

## **On the agonism of the woman-question: Nietzsche and the conflict between truth and wisdom**

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### **Abstract**

In this essay, Nietzsche's troubled relation to women is recast into the woman-question as a question of wisdom. For Nietzsche, the question of wisdom incites the double gesture of reversal and substitution, which defines the paradoxical relation between truth and mimesis, model and copy, etc., exposing the dissimulation that lies at the foundation of philosophy. The woman question is revealed to be philosophy's foundational apriori, assigning the woman the function of art, which provides philosophy with a non-philosophical complement in the name of difference, essential to its self-legitimation. The essay then briefly ventures into contemporary feminist debates employing Nietzsche's genealogical approach to gender and sexuality, linking the debates over this fraught relation in feminist literature to a more fundamental question of wisdom, the birthright of philosophy.

**Keywords:** agonism, asceticism, feminism, gender, genealogy, woman-question

## Introduction

*Aren't there reasons for suspecting that all philosophers, to the extent that they have been dogmatists, have not really understood women? That the grotesque seriousness of their approach towards the truth and the clumsy advances they have made so far are unsuitable ways of pressing their suit with a woman? What is certain is that she has spurned them – leaving dogmatism of all types standing sad and discouraged. If it is even left standing!<sup>1</sup>*

'Suppose that truth is a woman.' That is how Nietzsche began his Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, from which the above passages were lifted – by all measures, a veritable prelude to a standout masterpiece, *On the Genealogy of Morality*.<sup>2</sup> In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche expands his tentative sketch of the ascetic ideal that he developed earlier in *The Birth of Tragedy*, defining it as a "mood which negates the will."<sup>3</sup> The *Genealogy* projects the same ideal but is subjected to a cartographic examination of what Nietzsche defines as his aprioris, the aprioris of ecological thought. Borrowing from Kant, he likens these aprioris, comprising of "environment and age, model and origin," to a deontological schema in the sense that, as he describes, "the categorical imperative [speak] through [them]."<sup>4</sup>

But as to how the woman's figure becomes relevant in this transmission of the ecological schema, we need to relocate the discussion to Nietzsche's over-arching motifs of wisdom and truth scattered throughout his writings. On the supposition that truth is a woman, Nietzsche hoped that *she* would be enough to render dogmatism irrelevant: "Because there are those who make fun of dogmatism, claiming that it has fallen over, that it is lying flat on its face, or more, that dogmatism is in its last gasps."<sup>5</sup> *But dogmatism is here to stay, as is the problematic concept of the woman in relation to*

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Preface," *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indiana/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, "Preface," *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

*truth*. This problematic lies no less in the fundamental awareness of the condition of truth and, thus, in terms of the origin of philosophy, in the *question of wisdom*. It is wisdom standing opposed to the historical tenacity of dogmatism, revealing the handiwork of the masculine, his will to power, and his dogmas that undermine the aprioris of thinking in the Nietzschean sense. Truth is to woman as dogmatism is to man.

Incidentally, the question of wisdom is the question Nietzsche was fond of always asking to a fault, "Why knowledge at all?"<sup>6</sup> Of "wisdom" that "wants," craves the free spirits, in the wake of its severance from the truth that dogmas have since besieged, Nietzsche has this to say: "Courageous, unconcerned, sarcastic, and violent ... she is a woman and always loves a warrior."<sup>7</sup> In the absence of truth that has inclined toward dogmas, wisdom-woman, however, becomes dissociated from a dialectical dyad. This narrative, however, is not new.

Since *The Birth of Tragedy*, the narrative has been framed within a familiar battle of instincts, laying bare the precondition for the tragic collapse of thinking already hastened by the destruction of the ecological aprioris since the advent of Cartesianism. Perhaps only Spinoza, a Cartesian, sought to revive the ecological spirit of philosophy, redrawing the focus on natural dynamism with remarkable acuity but lacking the radicalness and delirious approach of Nietzsche, uncovering the abysmal character of nature. The devastation of the ecological schema comes into play by denying the power that sustains an *already integrated* (hence, *ecological*) world, that is, of nature and humans, via the mutual wrangling of instincts. For Nietzsche, this conflict is equivalent to the mythical strife between Apollo and Dionysus. Their reciprocal contradiction intensifies the ecological spectrum of integration. Nietzsche's signature approach to life's contradictions thus extends beyond the specificities of existence, namely, the geological and the cosmic dimensions of being, history, and the cosmos.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he focused on the aesthetic dimension of the above approach as a problematic "[translation] of humanity

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, "Our Virtues," *Beyond Good and Evil*, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Reading and Writing," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

back into nature.”<sup>8</sup> Art expresses this difficult translation by relocating mythology into the interiority of everyday life. One can argue here that mythology is the earliest praxeology of translating the human back into the natural fold via an autonomous ethical re-enactment of the agonistic war of the mythical figures of Apollo (the impulse behind truth-seeking predisposed toward the masculine) and Dionysus (the feminine disposition of wisdom).<sup>9</sup>

