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# For a Modest Human Exceptionalism

## *Simone de Beauvoir and the “New Materialisms”*

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### Abstract

The “new materialisms” offer an important critique of “human exceptionalism,” challenging deeply held conceptions of “man” as a “sovereign subject.” However, they tend to overstate their claims by ignoring those qualities of freedom that still remain distinctive to human life. This article turns to Beauvoir to make a case for a more “modest” human exceptionalism: while she also grounds the human inextricably in the material, Beauvoir offers fuller resources than do new materialisms for examining human freedom and human responsibility to resist its oppression.

### Résumé

Les tenants des « nouveaux matérialismes » proposent une critique importante de l’« exceptionnalisme humain », laquelle remet en cause la conception fondamentale de l’« Homme » en tant que « sujet souverain ». Cependant, ils ont tendance à exagérer leurs prétentions en ignorant les formes de liberté qui singularisent la vie humaine. Cet article recourt à Beauvoir pour plaider en faveur d’un exceptionnalisme humain plus « modeste » : si elle situe aussi l’être humain au cœur de l’inextricable matérialité du monde, ses travaux fournissent des ressources plus complètes que les nouveaux matérialismes pour examiner la liberté humaine et la responsabilité de résister à son oppression qui en découle.

### Keywords

Simone de Beauvoir – abortion – freedom – materiality – historical materialism – human exceptionalism – new materialisms – responsibility

This paper engages with the “new materialisms” by bringing them into conversation with the work of Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir’s philosophy of ambiguity insists on the embodied qualities of human existence and it resonates with much of what is valuable about the new materialisms. However, she also diverges from some of their more emphatic denials of “human exceptionalism.” There are differences among the new materialisms, but fundamental to all of them is their insistence on the openness and indeterminacy of material processes and on the way these flow across the boundaries, as conventionally conceived, between human beings and all other organic life forms and (also for some thinkers) inorganic materiality. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, writes that “there is no definitive break between animals and humans, or between animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Mind is not an attribute of a consciousness much like our own but characterizes all primary forms.”<sup>1</sup> As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost well summarize, for the new materialists

the human species, and the qualities of self-reflection, self-awareness, and rationality traditionally used to distinguish it from the rest of nature, may now seem little more than contingent and provisional forms or processes within a broader evolution or cosmic productivity. [...] From this perspective the difference between humans and animals, or even between sentient and non-sentient matter, is a question of degree more than kind.<sup>2</sup>

The new materialisms in important ways deepen critiques of the “sovereign subject” that have already been elaborated by environmental, feminist, post-colonial, and critical race theorists. They effectively contest still-pervasive, neo-Cartesian conceptions of “rational man” as a disembodied sovereign subject, the master of all creation. Calling attention to the intrinsic inherence of human beings in the material world, they help to moderate the hubris that justifies such a “man’s” domination of nature and of “lesser” human beings. However, in their eagerness further to discredit the myth of man the sovereign, and to dismiss the claims of “human exceptionalism” that accompany it, they tend to exaggerate their own claims for the dissolution of the distinctly human. Accordingly, various difficulties, both ontological and ethico-political arise, and I shall argue through my reading of Beauvoir that there still remains a case for acknowledging the existence of what I call a *modest* human exceptionalism.

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1 Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 13.

2 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1–43, pp. 20–21.

Who counts as a “new materialist” is something of an open question, since a range of thinkers who also differ somewhat in foci and emphases have become grouped together under this title. Even so, and at the risk of over-simplifying, here I sketch out in broad-brush what I find most problematic about the new materialisms. First, by working at too general a level of abstraction, they tend to collapse the human into the material world writ large to such an extreme degree that they obscure what still remains ontologically distinct to human life: namely, the qualities particular to human agency that should be called “freedom.” Human freedom, I shall argue, while not “sovereign” but rather inextricably material, still remains qualitatively distinct from the “agency” that new materialists wish to attribute, variously, to “assemblages” and “actants;” to human-nonhuman “intra-actions,” or to indivisible “entanglements” of sentient and non-sentient matter. To elide what is better called the “dynamism” of matter, that is, its effective energy or force, with the intentional agency of which human beings are capable, namely freedom, has the benefit of humbling human hubris. However, it also obscures rather than illuminates many phenomena that are the effects of distinctly human action.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the new materialisms generally emphasize the contingency and *indeterminacy* of the material, often advancing an ontology grounded in quantum theory, or sometimes in neo-Bergsonian or other vitalist theories of “fluidity” or of open “becoming.” However, their persistent focus on indeterminacy comes at the cost of obscuring aspects of material human life in which power relations, such as those of class and social status, are *stably* instantiated. The long-term reproduction of inequalities and forms of domination among human beings, and the effects of those specifically *intra*-human institutions, practices, and relations that can block human freedom and give rise to its oppression, can become occluded. Indeed, in their focus on the general indeterminacy, flows, and porosity of the material the new materialisms are often so inattentive to specific social contexts and power differentials that they risk

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3 Bruno Latour has been especially influential here in arguing for nonhuman agency. For him, “assemblages” consist of human and nonhuman “actants,” in which “agency” is said to pertain not to individual entities but instead to lie in their “intra-action.” See his *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004. See, similarly, the “actor-network theory” of Lambros Malafouris: “Agency and intentionality may not be innate properties of things, but they are not innate properties of humans either; they are emergent properties of material engagement, that is, of the grey zone where brain, body and culture conflate.” “At the Potter’s Wheel: An Argument for Material Agency,” in *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, ed. Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris, Berlin, Springer, 19–36, p. 22.

producing an analogue to the very universalism that they critique: just as the celebration of universal “man” risks obscuring oppressive social differences, so too may the celebration of a material oneness in which “we” all participate dangerously obscure them.<sup>4</sup>

Third, although the starting-point for the new materialists is broadly ontological in orientation, an inquiry into the qualities of material being writ large, they are also driven by strong ethico-political commitments concerning human ecological damage or the destruction of “gaia,” and some are also concerned with concomitant harms to human beings. However, because “agency” is said to be so widely and fluidly distributed among diverse “intra-acting” material entities, *human* responsibility for harms—which are alone those harms that we might and should endeavor to ameliorate—become difficult to identify. For, importantly, human responsibility does not involve only the attribution of blame (whether this be to individuals, collectivities, and/or institutions) but also an obligation to ameliorate or prevent harms. It would not make sense, for example, to call on beavers to cease blocking rivers, but we can object to human plans to dam them, and we can hold human agents responsible for addressing environmental and social harms that have resulted from their construction.

