

Publicación: Van der Tuin, Iris y Buikema, Rosemarie (Eds.) (2010)]. *Doing gender in media, art and culture*. New York: Routledge

Fragmento: Van der Tuir, Iris. The arena of feminism: Simone de Beauvoir and the history of feminism (pp. 7-23)

ISBN: 978-0-415-49383-3

The arena of feminism: Simone de Beauvoir and the history of feminism

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*1.1 Simone de Beauvoir
at work.*

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) is best known for her treatise *The Second Sex* (*Le deuxième sexe*). The book was published in 1949. It probes the view on women and discusses the way they are represented, how women see themselves, and what the future holds for young girls. De Beauvoir advances the theory that women are classified as second-class citizens in relation to men. She also maintains that men as well as women persist in affirming this unequal relationship, both in the choices they make and in their actions, as these appear to be the fruit of fixed patterns. Men are in control of the economy, of history, education, and representation. It looks as if women can improve their position by finding a suitable marriage partner, but as soon as they give up their jobs to have children, they are in fact finished. They can no longer fulfil themselves and are imprisoned in their homes from this day forward. Preoccupied with silly chores, housewives and mothers just cannot find the time for personal growth, nor for contributing to society in any significant way.

On the face of it, de Beauvoir appears to be saying that women are stuck in an inescapably hopeless situation. Yet her analysis offers room for change. She posits that '*on ne naît pas femme, on le devient*,' a phrase usually translated as 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one.' It is a social-constructivist statement meant to indicate that women are not determined by biology. Because one is *made* female, because femininity is a social construct, alternatives can be designed (de Beauvoir, 1988 [1949]: 734).

De Beauvoir's oeuvre is known throughout the world. *The Second Sex* is a true feminist classic, a bulky and widely translated book. A million copies were sold in France alone (Rodgers, 1998: 310). The English translation sold over a million copies in the USA (Glazer, 2004), and the number of translated copies sold in a minor language such as Dutch approaches 100,000 (Vintges, 1992: 252, note 18). Part I of *The Second Sex* is devoted to historical and symbolical examples of how second-class citizenship for women is actually realized. Part II concentrates on the social relationships between men and women and discusses the ways in which women give shape to their lives. Here, de Beauvoir addresses the subjects of marriage and (lesbian) sexuality. She shows that women are in a way complicit to acquiring their second-class position and limited possibilities; it appears women are generally reconciled to their situation from the kinds of choices they make.

As is argued in *The Second Sex*, this situation should come to an end. Economic independence and women's right to vote (only since 1944 in France) are a step forward in an endeavour to design a new kind of femininity and a more balanced relationship between men and women. Apart from that, however, women will have to liberate themselves in moral, social, and psychological terms as well. In aspiring economic independence, women should acquire an active attitude – which is, de Beauvoir maintains, entirely against their nature (de Beauvoir, 1988 [1949]: 689–91).

De Beauvoir was radically ahead of her time with her statements on the position of women. However, for a long time she considered 'feminism' to be a dirty word. *The Second Sex* readers are urged to be wary of men judging women, of women's enthusiasm about 'real women', and of men glorifying the abominable position of women. But then she adds the following: 'We should consider the arguments of the feminists with no less suspicion, however, for very often their controversial aim deprives them of all real value' (de Beauvoir, 1988 [1949]: 26). Hence, the project of *The Second Sex* consists of freshly investigating the so-called 'woman question'. She posits: 'If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh' (de Beauvoir, 1988 [1949]: 27.)

Yet, as is attested by *The Second Sex*'s motto, she too relies on the work of earlier thinkers who are generally seen as feminists *avant la lettre*. One of these mottos is derived from the French enlightenment thinker François Poulain de la Barre (1647–1723), who wrote that 'anything written by men on women should be treated with suspicion, because they are both judge and interested party in the conflict'. Poulain de la Barre's work is firmly secured in the feminist canon, to the extent that only recently it was admitted to the philosophical canon at all (Stuurman, 2004). In fact, the same is true for the work of de Beauvoir. It was not until 1992 that Karen

Vintges made a case for interpreting de Beauvoir's oeuvre, and in particular *The Second Sex*, in philosophical terms. Until then, despite de Beauvoir's initial aversion of the term, her work had carried the label of feminism, which shows that apparently the 'feminist' and 'philosophical' categories are mutually exclusive (Braidotti, 1991). However, as is demonstrated by Berteke Waaldijk and Geertje Mak in this book, the process of canonizing is gendered, but still can be manipulated by (individual) women.