In this essay, we will engage how the woman-question arises, the question that sets off the *Genealogy*, as a consequence of philosophy’s self-origination. Transitionally, we will push our discussions to cover contemporary feminist debates, specifically around Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, concerning their distinct approaches to mimetic feminism, by far the most advanced by-product of the woman question initiated by the *Genealogy*. Yet, we will redraw the terms of this feminist debate back to the age-old conflict between philosophy and art, which originated the question of the woman itself, thus reflecting the problematic begun by Nietzsche’s venture into geophilosophy. We will then conclude by reaffirming the woman-question as the founding ecological question of the *Genealogy* that has insistently become a question of gender.

## **Woman: the genealogy of philosophy and art**

*[T]he ascetic priest will hardly even be the most successful defender of his ideal—for the same reason that a woman tends to fail when she wishes to defend ‘woman in herself’.*<sup>10</sup>

Employing Nietzsche’s words is not without its contradictions concerning the question of woman. It is beyond the purpose of this paper to settle this internal debacle in Nietzsche. If at all, this unsettled aspect of women in Nietzsche’s works speaks not only of the persuasive character of his rhetorical claims but also of his methodical

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, “Our Virtues,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 123.

<sup>9</sup> See Kelly Oliver, “Nietzsche’s Woman: The Poststructuralist Attempt to Do Away with Women,” *Radical Philosophy* 48 (1998), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, “Third Treatise: What do Ascetic Ideals Mean?”, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 83.

perseverance to unravel the nature of “woman as such”<sup>11</sup> without succumbing to essentialism. Nietzsche’s approach against essentialism, whose truth claim rests on a certain idea of naturalness, is agonistic at the very least, speaking of the need to escalate things into contentious comparison to demolish the pretense of a unitary essence. Thus, to ask for purity in nature outside of comparative dynamics begs the question.

The irreparable gap between the sexes lies at the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy of woman. Thus, attempting to bridge the “abysmal antagonism between them,” Nietzsche asserts, “is a *typical* sign of a shallow mind.”<sup>12</sup> The opposite side of this attempt is certainly untrue. Nietzsche’s philosophy does not champion the *masculine*, whose identification with philosophical truth has been well-established since the ancients. But, for Nietzsche, it is always the kind of truth indicative of unhindered pettiness, albeit normalized as the proper metaphysical disposition toward understanding life’s deeper meanings.

But, nor is Nietzsche anti-female, but undoubtedly anti-‘woman-as-such,’ woman *an sich*, arguably, the ascetic facsimile of Man that he uncovered in the *Genealogy*. Again, the argument against woman is broadly construed as Nietzsche’s contention against essentializing the sexes. Sex is an indication of the abysmal contradiction of nature in the sense that it allows sexuality to appear as an object of the will through the body and sensibility, whereby the will arrogates the right to interpret nature via the sexual organs, thus, natured by the human will. In this sense, natural claims can justify being more natural than others. But what is that to nature? In the following passages, Nietzsche provides a glimpse of what this naturing of sex implies for the question of truth that is supposed to be feminine:

What inspires respect and, often enough, fear of women is their *nature* (which is ‘more natural’ than that of men), their truly predatory and cunning agility, their tiger’s claws inside their glove, the naivete’ of their egoism, their inner wildness and inability to be trained, the incomprehensibility, expanse, and rambling character of their desires and virtues.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, “Our Virtues,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 124.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Nonetheless, the naturing of sex as expressed in “sensuality” can also be made to “[transfigure] itself” in the form of de-naturing, such that it “no longer enters consciousness as a sexual stimulus,”<sup>14</sup> but rather as an object of desire and willing.<sup>15</sup> This is what happens to the perceived nature of the feminine. Accordingly, this is also how philosophical truth transforms sex into a metaphysical conundrum when it skips consciousness to be interpreted as *spirituality*, which betrays the ascetic disposition that has always been “treated with considerable prepossession precisely by philosophers.”<sup>16</sup>

What Nietzsche aims at most, apropos of the question of woman, is that, as it is for everything imbued with the will of nature, the irreducibility of its non-essentialist and immanent presence in both the natural and human worlds, man and woman must relate to one another in “eternal hostile tension.”<sup>17</sup> This ought to be the correct standpoint of woman concerning truth in the Nietzschean sense, that is, in the agonistic sense of contradiction. With truth, in the modern sense, hounded by its absent pairing with wisdom, creating a power dynamic that pits dogmatism against the warlike instinct of wisdom, the ‘*woman an sich*’ lays the genealogical groundwork for what transpires next, the tug-of-war between mimesis and contemplation, copy and model, art and philosophy.

