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Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

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Since its publication in 1949, reception of *The Second Sex* has been ambivalent and fraught with emotion. Listen to how Beauvoir describes early response to the book in her 1963 autobiography, *Force of Circumstance*:
“Unsatisfied, frigid, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother. People offered to cure me of my frigidity or to temper my labial appetites; I was promised revelations, in the coarsest terms but in the name of the true, the good and the beautiful, in the name of health and even of poetry, all unworthily trampled underfoot by me” (FC, 197). Beauvoir goes on for several pages documenting violent and aggressive reactions to her book.

In an opposing stance, also emotional and deeply ambivalent, Beauvoir was cast as the “mother” of feminism, a label she disavowed in a 1974 interview remarking that “mother-daughter relations are generally catastrophic” (Schwarzer, 94) and “people don’t tend to listen to what their mothers are telling them” (Patterson, 92). Her text has also been called “the feminist bible” even though Beauvoir herself was an atheist (Thurman, xii). Over half a decade later, the text still solicits powerful reactions. Reviewing the new 2010 translation in the New York Times, Francine du Plessix Gray says: “Beauvoir’s truly paranoid hostility toward the

institutions of marriage and motherhood — another characteristic of early feminism — is so extreme as to be occasionally hilarious.” She goes on to say that “pessimism runs through the text like a poisonous river” while reassuring us that Beauvoir did not hate men (Plessix-Gray, 2010).

Even if we are reassured that Beauvoir did not “hate men,” the book is indeed *about* women. But unlike Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, another “seminal” book about women, *The Second Sex* is rarely considered a canonical text worthy of being read and studied within the history of political thought. Even specifically within feminist scholarship, while *The Second Sex* is almost always cited and acknowledged, only a few excerpts, mostly the introduction, are regularly read. Moreover, certain criticisms of the text render it politically noxious. It is said that the claims of *The Second Sex* are limited to mid-century French women or that despite a half-hearted nod to inclusivity and diversity, Beauvoir’s text reproduces a white intellectual perspective (Markowitz 2009; Spelman 1988). We are also reminded that were we sensitive to Beauvoir’s own criticisms of claims to universality proffered by traditional philosophy, we would regard *The Second Sex* as historically situated and limited by a particular perspective produced in a unique moment.

Overall, understanding the political and philosophical significance of *The Second Sex* has been marred both by its excessive historicizing and by emotional rejection or veneration. Possibly this is a result of its strong links with inspiring women’s liberation movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States, in France, and across the globe, and the pronounced tendency within

feminist movements to conceptualize time as unfolding either in a linear and progressive improvement narrative (wherein the text would be seen as long surpassed), or as tinged by nostalgia for the past and disappointment about the failure to deliver a promised future (wherein the text would be read nostalgically or in anger).¹

Given all these caveats and criticisms, why should we read *The Second Sex* as political theory?² The reading advanced here links affective responses to the text to its form, which itself produces its most valuable political insights. The form Beauvoir chooses, a situated dramaturgical staging of conversation, is a method of political engagement that both reveals affect—emotional states, ways of relating, and even bodily dispositions—and is itself affective and agonistic, putting several voices into conversation but leading to no resolution or prognosis for a certain future. As a political conversation, as opposed to a philosophical argument or utopian manifesto, *The Second Sex* unearths and evaluates dominant oppressive features of our world and relationships, but promises nothing. Rather, Beauvoir leaves it up to us to find our way via a politics that is localized, affective, and agonistic.

