Should My Bum Look Bigger in This?—Re-dressing the Beauvoirean Femme

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But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in color
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.
—Audre Lorde, "Who Said
It Was Simple"

Look(s) again.

WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 41: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2013)

Video Interruptus—or Becoming Naked Again?

I am looking at a black-and-white photo, the back of a woman standing in front of a bathroom mirror, naked and high-heeled, about to slide a pin through a bun just secured by her left fingers. Her right arm is reaching for the knot, blocking the view of her face from me, us. Left behind the mirror, outside the door left ajar, allowed only a glimpse of the top of her hair, we are faced instead with those hands, hips, and heels that form a flowy vertical strip parallel to the left frame of the picture. Whoever is that peeping Tom in the right corner might be, this snapshot, this good, must be the job of a professional. Whatever you are looking at, whomever you identify yourself with, you too, I imagine, are confronted with many minipointers here, including the very dorsality of this photographic moment, allegorized by the unavoidable centrality of her derriere. The subject in question seems unaware or else unconcerned; intruded upon but not exactly interrupted, she carries on, minding her own business.

I may not be the only one who finds this piece visually loaded, oddly suspenseful. What was this character doing prior? Where is she going next? What sort of clothes was she wearing? Is she dressing or undressing? Is this bathroom a room of her own? And who is looking at whom?

I find myself drawn to a curious cocktail of indifference and intimacy in this image of a woman in her birthday suit: her objective aloneness, her vulnerability, her striking carnality, her banality, her affirmative impersonality, her anonymity, her being there, (un)doing her hair, no matter what, no matter who, her being her. But wait: At what point and in what way is this person to be identified as, presumed to be, a woman? And why?

(If I were a Cartesian cogitator, I would have to entertain further the possibility that this "person" could be an automaton, but here, I would bracket off that hypothesis as my immediate interest seems to lie elsewhere, closer to my vision here.)

More clearly, I am rehearsing—hearing—Simone de Beauvoir, of *The Second Sex*, whose pivotal formulation on femme remains oddly un/re/translatable: "*On ne naît pas femme: on le deviant*" (Beauvoir 1949, 285–86). Typically circulated as "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 1953, 301), as H. M. Parshley's zoological version has it, the translation is good enough and has done us good service. Yet it needs some redoing in the manner, for instance, recently suggested by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, who write instead,

"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 2009, xviii). Just *woman*, not *a*: That is the one I would pick, for indeed the idea, to be more precise at the risk of being fussy, is that "one is not born femme [(a) woman/female/feminine]; one becomes so/that/it [*le*]." What a difference an *a* can make, what a devil in the detail.

As will become clearer, as implicit in Judith Butler's (1986) reading of Beauvoir, central to the convoluted logic of gender configuration and identification that Beauvoir captured with such deceptive simplicity is this bonded slippage, the elliptical tension between "a woman," a countable noun, on the one hand, and "woman/female/feminine [femme]" with no article, on the other hand, more of traditionally or conventionally uncountable "stuff" such as, say, cheese. *Femme* is *and* becomes the invisible fabric or matrix out of which a figure, "a woman," is cut and to which it is slotted or "fitted" back, at will, as the ultimate point of departure/return, which would also explain, often in the eyes of the other sex, their fundamental "superficiality" or surfacelike qualities. Put another way, *femme* both refers to the female sex in particular *and* inscribes itself by metonymizing the process of "sexuation" or "gendering," as in sexual or gender difference. Femme always already does a double (or triple) job of being herself while becoming herself for herself (as well as the other); for a woman, to be herself is to become herself and vice versa. No wonder femme is mysteriously busy and her business remains mysterious.