Art, whose lie, as Plato conceived, exalts appearance and beauty, is engaged in a protracted war against the perfect world of Forms. This will have far-ranging implications as to how philosophy reflects on its self-image. On the one hand, philosophy was “generated in order to define a place for art,” and, in the same manner that a theory of art is philosophy’s originating genealogy, truth (as opposed to artistic mimicry) creates a “cosmic guarantee that nothing can be made by [art] to happen.”<sup>18</sup> The same guarantee of inoperability applies to women. On the other hand, the point of view of art reveals the degree

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<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, “Third Treatise: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean,” *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Rampley, “Physiology as Art: Nietzsche on Form,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33, no. 3 (1993), 275.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, “Our Virtues,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 127.

<sup>18</sup> See Arthur Danto, “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art,” in *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1998), 67, 69.

to which “[n]othing is so utterly foreign, unfavorable, hostile for women from the very start than truth.”<sup>19</sup>

As American philosopher Arthur Danto argues, “philosophy itself may just be the disenfranchisement of art”– there goes the birthright of Western philosophical tradition! – which “reenacts the dilemma set by Plato for [mimicry].”<sup>20</sup> Philosophy sustains a strategic conflict with mimesis, not entirely defeating art by overshadowing appearances with ideal forms, if only to legitimate its existence as a discipline. Thus, truth’s relation to art is comparable to man’s attitude toward the woman-question: “Fear and pity: with these feelings man has so far confronted woman, always with one foot in tragedy which tears to pieces as it enchants.”<sup>21</sup> Conversely, art must retain its inferior relation to philosophy, reduced to “doing what philosophy itself does, only uncouthly.”<sup>22</sup>

In this light, defining the dyad between philosophy and art comes with a familiar dialectic, that of the master and slave. Over time, the dialectic diffuses into dense, intersectional, and often conflicted layers of in-between-agency settlements, concessions, and a peace treaty. Nietzsche’s preference remains that of reciprocal contradiction. The master and slave relation, like the mythical conflict of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, is governed by the same principle. With time, the dialectic unravels the sexual condition of social conflicts; after all, enslavers and enslaved are sexualized identities. Thus, the insinuation that the first division of labor originated from the division of the sexes is not far-fetched.<sup>23</sup> In the intervening time, it is not hard to think that these conflicts evolved into the present condition along

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, “Our Virtues,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 125.

<sup>20</sup> Danto, “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art,” 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, “Our Virtues,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 129-130.

<sup>22</sup> Danto, “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art,” 68. Simone de Beauvoir captures the relation of mimetic art to the problem of women living the “supposedly purified consciousness of men ... as a capricious hand of masculine authority in which reason is an instrument of violence” (See Bonnie Mann, *Gender Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 16. See also Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Molovany-Chavallier [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010]). As the discussions progress, we will further navigate the correlation between art and the feminine.

<sup>23</sup> Engels quotes and unpublished material written by himself and Marx in 1846: “The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children” (See Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* [New York: International Publishers, 1975], 129).

contested lines of speech acts, performativity, and confrontations with moral injunctions that disavow ethical autonomy.

Nietzsche's view of Platonic metaphysics, which formalizes the separability of philosophy and art, however, inverts this dyadic relation between philosophical truth (the enslaver) and mimetic aesthetics (the position of the enslaved) in favor of the idea of truth as the affirmation of appearances, reducing it to an artistic impulse, down to its procreant baseline, the woman, or better put, the woman-question. Lawrence Hatab states that: "The 'woman question' is not a digression or a sidelight. [As] the Preface to the *BGE* begins with the sentence: 'Supposing truth is a woman-what then?' Put another way: 'What if truth were appearance?'"<sup>24</sup> For Nietzsche, the woman-question is the *quilting point*<sup>25</sup> of the master-slave dialectic- it suspends the mutual antagonism between philosophy and art and slips under the illusion of *shared will*, i.e., the will to truth (which can also be transformed into the will to 'dogmatism,' thus, in both instances, transfigures the woman-question into self-enclosed mimesis).

### *Woman-art and man-truth*

Put differently, the desire for philosophy may just as well be the desire for women as for beauty and appearance, the desire for the lie of truth, which, following Danto, sustains the self-legitimation of philosophy. As depicted in Plato's *Symposium*, in terms of the psychonoetic life of philosophy, desire has to undergo a dialectical process of re-education via the "liberation of rational desire from attachment to an inadequate object and its redirection to its proper goal, 'the true knowledge which is knowledge of Beauty itself' (211c7)."<sup>26</sup> In Nietzschean terms, the re-

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<sup>24</sup> See Lawrence Hatab, "Nietzsche on Woman," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (1981), 340.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Lacan employs the concept of the quilting point (*point de capiton*) to suggest a fixed point where the signifying chain stops to arrive at a fixed meaning. He likens this function to that of an "upholstery button [that] forms on the surface of the material ... a point of convergence that enables everything that happens [in discourse] to be situated retroactively and prospectively" (See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, trans. Russel Grigg [New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993], 268).

