Definition and Power: Toward Authority without Privilege

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Feminists have urged women to take semantic authority. I explain what such authority is, how it depends upon community recognition, and how it differs from privilege and from authority as usually conceived under patriarchy. Understanding its nature and limits is an important part of attaining it. Understanding the role of community explains why separatism is the logical conclusion of this project and why separatism is valuable even to those who do not separate.

> It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting. (Simone de Beauvoir 1948, 9)
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> In order to improve their condition, those individuals who are today defined as women must eradicate their own definition. (Ti-Grace Atkinson 1974, 47)
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> When our feminist acts or practices have an aspect of separation, we are assuming power by controlling access and simultaneously by undertaking definition. The slave who excludes the master from her hut thereby declares herself *not a slave*. And *definition* is another face of power. (Marilyn Frye 1983, 105)

The theme of definition and re-creation is an undercurrent of much radical feminist thought. Sometimes this theme is expressed as a call for more participation by women in the ongoing creation of culture and for greater recognition of women's actual and potential contribution to culture.[1] Sometimes the theme is expressed as an injunction to women to reclaim what Mary Daly calls "the power of naming" (Daly 1973, 9). Sometimes it is expressed as a demand for more women's biography and autobiography: we need to know who we are

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and who we have been, and even more importantly, we need to articulate this ourselves if we are to call the resulting accounts authoritative.[2] At the heart of all these concerns is a demand for women to take the kind of authority to name, describe, and create our world that many men have had for a long time. This is a call for all women—whatever our age, race, class, sexual orientation, or ethnic background—to engage in the distinctively human activity of defining, describing, and re-creating ourselves while simultaneously defining, describing, and re-creating our social and material world. It is, among other things, a call for women's active participation in the projects of normative metaphysics.

The theme of redefining and re-creating women has been an important element in feminist theory because we tend to see women's various situations as contingent, as created and enforced by definitions, interpretations, and ideologies that tend generally to our detriment. These definitions, interpretations, and ideologies form an identity politics that has both theoretical and intellectual guises as well as material and practical manifestations. Our "struggle to end sexist oppression" (hooks 1984, 24) requires us to fight the practice and the ideology of dominance and subordination, and so we struggle to identify the old identity politics and strive to create new ones of our own. Feminists question the authority of men to write (or erase) women's lives, literally and metaphorically, and urge women to take semantic authority into our own hands.

This project of defining oneself, one's group, one's world, has recently come under attack as fostering a tendency to over generalization, illegitimate universalization, "totalizing" women in a way that necessarily obliterates important differences among us.[3] It has been claimed that we have (or ought to have) transcended identity politics.[4] The call to take semantic authority may seem to be in tension with a general attempt to undermine oppression, for it may seem to support only the eradication of woman-oppression (or white-woman-oppression) and threaten to replace it with some other form or at the very least to leave other oppressive structures intact. Baldly put, in light of Lugones and Spelman's observation that "some women's voices are more likely to be heard than others by those who have heretofore been giving—or silencing—accounts of women's lives," even a pluralized call to take semantic authority may tend to privilege white middle-class educated women and do nothing to challenge racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism and other forms of discrimination (Lugones and Spelman 1983, 574). Thinking of authority as being "established and exercised only by being vested with the force of discrimination, exclusion, and enforcement," as many scholars and activists do, helps to motivate this worry (Goldberg 1990, 305). As a relatively privileged group, educated white women do have greater opportunities to gain authority within patriarchy than those with fewer privileges.

My goal in this paper is to show that there is value in this feminist project of examining and taking authority over normative metaphysics. When we seek to articulate our experience, we must convey the particular by means of a commonly shared and norm-governed language. The "conceptual space" established within a community by its linguistic and nonlinguistic practices governs the expressive possibilities available to its members. Accordingly, this paper explores the relation between the individual and her community as she seeks to gain enough semantic authority to rearticulate herself. I will explain what I take such feminist-sought authority to be, how it differs from authority as usually conceived under patriarchy, and how it differs from privilege. Failing to adequately make and live with this distinction has been a problem for feminist practice.[5] A feminist call for women to take semantic authority is a call for more authority but not a call for greater privilege. In the process of taking semantic authority, we must each also disaffiliate from privileges that keep others from exercising their own authority; understanding the nature and limits of the authority we seek is an important part of the process of attaining it. Finally, I hope to show why separatism has emerged from this project as its logical conclusion and also to explain why separatism should be valued even by those who do not separate. Women working to build woman-centered, woman-safe, woman-affirming places are benefiting all women, not just those who join them there.

I. Existential Roots

Richard Rorty's recent characterization of feminist theory as being divided between what he calls universalists and pragmatists provides a useful point of departure for an inquiry into identity politics (Rorty 1991). Rorty's rival camps help to illustrate some issues of concern to feminists engaging in normative metaphysics, and also show how "translations" of feminist theory into mainstream (man-made) theory can miss important points. Seeing just how these categories go wrong is useful for seeing just how a radical/existentialist feminism goes right.

Let's look first at the universalists. Universalists commit many sins against modernism and postmodernism: they hold that there are such beings as women; they contend that women occupy moral space and are in some sense moral agents (even if that sense is more limited than the sense in which men are moral agents); they hold that "all the logical space necessary for moral deliberation is now available" (Rorty 1991, 234); and they tend to be moral realists who think that there are facts about human beings that make certain sorts of treatments of us immoral. Universalists tend to think that we can make *discoveries* about morality. Taking persons as *given* violates the Derridean attack on presence (cherished by continental enthusiasts) and the Sellarsian attack on the Myth of the Given (cherished by analytic enthusiasts). At bottom, these

universalists are guilty of Foundationalism in their social and political theories, and Essentialism in their ontology, and that is a very Bad Thing.

Pragmatists are historicists, and so Rorty sees them as more capable of avoiding the particular disabilities that realism and universalism impose on our thought. Pragmatists are not Foundationalists. They do not think that women as we exist right now are moral agents.[6] Taking Catharine MacKinnon to be a paradigmatically pragmatist feminist, Rorty claims that she holds that " 'a woman' is not yet the name of a way of being human—not yet the name of a moral identity, but at most the name of a disability" (Rorty 1991, 234). Paradoxically, this respects pragmatist moral ontology at the expense of falling under postmodern feminist critiques of dualistic views that treat man as presence and woman as absence. Pragmatists go so far in their flight from the Given that they won't talk about discovering anything—invention is all. Whereas the universalist thinks that logical space is already so vast that it encompasses expressive possibilities we have yet to envisage, Rorty's pragmatist holds that logical space goes only as far as we can see it going now and that if we are to invent women as moral agents we must extend (through imagination and courageous prophesy) the limits of our logical space. Most important, pragmatists do not think that there is some underlying reality that we can call woman's nature or human nature, and since there is no such thing, it cannot serve to explain what is so bad about woman's oppression as we currently construe it.

These two positions, as set out by Rorty, form a false dichotomy. They seem to map fairly neatly onto the essentialism/anti-essentialism issue as many feminists have construed it, with pragmatism holding out the promise of a somewhat more detailed account than many feminist constructivists have given so far. Pragmatism's emphasis on social practices is important, as is its stress of the significance of utopian visions, but we need not join Rorty in his pragmatist-inspired abandonment of discovery. Rorty's caricature of universalism prompts us to divert our attention from women's current social and political situations (since we are mere privations here) and direct it toward a utopian vision. Feminists need a vision that encompasses both. As Simone de Beauvoir stressed, "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting" (1948, 9). This is as realist as we need to be. Women in today's society are not just privations; we have many particular properties that are valued by ourselves and by others for a variety of sometimes sadly predictable reasons. (A secondary or derivative value is still a value after all.) When we make discoveries about ourselves, we need not be discovering a deep underlying immutable reality. Discovering may be highly contextualized, and what we discover may be something that we decide to work to destroy. Just the same, we must not close our eyes to the reality of our lives in favor of a utopia we seek to create.

The universalist has a story about what woman's oppression is and what is so wrong with it: men and women are moral equals who are not treated as moral equals (Cohen N.d.). Oppression is the result either of a failure of vision or of a deep moral corruption. The universalist gets this story, however, at the cost of commitment to there being such a thing as an enduring human nature, and here is where essentialism rears its ugly head. (Now we get the name-calling: "Foundationalist!" "Phallologocentrist!") The pragmatist is not stuck with the nasty ontology of natures, but is left without a clear account of what is wrong with oppression. Is oppression simply a story we tell and not a fact in the world? Rorty seems to think so. Sartre thought so too; he thought it was a particularly bad story, a story that was the result of bad faith, and one which led to more bad faith (see Le Doueff 1987).