Beauvoir was not a new materialist *avant la lettre* and her moral concerns did not extend to care of the material world writ large or to the sufferings of animals (though one might speculate that they possibly would do so were she alive today). However, her focus on the material qualities of human existence, on the always-embodied and situated qualities of the particular kind of agency that we may call human “freedom,” and on the ways in which intra-human relations are always materially mediated, enables her to address the materiality of human life in ways that challenge overly emphatic rejections of human exceptionalism—yet do so without returning us to the terrain of the disembodied “sovereign subject.” Beauvoir also carefully shows us, in ways the new materialists generally do not, how freedom may come to be blocked by specifically *human* agency. For, contrary to new materialist affirmations of fluidity and openness, freedom is often oppressed by *persistent*, even reified, power-laden human institutions and practices, such as those to which women and other groups are subject. There is, she argues, a specifically human responsibility

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4 For an excellent exploration of this issue from the perspective of postcolonial feminism, and a call for greater attention to the specificity of concrete human situations, see Deboleena Roy and Banu Subramaniam, “Matter in the Shadows: Feminist New Materialism and the Practices of Colonialism,” in *Mattering: Feminism, Science, and Materialism*, ed. Victoria Pitts-Taylor, New York, New York University Press, 2016, pp. 23–42.

for such oppressions. This concerns not only making retrospective judgments about blame but also includes the forward-looking imperative to act to address oppressions. In this respect, she writes, one can be “responsible” without being “guilty.”<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, my paper proceeds in four sections. The first discusses some ontological questions raised by reading Beauvoir with and against the more emphatic of the new materialists, taking Jane Bennett’s work as a key example. The second then turns to the “Biology” chapter of *The Second Sex* to consider what Beauvoir tells us about the *ambiguity* of the material, embodied quality of human existence in general; about how, if you like, human beings are at once both on and off a continuum with other animal species. The third section turns to Beauvoir’s examination of humanly established and persistent material institutions as they oppressively impinge on women. Here, the question of need and Beauvoir’s appropriation of aspects of a different kind of materialism—namely, *historical* materialism—to examine oppression come to the fore. The final section focuses on Beauvoir’s discussion of abortion in *The Second Sex* as a site at which to draw together the strands of my argument.

## 1 Matters of Ontology

There is a spectrum of intensities with which the new materialists reject human exceptionalism, and a few perhaps lie somewhat nearer to my own defense of a “modest” exceptionalism. Frost, for example, more “modestly” argues that “what we need in place of the fantasy of human exceptionalism is a different figure of the human, one that does not succumb to the conceits of old but also does not conceptually dissolve humans as identifiable agents.”<sup>6</sup> However, the more common and emphatic rejections of human exceptionalism endeavor to refute human difference by dissolving the human within the “agentic” qualities, the “animacy,” or (in pan-psychic variants) the “consciousness,” of all material phenomena. Agency, intentionality, even consciousness, it is claimed, are qual-

5 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York, Citadel Books, 1967 [1947], p. 98. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *EA*. How far responsibility, in either sense, is individual and how far collective, how far attributable to groups or mediated by institutions or social structures, are complex questions of which Beauvoir is well aware. Although responsibility may often be distributed, and intentions and outcomes may frequently be misaligned, this does not per se diminish our accountability, she argues.

6 Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 13.

ities of being *in toto*. They persist over the plenum of all things and processes, from the quantum level upwards or, sometimes less ambitiously, they are qualities of all living organisms. Some new materialists draw from recent developments in sub-atomic physics, inferring the qualities of all material existence from quantum indeterminacy. For example, Karen Barad claims that “[q]uantum physics is part of a complexly entangled web of phenomena that include scientific, technological, military, economic, medical, political, social, and cultural apparatuses of bodily production, to name but a few.”<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Alexander Wendt writes, “All intentional phenomena are quantum mechanical. That goes both for the private thoughts inside our heads and for public or collective intentions like norms, culture, and language, which we might generically call institutions.”<sup>8</sup> Others turn instead, or as well, to biology and to vitalist traditions in order to contest any significant animal-human distinctions. For example, “according to Darwinian precepts,” Grosz writes, “culture is not different in kind from nature. [...] [L]anguage, culture, intelligence, reason, imagination, memory—terms commonly claimed as defining characteristics of the human and the cultural—are all equally effects of the same rigorous criteria of natural selection.”<sup>9</sup>

Jane Bennett, to whose work I now turn, exemplifies the difficulties that attend the more emphatic end of the anti-exceptionalism spectrum. She invokes Spinoza’s monism as her “touchstone,” writing: “I share his faith that everything is made of the same substance. Spinoza rejected the idea that man ‘disturbs rather than follows Nature’s order’ and promises instead to ‘consider human actions and appetites just as if it were an investigation into lines, planes, or bodies.’”<sup>10</sup> However, if a monistic materiality encompasses the totality of being then it is difficult clearly to distinguish the human from other material entities. Instead, agency is seen as distributed more widely across material

7 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 388.

8 Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 149.

9 Elizabeth Grosz, “Darwin and Feminism,” in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2008, 25–51, pp. 43–44. See also further examples of work in a new materialist vein in Alaimo and Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms*; Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2012; Coole and Frost, eds., *New Materialisms*; Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015; Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2010; Knappe and Malafouris, eds., *Material Agency*.

