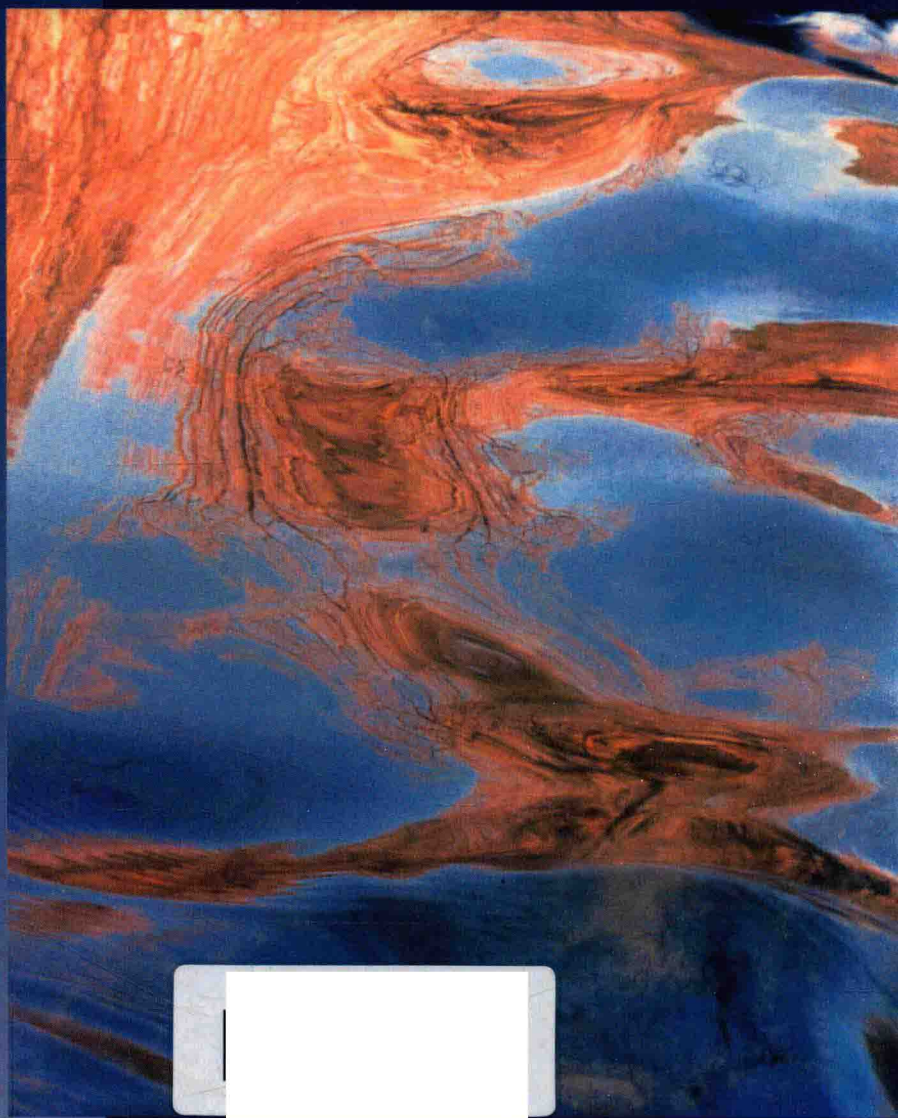


Feminist Imagination



Vikki Bell

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Genealogies in Feminist Theory

Vikki Bell



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Vikki Bell
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AFFIRMING FEMINISM

[T]he question of whether or not a position is right, coherent or interesting is, in this case, less informative than why it is that we come to occupy and defend the territory that we do, from what it promises to protect us. (Judith Butler, 1995: 128)

Not 'what can I know?' but rather 'how have my questions been produced?' . . . Not 'what ought I to do?' but rather 'how have I been situated to experience the real? How have exclusions operated in delineating the realm of obligation for me?' Not 'what may I hope for?' but rather 'what are the struggles in which I am engaged? How has my aspiration been defined?' (James Bernauer, 1995: 270-1)

What does it mean to affirm oneself as a feminist? Of what does a 'yes' to feminism consist? The privileged task of writing about one's own political affiliations is one that entails not simply a statement of commitments, and not even that, but a statement of commitment to reworking, genealogically, what one believes. Such a proposition is, of course, a result in turn of a commitment to a particular theoretical stance. And it is one that in a sense I would rather not hold. It would be easier not to have read Foucault, not to place oneself in a position in which every statement is rendered under the scrutiny of Foucault's re-posing of the Kantian questions. In terms of a commitment to feminism, the questions run: How have contemporary concerns about gender been produced? How have feminist aspirations been defined? How have exclusions operated in the realm of feminist obligation? But read Foucault I have, and thus the work presented here has as its initial impulse one that makes wonderous at the same time as it makes worrisome the formation of political 'communities'.

