

## Beyond Binaries: Reflections on the “Feminine Voice” in Philosophy and Feminism

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In her article, “Educating the Feminine Voice in Philosophy,” Saito offers valuable critique of both philosophy and feminism while mobilizing each of them to guide us to what she hopes will be a more “radical way of political criticism” and education “to rectify the imbalance between men and women” resulting from the “invisible but deep-seated phenomenon of the theft of the woman’s voice in academia.” Having argued that Stanley Cavell’s work in philosophy and film can help us to better grapple with the ways in which “the female voice in philosophy remains constrained within conventional masculine discourse” at a feminist philosophy conference, Saito found her own voice resisted and opposed in a space presumably designed to grapple with it. Was the fact that she presented on the work of a white male philosopher at a “Women in the History of Philosophy Conference” grounds for the exclusion? Saito clearly thinks not as she asks: does the female voice in philosophy amount only to the actual voices of women? “What can be meant by the female voice in philosophy? Who, if anyone, owns this?” These are important questions and tensions indeed.

Saito’s analysis of gendered exclusions in feminism and philosophy raises important questions about (white male) privilege, epistemic authority, and various forms of (in)justice in different contexts. Most importantly perhaps, her experience of the rejection of her own voice serves as a poignant reminder that too often, our very desire to trouble and to not reproduce exclusion, can wind up further entrenching it. I very much appreciate Saito’s desire to grapple with gender troubles in both philosophy and in feminism, but wonder whether her conception of the “feminine voice” forecloses more possibilities (for epistemic and other forms of justice) than it opens up. I suggest that any theoretical project premised on m/f (male/female, masculine/feminine) distinctions can be read

as a form of “erotophobia” that gives heterosexuality silent privilege, and risks further entrenching the very power relations we seek to disrupt.<sup>1</sup>

In this short space I hope to highlight important tensions with mobilizing a conception of “the feminine voice,” not just for philosophy and feminism but, perhaps even more urgently, in the context of the Me Too movement. I suggest that swerving out of analysis of binary sex/gender (identified by m/f distinctions) and into analysis of the erotics of (un)knowing might provide a more promising place from which to address gender trouble in philosophy, feminism, and social justice projects in general. Finally, I want to invite reflection on whether a shift in focus from a gendered conception of the feminine voice onto the non-sexed and non-gendered but highly erogenous zone of the ear may provide an avenue through which we can learn to attend not to “a different voice” but to differences that exceed our own perception and experience.<sup>2</sup>

I want to read Saito’s critique of masculinist, male dominated philosophy and her critique of exclusionary feminism in the academy as an attempt to get us out of “the epistemological straight jacket of essentialist vs. constructivist accounts”<sup>3</sup> of gender. I want to read her desire for a conception of the “feminine voice that retains the biological difference and yet does not assimilate it into gender distinction” as an attempt to mobilize elements of both essentialist and constructivist feminisms, an attempt to render the category of “the feminine” less exclusive than it may at first appear. However, while both essentialist and constructivist feminisms have done important work (like, for example, establishing sexual harassment policies and recognizing the role an ethic of care can play in determining moral responsibility) both, it seems to me, can wind up reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to disrupt. For, just what are these “fated biological origins” of which Saito writes? Is it genitals? Chromosomes? Hormones? Something else? What if it turns out that our ideas about the nature of biological sex are themselves cultural and as misguided as early ideas that the earth was flat? Where exactly do trans, intersex, and gender nonbinary people figure in to Saito’s privileging of the notion of the feminine?

I worry that this conception of the feminine voice eclipses our ability to see and hear and respond to the calls of the undocumented, the working

class, people of color, and other others that have been pushed to the margins, participating on the periphery of male dominated philosophy and (essentialist white middle class) feminism(s). For many, working to educate the feminine voice (and feminism in general) may not seem like a promising ally, for it erases other classes of difference and “middle ranges of agency that are nonbinary;”<sup>4</sup> we neglect other central differences and wind up insisting on heterosexuality as a core concept, as the reference point for all thought on sexuality.

I think perhaps the Me Too movement might be read as a politicized example of “the release of the feminine voice” Saito is after in philosophy and might provide an instructive example of the way in which it is in itself exclusive. I find it important to note that many, if not most, of my students are surprised to find out that an African American, Tarana Burke, founded the Me Too movement in 2006 in Alabama to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing. And yet, it was the voice of white wealthy Alyssa Milano that ignited the #metoo firestorm that brought national and global attention to the ubiquity of sexual assault in work and play.<sup>5</sup> I worry this new Me Too voice seems to have erased much of the work of Tarana Burke and other intersectional feminisms in the mainstream. What is it about (Saito’s articulation of) “archetypes of the feminine” that seem so rigidly white, wealthy, and straight?

Part of the problem, perhaps, is that sexuality needs to be centered and read intersectionally alongside race, class, gender, etc., in analyses of disciplinary and other forms of exclusion. We need to identify all forms of power in play, with power not conceived as top down but as fluid and present in the middle ranges of agency (not only m/f, straight/gay). We need to reflect on whether terms we use to name injustice wind up reinforcing it. Within the Me Too movement, it seems that certain voices are finally being heard while others are not; and perhaps more importantly, it is unclear about what exactly it is that is expected of the *listeners* to these disclosures. The problem certainly can’t be fixed through merely firing predators and moving on as if we have solved it. We need to be able to reckon with the precarious position of domestic servants, farm workers, incarcerated folks, trans communities of color, and so many

other classes of people who are not recognized at all, or are misrecognized and cannot be *heard*.

In closing, I want to point to the promise I see in how the “unknown woman” suffers from an “uncanny homeliness”<sup>6</sup> and support Saito’s claim that her feminine voice can teach us to learn to relinquish our belonging for the sake of finding a better way, for the sake of accepting the sense of our being “endlessly homeless.” Her call for an ethic of un-belonging, the teaching of “learning to walk away” holds much promise, but I want to suggest that we might relinquish our investment in archetypes of the feminine and attachment to “the feminine voice” in order to do just that. Perhaps by shifting focus to the erotics of (un)knowing and the erogenous zone of the ear, practices of listening can move beyond sex and gender into new forms of genuinely tender relationality. We might begin to look at the role erotophobia plays in institutionalizing forms of exclusion and contributing to hierarchically organized gendered sexual relations to create new ways of thinking about what a life is and what sustainable intimacy might involve, and to find new ways to attach to politics and creatively listen to othered others.<sup>7</sup>

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1 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), and Janet Halley, “A Map of Feminist & Queer Theories of Sexuality & Sexual Regulation” (paper presented at 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Brainer Currie Memorial Lecture, Duke University School of Law, Durham, NC, November 7, 2002), YouTube video, 1:17, June 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oALlk8bx-B2g>.

2 See Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

3 Halley, “A Map of Feminist & Queer Theories of Sexuality & Sexual Regulation.”

4 Ibid.

5 See Sandra E. Garcia, “The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>.

6 Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 129, 176.

7 See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).