Form, Affect, Politics

The Second Sex stages a series of conversations across multiple identities and perspectives. More simply put, Beauvoir puts several different *people* into conversation, yet their identities and situations are permeable to each other and to the world. The people, as described by Beauvoir, are each situated by ontological,

affective, economic, and historical conditions, but emerge transformed from the conversation as received by readers, opening up new opportunities for political collectivities to emerge. We should notice, too, that the text experiments in cross and intra-disciplinarity, putting biology, physiology, philosophy, literature, qualitative sociological record, history, economics, psychology, and political science all into conversation about the hierarchy of sexual difference. Additionally, these conversations diagnose both good and bad feelings about gender and belonging that are the products of patriarchal oppression, as well as show how ideology and myth-making are themselves a product not only of systems, structures, and material conditions, but also of affective states and interactions that have material effects. Beauvoir asks us, via the conversation she constructs within the text and solicits beyond the text, to revisit and explore the anxiety produced by bodily facts, turn away from myth, ideology, history, and linguistic and institutional structures and practices of oppression to embrace ambiguity, better imagine our world, and radically recreate its meanings.

Her choice of conversational style, or “talking about” women as she colloquially puts it, simultaneously gives credence to diverse and unconventional claims to authority (from the body, from women’s experience, from heterogeneous locations) as well as unmask and debunks traditional masculine claims to authority produced and reproduced in science, psychoanalysis, historical materialism, religion, and literature. The conversation Beauvoir constructs, and the way she invites multiple perspectives into her text by experimenting with this style, is especially adept for political thinking true to conditions of freedom as non-

sovereignty, inter-subjectivity, and an enactment of future possibilities for collective political action. Indeed, conversation for Beauvoir works both within and beyond the text as an affective and emotive political appeal to bring a new community of women into being, one that is not founded on any “natural” or already existing identity that can be discovered.

Discussing form necessitates attention to affect since the conversational form tracks and evokes affective states, conditions, and configurations of feeling. Beauvoir pays attention to and analyzes the emotions, biological realities, historical, economic, and social situation of the men and the multiple women she puts into conversation, the structures of feeling that condition women’s “lived experiences” and finally, the affect generated in reader responses to the text. Her method demonstrates that affective emotional states of the people in conversation create specific political assemblages, organizations, and modes-of-being, themselves noticeable and irreducible to the workings of structures and ideologies. Not only does Beauvoir note that the dominant masculine response to the human predicament of embodiment and finitude precipitate feelings of hostility, fear, and anxiety that result in the creation of myths and ideologies about sexual difference, she argues furthermore that women, too, absorb and replicate these emotions and attitudes, and they are imprinted on female bodies. Female melancholy, narcissism, anxiety, shame, and investment in romance enhance patriarchal structures and ideologies and themselves substantially contribute to the obstruction of women’s individual and collective political agency, while also potentially signaling dissent, or at the very least, discomfort with the way things are. Ultimately, the form of the text

itself invites new conversations: it unfolds as a political appeal, producing a community beyond the text inviting readers to invent new subjectivities, new thinking, and indeed to create a different future.

Beauvoir's argument occurs in three interrelated moments that I trace in the following three sections of this essay. First, structural conditions of oppression arise from the myth of Woman, an ideology produced contingently via political meanings about sexual difference assigned to bodies to reduce the complexity, contingency, and indeterminacy of biological, historical and psychoanalytic "data" and that are themselves a product of an affective state: male hostility and fear in response to bodily facticity and immanent ontological conditions such as time and death. Second, these constructed meanings perpetuate oppression (making men transcendent and women immanent) to produce conditions of patriarchal oppression that are bolstered by both good feelings—participation and belonging to a "woman's culture" of femininity—and bad or ugly feelings (Ngai 2005) —shame, narcissism, melancholy, and thwarted desire—when one falls outside the boundaries or inexpertly or inadequately belongs. These emotions and affective assemblages are not quite captured by an analysis of power, structures, or ideology, and yet they are key to exploring more precisely why and how women's agency and freedom are obstructed within patriarchal systems, and whether or how they might express dissent. Affective states span a wide range, and are as diverse as emotional responses, bodily symptoms, ways of relating to others, and acknowledging the effects of oppression on/in the bodies of the oppressed. Beauvoir shows the ways these affective states often elude our understanding when we fail to recognize their

links to situation and instead theorize them as personal afflictions or comportment. Third, perhaps ironically, Beauvoir's text brings another affective moment into play via her chosen form of conversation: the appeal to readers to break from oppressive gender bonds and disassociate from femininity in order to create a new future.