The sort of existentialist feminism that Simone de Beauvoir developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* provides a third alternative to Rorty's dichotomous feminist landscape (Beauvoir 1948, 1952). Beauvoir's existentialism places much more emphasis on the importance of one's community than is generally acknowledged; her emphasis on community provides an analysis of oppression and the nature of its harm. Contrary to most existentialists, who tend to be radical individualists (holding fast to a claim of the absolute freedom of the human person), Beauvoir holds that normativity and human freedom require membership in a community. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she argues that community recognition of an individual's freedom is necessary for her exercise of that freedom, and so we are each dependent upon our communities for the confirmation of our humanity.[7] At the same time, she holds that the only way out of oppression is to find or make a community in which one can be free; the oppressed person, she writes, has "to deny the harmony of mankind from which an attempt is made to exclude him, to prove that he is a man and that he is free by revolting against the tyrants" (Beauvoir 1948, 83).[8] This sounds like just the right thing to say about undermining the power of oppressive social contexts, but we will see later that the solution is much more complex than this advice portends.

For an agent in an oppressive context, the project of self-articulation cannot be divorced from defining and deconstructing that context. The rest of this paper explores the connections between community and the semantic authority of the individual, and raises the issue of what that connection has to do with separation. Beauvoir, who first raised these issues for us, began with an analysis of oppression (in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) and then realized that if she wanted to write her autobiography she first had to say that she was a woman and, further, to say what that means (Beauvoir 1965, 195). Similarly, Marilyn Frye writes: "If one is the norm, one does not have to know what one is. If one is marginal, one does not have the privilege of not noticing what one is" (Frye 1983, 147). A woman knows what it is to be a woman, at least as she has been constructed within phallocracy—that is, within a society in which women are

subordinated and sometimes quite literally enslaved to the service of men, where this subordination and enslavement is "naturalized" so as to make it seem inevitable, and where this is conceptually so ingrained that we need to develop new conceptual frameworks to be able to deny the natural subordination of women.[9] In a phallocratic society, all the various characterizations of woman reduce to one: she is a being who serves men. It is important to remember Beauvoir's warning about this "is": she notes that it is the "is" of "to have become" and not the static "is" of a given and unalterable being.[10] It is neither the indelible universalist "is" nor the pragmatist "is" that can be easily erased. Our knowledge of ourselves under oppression is often knowledge of a mystified reality, perhaps knowledge of who we have become, but not always knowledge of who we can be. Beauvoir, along with many other feminist writers before and since, sought to help us learn about our situations at least in part by teaching us about hers. Further, in taking semantic authority, which she did through writing her books, Beauvoir took steps to create the community that could make her the free woman she sought to be. We today are the start of that community.

II. A Feminist Conception of Community

The themes of the interdependence of members of communities, of the power of definition and interpretation to create or undermine social reality, of the power of social reality to create or undermine material reality, of the importance of separating from communities that do not nurture us, in which we cannot be fully human, and so on, are threads of Beauvoir's legacy spun into the writings of contemporary radical feminists. Consider, for example, *The Politics of Reality*, in which Marilyn Frye (1983) explains how women are constructed as such by the arrogant eye of the phallocrat, simultaneously suggesting ways to fight this construction and engage in constructive processes of our own. Beauvoir and Frye are very different theorists, but they are united by a common concern with the way the power of definition has been used against women, and both see the importance of women taking that power into our own hands. We also see these themes, differently emphasized, in Sarah L. Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics* (1988), in Monique Wittig's *The Straight Mind* (1992), and in Marilyn Friedman's papers on community (1990). These themes of definition and power may seem to be a corollary to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, often loosely construed as the claim that language shapes thought and that together language and thought shape reality.[11] Despite the obvious affinities here, especially in Wittig, most feminists do not take this pseudo-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as their starting point.[12] The roots of this theme in contemporary feminist thought are, I suggest, existentialist, and Simone de Beauvoir's works are their starting point.

The community, on Beauvoir's account, plays at least two roles: (1) it ["sets] up the world of tomorrow" (Beauvoir 1948, 82); that is, it creates situations, concretely and materially as well as psychologically and ideologically; and (2) it confirms or fails to confirm my existence as a free person by allowing me to participate in this process or barring me from it. When I am barred from participating in "setting up the world of tomorrow", I am diminished as a person, and my efforts at projecting my vision of the future are in vain, thwarted not by natural circumstance but by a community of men who use their socially established and normatively reinforced power to deny mine. We are fully human only as creators (and inheritors) of values, as beings who make norms and to whom norms apply.[13] Norms require a social setting, a community. Thus, Beauvoir incorporates the community into the establishment of the normative structure of the self. Beauvoir sees this normative interdependence of members of a community as the explanation of "why oppression is possible and why it is hateful." The only way out of oppression, she says, is to withdraw from a community that casts one as a thing and find or create a community in which one can be free.

The members of a community multiply interact, so that while it may not be the case that everyone interacts with everyone else, a group of people fails to be a community if no one interacts with anyone else. The manifold layers of interaction amongst the members of a community generate and reinforce common understandings, common perspectives, common values. The most powerful force in this process is language, for, as Charles Taylor points out, language "creates what one might call a public space, or a common vantage point from which we survey the world together" (Taylor 1985, 276). Taylor's conception of language as social, as fundamentally conversational (and so only derivatively monologic) leads him to argue a thesis very like Beauvoir's: Taylor says, "I become a person and remain one only as an interlocutor" (Taylor 1985, 276). Communities that oppress us deny us our humanity by keeping us out of the conversations and other interactions that are constitutive of personhood. In such communities we are not interlocutors; we are bystanders, supporters, sometimes even chattel.

Beauvoir's recommendation that we find or create a community in which we can be constituted as whole free human beings can be taken as a call for certain sorts of communities that Marilyn Friedman has called "communities of choice" in contrast to our found "communities of place" (Friedman 1990). Communities of place are in some sense given to us; they involve nonvoluntary association and they are metaphysically constitutive of who we are (and perhaps of who we will or can become). Friedman writes: "For the child maturing to self-consciousness in her community of origin, typically the family-neighborhood-school-church complex, it seems noncontroversial that 'the' community is found, not entered, discovered, not created" (Friedman 1990, 152). Communities of choice, on the other hand, are voluntary associ-

ations. In a phallocratic culture, even most of our communities of choice are oppressive, so a community's being chosen is not sufficient for its being liberatory, even though the act of choosing a community is itself the act of an agent. Ellen, as an adult, may choose to join the Catholic church, fully aware of its repressive views on women, recognizing that they apply to herself, and yet somehow not minding. The Catholic church then becomes a community of choice for her, and her choice is part of a process of reconstituting herself. In contrast, Catholic-bred Kathy's walking away from the church helps her to let part of her self atrophy, while participation in new communities helps her to develop her other aspects. In choosing communities we choose to foster certain aspects of ourselves and in leaving communities we often work to undermine aspects of ourselves they had supported.

In introducing this distinction between communities of place and communities of choice, Friedman is concerned with the question of the role of the community in constituting the individual, and concerned to undermine some communitarians' conservative stances toward this through their focus on the constitutive role of communities of place. Remember Atkinson's claim that to improve our situations "women must eradicate their own definition" (Atkinson 1974, 47). It is communities of place that initially constitute us as persons and as women; it is they who initially define and continue to maintain us. It is their definition of us as women that Atkinson and other feminists would have us eradicate. How this definition is cast will vary from one community to another, from one time to another, and so what it concretely means to be a woman will vary from one community to the next. One group at one time may define women as primarily mothers, another community may emphasize women's role as sexual partners for men, another may focus on women's domestic work, yet another may define women in terms of our work in the fields, factories, or markets (see Riley 1988). Whether the emphasis at any given time in any given community is on sexual service, reproductive service, household management, financial support, or ego service, the radical feminist points out that at the core of all these variations is a root definition: women are those who serve men.[14] Thus, many radical feminists have argued that there are certain commonalities among our communities and the patterns and purposes of our construction, and have held further that these commonalties are worth building a movement on and against (paradoxically). Contrary to communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Sandel, who, in their accounts of the constitutive role of community, fail to address adequately the ways in which the constitutive force of one's community of place is escapable, Friedman voices a widely held feminist position when she notes that "our communities of origin do not necessarily constitute us as selves who agree or comply with the norms which unify those communities," adding that each of us "may seek new communities whose norms and relationships stimulate and develop her identity and self-understanding more ade-

quately than her unchosen community of origin, her original community of place" (Friedman 1990, ???-???).[15]

The contrast between the norms and the kinds of relationships possible in the found communities and those possible in various envisioned chosen or developed communities is crucial, for these are the infrastructure of the different ways of life made possible therein. Clearly, the kinds of interpretations engaged in within a community represent the practices and relationships sanctioned within that community (and vice-versa). The relationship of the phallocrat to the woman is the antithesis of the sorts of relationships found in various envisioned woman-centered, woman-loving communities. The new communities suggested by many feminists place central value on the lives and experiences of women; such community is non-hierarchical, and the relations between women and others are not relations of dominance and submission.[16] That is to say, such communities are neither phallocracies nor gynocracies.