<sup>26</sup> See Charles H. Kahn, "Plato's Theory of Desire," *The Review of Metaphysics* 41, no. 1 (1987), 101.



education of desire in philosophy speaks of the necessity for Platonic metaphysics to treat women “like birds that have lost their way ... like something finer, more vulnerable, wilder, stranger, sweeter, more soulful, but also like something that has to be locked up to keep it from flying away.”<sup>27</sup> As Nietzsche scholars Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick claim, “Nietzsche’s woman is the truth metaphysics seeks.”<sup>28</sup> The truth sought by metaphysics serves a strategic purpose, to sustain the contradiction with which the mutation of appearances gives philosophy the alibi to impose permanence and eternal principles, or rather, an *interpretation*. The latter is what the “will to truth” does not need, the will that “postulates a reality, a woman,” any more than it does a “discovery.”<sup>29</sup>

It goes to say that women are non-interpretable but discoverable. But to the extent that nature loves to hide, women’s closest proximity to nature, closer to it than men, as Nietzsche rhetorically agrees, makes discovery incomplete and unreliable as an index of certainty. This explains why the woman remains a question, itself the possibility of wonder and awe. For millennia, philosophy itself has obscured this possibility to conceal its weakness and destitution, its perverted self-image.

As to art, this allows a degree of validity to woman, to beauty and appearance, to the extent that philosophy uses them to “deceive about [its] lineage, about the inherited vulgarity of body and soul.”<sup>30</sup> Insofar as it cannot flourish without the lie, philosophy itself is an art of deception. Art, or rather, woman-art, woman-beauty, woman-appearance, is philosophy’s founding apriori – the art it ought to conceal to keep its degenerate self-image, and worse of all, its contempt for art from *discovery*, from becoming the ‘*woman an sich*.’ Even so, as Nietzsche says of the ascetic ideal (which must have accompanied philosophy since the beginning), “the one who holds in contempt is still the one who has not ‘forgotten how to respect.’”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, “Our Virtues,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, “Chapter 3: Beyond Good and Evil,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, edited by Richard Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 305.

<sup>29</sup> Kelly Oliver, “Woman as Truth in Nietzsche’s Writings,” *Social Theory and Practice* 10, no. 2 (1984), 188.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, “What is Noble,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, “Third Treatise: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean,” *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 113.

Similarly, we can make use of Danto's criticism of philosophy's exclusion of art, taking off from Nietzsche's criticism of Plato's aberrant respect for art as he sees it: "Nietzsche refers to this as 'aesthetic socratism,' the philosopher having so identified reason with beauty that nothing could be beautiful that is not rational."<sup>32</sup>

Thus, from the perspective of philosophy's original founding vision, concerning which Nietzsche's ambivalence is in full dialectical display, a woman is essentially a man's woman. In terms of a more invasive, mechanical transmission of man's world, the woman has become 'one' of habit, a formalized habit vis-à-vis the historical perfection of the deception of philosophy through moral judgments, legislations, standards of taste, popular sentiment, etc. To the extent that appearances are deprived of actuality, the woman has been made to become the formal inclination of a habit that *does not make things happen*, which, has been assigned the analogous formalism of *art for art's sake*. But this useless power may also incline toward *commiserating with dogmatism*.

When prompting a call to action to launch the separatism of the sexes, of man's and woman's world, the woman enables the man's world by *separating the sexes* as if nature has not yet achieved this abysmal estrangement in the primordial sense (it goes to say, no human power can replicate nature's power of difference). This, then, deprives truth of wisdom. (The separation of the sexes can only be achieved aesthetically. Thus, a genealogical separation as a matter of situated positioning cannot be ontologized). At this point, *wisdom* becomes devoid of the soundness of action and judgment. She then ceases to be a warrior-wisdom and relinquishes her cause by default as the enemy of dogmatism. As Kelly Oliver asserts, as a consequence, "[s]he not only de-sexes herself in order to imitate men, but she also attempts to develop a science of woman, thereby destroying the power of woman which originates ... from her multiple meanings, her ambiguity."<sup>33</sup>

But what is that to man-philosophy when the woman-art challenges its authority by auto-critique or separatism? Now, with the men, primarily philosophers, women look at truth as a powerful weapon of enlightenment, personal liberty, emancipative desire, etc.,

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<sup>32</sup> Danto, "The philosophical disenfranchisement of art," 68.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly Oliver, "Woman as Truth in Nietzsche's Writing," *Social Theory and Practice* 10, no. 2 (1984), 188.

whereby feminism is celebrated as a moral obligation, such as a separatist ontology of sexes, not as an expression of ethical autonomy and singularity. But as a consequence of the loss of her original warlike instinct tied to her sexuality, the incapacity to reproduce this instinct (even in aesthetic, non-biological terms), the moment she certifies the separation of truth from wisdom, this time championing the cause against dogmatism but overvalues the fight in her favor, the man's world is even more protected from the redistributive promise of closure, more so, of justice by the rebellion of the absent sons.

