Feminist Thinkers and the Demands of Femininity

The Lives and Work of Intellectual Women

Second Edition

Lori Jo Marso

Second edition published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-41318-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-41316-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-35747-6 (ebk)

Introduction

Feeling Like a Feminist, by Example

CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

DOI: 10.4324/9781003357476-1

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Introduction

Feeling Like a Feminist, by Example

In February of 1795 Mary Wollstonecraft was observing a dark turn of events politically just as her personal life also seemed to be unraveling. Having courageously traveled from London to Paris in 1792 to see the unfolding revolution for herself and pen a history of its early events, Wollstonecraft also witnessed the Reign of Terror, the execution of several Girondin friends, and fell in love with American entrepreneur Gilbert Imlay and gave birth to a daughter. She worried that Imlay's affection for and commitment to their new little family was waning just as the revolution turned further towards violence, this time by forces of reaction as the Jacobins were executed too and revolutionary hope seemed to die. Wollstonecraft tied her disappointment in the revolution's promise to the failure of her partnership with Imlay and to the bleak prospects for girls and women in a deeply unequal and violent world. In a "melancholy mood," she wrote to Imlay:

> This has been such a dark period of barbarity and misery I ought not to complain of having my share ... You know my opinion of men in general;

DOI: 10.4324/9781003357476-1

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

> you know that I think them systematic tyrants ... when I am thus sad, I lament that my little darling ... is a girl ... I am sorry to have a tie to a world that for me is ever sown with thorns. ([1795] 1979, 273)

Over a century later, dark clouds of World War I were gathering as Emma Goldman parsed what happened between Imlay and Wollstonecraft this way:

> Imlay was much away from Mary at first under the pretext of business. He would not be an American to neglect his love for business. His travels brought him, as the Germans say, to other cities and other loves. As a man that was his right, equally so was it his right to deceive Mary.

True to her anti-capitalist politics, Goldman takes a swipe at Imlay's "love for business" and links it to patriarchal privilege ("as a man that was his right") and to his abandonment of Mary and their daughter Fanny ("his right to deceive Mary"). But Goldman also unearths an enduring insight from this iconic feminist's story of heartbreak and disappointment: "Mary's own tragic life proves that economic and social rights for women alone are not enough to fill her life, nor yet enough to fill any deep life, man or woman" (Goldman 1911).

Wollstonecraft and Goldman, two of several writers whose lives and work I explore in this book, champion feminist political visions in which material guarantees of equality cannot be separated from the need to transform deeply ingrained habits of intimacy and practices of relationality. Each of them hoped to change the world in ways that acknowledge how political conditions, economic structures, forms of governmentality, material inequalities, and the possibility to claim authority are linked to the most deeply personal ways we live and relate to intimate others. Each was unlucky in love or politics, or both. Each turned to autobiography or memoir to try to understand their

own experiences, craft a narrative, and leave a record of how it looks and feels to try to live a feminist life in times and places marked by pernicious forms of inequality that too often went unremarked upon or unnoticed. They confide that most often it doesn't feel good. Their autobiographies are marked by feelings of disappointment, ambivalence, anger, bitterness, but also energy, commitment, solidarity, and joy.[1] They write from within their own location and historical moment, self-consciously claiming their unique embodiment and situation as autobiography, but at the same time hoping to connect with others who shared or might be persuaded to share their visions for new ways to live and love, politically and personally.[2]

"The solitude of women's minds is regrettable," says the character Lenù in Elena Ferrante's *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*.[3] "It's a waste of time to be separated from each other without procedures, without tradition."[4] But we do have some "traditions" if we can call them that. Feminist thinkers have long sought out the experiences and insights of feminist writers who came before them, even when they lived across oceans and borders.[5] This book notices and extends this tradition of feminist intellectuals engaging with each other.[6] The feminist intellectuals I include in the book span from the eighteenth century to today, and write from experiences in the United States, Russia, India, Mexico, England, France, Iran, and Nicaragua. I attend to the specificities of their locations and situations, but also demonstrate that their writing exceeds bounds of time and place. For these authors, the future is uncertain and must be won, time sometimes seems to stand still or move backwards, and what is and could be possible is shaped by historical conditions, location, and social and political meanings of identity and community.[7]

A central theme in this book is that out of specificity and unique circumstance, connection and uptake can emerge. By invitation and disruptive example, these writers encourage their readers to feel like feminists by experiencing a taste of their struggles for freedom. I read their work (theory and autobiography) as a wish to reflect upon and illuminate new pathways not only for each author herself, but also for new generations, others, us.[8]

Key Questions of the Book

The key questions of the 2006 book are: Why *feminism*? Why *these* feminists? What are the demands of femininity and why and how are they so damaging, personally and collectively? Why read about struggles with the demands of femininity *alongside* political thinking about gender, race, state and carceral power, colonialism, revolution, and education? What new practices and insights are gleaned from getting a taste of the disappointments and pleasures these women experienced as they imagined new ways to live?

In this new introduction, I highlight the themes and insights of the book's first edition; consider newly published writings by a few of the contemporary thinkers; include recent work on some of the historical writers; and add a few new select voices to the mix. I emphasize again that each of the thinkers whose lives and work I find compelling is chosen in great part because of their refusal to answer the question of what and who is a woman. They foreground their struggles within and against the norms of femininity for their time, class, race, age, and overall situation; they refuse to adopt, but nevertheless end up having to struggle within societal expectations around intimate life, conditions of work, habits of

relationality, care-giving; and they link gendered norms concerning relationality, sex, love, and work to larger structures and forces of inequality including capitalism, racism, slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. They examine their own personal, individual, and intimate quests for freedom and the creation of new forms of subjectivity *as embedded and unfolding within* these political situations and forces. I agree with cultural theorist Lauren Berlant in their characterization of the "personal" as "*both* where structural and sensually endemic violence materialize *and* always a potential conversion space for not reproducing capitalist, imperial, racist, and patriarchal lines of descent" (Berlant 2022, 77). That the feminist thinkers I gather together here insist on changing how we live our intimate lives *alongside* the effort to enact radical change in our political and economic circumstances, for me, not only exemplifies but also electrifies the feminist insight that the personal is political.[9]

