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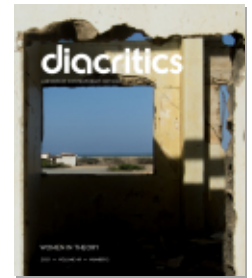
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## In Defense of Feminist Abstraction

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# **IN DEFENSE OF FEMINIST ABSTRACTION**

ANNA KORNBLUH

The formulation “women in theory” that collocates this special issue inscribes the classic problem of the concrete and the abstract. “Theory” is seeing of seeing, the meta-level of knowing, “ab-straction” as the “movement away” from the immediate, the self-evident, the self. “Women” are the concrete resistance to theory: situated embodiment, phenomenal selves, particular exceptions to the universal. The conspicuous oxymoron “feminist theory” addresses itself to this problem, siding with the movement away from movement away: subtracting from the abstracting, folding back to the concrete, verging toward a more politically righteous epistemic modality. In objecting to objectivity, impersonality, and universality, women in theory enact the void: what belies, evades, and disrupts—not only theory, but also conceptuality, and even signification itself. As Luce Irigaray inimitably insists of this void, “the feminine . . . is the lack . . . that might cause the ultimate destruction, the splintering, the break in their systems of presence, of re-presentation, and representation.”<sup>1</sup> Instead of presence and representation, instead of phallogocentric argument, instead of the cogs of telos, women in theory bestow lack and formlessness. Women are affect, experience, materiality, mystique, difference. Women in theory aggregate these subductions provisionally, crazy-quiltly, thus curating standpoint epistemology and *écriture féminine* as the situated knowing and perpetual writing that continually sacralize particularization, concretization, differentiation. Women pink theory not for a concept nor a canon, but in a preposition, through a position: a position of difference and exception, a position that has been elevated into a method. Both the constituency “women in theory” and the tendency “feminist theory” in this respect pre-figure and consummate otherwise disparate trajectories in queer antinomianism, rote deconstruction, vitalist materialism, and proliferating nihilisms: theory as abnegation of abstraction, theory as declination. In this way, the now pervasive vocation of undoing, unmaking, unbuilding (“burn it all down”) attests to a triumphant, if tacit, feminization of theory as such—even though “women in theory” remains a “special issue.”

Of course, #notallwomen: this schema of women in theory perpetrates various coarse errors of conflation, courting complaint at every phrase’s turn. There will have been particular women who aimed at something else. Yet deliberate synopsis of this type aids the suggestion that amaranthine resistance to theory, boundless selfwriting, and abiding eschewal of abstractions has not capacitated feminist emancipation. Via that suggestion, this essay speculates that in these appalling times it is both necessary and possible to formulate a feminist abstraction. A feminist theory—synthesis and generalization, values and norms—can do more than magnify self-representations and multiply dissolutions: it can tender an affirmative integral idea of how the social relations and mode of production should be structured for more flourishing than currently on offer. Integrations and imperatives usually are not welcome channels of feminist theorizing, but after all this time perhaps women in theory could come to subtract from reified subtraction.

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Let us begin with a historical coinciding. The past fifty years—the ultimate epoch of feminist knowledge generation—overlap almost exactly with a crisis of social reproduction that has immiserated women, albeit unevenly. The falling rate of profit in the sphere of production has been redressed by responsabilizing families for optimizing human capital and wrenching care and service labor. In this same historical arc, feminists have continually practiced feminism as the politics of difference, and penned feminist theory as the liquescing of theory's compounds. The more systematic the contradictions of privatization have become, the more vernacularized and situated the feminist genres of selfwriting and autotheory have become; the more total the domination of the species and the planet, the more our art of theory has treasured detotalization.

Acceding to a common signifier, accepting a resonant voice, agreeing to an adequate composite—the intellectual unions necessary for action—have been construed as acts of violence, domination, colonization. Properly feminist theory pursues anti-theory; the redemptive vector is to speak for oneself.

Chandra Mohanty: "Feminist writings . . . discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world . . . assumptions of . . . universality characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work . . . in this process of homogenization and systematization of oppression of women . . . power is exercised in much recent feminist discourse."<sup>2</sup>

Jacqueline Rose: "No feminism should claim to speak on behalf of all women."<sup>3</sup>

Michele Le Doeuff: "To be a feminist . . . is to be a woman who does not leave others to think for her."<sup>4</sup>

Adrienne Rich: "Women have always understood the struggle against free-floating abstraction . . . to say 'the body' lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say 'my body' reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions."<sup>5</sup>

Every woman speaks, of and from her own body, in her own voice, her truth.

