

## Facing Off: Postmodern/Feminism

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### Abstract

This performance is designed to illustrate the competition and complementary aspects of a convergence of postmodern and feminist theoretical positions. While postmodernism invites us to engage in continual dismantling of the grand narratives of progress and "the good", traditional feminists hold to an evaluative foundation in their analysis of societal positionings. Yet aspects of postmodernist thought are also useful to the feminist goal of unseating the hegemonic dominance of traditional male authority. The threat of moral relativism hangs over the postmodernist head, and this stance is strongly criticized within feminist circles: As Carol Gilligan has said, "Life can't just be continually reconstructed; ...There is a complex reality, yes, but there is something called reality, and there is something called a you." The major charges against postmodernism concern its "indifference" to the suppression of women's voices, and thus the self.

As I will hope to illuminate through the present performance, a postmodern feminism can cope with the collapsed notions of foundationalist premises, such as that of the stable and unified self-concept. We can live without our "I's" in the form we have previously understood, and can escape our "ego" installations. It can be argued, as Judith Butler has: "There is no "I" who stands behind discourse..., the "I" only comes into being through being called, named, interpolated." New considerations of multiple selves in action can be elaborated.

The postmodern and feminist positionings face off in this performance through multiple voices, in original and quoted texts, which blend conversations, arguments, jokes, poetry and songs. Costumes and props enhance the theatrical dimension of the performance.

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Method of action: Facing off: play on words of faces...identities... taking off identities....e.g. masks... make-up... make-believe. Also face off, as in hockey, when the two sides compete for the puck. coming head to head. (puckish play... as in Shakespeare's A Midsummer's Night's Dream)..struggling for meaning. (games: hockey).. hat trick... could mean hats too. scoring 3 goals... (why? pulling the rabbit out of the hat? excellent luck?? incredible performance.)

face masks... also hockey.. masquerade... faking... faking it... very feminine idea. What else is there? penalty box.. off sides... off sides as in going too far without ones team.. letting the puck cross the blue line without a stick handler... also off sides... betraying ones own... a feminist who gets involved in the postmod relativism.loosing one's

identity in the flux of the dialogic. Not holding one's own position firmly against others.

checking: bodily contact.. using one's body to derail another one's... checking, as in using one's body to get ahead.

goals, penalty shots, blue line.. goalie,

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some good quotes:

Science/foundational resistances

While postmodernism invites us to engage in continual dismantling of the grand narratives of progress and "the good", other feminists hold to an evaluative foundation in their analysis of societal positionings.

Some lament that just as women gain voice in the colloquy, the oppressor is deconstructed. If the category of gender is erased, the possibility for the continuation of male dominated and controlled enterprises cannot be challenged.

As Margo Culley (1991) suggests, "Most feminists and Black Studies scholars are cautious about the extreme skepticism of post-modernist thought. For it is more than ironic that just as the female and/or ethnic SUBJECT has emerged as a strong voice in the academy and on the streets that the concepts of subject and agency themselves have come under attack."(1991, p. 7).

Moral/Political resistances

The threat of moral relativism hangs over the postmodernist head, and this stance is strongly criticized within feminist circles:

As Carol Gilligan has said, " Life can't just be continually reconstructed; ...There is a complex reality, yes, but there is something called reality, and there is something called a you."

Postmodern resonances

Yet aspects of postmodernist thought are also useful to the feminist goal of unseating the hegemonic dominance of traditional male authority.

Beryl C. Curt : "Language which flows naturally and easily must always in a "climate of problematization", arouse suspicion. Its very ease and fluidity helps to beguile the reader into believing the text is merely mirroring the world 'as it really is', and obscures its ability to glamour that reality into being." (p. 14)

Turning about, searching for my tale, I am guilty as well: I wish to glamour a reality into being, spreading glitter, mascara, and rouge,

preening these words into worlds. Well, At least you have been forewarned.

Self-proclaimed as a "Revolting Hag", magna Mary Daly: "The acceptable/unexceptional circular reasonings of academics are caricatures of motion.... made to seem plausible through the mechanisms of male bonding. On the boundaries of the male-centered universities, however, there is a flowering of woman-centered thinking. Gynocentric Method requires... 'the free play of intuition in our own space... It arises from the lived experiences of be-ing."