The Rite and Rights of Conversation

Beauvoir introduces her topic of conversation, "a book on woman," in an ironically dismissive way. She says that the "subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new:" Indeed, "enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over: let's not talk about it anymore. Yet it is still being talked about" (SS, 3). There is no doubt that by opening the book we have stumbled upon a creative and sometimes baffling textual beast. Introducing "woman" as a subject that is suitable, although irritating, to "talk about," the text unfolds as two sequential parts of an extended conversation, or we might think of it as like attending two dinner parties, with different guests talking about the same topic, during back-to-back evenings. Book I features male authority figures—scientists, politicians, historians, psychoanalysts, philosophers, playwrights, theologians, and novelists—declaiming on the roots, legitimacy, and meanings of sexual difference. Introduced to diverse women in Book II, the conversation gets even more heated and we see the world from a new perspective. Here we meet famous and minor characters from fiction, authors of autobiographies, Beauvoir's friends and acquaintances, actresses, prostitutes, wives, mothers, girlfriends, girls and friends—sharing the "lived experiences" of becoming women.

One of the techniques that Beauvoir employs throughout the first volume of *The Second Sex* is to give male authority figures space to speak for themselves and in conversation with other authority figures while at the same time undermining, sometimes explicitly and sometimes in more subtle ways, their assumed right to shape, determine, and dominate conversation. Beauvoir admits early on that she “used to get annoyed in abstract discussions to hear men tell [her]: ‘You think such and such because you’re a woman’” (SS, 5). In response to this conversation stopper, Beauvoir says a woman is forced to answer, “I think it because it is true,” rather than “You think the contrary because you are a man.” “It is understood a man is in his right by virtue of being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong” (SS, *ibid*). Today, a woman could hold her own, if not carry the day, by responding: “you think the contrary because you are a man.” Yet this assertion of equal particularity, or equally shared and competing claims to authority, much like the proliferation of new gender identities or the right to marry who one happens to love regardless of gender, does not ultimately serve to undermine masculine authority and norms of bourgeois ideology. Beauvoir is doing something different, and far more radical and potentially transformative, than to simply add more voices to the mix when she stages conversations in *The Second Sex*.

Another textual technique at play is Beauvoir’s mimicking of male voices in a complex and what can be a confusing patchwork that sometimes results in readers now knowing who or what position Beauvoir is endorsing. Beauvoir does indeed warn us about her strategy: “It is noteworthy that physiologists and biologist all use a more or less finalistic language merely because they ascribe meaning [in this case,

gendered hierarchical meaning] to vital phenomena; we will use their language” (SS, 26). But she also steps in at key moments, aggressively inserting herself into conversation to make a pointed and often damning observation. Commenting on the conclusion that the ovum is likened to immanence and the sperm to transcendence, for example, Beauvoir says: “In truth, these are merely ramblings” (SS, 28). As readers, though, we have to be attentive: we must never turn away for even a moment for we might lose the thread. Were that to happen, we might not recognize who is speaking when, as in several instances, Beauvoir cedes the floor to a misogynistic male scientist or historian who chimes in with great gusto to conjure images of “devouring femininity” and “woman’s dream of castration” (SS, 33).

Beauvoir also sometimes *seems* to make sweeping assumptions in her own voice. For example, in Volume II in the chapter on “The Mother” Beauvoir says “all mothers have the idea that their child will be a hero; they thus express their wonderment at the idea of giving birth to a consciousness and a liberty; but they also fear giving birth to a cripple, a monster, because they know the awful contingency of flesh, and this embryo who inhabits them is merely flesh” (SS, 540). The very next sentence, however, says that these two fears of the mother are directly the result of male myths, and so we have to recall the “Myths” chapter in Volume I to remind ourselves that myths are created by men in response to their horror and fear of finitude and the body, and adopted, absorbed, and reproduced by women in a man’s world: “There are cases where one of these myths wins out: but often the woman wavers between them” (SS, *ibid.*). And so we start to wonder if women just ventriloquize the male perspective even when they presumably are

speaking for themselves. Is the power of myth, or to put it more precisely, the power that men have over creating myths, that resilient? Beauvoir more than hints that it is: “women have not created the virile myth that would reflect their projects; they have neither religion nor poetry that belongs to them alone: they still dream through men’s dreams” (SS, 162).

