
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 12, number 1. Spring 2016

<http://sgrp.typepad.com/sgrp/>

Comments on Gines

Stephanie Rivera Berruz

Philosophy Department
William Patterson University
113 Atrium Building
300 Pompton Road
Wayne, NJ 07470
riveraberuzs@wpunj.edu

I. Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has been and continues to be heralded as a seminal work in feminist philosophy. The prominence of *The Second Sex* has largely been due to its object of examination: the situation of alterity that characterizes woman. Kathryn Gines' essay "Comparative and Competing Frameworks of Oppression in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*" critically engages Beauvoir's method for substantiating the claim that woman is oppressed. Gines argues that Beauvoir sets up comparative and competing frameworks of oppression.

These frameworks problematically suggest that sexism is akin to other forms of oppression, and that the situation of oppression tied to gender identity is more significant than other loci of identity and their respective experiences. Gines' contribution to the critical work on *The Second Sex* is of deep importance as it takes up the use of race and gender as comparators in the structure of oppression. Unfortunately, the comparison between race and gender remains, for the most part, uncritically engaged as a shortcoming of *The Second Sex*. The implication of this is the erasure of black women and the problematic comparison between white women and Black men. Hence, Gines' essay should be taken as a serious critical call to more responsible scholarship on *The Second Sex*.

II. A Brief Overview of Gines' Arguments

Gines' first argument focuses on the way in which Beauvoir makes use of comparative frameworks of oppression. In order for Beauvoir to establish her claim that woman is other she compares her plight to that of the Black, the Jew, colonized people, and the proletariat.¹ The implication of this comparative structure, argues Gines, is that the justifications for the situation of inferiority are the same. Hence, what justifies the oppression of woman is the same as what justifies the oppression of the slave. However, as Gines notes, Beauvoir also takes note of key differences between situations of oppression, which undergird her claim gendered oppression is more substantial than other forms of oppression.

Gines' second argument focuses on highlighting the ways in which Beauvoir also sets up a competing framework of oppression in *The Second Sex*. She argues that Beauvoir notes some key differences in her comparisons thereby setting up a competing structure whereby gendered oppression is

¹ Kathryn T. Gines. "Comparative and Competing Frameworks of Oppression in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 35:1-2 (2014): 251.

constructed as more important and significant than other axes of oppression. (258) This competitive structure is seen through Beauvoir's claim that woman exists in the absence of reciprocity. Woman and man do not participate in reciprocal relationships. Hence, woman is always in a situation of domination. Furthermore, Beauvoir notes that unlike other oppressed groups, women, although existing in a state of domination, have not become a numerical minority. Gines notes that Beauvoir insists that we cannot pinpoint a historical moment that can account for the subordination of women. In noting these key differences Beauvoir traces a unique situation of oppression of woman that fundamentally competes with any other axis of identity and its experiences. (258)

According to Gines, the trouble at the heart of Beauvoir's competing and comparative frameworks of oppression is that the woman that is described as oppressed in *The Second Sex* is white, but this fact goes unstated. Moreover, her subordination is problematically juxtaposed, through the use of generalizations and stereotypes, to the subjection of men in different forms of oppression. (259) However, this juxtaposition only extends so far given that the category of woman is distinct to the extent that her subordination is the result of a lack of reciprocity and does not have a historical event that can qualify the situation. Hence, Gines argues that the outcome of the framework of *The Second Sex* is the erasure of non-white women and the failure to capture salient aspects of those lives found in and through experiences of anti-Black racism, anti-semitism, and/or classism. (259) One of the most noteworthy ways in which this erasure is constructed is through the woman-slave analogy, which Gines provides a notable analysis of at the end of her essay.

Most significant in Gines' critical analysis of woman as slave analogy is the impact of the use of the situation of the slave as comparable to that of woman. In taking note of the ways in which this comparison surges throughout *The Second Sex*, Gines

argues that Beauvoir fails to mention women slaves or enslaved women. Furthermore, the issue of slavery has not been a central point of emphasis in the secondary literature on the book. (263) This is of deeply concern for Gines because at stake in Beauvoir's use of this comparison is the appropriation of Black suffering to advance her philosophical claims on the situation of woman, and this remains uncritically accepted by her readers. (267) I contend that this is one of the most important points made by Gines' because it not only describes a deep seated problem with *The Second Sex*, but it is also one that has failed to draw attention precisely because it is a problem about the whiteness that permeates the text.

