Power, Ethics, and Polyvocal Feminist Theory

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The excitement and the boldness of feminist criticism as it has developed from a critique to a self-celebration and then to a heady engagement with the politics of theory and language derives largely from theoreticians' attempts to imagine a discourse and a world beyond oppositional differences. This theoretical development represents a political and an ethical challenge to theory-makers and consumers alike.

In this paper I'll analyze one area of difficulty in the relationship between feminist theory and feminist deconstruction, the ethics of power relations in a decentred polyvocal criticism. Though Foucault's writings on power/knowledge have influenced my understandings, I'll not allude to him directly, for a number of reasons, most of them political, and will attempt rather to keep this discussion focused on the actuality of power, conceived performatively as well as coercively.

When feminist criticism attempts to be a polyvocal discourse, how do critics address power relations, specifically differences among women? What ethical and political problems must they confront? I'll examine the work of three provocative and diverse feminist theoreticians who use deconstructive strategies to assess what happens when feminist criticism tries to destabilize itself while attempting to remain an ethical discourse, or in some cases, to become one.

To ground my discussion, I'll first make some claims about the relationships between feminism and the ethics and politics of critical discourse. Feminism, especially polyvocal feminist literary theory which attempts to hear the differences in and among women, in their texts and in their worlds, is an outsiders' discourse about power and difference. And since women are outsiders to different degrees and in significantly different ways, in terms of race, class, ethnicity and sexual preference, there will never be *one* feminist discourse. To the extent that a critic acknowledges that feminism is only "(ambiguously) nonhegemonic"[1], it will be decentred. The degree to which feminists recognize and refuse the hierarchy of centre and margin will always represent a political and ethical struggle within feminism and will constitute a way of situating the various feminist discourses on a spectrum from radical to liberal.

Feminist criticism is always implicitly and usually explicitly a critical discourse about power relations. It is therefore an ethical discourse, that raises questions about and attempts to clarify relationships between what is and what ought to be. In my view, feminist discourse tends to collapse the differences between ethics and politics. It does so because it begins as a critique of relationships based on power imbalances (and therefore it is an ethical critique, the claim being that such relationships are unjust), but it also insists that change is possible and that change must occur (and therefore it is a political critique, the claim being that oppressive situations exist which are "man-made" and are therefore humanly resolvable.)

Historically, feminist criticism has been a discourse of complaint about exclusion and silencing. It has problematized exclusion and silencing as political and ethical issues and has critiqued what has been included, what has been heard, as incomplete, univocal, and therefore as falsely universalized. Critics have differed about the degree of exclusion, whether it amounted to total silencing or muting, whether all women have been excluded, and whether we ought to desire inclusion. Some have seen what they were doing as making requests, or as graciously inviting the interpretive community to make the exchange between feminist and other critical approaches less one-sided. Others have seen themselves as making "righteous, angry, and admonitory demands"; but all have seen themselves as suppliants.[2]

In one more recent formulation of the ethical and political dilemmas posed by exclusion, Patrocinio Schweikart analyses them most convincingly as a deeply interlocking set of questions about discourse, power and logic. Because feminist critics have tended to appropriate the persuasion or enlightenment model of criticism unselfconsciously, they inevitably encountered resistance, "because the unenlightened party (from the feminist point of view) is also in possession of the instruments of power, and specifically, of the means for producing and regulating knowledge" (162). Schweikart's work clearly suggests why complaining is ineffective and makes one remember why, as early as 1938, Virginia Woolf had insisted that in some ways it is better to be locked out than locked into the interpretive community (72,122). Schweikart's formulation emerged at a moment in the history of feminist theory when many feminist critics had turned the focus of their attention from what *they* , the male literary establishment, had thought of *our*, that is, women's exclusion from the establishment, to what *we* , the critics ourselves thought of

it. At the same time, some feminist critics, with great surprise and defensive guilt or rage and resistance depending on whether they identified more with their privilege or with their oppression — had begun to attend to the ways some feminist critics exclude other. That re-focusing on who is the other (woman) made the ethical and political aspects of "the" feminist critique of power relations both more transparent and more troubling for it made many feminists re-think the insider-outsider opposition.

Since feminist criticism has been a discourse of urgency, some aspects of the decentring process have seemed almost politically suicidal. How can feminist criticism say, "hear this and hear it now," and also be detached and playful? While it was politically and theoretically necessary for feminist criticism to become polyvocal, there were also grave risks in adopting a decentred discourse that is playful or refuses authority, or most problematically, that admits or even celebrates moral and political uncertainty. Not that most of those writing on and around this subject recognize or acknowledge that in large measure the debate over feminism's use of deconstruction is fundamentally ethical. Instead of focusing on the question of whether deconstruction compromises the ethical certainty of demands underlying feminist criticism, the debate has centred on whether or not feminist critics should use "male" theory.[3]

In order to understand both why this debate has been largely misunderstood and why the feminist debate over deconstruction matters, we have to work backwards. To address adequately the dilemmas posed by polyvocal criticism, we need to clarify the ethical and political positions of polyvocal critics. Doing that depends on being able to show how those positions have been based on different problematizations of difference, which in turn requires that we see how they emerge from political and ethical analyses of power relations.