The German feminist Alice Schwarzer made a documentary film about de Beauvoir in 1974. Writing mainly for periodicals, Schwarzer was also the general editor of *Emma* and, as such, the equivalent of Gloria Steinem, who ran the major feminist magazine in the United States, *Ms.* In the documentary, de Beauvoir is portrayed as *the* feminist and the viewer can see that she appears to be entirely comfortable in this role. Schwarzer, who also wrote about de Beauvoir, interviews her and offers us a glimpse into her life. We see a living room littered with souvenirs and a desk piled with various papers. We witness de Beauvoir taking a stroll, reading the newspaper, and varnishing her nails. She is then introduced by a voice-over as the world-famous author of novels, autobiographies, travel accounts, and political and philosophical essays, including *The Second Sex*. The countless translations of her work subsequently appear on screen. Schwarzer claims that *The Second Sex* was a vital book in the process of women's emerging awareness, in the late 1960s, of the hopeless situation for women in general and in particular for themselves.

Schwarzer explains that, following American journalists, de Beauvoir is generally pictured as the mother of feminism. Schwarzer seeks to discard this image in her documentary and wonders who de Beauvoir *really* is: is she the intellectual, emancipated woman who is just as capable as men; or is she first and foremost the close friend and lover of the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and is her fame merely built on her relationship with this existentialist; or is she perhaps a woman who claims happiness while not being able to escape women's second-class citizenship?

From the way the documentary is set up, it appears that Schwarzer wishes to tell the 'truth' about de Beauvoir. However, since the advent of postmodernism, such a naive truth concept no longer holds, as is testified in several of this book's chapters. Rosi Braidotti shows that feminists began to criticize the alleged universal validity attributed to ideas on truth in the 1970s; Sarah Bracke and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa examine the ways in which the construction of situated (feminist) knowledge claims actually function; and Rosemarie Buikema subsequently demonstrates the impossibility of an unequivocal answer to the question of the meaning of a work of art. It is therefore legitimate to wonder what image of de Beauvoir was created by Schwarzer and how this image relates to other stories about her.

Although the documentary mentions de Beauvoir's initial aversion to feminism, the emphasis is on her role in feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. In a number of takes, de Beauvoir spells out the feminist list of demands: find a job, don't get married, don't have children, bisexuality for all, abortion legalized (abortion as well as contraceptives were still prohibited in France when *Le deuxième sexe* came out in 1949). The documentary ends with images of a festive dinner party in de Beauvoir's apartment, organized by a group of feminists in honour of Schwarzer's fortnight in Paris.

Both the manner of filming the 'list of demands' and the farewell dinner party serve yet again to frame de Beauvoir as the mother of feminism. Although the documentary features a variety of feminists, it is de Beauvoir who states the feminist demands and who thus becomes the representative of French feminism *par excellence*. Moreover, she is clearly exalted by the feminists present at the dinner party, all of whom are of another, younger generation. Schwarzer sought to abandon the standard image of de Beauvoir, but it is, in fact, reaffirmed. The image of the mother of feminism appears to be firmly glued to de Beauvoir (cf. Sara Ahmed's notion of 'sticky signs' in Ahmed 2004: 92).

This mother role also comes to the fore in the way de Beauvoir's relationships and affairs are portrayed. A kind of collage of photographs of (young) female and male (ex-) lovers is used to emphasize that she did not have a monogamous lifestyle. The view given is rather one-sided, however. The suggestion is that her daily rhythm is determined by her friendship with Sartre: they have lunch together, they work together, and after dinner they play a game of draughts and listen to music. Sylvie le Bon only plays the part of intimate younger friend and adopted daughter. For example, the documentary shows that Simone de Beauvoir administers some motherly advice to Le Bon, on teaching philosophy. In reality, both appear to have abhorred the idea of a mother-daughter relationship, both in theory and in practice, even though Le Bon was indeed adopted by de Beauvoir in 1980 – a formal decision instigated by the necessity to manage de Beauvoir's (literary) estate (Kaufmann, 1986: 127; Bair, 1996: 600 ff). However, they felt that a one-sided emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship, as the only possible relationship between women of unequal age, prolonged an oppressive stereotype. Deirdre Bair, de Beauvoir's biographer, even suggests that de Beauvoir once again turned away from feminism towards the end of her life because it would focus too much, in her view, on mother-daughter models. The documentary filmed by Schwarzer leaves no room for any alternative to such positioning. This raises the question of whether it is effectively true that the only way to think about feminism is in terms of mothers and daughters.

Waves and generations

Simone de Beauvoir is an important figure in the history of feminism, a history that is often characterized as a succession of metaphorical 'waves'. The first feminist wave crested around 1900 and was mainly concerned with women's right to vote. The second wave shook the world between 1965 and 1980, with radical positions on, mostly, the female body, sexuality, and relationships. (The wave metaphor aptly encompasses the heyday of feminism as well as its (temporary) submergence. Continuously in motion, waves have neither an end nor a beginning; yet the wave's crest will inevitably disappear into the undercurrent. By suggesting both continuity and discontinuity, the wave metaphor is therefore eminently suitable for characterizing developments in feminism. Still, within gender studies, there is also critique on this metaphorical usage. For example, who can identify the crest or decide its moment? And if it turns out that

the heyday of black or non-Western or lesbian feminism is not ever described in terms of a crest, should the conclusion then be that the wave metaphor is racist, Eurocentric, or heteronormative?)

