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Beauvoir or Butler? Comparing ‘Becoming a Woman’ with ‘Performing Gender’ Through the Life Course

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Abstract: Judith Butler claims to have based her theory of gender performance on Simone de Beauvoir’s path-breaking idea that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. However, Butler’s interpretation of Beauvoir’s work departs considerably from Beauvoir’s own expressed view which is that women are shaped by an interplay of femininity (construed by cultural and structural norms) and sexed bodies and that the concept of woman is a mutable one that can accommodate increasing degrees of freedom. In this paper I explore Beauvoir’s theories further, showing how they depart from Butler’s interpretations of them and in the process exploring the contribution that Beauvoir and Butler respectively make towards understanding ongoing gender inequality. Finally, I compare and contrast the role of temporality and the life course in ‘becoming a woman’ and in performing gender respectively, focusing on the figure of the post-menopausal woman in particular.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, sex, gender, masquerade, alterity

1 Background and Introduction: One is Not Born but Rather Becomes a Woman

Today, it is common to use Beauvoir’s famous sentence: “One is not born, but rather becomes, (a) woman” (2011, 294), in order to deconstruct the category ‘woman’ until it is meaningless and/or only arbitrarily connected to biological femaleness. For example, it is the starting point for transgender academic Susan Stryker’s statement: “Who gets ‘womaned’ by society and subjected to misogynistic discrimination as a result, and who answers yes to the question, posed publicly or in the innermost realms of thought, as to whether they’re a woman or not? The intersection of

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those two conditions arguably marks the status of belonging to womanhood in ways that do not depend on reproductive biology.” (Stryker 2020) Beauvoir most notably inspired Judith Butler who built her highly influential idea of gender performativity by, she claimed, building on Beauvoir’s theory.

Indeed, Butler uses Beauvoir’s phrase about women being made not born to assert a literal mind over matter. She stretches Beauvoir’s existentialist understanding of the body as the locus of intentionality to posit that ‘sex’ itself derives from such intentionality, via gender performance, through the crystallization of customs and traditions that can ultimately be turned into choice: “Sex is a sedimentation of gender norms that produces the peculiar phenomenon of natural sex” (1988, 524). Indeed, she says, “Because what we become is not what we already are, gender is dislodged from sex” (1987, 128). Here, gender *is* intentionality; gender is “an active style of living one’s body in the world” (1987, 131). Most particularly gender is performative, and as a performance of high theatre it produces the illusion of a real substance, of expressing outwardly what is a true essence within. But gender itself is an “aspect of identity gradually acquired” and therefore “it becomes unclear whether being a given sex has any necessary consequence for becoming a given gender” (1986, 35). These conclusions, in Butler’s view, are the inevitable endpoint of Beauvoir’s ideas, though, as she acknowledges, Beauvoir herself did not take them in this direction.

What is beneath this performance? What happens when the masquerade is over, when the mask is peeled away? In Butler’s critique of Foucault for not being sufficiently Foucauldian, in which she suggests he lets slip, without intending to, that there is a body outside the culture that gives it meaning or value, she indicates that, on the contrary, the style or surface is all there is: beneath the artifice is nothing. As she says, “There is, in my view, *nothing* about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed” (Butler 1989, 528; my emphasis). This resonates more broadly with deconstructionist/post-structuralist approaches as well as with Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the feminine is the marginalized, excluded from the phallogocentric realm of language and culture, as illustrated in Andrea Chu’s statement: “I’ll define as *female* any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another ... the self is hollowed out, made into an incubator for an alien force” (2019, 11).¹ Thus Rose (2023) can make the same criticism of Beauvoir that Butler made of Foucault: “the still-radical edge of de Beauvoir’s statement [about women being made not born] conceals its more conservative premise

¹ This position is one Butler seems to subscribe to, as in her statement to the New York Times, in a discussion on femicide, that “it is not just that murder is committed on the basis of gender; violence against women is one way of establishing the femininity of the victim” (2019). Here, to be acted upon, to be oppressed, to be *murdered* is to be feminine/a woman.

... which implies that ‘becoming a woman’ is something that biological females, one way or another, manage to do, however restrictive their lives then become ... Meanwhile the idea that ‘female’ is some kind of primordial condition remains, as if it were the bedrock of all limitations to follow.” Indeed, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler agrees with Jacqueline Rose’s take on Lacan that the Law is both prohibitive and generative: the ‘female’ is created through lack, loss and deficit. It is the ultimate hole.

My aim in this paper is to challenge this interpretation of Beauvoir by returning not to what Butler attributes to Beauvoir but what Beauvoir actually says (and means). This is important because, among other things, since Butler so explicitly claims to have built her famous theory of gender performativity upon Beauvoir’s work, many sociologists, indeed, understand (and teach) Beauvoir *through* Butler. This makes it particularly important to ensure Beauvoir’s thought is accurately presented and not viewed through a glass darkly. I use this expression because it is impossible to read Beauvoir and not see that sex is deeply important to Beauvoir’s account of women—what we are and what we can become in the future—and for Beauvoir sexual difference is ontologically enduring and meaningful in a way Butler’s ‘development’ of her ideas denies. I am aware that an illustrious rollcall of feminist philosophers and social theorists have already iterated this point, amongst them Gatens (2003), Heinämaa (1997), Kruks (2014), Moi (2005) and Nussbaum (1999). However, in the contemporary context, where the importance of female bodies is a problematic idea in the feminist academy, presented as terribly unsophisticated at best or bigoted at worst, it needs repeating.