This historical development has been overdetermined by impasses in feminist theory brought about by failures to acknowledge that defining "woman" is a highly problematic and political act and that for many reasons "we" might want to refuse the definition; acknowledgement of our failures to join practice and theory and subsequent self-criticism; and the unfortunate situation of having to make our theory and practice more radical in a political climate hostile to feminist and other demands for justice.

These historical pushes and pulls, which have left nearly every feminist critic wondering about the relationships between theory-

making and power, have led some to consider the paradoxes which come into play when feminist theorists use the persuasion model, the only model of critical discourse universally recognized by the interpretive community. Sometimes feminist theorists who have relied on the model have not been seen as using it competently because their evidence and their interpretations have not been accepted as valid. Nonetheless, even when they learn this political lesson about the workings of the interpretive community, feminist theorists must confront another paradox. The persuasion model has its origins in the logic of binary oppositions between centre and margin. Consequently, politically responsible feminist theorists may have to reject or at leat seriously redesign and re-appropriate the model. If theorists do that, however, they give up other political responsibilities such as appealing to and informing potential audiences. To a certain extent, giving up the persuasion model means cutting ourselves off from the political base of feminism and silencing ourselves as feminist theorists. Having said this, I'm now ready to analyse how three feminist theorists negotiate this paradox in order to suggest how ethically and politically difficult it is to attempt to write a decentred, polyvocal feminist criticism.

Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman risk provoking some feminist readers' discomfort about the degree to which feminist discourse is still white, privileged and univocal. In "Have We Got a Theory for You! Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for the 'Woman's Voice'" they explore the responsibilities of dominants when they listen to the voices of the dominated. If dominants acknowledge that their discourse is inadequate to the experiences of the dominated, who must nonetheless use the dominants' discourse if they want to be heard, how is any dialogue possible between the powerful and the less powerful? On whose turf will they meet? And what should motivate the dominants to hear the less powerful ones?

Lugones and Spelman attend to their own languages and voices, but even so, after the opening paragraph, written by Lugones in her native Spanish, they use the dominant language, English, Spelman's first language. Thus, in spite of themselves, the article re-enacts the workings of power relations analysed by Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed:

> In bilingual societies, one language represents power more than the other. The lower down on the social echelon, the more people tend to 'minor' unilingualism (language of the colonized); the higher up one goes, the more one finds 'major' unilingualism (language of the colonizer). (25)

They are perhaps more successful when they attempt to decentre "woman's voice": "Even when they speak in unison . . . there are two voices and not just one," (20) which is fitting, given that they want to speak about univocity and exclusion without invoking the binary logic of the persuasion model. They therefore refuse to efface the differences in voice between the Hispana and the white/Anglo authors. In the six sections of the article, six different voices or combinations of voices are marked. Yet they claim they are "both the authors of this paper and not just sections of it": "we write together without presupposing unity of expression or of experience" (25). How could they, when the decision to say "we" or "you" or "they" is so politically, ethically, and emotionally charged? These philosophers' innovative form produces a polyvocal discourse that heightens our awareness of power imbalances among women rather than tries to erase them or smooth over the contradictions when they "do theory" together.

They do this by analysing what happens when privileged white women, themselves writing from an excluded position, theorize about (all) women without examining the concept "woman": they force all women who aren't white/Anglo/privileged into the position of complaining about exclusion and thus silence them. Again. This time, however, *women* do the silencing rather than men.

Lugones and Spelman analyse questions about voice as questions about the ethics of discourse. They remind us of the historical and literary implications of the fact that the *demand* for the woman's voice began as a *complaint*. Complaining is what the less powerful do, but in this case not all who complained were completely powerless and so, to a certain extent, they were considered credible and were able to turn the complaint into a demand. Moral suasion had little to do with their getting a hearing (to the degree they have gotten one).