### *The redundancy of autocritique*

Would Nietzsche agree that man's dominance is irrefutable and indestructible? This is far from a settled opinion on the woman-question of Nietzsche, which is a question of wisdom that depends on the permanence of comparability willed into human nature – willed by the indifference of a pre-default, ahistorical origin, which can still be imagined to have existed before the division of the sexes – their equality. (Incidentally, this is a dimension of life that mythology seeks to renew in the present). Still, the default origin is *history* (reserved for the masculine that wills the uniformity of nature) as the precondition for analytic comparison, conflict, and negation, and if you will, the possibility of a resolution, however temporary. Concerning gender difference, Nietzsche offers a social ontology of this default condition of history: “Comparing man and woman overall, you could say: woman would not have a genius for finery if she did not have an instinct for the *secondary* role.”<sup>34</sup>

This instinct is logically willed, thus, desexualizes the instinct itself, into the interior of the woman's identity, naturalizing her instinct in terms of forcing her to embrace female sexuality as the object to be dissociated from the rational desire of philosophy (recall the purpose of Plato's *Symposium*). Hence, the woman does philosophy in the most primitive fashion, the 'woman as such,' just as artistic mimicry does a purposive secondment to philosophy's self-imposed task. In short, the woman cannot assume a proper negation standpoint as opposed to man. Plumwood exposes these maneuvers in classical logic:

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<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, “*Epigrams and entr'actes*,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 69.

In classical logic, negation ( $\sim p$ ) is interpreted as the universe without  $p$  ... [W]hat is important for the issue we are considering here is that  $\sim p$  *can then not be independently or positively identified, but is entirely dependent on  $p$  for its specification*. Not- $p$  has no independent role, but is introduced as merely alien to the primary notion  $p$ .<sup>35</sup>

To exacerbate the point even further, when a woman breaks free of the “woman as such,” tired of the illusion that by imitating the masculine, she could expose its true indeterminate character, she not only betrays complicity with the man’s world but also loses her power of mimicry as the greatest enemy of dogmatism. This much has been ignored, especially by radical and cultural feminists, which overlooked the differences among women (and among men too) by class, ethnicity, and social status, not to mention the indeterminate relation “between sexual practice and gender.”<sup>36</sup> Through a counter-society of the “maternal myth of the archaic mother,” for example, the woman deprives herself of a starting point of negating her logical reduction, which is how most men see women as condemned and isolated, forced to withdraw into the illusion of becoming men, original, unmysterious, historical. Thus, devoid of the condition of *imitating them*, the woman envisions a place outside of history and society built around the negation logic, beyond expressibility and provability. But the true power of mimesis is *lost* in this translation.

Mimesis presupposes the capacity to simulate truth by collapsing the distinction between model and copy, original and image, and more so, by revealing the dissimulation (not just the indeterminate character) of truth.<sup>37</sup> Truth generates appearances but hides the facts from the appearances themselves. Thus, a false ontological divide is created between essence and appearance, spirit and body, etc., for everyone to accept as *fait accompli*. In the same vein, classical negation logic conceals the actual independence of *not-*

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<sup>35</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 183.

<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the act of imitation or masquerade risks losing an agency. As Danto argues, “Mimesis and masquerade remain the prerogative of the artist, even the artists, the attributes of whose identity, having been brought to consciousness, are no longer theirs alone” (Afterword, “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art,” 198).

*p*, which uncovers the determination of the masculine to capture the specter of the feminine outside of logical means by invoking an alien category. Like a wandering, exotic planet, the alien is deemed non-independent, needing its own solar system, an interstellar shelter to express a homely identity.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to mimesis, truth dreads its proximity to life, fears its tentativeness which ungrounds all essences. However, its true life in as far as it can only make progress as truth lies in the neighborhood of *appearances* – alas! in the company of women, mimicry, and wisdom. In this context, the woman-question is the key to overturning metaphysics, the belief in the independence of truth from wisdom, and vice-versa, that has inclined toward the question of gender. Or, if you will, the ‘gender trouble,’<sup>39</sup> arguably one of the new configurations of the question of wisdom today.