10 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010, p. x.

entities and flows, emerging in the unpredictable play or “intra-action” among diverse kinds of “actants.” An actant may be human or nonhuman and, as Bennett quotes from Bruno Latour, “It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general.”<sup>11</sup> It follows then that claims as to the specificity of human beings as subjective knowers or intentional agents are profoundly put into question. In her radical challenge to “human exceptionalism” Bennett thus asks us:

[to] picture an *ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations* between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral. All forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, effective, and signaling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, serves, consumes, produces, and competes.<sup>12</sup>

However, an embodied human being *is* “radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it coexists.” Indeed, the very distinction Bennett makes in the passage (surely with shades of Aristotle) between a “*speaking* human body” and “*signaling* nonhumans” points toward a significant leap or disjuncture, one which radically differentiates the human.<sup>13</sup> Members of other species may certainly also demonstrate qualities of consciousness and agency as they respond to each other and to their environments. But that human beings are (among their other distinctive characteristics) a uniquely speaking, indeed concept-forming, symbolic-language using species, shapes their agency and consciousness in particular ways, and is integral to the qualities specific to human freedom. However—and as Beauvoir insists—this is not to affirm that human consciousness is autonomous or disembodied. To the contrary, specifically human bodily characteristics are precisely what *enable* particular qualities and abilities, including the capacity for speech, that human beings alone possess. Indeed, as Charles Fernyhough points out, “for all their propensities for learning sign language, chimps and bonobos can’t even get started on human speech. [...] [T]hey simply can’t shape their tongue, lips and mouths in the right contortions.”<sup>14</sup>

11 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 116–117, emphasis added.

13 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

14 Charles Fernyhough, *The Baby in the Mirror*, London, Granta Books, 2009, p. 72.

Indeed, Bennett herself also implicitly acknowledges the presence of distinctive qualities of human consciousness when she later concedes, against the grain of her own arguments, that there is a “performative contradiction” involved in the activity of theorizing about human and nonhuman material oneness.<sup>15</sup> It is, she says, a “perfectly reasonable objection” to say that “the ‘posthumanist’ gestures of vital materialism entail a performative contradiction: ‘Is it not, after all, a self-conscious, language wielding human who is articulating this philosophy of vibrant matter?’”<sup>16</sup> To this objection Bennett offers not a response, however, but rather a deflection: Why, she asks, even if we agree that humans participate in assemblages with other material “actants” in which agency is not specifically “theirs,” do we still look for “that special something that makes *human* participation in assemblages radically *different*?”<sup>17</sup> Why, she asks, “are we so keen to distinguish the human self from the field?”<sup>18</sup> There are several possible good answers to this question, and some of the most important bear on our capacities for moral and political life. Bennett, being quite consistent here, seeks to reject attributions of moral blame to human actors, be they individuals or collectivities, because, she argues, agency is too complexly distributed among actants for this to be justified.

Discussing the great blackout of 2003 (which left many millions in the Northeast United States without electric power for several days) as an example, Bennett suggests there was “not so much a doer (an agent) behind the deed (the blackout) as a doing and effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage.”<sup>19</sup> There was, she says, a “confederate” agency in which the sources of the blackout included (among others) not only social attitudes, government policy, and corporate greed but also nonhuman “agencies” such as “a quirky electron flow and a spontaneous fire.”<sup>20</sup> Their intra-action was such, she argues, that “blame” cannot be attributed to specific persons or entities, not even to the executives of the energy company.<sup>21</sup> “This federation of actants is a creature that the concept of moral responsibility fits only loosely and to which the charge of blame will not quite stick,” she claims.<sup>22</sup> Instead, she suggests a theory of “distributive agency” in which there is “always a swarm of vitalities at play.”<sup>23</sup> If by “blame” one sim-

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15 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 120.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 32.



ply means having played some role in producing an event, then we could say, as Bennett does, that “blame” is distributed among many and diverse phenomena that intra-act. But even then, “blame” is not necessarily evenly distributed and it may “stick” to some “agents”—in this case executives of the energy company with whom Bennett says she has some sympathy—far more than to others. However, “responsibility” is not only a matter of retrospectively assigning blame for what has occurred. It also carries a forward-looking meaning: being responsible also implies having an obligation to redress or mitigate harms, or to try to prevent their future occurrences. But “responsibility” in this sense can only be demanded of human beings, for it requires capacities for deliberation and judgment, for consciously planning and coordinating actions, and so forth, that flows of electrons, fires, and other material “agents” simply do not possess.

With this, let me return again to Bennett’s Spinozist claim that man does *not* “disturb the single substance of being.”<sup>24</sup> Against such a view Beauvoir wrote in 1944, in criticism of Spinoza, that it is impossible fully to identify oneself with this “single substance.” To the contrary, I *do* “disturb” nature’s order, since in the very act of claiming I do not do so, I distinguish myself from it: “My presence is,” Beauvoir writes, and “it breaks up the unity and the continuity of the mass of indifference into which I wanted it to be absorbed. Spinoza’s existence sharply contradicts the truth of Spinozism.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, our very ability to formulate a concept such as “being”—or indeed to plan more reliable electricity supply-systems—challenges a monistic materialism. It also suggests that the “performative contradiction” that Bennett acknowledges, but does not address, is more than a propositional paradox: it expresses the profound *ontological ambiguity* of human existence. For, as Beauvoir also writes with regard to sentient life, unlike for plants and animals, for human beings “life is not *just* a natural process [although it is that]; it thinks itself [*elle se pense elle-même*],” and man “is part of the world of which he is consciousness.”<sup>26</sup> She goes on to note that, as long as there have been philosophers, they have tried to mask this highly disquieting ambiguity: “They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to absorb matter into mind, or to merge them together within a single substance

24 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. x.

25 Simone de Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2004, 90–149, p. 101. Essay originally published in 1944. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *PCE*.