In 2006, I characterized the desires of the feminist thinkers I wrote about as desire to "have it all." Today's readers of this phrase might rightly think it sounds proprietary, with all that the word proprietary suggests—property, individuality, sovereignty, ambition. To "have it all" is linked to "wanting it all," a phrase I also used in the book. To "want it all" used in a feminist context may include the individual quest to find fulfillment in both family and work, to achieve professional success while seeking, making time for, and nourishing familial relationships. But we too often quickly equate the meanings of "having it all" and "wanting it all" with the values of empowerment that are often blind to the needs and situations of all women (think of "girl power" or "choice feminism"[10]). In these cases, "wanting"

and "having" it "all" is synonymous with an individual woman's quest to balance professional success with private fulfillment within unchanged structural, economic, and political conditions.[11]

This is not what I meant when I used these phrases in the 2006 book. Steeped in the ethics and politics of the feminist thinkers featured in the book, I was reaching for something much more expansive and radical. As diverse as they are, each of my thinkers expresses a desire for relationality as abiding connections to love, children, friends, comrades, or other chosen and meaningful ties nurtured within, rather than undercut by, their aspirations as writers, activists, organizers, and political thinkers doing the work of reimagining and transforming the world. For these feminist thinkers, integration of our intimate lives with and within ongoing political or creative work is only possible when *both* our intimate and political lives are fundamentally transformed. Material security and safety, freedom from oppression, violence, and exploitation, and the space to explore sexual and intellectual desire in freedom and abundance *all are needed at once*. *This* is the "all" they wanted to have. They yearned for this, each of them, in their *one* life, and they wanted it not only for themselves, but *also for others*.[12]

As we learn from their autobiographies and know from our own experiences, no life is perfectly balanced or integrated. A common theme that emerges across these writings is how the demands of femininity forced each writer to have to choose between their roles as intellectuals, thinkers, or activists as against lives nourished by meaningful, intimate, relationships, whatever these two conflicting desires meant to them. Gathering the voices of women writers who, out of necessity or choice, must "begin again," feminist critic Joanna Biggs

says that reading the work of these writers prompted the following kinds of questions for her:

> Could you be a feminist and be in love? Did the search for independence mean I would never be at home with anyone, anywhere? Was domesticity a trap? What was worth living for if you lost faith in the traditional goals of a woman's life? What was worth living for at all—what degree of unhappiness, lostness, chaos was bearable? (2023, 3)

My writers ask these kinds of questions, too, although they tend not to phrase them in quite such individualized terms. The feminist thinkers I study strongly tie their own personal desires to the collective Leftist political transformations (varying, historically specific) each of them was working so hard to achieve. Unable to accomplish the collective transformation they hoped for in their lifetimes, they still each experimented with ways of finding fulfillment, love, warmth, and home, by pushing against the demands of femininity and structural inequalities unique to their moment, specific embodiment, and situation. Some chose not to marry, become mothers, or have traditional partners; all of them sought to redefine relationships of sex, love, marriage, motherhood, and friendship. Many paths were explored.

Emma Goldman, for example, tried to integrate her desire for political change with her desire for intimacy by choosing comrades as her partners. From the historically available archive, we know that Goldman engaged in several intimate relationships with colleagues. In a brilliant imaginative leap that expands and queers the traditional archive, feminist theorist Claire Hemmings creates an "imaginative archive" (2018, 166) of letters between Goldman and one of her female comrades, Almeda Sperry, anarchist activist and labor

organizer. The letters penned by Hemmings attest to a sexually charged, deeply ambivalent, heatedly pursued, love affair. In real life, as I discuss in my chapter on Goldman, we know that when Goldman was in love with Ben Reitman, a colleague on the birth control campaign, she discovered that she had internalized many of the feminine roles she was struggling so hard to refashion. In a 1925 letter to Alexander Berkman, her closest anarchist comrade, Goldman reflects on the questions posed by Joanna Biggs as to whether life is worth living if one has lost faith in the traditional goals of a woman's life. Goldman puts it this way:

> It is a fact that we are removed only by a very short period from our traditions, the traditions of being loved, cared for, protected, secured, and above all, the time when women could look forward to an old age of children, a home and someone to brighten their lives. Being away from all that by a mere fraction of time, most modern women, especially when they see age growing upon them, and if they have given out of themselves so abundantly, begin to feel the upper emptiness of their existence, the lack of the *man*, whom they love and who loves them, the comradeship and companionship that grows out of such a relation, the home, a child. And above all the economic security either through the man or their own definite independent efforts. Nearly every modern woman I have known and have read about has come to [this] conclusion. ([1925] 1975, 131)

For the 2006 book, I collected personal stories by historical and contemporary feminist intellectuals (not Goldman's "nearly every modern woman," but some!) to stage conversations between them that were historically and physically impossible. One way I envisioned the book was to create multidirectional and multifaceted encounters amongst writers that wouldn't have otherwise been possible, or *if* possible, might have seemed infelicitous or unlikely. But for me, each writer was and is a muse and inspiration as I gathered their books

around me and began to imagine how they might argue or agree, laugh and cry, reference and learn from each other.

This reintroduction illustrates my three central arguments of the 2006 book. First, that written accounts of experiments in living a feminist life illustrate and locate structural constraints that situate that life; second, encountering these writings can invite and generate disturbing and disorienting feelings in readers; third, these feelings are productive for feeling like a feminist beyond identity, history, and generation. I weave these central arguments into new thematic sections that better reflect and contribute to current feminist research and concerns. My sections focus on metaphors for feminist historiography that feature bodies of water—waves, marshes, and rivers; encounters with autobiographies that feature lived experiences and experiments in living; and how a "taste" of and for freedom is communicated in struggles against the demands of femininity. Over these sections, I emphasize how vital and life-giving it can be for feminist politics, for *feeling like a feminist*, to encounter the writings of our predecessors (their inventions, fabulations, and fantasies) even and *especially if* these writings disturb and disorient us and we are able to hold and feel their dilemmas and failures.