### Is there a beyond-the-woman question?

*Let us immediately add that she also loses her taste. She forgets her fear of man: but the woman who ‘forgets fear’ abandons her most feminine instincts. It is fair enough and also understandable enough for women to dare to emerge when fear of men is no longer inculcated, or, to be more exact, when the man in men is no longer wanted and cultivated; what is more difficult to understand is that in the process – women degenerate.<sup>40</sup>*

I am more inclined to interpret Nietzsche's words in the above quotations as complaining of the degeneration of the woman-question (at least, in the way it had come to escalate during his time) in the sense that the woman is stuck between two choices: 1) to stay as *manly* and thus retain her feminine standpoint, and 2) to discover a new process of emancipation outside of the signifying chain of culture and society and the power structures it enables and reproduces. What

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<sup>38</sup> Incidentally, one can argue here that LGBTQI+ is similarly locked into this problematic desire for ‘home’ as a sexual body. Here it is worth quoting the words of Butler: “The relation between sexual practice and gender is surely not a structurally determined one, but the destabilizing of the heterosexual presumption of that very structuralism still requires a way to think the two in a dynamic relation to one another,” (*Bodies that Matter*), 183.

<sup>39</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London, Routledge), 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, “Our Virtues,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 128.

I choose to absorb of Nietzsche's woman-question is the echoes it creates in the contemporary delineation of the question of gender.

In light of Judith Butler's radical rewriting of Luce Irigaray's compelling version of mimetic feminism, a feminist position which partly shadows our interpretation of the woman-question of Nietzsche, the degeneration comes into play in terms of the transfiguration of the problem of sensuality. I see this dimension of 'transfiguration' as the *quilting point* of Nietzsche's complaint against the degeneration of women. Also, recall that Nietzsche's ascetic prepossession of the philosophers would have this elision interpreted as a question of [moral] propriety – the slide into the spiritual.

The transfigured sensuality in question evades consciousness as a "sexual stimulus." It lends itself to becoming a malleable property of the signifying chain, owing to its plasticity to language, this time as an operation of the unconscious that shapes habits, opinions, sentiments, and desires. The intervention of language-game enables a formulation of gender construction vis-à-vis the dominant signification discrediting the feminine. The problem with this turn to signification as a feminist recourse for constructivists and Irigaray is how it is appropriated without considering that the signifying process subtly operates through which the signification empowers itself. Irigaray is one example of being unable to transcend the limits of discursive mimesis in terms of how mimicry formulates an auto-critical standpoint vis-à-vis the power hierarchy dominated by men. Irigaray uses the guise of a sincere "cultivation of duality,"<sup>41</sup> what she calls "sexuate difference,"<sup>42</sup> hoping to *make things happen*.<sup>43</sup> Almost the same predicament confronts the constructivists, forcing them to take up a new alternative which only requires the seizure of a dominant sexual subjectivity to turn construction in favor of the feminine.

I am less inclined, however, to be argumentative as to the question of how to achieve this seizure. Radical and cultural feminists would be hard-pressed to propose a strategy, noting how most revolutions end up being reterritorialized by the powers that de-

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<sup>41</sup> Emily Anne Parker, "Precarity and Elemental Difference: On Butler's Re-writing of Irigarayan Difference," *Political Theory* 45, no. 3 (2017), 335.

<sup>42</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Key writings* (New York, London: Continuum, 2004), xii.

<sup>43</sup> For what it is worth, this idea presupposes the thinking that men are willing to negotiate their position of power and strength. That they are willing to compromise, however, is less a matter of intention than the strategic double effect of mimetic signification – the necessity to sustain and not to suppress the tension.

legitimate expressions of autonomy. The question is *what* to seize and, if it is possible to occupy this object, territory, place, or space to realize the desire for autonomy, a form of asignifying detachment.

As we learned from Danto, the auto-critical standpoint, at the behest of philosophy, only serves the proverbial disenfranchisement of art. In relation to Irigaray, as echoed by Butler, the idea of the feminine diving into the signification system where mimetic exposition is restricted to embracing the linguistic signifying chain between *signifier-man* and *signified-woman* reflects an optimistic consensus armed with hope that the chain will tire itself out – because it is illegitimate! – and thus, exposes its indetermination. Unfortunately, ‘hope’ would not wear this power through. The indetermination feeds on its negativity to pursue determinability in the re-arrangement of the ‘material’ bodies, organs, institutions, and social spaces of language that legitimize these effects of power maneuvers. On top of it, power has to constitute what matter means in the first place. The proverbial matter/form distinction is itself a fraught relation. This concerns the tension within matter itself, between the ‘idea’ of matter and the ‘constituted’ one, which is not restricted to just one sexual organ, that of the female, but also the phallus.<sup>44</sup> Butler navigates this Derridean assertion that matter can be *used twice*, further linking the question of materiality to femininity and how the woman’s body is constituted and re-constituted, apropos to the construction of matter. Matter varies according to the dispositif of power (not to discount the fact that the same problem of materiality applies to men).