This book is therefore about turning an affirmation of feminism toward the feminist political imagination itself, in contemplation of the very shape and forms of feminist arguments, affiliations and aspirations. Introducing his book *Present Hope*, Andrew Benjamin has written recently 'philosophy is constituted by an act of engagement with its own history. Engagement can take many forms. Here, and in contrast to a simple repetition of the Same, it is present as the process of *reworking*' (1997: 1, emphasis added). Feminism is more than philosophical; feminism has been an articulation, a set of demands, forces and strategies, the successes of which I for one have inherited and benefited from, since it has also been a generational gift. But when I say 'I am a feminist' I am fully aware that any statement of belonging, of aspiration and of commitment is necessarily a mobilisation of both a political *and* a philosophical imagination. And of what does the gift of

feminism consist if not a certain bundle of ways of thinking historically, ways of seeing, ways of hoping? It is of feminist theory that I write in this book, and it is a reworking, genealogically, in the sense of an engagement with the gift of feminist imagination.

Why suggest a mode of engagement that takes a genealogical form? Why consider that a commitment to feminism involves a commitment to genealogical thought?

Genealogy, in Nietzsche's sense, was meant to help one understand the nature of one's commitment to the value that motivates inquiry into that same value. Giving one's commitment a history does not necessarily dislodge that commitment, but it gives some insight into its formation, its disparity, contingencies, its becoming, into what has defined it, and hence, in part, defines oneself. For Nietzsche, genealogy is tragic in that the hold that certain commitments (especially, for him, certain religious truths) have upon us are in some ways fateful to who we are (Havas, 1995: 179); while we innocently assume them to be achievements, they can be given histories that are not only contingent developments but also are infused with the will to power (Nilson, 1998; Havas, 1995). In terms of feminist commitment, my engagement with the development of a body of feminist theorising is motivated less by an attempt to reveal the machinations of a will to power, and more in general terms by a commitment to understand the 'yes'. I am writing less along Nietzschean lines, to trace the 'will to power', and more attempting to follow in Foucault's genealogical footsteps, but in a direction that begins from my interest in feminist theory and its genealogical connections. The ensuing questions are such as those posed by the opening quotations of this chapter. What is it that motivates that affirmation? What is the resultant realm of obligation? From what does it protect? How have I been situated by that affirmation?

Thus genealogy is an attempt to historicise values, sentiments and modes of argument in the sense of seeking their relationship to past events and concerns. In this work, I am not attempting a comprehensive genealogy of feminist commitment, a task that would be beyond my scope, and which would be an ambitious task indeed. What I consider in the essays that constitute this book relates to specific aspects of debates that have taken place within feminist theory, or to specific thinkers. Nor am I engaged in autobiography, which would be a genealogy of my particular 'yes'. There is, nevertheless, a 'politics of location' involved in the specific ways in which I have reflected upon feminist debates and theory. My location – British academic feminism – is certainly an important factor in directing my attention. Moreover, the direction in which I pursue the genealogies, the links I follow and connections I make, are also informed by my location and concerns.

And while there is a certain naivety in explaining, or excusing, one's writing according to identity or location – as Gillian Rose has written, *apropos* the suggestion that she might write 'as a woman' or 'as a Jew', 'if I knew who or what I was I would not write' (1993: ix) – still my attention is

no doubt channelled to certain issues and problematics (in particular, I have been concerned to think about the connections between feminist theory and racism) that are correlated with where I write from. Exploring certain genealogical paths which are biased toward that concern has taken me to other unfamiliar locations, but in the main the focus has been biased to the links and connections between Europe and the United States. Furthermore, the way in which I argue for a form of genealogical understanding of feminist debates is not *determined* by my location, but that is necessarily shaped by the space that I inhabit, so that I would tend to agree with Spivak when she suggests that 'no one can articulate the space she herself inhabits. My attempt has been to describe this relatively ungraspable space in terms of what might be its history' (1990: 68). I have become interested, as will become clear, in how the development of 'second wave' feminist theory has been shaped by the concerns with thinking racism in the post-Second World War period, when the reverberations of articulating belongings have the shadow of fascism and racist destruction cast over them.¹ The affirmation of feminism, therefore, is reworked as a series of specific genealogies that seek to show how 'race' and questions of racism have been placed within the feminist imagination as it has developed in feminist theory. I have kept my investigations relatively specific and they are, in the main, based around relatively close readings of particular texts. They are, therefore, partial in many senses of the term.