Lugones and Spelman present the decentring process as a morally and emotionally difficult task most respectfully motivated by a utopian' that is, a feminist ethical vision of friendship which alters the way we see the other and ourselves. Nonetheless, the hope they hold out is never far from a realistic and politicized despair:

> We all know the lack of contact felt when we want to discuss a particular issue that requires knowledge of a text with someone who does not know the text at all. Or the discomfort and impatience that arise in us when we are discussing an issue that presupposes a text and someone walks into the conversation who does not know the text. That person is either left out or will impose herself on us and either try to

> engage in the discussion or try to change the subject. Women of colour are put in these situations by white/Anglo women and men constantly. Now imagine yourself simply left out but wanting to do theory with us. The first thing to recognize and accept is that you disturb our own dialogues by putting yourself in the left-out position and not leaving us in some meaningful sense to ourselves.
>
> You must also recognize and accept that you must learn the text. But the text is an extraordinarily complex one, viz., our many different cultures. You are asking us to make ourselves more vulnerable to you than we already are before we have any reason to trust that you will not take advantage of this vulnerability. So you need to learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learning any possible lessons. You will also have to come to terms with the sense of alienation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticized and scrutinized from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed, being veiwed with mistrust, being seen as of no consequence except as an object of mistrust. (28-29)

Lugones and Spelman take apart and mutually transform the opposition insider/outsider. "Difference" has not been done away with, but by working to create a genuinely reciprocal dialogue, each has become "both insider and outsider *with respect* (emphasis mine) to each other."

In their article, knowledge of a cultural text makes one an insider. Privileged theorizers who are outsiders nonetheless are advantaged by hierarchical distinctions, and so their accounts, univocal, culturally imperialistic, unhelpful and disrespectful though they may be, are generally the ones we get to hear. That such a situation is ignored by "the" interpretive community marks a profound ethical failure, Lugones and Spelman argue. Following from that charge, they reject the commonsensical notions that theorizers know more about the theorized than vice versa and that to theorize is to be in a state of mastery over one's subject. In a very different way, Jane Gallop also deconstructs the power relations of theory-making and allows ethical questions to arise. However, if readers fail to question theoretical "business as usual," Gallop's books might seem inaccessible and her treatment of theoretical power relations might seem *merely* offensive or nonsenscal.

This is not to deny that there is much in Gallop that is offensive and nonsensical: she is blantantly narcissistic, provocatively dramatising her transferences onto Kristeva, Irigaray, and Lacan.[4]

Gallop sexualizes her readings as she decentres them and herself. She writes from within her texts (see her use of Irigaray's "Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre" *DS* 114), constructing imaginary arguments between theorists and telling us her dreams about Lacan. She calls these strategies refusals to speak from a position of mastery. While claiming that to interpret is to exercise power, Gallop delights in her own interpretive inadequacy. Reading *Gallop* demands an intensely polyvocal reader response.

In *Reading Lacan*, Gallop explains how the book almost came not to be. Her narrative exemplifies one of her deconstructive strategies: how a wise fool can make theory into flesh:

> the reader returned a report that made a great impression on me. It began with the point that the text was not worthy of publication because it demonstrated inadequate command of the subject matter, adding that I even admitted as much . . . The reader was assuming my reading to be not something other, an alternative approach, but a failure at the only correct sort of reading, one that speaks from a position of mastery over a text. I was and am trying to write in a different relation to the material, from a more unsettling confrontation with its contradictory plurivocity, a sort of encounter I believe is possible only if one relinquishes the usual position of command, and thus writes from a more subjective, vulnerable position. (18-19)

This Lacanian position is more vulnerable because it assumes the critic's castration (we are all of us castrated). For most feminists, this is indeed a "position of difficulty" (*RL* 20). While it could be construed as a feminist stance because it recognizes that plurivocity entails contradictions, to have a woman who claims to be a feminist accept and even glory in her "castration" (sexual and linguistic) presents some dilemmas.

Gallop's paradoxical strategy for securing a hearing from the interpretive community completely gives up on complaining/demanding. Instead, Gallop admits that one never has the right to speak (*RL* 113) and thus releases us from phallocentrism — without silencing women! Here is her argument:

> To speak without authority is nothing new; the disenfranchised have always so spoken. Simply to refuse authority does not challenge the category distinction between phallic authority and castrated other, between 'subject presumed to know' and subject not in command. One can effectively undo authority only from the position of authority, in a way that exposes the illusions of that position without renouncing it, so as to permeate the position with the connotations of its illusoriness, so as to show that *everyone*, including the 'subject presumed to know,' is castrated. (*RL* 21)

Why should we listen to Gallop, if she, like the rest of us, is an inadequate reader? (Think about what that question assumes about the source of the worth of a reading.) We should listen, because Gallop is more entertaining than irritating. Even when she is irritating, she "interrupts" the "efficient operation" (*RL* 27) of phallocentricism, or as it says in the blurb to *The Daughter's Seduction*, "unsettle(s) feminism's tendency to accept a traditional, unified, rational, puritanical self — a self supposedly free from the violence of desire." The disruptive pleasure she provides suggests some ways of working/playing toward a feminist utopian project of theorizing which addresses the power dynamic implicit in the persuasion model.