For a case study of construction-by-interpretation, we can turn to Frye's exploration of the power and extent of phallocratic interpretation in "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love" (Frye 1983). The phallocrat interprets everything in the world as existing to serve his interests and takes his interpretation to ground his appropriation of others. This is arrogance. One important factor in the phallocrat's success is getting the woman he arrogates to think that she is alone in the world, except for him. He takes her from her community and he takes her community from her. His community and its meanings become the framework within which she lives, and these render her freedom nearly impossible. Through his words, through his values, through his actions, he interprets her out of existence. She is a thing for his use—a complex thing, but a thing nonetheless. This interpretive trick is very neatly spelled out in "To Be and Be Seen" with respect to the lesbian (Frye 1983). Phallocratic reality makes the lesbian a conceptual and natural impossibility.[17] Frye's point does not stop there. It is not just the lesbian who is impossible: it is any self-respecting, self-loving, or woman-loving woman.

If Frye is right that women's oppression is a structure created by men for the benefit of men so as to mold, immobilize, and reduce women, limiting our options to a very few (which put us into the service of men) and penalizing our movement in all directions (Frye 1983, 1-16), then it would seem that the forces of oppression primarily govern our social condition. From this one might conclude that "oppressive" is a characteristic of the community, and although a woman may be oppressed for now by that community, being oppressed is not a real characteristic of anyone. On this interpretation, oppression is part of a woman's situation, but not really part of her being. Like Beauvoir, Frye wants to deny this distinction between situation and being, for she holds that "we do become what we practice being" (Frye 1983, 34). This suggests that unless we strenuously resist our found situations, our very being becomes phallocratically defined. Because of the force of community interpretation in constructing and

maintaining our current identities, working to change those identities generally requires changing the communities in which we participate.

Despite her denial of the distinction between situation and being, it is important to note that, like Friedman, Frye does not think that phallocratic oppression is completely effective. Within such systems, we do become servants and we are reduced, but we are not (always, completely) annihilated. There is something leftover besides what we have been made into; there is a small but important bit of us that lies outside the range of phallocratic definition (Frye 1983, 165). This part of us that is undefined and unseen by men is the key to our gaining our own authority. Here we get a glimpse of the notion that our authority will be different from the kind of authority sought by those who would be phallocrats. Even within the context of phallocracy, we can practice being indomitable, independent, nonsubmissive, and eventually we may become so. Frye writes: "To break out of the structures of the arrogant eye we have to dare to rely on ourselves to make meaning and we have to imagine ourselves being capable of that: capable of weaving the web of meaning which will hold us in some kind of intelligibility" (Frye 1983, 80). We have to interpret ourselves *into* existence; we need to gain authority over our own lives. We gain authority by articulating our experience to ourselves and to others who will listen. By listening and speaking, each in turn, we create relations of reciprocity, we show respect for ourselves and for others, and we create community.

III. Definition, Community, and Power

Now a few words about definition, which is supposed to be a source of our semantic authority. There are aspects and elements of all women's lives that require redefinition and reinterpretation if we are to become free, active, and empowered beings. It is not simply or solely or perhaps even importantly by spinning words that we accomplish this redefinition. We do it through our actions, by establishing new social practices and establishing new norms. Redefinition is accomplished through creating community, through enabling alternative actions and projects, and by seeing each other as valuable in her own right, as an author of her being, and as a member of the community that enables her to author her own being. In *The Politics of Reality* Marilyn Frye points out that "differences of power are always manifested in asymmetrical access," and so she urges us to change definitions by changing the patterns of access in which we fit (Frye 1983, 103).

When we articulate our experience we do not necessarily seek *definition* in the philosopher's sense of this word. Definition, after all, is a particular sort of linguistic entity: it is the linguistic counterpart to the metaphysical essence and so is taken to be an important link between language and the world. Keep in mind Quine's slogan: "definition is what essence becomes when it is

divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word" (Quine [1953] 1990, 27). A definition of X gives necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing's being X, and it is not clear that anyone in seeking to articulate her own experience would really try to give a definition of herself or of her experience. Beauvoir said that she needed to say what it is to be a woman before she could write her autobiographies, but *The Second Sex* is not itself and does not provide a *definition* of "woman." It is an account of women's situation, as far as Beauvoir could (or would) see. When women try to articulate our lives, what we try to give is more like an account than a definition. We try to tell true stories about who we are, what we know, what the world has been like for us, and what we would like to see it become. When we tell these stories we provide information that can go some way toward providing definitions, but such stories are not themselves definitions.

Whether we are realists who think that we discover essences and try to capture them in our definitions, or whether we are constructionists who think that our definitions create what essences we have and so capture us, definitions are a special class of articulations which are granted greater epistemological privilege or greater ontological force than others. Definitions are a way of marking distinctions and making connections.[18] Some theorists, like Frye, think that there are differences to be marked prior to the marking of them; others, like Wittig, think that the marking makes the difference. In either case, if we do not accept the distinctions drawn around (and across) us, then we must draw some of our own. If we do not value the connections marked between us and others, then we must mark and make new connections of our own. (Even on an essentialist picture, the world is rich enough to sustain these new emphases.) Doing so changes both the relations and the relata. What matters here is not the meaning essentialism, but the holism. It is better to think of what we are doing when we rearrange patterns of meaning, systems of relations, and patterns of significance as articulating and re-articulating ourselves, our world, and our places in it. There are two main senses in which we talk about articulation: first, an articulated object is composed of segments united by joints; second, articulate speech is clear, distinct, with each part identifiable and the whole recognizable.[19] Articulation is more generic than definition, and it need not carry any essentialist associations. Definitions are the joints in our articulated conceptual scheme.

Recall Frye's claim that "when our feminist acts or practices have an aspect of separation, we are assuming power by controlling access and simultaneously by undertaking definition. The slave who excludes the master from her hut thereby declares herself *not a slave*" (1983, 105). What matters is the slave's engaging in the practice of the articulation of the self and its place in the world, a practice denied to slaves.[20] Definition, in the more specialized sense of necessary and sufficient conditions that provide the linguistic counterpart to metaphysical essence, is not what is going on. The slave tries to subvert the

master's attempt to justify his misuse of her by defining her as a thing to be so used; she thus denies someone else's definition. Thinking of this as articulation helps us to avoid the essentialist aspect of definition, for clearly one need not be an essentialist in order to engage in the self-articulating projects of normative metaphysics. In fact, it is an existentialist account of the self that generates the insight that we all are involved in these projects all the time; the question is whether we are actively engaged in them—engaged as agents—or whether we are passive participants unaware of how we are used. The slave takes power, even if only for the moment, because in asserting (declaring) that she is not a slave she stops being like a slave. She does what she can to rearrange the patterns of access that partially constitute her life. If this act and this agent are isolated, the result is probably negligible. She needs the recognition of others to make her act of not being like a slave become the first step in not being a slave.

Remembering Beauvoir's existentialist conception of the difference between the kind of being that humans have and the kind of being that objects have, we can see how the kind of definition or articulation we might seek ought to vary depending on which kind of being we are seeking to define or articulate. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir explains that the ambiguity of human life is the ambiguity of being both a subject to oneself and an object to others. Only the human being, she says, is "a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects," and yet although we are subjects to ourselves, we are each "in turn an object for others" (Beauvoir 1948, 7). To be a Self, on Beauvoir's account, is to be a being in transcendence. Transcendence is an "escape toward some objective, through enterprise" (Beauvoir 1952, 158); one engages in purposeful activities, projects of one's own choosing, and in doing so one treats oneself as an agent, as a being that chooses values.[21] The project of self-articulation, properly understood, precludes the articulation of a static or "totalizing" definition, for it requires an account of a being in transcendence. It is an articulation of a project that is itself a set of projects.

In contrast, a static definition would be appropriate for objects, since they do not participate in transcendence. They are simply there, to be used or modified according to the will of another. A person becomes object-like when she does not engage in freely chosen projects, when she "stagnates," when she is subjected to the will of another, and accepts this subjection, as does the arrogated woman described by Frye. Existentialists call this "immanence": it is simply being there, not *really living*. Treating someone else as a means to one's own ends is treating that person as an object. Treating oneself as powerless, saying "I couldn't do otherwise" about some action one took, is treating oneself as an object. Defining oneself, saying "I am X", where X is some sort of static property, is treating oneself as an object. Even appeal to a complex set of X-traits would ultimately be reductive.

According to this feminist existentialist picture, any articulation of our experience and any attempt to articulate who we are must be in terms of who we have become and who we are becoming. We must know who we are, and understand the people and situations we encounter. Any articulation of our experience is authentic only insofar as it recognizes our freedom, even within the constraints of oppressive norms and practices. Our actions are not mere behavior; our past actions and the actions of others establish a structure of significance which we inherit but which we can accept or reject through our own present and future actions. It is as creators of values, as beings who make norms and to whom norms apply, that we live fully human lives.