Why do women repeat male conventions when invited into the conversation? Backing up further, what motivates men to create oppressive and misogynist myths, and what motivates women’s reiteration of them? Beauvoir indicates repeatedly in the chapters on “Facts” that anxiety, fear, and disgust are common responses to biological realities and historical contingencies. Chapter One on “Biological Data,” for example, begins by noting that the term “woman,” when uttered by “those who like simple answers” as “womb,” “ovary,” or simply “female” is hurled as an insult; “female” is “pejorative not because it roots woman in nature” but rather due to the “disquieting hostility” “woman triggers in man” (SS, 21). And so, he (a singular term connoting the ideological mandates rendered true by scientific authority) abandons scientific method to “find a justification in biology for this feeling” (SS, *ibid.*). Strikingly, the conversation that Beauvoir constructs amongst male scientists reveals that “scientific” findings on biological reproduction, the demands of the species, and the significance of sexual difference are all motivated by the search to find justification for a “feeling,” in this case, hostility.

Likewise, myths too are a response to certain ugly, or at least unsettling and uncomfortable, feelings such as anxiety. Myths rescue men from the existential dilemma of longing for both “life and rest, existence and being;” they cast woman as

an “embodied dream;” “the perfect intermediary between nature that is too foreign to man and the peer who is too identical to him;” “She pits neither the hostile silence of nature nor the hard demand of a reciprocal recognition against him; by unique privilege she is a consciousness, yet it seems possible to possess her in the flesh” (SS, 160). Male myths, many and variable, depict woman as “privileged prey” as well as “Mother,” “Spouse,” “Idea;” (SS, 161-163); they coexist in “opposition, and each has a double face” (SS, *ibid.*). Like science, myths are not the products of rational thought; instead, they spring from men’s “hearts,” inspired by disgust, horror, embarrassment, fear, loathing, and repulsion (SS, 164-165, all Beauvoir’s terms). Myths arise in response to the grotesque truth of women’s flesh: the “chaotic obscurity” of women’s genitals; the “quivering gelatin that forms in the womb;” the “living magma” of the “pregnant woman’s stomach;” the “swollen breasts of the wet nurse;” the “regions of immanence” he “wants to escape;” the “roots he wants to pull himself away from” (SS, 163-165). Even the incest taboo, typically explained in structural anthropological terms as enforcing exogamy (Claude Levi-Strauss) and initiating the traffic in women (Gayle Rubin) is differently explained by Beauvoir as arising from the *fear* of finding the mother’s dreaded “essence in the woman” (SS, 170) in her role as sexual partner or wife.

What unfolds in the first Volume of *The Second Sex*, thus, highlights some of the political features of Beauvoir’s keen interest in affective states revealed in conversation. Moving between and amongst people in conversation, identities are seen as inherently unstable and relational, and affects as shifting and moving to both stabilize and destabilize material conditions and ideological perspectives. Put into

staged conversation with each other, male authorities show how their identities as authority figures is built on shifting sand, and they reveal their affective preoccupations—fear, disgust, repulsion, hostility, and anxiety. These emotions motivate and undergird patriarchal ideology and structures, and themselves form a complex assemblage of emotions that hold men, and as we shall see, women too, emotionally, anatomically, and psychically captive to the hierarchy of sexual difference. What we learn in Volume II when Beauvoir includes women in the conversation to talk about their own bodies and experiences, is no surprise: women are drawn into the web of these affective states by the demand to “*be women, stay women, become women*” (SS, 3, my emphasis). There are good feelings generated by the comfort that one receives from belonging to the community of women who embrace and manage femininity, and bad or ugly feelings experienced by belonging inexpertly or not at all. And yet, via the both formal and affective techniques Beauvoir utilizes to create new conversations (the staging and the appeal), we more clearly see the links between patriarchal structures and systems and their affective, particularly their emotional, hold on us. This method, she wagers, not only helps us see our shared world anew, it may also spark the emergence of new antagonisms, and solicit our investment in creating conditions for the emergence of new alliances.