Daly bread rising in the hagamony of a never never land. Crossing boundaries that place the absolute of womanliness wisdom in the crux of a postmodernist impulse... creating new words, new world, new realities. Gynocentric postmodern, a heresy for a new age -- witch is she?

No followers can track her broomstick trail. Others travel on more well worn paths.

Reviewing Madonna's video "justify my love", Columnist Ellen Goodman: "What bothers me is... if the work of growing up is finding a center, integrating the parts, Madonna spotlights the fragments and calls them whole. If the business of adulthood is finding yourself, she creates as many selves as there are rooms in her video hotel. ... If there is a search among Americans for authenticity, Madonna offers costumes and calls them the real thing.... The star of this show makes little attempt to reconcile the contradictions of her life and psyche. She insists instead that all the fragments of a self be accepted."

How can we stalk this giant, the core of modern selfhood, one's unified personal identity? Is this loss another bean in the beanstalk legacy?

Madonna's biographer, Lynne Layton: Madonna's "popularity stems from the fact that ... she represents to fans both sides of the identity debate, reflecting our own uncertainties about identity. On the one hand, she is the fragmented daughter of a dysfunctional family, who publicly exposes her pain ... On the other hand, she is a liberated, highly successful postmodern artist, who in performance transcends her pain by playfully and politically arranging and rearranging the fragments.... these two personae often contradict one another." p.150-151.

Bell Hooks, whose rhetorical stance seems to have shifted in a more constructionist position in the past five years, has urged feminists to "challenge the notion of identity as static and unchanging....and examine how we are gendered critically and analytically from various standpoints"

(1989, p.110

Audre Lorde: "You cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools".

"The feminist critique of social science supports the view that since interest-free knowledge is logically impossible, we should feel free to substitute explicit interest for implicit ones. Feminism challenges us to articulate our values, and on the basis of these, to develop new theories and formulate new research practices" (Sociologist Shulamit Reinharz 1985, p.163).

As Fine and Gordon suggest, We should, "understand gender as a relational concept full of power and possibilities;....we need to disrupt prevailing notions of what is inevitable, what is natural, and what is impossible. We need, therefore, to invent and publish images of what is not now, and what could be." (1991, p. 24).

Hollway: "Gender is produced through difference, in relations, and so if the other side of the relation is out of view, a social psychology of women's experience cannot provide a theory of how women are produced." (1989, p.106).

Lila Abu-Lughod, author of *Writing women's worlds, Bedouin Stories* lived for many years in the 1970's and 1980's with a Bedouin group in an Egyptian desert in order to better understand these women's lives. In her intergenerational study, she came to know the great differences between various people within the group, and especially how differently the three women of prime involvement with her in the study talked about the world. Abu-Lughod's theorizing was greatly influenced by these discrepancies, and she came to write against the notion that a culture is one monolithic orderly structure within which people think, feel and act in great accord. The form of writing her book takes is dependent on her subjects' voices: jokes, stories, conversations, songs, and remembrances.

Postmodern move to the relational

a postmodern feminism can cope with the collapsed notions of foundationalist premises, such as that of the stable and unified self-concept. We can live without our "I's" in the form we have previously understood, and can escape our "ego" installations.

Judith Butler : "There is no "I" who stands behind discourse..., the "I" only comes into being through being called, named, interpolated."

As Butler summarizes it: "If identity is asserted through a process of signification, if identity is always already signified, and yet continues to signify as it circulates within various interlocking discourses, then the question of agency is not to be answered through recourse to an 'I' that preexists signification." (1990, p.143)

Issue of being pinned against the wall by identification as an "I"

New considerations of multiple selves in action can be elaborated

.Emphasis on the relational, the "we"

