

## CAROLINE BERGVALL

### PRESSURE POINTS: gendered & tactical authorship

#### Intro

*I first gave this talk in LA in April 2007 as part of a colloquium on women, experimental writing and feminism called "Feminaissance"<sup>1</sup>. I had been invited along with a varied group of female writers to give a sort of personal or intellectual precis about how feminism and specifically écriture feminine (in the case of the panel I was allocated) might be resonating in my work.*

*As a writer and artist whose work has from the start been profoundly embattled and troubled by the complexities and blindspots of cultural belonging when seen from the point of view of gender and sexuality, I welcomed the invitation as an opportunity to take stock and perhaps also to speak more explicitly than I have for a long time about these issues. It had been a long time since anyone had asked me about feminism. Throughout the nineties, my first decade of making work publicly, the cultural mixity of queer explorations had subsumed gender into its dynamic, shapeshifting and carnevolesque umbrella. It seemed to many of us that "queer" was taking on the terms of feminism through the envelope of mixity and gender and it had felt like the most culturally exciting and relevant denomination for the questions I had about sexuated embodiment, as well as for providing one of the methodological and performative contexts for my writing strategies.*

*The first year of the millenium confirmed the arch-conservative and aggressive political and social cultures we live under; where questions of identity increasingly read as questions of border control and immigration, where various ideas around difference are by and large confined to the corridors of academic study, where cultural hybridities are practiced by dispersed bands of artists, writers, DJs, or social activists, but fail to crystallise into a renewed call for change, revolt, imagination at more shared collective levels. Notwithstanding a broader range of participation in citizenship in society at large, it is still the case that infrastructural and symbolic battles tied to the transformation of familial models, of professional representation, of the nature of power and dominance, of what collectivity and interdependency could come to mean, are crucially at issue and need our attention – our resolve as much as our tentativeness.*

*The symposium was playing its small topical part in reviving a larger need for collective and even communal motivations alongside and as part of our writing practices. It was a way of opening the door, a case of opening one's mouth and letting some stale air out. By and large what follows is what I had prepared for the day:*

**It has been happening to us, around us, slowly within us. Actions of pointing, of naming, of denouncing. That claim the enemy in our midst, not the enemy within.**

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<sup>1</sup> Feminaissance - a colloquium on women, experimental writing and feminism, April 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, 2007, at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in conjunction with WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution. Details and participants: <http://penusa.org/go/news/comments/feminaissance-colloquium-on-women-experimental-writing-and-feminism/>

Don't let this be my finger. We have moved from the greedy liberalism of "don't ask don't tell" to the authoritarian religiosity of the one and only. From official silence to official silencing, or indeed its upshot, collective hysteria. "The war on terror inevitably reduces active dissent"<sup>2</sup>. Both in Britain where I live most of the time and in America where I frequently share my work, political and juridical agendas such as the nature of citizenship, national identity and national language, cultural protectionism are squarely on the agenda. I'm a visitor, sometimes a resident, rarely a full citizen where I live. As a participant in a transnational poetics culture, my personal sense of what might constitute "us" and "we" is distended and contextual, finds its allegiance across all sorts of unclear borders.

**Wherever I go in my travels**, the public mood is nervous, its taste and values increasingly conservative. In the arts world, many of our celebrated artists are busy with commerce and success. In Britain, for instance, the YBAs have come of age and all we hear talk of relates to their personal branding and greed, hardly any room for investigative ideas. There's a standardisation of the progressive gestures inherited from the early avant-gardes as much as from the art and identity revolutions of the 60s and 70s, a saturation of formal applications of appropriative and disjunctive techniques, a rehashing of carnevalesque or and/or conceptual tools, now frequently depoliticised. A strange numbness, intellectual disenfranchisement, the need for personal comfort, paired with professional achievement and isolation into arts specialism have all become powerful factors in preventing the vitality of collective identification and in devaluing imagination's anarchism. One would therefore hope that the large artshows such as the WACK! show here in Los Angeles, and feminist manifestations elsewhere, will provoke in us a renewed attention as gendered artists/critics/beings to forms of art and dissent that favour collective voicing and new realms of imaginings.,.

**In 1993, the French writer Hélène Cixous** wrote: "In our impassioned times on all political fronts, where it is largely a question of an open and covert struggle with the mysteries of sexual difference, as women we are at the *obligatory* [her emphasis] mercy of simplifications"<sup>3</sup>. The fact that Cixous chose to point to, and ultimately warn about the very rough crudeness with which embodied politics are still at work in society is a reminder, if ever we needed one, that things are far from what one might have hoped

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<sup>2</sup> Gilroy, Paul. Postcolonial Melancholia. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> Cixous, Hélène. Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing. NY: Columbia University Press, 1993. p.52.

they would be in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; and that processes of simplistic identification might again be inevitable as strategy. She continues: "In order to defend women we are obliged to speak in the feminist terms of 'man' and 'woman'". Given the virulence with which Cixous has spent most of her writing career denying the value of feminist denomination, and rejecting feminist collectivity around socially gendered assignation, does this extraordinary statement indicate a change of tactics?