Butler also claims to have drawn her idea of temporality and agency from Beauvoir, but I will show that the element missing from Butler’s account is that of the life course which Beauvoir positions at the centre of her account of ‘becoming’ a woman. Moreover, this life course perspective runs counter to Butler’s positing of sex/gender as “styles of the flesh” (Butler 1986, 48) with its suggestion of something both superficial and lying firmly within the grasp of the will. As an age scholar, indeed, I find this emphasis on the malleability of the body, its subservience to the discursive realm, has striking parallels with technological projects to preserve youth, currently very popular with Silicon Valley billionaires and associated with a hyper-Cartesian view of (self) knowledge, and more broadly with the planet itself as pliable to the will. Returning the sexed body to its place in understanding ‘becoming women’, not via an ‘essentialist’ or ‘conservative’ theory but via one fully able to capture the interplay between culture and body—as in Beauvoir’s work—thus offers a powerful challenge to this ontology. Furthermore, only when this interplay is fully understood will there be any hope of restarting what is widely recognised to be a stalled gender revolution (England, Privalko, and Levine 2020; Kan et al. 2022).

What a life course perspective also offers is the chance to identify the stages of life at which the social and cultural norms of femininity are exerted particularly powerfully, as well as the ones when such pressure drops away, giving rise to greater potential for freedom. Such a point comes with menopause and ageing for women, as Beauvoir notes, but the potential this offers for feminist thought has still not been fully recognized and nor indeed has it been fully realized in lived experience, where it must counter a cultural view of ageing, and women's ageing in particular, as diminishment and decline. At the same time the kind of 'liberated' subjectivity associated with this may be of interest to, and serve as inspiration for, younger women seeking to negotiate the paradox and conundrums of their position.

In what follows, I will revisit Beauvoir's major text *The Second Sex* (2011) in order to explore: firstly, Beauvoir's approach towards the relationship between sex and gender; secondly, what exactly she means by 'woman' and who or what a woman. In the third section I will then explore what Beauvoir's and Butler's theories illuminate about ongoing gender inequality, and I will compare Beauvoir's notion of feminine alterity with Butler's view of the masquerade, using the concept of the 'pornographic gaze' taken from the work of Griffin (1981) as a way of contrasting the two. Finally, I will explore the role of temporality and the life course in 'becoming a woman' and in performing gender.

Unlike some of the Beauvoir scholars I have mentioned previously, my argument is not focused on metaphysics (e.g. see Witt 2011) but in sociological concerns, including the impact of definitions and concepts of 'woman' on the socio-cultural imaginary as well as on women's lived experience. As Beauvoir herself argued, the concept of woman is a crucial part of women's situation and what she feels she is and can be in everyday life is today, among other things, underpinned by Butler's ascendancy in the feminist academy.² I will explore women's situation by drawing on examples from women's contemporary fiction and memoir, all highly confessional in style, which give vivid insight into "the experiential realities of sexual difference" (Kruks 2014, 6) as well as women's subjectivities, rooted in the concrete and the everyday. The works I will refer to were all published within the last five years (since 2018) and are penned by widely reviewed and high-profile women writing in English who, in their range of experiences and reflections, discuss themes which resonate with many women.

These examples provide fine-grained illustrations which, through recurrent themes and metaphors, suggest a "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977, 132 and *passim*) associated with the performative turn in feminism embedded in the broader cultural context of post-feminism. In so doing I stay true to Beauvoir's own

² Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) is probably the most influential book in terms of feminism and gender theory to have been published in the past 30 years.

methodology as found throughout *The Second Sex*, in which she looks at both structures of consciousness in women's fiction and memoir and empirical examples. By working from the concrete to theory and back again she explored 'what commonalities may persist among the many particular and highly diverse ways of "becoming a woman"' (10) as well as revealing "the common structures of experience that are typical and persist through their manifold variations" (Kruks 2014 10). This also includes enduring elements of 'feminine' subjectivity which are more traditional than conscious claims of equality allow (Kaplan 1975). As Fullwood and Fullwood note: "For Beauvoir, only phenomenological evidence, not abstract reason, is admissible" ([1994] 2008, 128).

2 The Dance of Sex and Gender in Beauvoir

Contrary to Butler's suggestions, Beauvoir never separates sex from gender and sees them indeed as mutually constitutive; this fact lies at the very heart of Beauvoir's theory and what makes it both deeply innovative as well as still highly relevant in the contemporary setting (Moi 2005). Before discussing this further, however, a note about definitions and linguistics is in order. In this paper, I distinguish between sex (e.g. female) and gender (femininity) in a way Beauvoir did not where in the French language the female and the feminine are synonymous. As Christine Battersby (1998) explains, comparing English, French, German and Italian languages, in English 'feminine' is not necessarily a property of the female body; although mostly associated with females, it refers to socialized behaviour which can equally be present in males (bearing a different meaning and value accordingly). I state this also because in Butler and Butlerian feminism,³ the distinction between sex and gender is often confused, or used synonymously; for example, Butler describes 'woman' as a 'gender'; for her, the term 'female' does not necessarily designate a 'woman'.