Another reason for being circumspect about the wave metaphor becomes apparent once we realize that the crests of feminist waves are generationally delimited. The historiography of feminism suggests that the second feminist wave was predominantly due to baby boomers, a generation born just after World War II, with a liberal sexual morality and radical political positions. They were hippies; they were opposed to the war in Vietnam; and they fuelled the battle for democratizing European universities in May 1968. Moreover, baby boomers did not go along with the general 1960s belief that women's emancipation had been accomplished (Meijer, 1996: 26). In addition, they were critical of the first feminist wave. In their view, first-wave feminists had not been radical enough; the important achievement of women's right to vote was seen as a form of emancipation on paper that was not matched by real life liberation. Moreover, baby boomers were critical of the type of woman they associated with first-wave feminism, to wit upper middle-class bluestockings. In other words, first-wave feminists allegedly defended the interests of a limited group. Or worse, they defended only their own interests.

(What the waves in feminism have in common – that is, a radical position with respect to inequality between men and women – fades away when waves are primarily seen in generational terms.) The dualist mechanism of one generation succeeding another then becomes the central issue. The dynamic of generations is habitually seen in dualist terms: each new generation is opposed to its predecessors and is not necessarily motivated by historically accurate information in doing so. This pattern also emerges in the historiography of feminism. We now know that first-wave feminists did carry out radical acts – especially the suffragettes in Britain, who chained themselves to railings and ran out in front of police horses in order to make their objectives (the admittance of women into masculine domains) known to politicians.

The second feminist wave, in turn, was criticized by members of the so-called 'generation X'. These 'post feminists', as they called themselves, distanced themselves from what they felt were 'moaning feminists', who publicly denounced their own unsatisfactory sexual and/or professional lives (consider for instance the 'glass ceiling').

Apart from questioning the idea that there was no continuity, as the wave metaphor appears to suggest, gender studies has also sought to reconsider the model of generational dialectics for describing the developments in feminism. Second-wave feminism did not just present itself as different from first-wave feminism, but as more advanced. Feminists of the 1970s opted for emphasizing the differences between men and women, which involved a revaluation and/or stimulation of the feminine. The strategy which was important to feminists around 1900, that is, the struggle for access into the masculine domain, was consequently written off as inferior, as this strategy presupposed that those masculine domains need not change – it was merely necessary to include women.

There are at least two reasons for disputing the low merit awarded to the strategy of first-wave feminism. First, the first-wave notion of equality is still in use as the most

efficient way to effectuate a solution for certain problems (think of equal rights and equal opportunities commissions or the campaign instigated by Amnesty International, 'women's rights are human rights'). The claim that the equality strategy is inferior by definition therefore simply does not hold. Second, radical thoughts are not necessarily mutually exclusive to thinking in terms of equality. Domains are connoted either in a masculine or in a feminine way, which implies that it is not facile to simply admit women to the masculine domain because a form of transgression is always involved. As is explained in this book by Buikema, the presence of women in masculine domains raises certain questions about those domains and about the demarcation between feminine and masculine domains – precisely the topic of second-wave feminism.

(In other words, it is a mistake to believe that one wave's strategy is better than the other, because equality did not disappear from the scene when the first wave came to an end and because there is a radical variant in line with the 'new' notions of the 1970s. In summary, the idea of generational dialectics is founded on generalizations that ignore the complexities of history.)

Another reason for reconsidering the suitability of generational dialectics within gender studies is because it keeps women enthralled in the position of mother or rebellious daughter and subjects them both to the Law of the Father. It is a critique derived from Freudian psychoanalysis – discussed by Rosi Braidotti, Anneke Smelik, and Maaïke Bleeker in these pages – and Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological concepts. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) described the conflict which necessarily arises between mother and daughter because both want to be the father's lover, meaning that they are in competition with one another. Lévi-Strauss showed that this pattern of the male controlling inter-female relationships, forms society's foundational structure, based on the principle of women being exchanged by men. Because of this custom of exchanging women between families (or 'tribes'), family ties are not secured in unity, but rather in rivalry between (powerful) families. The explicatory models of Freud and Lévi-Strauss present the type of relationships between women of unequal age – antagonistic, competitive – as universally valid.

However, Freudian feminist criticism maintains that the generational dialectics model does not explain the wave-like development of feminism, but merely (re)affirms discontinuity by adopting a model of inter-female relations which is condoned by patriarchal culture (Stacey, 1993: 58–90; Buikema, 1995: 90–106; Roof, 1997). In other words, de Beauvoir and Le Bon do not find themselves alone in considering that the mother-daughter prototype for a relationship between women of unequal age is, in fact, an oppressive stereotype.