**The specific fighting that was feminism** at large, and the scandal it has always caused, and still causes, is about oppositionality and new forms of collectivity. It is about criteria for inclusion into collectivity, and questioning the ideological base of representation. It stems from the belief that one must break the cultural interdictions set up by gender hierarchy. The many disputes of feminism are a question of boundaries and of terrain rather than of strict genealogy. It is useless to trace up smooth continuities and lineages when the mapping of engagement runs across so many divergent methodological and conceptual lines, as well as cultural histories. It remains that "woman" is still a symbol of the ongoing revolution, a crucial, complicated dare that must be contextualised in relation to class, ethnicity, cultural belonging and sexuality. The controversial British social and cultural theorist Paul Gilroy has been looking to the political and intellectual energy of womens movement, and finds in their radical rethinking of gender and of its social ramifications an important historical step toward providing tools with which to dislodge the essentialism of race. Feminism has been a collective yet conflicted password; women, a heterogeneous potential; and the dark continent, "a rose wet cave". These things were difficult to say, did not sit easily in language, nor in culture and one needed to carve inroads. These things are still difficult to say, and still easily derided.

**As a poetic and semiotic investigation** of subjectivity, of identity, of difference, "écriture féminine" was a different affair. It was about lucid dreaming as a form of fighting. It was a methodological tool for unpacking hierarchical blindspots lodged in and revealed by discourse and semiology. It rested first and foremost on sophisticated arts practices informed by ideas of sexual difference. It was and is explicitly a discursive practice, rooted in semiotic disturbance. Its revolt is psychic and philosophical. It deploys eroticised, pulsing, energetic "feminised" body imagery to challenge and subvert the very idea of identity. It was and has been fundamentally an exploratory view of writing, and of the gendered subject, reliant on practices of reading, of reassessing and unpacking existing texts. "It streaks through official texts,

illuminating subtexts and subliminal noises as letters swerve, collide, coagulate in the wound-the scar in scarlet-the scars of historical/etymological silences" writes the poet Joan Retallack suggestively<sup>4</sup>. To assert, as French feminists and international post-structuralist thinkers did, that no-one has any idea what a woman is and where the boundaries go, inner or outer, highlighted through negative affirmation, the pervasive scandal and disciplining that gender (and other essentialised impositions) represents at the heart of social practice, embodiment and language. Gender implicates everything and everybody. The way cities are built, industry conducted, bodies worn, animals fed.

**In an interview with his American** translator Carl Weber, the German post-Brechtian playwright Heiner Müller receives the following question: "In many of your texts you deal with topics which in this country would be defined as 'feminist'; and female characters often have a central place in your work. Could you explain how you think women should be presented on the contemporary stage?" Müller replies: "As a playwright I don't deal with "isms" but with reality. Can you tell me what a real female character is?"<sup>5</sup>. Elsewhere he questions not only how to trace up the specific reality of a female character but more broadly, and this is how it all hangs together for me, the capability of the theatrical stage itself to continue to effect processes of confrontation and awareness. He readily envisages a future culture where the theatre's function, and therefore art and culture as they exist today, will have been completely transformed by changed social needs. The rise of telematic or live-fed spectacles, the popularity of web-based radio, the persistence of site-specific performance events, this democratisation of voices go hand in hand with Müller's notion, but they do not necessarily in and of themselves bypass neither the corporate ownership of the public square nor its phallogocentric ideology. In what kind of a culture will gender have been completely transformed?

**Gertrude Stein said of prepositions** that they are "the thing that can of all things be most mistaken"<sup>6</sup>. Let us suggest that woman is a preposition. What does of, by, with, into, under, towards reveal? What kind of directionality and discursive operations externalise, denaturalise identity into its gestures, its performance, its likelihood, so that everything starts to highlight the structure where there used to be Nature, or the

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<sup>4</sup> Retallack, Joan. *The Poethical Wager*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.p.106

<sup>5</sup> Müller, Heiner. *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*. Ed. Carl Weber. vols. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984.p.139

<sup>6</sup> Stein, Gertrude. "Poetry and Grammar". *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures, 1909-45.* Ed. Edited by Patricia Meyerowitz. vols. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.p. 127.

syntactical rule of gendering where there used to be something real? For some, like the British poet and feminist theorist Denise Riley, it is good to know that “I am a woman only sometimes”<sup>7</sup>. So timed a woman. Sometimes I man a wooing. All wool to some eyes. “I don’t know myself” writes Cixous. She continues: “We could think over these mysteries [mysteries of gender and gender identification] but we don’t. We are unable to inscribe or write them since we don’t know who we are, something we never consider since we always take ourselves for ourselves; and from this point on we no longer know anything. I’ll tell you frankly that I haven’t the faintest idea who I am, but at least I know I don’t know”<sup>8</sup>. For Judith Butler, to give an account of oneself retains a degree of opacity. It isn’t so much about professed ignorance, this could prove self-congratulatory, as about partial view.