Beauvoir's ethic of ambiguity says that we act inauthentically, or in bad faith, whenever we treat ourselves or others as objects; this is how we flee from or fail to respect our freedom. This makes sense of a large part of what is wrong in the actions of those who treat others as if they were slaves, for the "masters" fail to respect the freedom of the "slaves." The point also applies to one's actions toward oneself: I act genuinely (or authentically) only when I accept my freedom and recognize that although I may have been thrown into a situation, now that I am here the question of what I will do is up to me, and only me, to answer.[22] The claim that I must recognize my freedom even in the face of my oppression sounds paradoxical at best. Add to that Beauvoir's conception of the necessity of a community that recognizes one as an agent, and the result is a very perplexing picture of absolute and yet impossible agency under oppression. The interdependence amongst the members of a community would make it seem as if the decision about what I am to do and who I am to become is never really up to me and me alone to decide. If all such decisions only make sense against a background of shared assumptions, beliefs, values, goals, practices, etc., then while I may be an important arbiter of some particular choice, often the actual enacting of and fulfillment of that choice is not entirely up to me. My choice needs a kind of endorsement from my community in order for it to be effective. The slave who says "No," either needs the master to accept her "no"-saying and back off, or else needs the back-up of others who can make the master back off.

I said above that our past actions and the actions of others establish a structure of significance which we inherit but which we can accept or reject through our own present and future actions. This structure of significance is articulated in terms of social practices. The most obvious of our social practices are institutionalized and ritualized (e.g., education, work, marriage) but even our implicit practices are still very powerful. Within our networks of relationships, often social interpretations and practices distribute what Tom Wartenberg (1988) calls "situated power"; this power depends on both the social context and the existence of a dyadic relation in which one person is given greater power than the other and indeed is given power *over* the other.[23] Generally, men have greater situated power than women, gained through

various roles such as father, husband, teacher, boss; but (except in the cases of male children and incapacitated men) even in the absence of particular roles men are generally granted power over women. Our default interpretation is that he is a full agent and she is less so. Phallocratic interpretations of women aren't just any interpretations; they are interpretations enforced by social practices. Phallocracies are communities that back up interpretations of women as inferior, as destined to serve men, and so on. These interpretations are backed up by economies that pay women less than their male counterparts, by educators and employers who keep women from becoming peers of men, by reproductive practices that keep women out of or ineffective in the workplace while they are supposed to be in their career prime, by laws that say that police should not interfere in "domestic violence," that a husband may rape his wife, and so on. When the community backs up these interpretations with such powerful forces, they empower particular individual men in particular relations in particular situations to do particular harms to particular women. This conception of situated power helps to bridge the gap between social practices and individual experience. Seeking semantic authority, we seek to have the power to have a say over the norms governing our social practices.

To see how community-supported interpretations can dismiss important aspects of our experience as women who interpret ourselves as free, independent, autonomous agents, consider the way in which our legal and social system makes marital rape an oxymoron. When a community views heterosexual intercourse as a conjugal duty, then the woman who names her experience of forced sex as "rape" has made at least two mistakes. She erred morally in saying "no" and resisting her husband in the first place, and she erred both epistemologically and morally in calling it "rape." She made a category mistake and leveled a false charge against her husband. The community defines her as errant, if not crazy. On the other hand, if we look at the situation not from the point of view of a community that defines marriage as an institution within which rape is impossible, but instead from the point of view of a community that holds that every person, male or female, has a right to say "no" to any sexual encounter, no matter who is asking, then the woman who calls forced sexual intercourse with her husband "rape" is not making multiple mistakes but is accurately articulating her experience. Which perspective a woman takes is not determined by her community, in any strong sense of "determined" but it is difficult to go against one's community unless one has had exposure to communities (or subgroups) with different beliefs or unless one has great vision and courage of one's own.[24]

In the project of self-articulation we are largely dependent upon our communities for a framework against and within which to understand our experiences. Beauvoir's thesis that we are dependent upon our communities for the confirmation of our humanity is important here, for although this confirmation is not exactly the source of our freedom, it is the source of our ability to exercise

our freedom. We depend on our communities to give our articulations "uptake." I can speak all I like, but I need interlocutors, other speakers of the language who have backgrounds and interests similar enough to mine to make my words *matter* to them (Austin [1961] 1979). No one likes their words to fall on deaf ears. If all ears are deaf to what one says, eventually one stops talking (MacKinnon 1987, 39). In the case of language, I need interlocutors to gain the power to speak a language in the first place; without them, all I do is emit just so many sounds. I would suggest that, for Beauvoir, one needs one's community to become a moral agent in the first place and that without community all one engages in is just so much behavior.

This problem of uptake or community recognition and interpretation, is further illustrated in the problem of the general infantilization of women in our society. Many aspects of socially prescribed femininity keep many women seeming like children, from the shaving of our body hair to dysfunctional clothing fashions and lessons of feminine etiquette as passivity and servility. We must ask what is at stake in acquiescing to such norms. Why should one care that many men and women prefer women to be like good little girls? Beauvoir argues that treating the oppressed as children imposes limitations that need not exist, whereas treating a child as a child respects limitations that are a necessary part of the process of maturation. Childhood is a temporary situation that we all experience; it "does not represent a limit which cuts off the individual from his possibilities, but, on the contrary, the moment of a development in which new possibilities are won. To treat him [a child] as a child is not to bar him from the future but to open it to him" (Beauvoir 1948, 141). To treat a woman as a child, however, is to close the future to her, to demand that she stagnate, to deny her respect. A woman who is interpreted and treated as a child may indeed become childlike and in need of further paternalistic treatment, even though she will never again be a child. Such repressive needs are one of the results of oppression (Bartky 1990, 22-44). This example illustrates the importance of all those elements we call treatment: what we say of a person or thing, what we use it for, whether and under what circumstances we prohibit its use, what counts as an appropriate relation to it.[25] These forms of treatment are all embedded in our social practices; they are all deeply issues of interpretation.

Think about the slave standing outside her hut and refusing to let the master in. Is her act courageous or is it foolhardy? She may feel strong and empowered, proud to stand up for herself. Now, what do you imagine the master's response to be? The woman may be declaring herself not a slave, but what happens next? The slave can say she's not a slave all she wants; simply saying doesn't make it so. For the saying to carry any weight, it must be respected by others. Here the master's response makes all the difference. If, as masters are wont to do, he pushes her aside and enters anyway, she has declared herself not a slave but it

doesn't seem that she has taken any power. Definition is only another face of power when the definition sticks.

IV. Semantic Authority: Making It Stick

Seeking semantic authority, we seek to engage in the practice of naming, describing and re-creating ourselves and our world. Semantic authority is a matter of having a say (about something) that others recognize and respect; it is an important, perhaps necessary, element in constructing oneself as fully human. Seeking semantic authority, we seek credibility within our community. Even more, we require community support for our acts of self-articulation. Such support, however, is possible only within a community that has a normative structure capable of encompassing what one articulates.

Against this background holist view of the relations between language, community, and the individual, it would seem that there could be two sorts of ways to get semantic authority: either by having it given to you by your community, as so often it has been given to many white middle-class men in the U.S., for example, or else by taking it yourself. For an agent under oppression, the second option seems the only viable course, since it is not in the interest of oppressors to hand over such a basic means of power. If a woman is to counteract men's harmful definitions of her, then she must counter with her own articulations, taking semantic authority for herself. Acting as if one has semantic authority and actually having it are not the same, however, and the difference is marked by the presence or absence of uptake on the part of one's community. One cannot take semantic authority all by oneself, since one needs a community (with its norms and practices) to back one up, so these two apparent alternatives collapse into one. Unfortunately, really having semantic authority in the face of a recalcitrant community does not seem to be an option. It is difficult and sometimes impossible for an individual to force others to give her uptake. Semantic authority is granted by a community, so we can try to get our found community to grant it, but if it does not, then separation may be the only antidote to silence.[26] To gain authority through separation, however, one must be separating *to* an existing or a developing community, not just *from* an oppressive community.

Generally, authority and privilege go hand in hand, but they need not. This section explains what I take authority to be and how it differs from privilege. The program sketched here, grafting Frye's more recent work onto Beauvoir's roots, began ethnocentrically but need not remain so, primarily because the call for women to take semantic authority is not a call for greater privilege. In fact, part of this project requires disaffiliation from privilege. To see what this amounts to, we must first understand the difference between authority and privilege.

Authority is a form of power. A quite standard view of authority claims that it includes "assurance, superior judgement, the ability to impose discipline, the capacity to inspire fear" (Sennett 1981, 17-18). The powers to impose discipline and to inspire fear are usually taken to be central to authority. We speak of the government, the police, the ruling junta, etc., as "the authorities," for they have the power to enforce their demands of us. Their power of enforcement is institutionally conferred, so their authority is quite clearly as *agents of the system*. Similarly, when a scholar or expert is cited as an authority, she or he gets that authority as one who has mastered a body of received literature; the expert is also an agent of the system. The expert is supposed to make authoritative statements—statements that command or inspire the belief of others. Corresponding to these two sorts of authority, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two main definitions of "authority": "(I) Power to enforce obedience," which is what the commander in chief, the police, etc. have, and "(II) Power to influence action, opinion, belief," which is what scholars, experts, and cultural leaders have.