Femininity’s Damaging Allure

Witnessing conversation amongst male authority figures in Volume I helped us see the way feelings motivate oppression, lodge their effects on our bodies, and work with and through patriarchal structures and ideologies to hold us captive and

limit our political agency. Volume II of *The Second Sex* can be read as tracking what Lauren Berlant calls the “bargaining with power and desire in which members of intimate publics always seem to be engaging.”³ But while Berlant addresses these affects as they register in popular culture—sentimental novels, films, and musicals—when we change the form, such as Beauvoir does to solicit the complaint via staged conversations, we also enhance their political potential.

While Beauvoir is exceedingly attentive to the attractive affective links between oppression and identity, as well as the way these links emotionally bond us with each other and with repressive power, she simultaneously calls for dissociation from identity categories and the feelings, both good and bad, that they solicit. Put as an explicitly political question, Beauvoir asks: does femininity ever become a site of resistance whereby affects produced and nurtured via oppression can lead elsewhere? What we will see in the reading that follows is that while Beauvoir exposes both the attractive allure of femininity as well as the pathological characteristics its demands engender (Marso, 2006), her appeal to her readers via the conversational form invites us to embrace the risks of freedom and collective action that a dissociation with identity demands.

Volume II begins with an (in)famous phrase: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.”⁴ Many scholars have interpreted this phrase as introducing a distinction between sex and gender distinction to claim that sex is natural and gender is cultural, but Beauvoir never saw the body in these terms. She argues instead that ontology is a concrete and political reality (we have bodies, we reproduce, we die, we are slaves to the species, we are configurations of cells, blood,

tissues, bones and muscle), and that the meanings ascribed to sexual difference, itself *created* as a key and central difference, stems from an actively emotive fear of bodies, biology, and the complexity and vitality of life processes.⁵ Rather than claim anything about gender, sex, and the relationship between the two, Beauvoir's text questions and undoes any and all assumptions about women by posing the topic for conversation in the form of the question: "what is a woman?" (SS, 5).

Thus circumventing what has been called the "category of women" debates or the "subject question" in feminist discourse, Beauvoir acts *as if* women exist, since for all practical purposes they do,⁶ in order to question the way the idea of "woman" and the meanings of "femininity" take hold—physically, structurally, ideologically, and emotionally—in women's lives. Dismantling all claims about the "eternal feminine" while at the same time rejecting nominalism ("women *are* not men," she admits, SS, 4), Beauvoir says that nevertheless we can and should, in fact, speak in everyday language about and to women even though, and maybe precisely because, we do not know the answer to the question of what it *is* or what it *means* to be a woman. Indeed we must speak with and to those identified *as* women, and even speak emotively *as if* the category were meaningful, in order to begin to dismantle the many mechanisms that undergird the hierarchy of sexual difference.

Thus recognizing the draws and dangers of affectively lived identity and community, Beauvoir's rhetoric willingly calls to women as female-identified selves, with their habits and experience drawn and lived through femininity, but the conversation unfolds to question the very ground on which such experience is located. So doing, she creates a conversation amongst female strangers that "feels"

intimate and revelatory in order to challenge the emotional basis (our ties to femininity) of this same intimacy and shared feeling.