Waves, Marshes, Rivers

In this first section, I rethink the waves metaphor for feminism where each new generation of feminists surpasses the work of previous feminist "mothers," variously but often negatively cast as not quite right: too sexually uptight, or too naively sex-positive, too liberal, or too radical, too straight, or too lesbian, too white, or too diverse and thus divisive.[13] Or, in an alternative move, mothers are hoisted onto pedestals from

which a drop is precipitously far. Instead of generational lineage where daughters have to either kill off, or, in the complementary version, valorize their mothers, I emphasize feminist community freed from the "bad" and "good" binary poles that we retreat to when we are unwilling to sit with the ambivalence mothers often inspire. What if we thought about feminist movements and their feminist subjects as not always or not *necessarily* familial (and thus already known), but instead surprisingly *unfamiliar* even when the feminist subjects are our (biological or historical) mothers? Walking away from waves to wade in marshes and rivers, might we find and adopt alternative ways to be in collective spaces and embrace the surprises and challenges within them?[14]

If you Google search the terms "feminism," "feminism's history," "what is feminism," or "feminist waves," what turns up are sites that characterize feminist social movements defined within temporally bounded and sequentially numbered waves—first, second, third, and fourth.[15]

The waves metaphor misleadingly narrates feminist history as proceeding in a mostly straight line of increasing progress and enlightenment, and distorts our understanding of feminism's geography, politics, internal diversity, and substantive demands.[16] Built into the familial and familiar waves metaphor, too, is the smug assumption that Western and new generations of feminists are always exceeding the limitations of their historically constrained mothers, and their politically less astute and culturally constrained non-Western sisters. These are ideas that this book disputes by putting diverse and diversely situated feminists in relationship to each other across history, geography, and identity, while also disputing the assumption that we already know our mothers and sisters.

The waves metaphor neatly overlaps with the feminist "progress" narrative described and debunked by Claire Hemmings in *Why Stories Matter* (2011). Tracking collective citation practices in feminist journals and noting the kinds of affects that stories about the past and future create and reinforce, Hemmings names three modes of feminist historiography—progress, loss, and return—that seem distinct, but share many overlapping characteristics.[17] The "loss" narrative follows on the "progress" one, but it condemns the antagonisms within feminist politics said to be caused by increasing diversity of the "daughters," and laments the depoliticization that is the predictable result of accepting multiple feminist subjectivities and projects. The "return" narrative says we can escape this impasse by re-centering and affirming pressing political commitments. Tracing these narratives, Hemmings does not suggest a new, better, or different story to replace these misleading three.[18] Arguing for practices of "recitation," the act of re-narrating the same stories from different perspectives, she insists that we don't need new stories, but that we need to tell stories differently.

So how might we tell feminist stories differently? This book asserts that within a space of feminist genealogy (which affirms inheritance, but is neither genetic nor biologically generational), feminist thinkers can connect across borders of history, geography, and difference. To do this, we could do what Hemmings suggests and "recite" the feminist waves story. The way the story is told now, the waves wash out the old and bring in the new, and the new is clean and clear and improved. What I read in my feminist autobiographies, however, positions us to feel under our feet the debris that is left on the shore.[19] What can we do with the sharp edges of shells, the cast-off bits of dead fish, the

seaweed that pricks our heels or gets between our toes? These remainders remind us that waves do not wash everything away.

If we think of waves this way, we are better positioned to complicate narratives of linear time and certain progress, to sit with the ambivalence that mothers always inspire, and to think in the spirit of how water exists as matter and as energy. As Indigenous feminist thinker Joanne Barker puts it, “Water is confluence, transformation, diversion (evaporation, sublimation, condensation, precipitation, storage, runoff, infiltration), exchange, not qualitative or stagnate systematicity (this equals that)” (2019, 6). In the reworked—messier, dirtier—waves metaphor, feminist politics is less oriented towards improvement and more attuned to the complexities of working together in the midst of these remainders—broken little bodies and skeletal remains, slime-covered rocks, wet sand heavy with memory and history—and in relationship to process, flow, and transformation. Riffing on alternate ways to see feminist movement and collective energy captured by water metaphors, I introduce two iconic examples of feminist community: one set in a marsh, the other in a river.[20]

African American filmmaker Julie Dash’s 1991 classic film *Daughters of the Dust* was filmed in the marshes of Saint Helena Island in South Carolina but set in 1902 on Ibo Landing off the coast of Georgia. Here in these marshes, three generations of Sea Island Gullah women, descendants of African captives, prepare to travel to the mainland as part of the Great Migration. Though it centers on one family (the Peazants) and their struggle over whether to leave the island, the camera style, refusal of narrative, and deliberate focus on details rather than big picture puts viewers in a defamiliarizing and wholly disorienting space and time.

Throughout its almost two hours, *Daughters of the Dust* eschews narrative in favor of a rich collection of saturated images of women dressed in white Victorian-looking or colorful African dress and veils, women sitting in trees, extensive food preparation, Yoruba altars and Christian iconography, all set to African music, sounds of nature, Islamic chanting of prayer, and snippets of conversation and encounter. It is impossible to exaggerate the role that the swampy location plays: insects are always buzzing and hissing; reeds and moss rise out of dank and dark water framed by hanging cypress trees; viewers can almost feel the humidity on their skin. This is not the ocean and its clean, strong, powerful waves. This is the bayou and its brackish pools teeming with multiple species and forms of life.

As the film opens, we see images of two open hands spilling over with yellow dust, a man emerging from water, white curtains blowing in a domestic space, and a canoe arriving to shore with a woman dressed all in white and a large white hat accompanied by rowing men. A female voice-over narrates:

> I am the first and the last; I am the honored one and the scorned one; I am the whore and the holy one; I am the wife and the virgin; I am the barren one and many are my daughters; I am the silence that you can't understand; I am the utterance of my name.