To return, turning to her again: how does this difference between "femme [woman/female/feminine]" and "*une femme* [a woman/a female]" get played out in that female figure we saw? Suppose "she" in the photograph is indeed "a woman," performing her naturalized gender roles by fashioning herself, "making herself up" again in her privacy, before and after an act outside the water closet. The camera, often if not always the voyeur's guide dog, grammatizes the moment it slices open by composing a sentence into it. To capture a scene is to start a story: "here is a woman," et cetera. Through that X individually framed into a subject/object, the picture is saying, "Here is X, a woman." The bare facticity of this woman's woman-ness, visually rhetoricized as such, would be all the more alluring, as she is seen naked, *seen* naked. This nuanced nakedness discloses nudity as a sartorial construction in itself, a sort of metalayer, visibly invisible. That is, disclosed in nudity is not the hidden, natural, unmade-up, just-out-out-bed, preperfumed body per se, but the vertiginous, self-scandalizing layered-ness of socialized perceptions or cultural signifi-

cations; "Heir it is" (2012), quips the tabloid, upon releasing that Harry snap, Prince Harry having a strip party in Vegas with gals (with a camera), a view from behind. Again, when *seen* naked, one is not just a body but becomes that body, whether at stake is a (h)air or a heir. Similarly, when the photographic gaze strips/wraps that woman as a *woman*, like it or not, she turns into a *prey* (Beauvoir 2009, 10, 35, 75) with that mass of flesh turned, stylized, into an object, individuated, sexually itemized property claimed and circulated accordingly; "the female is the prey of the species" (35); "the female, more than the male, is prey to the species; humanity has always tried to escape from its species' destiny . . . (75); "the spectacle of the feminine body . . . is his property" (2004, 130).

Such, as many will recognize, is vintage Beauvoir, the sobering observer of the violent economy of a gendered gaze, a visual seizure, one in which, poignantly enough, she herself once got caught: yes, that was her, none other than Simone de Beauvoir, a queen of feminism, photographed in Chicago in 1952 by Art Shay, presumably at the apartment of Nelson Algren, a lover of hers. Published on the cover of the newsweekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* for January 3–9, 2008, in celebration of the centenary of her birthday, yes, birth, this photograph, rightly, infuriated many thinking people including the French feminist group Les chiennes de garde, which demanded to see photographs of male philosophical bottoms, including that belonging to Jean-Paul Sartre, her lifetime companion, not to mention to the director of *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

Who knew that thinkers had bodies? Believe it or not, s*** happens, as Buddhists would say. Like it or not, with or without her consent, Beauvoir was photo-shot this way, and that is an archived fact. I, too, remain acutely concerned with the ethics or politics of visual control as directly linked to issues of gender objectification or identification, which Beauvoir herself seriously satirized in chapter 7 of *The Second Sex*, titled "Social Life," where she writes, "The toilette is not only adornment; as I have said, it also indicates woman's social situation" (2004, 129). The Beauvoir of 2008 would have started a sequel.

The Bottom Line: the Becoming *Femme* of *Femme* Today—à la Beauvoir 2.0?

Now I am looking somewhere in between, with Beauvoir: the pages filled with the philosopher's brilliant reflections on bourgeois women's sarto-

rial life and the rather "obscene" photo that writes the philosopher into the very toiletry space she sought to question herself out of. Where is a way out or back in? Perhaps it is the same, more or less—like a cat flap? If construction is nearly an unavoidable social fact, even a condition, I should be and am turning to the other side of what I seem to be facing. Can these constructed images of women, clothed or naked, be flipped open otherwise? What recompositional or shuffling possibilities do we see there? This line of questioning, not just tactical or metaphysical but both, involves rescrutinizing and rediscovering the Beauvoirean gender dialectics of being/becoming. What else is there in this otherwise scandalous image that would not only haunt but also further illuminate the enduring genius of Beauvoir's formulation, "*On ne naît pas femme: on le deviant*"? And what has it got to do with the question of the re-/self-/fashioning of femme?

Here, I am banking on a certain third vision, a more formal compositional, Beauvoirean dynamics of gender construction. What I have in mind is the elliptical, elastic, enduring quasi-geometry of a third perspective that enables the very observation and articulation of the perpetual second(ari)ness of the second sex, something akin to "a recovered literary formalism, a formalism *otherwise*", as Marjorie Garber puts it in her theoretical modeling of "third-person interruption." She sees this interruption as part of an "extrapoetic, though not extradiegetic" (2012, 116), art of life, the clitoral temporality, if you will, which would immediately complicate the clotural totality of didactic dialecticism. No time for just some sequential reordering of time but rather perhaps, if possible, restarting the order of time itself, the second time around. In a similar vein, the thread of an idea I wish to follow, while continuing to explore the Beauvoirean bottom line, is that the Beauvoirean agent becomes *femme* in some "extra" senses: what would be, in other words, the becoming-femme of femme today—à la Beauvoir 2.0?