Rather than track the way affective bonds and women's emotional life are presented in *The Second Sex*, scholarship on the text has tended to focus on Beauvoir's theorization of *situation* to explain her unique contribution to understanding women's oppression under patriarchy. Beauvoir argues that all humans are situated, located as we are within constraints of biology, history, social and political conditions, the existence and experience of time as linear and non-linear, ideologies and systems, the existence of others, and webs of discourse. Beauvoir recognizes these constraints, and furthermore argues that some of these constraints—the ontological aspects of conditions within biology, for example, such as time and death—should be embraced. To avow and embrace ambiguity would be to accept that we are each simultaneously self and other, transcendence and immanence. Throughout her oeuvre, especially in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir seeks to understand how some subjects (race, class, gender, and power are interlinked here) have been able to deny ambiguity, systematically and structurally, by assuming the role of transcendence for themselves and confining others to immanence. In *The Second Sex*, she explores this dynamic as the oppression of women.

Most interestingly for my focus here, however, Beauvoir says women often acquiesce to conditions of oppression by acting in some combination of bad faith and reasonable assessment of situation. Women do, she reminds us, have a vested material interest in assuming their inferior position: "Refusing to be the Other,

refusing all complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them" (SS, *ibid.*). But there is an emotional component as well. Claiming freedom triggers the angst that accompanies making free choices. Ever present is "the temptation to flee freedom" and make yourself "into a thing" (SS, 10). This is what Beauvoir calls "an easy path" one where "the anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence is avoided" (SS, *ibid.*). She concludes this part by noting "the man who sets the woman up as an *Other* will thus find in her a deep complicity" (SS, *ibid.*). Hence women often make no claims as transcendent subjects as a result of several interacting components: lacking the concrete means, sensing the necessary links connecting her to men, and deriving a certain satisfaction "from her role as *Other*" (SS, *ibid.*). The claim that women are affectively invested in their role as "other" via emotional investment, via training in techniques to develop and perform femininity, and via participation in an emotive "women's culture" has been mostly neglected in Beauvoir scholarship. But, as we will see, Beauvoir returns to the emotional and affective register again and again in Volume II to explore why and how bad faith can be such an attractive option, why and how the bonds that hold us captive look, and even sometimes can feel so good.

Part of the attraction of belonging to what Berlant has called an intimate public, in this case an affectively felt "women's culture" built around norms of femininity, is that "aleness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally unprivileged" (Berlant, viii). When you are part of a woman's culture, when you conform to the demands of femininity, you can feel good. Not only do you

get positive reinforcement from patriarchal structures and from the individual men to whom you are attached, you also get the feeling of belonging to a culture that points beyond the self. As Berlant explains, “women’s culture” enacts a “fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any” (Berlant, x).

Within the conversations she stages, Beauvoir reveals that women repeatedly consume the message that good feelings arise from belonging to “the second sex” as men have shaped it. And indeed, while women are often able to take pleasure in relinquishing agency as she shows us in the chapters on “The Narcissist,” “The Woman in Love,” and “The Mystic,” at the same time, the conversations illuminate that ugly feelings of anxiety, melancholy, envy, or the ongoing feeling that one does not belong, are possible, acceptable, and potentially able to be politically mobilized. One thing, of several, Beauvoir accomplishes in the conversation she creates in Volume II of *The Second Sex* is to show that the good feelings women are supposed to get through their identities as “wives,” “mothers,” “girlfriends” and “sexual partners” are, after all, often not the ones that women actually end up having. Both good and bad feelings are thus exposed, and explored, by drawing us into conversation through our identity as “women,” as beings who are *supposed to* feel good by fulfilling patriarchal roles.

Beauvoir’s chapter on “The Married Woman,” as just one example, asks whether being a wife, the “destiny that society traditionally offers women,” is all it promises (SS, 439). Even the “single woman” is defined by marriage though she might be “frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution” (SS,