These axioms—that representing others does violence and that presenting the self does ethics—have been elaborated into epistemologies emphasizing phenomenality, situatedness, and sublime entanglement. Nancy Harstock configures the feminist standpoint as one which "expresses female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of relations."<sup>6</sup> Sandra Harding revalorizes partiality: "Standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemic, scientific and political advantage."<sup>7</sup> Patricia Hill Collins formidably defines "experience as a criterion on meaning"<sup>8</sup> in arguing that "the significance of individual uniqueness, personal expressiveness, and empathy in African-American communities resembles the importance that some feminist analyses place on women's 'inner voice,'"<sup>9</sup> and that "unique standpoints become the most 'objective' truths. Each group speaks from its own

standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. . . . Partiality, and not universality, is the condition of being heard.”<sup>10</sup> June Jordan articulates how a standpoint materializes in syntax: “Our language . . . abhors all abstraction, or anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now/the truth of the person who is speaking or listening.”<sup>11</sup> Feminist knowing embraces self-presentation as the aesthetic, epistemic, and ethical remit of women in theory. Seyla Benhabib’s famous correction to liberalism’s concept of the universal subject thus alights upon feminist praxis as the *narrativization* of situated difference: “I as a concrete, finite, embodied individual shape and fashion the circumstances of my birth and family, linguistic, cultural, and gender identity into a coherent narrative that stands as my life’s story.”<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Walker concurs that “personal stories are the most political . . . because they build empathy and compassion, and are infinitely more accessible than more academic tracts.”<sup>13</sup> First-person narrative and autowriting become the generic instantiation of the philosophical objection. And Sara Ahmed sums up: “Autobiographical modes of criticism . . . [address] the difficulty of representation: how to speak of oneself without assuming that one can speak for others.”<sup>14</sup>

Such emphasis on first-person narrative as the feminist rejoinder to theoretical abstraction has consequences for theory that are both conceptual and generic. Conceptually, feminist theory rejects theory’s alleged denial of difference, impugning the possibility of truth claims in the third person as not only undesirable tools in the project of emancipation, but as themselves weapons of domination. Naomi Schor nicely assesses: “Universalism . . . has been endowed within the context of feminism with the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion.”<sup>15</sup> Linda Zerilli thus finds “the result of these critiques of representation has been to strike universalism from the feminist theoretical agenda, to assume that the very idea of the universal can no longer be entertained.”<sup>16</sup> The resultant project of unlimited differentiation entails, Hortense Spillers recently noted, “proliferating a vertiginous gigue of virtually unique porous individual identities (while) common ground . . . appears to have become an undesirable, even a defunct, idea.”<sup>17</sup> In place of any common arises the nominalist endeavor of unceasingly establishing one’s own right to speak; indeed for Judith Butler feminist theory ought be understood as nothing other than this contest:

If feminism presupposes that “women” designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. I would argue that the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory.<sup>18</sup>

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Political analyses of the world, political demands upon it—collective, cohesive enunciations of how things should be arranged for broader benefit—melt under the blazing gaze of woman, who in turn spends her time in unfinishable colloquy with sisters of infinite facets.

Generically, rejecting abstraction has meant autobiographical crenulations of theory, a trend that Nancy K. Miller approvingly summarized already in 1991 as a “proliferation of autobiographical or personal criticism”<sup>19</sup> and that reigns resplendent in our present: lifewriting sublated as autotheory, rewarded with critical accolades, syllabus prominence, and high sales figures continuous with the unprecedented dominance of the contemporary literature marketplace by memoir, personal essay, and first-person narration.<sup>20</sup> Recent feminist darlings include Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, Sara Ahmed’s *Living A Feminist Life*, Colin Dayan’s *In the Belly of Her Ghost*, Roxane Gay’s *Hunger*, Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake*, Rebecca Solnit’s *Recollection of My Nonexistence*.