For activists, academics, and intellectuals, the power to influence is a matter of having the "power to inspire belief" rather than to command obedience. Such power to inspire belief is importantly social, for it is gained through deft use of a shared system of beliefs and norms. To have authority is to have a say that others listen to and generally believe. It is to have credibility. This is the sort of authority, *authority as credibility*, that we seek. What a person with authority says must be considered, even if it is later rejected. Clearly, both forms of authority admit of degrees; how much authority a person has depends crucially on what the person is talking about, on the person's place within a formal or informal institutional setting, and on the recognition and estimation of her peers.

Both authority and privilege are thoroughly social phenomena. Generally we think of privileges as benefits, and indeed they are. A more precise conception of privilege, however, helps to show what we must avoid. A privilege is a special dispensation from the rules that are supposed to apply to everyone. The roots of this conception go back to Roman jurisprudence, where "privilege" meant "the exemption of one individual from the operation of the law" (*OED*). So privilege is a matter of having a special advantage, a special benefit, or being given a special immunity. Clearly, only those with authority are in the position to grant privileges, and the temptation to grant them to themselves must be tremendous. Despite their common co-occurrence, authority and privilege need not be found in the same person; some of the privileged lack authority and some authorities lack privilege.

This picture of privilege helps to explain certain aspects of the situations of American men and women. For example, we may note that despite a general prohibition against nudity in our culture, men have the privilege of upper-body nudity in certain circumstances without fear of penalty (e.g., on beaches, when

mowing the lawn, walking the streets, but not in restaurants, factories, or board rooms). Women who try to exercise the same privilege are subject to harsh penalty (ranging from catcalls to social censure and even to rape). In a two-class system, when one group is granted a privilege, the other seems no longer to be facing a general operation of the law but rather a specific dis-privileging. So it may seem that American women are given special prohibitive treatment in not being allowed to roam shirtless. A two-class system in which privileges redound to one class in the main quickly becomes a zero-sum game. His privilege is her prohibition, and it is not clear that it matters which came first.

Like authority, privilege is a matter of degree and depends on one's relation to others in one's community. Privilege is something others give to you. In the cultures of the U.S., some races, classes and genders are given privileges over others; these cases suggest that the grounds for privileging members of one group over another do not necessarily and often do not at all provide *justification* for such privilege.[27] We have mystified some of these aspects of our experience and not others; we generally take race and gender to be givens, whereas it is built into American ideology that socioeconomic status can be changed across one's life. Some privileges may be sought after and earned, but male privilege and white skin privilege are not. These privileges are quite automatically conferred to the members of the relevant group; group members need not seek the privilege and may take its effects for granted to the point that they find it difficult to see it as a privilege.

These sorts of privilege are inherently problematic in a just society (Okin 1989). Frye makes an excellent case that the privileged must disaffiliate from their privilege if they (a) want to be good people, and/or (b) care at all for the welfare of those who are not privileged. In "On Being White" Frye (1983) addresses the need for white disaffiliation from race privileges, and in "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement" she argues that a similar disaffiliation from gender privilege is necessary for men. There Frye writes:

> Any man who would be a friend to women must come to understand the values and principles of phallocratic culture and how his own life is interwoven with them, and must reject them and become disloyal to masculinity. Any man who would do this has to reinvent what being a man is. (Frye 1983, 146)

For men, reinventing what being a man is involves disaffiliating from male privilege; it involves undermining a social system that grants special benefits to men as men. Clearly women need to reinvent ourselves; sometimes this will involve disaffiliating from race, class, or heterosexist privileges. Changing the genders in Frye's claim yields a parallel and equally important injunction: [28]

> Any woman who would be a friend to women must come to understand the values and principles of phallocratic culture and how her own life is interwoven with them, and must reject them and become disloyal to femininity. Any woman who would do this has to reinvent what being a woman is.

Reinventing womanhood is a central feminist project. We can add to our disloyalty to femininity a disloyalty to whiteness, to the superiority of the monied class, to the superiority of the educated class, to the superiority of heterosexuality, and so on. Ideally, a feminist sees women as we variously are and she tries to see what we can be. She rejects heterosexualism (Hoagland's term), may also reject heterosexuality, and rejects the prescriptive femininity that goes with them. Some would describe this feminist project as *destroying* womanhood, for it seeks to eradicate definitions that disfigure us, and replace them with articulations that value us.

Disaffiliation from privilege need not be a matter of ceasing to value or appreciate the benefits of a privilege, but it is a matter of ceasing to allow them to be benefits for a select few. Disaffiliation is sometimes a move to shift benefits for a few to being standard conditions for all. If one likes the special benefits of the dispensation from a rule and then decides that such special dispensation is unjust, the sensible approach is not to step back under the rule again but to make the dispensation itself into a rule and abolish the original more prohibitive rule.[29] Deep, widespread, successful disaffiliation from the central privileges of membership in certain race, sex, and class groups would result in a radical reconfiguration of society. Rampant radical disaffiliation would obviate the need for separation from phallocracy, since phallocracy would dis-integrate, and if the radical reconfiguration created an appropriately pluralist and truly egalitarian community, there may be no difference between this community and the one many feminists now imagine separating to.[30]

To achieve disaffiliation, one's words and deeds must count in a social arena. Disaffiliation from privilege requires a certain authority, and the undermining of the privilege is an act of taking authority. There is a difference between simply not exercising a privilege, however, and really disaffiliating from it. Refusing to exercise a privilege is a necessary but not sufficient condition of disaffiliation. *Real disaffiliation requires acting to change the social context.* In particular, it requires getting others in one's community to recognize that one has disaffiliated and that the privilege is separable from one's various modes of being. So if privileges are granted to males on the basis of sex, then men who would disaffiliate must work to get their communities to see that one can be biologically male while rejecting the privileges the group would assign. They thus force a distinction between the ground of the privilege and the granting of the privilege, ending the mystification that keeps us from seeing the situation as open to change.

To see what it takes to disaffiliate, let me draw an analogy. Think of a young man, James, whose very rich family bestows a goodly portion of their wealth upon him in the form of trust funds and stocks. Suppose that James is aware of what they are doing and doesn't like it, and that he tries to disaffiliate from the wealth by ignoring it and living on his own meager wages as a laborer. He does this for many years, much to the embarrassment and disappointment of his family. The money still sits in various accounts, managed by professional managers (whose names James does not know), earning dividends and growing regularly. James ignores his assets and assumes that his neglect counts as washing his hands of the benefits of wealth, but it is important to note that the assets are still there for him if he should want them. Call this *the purist approach*. The purist does not exercise his or her privilege but keeps it just the same. Alternatively, James may try to reject the giving of the assets in the first place. It is important to see that his just saying "no" may not be enough to stop his family from setting up the trusts and accounts in his name. If his having the privilege of wealth *matters to them*, they will set it up whether he wants it or not. (This is in part why privilege can be so pernicious.) So, if James wants to take direct action to keep them from granting him the privilege of wealth, he must make them think that he doesn't deserve the privilege before they bestow it. What it will take to make them think that he doesn't deserve the privilege will depend upon the ground of the privilege. If that ground is family membership, then James has to make them think that he is not *really* a member of the family. (Similarly, if the ground of male privilege is being a man, then one has to make others think that one is not *really* a man. (See Stoltenberg 1989.) Call this *the outsider approach*. This approach will fail unless he can convince them that he is not really of the family, which will be especially difficult if blood is all that matters. A third strategy would be to take the assets and use them in the community in a way that undermines the legitimacy of his having them at all. So if, for instance, James's family is rich because they built railroads, and he knows that the railroads were an important force in the destruction of Native American life, he could give all of his assets to foundations within Native American communities serving their own development projects. Now James would no longer have the assets (he would not be playing patron), and at least some of those who need them would benefit. Call this *the dispersal approach*.

The purist approach is at most partially effective for disaffiliating from wealth, but it is completely ineffective for disaffiliating from male privilege or white-skin privilege. In the case of wealth, ignoring one's assets while they accrue is not much of a disaffiliation, but it just is not possible to fail to exercise the benefits of being white or male (or both) in our culture simply by ignoring them. The benefits redound to you daily and directly; there is no nameless manager who keeps your hands clean while keeping the assets tucked away safely. So, while the purist might achieve some level of disaffiliation from

wealth by living on his own wages and ignoring his funds, the same cannot be said of men and whites who ignore the privileges of these group memberships.

The outsider approach is also problematic, for it requires showing, or at least getting others to believe, that the ground of the privilege does not hold in the particular case. This serves to diminish the privileged set but it falls short of challenging the very drawing of the line between insiders and outsiders. I wear my whiteness on the surface, and others treat me in certain ways accordingly. A deep tan may allow me to "pass" as nonwhite, but such passing is kin to the purist's passing for poor. The tan can fade and the privileges will again be granted. Putting oneself on the other side of the race line doesn't in itself challenge the drawing of the line, and successfully challenging the drawing of the line is what it takes to disaffiliate. In many cases, it will be difficult if not impossible to undermine the ground of the privilege in one's own case until one has changed one's community. One definitive aspect of whiteness is the privilege it bestows. Change that, and there may well be no reason to even keep track of who is lighter than whom; whiteness would no longer be a property worth marking. To disaffiliate from white privilege, one has to change what it means to be white; one has to work to eradicate the social significance of light skin.