The notion of 'generationality' occupies a central position in the fundamental debates within gender studies, just as with the debates on biological determinism (discussed in the chapter by Cecilia Åsberg), on queer (see the chapters by renée hoogland and Bleeker), post colonialism (the chapter by Sandra Ponzanesi), inter-disciplinarity (consult the chapter by Gloria Wekker), and representation (discussed in the chapter by Buikema). The present chapter aims to clarify the (generational) battle for feminism on the one hand; and on the other, it will attempt to present the generational dimension of the phenomenon of feminism in a different light. It is

important for a textbook on gender studies to create an insight into the battle for feminism, because the term 'feminism' and its (generational) connotations may keep students and other potentially interested people from engaging themselves with this discipline. Such initial hesitations may be overcome with the realization that feminism has no essence but is not an empty vessel either.

Woman as historical Other to Man

Apart from the probing insight into so-called second-class citizenship, *The Second Sex* also offers an explanation for the unequal relations of men and women and signposts some routes to change these. Binary oppositions are at the core of de Beauvoir's discourse, and *The Second Sex* is packed with dozens of oppositions. De Beauvoir demonstrates that social structures, psychological processes, moral values, and representations are structured according to these mutually exclusive oppositions. Then she goes on to show that each such binary opposition is, in fact, gendered. Within this context, the term 'gendered' implies that gender neutral phenomena principally acquire gender. Paid out-of-doors work therefore acquired masculine connotations, whereas feminine connotations are reserved for running a house and caring for a family. Fairytales, literature, past and present events – they will always position the subject as a token of masculinity, with a host of connotations in its wake: what is active and free, the rational, consciousness, mind, culture, self-determination, responsibility, and being. Conversely, the object, the passive and unfree, the irrational, the unconscious, body, nature, *being* determined, being unaccountable, and nothingness will time and again signify femininity. The third step in de Beauvoir's argument then consists of showing that gender-specific connotations are not simply structured as binary oppositions, but are organized hierarchically. Masculinity, de Beauvoir sustains, is always valued higher.

The scheme of gendered oppositions constitutes a universal truth in de Beauvoir's discourse; *The Second Sex* suggests that the validity of this analysis is applicable to all times and places. Although this scheme was somewhat adapted and refined under the influence of poststructuralism and poststructuralist feminism (i.e. by introducing the possibility of 'hybridity', as discussed in the chapter by Ponzanesi) and was somewhat stripped of its universal validity, it still forms one of the pillars of contemporary feminism and of gender studies as a discipline. We are still operating within the paradigm that images, terms, and phenomena are related to one another in gendered and hierarchical ways. The binary oppositions scheme, which was advanced by de Beauvoir, furnishes both the source of our analytical tools and the target of what we seek to deconstruct or change.

The Second Sex employs the conceptual term 'the situation of woman' in referring to the above-mentioned second-class citizenship. In using 'situation', de Beauvoir refers to her thesis that 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one'. She wishes to show that second-class citizenship does not constitute a woman's essence, but that it is a situation which can be changed.) She wonders:

How can a human being in situation attain fulfilment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome?

(de Beauvoir, 1988 [1949]: 29)

The Second Sex begins with the statement that the equality between men and women achieved by first-wave feminism is merely equality on paper:

The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral [. . .]; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.

(ibid.: 15)

In order to understand what she means to say here, consider the word 'doctor'. In theory, this term refers to both male and female physicians, yet we all too often come across 'female doctors'. The 'female' adjective designates 'doctor' as a masculine or ostentatiously neutral term. The fact that it is important to add 'female' when speaking of female physicians implies that they cannot be 'real' doctors for certain.

De Beauvoir explains the absence of reciprocity between men and women by following the philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) in maintaining that the duality of Self and Other is fundamental to human thought and actions. However, in the case of man (Self) and woman (Other), there is no reciprocity, whereas normally each duality has a reciprocal aspect. The woman question is, in other words, a *specific* question. She draws a comparison, for example, between women and people of the working classes, but she emphasizes that this comparison does not hold water. In her words, the woman question is a *specific* question due to the absence of any form of reciprocity between men and women:

[. . .] proletarians have not always existed, whereas there have always been women. They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology. Throughout history they have always been subordinated to men, and hence their independency is not the result of a historical event or a social change – it was not something that *occurred*. The reason why otherness in this case seems to be an absolute is in part that it lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts.

(ibid.: 18)

What she shows here is that woman is the *historical Other* to men. She also clarifies the fact that women – all women in any situation – are the negative and non-essential with respect to men who are manifested as the neutral (or positive) and the essential, a situation which is perceived as natural.