26 Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity,” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader, Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2004, 289–298, p. 289, emphasis added. Introduction originally published in 1946.

[*dans une substance unique*].<sup>27</sup> However, neither dualism which, as she notes, ends either by reducing consciousness to matter or matter to consciousness, nor a monism that affirms the unity of being as a “single substance,” can grasp that paradoxical existent: a human being. For to be human is to be, indissolubly, a material *and* a conscious existent: an embodied subjectivity.

This is not to say, however, that human existence is a harmonious blending of materiality and consciousness, of body and subjectivity; there is no smooth or happy “synthesis” found here. To the contrary, human existence involves a painful ambiguity, indeed, she says, it is lived as a heart-wrenching “tear” (*un déchirement*) in being; an ever-unstable, painful, paradoxical, tension, in which one must give up “any hope of escaping into inner purity or losing [oneself] in some foreign object.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, even though each lives this ambiguous freedom individually, it is always and necessarily lived as an ambiguity that weaves itself throughout the multiplicity of human social relations within which each is situated. For although freedom is an ontological quality of human existence, it can only be realized as it projects itself into the social world. It requires a concrete, practical field for its enactment and so it cannot be other than *intra-humanly* (as well as otherwise materially) situated. For “no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others” and, accordingly, “to will oneself free is also to will others free.”<sup>29</sup>

However, here, in the intra-human ontological qualities of human freedom also lies the possibility of its oppression. For human beings are vulnerable to specific *humanly* initiated harms in situations where their ambiguous, embodied freedom is limited or foreclosed by the actions of others, or by the sedimentation of human actions in oppressive social practices and institutions.<sup>30</sup> “Man is never oppressed by things,” Beauvoir writes. She goes on to observe that,

Certainly, a material obstacle may cruelly stand in the way of an undertaking: floods, earthquakes, locusts, epidemics and plagues are scourges [...]. [However] one does not submit to a war or an occupation as one does to an earthquake: one must take a side for or against it, through which the

27 *Ibid.* p. 290, translation modified.

28 Simone de Beauvoir, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2004, 175–193, p. 190. Essay originally published in 1945.

29 *EA*, pp. 67, 72.

30 See Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, especially chapter 2, for my fuller discussion of the various dynamics through which oppression can operate.

foreign wills become allied or hostile. It is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful.<sup>31</sup>

Here, then, responsibility arises for Beauvoir as an ontologically given commitment to struggle against oppressions even when one is not oneself subjected to them, and to do so in the full knowledge that one's solidarity may well result in failure of various kinds.<sup>32</sup>

Alia Al-Saji has argued that Beauvoir's work (notably *The Second Sex*) suffers from a contradiction between affirming an existentialist philosophy of the free, transcendent subject and a philosophy that attends to material life: there are two "contradictory aspects of the work," she writes, continuing, "I find in *The Second Sex* a tension between two different philosophical directions or commitments: on the one hand, a philosophy of existence, which privileges conscious existence and transcendence as the taking up and surpassing of materiality and life, and, on the other, hand, a tentative philosophy of life and time that understands life in terms of ramified tendencies subject to social-historical elaboration and actualization."<sup>33</sup> However, this is surely not a contradiction on Beauvoir's part. Rather, the "tension" Beauvoir presents is the difficult ontological tension of human life *itself*: that of an ambiguous existent that is at once consciousness and materiality, at once individual and social-historical. In the next sections I focus more fully on *The Second Sex*, for this is where Beauvoir examines such ambiguity and its vulnerability the most extensively. Exploring the situation of women, she both anticipates what is important in new materialist critiques of "man's" claims to be a "sovereign subject," while also insisting on what remains distinctively human: namely, the existence of an embodied (thus material) and also always a socially and historically situated (and thus, in other ways, material) freedom.<sup>34</sup> Crucially, then, this is a freedom that can be subject to oppression.

31 EA, pp. 81–82, translation modified.

32 On the tendency to failure inherent in political action, see especially Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism."

33 Alia Al-Saji, "Material Life: Bergsonian Tendencies in Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy," in *Differences: Rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray*, ed. Emily Ann Parker and Anne van Leeuwen, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, 21–53, p. 24.

34 As Toril Moi has nicely put it, Beauvoir makes "the double claim that the body *is* a situation and that it always is *in* situation." *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 67.

## 2 Ambiguities of Embodiment in *The Second Sex*

Asking, in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, “What is a woman?” Beauvoir initially answers that a woman is man’s “Other”: “She is the inessential compared to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.”<sup>35</sup> However, this is not, contrary to some misreadings, an ontological claim on Beauvoir’s part. Indeed, her key point is going to be precisely that man is *not*—he cannot be—the Absolute, the Subject, as he asserts; nor can woman be wholly his Other. It is rather that, in his vain endeavor to assert himself as the Absolute, man projects onto woman what he seeks to escape: namely, the vulnerability and finitude that accompany his embodiment. He thus casts her, above all, as body: as her sex, as womb, and as threatening nature. However, this endeavor is bound to fail. As Beauvoir drily observes:

Man claims to make Spirit [*l’Esprit*] triumph over Life, activity over passivity; his consciousness keeps nature at a distance, his will shapes it, but in the form [*la figure*] of his sex organ he rediscovers life, nature, and passivity in himself [...]. As a subject he posits the world, and, remaining outside the universe he posits, he makes himself lord of it; if he grasps himself as flesh, as sex, he is no longer autonomous consciousness, transparent freedom: he is engaged in the world, a limited and perishable object.<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, women are not reducible to the role of the Other. Although women have, for the most part, complied in their alterity to varying extents, they too are subjects. “What specifically defines the situation of woman,” Beauvoir writes, “is that while being, like all human beings, an autonomous freedom, she finds and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object [*on prétend la figer en objet*].”<sup>37</sup> But if woman could *literally* be reduced to man’s Other, to the status of a material object vis-à-vis the Subject, or if he were no more than a pure consciousness, then both would cease to be human beings at all.