* * *

One has to maintain a certain humility whenever one speaks of political communities, of any community for that matter, as an academic theoretician. Such humility is one that resists the temptation to close the text with statements that assume the position of greater political insight simply by virtue of reflection. The tenability of that assumption has long gone. Theoreticians, like politicians, cease to be interesting, or to offer any hope for the future, whenever they imagine their ideas to encapsulate all that there is to say. Foucault made a statement to this effect (in relation to the Iran-Iraq war):

There are more ideas on earth than intellectuals imagine. And these ideas are more active, stronger, more resistant, more passionate than 'politicians' think . . .

I I certainly did not intend this book to become 'about' fascism, and, indeed, I still would wish to assert that no part of it is, in any real sense, analytic of such political formations. The focus is always on feminism, and particularly a rumination on the areality of the political imagination that enables and informs feminist thought. However, it is the case that in writing a book which addresses the above problematics, I became more and more drawn into a discussion of theorists from a certain era, the post-Second World War period, who were involved and influenced, some profoundly, some less clearly, by the changing nature of the political contexts in which they wrote. How are we to imagine feminism as a movement of the twentieth century if we do not see its relation and response to other political visions that have animated this century's political movements and moments?

Ideas do not rule the world. But it is because the world has ideas (and because it constantly produces them) that it is not passively ruled by those who are its leaders or those who would like to teach it, once and for all, what it must think. (in Eribon, 1991: 282)

This book begins from the premise that such a position should not be feared; indeed, any sense of danger conjured up by intellectual engagement without the possibility of political solutions must be confronted and understood, rather than altering one's theoretical stance to make it more 'practically' productive. Several debates have surrounded the work of Foucault on this point, for many have found cause to argue that Foucault disappoints. In a search for something more, for a prophetic moment, for some form of guidance, the term 'political' is frequently served (up) as the final accusation: What are the political implications? How are we to become political, remain political, be effectively political? Even, where is the political? Noting that Foucault's refusal to engage with such questions in his written intellectual texts did not prevent him from engaging with politics through other activities in his life – witness the 'humanist' impulses, the roles of reluctant mentor as well as the 'mistakes' of that life – some have sought to sketch the implicit political trajectory of Foucault. I am not convinced that such a route promises much. I am more interested in why genealogical modes of investigation have become cast either as apolitical or as nihilistic. Genealogy is not passive; its engagement is one that is attentive, and attentive to the detail of the present in a way that more straightforwardly 'political' perspectives are not, seeing only the same struggles reproduced in every location. A history of the present suggests a commitment, broadly speaking, to a present that surrounds the commentator, a commitment that is also a decision to be alive to the historical. Agnes Heller has made such a point:

In the absence of historical consciousness, one can live in the present without choosing it. But then, one does not live historically, or rather, one's historical existence remains (or becomes) unconscious. Ever since historical existence became a matter of reflection, the philosopher's scorn turned against the man who lived only in the present, and justly so. (1993: 223)

One of the most controversial aspects of Foucault's work was the sense in which his genealogical reflections on the present avoided the impulse to locate, judge and denounce the political enemy. Frequently, Foucault's attention was on the modes of argumentation that surround and contest the chimerical source of power. His concern with monitoring the ways in which the politics of resistance are enunciated and practised on the 'inside' of power relations – a statement in danger of slipping into the most banal and least constructive of academic exchanges – needs to be kept close to the sheer historical and contemporary weight that such a statement carries. In addressing what follows from this argument, one begins a commentary on those political issues which are our most pressing. Thus the string of questions: Why do we argue like *that*? What are the connotations of imagining that our world functions in *this* way? How are we imagining the

target of our political struggles? From whence did the imagination of our utopias arise? Such questions pull into the frame a set of questions that have been, and are being, debated and fought around the world over. What notion of citizenship should one mobilise around in the contemporary world, given the genealogies of the concept 'citizen'? What mode of democracy, given its display of imperfections? What ethical criterion, given their crisis? Which affinities?

The invitation to assess critically one's own political affiliations, the modes of constitution and compromise, the forms of rhetoric and argument that are deployed in the name of resistance, is also an invitation to consider the ways in which political imagination is presented, is 'made present'. Denise Riley has written: 'The question of the politics of identity could be rephrased as a question of rhetoric. Not so much of whether there was for a particular moment any truthful underlying rendition of "women" or not, but of what the proliferations of addresses, descriptions and attributions were doing' (1992: 122). The assessment that this book represents is an attempt to take up this approach in its specific context; to consider moments in the feminist imagination with an attentiveness to the modes of address and argument, rather than as it were simply entering into the debates in order to push specific political or theoretical points.