In using terms such as 'Self' and 'Other', de Beauvoir betrays her debt to existentialism, the Sartrean philosophy.¹ Sartre and de Beauvoir were not just partners for life, both had actually been star students in philosophy at the Sorbonne and when they met

Cher monsieur
Je serai enchantée de
faire partie de votre
comité de soutien.
et avec espoir et en toute
sympathie.
S de 13 édouard

1.2 Note written by Simone de Beauvoir.

they were reading at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris. Since their time at university, they belonged to more or less the same circles of friends. Together they set up the leftist periodical *Les temps modernes*; they had joint publications and read each other's work before it went to the printers.

Existentialism provides the foundation for an ontology of being. There are two types of being in this philosophy: in oneself or itself (*en-soi*) and for oneself (*pour-soi*). 'Things' are not included in this duality, they are of necessity *en-soi*. People are *pour-soi*, in the sense that they can allocate place and purpose to things; they can read and interpret; they can assume responsibility and make certain choices. One such a choice is to opt for being *en-soi* rather than *pour-soi*. That should not really happen within the perspective of existentialism, because human beings are assigned to be *pour-soi*. But it is also important to realize that when two people meet, only one can be *pour-soi*, although (ideally) it is the aim of both. According to existentialism, there is always a conflict when two people meet. One becomes *pour-soi* and classifies the other as *en-soi*. The first transforms to the transcendental subject, the second to the immanent object.

This occurs in love too, as Sartre argues, which turns love into an impossible enterprise. In the eyes of de Beauvoir, however, two people can merge in love – or in carnal love – and they should continuously aim for such blending (Vintges, 1992: 36–69, 70–96). This implies that, to de Beauvoir, there is not just the subject or the Self which exists thanks to the negation of an object or the Other.

The point of this brief survey is to show how *The Second Sex* effectively argues that Sartre's existentialism is gendered. Woman is the Other to man for historical and not for biological reasons. Time and again man has assigned himself the part of Self,

at the expense of woman who is made Other. The critical point in this process is formed by reproduction. When reproducing, women affirm the subjectivity of men because they lock themselves in: in their bodies (temporarily) and their homes (forever) – thus blocking the road towards transcendence.

The conclusion to *The Second Sex*, titled 'The Road to Liberation,' states that it does not suffice to change the economic situation for women if the moral, social, and cultural consequences entailed by such a change are not accepted (de Beauvoir, 1988 [1949]: 734). De Beauvoir wants women to have access to masculine domains, but realizes that the presence of women will affect those domains. Her objective is an 'androgynous world' (ibid.: 735), where women can fully realize their potential. This emphatically does not lead to uniformity:

New relationships of flesh and sentiment of which we have no conception will arise between the sexes; already, indeed, there have appeared between men and women friendships, rivalries, complicities, comradeships – chaste or sensual – which past centuries could not have conceived [. . .] I fail to see [. . .] that liberty ever creates uniformity. [. . .] her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female, and to the child.

(ibid.: 740)

She puts her bets on communism in *The Second Sex*, to realize the swing towards full reciprocity between men and women (ibid.: 733, 741).

The female line of thought

Although de Beauvoir puts her stakes on the communist rather than feminist revolution, *The Second Sex* is generally seen as the bible of second-wave feminism. It is believed to have acted like a starting shot; it set the movement in motion because women became conscious of their own situation when reading *The Second Sex* and many decided to become active in the practice of women's emancipation, which resulted in a transnational women's liberation. We now know that this narrative does not represent historical reality, but is part and parcel of the mystification which surrounds *The Second Sex*.

De Beauvoir wrote this book just after World War II. She worked alone. In attempting to readdress the woman question from a new perspective, which entailed arguing why there was not a case of a 'man question', she extensively researched the sources held by the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* in Paris. The book was not received with much enthusiasm in post-war, conservative France. A small number of women read the book but it certainly did not result in an instant large-scale women's movement, such as the later *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* or *MLF* (Rodgers, 1998: 15–22). In fact, in the *MLF*'s first publications, which appeared around 1970, *The Second Sex* is only met with disapproval (Vintges, 1992: 253, note 19). A transatlantic journey of *The Second Sex* by way of an English translation and publication in

the US was necessary for the book to be recognized *en masse* by feminists in France and Europe.² American feminists turned de Beauvoir into the icon of Women's Lib, as is testified, for instance, by the dedication to Simone de Beauvoir 'who endured' in Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971). Firestone appears to be saying that de Beauvoir's analysis of the situation of women was probably complete and pervasive (Firestone, 1971: 7).

It seems that the book appeared just a little too soon in France. It was too radical for those who were in charge of feminism after World War II, and the women who would later become *MLF* militants were too young to appreciate it when it came out and could not dispose of a feminist context or a group of friends to help interpret the book (Rodgers, 1998: 17, 21–22). In other words, the book needed to travel in order to become influential and perhaps the timing was in any case better when it was launched in the United States, as it took a while before *The Second Sex* was translated. That translation, incidentally, was neither accurate nor complete. Thus, *The Second Sex* became a feminist text in the United States first; European feminists followed suit because at the time they were being inspired and influenced by feminist publications from the States.