We understand later, although we do not understand now, that the narrator is the Unborn Child, a future that is not yet here and certainly is not guaranteed.

Dash slows time and movement with her camera, almost seeming to match the pace of the sleepy marshes. The characters are mostly inscrutable—we only get glimpses of their subjectivity and desires through conversation and voice-over, which are never neatly tied to

goals or identity, nor to a clearly articulated stance towards the past or future. We can call the film "feminist" because it centers the experiences of a group of Black women, but more importantly because of its innovative, disturbing, and non-narrative form and in the affects this form invites for viewers.[21] Even after several viewings, it is not easy for viewers to orient themselves, and on each viewing, there are several new things to see and absorb and think anew.

In the first moments of the film, we see "Cousin Mary" Peazant (also called "Yellow Mary," played by Barbara O. Jones) standing regally in the boat, arriving from the city with her female lover, Trula (Trula Hoosier). Yellow Mary's boat stops to gather her Christian cousin Viola (Cheryl Lynn Bruce) who is accompanied by Mr. Snead, a photographer, whom she is bringing to the island to document the family gathering before the migration. Viola sees the impending migration as "the first steps towards progress," a position that will be countered by other members of the family leading up to the feast on the beach, particularly the matriarch Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day) who intends to stay on the island to practice and remember traditional African customs. Nana's memories of times of enslavement are intercut with scenes of the family gathering, eating, and being photographed on the beach, and via voice-over we learn about absences in the official archives that erase Black subjects and subjectivity.[22] "How can you leave this soil, *this* soil?" Nana asks. "The sweat of our love. It's here in this soil. You're the fruit of an ancient tree." Conversations about whether to stay or leave, and what it means for identity, possibility, and freedom, continue through the film in snippets and bits. What is more present for viewers, however, are the images

and sounds of past and present, and the stunning mix of iconography and spiritual practices from many cultures: African, Native American, Christian, Yoruba, and Islamic.

To the scene and site of marshes in *Daughters of the Dust*, I add the theory, writing, and activism of the Combahee River Collective. The CRC is a group of writers (Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, Cheryl Clarke, Gloria Akasha Hull, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Chirlane McCray, Audre Lorde) whose collective name honors Harriet Tubman's efforts to free enslaved peoples at the Combahee River in South Carolina. In 1977, the CRC collectively drafted a statement centering Black feminist lesbian lives and struggles. The statement can be categorized as a manifesto, a feminist essay, or a collective autobiography. In feminist scholarship, the CRC is said to originate the idea of what we now call identity politics, but in quite different terms than identity politics is now understood.[23] Their writings anticipate what we now call intersectionality in feminist politics (Crenshaw 1989), a theory that rejects the idea of identity as singular, solely biological or natural, non-materialist, and cohesively tied to interest. As the theory of intersectionality shows, identities are never singular, they do not arise out of thin air, and they shift and cohere differently depending on context and history. Like identities, rivers are not just or only natural formations. They are also sites of traffic where the circulation and exchange of goods and materials produces and reinforces the forms of material oppression to which the CRC draws our attention. The fact that the CRC name themselves after a river brings this material history to mind while also bringing to mind the possibility for flow, change, and transformation.[24]

Streams move into rivers, rivers meet and join other rivers, rivers break into tributaries; these bodies might form a confluence.

The CRC statement explores the history and materiality (the weight, we might say) of political and social identities, as it opens us to new situations and solidarities. The authors patiently and thoroughly explain that identity is always material and historical, and never just one thing: "We are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions." Members of the CRC are fighting for their own liberation as Black lesbians experiencing multiple intersecting forms of harm. They say, "Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work." Doing this work, they insist they will free others, and they invite *everyone* to join in anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, non-hierarchical struggles for liberation. The CRC describe their work as liberatory *and* pragmatic:

> During our time together we have identified and worked on many issues of particular relevance to Black women. The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneous factors in oppression. We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate heath care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.

I read the CRC statement through the lens of the "river" in their name to decenter the way the feminist waves metaphor has typically

been understood. I also brought in the example of the CRC to draw attention to yet another powerful instance of feminist collectivity (reading the "collective" in their name) to think and move and feel with alongside the swamps in *Daughters of the Dust*. If we sit at the intersections of rivers to study old traffic patterns and possible new ways of moving, if we linger in the swamps to feel time slow and images blur, we are better able to attune ourselves to notice debris on the beach and feel it sticking between our toes.

I turn now to why we should scrutinize together the lives and work of our never quite feminist enough, never quite admirable enough, feminist "mothers" and "sisters." I am drawn to work that disrupts, disorients, disturbs, disappoints, and discomforts our too easily won sense of self, movement, and purpose, and feminist family relationships. In the next section, I notice what is generated in the space between writer and reader when we open ourselves to the discomforts of encounter when we read, hear, see, and taste experiments in living written by feminists who are struggling to get free. Feminist autobiography is often disruptive and disturbing, and we can harness these affective and aesthetic disruptions to enliven contemporary feminist politics.

Encounters with Experiments in Living

Inspired by debris on the beach, and by marshes and rivers where multiple species reside collectively in antagonism *and* cooperation, never one species washing away the other, this section asks how we might build community by encountering diverse, disruptive, and disorienting examples of feminist lives. Holding examples of feminist lives up to the light and turning them this way and that reveals many

fault lines, scuffs, and scars. They not only discomfort but also fail to perfectly represent, reflect, or mirror our own lives. I claim that difficult feelings of disappointment and ambivalence towards our feminist foremothers, and disorientation in relationship to their choices, values, and struggles, can help *reorient* us to new ways of feeling, thinking, and acting in our own lives and communities.