**This notion of opacity is about** non-transmission, local untranslatability. This body is both already translated (by gender, say) (by daily commute, say) (by having an accent, say) and remains also in part non-translatable, non-reducible along representational lines<sup>9</sup>. It makes my address necessarily contextual and could guarantee an effort towards difference. She calls this effort to be different to one’s perceived self one of responsibility. Similarly, you are different from what I envisage or imagine you to be. “We are not mere dyads on our own, since our exchange is conditioned and mediated by language, by conventions, by a sedimentation of norms that are social in character and that exceed the perspective of those involved in the exchange”<sup>10</sup>. To begin to see everything and everybody from this angle. Not I love you, but I love TO you. Now here’s a great use of a preposition. “I love TO you” writes Luce Irigaray. The phrase is grammatically awkward. It proposes a dynamic directionality, not fusion, nor emotive immersion, but a conscious separateness yet connection in the form taken by the lovers and their address to each other, and by extension their tentative availability to the world. Love is direction, positioning. It is the apprenticeship of reciprocity. A poetic traffic based on the complexities of exchange and of separateness. It tries to bridge current difficulties in establishing communal yet differential dialogue. It makes it explicitly mysterious, not self-evident to know how to talk about oneself as gendered being. And how to talk to someone else.

**For a long time, I’ve been** working out of pressure points, awkward grammatical and cultural units that force up questions about linguistic belonging, bodyshape, the

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<sup>7</sup> Riley, Denise. *Am I That Name? : Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Sellers, Susan, ed. *The Hélène Cixous Reader*. New York London: Routledge, 1994.p.200.

<sup>9</sup> Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. p.39.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Giving an account*, p. 28.

communal bonds or binds or bounds that lodge within my own make-up. I know for instance that when I speak I get heard as a non-native English speaker. I also appear to be female, and white. Do I need to also declare myself so, and how or why would I do this? Is this a framing I can avoid? A framing I can dissociate from? A framing you need? How do I declare myself or appear to function? How many terms are necessary or viable? Surely they don't all apply at once nor all the time. When and how and why do I appear to speak to behave to work as a female, as a trilingual writer, as a gay citizen, a white European, EU resident, artist in London, writer in academic employment. How do I announce points of obvious or difficult visibility not primarily as points of belonging, but rather as moments of contact and of contract with the world? There is no equivalence between the terms, each carry their own political and cultural histories and assumptions of passing or not passing, of inclusion or exclusion. To pass through one term and become suspicious at the next. To carry this jigsaw. To know that attitudes to gender and citizenship keep on flipping in and out of focus, as laws change, as social ways change in favour of wider or narrower processes of inclusion and mixity in society. They are still often the first to change back during political unrest, economic distress, religious encroachment on civic life, witness the drastic changes to women's social and professional lives in recent fundamentalist countries.

**Sweat under the collar because boxes** tick me off. That's it sorted. Does that make me anything else? From now on make me nothing else? The arrow says that way. Now point that finger. Mostly it feels like walking into a glass-door or cube. Like measuring one's sleeping quarters. Yet declared as much by what I'm not. Or by what I remain unawares of being, or of being connected to. An Amharic speaking sax-player in the clubs of Addis Ababba. A Spanish film-maker in the streets of Paris. Large birds in vast blue cedar trees. Clarice Lispector became a cockroach. Kafka was a dog. The foreigner has the animal. Metonymic, interdependent cultural stretches, animist extensions, prejudicial or exploratory dehumanisations live in the grass skin of one's humanness. My truth is not in what I say I am, and the ways it measures me up, but in all I am with. In all I accept to be with. In all I seek to be.

**In the long run, the most** radical domino effect of questioning identity must be that it is felt through the entire tissue. Social, mental, perceptual. Paul Gilroy has called this the necessity to "learn to practice a systematic form of disloyalty to our own local civilisation if we seek to understand or interact equitably with others formed

elsewhere"<sup>11</sup>. Cixous's perception of writing as an exploration of embodied language emerges from gendered and cultural displacement. In a sense her view of language and writing stems not only from being occupied by gender but also from her colonised background as an Algerian Jew of European descent, brought up speaking German in a French and Arabic context. For many bicultural artists and writers, the processes of identity and of writing acquisition go hand in hand with aspects of cultural belonging and the way this articulates their lived body. When the writer's cultural and social body accommodates two or three languages and/or cultures, their inscriptive narratives and poetics are necessarily at a break from a monolingual textual body-type and a nationally defined writing culture. It is often accompanied by a propensity towards open-forms and mixed genres, remains dubious and questioning of defining terms, can be resistant of exile or immigrant narratives and their inward longing for a traditionalist past where identities are firmly locked in place, rather than in play<sup>12</sup>. The binarism of gender continues here to play its part in locking narratives into unexamined and familial patterns of kinship.