Indeed, if woman’s objectification were complete, this could not satisfy man, since she could no longer be brought to recognize his status as the Absolute.

35 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, p. 6, translation modified; originally published as *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 1, Gallimard, coll. “Folio,” Paris, 1988 [1949], p. 15. Subsequent references to these works are respectively indicated by the abbreviations *SS* and *DSI*.

36 *SS*, p. 180; *DSI*, p. 270.

37 *SS*, p. 17, translation modified; *DSI*, p. 31.

Thus what is at issue here is what Axel Honneth has helpfully called “fictive reification”—the treatment of persons “*as if* they were mere things.”<sup>38</sup> However, fictions are also “real”: that is, they carry weight; they have effects that take *material* forms; they shape human bodies and needs, desires, and agencies. Furthermore, because such fictions are not literally “destinies,” because they are not actually determinate, they will also demand some complicity from their “objects.” Women, it follows, play a part in their own alterity.

Strikingly, Beauvoir starts the chapter on biology by taking pains to point out that the division of a species into two sexes is *not* a universal necessity. To the contrary, in many one-celled species multiplication takes place without sexual differentiation; in other species there is parthenogenesis or hermaphroditism. Besides, she points out, even when there is generally clear-cut sexual dimorphism, intersexuality is still common in numerous species—including human beings. “Even in species where sexual division is the most clear-cut, there are individuals that are both male and female simultaneously: cases of intersexuality are numerous in animals and human beings.”<sup>39</sup> “Indeed,” she claims, “in nature nothing is ever completely clear: the two types, male and female, are not always sharply distinguished.”<sup>40</sup> As the new materialists helpfully elaborate in far more depth than Beauvoir, there is much greater openness and contingency in nature than wholly “finalist” biological theories suppose.

In anticipatory agreement with the new materialisms, Beauvoir also suggests that a certain “transcendence” and a “project” (her terms) can be attributed to *all* animate phenomena: “we can affirm that all living phenomena [*tout fait vivant*] indicate a transcendence, that a project swells from every function [*en toute fonction s’empâte un project*].”<sup>41</sup> “Transcendence,” that is, an open project, an agency upsurging toward a future, is not then a quality of human existence alone; however, it will still take distinct forms in human life. Here the question of *degrees* of transcendence matters. One can, for example, attribute a “small agency” to earthworms, as Bennett does, or acknowledge certain reasoning processes, and individuated “personalities,” in higher primates, and yet still affirm the distinctiveness of qualities of human freedom.<sup>42</sup> For one does not have to be a committed Habermasian to acknowledge that the unique human ability for speech, with its key role in enabling not

38 Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, ed. Martin Jay, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 157.

39 *SS*, p. 30; *DSI*, p. 49.

40 *SS*, p. 38; *DSI*, p. 61.

41 *SS*, p. 26, translation modified; *DSI*, p. 43.

42 On the agency of earthworms, see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 94–98.

only subjective and intersubjective human life but also our greater ability than other species to transform our own culture and ambient material world over time, distinguishes us even as we remain on a continuum with other animate species.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as Frost writes, in a less anti-exceptionalist vein than Bennett, “to insist on human creatureliness is not to deny humans’ difference from other creatures, and there does not seem to be a particularly good reason to refuse to acknowledge the difference of human creatures from other creatures too.”<sup>44</sup>

Far from being a “mute facticity” for Beauvoir, as Judith Butler once said, one’s body is how one exists in the world: one *is* one’s body.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, already in infancy, and irrespective of sex, “the body is first the radiation of subjectivity, the instrument that brings about comprehension of the world.”<sup>46</sup> However, for a girl, her “sexual specification” also begins in infancy, for “her vocation is imperiously breathed [*insufflée*] into her from the first years of her life.”<sup>47</sup> But, then, we might well ask, what has female biology to do with this “vocation”? Well, everything and nothing. For the female child is being prepared for the “destiny” which her biology is (wrongly) said to *necessitate*—but which it does, indeed, uniquely *enable*: that is, childbearing and all that has been made to accompany it.

Only female mammals bear their young internally and suckle them, and Beauvoir argues that this form of reproduction places a far greater physiological burden on the females of the species, including human ones, than on males. Thus, if one proceeds abstractly, from what she calls “an *exclusively* physiological point of view,” it is true that women *are* negatively subjected to the requirements of human species reproduction in ways that men are not.<sup>48</sup> “A woman *is* her body as a man *is* his, but her body is something other than herself,” she writes.<sup>49</sup> Notably during menstruation, a woman acutely feels that her body is “an alienated opaque thing,” while, physiologically speaking alone, pregnancy

43 As Beauvoir writes: “One speaks only to men. Language is an appeal to the other’s freedom since the sign is only a sign through a consciousness that grasps it again.” *PCE*, p. 133.

44 Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, p. 4.

45 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 129.

46 *ss*, p. 283; *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 2, coll. “Folio,” Paris, Gallimard, 1989 [1949], p. 13. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *DSII*.

47 *ss*, p. 283; *DSII*, p. 14. Beauvoir’s striking metaphor of “breath” is significant here: a girl’s “vocation” is not inscribed *on* her body as social-constructionists would say; it literally becomes intrinsic to her living, embodied being.

48 *ss*, p. 42, note 8; *DSI*, p. 67, note 2.