Beauvoir's life and work anchor the 2006 book as I interpret and extend her method to consider the experiments in living offered in autobiographical accounts written by feminist intellectuals, past and present. In Volume 2 of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir gives us a dizzying array of moments, events, and examples from the lives of girls and women. Readers encounter voices from the characters not only from her own novels, but from scores of writers; she includes things her friends tell her; she lifts passages from published diaries, memoirs, and films; she even includes the experiences of female characters from novels and plays and texts authored by men that in Volume I were examples of male cultural dominance but in Volume 2, framed differently, signal differently too. All these examples, especially when gathered in multiplicity, articulate inchoate and wildly different but *persistent* desires for *something else* than what patriarchy offers. The examples show the idea that the "Eternal Feminine," or the idea of who a "Woman" is or should be, is a male-created myth. They vividly demonstrate that women exist in the plural and lead many kinds of lives. At the same time, Beauvoir's collection reveals that patriarchal, racialized, economic, and social factors, as well as physical or mental bodily traits (neurodiversity, difference in physical ability) and the social/political meanings bodies take on (the disdain for aging women,

as one example), situate the lived experiences of female-identified subjects and condition if not fully determine what is possible.

This collection of experiences, that include Beauvoir's own, pose as an invitation to readers to identify and disidentify (feeling all the feelings) and to subsequently reflect on one's own lived experiences under various conditions of patriarchy in bodies marked as feminine. We come to understand that one thing woman-identified subjects may have in common is the everyday and multiple ways their freedom is constricted, redirected (into romance, religion, motherhood, for example), or blocked.[25] Engaging in comparison and discussion about these experiences via reading *The Second Sex* and the volumes of Beauvoir's autobiography, opens us to the often-opaque worlds we inhabit, and can help us imagine other ways to live. Thus, following Beauvoir's method but moving beyond it, this book collects intellectual women's lived experiences as *feminist experiments in living*. The examples I choose for this book are ones that tend to provoke the disappointment, discomfort, confusion, and ambivalence of feminist readers. Considered together, various feminist experiments in living might build feminist community in ways that, as we witnessed in marshes and rivers, could hold space for multiple kinds of encounters.

Feminist historian Judith Coffin characterizes the effects of Beauvoir's method as it reverberates with readers in an "exceptionally interesting author-reader intimacy ... made intimate by the subjects discussed and the dense exchange of ideas, feelings, fantasies, and experiences" (Coffin 2020, 2). These were often, but not always, positive or inspiring. That Beauvoir herself did not always behave as "The Independent Woman" from the last chapter of *The Second Sex*, for example, is a reason some readers felt or feel dismay upon learning

that she did not live up to her own standards for independence. Some readers, for example, were disturbed to learn cringe-inducing details about Beauvoir's romantic relationships with Jean-Paul Sartre, Nelson Algren, Claude Lanzmann,[26] and the relationships, romantic and otherwise, with notable women in her life, in which Beauvoir's behavior was less than feminist by any measure.[27] Some readers wondered how their feminist icon could have served men and betrayed women in the ways Beauvoir apparently did.[28]

Deeply ambivalent reader response to Beauvoir's life and work is not a new phenomenon. Since its publication in France in 1949, reception of *The Second Sex*, for example, has been marked by strong emotions. Listen to how Beauvoir describes early reactions to her magnum opus in her autobiographical account, *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. ([1968] 1992, 197)

She continues for several pages documenting several kinds of violent and aggressive responses.[29]

Organized as a series of encounters, a recent book by philosopher Kathryn Sophia Belle recovers and stages difficult conversations between Beauvoir and Black feminists, white feminists, and frameworks beyond the Black/White binary. Cleverly riffing on the title bell hooks gave to an essay hooks penned in 2012 called "True Philosophers: Beauvoir and bell," Belle names her book *Beauvoir and Belle: A Black Feminist Critique of The Second Sex*.[30] Describing herself as a "happily unmarried mother of four children who is reading,

teaching, and writing about *The Second Sex*" (2024, 6), Belle disrupts what she sees as Beauvoir's too-smooth reception amongst white feminist philosophers. She says the "defensive responses and ongoing efforts to protect Beauvoir's legacy" (4) undermine any ability to "really hear and acknowledge the shortcomings of Beauvoir's philosophy, especially from the perspective of many Black women and other Women of Color" (4). Acknowledging her several debts to bell hooks again, Belle notes with approval that even the *typing* of the name "bell hooks" causes a disruption: "A writer must override the 'autocorrect' function in an electronic document that defaults to capitalizing bell or hooks at the beginning of a sentence" (2024, 2).

One especially compelling part of Belle's book features the writings of Black feminist thinkers Claudia Jones, Lorraine Hansberry, and Audre Lorde. Each received and uplifted *The Second Sex* in spite of the ways their own experiences as women, and their own analyses of gender and racial oppression, differed from, and were much more intersectional than the account offered by Beauvoir. In other words, they did not fully identify with Beauvoir and yet they read her book in the way she intended—as an appeal and an invitation. Belle reminds us that in 1949, the same year that *The Second Sex* was published, Black communist (internationalist) thinker Claudia Jones published "An End of the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!" In this piece, Jones covers issues of

> fascism, imperialism, poverty, sexism, Black women (as Black, as women, and as workers; as militants, guardians, providers, protectors, mothers, domestic laborers, and more), Black women's health issues (including pregnancy and maternal death rates), slavery and rape, abolition and suffrage, Jim Crow and segregation, lynching, and police brutality. (Belle 2024, 75)

Jones offers a "triple oppression thesis" (race, class, gender) that exceeds Beauvoir's primary focus on gender, and in spite of this difference, she "intervened to prevent the publication of a negative review of [*The Second Sex*] in *Masses and Mainstream*, and also later advocated for the publication of a more positive review in *Worker* (Belle 2024, 96). Belle credits Jones as being one of the earliest contributors to the recovery work of Beauvoir, alongside Hansberry and Lorde. For her part, Hansberry, also a Black left internationalist feminist, wrote a favorable review of *The Second Sex* in 1957, but it was not published until 1995 in Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire*. Suggesting that *The Second Sex* "may well be the most important work of this century" (1995, 29), Hansberry underscores "how class, colonial, and gender oppressions are overlapping" (Belle 2024, 127). Finally, Audre Lorde's influential "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," an essay delivered as commentary for a conference on "*The Second Sex*—Thirty Years Later" at New York University in 1979, amplifies the fact that Lorde insists on attentiveness to "other kinds of difference beyond the singular focus on gender" (2024, 138).[31]