III. Critical Considerations

By drawing attention to the presumed white woman at the center of *The Second Sex* Gines is able to articulate the problematic implications generated by the framework of the text.

Most notably, the comparative and competing frameworks that characterize *The Second Sex* necessitate the erasure of women of color. However, when providing particular instantiations of this concern Gines only notes the erasure of black women. I am in full agreement with Gines' argument with respect to the erasure of black women. I am, however, left wondering how the erasure of women of color more broadly is complicated by the fact that *The Second Sex* in deploying competing and comparative structures also instantiates racial dynamics along the black-white binary. In coding race through white and black terms the structure of *The Second Sex* seems to not only erase black women, but also necessarily make other women of color imperceptible because they exceed the racial terms provided. For instance, the identity of Latina does not seem to be erased in the same way as black women are because the racial makeup of the identity of Latina exceeds the black-white binary. The racial dimensions Latina identity cannot be solely understood

through the black-white binary. If race is codified in and through black-white terms, as it is in *The Second Sex*, then Latinas do not seem erased, but rather rendered imperceptible from within the structure.

A further consideration sparked by Gines' analysis has to do with the status of the black male that drops out the framework of *The Second Sex*. Gines notes that the comparative structure codes race in and through the black male. Specifically, the plight of the black male slave is analogous to that of the white woman. She argues that the outcome of this comparative structure is the erasure of black women that warrants critical attention. However, the comparison between the white woman and the black male seems to also warrant significant attention beyond the erasure of the black women. Gines hints to this effect by noting that the comparison perpetuates a "white feminist strategy of exploiting the suffering of those actually enslaved to garner support for the cause of white women." (267) Yet, she does not further articulate the detriment found in the comparison between white women and black male slaves. Although she notes that this is not a trivial comparison, the comparative gest requires more critical attention.

Black maleness continues to be confined by its social status of Black Death, which finds articulation in images of the black male as dangerous and criminal.² Moreover, the status of danger and criminality is historically linked to enslavement. In drawing a comparison between the black male slave and the white woman, Beauvoir is also setting up a comparative structure that necessitates the occlusion of the relationship between white women and black male slaves. For instance, there are no conceptual tools available from the comparative structure to explore the rape of enslaved black men by white

² Tommy J. Curry. "The Eschatological Dilemma: The Problem of Studying the Black Male only as the Deaths that Result from Anti-Black Racism." Forthcoming (2016) in *I Am Because We Are* Second Edition. ed. Fred L. Hord and Jonathon S. Lee.

women, which to date remains a topic that is underexplored because the discourse on rape rests on gendered lines that thwarts the possibilities of thinking of black men as victims of rape.³ So this is not just a problematic comparison, it is a comparison that perpetuates a specific relationship of power between white women and black men and that needs to be noted.

Of further mention, Gines notably argues that Beauvoir also sets up a competing framework that identifies gender as more substantial to identity over other axes of identity. Yet, her position does not further question the way in which woman is constituted as always already in opposition to man, whereby the status of maleness is always rendered as a status of privilege. So, the gender identity of male bodies cannot be read as anything other than dominating. By privileging gender identity through a competing structure, there is also a failure to attend to how femininity is not just structured in relationship to men. The outcome is the implication that we must view all masculinities as privileged, a claim that in contemporary contexts is difficult to maintain given the routine and repetitive status of black male death in our society.

In closing, Gines' essay "Comparative and Competing Frameworks of Oppression in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*" is a very important contribution to the secondary literature on *The Second Sex*. Her arguments open up for discussion some of the most problematic and underexplored aspects of *The Second Sex*. In this essay I have attempted to provide further considerations that build on Gines' critical contributions. As such, I intend my response to contribute to the growth of secondary literature on *The Second Sex* that tackles the deep-seated troubles with the use of race and gender as analogous concepts.

³ Curry, "The Eschatological Dilemma," 7.