No need to look elsewhere. Take the Beauvoirean character in this thinly disguised autobiographical novel *The Mandarins*, which is, after all, about and written by a woman observing men. She could have been perfumed, or not, in the manner derided in that chapter 7 of *The Second Sex*. Yet that remains a secondary question. The point to note is that, here, the reader would follow a woman who chronicles a series of events in the voice and style of an ironic mother-receiver-listener who, no matter what, plays along, allowing boys (and girls) to become who they think they should

be: "We entered a bar. Brogan ordered ginger ale; I, bourbon. He seemed happy having someone listening to him but embarrassed talking about himself. He formed his sentences hesitantly and then threw them at me with such force that I felt as if I were receiving a present each time. He was born in South Chicago, the offspring of a Finnish grocer and a Hungarian Jewish mother." (Beauvoir 1999, 326). How is this "I" of "I felt as if I were receiving a present each time" to be heard each time? How does one square the voice of the narrator above with images of a "prey" a while ago, a pretty, scared little animal in captivity? How does one, or a gendered image itself, interrupt and intervene in the ocular regime of reductive gender codifications and positionings? How about thinking, also, of the diegetic openness of the thirdness of the secondary character, of which thinking ladies and typing wives too might be extra capable?

So, to recap: a woman is a woman by becoming one or becomes a woman by being one, so they say, as confirmed by Beauvoir. In this now classical, sociobiological trap and trappings of Beauvoirean womanhood, we can also see, however, first, evidence of the fundamental arbitrariness of gender norms. As Judith Butler points out, "The phenomenology of victimization that Simone de Beauvoir elaborates throughout *The Second Sex*," in particular the psychopolitical tragicomedy of glorified or glamorized victimization explored in chapter 7, "reveals that oppression, despite the appearance and weight of inevitability, is essentially contingent" (1986, 41). Just as in fashion that is oppressive as much as it is expressive, rules of constructing gender identities remain "superficial," "skin-deep," mutable, although internally or "seasonally" necessary. On closer inspection, we can see how this necessary contingency coupled with ritualized vicissitude is prescripted and transcoded into social ontological imperatives, a reciprocally reinforced circularity of being and becoming (femme). In other words, the "consequential ambiguity" (36) of "being/becoming," as in "being/becoming a woman," is a structural reflection of the sociotemporal complexity, including that seemingly "inevitable" aporia of gendered and especially female agency. That is, a woman's biology being purportedly her destiny, she is already a woman before or after she "chooses" to become one, and yet she can be properly woman only by choosing to become one, that is, by internalizing its Janus-faced expressive-oppressive codes, accordingly, self-tantalizingly: "to 'choose' a gender in this context is not to move in upon gender from a disembodied locale, but to reinterpret the cultural history which the body already wears. The body becomes

a choice, a mode of enacting and reacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh" (48).

The nude body of Beauvoir, although self-contained in the indifference of its solitude, refuses to stay neutral in the eyes of the beholder. Through its very nudity that intensifies the complexity of its gendered sociality, it instantly puts on, carries, inter alia the shadows of the history of philosophy and its gendered actors whose bodily exsistences tend to become extraneous distractions from their pursuits of "universal or fundamental" existence, so they say; boys would succeed automatically, girls should fail by nature, as the usual scenario goes, as "the specific content of the difference is unevenly and duplicitously shared out between the two sexes" (Mader 2011, 77). The quasi-sartorial complexity of gender identity here, internal to the surreptitiously tautologized, almost totally rigged, "duplicitous" (77) logic of reciprocal borrowing of and interlocution between sex/gender categories, remains both culturally and ontologically specific. Cultural ontology, in turn, (mono)sexuates and (hetero)sexualizes gender at various pressure points of identification thus specifically demanded or recognized—in the Lacanian monolingual world of urinary segregation, for instance. As Butler concludes, such is how the performative complicity between the two genres of being manifests itself: "The incorporation of the cultural world is a task performed incessantly and actively, a project enacted so easily and constantly it seems a natural fact. Revealing the natural body as already clothed, and nature's surface as cultural invention, Simone de Beauvoir gives us a potentially radical understanding of gender. Her vision of the body as a field of cultural possibilities makes some of the work of refashioning culture as mundane as our bodily selves" (1986, 49).