Even so, the initial reactions of new-baked feminists were at best lukewarm at the text's return to continental Europe, as can be illustrated by the history of *The Second Sex* in the Netherlands. A Dutch translation was available when the second wave flooded the Netherlands too in the 1960s, but this was only read by a small circle of non-feminist intellectuals (Meijer, 1996: 26). An essay by Joke Kool-Smit (1933–1981) was published in the prestigious journal *De Gids* in 1967. Entitled 'Discontent of Women', in retrospect this essay appears to have launched the second wave in the Netherlands. It refers to *The Second Sex* with a mixture of praise and criticism:

Men are having a good time, women are miserly. This is what remains after reading the otherwise excellent study by Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. But this residue misrepresents reality. If there is a second sex at all, then most men belong to it too, because top dogs are simply rather rare. One could even say that most women have a much easier life than men, as it is less frustrating to do routine work while running a one-person company than having to obey orders.

(Kool-Smit, 1967: 267)

This influential essay was founded on a partial reading of *The Second Sex*, as de Beauvoir does not restrict her discussion of women to their economic position alone, but refers to society as a whole. According to de Beauvoir, women are by definition worse off than men (even when compared to the lowest in rank), because men, whatever their job or function, allegedly are neutral or positive and women negative.

There is then no historical reason for the picture painted by Schwarzer and her predecessors: de Beauvoir is not the unproblematic 'mother' of feminism who single-handedly engendered second-wave feminism. Rather, the book was picked up and made into the standard work of the movement by feminists of the baby boom generation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Eventually de Beauvoir, who despised mothers, was

declared the mother of second-wave feminism in Europe. In the US, this part was reserved for Betty Friedan.

Considering this, how can it be explained that women keep positioning *The Second Sex* as the origin and cause of second-wave feminism? Perhaps this is because the above-mentioned antagonistic and competitive relationship between women, due to their subjection to men who control and determine relations in society, is often consciously reversed by feminists. It is therefore a feminist *position* to ascribe such prominent propelling force to *The Second Sex*. Historical reality is subordinate to theoretical points such as made by the feminist Adrienne Rich, who stated that continuity between women is central and who questioned the alleged psychoanalytical inevitability of rivalry between women.

Rich addressed the institution and experience of motherhood in her influential treatise *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Writing about the mother-daughter relationship, she argues that in patriarchy this has become a relationship of mutual exclusion which ignores the fact that each mother is a daughter too, and each daughter may become a mother. This is in fact true in a figurative sense as well, she says: all women are mother and daughter alike, because even when they do not bear children of the female sex, women act to type in relating to other women. There are mothers, or 'eternal givers', and daughters, or 'free spirits'. Rich goes on to say that the mutual exclusion engendered by patriarchy entails a hierarchical order as well, with motherhood representing the negative and daughterhood the positive. She writes that 'patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize, these images, and to project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the "other" woman' (Rich, 1976: 253). Having unravelled the question of rivalry between women, Rich subsequently argues that this pattern should be subverted, because 'any radical vision of sisterhood demands that we reintegrate them' (cf. *ibid.*: 246).

Contrary to de Beauvoir, who puts the blame on reproduction when explaining the situation, Rich argues that reproduction is the source of potential:

This cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.

(*ibid.*: 225–226)

She locates the 'most painful estrangement' in the anger daughters feel with regard to their mothers: their mothers have set them loose in a male-dominated world (*ibid.*: 225). There might have been the 'deepest mutuality' between mother and daughter if patriarchy had not intervened (*ibid.*: 245–246).

Rich believes that feminism will provide the impulse for restoring reciprocity between women. Note that Rich's agenda involves reciprocity of women only and not, as with de Beauvoir, the (exclusive) search for reciprocity between men and women. It signifies both a personal quest and an artistic and academic process:

Without the unacclaimed research and scholarship of 'childless' women, without Charlotte Brontë (who died in her first pregnancy), Margaret Fuller (whose major work was done before her child was born), without George Eloit, Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir – we would all today be suffering from spiritual malnutrition as women.

(ibid.: 252)

Rich wishes to reinstall a female continuity which has been dismantled by patriarchy. In other words, she seeks to fortify the female rather than the male line.

