

EXAMPLE 1/2: Journal Entry on “(Un)conscious”

The readings for this week’s class meeting were arranged under the heading of “(Un)Conscious,” which I view as a telling, if not totally obvious, title for this set of articles. I was particularly interested by the ways in which each of the reading selections seek to make visible the previously invisible structures governing patriarchy and the oppression of women, whether from a material analysis (Friedan), a theoretical analysis (Frye), a grammatical analysis (Irigaray), or a methodological analysis (MacKinnon). However, I also found that each of the readings were one-dimensional in their critiques, all of them leaving something to be desired either theoretically or materially.

The first chapter of Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique is, I believe, a powerful assessment of the plight of the American housewife, particularly during the fifteen-year span from the end of World War II to the early 1960s. Friedan outlines the symptoms of what she refers to as “the problem with no name,” but while the depression, ennui, and neuroses of married suburban women may not have a name, per se, she uncovers – makes conscious – this condition as well as its source: dissatisfaction with confinement to the domestic sphere, and “that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.’” This “problem” and the consciousness of it were obfuscated by media, medical, and psychoanalytic discourses that extolled the virtues of housewifery and located feminine fulfillment in the domestic sphere while neglecting to take women’s concerns seriously. Friedan’s attempt to make invisible discontent visible was, to some extent, successful as judged by the book’s historical impact. Perhaps the remainder of The Feminine Mystique has more to offer, but the first chapter problematically represents only the situation of an extremely privileged group of women (suburban, middle-class, Western, heterosexual, presumably White) that by no means constituted the majority of American women either then or now. Nor does Friedan offer any further analysis or attempt to position women in their particularities rather than as a universalized, unmarked category with near-identical experiences. While this can be

attributed to The Feminine Mystique being nearly fifty years old, Friedan's disregard for all but a particular subset of women with less-than-universal concerns certainly contributes to this chapter's dated feel and what I would consider a lack of current theoretical relevancy.

Offering a theoretical analysis of women's oppression, Marilyn Frye, in "Oppression," attempts to make the previously invisible overarching structures of patriarchy visible by means of an analogy. Frye requests that the reader consider a birdcage -- a confining structure composed of multiple interlaced wires that in its totality forms an enclosure. If a person were to focus on a single wire, s/he would wonder why a bird could not circumvent the wire in order to escape; the bird could simply fly around it and reach its desired destination. However, if one steps away from the birdcage and notices its interconnected wires, it becomes "perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon" (5). In a sense, I find this analogy to be useful; systems of oppression are interconnected and inseparable, often constricting the mobility and agency of those individuals or groups who happen to belong to marginalized or oppressed categories. Unfortunately, I also find Frye's analysis to be limiting; in particular, her wholesale assertion that men can never be oppressed seems simplistic to me (men often suffer under the auspices of normative masculinity; those that do not uphold those norms, or compulsory heterosexuality, may experience severe repercussions and an effective loss of privilege), and the implicit claim that kyriarchy has dispersed women into disparate categories of race and class in order to perpetuate inequality and patriarchy removes the particularities of these intersecting oppressions and marginalizations in favor of retaining "woman" as the primary oppressed category. There is limited utility in this differentiation and subsequent erasure outside of a privileged Western context, but the existence of women of color and non-Western women reads as a mere afterthought in Frye's analysis.

Catharine MacKinnon's methodological analysis of women's oppression, in "Consciousness Raising," takes a different angle. In MacKinnon's view, "the pursuit of

consciousness becomes a form of political practice,” and, through consciousness-raising and the resulting unveiling of oppression, the personal can become the fully realized political (84).

Unlike Frye, MacKinnon pays special to the particularities of women’s lived experiences and situated knowledges: “the particularities become facets of the collective understanding within which differences constitute rather than undermine collectivity” (86). I wonder if one of the reasons why MacKinnon embraces particularity over homogeneity at least partially follows from her non-essentialist position regarding the category of “women.” This non-essentialism (if not anti-essentialism) was something I was surprised to discover, as I had mentally categorized MacKinnon with other, more explicitly essentialist feminist theorists, but she explains that the social meaning of being a woman “is unattached to any actual anatomical difference between the sexes, or to any realities of women’s response to it” (90). If women are not marked as “women” through the assumption of universalized material or metaphysical traits, it becomes more difficult to totalize “women’s lived experience” and erase standpoints and particularities. At any rate, consciousness-raising as a method and political practice serves to make visible various layers of women’s collective experiences taken in tandem with all of these particularities. Not only does consciousness-raising uncover the gendered power relations that imbue every aspect of women’s lives – power under which women suffer and men generally benefit – but it also reveals a new feminist epistemology that serves as a rejection of the masculinist, “objective” epistemological knowing that requires an unmarked, aperspectival subject that assumes universality and continuity. MacKinnon’s theorizing of the feminist epistemology that is brought into view through consciousness-raising is based on the assertion that “the social process of being a woman is on some level the same process by that which woman’s consciousness becomes aware of itself as such and its world” (98). For someone categorized and oppressed under the category of “woman,” no matter who they are, they are not and can never be the subject that can view “objective reality” from all standpoints and no standpoint, from positions situated both within time and outside of time. While this is productive for uncovering and legitimizing a feminist epistemology, it still reinforces on some level the feminine-as-

immanence/masculine-as-transcendence binary, a metaphysical bind to which I am not certain of the solution.

Luce Irigaray's essay "Toward a Grammar of Enunciation for Hysterics and Obsessives" doesn't read like an overtly feminist piece; it would be easy to read this piece as the work of a semiotician with limited political or ideological commitments if one is not aware of her other work. While she attempts to keep the distinctions between the hysteric and the obsessive (the two variations of neurotics whose enunciations Irigaray attempts to study) gender-neutral, her study of the hysteric unveils a grammar that could easily be ascribed to women; as Irigaray writes, "the hysteric leaves it to the addressee to assume the utterance" (53). The utterances of the hysteric are predicated on the relation to the subject that the hysteric is addressing, and the subjectivity of the hysteric is obscured or erased. Meanwhile, the obsessive "lives in his experience in a way that is so elaborated by his own imagery that it cannot be directly understood," marking him/her as egocentric and self-contained (53-54). Within a society in which patriarchy is invisible, totalizing, and circumscribes the existences of those oppressed by it, it is of little surprise to me that the utterances of "neurotics" can illuminate these structures.

The primary and most consistent point within all of this week's readings is the underlying supposition that patriarchy, and the associated relations and fields of power that serve to oppress those constituted as women, is invisible to those who fall into that oppressed class up until those structures and oppressions are illuminated, named, and explicated. Irigaray may not make this point as explicitly as the other theorists do (the hysteric may or may not be aware of the ways in which phallogentric discourses serve to structure her utterances, though Irigaray herself is perfectly aware of these discursive and linguistic constructions), but the livelihood, agency, and mobility of all women are viewed as circumscribed by male supremacy and the systems of privilege and oppression that sustain it. It is only when this subjection is raised to the level of the conscious mind, and when women as both individuals and a collective category can recognize and explain their oppression, can the struggle towards subjectivity and liberation begin.