Belle is disturbed by the fact that white feminists have failed to notice or take seriously the evidence that Black feminists have read, recovered, and productively engaged with the work of Beauvoir.[32] Each of these readings of *The Second Sex* by Black internationalist feminists can be marked as a disturbance in the too-favorable or too singularly gender-focused receptions of the book, pushing its reach, scope, and impact far beyond white women. It is but one example of the ways readers can be moved by disturbance, noting the book as too white, inadequately intersectional, and so on, to feel like feminists in different and new ways. When readers encounter the theory and

autobiography of feminist thinkers across time and borders, it is most often not agreement with the work or holding up the life as exemplary that creates movement and connection.[33]

Charting a political role for disturbing affects in feminist politics, I am fully aware that individual affects are mobilized and become collective in all kinds of ways and can move in various political directions. My claim is that in the *reception* of autobiography, readers can occupy a space, one marked by discomforting and unresolved feelings of disturbance and disappointment. One of the thinkers I engage in the 2006 book, Iranian immigrant Azar Nafisi, also emphasizes *how we read* by insisting that we embrace the courage to "read dangerously" (2022). Organized as a series of letters to her dead father (former mayor of Tehran and political dissident jailed by the Shah in 1963), Nafisi sketches images of protest against repression across time and place: opposition to the Shah; the 2019 Iranian protests against the mandatory headscarf rules and the policing of women's dress; and in the United States in 2020, the outrage in response to the police murder of George Floyd. As in all of her writing, Nafisi puts her lived experiences as a feminist intellectual struggling to make sense of how embodied and structural conditions shape women's lives at the center of her attention. In one letter, she reckons with her feelings of "frustration and despair" (2022, 51) upon viewing photographs of young protesters killed in the 2019 Iranian demonstrations against the regime. Navigating these negative feelings, she reaches for the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison for solace and support. She finds connection with characters Hurston and Morrison create in their novels: "African American women oppressed because

of their race and gender … very different individuals, near opposites, in fact" (2022, 56). Reading Hurston's autobiography, Nafisi laments that Hurston was "castigated by some of her prominent male African American peers" (2022, 65) but notices that she nevertheless retained an "eagerness, the burning within" (75). Writing about Pecola, one of Morrison's characters in *The Bluest Eye*, Nafisi says Pecola gets justice by way of Morrison "telling her story, revealing her inner beauty, the poetry of her being" (79). Political theorist Lawrie Balfour perceptively calls what Morrison does in *The Bluest Eye*, "word-work," an effort to "do beauty" and "pursue freedom through the work of words" (2023, 178).

This "word-work" reaches us if we do what Nafisi asks, which is to "read dangerously." Reading dangerously is akin to the orientation Belle has toward Black feminist thinkers who engaged with Beauvoir, and the Black feminist thinkers who were Beauvoir's contemporaries had toward Beauvoir. Each author/reader approaches the encounter with a "mindset that questions and doubts," acknowledges "curiosity," and "restlessness," and seeks "multivocality" and "different perspectives" (2022, 5). What we discover as readers, and what we feel upon discovery, may not always feel good. In particular, *feeling like a feminist* in response to, and as we encounter, the lives and lived experiences of others unlike ourselves can provoke anxiety, bring contradictory feelings about norms of femininity to the surface, and trigger ambivalence and confusion about sex, love, marriage, children, and friendship.[34] It can be quite upsetting to notice that the roles, habits, relationships, goals, and desires that girls and women have been taught to strive for, to hold onto, to cherish, are the very ones that work to

solidify women's status as "the second sex."[35] It can also feel very disorienting to discover our (unchosen, structural) connections to other women, to recognize that our actions and inactions harm others, and to slowly or suddenly understand that we have unwittingly chosen our own harm. It seldom feels good or empowering to learn we occupy unchosen locations within racist, capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal, extractive (of people and nature) structures that have deep interests in concealing these connections and these interests.[36]

In the context of complicated and pernicious sets of structures in which sexual, race, colonial, and class identities mark women's lives, encounters between different women that are marked by disturbance, disorientation, disappointment, and disagreement (and of course, inequality) not only have to be noticed—they are *productive* for feminist politics. They *are* feminist politics. Especially when conducted across time, geography, and identity, embodied, affective, intellectual encounters can help us see *more* historically and more politically by feeling the discomforting jolt of recognizing similarity and difference across time and space.

"Tastes" of Freedom

Taking negative affects seriously and thinking about how they move us and can move our politics is a way to not only affirm difference and the disturbances that difference can create but to also acknowledge the limits of knowledge regarding our feminist "mothers" and feminist comrades. As we saw earlier, complicating the progress, loss, and recovery narratives in feminist theory, Hemmings discovers that these kinds of difficult encounters are

the substance and motor of feminist politics. In the final sections of her book, Hemmings "point[s] to the limits of self-knowledge, and invariability of knowledge of the other, as the starting point of political engagement" (2011, 226).[37]

What matters most, I insist, is how we (readers/listeners/viewers) respond in the face and fact of difference and disappointment. In a book on the cultural history of political disappointment, Sara Marcus also emphasizes response and reception as she considers the continuing legacies of 1970s feminism. A too-singular emphasis on voice, she says—as in finding one's voice, using one's voice, "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar," croons Helen Reddy—downplays the roles of mediation, technology, reception, and difference in feminist politics. Emphasizing voice prizes authentic or unmediated experience, individual choice and empowerment, undivided desire and agency, and certain progress. Tracking the experiences of 1970s US feminists and their focus on the metaphor of voice, Marcus applauds the turn towards visuality initiated by thinkers such as Audre Lorde who, much like bell hooks in her work on the "oppositional gaze" (1992), shifts our focus away from the all-enveloping field of the male gaze, as the object looked *at*, to how we *look*, how we *read*, and how we *write*.[38]