Finally, it may seem at first that the dispersal approach is inappropriate for undermining the privileges under consideration, since keeping the privilege in order to do good for the cause of the less privileged is paternalistic and does not effectively undermine the system of values that granted the privilege in the first place. On the other hand, there is a way that the dispersal approach can feed into the outsider approach. When James gives all his money to the Native American foundations and then walks away, he does not garner any power unto himself through that dispersal. He does empower others by giving them the resources they so badly need to do the projects they deem important. Having given up his money in this way, James may well become an outsider to his family, for his action constitutes a serious challenge to their status. He does not directly challenge their granting of privilege to him, but by giving the resources of that privileging to those who are not so privileged, he undermines the economic effect and economic base of the distinction that the privilege is meant to enforce. He thereby changes the social pattern to some degree.

Changing the patterns of our practices is what it takes to create new meaning. Meaning is a structure of significances; things are set out each in relation to the other, and these relations in some sense constitute the natures of the things so related. I said earlier that how much authority a person has depends crucially on the person's place within a formal or informal institutional setting. As Frye points out, "The powerful normally determine what is said and sayable. When the powerful label something or dub it or baptize it, the thing becomes what they call it" (Frye 1983, 105). It is not merely that their saying makes it so. The powerful get their power from their community,

for it is the community's recognition, support, and enactment of their saying that make it so. Without that recognition, support, and enactment, the powerful would lose their power. Frye argues that when the Secretary of Defense calls "the working out of terms of a trade-off of nuclear reactors" a "peace negotiation," then that "is an instance of negotiating peace." Why? Because "people laud it, and the negotiators get Noble Piece prizes for it" (Frye 1983, 105). The community accepts their dubbing the activity a negotiation of peace, and follows through accordingly. Since it is the community that grants the power, we can justifiably hope that the community can take it away.

This discussion suggests what the disaffiliation of the privileged would do: by granting the benefits of their privileges to those who have borne the penalties of that privilege, the changed distribution of material goods and access to those goods would change the social and material distribution of power and authority. For many women, our own disaffiliation is not an issue because we do not have privileges from which to disaffiliate. This discussion does not show that our primary political goal should be to try directly to convince men to disaffiliate; it suggests, rather, that we do not seek to be in a position of those who must disaffiliate. We seek authority, not privilege.

We make our claimed semantic authority stick not by getting everyone to agree with what we say, for that's a nearly impossible requirement and we know now that some people do have semantic authority even in the face of disagreement. (After all, not everyone accepts that trading arms is "negotiating peace.") We make our saying count by getting relevant others to take what we say seriously. Our saying it must have cognitive and causal efficacy; and this requires that it in some way build upon a system of beliefs shared amongst the interlocutors. Others must listen to what I say and take it seriously, sometimes agreeing and following through on what I say and sometimes following through by disagreeing with what I say. On this picture, authority gets one the respectful attention of one's community, but guarantees neither its obedience nor its agreement in belief or action. Authority gets one's words and deeds woven into the fabric of a social life.

From this characterization of the quest for semantic authority as a quest for credibility within one's community, it should be clear that I will not join Frye in saying that "it is only against the background of an imagined community of ultimate harmony and perfect agreement that we dare to think it possible to make meaning" (Frye 1983, 81). Frye is talking about an individual, isolated by her vision, imagining support from others who are in perfect agreement with her. This homogenous supportive crew of "yes"-women is a theoretical/psychological prop, not a community that anyone (including Frye) would want to make real.[31] Frye admits that this imagining "brings us into an arrogance of our own, for we make it a prerequisite for our construction of meaning that other women be what we need them to be to constitute the harmonious

community of agreement we require" (Frye 1983, 81). I suggest that this arrogance is unnecessary and undesirable, even in fantasy.

Let's talk instead about real communities and about imagining communities that we would want to become real. We need some level of harmony in beliefs, practices, and goals within our group for it to even be a community, and each individual must see herself as at least to some degree in agreement with the explicit and implicit norms of her community in order even to begin to attempt to gain semantic authority within that group. Harmony presupposes difference; if we sing in harmony, then we sing two or more parts that sound good together. Harmony is not homogeneity and "perfect agreement" is not only impossible but also undesirable. The imagined homogeneous community is not desirable in reality, because in a community of perfect agreement we lose all but our numerical distinctness. In articulating myself, placing myself under categories or denying the applicability of categories to myself, I am working with a system of meaning, and giving a certain account of who I am (in the sense of who I have become and am becoming). In grappling with my own identity politic, I work to configure my own conceptual scheme, setting certain features near the center of that framework, making certain properties very important, and pushing others toward the periphery. Some aspects of my socially conferred identity are difficult, if not impossible, to move from center to margin: in a heterosexualist society, placing "woman" at the periphery of my own conception of myself runs in the face of the social construction of who I am. If I am to be allowed to keep my new configuration, I've got to change the social configuration. Such differences among persons as man/woman, black/white, gay/straight are marked in phallocratic reality in order to make discriminations of rank. The fact that we struggle to maintain these dualist categories in the face of their inapplicability shows how important their power differentials are to us.[32] Thinking of the demand for authority as distinct from a demand for privilege helps us to see that we can make distinctions and discriminations amongst ourselves and our communities without necessarily ranking them in general. We may give various traits various priorities in various contexts but still not assign an overall value.[33] To make meaning within our communities, we do need to presuppose a certain amount of overlapping normative commitments on the parts of those involved in our communities—both new and old—but this assumption that there is some overlap, that we are interlocutors for each other, that we share a language or can learn each other's language, that we are each differently contributing to and benefiting from a set of shared cultural and intercultural projects, does not require perfect agreement or feminist erasure of diversity amongst ourselves, not even in imagination.

V. Separations and Transformations

Simone de Beauvoir envisions the liberated woman as someone who engages in meaningful projects that she herself has chosen freely and to which she has, in an important sense, given their meaning. She has "found herself" enough so that she can get "lost" in her projects: although as a human being her identity is always an issue, the project of claiming herself directly can be put on a back burner.[34] She has "found herself" because she is in a community that interprets her as a full and valued member, and she finds in this community others who can hear what she says and see what she does, even when they do not agree with it completely. She is understood and taken seriously as an agent. She takes the metaphysical risk of engaging in freely chosen self-defining projects. To become such a woman, I must change the future that lies before me. To reshape my possibilities and the process of becoming that is my life, Beauvoir says, I must transform my world as well. Re-creating oneself and re-creating one's community are two sides of the same coin.

The project of creating oneself while creating community is best articulated within Frye's work in her concept of the lesbian. Frye's characterization of the lesbian provides a characterization of an alternative to woman as constructed by phallocracy, for she is, at least, a woman who does not exist to serve men. Just as importantly, she is "a seer in whose eye the woman has authority, interests of her own, is not a robot" (Frye 1983, 171). Considering Frye's claim that the theme (and practice) of separation is present in various degrees in all feminist thought and practice, it would seem that one could separate from phallocratic reality by degrees and so could participate by degrees in the seeing process practiced by the lesbian Frye describes. As plausible as this suggestion is, it may instead be the case that one must be fully disassociated from the system to gain this valuable perspective. Frye suggests that "a lesbian is one who, by virtue of her focus, her attention, her attachment, is disloyal to phallocratic reality," adding that "her mode of disloyalty threatens its utter dissolution in the mere flick of an eye" (Frye 1983, 171).[35] As one who sees and values those individuals today defined as women, Frye's lesbian works to undermine a social system that undermines these individuals. She separates from that community (which cannot sanction her and which she cannot sanction) and she joins or establishes one in which she can be a full member. For most of its members, the lesbian separatist community is just such a community of choice.[36]

A lesbian separatist community may not be the appropriate home for every individual now defined as a woman, but its conceivability and its various incarnations reshape every community in which there are such individuals. As Friedman notes, communities of choice provide "models of alternative social relationships as well as standpoints for critical reflection of self and community" (Friedman 1990, 158). The conceivability and existence of

lesbian separatist communities gives new meaning to other separations in which women engage. Perhaps ironically, it may even make it possible to really *choose* heterosexuality, heterosexualism, and what Frye calls "phallocratic loyalism." Most of us, most of the time, are members of more than one community, each of which takes different aspects of our identities to be more or less relevant (to the goals of the community). We bring our whole selves to these communities, even where they cannot see us whole, so we are part of the ways that communities effect each other. Even communities of which we are not members can provide insights and inspirations, and can reshape the communities in which we participate. This is the promise (or threat) of lesbian separatism for all women, even those who do not separate: lesbian separatist community holds out the very real promise of a community in which one can be a full and active agent. It is a community in which women have authority.

The call for women to have the power to articulate our own experiences in our own terms, to develop a conceptual scheme that can encompass many of the experiential dissonances with which we struggle daily, is a struggle against what Audre Lorde calls "the restrictions of externally imposed definition" (Lorde 1984, 121). In most cases, it is a struggle against our own cultures, against our own communities of place. Beauvoir and Frye suggest that escaping the power of these externally imposed definitions requires walking away from the communities that impose them. Such separations are also separations from aspects of ourselves, and whether these separations are possible or desirable may depend not only on one's relation to one's own culture but also on the relation of that culture to other cultures.

