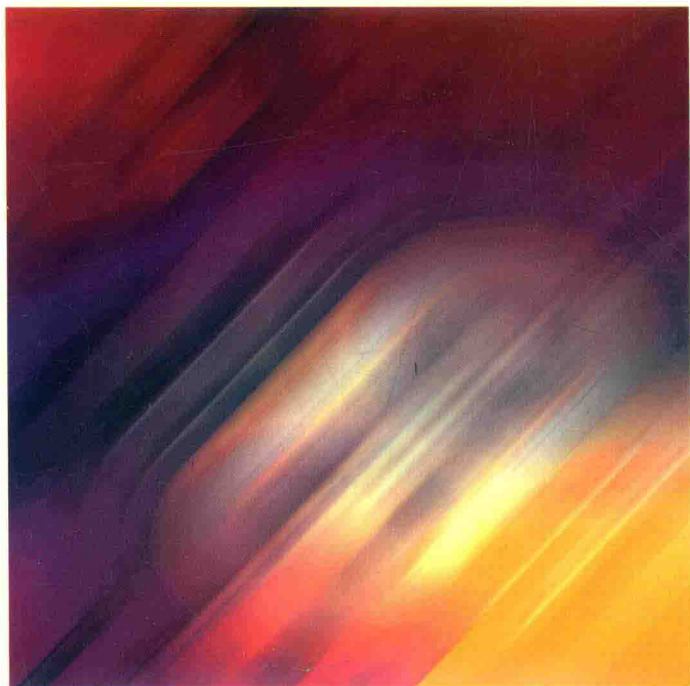


# beyond identity politics



feminism, power & politics

moya lloyd



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*In memory of my parents, Bert and Sylvia Lloyd*

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## acknowledgements

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## introduction

### the subject and politics

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This book began with a puzzle. In the early 1990s, reading about the potential relation between Foucault and feminism, I kept encountering the claim that if I, as a feminist, used Foucault I was 'untrue', somehow, to my feminist politics. I was endangering that politics in some way. Intuitively I experienced this charge as unconvincing. Foucault's idea that resistance to power operates in a multiplicity of local, 'microphysical', and dispersed ways allowed me to explain much of the feminist politics I saw around me and read about. This feminist politics was, to paraphrase Vicky Randall, often ad hoc, based on brief campaigns with a local focus, bolstered by a rough and ready organization, and frequently orchestrated around transient coalitions (1987: 58). This politics was not systematic and it did not simply serve the interests of pre-given groups of women. Instead, it frequently led to the generation of alternative female/feminist identities.<sup>1</sup> So, while it was the case that turning to Foucault compelled me to question vigorously a particular understanding of feminist politics, where politics was construed simply as putting into action the demands of a pre-existing community of women, it did not, to my mind, imperil feminist politics as such. Instead it challenged me to rethink politics and what it does: what it enables and what it disallows. Far from being a tool that could just be used to eradicate all gender conflict and inaugurate, and guarantee, a woman-friendly future, politics in all its guises works, I will suggest throughout this book, as a messy unstable, infinitely reversible, yet generative dynamic. Although Foucault has remained a shadowy companion on my travels, since those early days in my thinking I have ventured beyond him to a wide range of work, both feminist and non-feminist, exploring ideas of what, in this book, I call the 'subject-in-process',<sup>2</sup> a term I use heuristically to capture the idea that subjectivity is constituted (by language, discourse, or power), inessential and thus perpetually open to transformation. For all my theoretical ventures, my initial intuition has, however, been confirmed. Politics is not, I contend, compromised by a turn to the idea of

the subject-in-process; it is radically reconfigured by it. This reconfiguration is what I explore in this book.

My argument in what follows is that acknowledging the processual nature of subjectivity does not entail the demise of feminist politics, although it has a number of far-reaching implications for feminism. First, I suggest, it problematizes feminism's assumption that it requires a stable subject in order to justify and ground its politics.<sup>3</sup> This assumption is, I contend, based upon a naturalization of the relation between the subject and politics that is, in fact, itself already political. Next, I argue that recognizing that the subject is politically invested does not impede political engagement; it opens it up. This in turn leads to a proliferation of possible sites of political contestation (from the state to the domestic realm, from bodies and identities to the many places these bodies and identities are reproduced – medicine, the law, and so on). It also multiplies the potential forms of political activity (from parody, to critique, to radical democracy). Finally, I demonstrate how key ideas such as agency, power and domination rightly take on a new shape as a consequence of this radical rethinking of the subject–politics relation and how the role of feminist political theory is thereby transformed.