Going back to the constructivists’ question of seizing the subjectivity of power, how would one imagine a new signifying chain that does not repeat the same mechanical process that isolated, condemned or persecuted their kind? If it is all about signification, the reconstruction of binarism and difference is inevitable as long as the game is linguistically restricted. This means it avoids the question of the body’s materiality. The body is the *point de capiton* (the quilting

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<sup>44</sup> For instance, Butler takes issue with some forms of lesbian feminism, which “[appear] to cut off any kind of solidarity with heterosexual women and implicitly to assume that lesbian feminism is the logically or politically necessary consequence of feminism. This kind of separatist prescriptivism is surely no longer viable. But even if it were politically desirable, what criteria would be used to decide the question of sexual ‘identity’?” *Gender Trouble*, 162.

point) that enacts a different level, degree, and intensity of the *disparate*<sup>45</sup> vis-à-vis mere difference (which often serves as the understudy of representation). In contrast to the earlier notion of the quilting point we mentioned in the previous section, the operation is invoked to suggest an option other than the shared will to truth/dogmatism that both man and woman partake of in a self-enclosed mimetic transaction. This time, the quilting point exposes the concealed intensities of difference beyond the purposive design to acknowledge the mere difference that language shows but unable to fathom the depths of intensive modulations, etc., that the effects of the signification upon the body can reveal. In short, the body introduces a new dimension to mimesis which remains a powerful counter-hegemonic approach. Along the same line, can one imagine the tongue independent of the materiality of the body that hosts its immaterial words? As Butler contends along the lines of gender construction:

It is not enough to argue that there is no prediscursive 'sex' that acts as the stable point of reference on which, or in relation to which, the cultural construction of gender proceeds. To claim that sex is already gendered, already constructed, is not yet to explain in which way the 'materiality' of sex is forcibly produced.<sup>46</sup>

It would suggest that as soon as the woman steps outside the signification process, she enters a new dimension of the real. While it is supposed to escape the signifying chain or language, the woman enters into a more complicated realm of material bodies already shaped by intersectional conflicts of power, desire, and subjectivity that have become the central motifs of fourth wave feminism. In defending Irigaray's prospective baseline for extending the power of mimesis to disrupt signification, Butler identifies the exact productive distich (the materiality) of the signification itself, which is not independent of the effects it produces. The problem with signification

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<sup>45</sup> We are borrowing the sense of the disparate from Deleuze and Guattari, wherein the 'disparate' "stands opposed to the identity of representation," which points to the *decidability* of that which doubly dissimulates, the simulacrum or the "circle of eternal return [undoing] that of the identical and contradictory" (See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 57).

<sup>46</sup> Butler, "Preface," *Bodies that Matter*, x.



is that its imperfect, actionable *negativity* enables it to close in on itself, sealing the linguistic sovereignty of the signifier-signified relation, ensuring the signification remains unpolluted by the material effects it produces on bodies. As Butler asserts, “Materiality appears only when its status as contingently constituted through discourse is erased, concealed, covered over.”<sup>47</sup> (In hindsight, the materiality that leaks from the signification process ignites the woman-question of Nietzsche, precisely at the juncture where truth turns inward and becomes dogmatic, thus unpaired from wisdom. What is wisdom but the materialist challenge to the complacent idealism of truth?). Here, Irigaray’s hope for destabilizing mimesis is complemented by identifying the neglected dyad of the signifying process – the body’s materiality:

Language emerges from the body, constituting an emission of sorts. The body is that upon which language falters, and the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers, in ways that remain largely unconscious.<sup>48</sup>

By re-examining the problematic of the unconscious, the ‘material turn’ from signification to bodies (in a way, a return to Foucauldian dynamics), shifts the focus from the workings of language and signification to the effects of power on power itself. After all, power is produced through its effects/products. In other words, power is built on an uneven plane of consistency. Here, one could note a reversal and substitution effect. The dissimulation that has become the trademark of truth happens *post-facto* after its actual effects on bodies have been registered in the signification process, marked by its victim, and thus, not without the possibility of the signified’s (the isolated’s, the condemned’s, the other’s) eventual *awareness* that the dissimulation preserves the status quo. This is one of the empowering characteristics of mimetic feminism, notwithstanding its inability to go beyond the signification:

There is no ‘power,’ taken as a substantive, that has dissimulation as one of its attributes or modes. This dissimulation operates through the constitution and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 192; fn. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 198.

formation of an epistemic field and set of 'knowers' when this field and these subjects are taken for granted as prediscursive givens, the dissimulating effect of power has succeeded.<sup>49</sup>