Thinking in the female line – symbolized by the term 'sisterhood' in Rich's treatise – is also referred to as *thinking difference* (see the guides to key concepts by Andermahr, *et al.*, 2000; Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004). Thinking difference elaborates on the radical branch of thinking equality. In radical forms of thinking equality, it is argued that domains which are coded in a masculine way are subjected to critique when women are admitted. Difference thinkers are focused on female coded domains which have remained underexposed, both in society and in feminism. They wish to reassess these allegedly nonessential domains and help them to flourish, although they believe that this can only ultimately happen from within the domain itself. (For example, difference thinkers will question what has been written by men about women, because such writings tend to keep women trapped in the negative and nonessential. In other words, in defining women, such writings prolong and entrench the hierarchical relation between men and women.)

Thinking difference seeks to design a *female* standard based on horizontal/reciprocal relationships, instead of vertical/hierarchical relationships. Thinking difference involves reappraising femininity. For instance, a female canon is proposed, or a female aesthetics. The general standards for literariness, the poetical (see the chapter by Maaïke Meijer), or beauty (see the chapters by Ann-Sophie Lehmann and Marta Zarzycka) which are coded by masculinity can thus be abandoned in favour of a new standard based on the work of women. This creates an understanding for the difficulty in defining such works in masculine terms. Still more radical differential thinking rejects the linguistic system as masculine and hierarchically organized in its entirety. French poststructuralist feminists, such as Hélène Cixous, developed the notion of feminine writing (*écriture féminine*) with the idea of reciprocity between women at its core.

The question of the 'essence' of woman arises again within the context of thinking difference. De Beauvoir rejected this notion, but within gender studies there has been some debate among difference thinkers about reintroducing the idea of essence. In the end, the conclusion is that the emphasis on the feminine does not necessarily entail erasing differences between women. However, one should remain alert, because the risk of ignoring power differences between women, or other types of differences, lurks in the prevalence of white ethnicity and heterosexuality. As is variously explained in this book by Braidotti and by Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa, Rich used her 'politics of location' concept to design a methodology which was alert on differences, arguing that thinking should occur from the concretely physical and, on occasion, fragmented locations (Rich, 1985c). In addition to gender, her work systematically addresses

issues of ethnicity and sexuality too. One such location from which Rich's own thinking departs is her Jewish descent. She writes that being both a woman and a Jew implies that she is 'white' in some situations and 'non-white' in others, an observation which serves as a starting point for her analysis of power differences between white and black women. Rich's own lesbian sexuality informs her famous essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1981), which reflects on both the differences and similarities between heterosexual and lesbian women (consult the chapter by hoogland).

The work of Teresa de Lauretis offers a good illustration of the way in which thinking in the female line can be further developed and deployed within gender studies. This notion informs her article 'Feminist Genealogies' (1993), about the hidden connections between Elena Lucrezia (1646–1684), Belle van Zuylen (1740–1805), and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). On the face of it, these women appear to have nothing in common, if it were not for the fact that all three were female and that each of them had an impact on the thoughts of de Lauretis. They each resisted being gagged by misogynous circumstances and in resisting they spoke up for all women, giving vent to silenced voices. Thinking up and describing such 'genealogies' is an important part of feminist theory. In contrast to de Beauvoir and early second-wave feminists, who mainly denounced their predecessors and therefore effectively gagged them once again, difference thinkers wish to surmount rivalry between women by imagining a more affirmative inter-female relationship.

De Lauretis' genealogy (Lucrezia–van Zuylen–Woolf) clearly is not necessarily valid for all (academic) feminists. This is an important aspect of de Lauretis' work, which is attentive to the partial dimensions of her efforts, and in line with poststructuralist tendencies in feminist theory. Poststructuralist feminists question the single and undivided assumption of the idea of women's writing or female literariness or aesthetics. They represent a mode of feminist thought which is focused on context-dependent research. (The feminist genealogies of de Lauretis – note the plural – then explicitly do not pretend to represent general truths (there are always other connections that can be drawn), but are narratives which can be located specifically in time and place. They claim that the loss of the comfortable suggestion of a single Truth is balanced, if not improved, by the exactitude of narratives which account for the politics of location.)

Dis-identification

So it was only subsequent to the beginning of a transnational women's movement that de Beauvoir came to present herself as a feminist. She was not the source of second-wave feminism, but was rather *made* into the mother of feminism. In feminism and by feminism, de Beauvoir became a feminist and *The Second Sex* a feminist tract: One is not born a feminist, one becomes one. She too had no essence but acquired one through interacting with a transnational feminist movement.

On the flip side of the coin, there is no essence to *feminism* either. There is no single origin or aim. There are different feminist actions which each inform 'feminism' and

create (new) feminist heroines and fundamental publications. (A feminist genealogy, in short, is continually revised and reshaped.) For example, the brand of feminism which inked in, as it were, de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* in the 1970s, is a specific kind of feminism that does not necessarily have an eye for non-Western forms of feminism or for feminisms less focused on propagating the slogan that 'the personal is political'. It is a pity that, in general, there is only a single ostentatiously true story about the history of feminism. This hackneyed narrative excludes certain forms of feminisms or fails to qualify these as feminisms and also classifies some feminists as more feminist than others.