ibid.). Many women end up feeling melancholic as a result of being “locked into the conjugal community” (SS, 470). We can read this, however, not just as a case of individual unhappiness, but rather as the mark of a collective condition. Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), for example, argues that affects move between and through people, that they are social and material, as well as psychic. While affects do appear on particular bodies, Ahmed says it is the failure of emotions to be located *solely* in a particular body or object that allows them to reproduce and generate the effects that they do. Indeed, as Ahmed shows in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) affects and emotions coalesce in social and material form to falsely appear for individuals as specific orientations that are the result of conscious choice, i.e. that we are oriented on the right path or the wrong path, that our “unhappiness” or “melancholy” is the result of the wrong choice or a wrong relationship to our world. Unhappiness or melancholy gets attached to particular individuals, or “sticks to some bodies” (Ahmed 2004, 131) as a psychic condition but is generated through past histories of political, material, and social significance. Ahmed, thus, returns to the unhappy or melancholic subject to read beyond pathology. Here melancholy becomes a collective condition, or a saturated sign, rather than just an individual symptom. This helps us see melancholy anew as produced in a social system, reflecting the circulation of affects between and across bodies and histories, and registering a potential critique of the world as currently configured.

Anticipating contemporary work in cultural and feminist theory, but solicited differently through the conversational form as mobilized through people (both real and fictional), Beauvoir brings attention to the melancholic woman, diagnosing the

condition as a response to situation, and expressed on the body and its comportment as one of many possible kinds of responses. Take the following passage, for instance:

The chains of marriage are heavy, particularly in the provinces; a wife has to find a way of coming to grips with a situation she cannot escape. Some, as we have seen, are puffed up with importance and become tyrannical matrons and shrews. Others take refuge in the role of the victim, they make themselves their husbands' and children's pathetic slaves and find a masochistic joy in it. Other perpetuate the narcissistic behavior we have described in relation to the young girl: they also suffer from not realizing themselves in any undertaking, and being able to do nothing, they are nothing; undefined, they feel undetermined and consider themselves misunderstood; they worship melancholy; they take refuge in dreams, playacting, illnesses, fads, scenes; they create problems around them or close themselves up in an imaginary world (SS, 515).

In another passage, Beauvoir explicitly names lack of freedom ("empty freedom") as the instigator to the melancholy women often experience. She argues that while at first, the wife "lulls herself with illusions," eventually her "true feelings emerge" (SS, 519):

The home no longer protects her from her empty freedom; she finds herself alone, abandoned, a subject, and she finds nothing to do with herself. Affections and habits can still be of great help, but not salvation. All sincere women writers have noted this melancholy that inhabits the heart of "thirty-year-old women"; this is a characteristic common to the heroines of Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Parker, and Virginia Woolf (ibid.)

In another instance, Beauvoir describes the "pathological melancholy" that some women feel after having an abortion as a feeling of guilt induced only by the atmosphere (the affects that circulate in and through bodies) that condemns the woman who makes this difficult choice (SS, 531). Listening to this and the thousands of other experiences mobilized through the voices of women in the text,

Beauvoir wagers that readers will see that what is framed as “private” or “personal” emotions and feelings are constructed through political and social contexts.

Invoking another common emotional state for women, Beauvoir talks about worry to diagnose it as lack of freedom. “Worrying” because she is prevented from “doing” anything, “long, despondent ruminations” ensue as the “spectator of her own powerlessness” (*SS*, 645-646). Forms of melancholy are in other passages linked more directly to what Beauvoir specifically calls “the female complaint” (*SS*, 646): “together, women friends groan individually about their own ills and all together about the injustice of their lot, the world, and men in general” (*SS*, *ibid.*). But whereas Berlant reads the female complaint as “the bitter vigilance of the intimately disappointed,” (Berlant, 1), Beauvoir’s analysis portends a politics, seeing the fact of complaint as an expression of “impotent anger” (*SS*, *ibid.*)

While Beauvoir admits that these behaviors and symptoms cannot be categorized as collective agency or anything approaching a conscious rebellion, she says that we can interpret them “as protest” (*SS*, 649). Berlant argues that the female complaint fuses feminine and feminist rage “hailing the wounded to testify, to judge, to yearn, and to think beyond the norms of sexual difference, a little” (Berlant, 1). We might ask: how much is “a little?” Certainly not enough, but where might it take us? In the following and final section, I return to the significance of the conversational form to draw out its most explicit political implications.