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### Interrogating the Stable Subject

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To ask questions about the relation between the subject and politics at the start of the twenty-first century is, in some ways, inevitable. Social and political life, in the West, has altered dramatically since the end of the Second World War. The primacy of class in politics was challenged during the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, by the rise of the 'new social movements' (including feminism, gay and lesbian liberationism, the anti-nuclear movement, and environmentalism). The proliferation of these movements, and the increasing recognition that no subject's identity could be explained exclusively in terms of one axis (race, gender, or sexual orientation) brought forth disquiet with one-dimensional accounts of oppression, such as Marxism (with its sole focus on class). At the end of the 1990s, the relation between formal politics and its informal counterparts became particularly salient. With a turnout of only 69 per cent for the 1997 UK general election – the lowest since the Second World War – and 51 per cent for the US presidential elections in 2000, the indications were that dissatisfied voters were 'boycotting' formal politics (Hertz, 2001: 107). Alongside declining party membership in the post-war period, it seemed that people, and particularly the young, were viewing party and electoral politics as, at best, uninteresting and, at worst, unimportant. At the same time, the aestheticization of daily life, with its heightened emphasis on the cultural and symbolic realms, appeared to

be gaining in salience. Changing image (and thus potentially bolstering capitalism), seemed more important (to some) than changing the world – at least, via conventional means.

My point is not that we are witnessing the end of politics. At the same time that disillusionment with party politics set in, there has, after all, been an upsurge in political forms not easily calibrated in conventional terms. These include the politics of ethno-national, linguistic, cultural or religious recognition, ethical forms of politics (including animal rights activism), and the 'anti-political' politics evident in the anti-globalization protests that marked the beginning of this century (Hertz, 2001; Rose, 1999: 1–14). My contention is rather that what these shifts indicate is that the political sphere is not fixed. It changes as dissonant or alternative forms of politics irrupt into it. The same, I propose, is true for feminism. Its conception of the political sphere has also been disrupted by alternative ways of thinking and doing politics. Questioning the nature of the subject–politics relation has been central to this. To use a different idiom, part of the historical present of feminism has been constituted by its claim to need a stable, unified and coherent subject as the basis for its politics. This claim, I suggest, sets a limit to how feminism conceives politics and disguises the power relations that underpin this conception.

It may be objected that feminism has had a persistently interrogatory attitude towards politics from its inception. Throughout its history, it has posed repeated questions about the nature of politics, not least in relation to how politics is gendered. Liberal feminism, while embracing the dominant conception of politics as activities taking place in the formal arena of voting, electoral candidacy, political representation, and so on, argued significantly that women ought to be allowed to participate in them on equal terms with men. This manifested itself not only in the writings of liberal feminists such as Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill, advocating equal political rights for women and men, but also in campaigns for women's suffrage and parliamentary representation. It can also be discerned in the emphasis in feminist political science on voting behaviour, female candidacy, lobbying and levels of representation of women in parliaments (at all levels), and in feminist political theory on conceptions of citizenship (a term often used to encapsulate the agential nature of political subjectivity).

Radical feminism, of course, went further: it questioned the very idea that politics could be equated solely with public level, governmental, activity. Authors such as Kate Millett (1977) charged that the realm of the state was a bastion of patriarchal power. Co-opting women into formal politics (as liberal feminists proposed) would do nothing to alter the structure of patriarchy as it spread its tentacles through every aspect of life. Moreover, treating politics as confined to the public sphere obscured the fact that the private realm, far from being immune from politics as

conventionally argued, was saturated with gendered power relations, and thus with politics. As the radical feminist slogan put it: 'The personal is political.' In place of the kinds of political activities championed by liberal feminists, radical feminists advocated instead politics as direct action targeted at grassroots power relations. This included, among other things, surrounding army bases believed to contain nuclear weapons (as at Greenham Common, in the UK); establishing rape crisis centres and shelters for survivors of domestic violence; refusing sexual services to male partners and taking up lesbianism as a political stance. Radical feminism not only re-envisioned the sphere of politics (extending it to the private realm). Equally significantly it contested and transformed what could be thought of as a political issue. It *politicized* sexual relations (including prostitution and pornography), sexual orientation, the body, abortion, and reproduction.<sup>4</sup> The effect of this feminist rethinking of politics was to shift the terrain of what could be counted as political. And, of course, Marxist feminism and socialist feminism too added to this contestation of mainstream politics.