Present-day feminist theory is attentive to the ways in which the history of feminism is (re)told and in this context often reconsiders the generational dimension of (stories about) feminism (Hemmings, 2005a). De Lauretis' proposal to devise partial genealogies for feminism, rather than the alleged truth of a single feminist historiography, has become common practice within gender studies. Female continuity acquires specific significance with this gesture. Recently, this debate was enriched by a term introduced by Astrid Henry, which encompasses both continuity and rivalry between women. She argues that the binary opposition of continuity versus rivalry masks the *ambivalent* relationship between (generations of) women. Feminists of the past are neither necessarily our arch rivals, nor unproblematically our sisters. They are, or should be at best, both. Henry explains in her book *Not My Mother's Sister* (2004) that there is a new generation of third-wave feminists who relate to second-wave feminism according to a pattern of so-called 'dis-identification' (Henry, 2004: 7).³

Dis-identification immediately signifies the identification *against* something or somebody and the intimate concentration on otherness or the other person. If, as a feminist, you wish to identify *against* de Beauvoir, you will need to know her work intimately, you will need to know it by heart. (Henry explains that dis-identification does not involve refusal (I refuse to relate to de Beauvoir's work) but rather a resistance to an identification which has already been made (I don't *want* to identify with de Beauvoir because she claims universal rather than specific validity for her statements about women and because she was opposed to having children).) De Beauvoir's feminism is then acknowledged but not accepted as the desired type of feminism for third-wave feminism. The concept of dis-identification then offers the opportunity to understand the work of American feminists and their references to de Beauvoir in the following terms: they did not all wholly agree with de Beauvoir, but in carving out their own position in feminism, they could not do otherwise than take in *The Second Sex* because this was a text that was at their disposition. Because feminism in the tradition of difference initially subverted and glorified the mother-daughter relationship, de Beauvoir was automatically converted into the symbolical mother of second-wave feminism. When European feminists began reading work by American feminists, they also began to take account of de Beauvoir.

The concept of dis-identification helps to think through generationality as a notion which involves neither sheer rivalry nor continuity. It accounts for both continuity between women and for specific cases of inequality between women (based, for instance, on nation, ethnicity, or sexuality). The notion also makes clear that a feminist

'wave' or generation is neither wholly new nor entirely the same and so a simple copy or repetition. Because of dis-identification, you can immediately think of and talk about continuity and change in feminist thoughts. It allows for waves or generational positioning, while making clear that the stale pattern of rivalry between women is not repeated.

The history of *The Second Sex* teaches us that, in thinking about feminism, the dimensions of (national) location and generation should always be taken into consideration. However, at the same time, analysis of this history proves that neither location nor generation are stable concepts. In discussing feminist thought, one should allow for the possibility that certain texts or images have made a (trans-Atlantic) *journey* and also account for generational disidentification or *transposition*. The latter implies that early feminist works are neither mechanically rejected nor automatically accepted. In retelling the history of feminism, we should consider *where* feminist theory originates (and such a location can imply plurality or motion) and *who* were involved in constituting feminist thoughts.]

Notes

- 1 There is some speculation among de Beauvoir scholars about the share of de Beauvoir in Sartrean existentialism. They wonder, for example, about the contents of her dissertation, inaccessibly guarded by Le Bon in a vault. It has been suggested that it possibly contains the earliest formulations of existentialism (Fullbrook and Fullbrook, 2008).
- 2 Sarah Glazer (2004), as well as Karen Vintges (1992), nicely sum up the debate on the American translation of *Le deuxième sexe*, which suffers from mistranslated philosophical concepts, the omission of important sections, biologisms, etc.
- 3 The term I use for this pattern is 'jumping generations' (van der Tuin, 2009).

Questions for further research

- 1 Is feminism considered in the study you are enrolled in? If the answer is negative, why should this be so? If positive, then what is feminism associated with? In answering the question, refer to a textbook for an introductory course in your first year.
- 2 What famous feminists can you mention? Where did you come across these women, and what does that tell you about their place in, for instance, the literary or philosophical canon and in popular culture?
- 3 What do you think is the reason for founding special libraries and archives for women and the women's movement? Think of The Women's Library in London (www.londonmet.ac.uk/thewomenslibrary) or the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in Paris (www.annuaire-aufeminin.net/assBIBmargDURAND.html) or The International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV) in Amsterdam (www.iiav.nl/eng). Visit these websites and describe how these libraries mediate libraries and archives in general, on the one hand, and the women's movement, on the other.

- 4 Is feminism strictly a women's topic? Argue why (not).
 - 5 Is it possible to see women's lib as disconnected from fighting racism or homophobia or ageism? Argue why (not).
 - 6 Is the base of feminism destroyed in acknowledging the differences between women? Try and argue both a negative and a positive position in relation to this question.
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