As this market rhyme suggests, the trajectory of personalization in feminist theory since the 1970s has been overdetermined by the political economy of privatization. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, economic restructuring in the anglophone world and especially the U.K. and U.S. has sculpted every aspect of social life to the model of market competition, forging new frontiers in reconceiving human being as human capital. Biopolitical subjugation and the intensification of social reproductive labor as a result of macroeconomic privatization parallels the ascension of feminist theory as echolalic lifewriting. The context of channeling wealth upward by defunding public institutions (including universities, where theory-making can be nurtured), slashing corporate and upper-income bracket tax rates, and commodifying the commons and the body suggests that feminist political goals have not been advanced by feminism’s repudiation of theory or of speaking for another. Women in theory have been driven by a repetition compulsion to enunciate in personal voice why there can be no theory of women, and in the process have enjoyed an intellectual and academic heyday that exactly tracks with a historical plunge in women’s material conditions.

The sidelining of emancipation inferable from this track is baked into the project of anti-theory feminist theory. As the philosopher Olúfémi Táiwò recently argued, standpoint epistemology begets norms and practices of “epistemic deference” like injunctions to testify and to believe, to center and to listen, good impulses with moral import, but because they are most often practically enacted in spaces and institutions defined by a relative exclusivity in the grand scheme of money, power, and safety (academic departments, publication venues, presidential cabinets, corporate echelons), these norms and their moralistic veneer “can actually work counter to marginalized groups’ interests” since “it entrenches a politics unbefitting of anyone fighting for freedom rather than for privilege, for collective liberation rather than mere parochial advantage.”<sup>21</sup> Women in theory have made subtraction rapturous. But in form and content the ensuing tradition has centered and authenticated the experiences of a global elite while giving the impression of justly according overdue attention and righteously dismantling frameworks of abstraction even as it confounds those discursive frameworks for more material structures of exploitation

and exclusion. In so avidly renouncing the mediations of theory, women in theory discredit the abstractions, totalizations, and meanings that could scaffold collective determinations of social alternatives.

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Is there a different feminist difference, a different way for women in theory? Is there an approach to the knowing of knowing that moves away from the privacy of own voices, and lays claim to speaking for more than one's self? Women in theory have repeatedly asserted that theory harms, that generalizations obscure, that universals oppress. But maybe something else is true: abstractions also liberate.<sup>22</sup>

"Abstraction" foregrounds the crucial capacity of "moving away": proceeding asymptotically out of private interests toward a general horizon, proceeding constructively out of immanentized experience toward mediations. Precisely because it is so counterintuitive to the feminist tradition, the notion of abstraction might dynamically redirect women in theory today. A feminist conjugation of emancipatory abstraction—a defense of abstraction against feminist objections, for feminist purposes—involves the public vector of invoking a shared vision of the world, extending a joint analysis of social relations, tendering common commitments to objective improvements. It involves the venture to reason: arguing from a ground other than experience, moving away from proprietary phenomenality, composing a frame of resonance for collective values. It involves theory, speculative velocity uprooted from the solely existent. It involves the risk of imagination, of metaphorizing, composing, and building.

Feminist abstraction lurks in very recent work from Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Batthacharya, Jodi Dean, Nancy Fraser, Jennifer Nash, Sylvia Wynter, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. Efforts to affirm generalization and speaking in the third person or the first-person plural redirect feminism, as Wynter has it, "to demand a now entirely new (because non-exclusivist) meta-answer to the question of who we are as human . . . to thereby grasp the hitherto unknowable conception of human freedom that is to be now imperatively realized."<sup>23</sup> This expanse of freedom animates Nash's reimagining of Black feminism *After Intersectionality*, which starkly critiques the "defensive" and "proprietary" logics of epistemic privilege. Nash illustrates that "ownership as a primary model for conducting black feminist inquiry" conflicts with the "anticaptivity project" that should center it.<sup>24</sup> She argues instead for "other ways of being black feminist and doing black feminist labor in the academy that eschew defensiveness and its toxicity."<sup>25</sup> In pursuit of anti-ownership paradigms, Dean constructs forms of commonality, generic categories like "the party" and "the comrade" tethered in shared goals that unite disparate individuals in active pursuit of something outside their experience. As she writes: "The comrade [is] a generic figure for the political relation between those on the same side of a political struggle. Comrades are those who tie themselves together instrumentally, for a common purposes: *If we want*