There is nothing obvious about the form and formulations that are practised as politics. The tracing of what counts as, feels or looks like resistance – the logic, calculations, and aporias of its operations – is an attempt to open up for examination the conditions of possibility of the political landscape. Some of the most imaginative and complicated strategies of resistance are performed in times of war amidst violence and uncertainty. But equally there are styles of contestation that are enacted in the most mundane and routine situations of everyday lives, and these too are both political and imaginative. Between the bloody and the everyday, moreover, there are all the various ways in which political involvement is articulated and put to work. Attentive to the historical twists and turns that enable these articulations, the exercise of questioning the political present is not necessarily searching for a telos that will enable a movement and moment beyond that present. The study of conceptions of the political and of utopian visions does not in itself require the offering of a critique that stems from a different alternative imagination; that would be a different exercise, one that battles at the same level of abstraction as the focus of one's attention.

The alternative vision of feminism is a display of an imaginative faculty; but while it is 'about' the future, it is in the present, and, therefore, open to historical and genealogical understanding. Feminism has been made present, in both the sense of gifted and actualised, in my life, in my work, in this book. It offers a way of thinking that is, certainly, political. But it is not merely directive, and it involves all kinds of modes of understandings, often conflictual, about how the world works. One of the tasks of this book is to think longer about some parts of that understanding, because in saying 'yes' to feminism, I commit myself to a form of political awareness,

while at the same time I am intellectually obligated to ponder my 'yes' and to think genealogically about that political commitment, for partaking in feminism involves a partaking in marking out boundaries. In the course of his discussion of Derridean thought, Jeff Bennington argues that a 'yes' is not a simple affirmation, but is '*already* a promise of its own repetition, in anticipated memory of itself, divided in its act just as was the signature (itself a way of saying yes to what one signs and to the fact of appending one's name to it) . . . "Yes" opens a future in which one will again say "yes"' (Bennington and Derrida, 1993: 199). Feminists might disagree with such a statement taken out of its context, given the history of sexual violence against women, but declaring oneself feminist is, within 'our' own ranks, considered an affiliation that has a constancy about it. Declaring oneself a feminist is a risky manoeuvre because all statements of affiliation are just that. In the 'yes' to the appellation 'feminist', what does one sign up to repeat?

I am suggesting, therefore, that the repetition that one engages in is a process of involvement in feminism 'becoming historical', and that being alive to how feminist thought sits in relation to past ways of thinking about the phenomena that constitute feminism's concerns is not merely an exercise in thinking about the past, but is simultaneously an indication of a contemporary commitment. It is both 'historical' and futural, for the commitment is to a continuity that operates against time, that battles with the possibility that these commitments may evaporate, and that time will let them be forgotten. In thinking about how the present political imagination might sit within the concerns of this century that has belonged to it, and to 'us' – that is, in thinking genealogically – I am attempting to consider the relationship of the feminist imagination not mundanely to 'its history', but rather to its temporality. Jean-Luc Nancy, whose provocative work I employ in the next chapter, has put the point succinctly: 'History, in its happening, is what we are never able to be present to, and *this* is our existence and our "we". Our "we" is constituted by this nonpresence, which is not a presence at all, but which is the happening as such' (1993a: 160). Feminism is becoming historic, and this both in the sense that it has been a significant force of the twentieth century *and*, more profoundly, in the sense that in its happening it cannot be grasped, giving 'feminists' the enunciative ground for saying 'we', even as the historic quality of what occurs is never present, and never appears as such. The 'we' of feminism here, therefore, is used ironically, referring not to a real, felt sentiment of belonging that is shared by any person declaring themselves 'feminist', but being used more in the sense that feminism is 'becoming historic', that 'we' are becoming constituted by it, and our engagement with 'feminism' is one that necessarily takes the form of an engagement with a non-presence. And this is not to be bemoaned, for to pretend that feminism were simply and merely 'of' the present would be just that, a pretence. The choice to think genealogically – with the attitude of the genealogist – about the feminist political imagination, therefore, emerges out of this conviction that the

present feminist political imagination in the specificity of its presentness is formed and informed by the past, by the traces of the past that remain within feminist theory, conceptually, or as motivations to think in certain ways, as well as by the way in which the past is remembered, the connections that are deemed relevant and irrelevant. It is with these issues that this book is concerned.