The significance of these developments cannot be underestimated. Without them, it is arguable that women would not have the same formal political privileges as men (though the actual ones may remain more elusive) and that politics would have remained confined to a narrower range of activities and issues than it now is. Such has been the change in politics that a student studying its disciplinary form today is more likely to encounter feminist ideas and discourses than one studying 20 years ago. For all this, however, these feminist developments are not quite as radical as they may first appear. The reason, I suggest, is that they still retain the same underlying logic as the accounts they critique in that both feminist and mainstream interpretations assume that politics requires a unitary subject as its guarantor. Although sensibly critiquing the masculinist nature of many conceptions of the individual, this awareness of the *political* contouring of subjectivity has not always led feminists to realize that their own account of the subject (collective or individual) may itself be a *political* construction.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in these mainstream and feminist accounts, politics is conceived in traditional fashion as a set of practices, processes or policies, tied topographically to a particular realm (public and/or private), which are capable of altering the world in some specifiable way. In Shulamith Firestone's thesis, politics is the means by which when women as a sex-class recognize their subordination they act to liberate themselves from patriarchal structures of oppression by overthrowing the means of reproduction (1970). Or, in the context of liberal feminism, politics refers, for instance, to campaigns that mobilize women to fight against sexual discrimination in the workplace by pressing for legal change. Politics in this sense is intrinsically connected, therefore, to a particular understanding of agency,

apprehended as the faculty that enables autonomous actors to transform certain practices or policies or to act self-consciously for their emancipation (political or human). No matter what the ideological position (Marxist, liberal, or feminist – whether it is radical feminist, liberal feminist, Marxist feminist or socialist feminist), the ‘politics of the modern era’ is, as Diane Elam observes, ‘anchored upon the idea of a subject’ (1994: 70).

Such is the tenacity of this assumption that, unhelpfully, it seems to have become a ‘conceptual necessity’ within much feminist discourse (Fraser, 1995a: 69). This particular configuration of the subject–politics relation, that is, has been imbued with a near unquestionable legitimacy. Diane Bell and Renate Duelli Klein thus note that the ‘identity of woman’ must be ‘the basis of political action’, for, they inquire, how else ‘can we speak if we are fragmented into so many partial and shifting identities?’ (1996: xviii; see also Thompson, 1996, 2001; Waters, 1996). Feminist politics cannot exist it seems, without a stable subject. It *alone* gives substance to the feminism that functions in its name. It provides the justification for political intervention, for woman, as a coherent (collective) entity, is the one who has suffered from discrimination/oppression, and who can recall this suffering and act to remedy it. I am not denying that the idea of ‘woman’ and her pain has mobilized many feminist campaigns including those relating to legal, social, and political change, but did these campaigns act on behalf of a pre-existing subject or did they produce a subject through their activity? Many feminists have contended that interrogating the viability of the traditional subject of feminist inquiry is tantamount to repudiating feminist politics *as such*. For such writers (discussed in more detail in Chapter 1) it de-politicizes women’s suffering, compelling them to a collective acquiescence to their situation. But does it?

In ‘Eccentric subjects: feminist theory and historical consciousness’, Teresa de Lauretis charts three moments of ‘self-conscious reflection’ within feminism (1990). I am interested in her description of the third of these.<sup>6</sup> This is the moment when four inter-related areas of feminist thought are revisioned. The subject is rethought as multiple and shifting; how to do theory is re-framed in terms of understanding intersecting relations of oppression; there is an increased awareness of ‘marginality as location, of identity as dis-identification’; and feminism becomes identified as ‘self-displacement’. It slips between the personal and the political, the social and the subjective, ‘internal and external’ (de Lauretis, 1990: 116).

Chronologically, de Lauretis’s description is especially apt for, and prescient about, feminist debates that began to take shape during the 1980s but persisted well into the 1990s. This was a time when, as I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2, feminism was faced not only with

insights from postmodern or poststructuralist thought that challenged its theoretical understanding of the nature of subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> It was also the time when the question of how to tackle the differences between women became prominent, differences (of power, privilege, location and oppression) that compromised any attempt to posit a shared history of women's experiences. *Against* and *despite* the hegemonic construction within feminism of politics as an activity in which only a stable subject can engage, then, alternative accounts began to arise to better address the issues just noted. These accounts, in varying ways, positioned the subject as an *effect* of politics; an effect generated in exclusionary and power-invested ways. This is the province of the subject-in-process, articulated by thinkers as diverse as Judith Butler, Chantal Mouffe, Donna Haraway, Diana Fuss, Shane Phelan, and many others.