When naked bottoms "reveal the natural body as already clothed," as almost instantly and irreversibly coded F(emale), we see how the distinction between sex and gender itself is categorically maintained and practically blurred at once. So Beauvoir, the historical being, cannot unbecome femme, as she is returned to her birthday suit on her birthday. Such is what the photo appears to dictate: the fixity of the law of the gendered gaze. At its most reductive moment, the image is saying, "Beauvoir was and is a woman, first and foremost, before she became and is a philosopher"; a woman is her first profession, and a philosopher, second. She might wear a frumpy coat and sweater like her pal, Jean-Paul, performing her trailblazing philosopher-ness, but underneath it all, she wears her original sex(iness).

Larvatus prodeo—Femme 2.0?

Larvatus prodeo (masked, I go forward/mount on a stage).

Again, the quasi-sartorial mutability and supplementarity of social ontology provides a fertile allegorical model with which we can understand the social dynamics of gender construction, including its inscriptive theatricality and transformative inventiveness. If sex, sexuality, and gender are categorically mixed or interactive in the way sketched above, that is also how skin and clothes merge through fashion, becoming one. To push this analogy further, we might even say that gender *is* in its "*presentations*" (Bornstein and Bergman 2010, 58), expressions, sensibilities, and perceptions, rather than in some categorically bundled "identity" or identities locked in the grid of cultural intelligibility or legibility. In this view, then, a gender is, at every point of its emergence, including transition, a look, a composed item, an individuated phenomenon, a gestalt that any tiny detail can affect and alter personally or interpersonally; if I do not feel right about the position of the first button of a new shirt, it could even amount to a gender failure or challenge; perhaps extreme but not unlikely. Such is the case especially for women, for every one of whom what she is, could literally *be* (reduced to) how she looks. "In a twice-worn toilette, or in one that is a failure, she feels herself an outcast" as Beauvoir confirms wryly (2004, 133); again, "When she was not appropriately dressed she felt awkward" (134), since "even in narcissism being observed by others is implied" (134). In this Beauvoirean world of corporeal sartoriality sustained and enriched by the "look" (*le regard*), where a garment becomes a body and vice versa, the "inner" sense, activated by touch, becomes indistinguishable from the outlook, rendering the inner-outer distinction perpetually unstable if necessary, necessary for creatively disciplined acts of self-individuation and self-identification; what more horrible nightmare could there be for a woman at a cocktail party who spots another in the same dress as hers!

What would Beauvoir say, then, I wonder, about something like Botox, the self-uniformizer? If she had lived long enough to witness the recent global advent of cosmetic surgery and body modification technology, she would have turned such surgical phenomenological attention to this structurally sartorial and sartorially layered dimension in and of the body itself. My Beauvoir begins to wonder, as do I, how the "natural" body itself becomes something of a permanent garment, a "second" skin, so to speak,

that anchors the ever so finely metricated and increasingly statisticalized ego ideal, something unreal, fixed, perfect as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or a bust, that gratifies her: "The actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there—that is, the character she represents, but is not. It is this identification with something unreal, fixed, perfect as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or a bust, that gratifies her; she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus seem to herself to be stabilized, justified in her splendor" (Beauvoir 2004, 131). Aesthetic security would become the other destiny, the other biology, for women.

Again, what would become of these femme bodies or these bodies that would become femme? How would or should they be individuated or identified as such, including and especially in their complex transitory moments? Who knows? Yet such is precisely the enduring, metaphysical force and riddle of Beauvoir's femme thought in its originary temporal convolution or queerness, which also illuminates our rereading of corporeal sartoriality of the *femme* body in its naked, material glory, in its singularized contingency.

If you do not feel moved by the material presence and shapely vibrancy of Beauvoir's body (of knowledge), its formal material, declarative singularity, I do not know what else would, but I should only say, read her again, and all over again, until you do.

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Photo

Simone de Beauvoir (nude after bath) © Art Shay, 1950.

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