At this point, the lived and actionable awareness that dissimulation is *not* a pregiven attribute or mode of truth slightly undermines the promise of mimesis even as it remains within the signifying chain. Only 'slightly' insofar as the promise can still be extended beyond signs without ignoring the fact that it can also force the "*woman an sich*" to stay in the game (of binarism). Butler reiterates her Foucauldian reading: "The production of material effects is the formative or constitutive workings of power, a production that cannot be construed as a unilateral movement from cause to effect" (p. 192). Thus, the non-unilateral flow of power trounces the perceived sovereignty of the sign system. Its material effects leak on all sides, suggestive of the African myth of the Dogon egg, that the world is an egg, an *intensive spatium* on the surface, containing differentiated distributions of intensities, but held compressed in a fragile unity such as an egg.<sup>50</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

*Finally, I will pose the question: has a woman herself ever acknowledged a female mind as profound or a female heart as just? And isn't it true that, judging overall, "woman" has historically been most despised by women themselves – and not by us at all? – We men wish that women would stop compromising themselves through enlightenment.*<sup>51</sup>

Concerning the above passages, it is arguable that Nietzsche's misogyny is put on display, but not without a much-needed clarification. Nietzsche's hatred of woman is the philosopher's woman,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the appropriation of the myth of Dogon egg by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* see Robert Leston, "Deleuze, Haraway, and the Radical Democracy of Desire," *Configurations* 3, no. 3 (2015), 372. See also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, "Our Virtues," *Beyond Good and Evil*, 125.

the disenfranchised woman-art/beauty/appearance of philosophy that has willingly absorbed a second nature as if it were her own.<sup>52</sup>

But how can we establish the distinction between woman and 'woman as such' beyond mere difference? This question partly resonates with how we assess Nietzsche's misogyny. Or, going back to our previous question, is there a woman that precedes and even exceeds the 'woman-question'? If there is, would she still be called 'woman' that philosophical truth has constituted through the dogmatic separation of truth and wisdom? The latter, after all, has responded with either exclusivism or auto-critique.

In a biblical parody, Nietzsche writes in *The Twilight of the Idols*: "Man created woman, but from what? — From the rib of his God, of his ideal."<sup>53</sup> Concerning this parody in which Man emerges as the creator, not God (the latter serves as Man's ideal of creation), Frances Nesbitt Oppel offers the following provocations in *Nietzsche and Gender: Beyond Man and Woman*:

If 'woman' is part of God, even if only his rib, then God's death, pronounced by Nietzsche, has grave implications for man's other ideal, 'woman.' Are the two ideas also connected that the death of the one means the death of the other? What sort of thing is a woman, after all?<sup>54</sup>

Thus, the question of the feminine is central to Nietzsche's concept of the death of God. The question presupposes two fatal conditions: 1) the degeneration of the woman-question in the wake of the separation of truth and wisdom, and 2) the mimetic corruption of the other ideal of Man in terms of the abandonment of wisdom's

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<sup>52</sup> Still, the concept of the 'woman as such' in Nietzsche's misogyny is undoubtedly informed by his personal misfortunes: "Personally, he fell short of the ideal of the manly in almost every conceivable way. He was not tall and lithe of build, but rather of medium height and pudgy. He did make the mandatory visit to a brothel, but with either comic or tragic results...He was not healthy but constantly sick, possibly from a syphilitic infection picked up at the aforementioned bordello. He did not marry, and left no wife or children. By the standards of the day, he was most likely perverse, spending much of his time suspiciously alone" (See Frances Nesbitt Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman* [Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005], 8).

<sup>53</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>54</sup> Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 16.

warlike instinct succumbing to a shared will to truth or dogmatism following the creation of the woman out of the ideal, God. In this sense, the death of God/woman is the inevitable fate of mimetic feminism.

To challenge the nihilism of the death of God, Nietzsche elevates the feminine into a non-philosophical question, the woman-question that philosophy will never want to resolve. This is if we grant that philosophy means two things: 1) the severance of truth and wisdom, whereby the fundamental truth that “demands a reality” which is a “woman,” is permanently besieged by dogma, and 2) the ascension of the spiritual away from the body to secure the sovereignty of the mimetic transaction between man and woman, philosophy and art. As non-philosophical, the woman-question, thus, can redeem its actual merit, rescued from dogmatism by herself, by manifesting as *irremissible art*, as philosophy’s proper foundation in the immanence of appearances, phantoms, and illusions.

Once again, think of this as a Dogon egg. The woman-question demands the affirmation of intensive, virtual difference and the disparate relation between and among organisms, entities, or things within a pre-integrated ecology. This pre-integration ensures the world as an egg remains intact. The goal is not to destroy a plane of immanence, which, in Nietzsche, is exemplified by the agonism of Apollo and Dionysus. Put the other way around, the woman-question establishes the ecological aprioris announced by Nietzsche in the *Genealogy*, such that their demotion to spiritual propriety, which complicates the mimetic transaction between philosophy and art, has led to the contemporary predicament of the question of wisdom – the question of gender.

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