De Lauretis, in her account, focuses on subjectivity. I intend, instead, to examine the subject-politics *relation*. As indicated already, the claim that politics requires a stable subject operates within certain forms of feminism, as if it has *prima facie* legitimacy. To question this is taken by them to be both against the feminist subject and against feminist politics, a heresy deemed even more pernicious when those doing the interrogating do so from positions indebted, to some degree, to poststructuralism (or postmodernism, since the two terms are often used interchangeably). This judgement is, in my view, deeply problematic. First, it denies those accounts of mobile subjectivity, which I discuss in Chapters 1, 2 and 8, which have emerged from within feminism itself *without* recourse to post-structuralism. Next, it sets up a dead-end debate between those for the subject and those against by treating the critique of the subject as a dismissal of it. As will become apparent in the next two chapters, exposing the political nature of subjectivity enables us to understand how particular versions of the subject come to be centred while others are denied.<sup>8</sup> Finally, it mistakes the nature of feminism's engagement with poststructuralism. This engagement does not lead to the depoliticization of the subject-politics relation at all but rather to its re-politicization. "Anti-postmodernist" feminism' (to borrow a descriptor from Sasha Roseneil [1999]), in other words, fails to recognize that the subject-politics relation is *political*: that the subject is a political effect (which helps, as I explain in Chapter 3, to secure other political effects). Politics and the political are thus not negated in this sense by the feminist turn to post-structuralism, I propose, but quite the opposite: they are enlivened by it.

It makes no sense in this context to ask 'what is politics?' if by this a metaphysical response is expected. There is no stable discourse of politics enabling us to say 'this is what politics or the political are.' Instead any answer to that question is itself, I propose, always already *political*; it is an attempt to determine where the boundaries between the political and the apolitical are to be set. Politics, in this sense, may well

'tenaciously resist definition', to borrow words Fuss uses in a different context (1994: 111); it may remain elusive, hard to pin down, altering its markers like a chameleon to fit differing environments. This elusiveness will not be treated, in this book at least, as a problem. It will be regarded as evidence of the effectivity of politics: its capacity to be generative, disruptive, and sometimes transformative.<sup>9</sup>

Examining the work of thinkers who, more or less explicitly, challenge the 'politics of the subject' (Elam, 1994: 70), therefore, facilitates both rethinking politics (and the political) and problematizing the connection that ties feminism to a particular conception of the subject-politics nexus. (This is a nexus that veils the complexity of the relation between elements and that cannot, as such, capture the productivity of feminist politics.) By sketching alternative versions of this relation I aim to identify a route out of a particular aporia within which feminist discourse has become confined: where the recognition of difference or specificity is taken to threaten the foundations of feminist politics. As I explain in Chapter 3, this route does not involve simply reversing the priority between the subject and politics. It requires examining the agonistic interconnections between them. To do this I return to some of the key debates that occupied feminists until the late 1990s, questions about essentialism versus non- or anti-essentialism and identity and difference. My aim is not principally to rehearse these debates, however, but to reframe them. As already indicated, however, *Beyond Identity Politics* is not a book solely devoted to competing conceptions of subjectivity. I am a political theorist by training and, in consequence, many of the concerns I have in this book are with issues traditionally pertaining to that academic discipline. I thus explore how to understand political agency, power, domination, and critique when one begins from a position that emphasizes contingency over necessity and when one sees the relation between the subject and politics as agonistic. I also evaluate how political activism plays out when politics does not require the stable unitary subject to guarantee or authorize it. Here I examine the politics of parody, radical democracy and what Phelan (1994) calls 'nonidentity politics'.