Sex provides the foundation stone for gender in Beauvoir's work as the following statements demonstrate: "no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex" and "the division of the sexes is a biological given, not a moment in human history" (2011, 9). Beauvoir's focus was the complex and indivisible intertwining of sex and gender in the realm of lived experience, in 'the situation'. The 'situation' incorporates our biological, economical, psychological, biographical (including age and life stage) and other characteristics; for Beauvoir,

³ I use the term 'Butlerian feminism' to refer to the feminism that has been influenced by her performative turn regarding gender which is broadly in a post-structuralist vein but also has resonances with post-feminism.

unlike for Sartre for instance, the ‘situation’ itself limits and shapes but does not define or deny our freedom (Kruks [1990] 2019). Beauvoir writes, in what is the kernel of her approach to this matter: women’s “enslavement to the species and the limits of her individual abilities are facts of extreme importance; the woman’s body is one of the essential elements of the situation she occupies in this world. But her body is not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on by consciousness through actions and within a society ... ” (2011, 49) Indeed, the fundamental way in which women are oppressed is centred on women being assigned the role of Other to men in patriarchal society. Not only is the Other dominated by the ‘One’ but it is the Other against which men (as the One) define themselves, thereby claiming all positive social and ontological attributes: “The Other is passivity confronting activity, diversity breaking down unity, matter opposing form, disorder resisting order.” (Beauvoir 2011, 91) In turn this allows men to evade a crucial self-knowledge (epitomised in women’s embodiment and its connection to birth, death, change, vulnerability) as well as knowledge of their place in the world.

In countering charges of ‘essentialism’ in the emphasis on the importance of sex (which really mean in such debates: biological determinism) there are helpful parallels in Teresa de Lauretis’ use of Locke’s ‘concept of the Triangle’, to denote a ‘nominal essence’ for a woman. Locke defines this as “the totality of the properties, constitutional elements etc. without which it would cease to be the same thing” (1989, 5) which for the triangle are “three lines meeting at three Angles”. So, applying these to women de Lauretis suggests specific properties (e.g. a female sexed body, which Beauvoir would agree with), qualities (certain dispositions and relationships to the body and others, which Beauvoir believes would last beyond the end of patriarchy), and attributes (such as the lived experience of a woman in the world which, in a patriarchal context, implies for Beauvoir a temporal and spatial constraint, both biologically and in terms of being-in-the-world). For women, these attributes and qualities can also be seen as dynamic through socio-historical context and life stage (and indeed feminism allows for the aspirational to be considered at each of these angles). Beauvoir’s ‘situation’, then, is comparable to the idea of the triangle. For Beauvoir, what a woman is and how she is constituted can and certainly does change: as social norms change, so does the whole lived experience of womanhood, including her experience of her body, and each of the points of the triangle shift together. However, Beauvoir also identifies certain obstacles to freedom and transcendence within the facts of the female body as *Moi* beautifully summarises:

For Beauvoir ... patriarchy produces a conflict between women’s free subjectivity and the pressure to alienate and objectify that subjectivity. Given that women also suffer from a series of involuntary biological processes (menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, menopause)

the same contradictory scenario is repeated, but never overcome, on the level of the body itself: the woman is condemned to suffer from her subordination to the species. ([1994] 2008, 185)

Beauvoir describes a woman fighting the tyranny of her role in the species' reproduction, a fight that also "weakens and endangers her" (2011, 40); menstruation making her feel that her body is "an alienated opaque thing" (42); breast-feeding "an exhausting servitude" (43) and so on. Contemporary women's experiences suggests continued challenges including those less detailed by Beauvoir, for example through endometriosis (e.g. Lindemann 2023, 212); pre-menstrual syndrome (Ewens 2015) or pre-menstrual dysmorphic syndrome (Henderson 2019), menopause (e.g. George 2018), traumatic experiences of birth (Scott 2023), and continued (and currently in the UK rising) deaths in pregnancy and childbirth (Iacobucci 2022; Sylvester 2023), all of which are intensified by an inadequate response by the medical profession. We are certainly not 'post-biology' in any sense.

3 What is a Woman?

As the previous section has demonstrated, in considering the linked question of who or what is a woman, Beauvoir never removes the bedrock of sex and sexed experience. However, in contrast to Butler's account, Beauvoir does highlight the heterogeneity of women noting: "women manifest themselves in many different ways; but each of the myths built around woman tries to summarise her as a whole" (2011, 275). There are differences in biology, psychology, economic situation, age, life history and so on, that can result in different kinds of womanhood, without making womanhood irrelevant as a category or—by implication—one from which women (less constrained by the norms of femininity for instance) can graduate or progress. Today, in a post-feminist landscape 'ideal' femininity combines assertiveness and sexuality, high achievement, a can-do attitude that boosts the economy and yet remains compliant to patriarchy (McRobbie 2009). This is important because, what the 'ideal' or normative woman is, constitutes a key part of a woman's 'situation': "woman knows herself... not as she exists for herself but as man defines her" (Beauvoir 2011, 159). While gender is indeed performative it goes much deeper than a 'style'.⁴ Indeed, it results in a constrained intentionality, both in spatial and temporal terms (Young 2005) which has been identified for popular feminism in the notion of a failure to 'lean in' (Sandberg 2013; see Pickard 2020 for a fuller account

⁴ In Butler, performativity is a strong term which shapes both the materialization and subjectivization, in Foucauldian terms, of the subject. Nevertheless, the idea that by doing things differently such embodied constraints can be bypassed is unconvincing.

of this tension across multiple domains of life). However, transcendence, by which Beauvoir means the ability to project one's intentionality outward towards fulfilling personal goals, is not a male project (and will not turn her into a 'man' contra Butler's interpretation of Beauvoir) but a human project. As Beauvoir explains, "every existent is simultaneously immanence and transcendence; when he [sic] is offered a goal, or is prevented from reaching any goal, or denied the victory of it, his transcendence falls uselessly into the past, that is, it falls into immanence; this is the lot assigned to women in patriarchy; but this is in no way a vocation, any more than slavery is the slave's vocation." (2011, 276–7)