Sometimes, including in Nancy's work, there is a suggestion that a commitment to political community involves forms of violence, in the sense of the textual violence of excluding or refusing some modes of participation, but also in the sense of the violence that is and has been perpetrated in the name of communities. I would not wish to suggest that a commitment to the imagined political community of feminism should be abandoned simply because it can be thought of as 'community', since I would not wish to assert that all communities can be simply understood as, by definition, exclusionary and therefore to be dispensed with.² However, the appearance of several philosophical attempts to unravel the complexities that praise of solidarity and communities has, and has had, with violent events does give pause for thought. And, indeed, one of the main themes of this book is how boundaries have been placed within the feminist political imagination, affecting the way in which the necessary exclusivity of a political imagination has been shaped.

The task of mapping the feminist political imagination, as I am thinking it here, is thus deeply entwined with this concern with the violence of making 'community'. Much recent feminist work has shown how, historically, the centrepiece of feminism – Woman – cannot be posited as simply a matter of bodily difference; for 'Woman' is a discursive construction, entrance to which has been a matter of conflict as the boundaries of the feminine have been, often fiercely, erected and defended. Woman, as an enunciative position and as an ontological basis of community, has been violently policed, exactly because its boundaries are mobile and contestable, and this is the case even within feminism itself (as the much-discussed work of Riley (1988), hooks (1982) and Mohanty (1993) illustrate). It is no longer news that the 'feminist community' itself can operate, and has done so, along certain lines of exclusion. There is a growing literature which confirms that the feminist political imagination is one which has, even with its ostensibly expansive vision and ambitions, been no stranger to exclusions.

The possibility of an inclusive feminist imagination is confronted with the history of exclusions that have operated between women and within feminism. Historical investigations have illustrated how women have been differently placed in various power constellations, in colonial settings, for example, or in contemporary societies, such that the representation of 'women's interests' strains to accommodate the different – if 'intertwined',

2 Boyarin and Boyarin (1993), whose work is discussed in Chapter 5, make a similar point. They argue that Jews seem to be denied, because any existing community seems to be denied, positivity by Nancy.

as Said (1994) phrases it – histories of all women (Ware, 1992; Caraway, 1991; Jayawardena, 1995). The now classic *Ain't I a Woman?* (bell hooks, 1982), raised these issues in relation to the history of feminist movements in the United States, illustrating the sense in which feminism deployed an imagination which could not encompass all subjects who were nevertheless positioned in relation to it (see also Sanchez-Eppeler, 1988). In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, moreover, hooks wrote explicitly about the 'exclusionary' aspects of contemporary feminist thought and practice that operate on several different levels; she argued the dangers of the reification of feminist thought into an ideology, one that worked against its intentions, to stifle discussion and different modes of seeing the world (1984: 9–10). There, hooks explored the notion that feminist thought must confront the risk it runs of becoming ideological and thereby limiting the fields of obligation for feminism, suggesting that struggle against patriarchal modes of thought and sexist modes of oppression might be better understood and confronted by maintaining an openness of conviction, a 'radical openness', in voicing critique and in forming communities of resistance (1984: 149).

The tasks of representing 'women' and of knowing who the community is that feminism represents have become, and rightly so, vexed questions for feminist theory (see, e.g., Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Spivak, 1988, 1990). The impact of feminist historical investigations, as well as the feminist involvement in debates crudely gathered under the rubrics of 'post-structuralism' and postmodernism,³ has meant that the interrogation of the meaning of feminism has taken place on the historical and organisational level as well as on the level of epistemological and philosophical considerations. Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman* (1988) and Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking* (1989) are examples of the kind of interrogation that feminists have made of the epistemological and philosophical questions that arise when one confronts the exclusions that can operate within the feminist political imagination. These influential works focus on the concept of essentialism, the notion that in some way there is something essential about womanhood that unites all women,⁴ in detailing the dangers of the assumption that sexual difference can override the differences *between* women.

In short, as a result of various factors, feminist theory has come to the 'end of innocence', to employ the words of Jane Flax (1993), wherever the subject position of 'woman' or the existence of a commonality is concerned. Feminist attempts to develop 'innocent knowledge' have predominantly been attempts to pursue models inherited from elsewhere – be they Marxist, social scientific or liberal political – in the belief that it is possible to discover 'some sort of truth which can tell us how to act in the world in ways that benefit or are for the (at least ultimate) good of all' (Flax, 1993:

3 To speak of the impact of post-structuralism or postmodernism on feminism here is to enter a conceit that 'forgets' the sense in which feminism has been instrumental in bringing about the condition of 'postmodernity' (see Huyssen, 1990).

4 There are several different versions of essentialism (see Fuss, 1989; Fergusson, 1993: 81–91).