

## IN DEFENSE OF A POLITICS OF IDENTITY

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Selya Benhabib's paper has three chief virtues; (1) it reminds us that the point of feminism is not merely to interpret the world but to change it; (2) it reminds us also that the theoretical problem of agency has to be linked to the practical problem of collective interests, needs, desires and perspectives; and, (3) it affords me the quite unusual opportunity to talk about drag queens and kindergarten classes in almost the same paragraph.

Selya Benhabib claims that in the transition from standpoint feminism to post-modernist feminisms we have lost the female subject; and "contemporary feminist theory has nearly effaced its own possibility." She fears that, with a shift to the politics of identity/difference, feminist theory is now in danger of "not being able to develop a voice vis à vis the difficult issues of conflicting and competing identity claims." It is a legitimate fear. This is particularly troubling in a context where different groups are struggling for a just redistribution of scarce resources. For example, in Canada during the 1985 Constitutional talks the premiers of the provinces were quite literally bargaining with each other about granting equal rights to women provided aboriginal claims were not recognized.

According to Benhabib's account the "difficulties of identity/difference politics...derive ultimately from the fungibility of identity" (that is, identity categories that are in principle replaceable, substitutable). I am not altogether clear about her claim concerning the fungibility of identities. In one sense I understand her perfectly well, and know from the Canadian example that the playing off of women's rights against aboriginal claims leaves a Native woman in a terrible position. But fungibility in these cases is *externally* imposed, others decide to replace those identities who may be bearers of rights, it is not a feature of the identities themselves. Yet Benhabib also worries about fungibility from the inside as it were, where identities may come and go "like layers of clothing that social actors can remove."

In order to avoid a "mindless empiricist celebration of all pluralities," Benhabib suggests that feminist theory must "develop a concept of normative agency robust enough to say something significant vis à vis such clashes" and provide "principles individuals should adopt to choose among them." I understand the impetus for this suggestion: a desire for a politically effective feminism, that has enough sense of a common direction or a shared vision, and an "enlarged mentality" so that we can avoid "being caught by a tribalism within or without." I share this desire. However, I think we must be careful in how we interpret this call for principles that would make choices amongst our identities.

In fact, I am not only cautious about the impetus to order our identities I also regard some attempts at ordering principles as *undesirable*. And I regard these as undesirable for the same reason Audre Lorde does:

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of myself. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves.<sup>1</sup>

I do, however, think we can still get what Benhabib wants another way. But first we have to separate the ways in which power holders use identity politics to divide and conquer from the ways in which people struggle to define and empower themselves. There is no reason why it has to follow that once I recognize multiplicitous facets of myself, or alternative identities, I must feel fragmented, or conflicted. Or, more to the point, if I do feel conflicted, fragmented, there is no reason why I need necessarily regard that as a bad thing rather than as something to “work with.”

Consider how Patricia Williams uses the knowledge and awareness she acquires of her history, her identity, to open possibilities for herself to create a new sense of responsibility for “the images of others that are repositied with us.”<sup>2</sup> In her book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Williams tells the story of her great-great-grandmother Sophie, a slave who was purchased at age eleven and impregnated by a white lawyer named Austin Miller. Williams observes how difficult it is to claim a child molester as part of one’s heritage.

The paradox for Williams lies in confronting that part of herself that is “the dispossessor” of another part of herself. She feels the conflict most acutely when she decides to become a lawyer. Just before she enters Harvard law school, her mother tells her “in a voice full of secretive reassurance, ‘The Millers were lawyers, so you have it in your blood.’”<sup>3</sup> Williams’ conflicted response to this statement illustrates many things, but what is striking for me is the heroic efforts she makes to not dispossess any part of herself.

Another author, Minnie Bruce Pratt, a white, southern, Christian-raised, lesbian woman, in her essay “Identity: Skin Blood Heart”<sup>4</sup> addresses the urgent obligations surrounding identity politics. In her struggle to reject the rigid identity of her father, which sustains an appearance of stability by defining itself in terms of what it is not: not black, not female, not Jewish, not Catholic, not poor.”<sup>5</sup> Pratt has this dream:

On the night before my birthday, I slept and thought I heard someone walking through my apartment. I wanted it to be my lover, but it was my father, walking unsteadily, old, carrying something heavy, a box, a heavy box which he put down by my desk. He came through the darkness, smoking a cigarette, glints of red sparks, and sat down on my bed, wanting to rest: he was so tired. I flung my hands out angrily, told him to go, back to my mother; but crying, because my heart ached: he was my father and so tired. He left, and when I looked, the floor was a field of sandy dirt, with a diagonal track dragged through it, and rows of tiny green seed just spouting.