**Feminism acted as the launch pad** for multiple and ongoing critical collectivities. Whether admitted to or not, it did change our perception of the world. For this reason, in the great scheme of things, it matters little today whether one's individual impulse towards feminism is anti-feminist, feminist or feminoid. What I think does matter is that the histories and battles of feminist struggle and gendered consciousness are picked up and utilised in the formations they now need to take. It does matter that one acts in the knowledge of these many fronts and sometimes antagonistic yet co-existent phases of cultural and social history, through which world cultures have experienced a denaturation, yet far from neutralisation, of big essentialist narrative categories (gender, race, sexuality, history,...). It matters that one makes one's art from contingent and insurrectional terrains that are conscious of identificatory structures.

**It is difficult to stay precise**, close to one's chest, aware of how to use privilege, prejudice, one's positioning in the world, all the while trying to throw a line into the pot. How does one find ways of making a meal out of one's art, and out of one's bones. The bottomline is still that the social and symbolic reality of gender is far from undone, far from having achieved the conceptual and political restructuring we need

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<sup>11</sup> Gilroy, Paul. Postcolonial Melancholia. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. p.71

<sup>12</sup> I have discussed this elsewhere in relation to the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Dictée, Lisa Linn Kanae's volume Sista Tongue, Rosmarie Waldrop's Key to the Language of America, Erin Moure's complex translative poetic practice.

in order to neutralise the archaic and symbolic violence that persists towards women-identified or women-different beings. For this reason, an awareness of located and gendered identity is crucial, however faulty and open-ended. It sort of clarifies that there is a problem, makes the terms available to be worked on and worked out. It keeps terms of dominance and power in play, both socially and symbolically. The cultural impact of located and socially aware artwork, its “where-ness”, is to a large extent a product both of its own risk-taking and of the ways in which it accepts its own localised sociality, and this can be at odds with its own originating cultural terms. This is perhaps what Gayatri Spivak means when she talks about “transnational literacy”, modes of learning and of thinking that are more concerned with an awareness of geopolitics and global capital rather than with fantasies of national origin<sup>13</sup>. It remains necessary to realise how one is used by what one identifies with.

**“Orientons nous”** exclaims the Martiniquais writer Edouard Glissant in his *Poetics of Relation* in which he looks for the terms of an inclusive, historically charged, yet not identity-ruled poetics. “To orient oneself”, to look for one’s direction, is to carry out a process of orientation and it is simultaenously a way of looking East. From the West Indies, a turn to the East is a turn across the oceans, towards Europe and Africa without diminishing the radical contemporaneity of Caribbean creolité. Neither aspects are denied, both have to be taken into account in pursuit of a creole poetics that is also a poetics for the coming world. For Glissant, the visionary and liberatory is tied to a strongly materialist cultural poetics.

**Importantly, the value of erring, of being disorientated,** which in itself calls on more movement, is part of the process of orientation. What had escaped the known of the settled, escaped the possible of the lodged, escaped the very idea of being “here” is experienced once one accepts that one is lost, that one is getting lost, becoming lost, staying lost while looking for new directions. Orientation becomes a form of belonging, or a method for thoughtful belonging. This is a paradoxical line of thinking. The feminist and queer thinker Sara Ahmed pursues exactly this line: “Being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar”<sup>14</sup>. We open up our own narratives, those we think we know, and register that we don’t know where they go from here. Again, we start with that. Jane Blocker in her excellent study on the exile

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<sup>13</sup>Spivak, G. “Claiming transformation: travel notes with pictures” in Ahmed, Sara ed. (et al). *Transformations : Thinking through Feminism*. London: Routledge, 2000. p.123.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology : Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, N.C. ; London: Duke University Press, 2006. p.7.



Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, writes that “understanding identity as having these “performative” qualities enables a discussion of gender, color, nation, and ethnicity that ... allows us to ask “where is Ana Mendieta (implying contingency), instead of, “who is Ana Mendieta? (implying an unconditional truth)”<sup>15</sup>. What still matters is not first and foremost where you’re from, or what you’re from, it’s where you’re at, it’s how you move along the sets of **points and pointers that drive you**.

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<sup>15</sup> Blocker, Jane. Where Is Ana Mendieta? : Identity, Performativity, and Exile. Durham, N.C. ; London: Duke University Press, 1999. p. 25