In *The Prime of Life* Beauvoir traces the effect of her own femininity on her behaviour as a young woman and how she, slowly and effortfully, transcended these constraints, both internally and externally imposed. Talking about her relationship with Sartre, she reflects, it was because of femininity that "it suited me to live with a man whom I regarded as my superior; my ambitions, though stubbornly held, were nevertheless timid ... " ([1960] 1983, 367). Her own ethical project included growing out of this dependency and growing into her own projects, a process that the greater part of a *Prime of Life* is concerned to elaborate. Not only was she inspired, at 18, by the example of a philosophy PhD (Mademoiselle Zanta) who, Beauvoir felt, had "succeeded in reconciling her intellectual life with the demands of feminine sensibility" ([1958] 1963, 160), but later she discusses how she grew further out of the constraints of femininity by active choices and by determination, through earning her own living which helped her gain "inner independence" ([1960] 1983, 367). This included material/economic independence but surpassed these elements to encompass a psychological and emotional autonomy gained through living alone, setting herself tough physical challenges such as hiking in dangerous mountains alone, and thus breaking some of these feminine 'limitations'. As Moi points out, "the logic of her [Simone de Beauvoir's] argument" and, I would add, of her own life, "is that greater freedom will produce new ways of being a woman, new ways of experiencing the possibilities of a woman's body ... " (2005, 66).

Today, in Butlerian feminism, the importance of this message has been lost, the symbolic and the discursive not only bringing the real into being but gradually assuming the status of 'the real'. This position bestows legitimacy on the deliberate changing not of behaviour but of bodies themselves through surgery and medication to bring them in line with the symbolic. An example of the impact of this process on feminist consciousness and on the cultural imaginary more generally is found in the trans memoir of Cyrus Grace Dunham. At the start of the journey, she is confused about her 'gender' (in my terms 'sex'). Schooled in feminism from an early age, at first she reasons that because she believes that she is a woman, she must indeed be one: "What is womanhood, anyway, beyond a belief that constitutes itself?"

(2019, 4). She loathed her breasts, when they developed, like many girls do; as a teenager, Dunham felt herself to be engaged in what appeared to be a ‘video game’ of dance and masquerade and stereotype: “The boys were handsome, happy, and full of laughter. The girls wanted their approval. Each man was a main character, an amalgamation of characteristics that rendered him a leading man.” (57)

She continues: “Letting men be protagonists was indulgent and pornographic. It was not what I’d been taught. It was nasty, backward, even medieval.” However, she goes on: “The more I tried to block the boys from becoming protagonists, the more I succumbed to the storyline.” (57) She couldn’t resist; *she* wanted to be the protagonist and, for her, this meant the breasts must go and so must the identity of ‘woman’. So, with the help of ‘top surgery’ and testosterone, ‘she’ became ‘he’ and at the end of the novel she is fluctuating between both, as well as ‘they’—meanwhile remaining as unsettled and discontented as ever. Butlerian feminism has no framework within which to judge the merits or demerits of this performance.⁵ Indeed, Chu’s infamous sentence—in which he distills “femaleness to its barest essentials—an open mouth, an expectant asshole, blank, blank eyes” (2019, 78–9)—fits here with the idea of the boys as protagonists and the girls as merely acted upon as some kind of essential reality. Taken to its extreme, the asshole includes the vagina, as there is nothing special about the latter, indeed it has no value at all symbolically and therefore materially. Or, as Cyrus Grace Dunham felt, as she struggled with her femininity, and in wondering whether to transition: “my ‘vagina’ evoked nothing. It was a non-part” (2019, 97).

4 Power and/or Performance?

4.1 Gender Inequality versus Gender Expression

Butler talks enthusiastically about “a carnival of gender confusion” which may result in a “new gender vocabulary, a proliferation of genders freed from the substantializing nomenclature of ‘woman’ and ‘man’” (1992, 260). The benefits, as Butler sees them, include that of a wider range of performance, a complexity of gendered styles, and thus a subversion of the binary ‘heterosexual matrix’. Yet all

⁵ In a recent interview Butler talks about being ‘girded’ as a process of ‘entering into a realm of girlhood’ that has long preceded the individual and which many obliged to enter it (including Butler herself) have felt as a deeply uncomfortable experience. But she doesn’t discuss changing the meaning or situation of girlhood; instead she asserts: “we can take over the power of assignment, make it into self-assignment, which can include sex reassignment at a legal and medical level” (Gleeson 2021).

this requires, she suggests, is a new range of performances. Indeed, for Butler (1993), names are the key to reality, interpellating someone as a woman is what it is to *be* a woman. There is here no sociological understanding of patriarchal power specifically and the way it operates through the gender hierarchy. Barbara Risman's research with Millennials demonstrates that, despite professing a range of diverse gender identities young Millennials do not aim to challenge the gender order or structure itself. She notes: "Simply having more categories does not, by itself, address the issue of a gender structure" (2018, 312).