The box was still there, with what I feared: my responsibility for what the men of my culture have done, in my name, knowing my responsibility to change what my father had done, without even knowing what his secrets were. I was angry. Why should I be left with this? I didn’t want it; I’d done my best for years to reject it; I wanted no part of what was in it — the benefits of my privilege, the restrictions, the injustice, the pain, the broken urgings of the heart, the unknown horrors.

And yet it is mine: I am my father’s daughter in the present, living in a world he and my folks helped to create. A month after I dreamed this, he died. I honor the grief of his life by striving to change much of what he believed in; and my own grief by acknowledging that I saw him caught in the grip of racial, sexual, cultural fears that I am still trying to understand in myself.<sup>6</sup>

In answer to Benhabib’s question “What kinds of paradigms of life stories or narratives must we develop” to understand the unity of the self and agency in a postmodern world, I think we *do* need micro-narratives that tell the story of interlocking oppressions, stories of just the nature provided by Patricia Williams and Minnie Bruce Pratt.

Initially I resisted Benhabib’s suggestion that the individual needed principles to order these conflictual, fragmented identities, however, as I read more of Patricia Williams, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Maria Lugones, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Adrienne Rich and Gloria Anzaldua, I think that there may be a principle after all. And it is a simple one. It is one that Vivian Paley uses in her kindergarten class: “You can’t say you can’t play.”<sup>7</sup>

What does “You can’t say you can’t play” mean? Well, first and foremost, it is a principle of non-exclusion. No identity can be excluded. If indeed as one writer claims, postmodernism is “the return of the repressed,”<sup>8</sup> then I think we are better off allowing the repressed into our conscious awareness.

Selya Benhabib tells us that while some others in our postmodern era are “Relishing in diversity, basking in fragmentation, enjoying the play of differences and celebrating the opacity, fracturing and heteronomy of it all,” she cannot proclaim herself happy about the manner in which plurality, heterogeneity and diversity have played themselves out in feminist theory and feminist politics. But here too, I have a rebellious little girl in me that wants to say to Benhabib, “You can’t say you can’t play.” If Judith Butler thinks that drag queens do us a great service in parodying gender because they allow us to see it as not all that natural, maybe she’s right.<sup>9</sup> When Marilyn Frye addresses the whole issue of sex marking and sex announcing and the thousands of ways in which we do it and writes:

It is quite a spectacle, really, once one sees it, these humans so devoted to dressing up and acting out...the theory that there are two sharply distinct sexes and never the twain shall overlap or be confused or conflated...marking a distinction between two sexes as though their lives depended on it. It is wonderful that homosexuals and lesbians are mocked and judged for dressing in “butch-femme drag,” for nobody goes about in full public view as thoroughly decked out in butch and femme drag as respectable heterosexuals when they are dressed up to go out in the evening, or to go to church, or to go to the office. Heterosexual critics of queers’ “role-playing” ought to look at themselves in the mirror on their way out for a night on the town to see who’s in drag. The answer is, everybody is. Perhaps the main difference between heterosexuals and queers is that when queers go forth in drag, they know they are engaged in theater — they are playing and they know they are playing. Heterosexuals usually are taking it all perfectly seriously, thinking they are in the real world, thinking they *are* the real world.<sup>10</sup>

Pratt and Williams both practice a form of identity politics that exemplifies an “enlarged mentality.” It is an identity politics in which the individual takes responsibility for her situatedness, and location. It is an identity politics that involves a material, historical, bodily specificity about the interconnections between our own well being and the existences of others. It recognizes how our identities are partly fungible with the lives of others past and future. It involves asking the questions: “What is the moral content of [my] cultural identity” and “what are the political consequences of this moral content and cultural identity?”<sup>11</sup>

The final point I want to make here is that there is likely no one way, no one sort of theory of the subject or agency that will do. Some will do their politics in anger, some in moral earnestness, some playfully, some with compassion, some in a principled manner. The one thing to remember is that the new feminism(s) will require just what Cornel West says that the new cultural politics of difference will require: and that is “all the imagination, intelligence, courage, sacrifice, care, and laughter we can muster.”<sup>12</sup>

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1. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansberg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 120-121.

2. Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 73.

3. Quoted from Martha Chamallas’s book review of *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 678-682. Quotations from Williams are from *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 216.

4. Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Rebellion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1993).

5. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986), 197.

6. Pratt, *Rebellion*, 70-71.

7. Vivian Paley, *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

8. P. R. Radhakrishnan, "The Changing Subject and the Politics of Theory," *Differences* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 147.
  9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990). See especially her chapter "Conclusion: From Parody to Politics."
  10. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansberg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983), 29.
  11. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 30.
  12. *Ibid.*, 31.
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