When the call to separation is heard by women of color, it is often perceived as a call to abandon their cultures in the face of rampant Anglo cultural imperialism. María Lugones argues that when one's home culture is under attack, as Hispanic cultures are in the Americas, one needs to work to protect it and transform it.[37] For many women, the struggle for socially empowered self-articulation is a struggle to gain an internally integrated self. To let one's culture die is to let aspects of oneself die or become obsolete. It is to foreclose the possibility of sustained integrity. Gloria Anzaldúa writes:

> What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me, then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (Anzaldúa 1987, 22)

Here Anzaldúa is very clear about her own competence, and angry that her culture does not value her; she repeats "not me sold out my people but they me" (Anzaldúa 1987, 21-22). The ways in which she has been sold out by her

culture may be specific to her culture, but cultures the world over have been selling women out for ages. This raises a different issue of separation, for if we have been sold out and we are not really members of our communities, then others have already begun our separation for us. Even more radically than Beauvoir did, Anzaldúa sees that she is both of and not of her "home" community. Recognizing the indelible print of her culture on her own identity, Anzaldúa says "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry my 'home' on my back" (Anzaldúa 1987, 22). This "home" she carries with her is not enough, though, for she also wants a place and a community to go home to. Like Beauvoir, she sees that if she cannot find one she will have to make one.

The need for a unified community is clear in Anzaldúa's claim that "alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (Anzaldúa 1987, 20). Without a unified community, without a unified self, the woman of color is caught in what Anzaldúa calls "the borderlands," and she recognizes that any either/or choice of community leaves the unified self she could attain significantly lacking. Such a situation is profoundly disempowering. Audre Lorde writes: "My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition" (Lorde 1984, 120-21). If Lorde is right, then living in the borderlands is debilitating, blocking energy that can come only from internal integrity.

María Lugones's work on the politics of multicultural identity has led her to argue that the quest for a unified self is misguided, if not pernicious (Lugones 1990b). Those who are inhabitants of borderlands are plural selves, and the quest for unity is a quest for the denial of a part of oneself. Lugones's point is generally true of inhabitants of multiple incommensurable communities each of which plays an importantly constitutive role in their identities. It seems clear, however, that whether we seek unity or plurality, we seek a harmony between self and community (or selves and their communities). On the pluralist picture, there is always a certain amount of internal disharmony; I would speculate that this is the fuel for the efforts to transform the community. Despite the practical difficulties and costs of seeking unity, I suggest that the unified self remains a *regulative* ideal in our efforts to articulate ourselves and transform our communities.[38] We seek it, and need to seek it, even when we cannot have it. Lugones has shown, at least, that this regulative ideal is no justification for cultural imperialism.

Beauvoir's position has two related theses: (I) the oppressed person must overcome the illusion that she is really a member of the community that oppresses her; and (II) to be free, she must find or make a community that can

grant her full membership. Both of these theses make sense in cases of extreme oppression and deprivation, as in the case of Africans enslaved in the United States, but they do not seem to apply so neatly when one has some limited authority and agency within a community. If my community recognizes me as a limited agent, I need to assess whether those limits allow resources enough to fight for full agency within that community and whether it would cost too much of myself to leave that community. If I have enough resources within the community to fight for change, then my struggle within the community may transform the community (especially if I am not alone in this struggle) to the point at which I will have separated from the community that *was* by helping to make the community that *is*—all without "walking away." We do this through articulating and re-articulating ourselves in our relations to others, by building new and different sorts of alliances, and by reshaping our social practices.

Given Beauvoir's emphasis on community in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it is striking to note that in her autobiographies Beauvoir repeatedly takes the stance that she is an exceptional woman who escaped the personal experience of women's oppression.[39] This thinking that she was liberated while most other women were not has been perceived by many to be a deep arrogance. Michelle Le Doeuff (1987) points out, however, that this viewing of herself as an exception gave Beauvoir the distance she needed to see the situation of woman as contingent and so enabled her to gain the perspective from which the analysis offered in *The Second Sex* could be written. If we take seriously Beauvoir's view that one must fight oppression by rejecting one community for another, then we must look at her grounds for thinking that she had somehow escaped this oppression. Although the community that she constructed around herself was not a woman-only, woman-centered, woman-defined world, she thought it was community enough for her. (This is exactly the point of entrance for those feminists who want to interpret Beauvoir's life and her philosophy together and argue that neither was truly liberatory.) My point is that Beauvoir did not think that the community one needs to fashion must consist only of the members of the oppressed group; it simply must be a community in which those individuals who are oppressed elsewhere find the opportunity to exercise their freedom. Since most of us usually are members of multiple communities, each nourishing different aspects of the selves we are trying to articulate through our lives, we may use the power and sense of competence that we gain in one community not only to nourish others in that community but also to transform other communities in which we participate.

Beauvoir's writing of *The Second Sex* served to create a community that could validate her even though she did not explicitly set out to write it with this goal in mind. Recall that Beauvoir says that she undertook *The Second Sex* to try to give a general account of what it is to be a woman so that she could begin to give an account of what it is to be the particular woman that she herself is.

Recently, many feminists have criticized *The Second Sex* as being too bourgeois, too white, too heterosexist, etc. The text does have these limitations, each to some degree. Seeing the text in the context of Beauvoir's project will help to see what is valuable in it despite these drawbacks. Remember also that this work has a very wide-ranging scope: often Beauvoir goes beyond her direct experience, to discuss topics of central importance to many women, i.e., the formation of gender identity, sexuality (heterosexuality and lesbianism), marriage, motherhood, contraception, abortion, old age, and so on. Although *The Second Sex* is not explicitly autobiographical, it is, and was conceived as, the foundation for a set of autobiographies. If all one know of Beauvoir were *The Second Sex*, its wide-ranging scope might keep one from seeing the text as a foundation for her autobiographies, since it is not immediately clear why such a foundation is needed and why this sort should be appropriate. It is not such a stretch, though, once we've seen that she is clearing the ground for her own autobiography, to see that in writing such a general, social/political/philosophical analysis of what it is to be in *a* woman's situation (that is, in the situation of a middle-class white heterosexual intellectual Frenchwoman of the mid-twentieth century), she is clearing the ground for other women to write their own autobiographies, or perhaps more generally to construct their own lives.[40] The wide-ranging scope of *The Second Sex* answers Beauvoir's belief that one must choose one's actions with a clear knowledge of the situation one is in (for it is through our actions that we establish our values and create our selves). For women, accurate knowledge of our situation is often hard to come by, because of too many layers of social mythology and a complexly supported power structure that positively obscures our oppressive situation so as to keep us in it. *The Second Sex* is one attempt by Beauvoir to figure out woman's situation, her autobiographies are another. *The Second Sex* is more general and theoretical, whereas the autobiographies are very concrete and particular, and we can read them together as an attempt to defy these distinctions. Further, by taking semantic authority, and by taking it so effectively, Beauvoir actually created a community that could recognize and sustain the self that she was trying to create.

Through her writing Beauvoir changed herself, changed other women, and helped to create a world in which she could be understood. Others do it in other ways. Writing one's life is a metaphor, which can also be taken literally. The defiant slave who refuses to allow the master into her hut attempts to articulate herself not a slave. Whether her re-articulation gets uptake, whether she can make it stick, depends on her community. We all articulate ourselves within and against the definitions we are handed, through the actions we do, through the stories we tell, fundamentally through the choices we make. Those choices are ways of giving value to aspects of ourselves and our world. As Joyce Trebilcot has argued, when we articulate our experiences, "the idea is not to discover 'the truth' and, competitively, to present it more clearly or forcefully

or completely than anyone else"; it is rather, to contribute one's own words, insights, speculations, jokes, to feminist realities (Trebilcot 1991, 45-51). We articulate our experiences because we must, but we seek authority for our articulations because we want to contribute to shaping the social reality in which we participate. To settle for anything less is to settle for less than a fully human life.

NOTES

I would like to thank Claudia Card, Alisa Carse, Marcia Lind, Linda Nicholson, Stanley Munsat, and two anonymous reviewers for this journal for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. See, for example, Bartky (1990). Bartky calls for more than this, but her analysis of what is at stake in being excluded from the ongoing creation of culture is important.

2. See, for example, Lugones and Spelman (1983).

3. See, for example, Nicholson (1989) and Fuss (1989).

4. Nancy Hewitt, for example, took this position in a recent paper (Hewitt 1992).

5. See Radford-Hill (1986); Lugones and Spelman (1983); hooks (1984); davenport (1981).

6. Sometimes Rorty weakens this to saying that we are not "full" moral agents; the difference is enormous and his argument depends on the stronger claim.

7. She writes, "Only man can be an enemy to man; only he can rob him of the meaning of his acts and his life because it also belongs only to him alone to confirm it in its existence, to recognize it in actual fact as a freedom" (Beauvoir 1948, 82). For an insightful discussion of the importance of normativity to human freedom, arguing from a broadly Kantian perspective to a Hegelian self-expressive end, see Brandom (1979).