Judith Lorber is similarly unimpressed by the proliferation of gender categories which ignore concrete power. The multiplication of individual 'gender identities', she observes, such as genderqueer, non-binary, gender fluid and so on, is "not relational, social, structural or institutional, but purely personal" (2018, 299). She observes that multiple gender categories arise from and, indeed, strengthen the gender hierarchy (a binary of man/woman), unlike, for example, intersectionality, which slices the binary into a nuanced kaleidoscope registering degrees of privilege and inequality through class, race, age, sexuality and so on. This kaleidoscope, of course, is also a feature of the Beauvoirian 'situation'. In this sense, Butlerian gender performativity feeds into the post-feminist neoliberal landscape, with its emphasis on choice and individualism, its dismissal of power in the form of the state, cultural institutions, and of course the patriarchy, in favour of diffuse Foucauldian circuits. Combined with this, the deconstruction of the concept 'woman' means that "it is a problematically 'she', rather than an unproblematically 'we'" which is the subject of this kind of feminism (McRobbie 2004, 256).

Meanwhile, survey data analysis reveals enduring, and hardening, gender inequality. Paula England and colleagues' examination of data from the US and Ireland indicates progress to equality has stalled or slowed in a range of fields, including in employment, pay and educational and occupational segregation (England, Privalko, and Levine 2020). Similarly, Mee Yee Kan and colleagues found, through examining time use data, that in 4 East Asian and 12 Western countries there is an "over-whelming evidence of stalled progress in gender equality in the division of labour" (Kan et al. 2022, 391). Both studies indicate that such stalling has been particularly marked during the past decade. Both studies also suggest that, although structural and institutional factors come into play, especially with regard to the availability of good, low-cost childcare, nevertheless cultural norms and gender socialization—working at the level of the self (England 2010)—are also implicated in this stalled revolution. Currently, in UK universities, students and staff are being encouraged to express their gender identity along with 'preferred pronouns'; for example, in the University at which I work students are presented with an extensive menu of options, including man and woman as separate categories alongside 'agender', 'genderfluid', 'gender neutral', 'gender non-conforming'. Choosing one

implies that, if you are a woman, you are by definition conforming to a ‘stereotype’. Meanwhile, women remain at a disadvantage to men in terms of career progression: as Santos and Dang van Phu (2019) and colleagues found, from their survey of the 24 Research Intensive Universities in the UK known as the Russell Group. Comparing like for like across all individual variables with the only difference being one is a man and one a woman, the man is likely to have a higher rank than the woman. Thus, clearly, whilst tools of resistance and change are required, the proliferation of gender expression and gender identities during the same period in which the gender revolution has notably stalled worldwide suggests that these are clearly not those tools.

By contrast to Butler, Beauvoir’s approach is grounded in the concrete and the empirical, rejecting high-level theory for phenomenological experience rooted in the everyday. She observes that the Independent Woman (the name she gives to the most free and liberated contemporary woman of her day) is pulled between her self-determination, associated particularly with economic self-sufficiency, and her more traditional femininity: “most working women do not escape the traditional feminine world” (2011, 738). Thus, the best the Independent Woman can hope to achieve is some precarious balance between both realms (see Rottenberg 2018 for evidence of how this has become a neoliberal feminist imperative today). Beauvoir also stresses that this balance is most threatened through sexuality and sexual relationships, where the tension and the ambiguity in women’s embodied situation reveals itself most acutely. For example, through her femininity, despite her independence, she remains “object and prey” (2011, 739). In erotic relationships, men do not want her to take the lead; she must learn to wait for his direction, however assertive she is in other areas of her life. Moreover, there is always the insidious temptation for women, as the Other, to accept this role in personal life, to make herself willingly that object in a broader existential sense; to avoid the anguish of freedom.

These tensions do not melt away in the context of queer identities and the same constrained agency and intentionality endure regardless of women’s ability to choose her ‘gender identity’. In contemporary novels and memoir, we find rich depictions of how the Independent Woman of today, queer and otherwise, navigates the terrain of her sexual relationships. A brilliant and damning exploration is found in Fishman (2022) novel *Acts of Service*. It takes as its subject matter the sexuality of a progressive, wealthy, highly educated and self-identified ‘queer’ Millennial woman, Eve, living in New York City. Eve begins a casual but intense sexual relationship with a hegemonically masculine wealthy man, Nathan. It is also a love triangle—there is a woman, Olivia (Nathan’s partner)—but, although it is Olivia who first contacts and connects with Eve (after Eve posts nude photographs of herself on an app), with time competition between the two women for Nathan’s

approval grows more intense. The difference between Eve's queer relationships and the one with Nathan are described in the following passages. With women, she explains, "often neither of us offered to lead, and I would become overwhelmed with the responsibility of arranging whichever situation arose between us . . . It was nerve-racking to avoid the seat of power, to work around it or pretend we had transcended it by virtue of our queerness." (44) By contrast: "Olivia and I had met each other first, had liked each other, I thought. Yet the drive to impress him [Nathan] was so great it could not be intellectualized or dismissed through any justifications of the mind. In this hour, in Nathan's apartment, he seemed utterly capable of determining our value." (50) For Eve, queerness and its codes of equality crumple beneath the weight of this traditional gendered interaction. The idea that men continue to own the value—either taking it for themselves or choosing the women upon whom to bestow it—is very far from Beauvoir's discussion in *The Second Sex* of the Lesbian as avoiding the 'second sex' position through disregarding the male gaze. When Nathan is subsequently sued for sexual abuse by an employee of his, Eve refuses to testify against him. Of the many 'acts of service' the title refers to, this is, perhaps, the most significant.