### Clarifications and Qualifications

Before I end this Introduction, I want to clarify an earlier remark. This is undeniably a book that explores feminism's utilization of poststructuralist insights (though not all the thinkers I discuss engage in such a use) and I make no apology for this. It is not, however, a book about feminism and poststructuralism if by that is meant a systematic attempt to assess what is at issue in bringing the two together: what feminism loses or gains, what poststructuralism loses or gains, whether or not feminism



is derivative of postmodernism, or what politics of authorization may be operating in this conjunction (for recent work on this, see, for example, Ahmed, 1998; Lee, 2001). These are important questions needing careful examination, but they are not my concern. What follows is rather an examination of the effects on how feminists think of politics and the political when the subject is recast as in-process, only certain versions of which result from the importation of poststructuralist insights into feminism. There is, thus, a heavy but by no means exclusive emphasis on feminist work that productively engages with certain aspects of the work of Foucault, Derrida, and to a lesser extent, Lacan. I am not concerned with whether or not these are faithful importations, whether they are loyal to their source or whether they distort it. Indeed, I doubt that they could be faithful for the very reason adduced by Sara Ahmed, that adding gender to the poststructuralist/postmodern pot 'means transforming it' (1998: 15). Forcing questions of gender into theories that conventionally ignore or marginalize them destabilizes those theories, altering their very fabric. But it also subtly transforms feminism and it is these transformed *feminisms* that interest me. Although I am extremely sympathetically disposed towards them, it should not be assumed, as will become apparent, that I offer a blanket endorsement of them.

*Beyond Identity Politics* is, more specifically, a text concerned with how questions about politics, subjectivity, power and difference were theorized in the Anglophone world (predominantly in North America, the UK and Australia). As such, there is only minimal discussion of the works of, for instance, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva or Hélène Cixous who not only critically engaged with 'poststructuralism' but were also instrumental in its constitution. Poststructuralism has not, however, been the only source of transformation for feminism: psychoanalysis, science fiction and cultural history have also affected its contours and contents. These too have directed feminists away from the idea of a stable subject. In this respect there is a second exclusion in the text and this concerns the interchange between feminism and psychoanalysis, which is covered only partially. The reasons for this are twofold. First, there is a simple matter of space. Second, and more importantly, to ask questions about the intersection between politics and the psyche, while of irrefutable importance, would take this book in a different direction than the one I wish to follow here; hence my limited engagement with psychoanalytic material.

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### The Structure of the Book

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There are two broad areas that concern me in this book. First, the alternative accounts of feminist subjectivity that have emerged as a result of the immanent critique of traditional conceptualizations of the subject in



feminism. Second, the rethinking of politics that is contingent upon and productive of these alternative figurations. Obviously, in a single book, I could not hope to chart in detail all the nuances within competing accounts of this relation. So, what I offer is a selective reading of some of the most influential of this material. What this means in practice is that I am evaluating *examples* of how particular issues have been approached without claiming comprehensiveness for what is covered. Bearing this caveat in mind, what follows is a summary of the book's structure.

I begin, in Chapter 1, by mapping various different accounts of the subject-in-process. My aim, as just noted, is not to present a complete chart of feminist accounts of subjectivity or even of the subject-in-process; rather, it is to plot some influential theoretical trajectories within feminist debates about the subject. So, I examine five accounts of subjectivity: the subject as *mobile*, *lack*, *deferred*, *constituted* and *performative*. I then consider what these reformulations of subjectivity portend, in general, for thinking politically. My purpose is to sketch some of the 'new lines of flight' (to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari [1987]) discernible within feminist work on the relation between the subject and politics. One of the impulses behind the idea of subjects as processual, and which motivated, in part, the turn by some feminists to poststructuralism relates to questions of difference and specificity. In Chapter 2, therefore, I consider two broad trends in accounting for difference. The first examines the production of specific differences at particular times in determinate locales; the second revolves around the idea of certain images or concepts that act as metaphors for the plural nature of subjectivity. In this instance, I examine the *mestiza* both as an expression of concrete difference and as an allegory of difference in general. I also consider the question of the politics of identity.

The focus of Chapter 3 is essentialism, an issue that has polarized feminists. In this chapter, I reformulate this debate by rejecting the oppositional logic that *appears* to underpin it and by recasting essentialism/anti-essentialism as an agonistic (rather than binary) relation, and one that is historically inflected. To do so, I deploy the notions of *constation* and *performativity* in considering subjectivity. I begin my examination by exploring the historical conditions of production of subjectivity in its essentialist mode, through a consideration of the work of bell hooks. Re-examining the debate around 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak, 1988), I show that essentialism and anti-essentialism are co-implicated.

The next five chapters take up problems of politics relating to subjectivity. I address questions of power and domination in Chapter 4. I evaluate whether it is possible to offer an account of *global* structures of oppression, subordination and inequality while drawing on post-structuralist ideas. To this end, I consider Teresa Ebert's theory of