Bauer] would not know how to go on as a philosopher.”

And yet, here Bauer is and here we all are – philosophers and academics – going on with our scholarship of research, teaching, and administration/service. Bauer and the rest of us have continued as philosophers despite the realities of the

seemingly hyperbolic but *actually* quite accurate observations offered here by Bauer about Beauvoir. These are issues not only for Beauvoir in particular, but also the Western philosophical tradition more generally. I agree with Bauer that doing philosophy that matters “entails putting your own ignorance and obtuseness on display.” But the consequences of this vary. White male philosophers continue to display their ignorance and obtuseness by deifying their beloved dead (or living) white male philosophers with no regard for issues of sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. and with no regard for critiques outlining these issues from feminist philosophy, critical philosophy of race, queer philosophy, indigenous philosophy. Many white feminist philosophers follow a similar pattern, disregarding relevant critiques from women of color feminists.

Bauer notes, Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* offers a model for doing philosophical work. But this philosopher and this text models multiple things for multiple readers, not only the positive model described by Bauer, but also the problems that have been outlined by me and others. I have no expectations that Beauvoir scholars, even those sympathetic to my arguments, denounce her altogether. And that was not my intention. But if Beauvoir scholars teach and write her work in a more honest and theoretically nuanced way – a way that places these issues of absence and exploitation at the center of Beauvoir’s work rather than as murmurs on the margins, then that is an improvement.

Let me conclude by thanking *Symposium on Gender, Race, and Philosophy* (especially Sally Hallsanger and the editors Ronald R. Sundstrom, Alia Al-Saji, Cynthia Willet, and Robert Gooding-Williams) for featuring my article as well as Sabine Broeck, Nancy Bauer, Penelope Deutscher, and Stephanie Rivera Beruzz for their critical commentaries. This article is part of my larger manuscript on racism, sexism, and colonialism in Beauvoir’s writings. In the book project I am

engaging Beauvoir philosophically while situating the debates and encounters between Beauvoir and her interlocutors (e.g. Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and Richard Wright, as well as Gunnar and Alva Myrdal) in an intellectual historical context. I examine Beauvoir’s (and her interlocutors’) analyses of race/racism, gender/sexism, and colonialism/anti-colonialism as systems of oppression paying particular attention to places where these figures’ analyses, insights, and oversights converge and/or diverge with one another. Like my last book *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Gines 2014a), I want to make philosophical interventions concerning questions of race, colonialism and violence that are conversant with but not limited to the existing (white) feminist debates around Beauvoir’s philosophy. Furthermore, I engage women of color feminist arguments that are often absent in both white feminist philosophical debates and critical philosophy of race debates about these intellectual figures. These critical commentaries offer invaluable insights for the larger project.

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