Some of these themes also appear in the literary auto-biographical writing of self-proclaimed queer writer, Carmen Maria Machado, in her prize-winning 2020 memoir *In the Dreamhouse*. One theme concerns her abusive girlfriend who has been influenced by her domestic abuser father, Machado's surprise and shame that relationships between women are not somehow absent of such power struggles and violence. Another is when this volatile relationship ends, and Machado has a brief casual fling with a man. This is how she describes a date with him: "Even as you're responding to him, even as you're ordering and making small talk, you're marveling at the fact that his maleness—the generic fact of it—has as much pull as a carefully curated, long-term abusive relationship's as if one scientist spent decades developing a downward-facing propulsion system to get an apple to descend to the ground and one just used gravity. Same result, entirely different levels of effort." (2020, 245)

Although these two examples focus on queer relationships in order to indicate the power dynamics unnoticed by Butler's dismissal of the "cultural and psychic relations long past" (1987, 131) the same patterns shape interactions between heterosexual women and men, as revealed in a range of other memoirs and literary novels. In novels by Millennial writers including Sally Rooney, Megan Nolan, Raven Leilani and others, one finds the same old themes recurring: the erotics of domination and, echoing the mainstreaming of porn culture (Perry 2022), of choking and other forms of sexual violence, the eros of domesticity, delighting in scrubbing his toilet, the religion of submission to the male, even while they register the shocking disparity between this and their taken-for-granted feminist convictions. There

is also a phenomenological sensation of the self as ‘nothing’ as the grounds of their womanliness. For example, in Megan Nolan’s autobiographically infused novel *Acts of Desperation* (2021) as well as suggesting the endurance of a traditional femininity that rises up as if out of nowhere to structure her behaviour within a sexual relationship, she describes a recurrent sensation of feeling herself to be ‘nothing’ on account of her lack of agency and identity within the relationship. Desperate to please her boyfriend the (nameless) protagonist confesses: “I didn’t ask love of him. I didn’t want him to look in my direction and see me; for there was nothing I could say, with confidence, was me.” (52) Again, with nothing much to ‘leave behind’ in the relationship she reflects: “I disappeared with perfect peace.” (128)

This sensation of being ‘nothing’, or empty of one’s own desires or identity, is an old theme for women, with many psychic and cultural underpinnings. However, to a great extent, I suggest, it is fed and strengthened today by Butlerian discourse which also unfortunately undermines any resistance to patriarchal norms. I elaborate this argument in more detail next.

4.2 The Masquerade, Pure Alterity and the Pornographic Gaze

Beauvoir identifies the most important reason for the maintenance of gendered inequality lying in women’s being posited as the Other. So, man is the subject; “she is the inessential in front of the essential” (2011, 6). Beauvoir gives us a phenomenological depiction of this state (from the point of view of the man, who is the judge of women’s Otherness more generally) in terms of opacity, darkness, suffocation, engulfment, emptiness, vertigo, abysses into which a man may fall, eternal sleep, and of course nothingness. Mother Earth, Beauvoir writes, “is Nothingness”, transcendence or spirit “locked up in ... night of sleep and nothing” (2011, 170). To Beauvoir, this is the starting point for a critical enquiry into the situation of women, whose origins she explores, and whose end she is hopeful is in sight (together with women’s freedom). Butler, however, ends with the idea that woman is no more than the masquerade; she quotes Riviere (1929, 306) approvingly when she says that the masquerade and ‘genuine womanliness’ are identical. There is, Butler agrees with Rivière, nothing more to womanliness than a style, an expression, an arrangement of parts.

I suggest that we can explore more fully the differences between Beauvoir and Butler’s work through revisiting Griffin’s concept of the ‘pornographic gaze’ which, Griffin writes, constitutes an abnegation of women, as “nothing”, “a void”, reduced to a “blank screen and onto this screen a fantasy which does not belong to women is projected” (1981, 201). Beneath this gaze, women are encouraged to “impersonate a stereotype of the female” (1981, 204) which, when not passing unnoticed, when evident, for example in exaggerated femininity, results in the charge that women

are “called, in our very being, artificial” (1981, 204). This resonates with Butler’s assertion (1988) that the drag queen or transvestite’s ‘gender’ is as real (i.e. fake) as the woman’s. The assumption of the pornographic gaze also is that there is nothing beneath the masquerade or mask of femininity: “the pornographic mind conceives of female sexuality as a kind of bottomless pit, an empty space which craves male presence, and which cannot exist without the male” (Griffin 1981, 218). Again, we can overlay Butler’s words on this and find a remarkable fit: “If gender attributes . . . are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal.” (Butler 1988, 528) According to Griffin, while all women learn to imitate the pornographic ideal, they assume a false self, a man’s idea of what a woman is; the true self beneath—a self with a different kind of identity and desires outside those constructed by what Beauvoir calls her “being-for-men” (2011, 159)—is repressed and its existence may even be forgotten. There is, arguably, no greater gender performativity than that found in porn (as, if we remember, Cyrus Grace Dunham vividly observes). Thus, today’s young women find themselves in a cultural context where the mainstreaming of porn and the post-feminist masquerade dovetail almost perfectly.

As Ariel Levy writes about her study, in the noughties, of ‘raunch culture’, sex-positive women (straight and gay) are confusing freedom with self-objectification: “the truth is that the new conception of raunch culture as a path to liberation rather than oppression is a convenient (and lucrative) fantasy with nothing to back it up” (Levy 2005, 82). Since she wrote these lines this culture has become so mainstream that it is scarcely recognised as what Levy termed ‘raunch’. Gill (2007) identifies the emergence of a sexualized culture and what she calls ‘porno-chic’ from the late 1990s in fashion, advertising, magazines and TV. Involving women’s complicity or active agency in rendering themselves sexualized subjects, not just objects, the emphasis on choice presents women as “autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances” (2007, 153) and with femininity “defined as a bodily property” emphasised in exaggerated displays, “rather than a social, structural or psychological one” (2007, 149). In other words, the masquerade has become the reality, and this reality is further built on the following logic, in de Lauretis’ words: “If ‘woman’ is a fiction, a locus of pure difference and resistance to logocentric power, and if there are no women as such, then the very issue of women’s oppression would appear to be obsolete” (1989, 11). In this logic, performance *is* liberation.