Instead of the unit of study the independent individual, psychologists are beginning to formulate theories in which the unit of analysis is "relational" (cf. Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Shotter, 1984; Shotter & Logan, 1988). By this it is meant that this new relational unit would not be delineated by the borders of one's biological assembly, for example the line drawn around one's skin, hair, finger nails, or perhaps the clothing covering one's skin, hair or finger nails (we do not fail to call someone an individual because the person is wearing clothes), but would be inscribed by contextually delimited relational bonds. A "mother-child" unit might be a prototypical relational unit; a "couple", a "bowling team", or a "convention of political party delegates" might be others. The new relational unit would not be a static entity, but a flexible, changing module that would be caught for a limited period of time in a web of analysis, and then allowed to reenter the flow of life, to be dissolved, and/or reformulated. Relational theories would take seriously the intimately intertwined, and sometimes merged, nature of the "parts of the whole". They would take account of the changing nature of relationship units over time and space. They would not endorse stability or consistency as a necessary component of a unit. The goal of psychologists would be to fashion theoretical understandings that would not be translatable or reducible to individual terms, either additively or multiplicatively, but rather would be based on relational entities. In other terms, the highly acceptable analysis of variance model of assessing causal weight, or the also popular interactions models of describing the contributions of various variables to an outcome would be discouraged. Once a unit of analysis is established, then the assumption would be that no further breakdown into separated sub-parts would take place.

Jane Flax has suggested that "A feminist deconstruction of the self ... would point toward relational theory as a substitute for individualism" (1990, p. ).

Flax summarizes: "Logocentrism is inextricably connected to phallogocentrism."

The binary and asymmetric oppositions by and in which this discourse is structured are all in some way related to the "couple" man/woman." (1990, p. 172).

As Judith Halberstam suggests: "In our society, discourses are gendered, and the split between mind and body ... is a binary that identifies men with thought, intellect, and reason, and women with body, emotion, and intuition." (19; p.439).

Butler questions the distinction between sex and gender that permeates feminist discourse. "'Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance, or is 'naturalness' constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?'" (1990, x)

Judith Butler argues that once the binary of man/woman is cut, "cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate" (1990; p.149). Thus, the possibility of questioning the binary of man/woman, of doing away with two sexes allows for the possibility of more options (also Mary Poovey, 1988).

Celia Kitzinger (1991) underscores the problem, "Feminist psychologists confront a discipline which is all too clearly oppressive of women -- a discipline which has taken man as norm and woman as deviant, labelling us intellectually and morally inferior when we comply with patriarchal models of femininity, and mad when we refuse" (p.49).

As described by Elizabeth Grosz and Marie de Lepervanche, "The ideals men attribute to themselves are projected onto the forms adopted by knowledges, so that the latter are forms of masculine self-reflection - not unlike man's representation of God as a reflection of his own form." (1988, p. 25)

A crucial first argument challenges the liberal humanistic "production/representation" of the person, that is the view of the ideal individual as autonomous and endowed with free will. From the feminist viewpoint, constructions of reality that organize the world order under the control of autonomous individuals are the result of the male domination of cultural meaning systems (Brodribb, 1992).

"Myths of gender, however alluring, are the bane of women's lives. The false idea that gender is fixed and immutable is all too often used to keep women in their place, to justify all manner of discrimination against them. Janet Sayers (from *Fem & Psych.* 1993, June, 2

"Foucault argues, our experience of 'having' needs, desires, selves and erotic orientations, our experiences of love and fear are themselves constructed through relations of power. ....The construction of 'self', and

attempts to analyse and manipulate 'self', are not a path to 'liberation', but a central feature of the form of social regulation which he terms 'discipline'. Thru potent discourses we construct our selves, our desires, our erotic orientations and our possibilities. Sue Condor.(from *Fem & Psych.* 1993, June, 2

"Poststructuralist feminism is a high cult of retreat. Sometimes I think that when the fashion passes, we will find many bodies, drowned in their own words like the Druids in the bogs".. Naoimi Weisstein. (from *Fem & Psych.* 1993, June, 2.

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

>From Walt Whitman *Song of Myself*. Stanza 51 lines 8-10..

>From *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Closing speech of Puck: Act 5.1

"If we shadows have offended  
Think but this, and all is mended.  
That you have but slumber'd here  
While these visions did appear,  
And this weak and idle theme,  
Gentles, do not reprehend:  
If you pardon, we will mend.  
And, as I am an honest Puck,  
If we have unearned luck  
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,  
We will make amends ere long;  
Else the Puck a liar call:  
So good nightt unto you all.  
Give me your hand, if we be friends,  
And Robin shall restore amends.

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