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to win—and we have to win—we must act together.”<sup>26</sup> Just as Dean formalizes a relation of those who articulate a project together, who hold out a goal beyond selfcare, and hold others to the standard of acting toward that goal, the recent reconstitution of “feminism” as “feminism for the 99%” moves beyond lifewriting to collective demands and operative totalizations. In their impid, bold, comprehensive new book *Feminism for the 99%*, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhatthacharya, and Nancy Fraser declare within the first pages their willingness to speak as a “we” representative of “humankind,” which is less the efflux of their co-authorship (though that collaboration is important) than the necessary signifier of their convocative politics. They assert that “we find ourselves at a fork in the road, and our choice bears extraordinary consequences for humankind. . . . Will we continue to pursue ‘equal opportunity domination’ while the planet burns? Or will we reimagine gender justice in an anticapitalist form—one that leads beyond the present crisis to a new society?”<sup>27</sup>

These insurgently abstract feminisms surely differ among themselves, yet they importantly coalesce a contrast not only with liberal feminism (nor only with Fraser’s own earlier positions against universalism<sup>28</sup>) but also with the reigning lifestyle-feminist autotheory that culminates feminist concretude. The “we” signifies something more than the “I”; it does the work of risking synthesis: these insistent differences, these commanding visions move not towards dissolutionism but union. The feminist writing of difference can reverberate beyond a thousand voices each singing her own stylized signature lyric, effecting rather a united chorus who rings out the liberatory difference of rebuilding universality. Real difference inheres in dividing from the opponent of our common: the 1% excepted from the 99%. This is the difference Barbara Smith, the queer Black feminist among several original authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement, evokes in her essay explaining why the feminist choice in the presidential primary field was a man: “He is committed to fighting for regular working people, which is most of us.”<sup>29</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor upholds this “most of us” as the “solidarity” that should be the lasting legacy of the Combahee River Collective, disarticulated from identitarianism,<sup>30</sup> adding that “solidarity is hard. It usually requires struggle, the struggle to pick up someone else’s burden as your own, to see someone’s suffering as your own.”<sup>31</sup> This other difference—the difference not among infinite varieties of lushly-served women but between the masses and their rulers, this difference not of speaking in one’s own voice about one’s own body but of picking up someone else’s burden and acting in common—this difference is the antagonism in the social field that is actually available for political determination and for coherent representation.

Feminist theory could set this other task of mobilizing abstractions that formulate the social contradiction against the forces of degradation and extraction, and propose something positively delineated as “less worse”—a task worthier than the decadent multiplication of stylized self-narration. It could pursue speculative movement. It could declare: the impersonal is political. It could compose flourishing as a positive value. Then, theory would proffer itself *as* itself: a way of seeing above merely phenomenal seeing, a mediation beyond the immediate, a projective framework for making judgements, a committed composition for illuminating action, an emancipatory abstraction. Then, “women in theory” would no longer name subtractive stepsisters, but rather gather givers of synthesis.



# Notes

- 1 Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 50.
- 2 Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 334.
- 3 Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, ix.
- 4 Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, 29.
- 5 Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," 215.
- 6 Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint," 303.
- 7 Harding, Introduction to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, 7–8.
- 8 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 258.
- 9 Collins, 264.
- 10 Collins, 270.
- 11 Jordan, *On Call*, 129.
- 12 Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other," 89.
- 13 Walk, *To Be Real*, xxxvii.
- 14 Ahmed, *Differences that Matter*, 196.
- 15 Schor, *Bad Objects*, 46.
- 16 Zerilli, "The Trojan Horse of Universalism," 147.
- 17 Spillers, "Difference," 49.
- 18 Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 166.
- 19 Miller, *Getting Personal*, ix.
- 20 A truly crucial alternative to this pervasive tendency toward autowriting as the feminist genre departure from masculinist theory is dramatized in Barbara Johnson's *A World of Difference*. In her essay "Gender Theory at the Yale School," Johnson has occasion to speak of her own critical contributions to deconstruction, and she does so not in the first person, but in a remarkable, dissident third person. Considering that the essay opens with a first-person anecdote about the embarrassment of being a woman asked to speak in place of Paul de Man at a symposium, but about his work rather than her own, the rejection of the first-person perspective in the essay's final section brilliantly reveals that first-person criticism is a too-hasty imaginary solution to the real problem of theory's person.
- 21 Táiwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege."
- 22 "Abstractions also liberate" appears in, and is a subthesis of, my recent book (Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*).
- 23 Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, 63.
- 24 Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 26.
- 25 Nash, 32.
- 26 Dean, *Comrade*, 3–4.
- 27 Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%*, 3–4.
- 28 Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy," 83–104.
- 29 Smith, "I Helped Coin the Term 'Identity Politics.'"
- 30 Taylor, *How We Get Free*, 21.
- 31 Taylor, "Tweet."