I turn to Ottessa Moshfegh’s critically acclaimed 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as a means to explore the existential and phenomenological impact of the pornographic gaze/pornographic culture on young women’s subjectivity: in this case, a cultured, thin, rich and beautiful middle-class graduate of Columbia

University.⁶ Through a kind of cartoonish exaggeration and mordant black humour it makes its points in the way the drag queen does in Butler's theory, namely highlighting the structures of the pornographic gaze and their invisibility in more ordinary contexts. Moshfegh's (again, fittingly nameless) protagonist gives up her job as receptionist in an art gallery in New York to take a regimen of tranquillizers and sleeping pills on a daily basis with the aim of spending most of one year in a kind of hibernation only briefly broken by bouts of wakefulness. This drug-induced sleep, she hopes, will render her 'immune' to painful emotions and memories, as she withdraws into a state of medicated numbness where nothing hurts because everything (including sexual abuse) is distant. As she says: "My favourite days were the ones that barely registered." (2018, 71)

Porn is a constant theme in the novel, the current in which the heroine swims: it shapes the aesthetic of the art in the gallery she briefly works in before her hibernation, she wakes up from bouts of sleeping to find it playing on the TV, she thinks her best friend looks "troublingly pornographic" (280) in her heavy makeup, it structures the unsatisfactory encounters with her boyfriend, Trevor. As if to suggest a certain blamelessness on his part, Trevor insists that her sex-goddess appearance—variously described as like Kim Basinger, Faye Dunaway and Daryl Hannah—makes it hard to see a 'real' person beneath the fantasy associations. She says: "His favourite thing was to fuck my mouth while I lay on my back pretending to be asleep, as if I wouldn't notice his penis slamming into the back of my throat" (2018, 175). By actually putting herself to sleep, by existing in a twilight state for as much time as she can manage, she is simultaneously succumbing to the emptiness assumed of her by Trevor and other men, whilst trying to liberate herself from the pornographic gaze by checking out.

This very same tone of cool blankness is one Angela McRobbie identifies in the facial expressions of models in fashion magazines and sees this as resulting from the gender pain occasioned by the obligation to perform the masquerade. This look conveys, she says: "a turning away from male desire, but in no perceptible direction, indeed in a directionless direction" (2009, 111–2). Of course, there is, as our protagonist was no doubt taught in her cultural studies degree, and had repeated in her art world milieu, no place in which that self can be found. For the protagonist it is not entirely negative; indeed, she feels a connection with her dead mother (who had killed herself following years of depression) through sleep and a way to feel close to her again: "it was the one thing my mother and I had enjoyed doing

⁶ I am aware that other reviews of this novel have not stressed such an interpretation (e.g. Tolentino 2018) but if looked at through the lens of the performative turn in feminism and its imbrication with post-feminism then certain structures of feeling can be seen to be articulated through the (anti)-protagonist.

together when I was a child” (2018, 46). Yet, the complex, layered and melancholic nature of this connection is made clear by Griffin who writes of how the annihilation of the selfhood of women through and behind the ‘masquerade’ deeply affects a woman’s relationship with her own mother, whose self has melted into invisibility: “To look back into childhood, in the place occupied by one’s mother, and find nothing, this is a desolation ... ” (210)

Our protagonist takes her last four months of sleep-therapy to another level when she enters into a pact with a successful contemporary artist whom she had been represented at her gallery. She will sleep for periods of three days at a time, waking for a few hours, then, with the help of the (fictional) drug *Infermiterol*, returning to her comatose state. As part of the pact, the artist agrees to take care of her, including leaving pizza for her to consume during her periods of wakefulness and carrying out other errands as instructed. The door is locked from the outside and only he has the key (she cannot get out until he opens the door on an agreed date at the end of this hibernation). She wonders briefly if she might, in a comatose state, throw herself out of the window of her tower block apartment in a vain attempt to escape but the thought does not disturb her. In return during his visits (which only happen when she is sleeping), she agrees that he can photograph her any way she chooses (and of course he chooses to shoot her, in her black out state, in various nude poses). The ceding of her entire life, her entire will, to a male stranger is the culmination of this retreat into emptiness. Meanwhile, the very last pill she swallows takes her to the edge of obliteration: “I travelled more peacefully through outer space, listening to the rhythm of my respiration, each breath an echo of the breath before, softer and softer, until I was far enough away that there was no sound, there was no movement. There was no need for reassurance or directionality because I was nowhere, doing nothing. I was nothing. I was gone.” (276)

These scenes and images summon up what Beauvoir has written about alterity with its metaphors of entrapment, nothingness, enormous heights and terrifying abysses. Direk (2011) draws our attention to the way that, in Beauvoir, the alterity accorded to woman—a “radical alterity” of one to Other, not the “relative” alterity of one to other (as in the slave) and thus rendering recognition impossible—is the same phenomenon identified by other writers as “abjection”. Abjection, like radical alterity, both tempts and repulses men. So “the woman lover draws her lover into relinquishing life and giving himself up to the supreme sleep” (Beauvoir 2011, 188). “Man wants to assert his individual existence and proudly rest on his ‘essential difference’, but he also wants to break the barriers of the self and commingle with water, earth, night.” (Beauvoir 2011, 182) Indeed, according to Griffin, “pornography exists to silence eros” (255) by which she means this wholeness or connection to that which is beyond the self, and thus keep this commingling in abeyance. This suggests that what we have presented here in the *Moshfegh* is a phenomenological

account of radical alterity from the point of view of the abject woman. Although in this novel it is taken to an extreme, there are clear threads of continuity with the experiences of the young women I have discussed reflecting painfully on their gendered identities in more ordinary or realistic contexts.