49 *ss*, p. 41, translation modified; *DSI*, p. 67.

itself has no benefits for a woman; it is exhausting, dangerous, and so forth.<sup>50</sup> Beauvoir's account of the female body and women's bodily experience, describing how their reproductive physiology renders women, unlike men, "slaves" to the needs of the species, has been the subject of numerous feminist critiques. Yet, while Beauvoir's heightened rhetorical tone is certainly disturbing, it is not grounds for rejecting her claim about women's bodies: namely, that *at the level of their physiology*, that is, *abstracted* from all else that shapes human lives, women's bodies are *in general* (but also recalling that "in nature, nothing is ever completely clear") far more onerously subject to the demands of species reproduction than men's.<sup>51</sup>

However, as Beauvoir goes on to insist, in actuality, "it is *not* possible to measure *in the abstract* the burden of the generative function for woman."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, not all females are "women", she observes, and—famously—"one is not born a woman, one becomes one."<sup>53</sup> From infancy onward, a girl is schooled for what is deemed her natural "vocation"—namely, "motherhood," and all that it has implied (and continues to imply) about the privileging of heterosexuality, heterosexual marriage, female child-rearing, women's exclusions from economic activities and public life, and so forth. But whether, how far, or in what manner, a *particular* woman will embrace this "vocation" still remains open. For this remains a matter of freedom and of how she takes up the constraints of her situation. Thus, in the second volume of *The Second Sex*, "Lived Experience," Beauvoir describes at length the tremendous variety in how women take up and experience the biological specificities that are pervasive aspects of their lives. As Beauvoir concludes the "Biology" chapter: "[A] woman's body is one of the essential elements of the situation she occupies in this world. But neither is it sufficient to define her [...]; biology is not sufficient to provide an answer to the question that concerns us: Why is woman the *Other*?"<sup>54</sup>

50 ss, p. 41; *DSI*, p. 67. However, she also notes that maternity may have psychological benefits. ss, p. 42, note 8; *DSI*, p. 67, note 2. In volume 2 she describes a great variety of ways women experience maternity, some of which offer satisfactions.

51 ss, p. 38; *DSI*, p. 61.

52 ss, p. 46, emphasis added; *DSI*, pp. 74–75.

53 ss, p. 283, translation modified; *DSII*, p. 13.

54 ss, p. 48, translation modified; *DSI*, p. 77.

### 3 Need and Material Institutions: A Historical Materialist Approach

But why, then, *is* woman so persistently the *Other*? Also crucial is women's place within the social organization of material production. "Economically, men and women form almost two castes," Beauvoir writes, and, unlike in other species, "individual 'possibilities' depend on the economic and social situation."<sup>55</sup> Thus, women's roles (or lack of them) in economic production, and their limited access to material resources, establish situations of need and dependence that work to perpetuate their alterity. Here, extrapolations from quantum indeterminacy, Spinozist claims that all pertains to a single substance, or celebrations of the vibrancy matter do not much help. They do not offer us a grasp on the stability of large-scale human institutions and practices that facilitate pervasive forms of oppression.

To explore women's enduring oppression, Beauvoir selectively turns to an earlier and different kind of materialist theory—*historical* materialism. This offers resources to examine how human actions become sedimented in social structures and institutions that can stabilize relations of alterity and delimit human freedom. It thus offers insights into how the *differential* material vulnerability of some kinds of people (but not others) to social injustices and oppression arises, and how such vulnerabilities are perpetuated with what, still today, remains a remarkable degree of stability. Beauvoir was strongly critical of the deterministic "orthodox" Marxism-Leninism, espoused by French Communism in the 1940s. But, just as she rejected biology as a "destiny" while still insisting on its significance, so too she drew her own insights from historical materialism while rejecting its economic reductionism.<sup>56</sup>

"Need" is the pivot-point at which Beauvoir conjoins historical materialist insights with her account of the materiality of the lived body itself.<sup>57</sup> For the

55 ss, pp. 9, 46; *DSI*, pp. 21, 75.

56 For my fuller treatment of Beauvoir's relationship with Marxism, see Sonia Kruks, "Beauvoir and the Marxism Question," in *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer, Oxford, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, pp. 236–248. In her autobiography Beauvoir describes reading *Das Kapital* for the first time (probably in 1930). Although she says she did not yet understand its full significance, she still describes it as a major formative experience: "[T]he theory of surplus value was a revelation for me [...]. I condemned exploitation with all my heart and I felt an immense satisfaction in being shown its mechanism. The world dawned on a new day at the moment when I saw labor to be the source and substance of values. Nothing has ever made me deny this truth." *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green, Cleveland, World Publishing, 1962 [1960], p. 46, translation modified.

57 Significantly, "need" later became a key concept in Jean-Paul Sartre's account of human praxis in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Writing, in 1963, a few years after Sartre published the *Critique*, Beauvoir observed that, were she to write *The Second Sex* today,



naturalizing of women's reproductive role has long been used to *justify* excluding them from access to property and valued productive activities (that is, activities valued from men's point of view). Their ensuing dependence on men to meet their material needs is also strongly conducive to their complicity. Thus she writes:

To refuse to be the Other, to refuse complicity with man, would be to renounce all the advantages that an alliance with the superior caste may confer on them. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with protection and take care of justifying her existence: along with *economic* risk, she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help.<sup>58</sup>

Accordingly, Beauvoir's reading of history emphasizes the key role that men's control of private property plays in maintaining women in objective situations of need and material dependence, situations that invite their complicity.

Focusing primarily on the West, Beauvoir traces in historical materialist vein the long—and enduring—history of women's economic exclusions and dependency, and their effects. "Once dethroned by the advent of private property, woman's fate is linked to it across the centuries," she writes, and "abstract right is not sufficient to define the concrete situation of woman; this situation depends in great part on the economic role she plays."<sup>59</sup> Thus, for example, in ancient Greece, it was only in Sparta, where property was held in common, that woman was "almost an equal of man," while it was the monetization of feudal dues and not the emergence of practices of "courtly love" that somewhat improved the situation of women in the late Medieval period.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in discussing the role of early nineteenth-century women's reformers, Beauvoir also insists on the primacy of material change, arguing that:

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she would "base the notion of woman as other [...] on the facts of scarcity and need." However, she continues, "this modification would not necessitate any changes in the subsequent development of my argument." *Force of Circumstance*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Howard, 1992 [1963], p. 192, translation modified. This is yet another instance of the complex entwinement of Sartre's and Beauvoir's thinking. Although the concept of "need" is not yet as explicitly systematized in *The Second Sex* as it will be in the *Critique*, it runs as an inexorable vein throughout the entire work and plays a dominant role in accounting for women's alterity.