Conversation and Collective Political Action

As Beauvoir constantly reminds us, seeking meaning through identification with god, myths, humanity, or any a priori or transcendent universal, even the belief in revolution, destroys the space and time between us, and thus destroys politics. Although near the end of the text in the section on “The Independent Woman” there is a half-hearted embrace of socialist-world policies to get women into the work force as a guarantee of concrete freedom (*SS*, 721), Beauvoir makes a clear break with a revolutionary historical dialectic to show not only that material contradictions and conditions are not enough to guarantee dissent and change, but that affective relations are themselves material and must be seen as such. Moreover, politics, meaning for her an appeal to an “other,” or to others, is an absolutely necessary gesture, and yet one that offers no guarantee of response, understanding, or closure.

Theorized as an “endless becoming,” Beauvoir sees each person’s point of departure as creating “requirements and appeals to which only the creation of new requirements will respond” (*PC*, 110). This open, never-ending, appeal and potential response of individual subjectivities, each themselves continually breaking the bonds of pre-set identities, happens within a context where “our judgment alone” (*PC*, 120) allows us to examine the conditions of our lives. Because “there exists no heaven where the reconciliation of human judgments is accomplished” (*PC*, 131) and because we are each singularly situated but necessary in our freedom as “foundation” for the existence of others, it is only through reaching out to others in their freedom that we can create a new and potentially liberating future.

The formal conditions of conversation, that “there must be men ready to hear me close by, and that these men must be my peers” (PC, 137) is both met and not met in *The Second Sex*. There were men close by, but several were clearly not ready to hear Beauvoir’s voice. She also says, though, that many, both women and men, heard and responded to her appeal. Beauvoir says she is told the book sometimes “helped women” and she says this is partly because “it expressed them, and they in turn gave it its truth” (FC, 203). Could it be the case that hearing the female complaint, learning the truth of the origins of myths in male anxiety and fear, and making space for conversation between and amongst women is, itself, what feminist politics is about? Do these acts themselves create the possibility to encourage collective action? If we read *The Second Sex* as an appeal to solicit our judgments, and consider feminism to be an unending, open, and necessary conversation, we can see the text as a political conversation that rather than being “now almost over” (SS, 3) is instead, perpetually new.

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¹ I diagnose stances towards feminist “time” and the labeling of the waves in the generational model to make a political argument for reading feminism as genealogy in Marso 2010.

² There has been a return to Beauvoir in recent years, particularly by feminist philosophers and academics studying her literature and fiction. Particularly important are the 2010 complete (albeit controversially received) translation of *The Second Sex* and the several volumes of Beauvoir’s work, edited by Margaret A. Simons with scholar’s introductions to each piece, published by the University of Illinois Press. Several volumes in this series have already been published including *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings* (2004), *Diary of a Philosophy Student* (2006), *Wartime Diary* (2008), *“The Useless Mouth” and Other Literary Writings* (2011) and *Political Writings* (2012). Attention to the political implications of Beauvoir’s work, however, has been limited. See Marso and Moynagh 2006, Marso 2006, Marso 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, and Kruks 2012.

³ Berlant defines an “intimate public” as “marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensation, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging—partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live” (Berlant 2008, viii).

⁴ I have changed Borde and Malovany-Chevalier’s translation of this important line in light of Toril Moi’s critical review of their translation (Moi, 2010). Moi notes that when this line reads, as they put it, “one is not born, but becomes, woman,” rather than “one is not born, but becomes, a woman,” it makes it sound as if a girl grows up to be the incarnation of the male myth of Woman, rather than one woman among many, but still subject to women’s situation.

⁵ Rather than depicting sex as natural and gender as cultural, Beauvoir analyzed the body as somatic, active and affective, as well as created by and interpreted and lived through situation. For an insightful reading of Beauvoir’s body politics as it emerges in her aesthetic theory see Melissa Moskowitz 2014.

⁶ “And the truth is that anyone can clearly see that humanity is split into two categories of individuals with manifestly different clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, movements, interests, and occupations; these differences are perhaps superficial; perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that for the moment they exist in a strikingly obvious way” (SS, 4).