When we reference the gaze—as in we are shifting from the male gaze to something else such as the female, queer, feminist, or for bell hooks, the oppositional gaze—and when we talk about voice—who has it, whether it is speech or sound, what kind of noise can be made—we call upon organizing metaphors (like the dominant readings of the wave, too) that have been productive and empowering for feminist politics, but have significant drawbacks that I have been describing. With the gaze and voice stories, we find space to critique the *male gaze*

and *mansplaining*, and this can be very productive. But inside our own feminist stories—the stories we tell ourselves—we denounce bad gazes and bad voices *internal* to our politics and the history of our politics. Recall that in the wave metaphor increasing representation is linked to a progress story where more hip, more diverse, more woke daughters go beyond the tired-looking eyes, and the old-sounding voices, of feminist mothers. We can and sometimes must make feminist judgments, but we must do so outside of a linear framework where we are leaving bad histories, bad mothers, and non-Western cultures and religious practices behind (see Marso 2010).

What if we emphasized a different sense? Might readers develop a *taste for freedom* by encountering the "taste" of other women's struggles to get free? To imagine their own lives differently, the thinkers I study in this book engaged in experiments in living and crafted stories about them for posterity, stories that I interpret as not only disruptive and disorienting, but in this disruption and disorientation, poised to offer a taste of their struggles to get free. The stories show what it looks and feels and sounds and tastes like to free themselves from the demands of femininity at different times, in different spaces, in different bodies. We might say that autobiography as feminist form can offer a taste of and for freedom.

Simone de Beauvoir lauds the formal and narrative strategies of film, literature, and memoir as the "only form of communication capable of giving me the incommunicable—capable of giving me the taste of another life" ([1965] 2011, 201). Here we move from ear (voice) to eye (visual) to tongue and taste.[39] Taste is arguably even more internal, more intimate (an experience of the tongue), even more personal (inside the mouth) than voice and vision. Beauvoir says taste is able to

"communicate the incommunicable." "Taste," I think, is what Carolyn Steedman (discussed in this book) alludes to when she offers her own mother's story, "a sad and secret story," but "not just hers alone" (1986, 22). Steedman tells one part of the story of her own mother by narrating her mother's taste for beauty, for "a full skirt that took twenty yards of cloth" (1986, 47). Her mother didn't want children, nor even a daughter. She wanted to be free, wanted a different kind of life. Taste communicates desire, a longing so internal, so expansive, but difficult to ever satisfy. The longing remains.

Unruly, impossible to classify, improper, and often even said to be in *bad taste*, autobiographical accounts penned by feminist thinkers can move us away from emphasizing voice as authentic (or true) to instead see creative crafting, mediation, difference, multiplicity, and (compromised) gestures of freedom. If we accept the invitation from these writers, we can recognize these examples as ones that are not only in the service of the authors trying to get free, but also as trying to free others: us.[40] I ask what these examples might inspire as we feel ourselves begin, or continue anew, to *feel like feminists* via disruptive and disorienting tastes of struggles for freedom that we recognize by reading/looking/tasting/feeling with them.

I emphasize again that the autobiographies are not necessarily "authentic" or factually true.[41] Offered as acts of invention, of creation, I think of these autobiographies as *aesthetic* appeals to *us*. Recall that in her autobiography, Audre Lorde not only renames herself; she also claims her story as a *biomythography*, calling her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography*. In her own distinctly unorthodox (non-linear, non-familial) biography of Lorde, Alexis

Pauline Gumbs reminds us that "Audre repeatedly referred to it as a 'novel' and to the primary character Audre as 'the protagonist'" (2024, 43). Gumbs says, "Sometimes I read *Zami* as a place where we can see Audre's fantasies and her critical lens on what she lived through" (2024, 43).

As we encounter their stories, we might become comrades, or we might remain distant interlocutors. We can agree, disagree, engage or reject any connection at all (we can put down the book, stop reading), but the writing comes in the form of an invitation. The invitation is never only or even primarily cast as a call to identify, empathize, or feel seen. How the invitation lands, whether it is even received, will depend in part on the overall situation (in Beauvoir's sense as involving markers of identity, as well as historical and political milieu) of both writer and reader. One of the writers I discussed in the 2006 book, Ana Castillo, foregrounds the difficulty of reaching beyond one's own self-identified audience as she extends her own invitation. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, she insists that intellectual (feminist) women (like herself, like most of her readers) not forget their *hermanas* (1995, 61) who work in garment sweatshops in Los Angeles, in the fields picking fruit, and whose lives are deeply shaped by Catholicism and conservative Mexican values.[42]

In a new memoir called *Black Dove* (2016), Castillo centers aesthetic, affective, deeply personal, pleasures and losses marked by politics as she offers readers a taste of her struggles. Notably, she pluralizes her identity as she searches for her "self" through relationship with others. This is indicated by her subtitle—*Mamá, Mi'jo, and Me*. Her multiplied identity is bigger than that though, too, as she links self to community. Castillo dedicates her book

"To all those who dare to dream—not necessarily for riches and fame—but for everyone on the planet to live with dignity," and writes in the very first paragraph:

> Perhaps some of you may come away from this book feeling that my stories have nothing to do with your lives. You may find the interest I've had in my ancestors as they were shaped by the politics of their times, irrelevant to your own history. My story, as a brown, bisexual, strapped writer and mother, constantly scrambling to take care of my work and my child, might be similarly inconsequential. However, I beg your indulgence and a bit of faith to believe that maybe on the big Scrabble board of life we will eventually cross ways and make sense to each other. (2016, 1)