58 ss, p. 10, translation modified, emphasis added; *DSI*, p. 21.

59 ss, pp. 90, 100, translation modified; *DSI*, pp. 136, 151.

60 ss, pp. 96, 109; *DSI*, pp. 145–146, 161.

[I]t is not these theoretical debates that influenced the course of events; they only timidly reflected them. Woman regains the economic importance lost since prehistoric times because she escapes the home and plays a new role in production in the factory. The machine makes this upheaval possible because the difference in physical strength between male and female workers is canceled out in a great number of cases.<sup>61</sup>

However, technological change alone does not drive human history—nor do class relations and class struggles. Thus, although the focus on production relations and ownership as sources of women's subordination that originated with Friedrich Engels's analysis of "the woman question" remains crucial to Beauvoir's account of women's enduring oppression, she also criticizes his economic reductionism.<sup>62</sup> For it is impossible, she writes, "to consider woman *solely* as a productive force: for man she is *a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object, an Other through whom he seeks himself.*"<sup>63</sup>

It is in their ubiquitous designation as "mothers"—a term that designates them as at once biological and social reproducers of the species—that the specificities of women's bodies are most fully moulded and acted upon by diverse institutions and practices (economic, legal, political, religious, and so forth) that place them in situations of material need and dependence.<sup>64</sup> "Motherhood" involves not only the bearing and birthing of children but usually primary responsibility for their long-term care and upbringing. Changes since Beauvoir's era notwithstanding, this broadly continues to be the case. In principle, pregnancy can now be avoided with contraception, and there is absolutely no biological necessity that birth-mothers (or other women) be the ones to raise children. Yet, still, the vast majority of women in the United States (and elsewhere) bear children, and women continue to be their primary carers.<sup>65</sup>

61 ss, p. 132; *DSI*, p. 195.

62 Beauvoir focuses her critique of "orthodox" Marxism's treatment of women on Engels's work, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), since this was the canonical source for the Communist analysis of "the woman question" up to and including Beauvoir's era, and beyond.

63 ss, p. 67, emphasis added; *DSI*, p. 104.

64 "There is no way directly to oblige a woman to give birth: all that can be done is to enclose her in situations where motherhood is her only option: law or customs impose marriage on her, contraceptive measures and abortion are prohibited, divorce is forbidden." ss, p. 67; *DSI*, p. 104.

65 Women are now having children at a later age than previously, but in 2016, 86% had given birth by age 40–44. See "They're Waiting Longer, but U.S. Women Today More Likely to Have Children Than a Decade Ago," webpage, Pew Research Center, [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org).

While for those who do not have children, the norms and practices surrounding women's purported maternal "vocation" continue to shape expectations and identities.

Still today, their material dependence on men to meet their needs remains a constant in the lives of the majority of women. This dependence is frequently effected through reliance on an individual man's income by the "stay at home" mother, or of the woman who works part time (and usually at low wages) to accommodate childcare and domestic duties. In other situations it is effected through the need for "single mothers" (the poorest group of women) to obtain meagre resources from a patriarchal welfare state that also supervises their lives. For those women who do fully enter the labor force, women's average incomes, even when in full-time employment, remain far lower than men's and are often inadequate.<sup>66</sup> Here again, the stability and ubiquity of oppressive socio-economic structures that place women in situations of dependency is striking, and they cannot be grasped via new materialist affirmations of human participation in the generality of material being. Furthermore, resistance to such oppressive structures requires engaging in distinctly *human* forms of agency, where moral claims and political goals must be articulated, and judgments and plans must be made to enable coordinated action. Because they do *not* smoothly emerge from human participation in the "singularity" of material being, Beauvoir argues that forms of solidarity must intentionally be created through political struggle.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4 Abortion: Physis and Anti-physis

As Frost has pointed out, recent research on the development of germ cell DNA during pregnancy shows it to be a highly interactive "biocultural" process: the porosity of genes, their plasticity in response to environmental factors, and their role in the transmission of intergenerational change mean that fetal development is not the predetermined, automatic process that it was presumed to be in Beauvoir's era.<sup>68</sup> Even so, from the point of view of a woman who

66 Women in full-time employment earn on average about 82% of what men do in the US, with young women earning more equally with men and—not surprisingly—the gap increasing as women enter child-bearing age. "Fact Sheet, September 2019," webpage, Institute for Women's Policy Research, [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org).

67 As she wrote earlier, "wars, unemployment, crises plainly show that there doesn't exist any pre-established harmony between men [...]. [S]olidarities are created, but a man cannot enter into solidarity with all others [...]. One will always work for certain men against others." *PCE*, p. 108.

68 Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, ch. 5, pp. 53–76.

has an unwanted pregnancy, gestation still marches on irrevocably towards its dread culmination in the birth of an undesired baby—unless this march can be halted.

Truly scandalous to her readers in 1949, Beauvoir began the chapter of *The Second Sex* on “The Mother” with an extended discussion of abortion. She did so with the very precise intention to shock: to disrupt and denaturalize saccharine myths of motherhood as women’s “natural” function and the source of their fulfilment. Moreover, the stigmatization and (still today) frequent criminalization of abortion constitutes one of the bluntest tools for women’s near-literal reification. Forced maternity treats a woman as no more than a womb, a passive vessel, an object to be used for purposes not her own, and with all that follows in terms of material dependency and constraint.