Gallop only partially unsettles the "economy of the One" because of the slippery games she plays with power. If we examine the language she uses to explain the paradox of speaking as a feminist about Lacan, its limited usefulness becomes apparent. How did Gallop persuade Cornell's reader to approve publication of her inadequate book? Did she succeed in permeating "the position itself' (Cornell University Press?) "with the connotations of its illusoriness"? (Cornell should publish that permeating document too so feminist would-be authors can see how it's done.)

Gallop chooses an explicitly formalist way of being inadequate to the demands of heterotextuality within one sex/text by writing a "doubly duplicitous discourse." By comparison with Lugones and Spelman's formal innovations, Gallop's is a de-politicized, individualist's attempt to decentre. Lugones and Spelman write polyvocally as a response to a politicized rage over oppositional differences, whereas Gallop, ungrounded politically, is ambitious enough to want to fail alone. She does this because she reads desire as (always) outside of or at variance with or excluded from the feminist ethical project, as in her critique of Juliet Mitchell:

> Because desire is non-articulable in ethical discourse and because to be within the bounds of feminism, where she would locate herself, necessitates ethical discourse (prescription for action) Mitchell is trapped into making the reign of insatiable desire contingent in order to make it impeachable. (*DS* 12)

By contrast, Gallop wants to be free, untrapped — by one column of ink! So, she creates *two* columns of ink and we have reached the new Jerusalem. In her privileged position, choice "beckons" to Gallop. The right column or path is the right/correct path of heterosexism, the "comforting norm" (*DS* 128). Gallop feels worried. By contrast, Lugones and Spelman feel anguish and rage. The path which is the "one left" pulls Gallop by desire rather than by hunger or thirst for justice. Three pages later, the right path takes over (the left was just a phase) at the point where the unheard difference between " hérétique" and "éthique" in Kristeva's made-up word, "L'Héréthique" makes its mark in writing: "That unpronounceable paternal, heterosexual presence opens up the 'heretic' to 'ethics'. According to 'L'Héréthique', access to ethics is 'access to the other'" (*DS* 130).

Has Gallop found a way to marry ethical discourse to desire? To "open up" the female heretic to a female ethics of desire by means of a phallus that is definitely not male? Has Gallop escaped from the phallic mother? Has Kristeva's polyvocal or rather polylogical text rescued her? Or has Gallop been reabsorbed and neutralized while refusing to command the reabsorption of her selves? Gallop tries to awe the reader with the ferocity of her struggle to live with the contradictions between women's body and women's attempts to assume power.

Her assessment is uncharacteristically earnest and politically disturbing: "The need, the desire, the wish for the Phallus is great. No matter how oppressive its reign, it is much more comforting than no one in command" (*DS* 130-1). This special pleading makes Gallop's decision about how to use power seem as deep as comicbook versions of Zen wisdom: "the only way I can move from this spot is to do both" — take a left and a right. Stay paralyzed in the same spot, the same ahistorical moment where "we" have always been. In a feminist reign of justice, no *one* would be in command, but the world we struggle in and against is unfortunately a world where *the One* is in command.

This means that feminist theorists must reconceptualize the ethical so as to reveal the exclusions which made and still make univocity seem possible, credible, desirable and unremarkable. Doing this requires that we elude the circularity of power/knowledge. We can do that, or

rather, get glimmers of what it would be like, when we do two things: simultaneously deconstruct our own interpretations and also ask painful questions about the materiality of differences among women.

Such questions, coming after I have spoken as abstractly, might seem refreshingly concrete, but they are also amazingly difficult. Do you believe that the concept of class is a British import and doesn't really fit North American reality?[5] Does hearing feminists address class at a conference make you feel angry and uncomfortable? Is oppression "interesting" only as a linguistic construct? Haven't we focused our exploration of power too narrowly if we are only interested in how it is mediated through language? That such questions do not tend to arise in feminist criticism points to the aporia in our theory and practice and suggests how limited it is to propose only discursive strategies for eliminating political oppression.

Notes

[1] This useful and memorable phrase was coined by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in "For the Etruscans." Nothing else I know states the theoretical problem as succinctly.

[2] The critics are Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," Showalter 149-150; Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," Showalter 140 and 142; and Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine R. Stimpson, "Theories of Feminist Criticism: A Dialogue," Donovan 64.

[3] See, among others, Andrea Lebowitz, "Is Feminist Literary Criticism Becoming Anti-Feminist?". Lebowitz seems wrongheaded to me in many of her claims about theorizing, but she states the case for the ethical and political responsibility of the feminist critic very well. Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" is the locus classicus for feminist suspicion of "male theory."

[4] Gallop, by the way, herself concludes that Kristeva's "surprising self-references that interrupt her efforts to erect a theory . . . are the marks of a female sexual economy" *DS* 119.

[5] This comment was actually made to me. Can you top it?

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