Black Dove is styled as a series of essays: about her mother's and grandmother's lives in Mexico, her favorite aunt Flora and what Flora taught her, her girlhood and teen years, becoming a single mother and raising her son, and most powerfully and centrally, her son's imprisonment for robbery when he was twenty-six.[43] She explicitly thematizes how living in the body of a bisexual, Chicana, single, writing, woman affects and continues to shape everything she thinks and does. Mother of a grown son, and older now, she does not necessarily say she regrets the unconventional life she chose when younger, but she does admit how patriarchal beliefs about the role and responsibilities of mothers permeate and condition her own sense of self. When her son is arrested and has to spend two years in jail, she says:

> I imagined the whispers—*What more could anyone expect from a woman who left a husband and who, furthermore, behaved as if she had no use for men? How dare she think she could walk about and be as liberated as any man? What male role model had he had?* (2016, 229)

These thoughts invade Castillo's consciousness even as she acknowledges the risks her son—a young brown man who fashioned himself after rappers and hip-hop artists, engaged in graffiti art and drug use,

and had a history of depression—faced in a world marked by police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and hundreds more.[44]

Castillo's struggles to get free are marked by pleasure and love as well as grief and loss. The writing and the reception of the memoir connects author to readers via multiple kinds of disturbing feelings as we absorb the words and images they conjure, feel the discomfort of Castillo's experiences which invite us to think of our own, and acknowledge that Castillo's personal circumstances are indelibly shaped by the racialized, gendered, colonial, and class inequities of the United States. In 2006, I emphasized empathy as central to identifications and receptions of feminist lives across time, geography, and identity. As I pen this introduction now almost twenty years later, I find it more generative to think beyond empathy to center disturbance and disappointment. Thinking and feeling beyond empathy, we can be more open to difference, more willing to be surprised, more able to find new comrades, and to imagine and create new futures.

As we saw in the previous section, Kathryn Sophia Belle's encounters with Beauvoir—and Claudia Jones's, Lorraine Hansberry's, and Audre Lorde's encounters with Belle and Beauvoir—are new examples of the kind of encounters that I stage and amplify in the 2016 book. They reach across difference to consider and create the common. In *How We Write Now*, feminist theorist Jennifer Nash captures the look and feel of these kinds of encounters when she notices that "the visual component of [Saidiya] Hartman's historiographical effort [i]s an invitation to closeness, to encounter historical actors in the context of an intimate archive that *feels* different from what a reader might anticipate" (2024, 79, emphasis in original). Nash goes on to (fittingly,

I think) describe Hartman's *Wayward Lives* as a "family album." Earlier I argued that we could and maybe should describe feminist movements outside of metaphors that center the family so we can be open to surprise and unknowingness, the kind of surprise we would expect when we encounter strangers, rather than the familiarity we expect from family members. But inside this book, I document that biological and feminist daughters are often *very* surprised when they become open to encounters with their biological and feminist mothers. They are surprised, but often *also* disappointed and disoriented. These encounters do not always taste good. Maybe some of our mothers were not good cooks? Nash captures the sense that mothers are often strangers when she describes Hartman's *Wayward Lives* as a family album, and notes that she is "fully aware of all the complex circuits of feeling that the family album can produce" (2024, 81).[45] "These [the photos, the stories] are affectively saturated objects dense with historical desires, spaces where the present, past, and future touch" (2024, 81).

"How can I live? I want to be free. Hold on" (Hartman 2019, 349). These are the last words in Hartman's *Wayward Lives* ending a short chapter titled "The Chorus Opens the Way." The "chorus" opens the way, I contend, as women reach out to each other invited by feminist autobiographies that offer a taste (as Beauvoir said so well) of another's life. So many women's lives could have been included in the chorus I assemble here, so many, *too many*, fit, even as they are not all singing the same notes. ***How can I live?*** they each ask from their different circumstances. Shelley Muneoka tells the story of her Hawaiian grandmother who "tells me stories of growing up on Kauaʻi as the middle child of sixteen siblings, and

about her dreams beyond being a wife and mother" (2020, 203). Mishuana Goeman shares the story of Mohawk writer E. Pauline Johnson who ends her confessional story of dispossession by saying, "They account for it [settler dispossession of Native land through marriage] by the fact that I am a Redskin … they seem to have forgotten that I am a woman" (Goeman 2013, 43). Much like feminist intellectuals whose stories are in the pages of this book, Goeman's account of twentieth-century Native women's writings (poetry and prose) links feminist desires for something else, something more, to the political circumstances in which they are ensconced. She powerfully and painfully shows that Native women's bodies (and lives and freedoms) were a battleground for interpretations of colonial law through the lens of heteronormativity, race, gender, sex, and property. ***I want to be free***. There are many ways to try. For Lorde, books were "escape route[s] in a restrictive microculture … pages and pages of black loopholes … openings to squeeze through toward freedom" (Gumbs 2024, 74). Nicaraguan writer Giaconda Belli, another figure in this book, took many physical and political risks to get free—as a citizen and as a woman. She says that, like her mother, she wanted to "push the limits" (2002, 105). Belli, the daughter, was the "one to dare" (2002, 105).

Hold on. As I write this introduction in 2024 to the book that I originally published in 2006, I wish that *more* had changed for women, girls, feminized and woman-identified persons, even though much *has* changed, some things for the worse. The women writers featured here are here to remind us, uncomfortably, disturbingly, that they wanted it all and they didn't get it. They *wanted* in expansive, imaginative, and creative ways, and they give their readers a taste of

this wanting by crafting and sharing their stories. Often their stories disturb, disappoint, make us cringe, make us uncomfortable—they were too in love, too feminine, too masculine, too conservative, too radical, too white, too racist, too not-white, too wild, too complicit with power, just *wrong* because *too close* to our own foibles, mistakes, and inner sense of shame. We have all absorbed the demands of femininity, after all, whether we can admit it, or see it, or say it, or not. These stories uncomfortably remind us of this uncomfortable fact, but they also invite *us*, their readers, to want *more*, to want it *all*: all the beauty, all the love, all the equality, and all the freedom. Together. They invite us to feel like feminists, by example.