Beauvoir explores both pregnancy and abortion as uniquely heightened sites of human embodied experience. A pregnancy is lived as at once a *sui generis* experience and as an intense revelation of human ambiguity. For in pregnancy a woman’s body most literally both is and yet is not “herself.” In pregnancy, a woman is not a simple “prey to the species” but a living subject, and there is “a drama which plays out between a woman and herself.”<sup>69</sup> The fetus both is and is not her: she both possesses it and yet it possesses her; it both enriches her and threatens her: she and the fetus form an “ambivalent couple.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, beyond what we could call the “normal” ambiguity of human existence as a “tear” in being, one finds a yet more heightened experience of ambiguity that is specific to a pregnant woman—and an abortion is a yet further tearing apart of that self. For although a woman is not the material vessel that men may endeavor to make of her, neither is she a sovereign subject for whom her body is a separate material object. As new materialists would concur, her body is not a mere *res extensa* from which she can detach herself.

However, at the same time, Beauvoir’s discussion directs us elsewhere, for abortion also presents a “particularly acute” form of “anti-physis.”<sup>71</sup> An abortion is a uniquely human disruption of an on-going mammalian biological process. It is a deliberate, conscious rupturing of gestation in which a woman’s own ambivalent flesh will be destroyed. Thus “she feels [*elle éprouve*] these contradictions in her wounded flesh”; she is “divided within herself,” so that, “even if she does not positively want maternity, she feels ill at ease with the ambiguity of the act she performs.”<sup>72</sup> Although members of some species may abandon

69 ss, p. 538, translation modified; *DSII*, p. 349.

70 ss, p. 538; *DSII*, p. 350.

71 ss, p. 524; *DSII*, p. 330.

72 ss, pp. 532, 531, translation modified; *DSII*, pp. 342, 340.

or kill their young, no other species (as far as we know) can intervene in this way to halt the process of gestation once it has begun. However ambivalent or coerced a woman's decision to abort may be (and it may, of course, be highly coerced), an abortion must be an intentional human intervention that *disrupts* a biological process. Here, contrary to Bennett's Spinozism, "man" (or "woman") *does* "disturb rather than follow nature's order." In abortion, *both* physis and anti-physis, the ambiguity of a woman's existence—and, indeed, of all human existence—as being *at once* "nature" and its "disturbance" is starkly revealed.

Furthermore, an abortion is an intervention that is always undertaken within a particular social context, here within (and also reinforcing) a conjuncture of oppressive socio-economic, cultural, and political institutions and practices that perpetuate women's alterity. In the hostile treatment of abortion the realities of masculine power are visibly materialized in economic, legal, medical, religious, and other institutions. Discussing abortion through a historical materialist lens, Beauvoir also argues that in postwar France it is most often a "class crime."<sup>73</sup> Wealthy women have resources to travel elsewhere for the procedure, and abortion is predominantly an illegal act of working-class women. According to studies she cites, poverty, lack of housing, and the need to seek paid work are among the most common reasons for seeking an abortion. Furthermore, most women who abort are mothers who are unable to support more children. As Beauvoir wryly notes, "this hideous woman who aborts is also this wonderful mother who rocks two blond angels in her arms: the same woman."<sup>74</sup>

Today, in the US, nearly two-thirds of women who abort also have a child already, and most live in absolute or relative poverty. In a recent study, most gave their inability to afford raising a child as a reason for aborting.<sup>75</sup> Thus, in spite of great advances in reproductive technology, little has changed economically and politically with regard to abortion since Beauvoir's time. Indeed, the present relentless proscribing and recriminalization of abortion, both in the US and elsewhere, speak to Beauvoir's perspicacity in placing the question of abortion at the very beginning of her treatment of "motherhood"—for

73 ss, p. 527; *DSII*, p. 334. Not only the abortionist but also the woman who underwent an abortion was liable to prosecution in France at the time.

74 ss, p. 527, translation modified; *DSII*, p. 335.

75 In a recent study of women having an abortion, 59 percent had previously given birth to a child or children. Seventy-five percent gave as a reason for aborting that they could not afford to have the child. The majority were in poverty: 42 percent below Federal poverty level; an additional 26 percent at 100–199 percent below it. Sixty-one percent were non-white. Contrary to the popular image, only 12 percent were teenagers. See "Fact Sheet: Induced Abortion in the United States," webpage, Guttmacher Institute, [www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states](http://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states).

sadly it is where it still belongs. This is also why when, in the 1970s, Beauvoir became involved with the growing women's movement in France she visibly—and scandalously—threw her presence into the struggle for abortion rights.

## 5 For a Modest Human Exceptionalism

As seen in her discussion of abortion—and in *The Second Sex* more generally—Beauvoir affirms not only significant material continuities but also important distinctions between nonhuman species and human beings: she makes the ontological case for affirming what I am calling a “modest human exceptionalism.” For Beauvoir, as for the new materialists, the embodied quality of human life situates it inextricably within the singularity, the plenum, of all sentient life where, to recall her description, “a project swells from every function.” Contrary to the fantasy of “man” as the “Absolute,” the “Subject,” the “Sovereign,” our materiality does not constitute a limit from which we can or should attempt to escape. To the contrary, she and the new materialists agree that it is only as embodied beings that humans feel, think, act, and are open to new “becomings.” Yet, at the same time, Beauvoir also shows us why the more emphatic new materialist denials of human exceptionalism, such as Bennett's, can be problematic. For new materialist anti-exceptionalism tends to deflect attention not only from the distinctive intra-human qualities of human freedom but also from its vulnerability to human oppressions and from our responsibility to resist them.<sup>76</sup> Writing in the 1940s, it is not surprising that Beauvoir's materialist orientation did not lead her to extend her ethical reach beyond human existence to other forms of being. One could hypothesize that, were she alive today, she would share at least some of the ecological concerns of the new materialists. However, she would still want firmly to insist on the distinctive qualities of human existence, above all the qualities of human freedom.

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76 Women are not the only group whose oppression concerned Beauvoir. Already in *The Second Sex*, and anticipating her later extensive support of anti-colonial struggles, she writes of how the “mystery” attributed to woman as the Other is also attributed to “Black” and “Yellow” people “insofar as they are considered absolutely as the inessential Other.” ss, p. 271; *DSI*, p. 403.

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