8. Notice the irony in the fact that the sense and the power of Beauvoir's claim is lost if we switch sexes: woman must "prove that she is a woman and that she is free by revolting against the tyrants." Revolting against tyrants is built into the concept of manhood and erased from the concept of womanhood.

9. This definition of phallocracy does not entail that men are the only agents of women's oppression, nor does it deny that some women benefit in some ways from the social system. It is also important to recognize that as beings who are programmed for service, we develop traits that we may deem generally valuable. At issue is what can be reclaimed once the service is no longer mandatory.

10. In discussing the situation of African-Americans, Beauvoir writes: "As George Bernard Shaw puts it, in substance, 'The American white relegates the black to the rank of shoeshine boy; and he concludes from this that the black is good for nothing but shining shoes.' This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual (or group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he *is* inferior. But the significance of the verb *to be* must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become.' Yes, women on the whole *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?" (Beauvoir 1952, xxviii)

11. In fact, this widespread loose construal is a misconstrual which has gained considerable intellectual force. The more limited claim put forth by Sapir and Whorf is that the grammatical structure of our language shapes our very conception of the way the world is structured. (It does not follow from this, for example, that if I haven't got thirty-two words for white in my vocabulary that I cannot discriminate between thirty-two shades of white.)

12. Dale Spender is a notable exception.

13. Hoagland (1988) seems to take this up. See also Taylor (1985).

14. See Frye (1983, 9). Frye lists three forms of service work: personal, sexual and ego service. She adds: "Women's service work is also characterized everywhere by the fatal combination of responsibility and powerlessness: we are held responsible for good outcomes for men and children in almost every respect though we have in almost no case power adequate to that project." See also Anzaldúa (1987, 21): " I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us, *lowly burras* bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes macho caricatures of its men." It is interesting to note that both Wittig and Nietzsche say that calling a woman a servant or a slave is redundant (Wittig 1992). Nietzsche's having said so shows that one need not be a feminist to be aware of such phallocratic definitions. See Nietzsche (1974, Sec.363).

15. See Sandra Lee Bartky's "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness" (in Bartky 1990) for a discussion of the way in which feminist consciousness requires both an apprehension of the overwhelming nature of our oppressive situation and an evaluation of that situation in light of an apprehension of how it ought to be for us.

16. Hoagland (1988) does a quite thorough job of spelling out these desiderata and the reasons for them.

17. Jane Reid (in conversation) points out that the phallocrats are also guilty of seeing lesbians everywhere—any woman who doesn't comply with compulsory femininity, for example, is labeled "dyke" and punished as such. Taken together, Frye's and Reid's claims point up a paradox: the lesbian is both ubiquitous and impossible.

18. Austin (1979, 175-204); Frye discusses Austin on this (1983, 161).

19. I mean for this to evade the issue of meaning-essentialism, since in the first sense of articulation, we may create the segments by inserting the joints, or we may begin with segments and "discover" which can be joined.

20. Africans held captive as slaves in the United States actually did a lot of articulating themselves and their place in the world, if the slave narratives that we have today are typical. What was denied to them was the unity of word and deed and a full range of *effective* sayings. So, for example, the slaves could tell stories about why their children were taken away, but it was rare for them to be able to *prevent* their children from being taken away.

21. The striving that marks transcendence requires as its subject an imperfect being who has something to strive *for*; God would have no need of transcendence. The notion of the sovereignty of the subject has often been misconstrued. It takes as its premise that there is no God or other absolute to give us values, and recognizes that we do in fact have values, so sets out to say how we, not being God, create values. To be a self is to be a sovereign, even if it is not to be God.

22. Frye challenges Sartre on just this point, claiming that his position collapses into absurdity because it entails that a woman who is raped and survives chooses rape because she did not fight unto the death. This is misleading. Frye's version of Sartre (who is admittedly careless here) is also careless about the description of what the woman chooses.

Rape is an aspect of the situation into which she is thrown. She may have chosen to let her roommate's boyfriend into their apartment (ostensibly to wait for the roommate) but that does not entail that she chooses to be raped by him. If he then rapes her, her survival doesn't prove that she chose to be raped; at most it proves that she chose survival, and chose it even in the case in which rape is a cost. On a feminist existentialist picture (not Sartre's), it is important that she accept the fact of a past rape but this never amounts to a requirement that she think of the rape as *justified* by her choice to live.

23. Wartenberg's example of the power a teacher has to grade her students is helpful for illustrating the situated aspect of this power. The teacher's evaluation would have no effect without the cooperation of others in the community, for others must recognize the significance of the grade assigned both as it reports past performance and as a predictor of future performance in order for the grade to carry any weight. Without this shared interpretation, the teacher loses her power over the student; the student can dismiss the teacher's evaluation with a shrug and a "That's just what she thinks." When the community backs up the teacher by situating the grade in a network of social practices that reward those with high grades and deny benefits to those with poor grades, then the teacher's power to grade is a power to effect community interpretations of the individual. Even in a more ideal situation, where poor grades are treated as reasons to provide extra help, the teacher is effecting the community's interpretation of the individual.

24. This last point about vision and courage is Rorty's view about MacKinnon and Frye. In calling them visionaries he ignores the community from which they come and to which they give their support. In saying this, I do not mean to diminish their significance, but I do mean to honor the others whose lives and work provide the inspiration upon which MacKinnon, Frye, and other feminist leaders draw.

25. Brandom (1979) argues that these community responses are *constitutive* of the social practice.

26. This is not to suggest that separatism should always or only be last-ditch effort. Creating a woman-centered space would be of value even in a community in which women's safety weren't threatened.

27. The nonjustifying grounds I am thinking of are race, sex, class, etc., but sometimes, as in the case of affirmative action, such grounds for privileging those who have been disadvantaged may well provide the basis for excellent justification. By themselves, however, these factors are not justifiers; justification requires further premises such as claims about the injustice of the current situation and claims about how to change it.

28. The idea for this procedure comes from Friedman (1987), in which she changes the sexes of the participants in Kohlberg's Heinz case.

29. Obviously this won't work if what one likes is being richer than everyone else, since that cannot be generalized. If what one likes is having enough money to have a roof over one's head, food on the table, clothes on one's back, etc., that standard of living can and should be extended to others. The first kind of desire is just what moving outside of the zero-sum game is supposed to undermine.

30. In fact, rampant disaffiliation from male privilege and disaffiliation from female disadvantaging would result in the dissolution of the categories of sex, according to Wittig. Wittig argues that the categories of sex are created by the power structure and not vice versa (see "The Category of Sex" in Wittig 1992).

31. Even in the early papers, Frye says that given what meaning is, this imagined homogeneous community "which we imagine we need *could* not be the community in which we can make ourselves intelligible, im-mediately [unmediated by men], to and for ourselves" (Frye 1983, 81). This is echoed in Frye (1992), 70.

32. The distinction we make between those who are able-bodied and those who are not illustrates the sort of categories one can move into and out of at various times in one's life.

33. When I need someone to fix my sink, I look for someone we define as a plumber, and when I find her and she accepts the job, I value her a lot. I don't value her skills or contribution when I am looking for a piano teacher. Admittedly, this is self-centered instrumental valuation, but it illustrates how we value each other in many non-intimate community relationships.

34. Beauvoir writes: "To forget oneself it is first of all necessary to be firmly assured that now and for the future one has found oneself. Newly come into the world of men, poorly seconded by them, woman is still too busily occupied to search for herself' (Beauvoir 1952, 781). Beauvoir does not think that the liberated woman has transcended identity politics; she has simply taken a less explicit approach.

35. Whether certain intimate practices, genital sexual encounters, and such are criterial for the status of lesbian is a controversial issue. I think that this perspectival element is crucial to Frye's contribution to what has come to be called identity politics, but I also think that it is important not to trivialize the risks that women who engage in woman loving practices take. Adrienne Rich's notion of lesbian continuum strikes me as basically right, even if it needs to be amended to admit of multiple axes. One thing that is right about it is that loyalty, intimacy, and attention are all phenomena that admit of degrees.

36. It is possible to be born into a lesbian separatist community, and so for some it would be a community of place.

37. Lugones argues that "lesbian pluralism cannot be achieved through the inclusion of lesbians of different cultures, classes and situations in a separating group. Rather, pluralism requires the painstaking dismantling both of the dominator/dominated relation between the different systems and cultures that form the lesbians' 'home' systems and cultures. Pluralism also requires the transformation of these 'home' cultures so that lesbians can be rid of 'homo-phobia' in Anzaldúa's sense: 'the fear of going home'." (Lugones 1990a, 143)

38. I take this idea from Nehamas (1981), which applies critical monism to literary authors, not writers or persons.

39. Her reasons had to do with certain psychological traits and also with certain life choices-for example, choosing not to marry, not to have children.

40. For an intriguing discussion of the importance of telling our own stories, see Trebilcot (1991); see also Tirrell (1990) and Williams (1991).

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