So far, I have explored the differences between Beauvoir and Butler's work, including Butler's interpretation of Beauvoir, and suggested certain socio-cultural consequences or accompaniments of Butler's view of masquerade as the totality of what a woman is. The echoes of Butlerian feminism in the pornographic gaze demonstrate precisely and disturbingly what is at stake for young women today. This 'nothingness' behind the mask is also the vertigo of radical alterity. Yet unlike in Butler, for Beauvoir alterity is associated with inequality and oppression and is the position which Beauvoir exhorts us to leave behind. In the next section I turn to consider how this can be accomplished through the very ordinary process of (self-reflexively) growing older.

5 Temporality and the Life Course: Asserting the 'Something' of Womanhood

5.1 Who Becomes? The Life Course Approach

Butler correctly attributes to Beauvoir the view that becoming a woman is a process involving both temporality and agency. Whilst Butler does include temporality it is the kind of continuous present one finds on a stage, extricated from any material conditions, socio-historical context and power relations. Gender performance is associated with 'repetition', and its subversion, rather than embedded in biography, or evolving and changing with age and time. By contrast, Beauvoir posits that time is central to the project of becoming, and here she means, above all, life course time. With puberty, a girl's body is transformed concurrently with her social situation, and she becomes 'the second sex', in which her subjectivity or consciousness is 'doubled', as she takes on the role of the Other and finds herself simultaneously both subject and object. The changing body itself also impacts phenomenologically on her sense of identity as well as being reflected back to her through the male gaze.

At the end of youth, however, with the advent of powerful bodily changes at menopause, women have the opportunity to remove ourselves from this constrained situation; no longer an 'object' in the sexual economy, which values youth, we can once again claim our full subjectivity but at the price of expulsion from this economy. As Beauvoir notes: "She is asexual but complete" (641), independent but without authority. The paradox here is that the loss of objectification is also the

loss of patriarchal value. Of course, women also have the choice to try to retain a youthful appeal in which case, if we succeed, we remain ‘doubled’ and subject to all the ambiguity of the second sex position, for as long as we qualify to remain within the sexual economy. We also have the choice to succumb to that devaluing and internalize ageism and sexism. But if we embrace the ejection from the sexual régime we become what Beauvoir calls the ‘third sex’ to signify a position located outside this binary hierarchy.

As always, Beauvoir is clear that society does not work from the outside in to inscribe the body with its messages but rather there is a mutual co-constituting in which the body also contributes. Beauvoir notes: “Woman is now delivered from the servitude of her female nature ... she is no longer prey to powers that submerge her: she is consistent with herself” (2011, 43); or in the more resonant language of Parshley’s earlier translation: “she is herself, she and her body are one” (1996, 63). In Griffin’s terms, she is no longer ‘a stage’ or ‘blank screen’ onto which a male fantasy of ‘woman’ is projected; she is too much of a person in her own right for such invisibility to be possible; she is, in Dunham’s words, a ‘protagonist’. This, then, is another stage in the never-ending process of ‘becoming a woman’.

But what is the ‘complete’ self that emerges once the false self of the masquerade is dropped? Of course, the obvious answer to Butler’s question: “Who becomes? Is there anything that exists before gender?” (1992, 255), following the logic of her whole argument, is ‘nothing’. But this is both the wrong question to ask and furthermore, the co-sequences of accepting women to be ‘nothing’ play into the hands of the patriarchy. Rather, the important question was, and still is: ‘What will the free woman be like?’⁷ In the continued absence of a cultural context in which men and women are both equal and free, and where myths of womanhood from the point of patriarchal culture still structure our situation, the subjectivity of the free woman can be usefully explored through that of the ageing woman. Here we may glimpse a subject position in which it is possible to assert the claim to be ‘something’. I should also note here that ageing is somehow not the ‘end’ of gender, just like childhood was not ‘before’; even in the little girl, there is an always/already quality to gender (she is socialized early into femininity even during her more ‘androgynous’ childhood phase). Although there is a real embodied memory of ‘before’ the second sex which inspires many older women in looking back, yet to see this as the only source of inspiration is to fail to recognise the deeper insights of maturity. Considering the gendered changes of age, there is a useful parallel in the concept of ‘agefulness’

7 These are indeed the questions Beauvoir sets out to answer in *The Second Sex*: “How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women’s freedom and can she overcome them?” (Beauvoir 2011, 17)

(Andrews 1999) which recognises and values the time ‘one has’ (as in the French form of ‘having an age’). The ‘self’ here is a mixture of continuity and change with the lived experience of gender and age incorporating a lifetime of experience and insight.

I turn to this next.

5.2 Sex, Gender and Freedom in the Post-Menopausal Woman: Towards Women as Something

In this final section I draw on the literary auto-ethnographic account of menopause written by Steinke (2019). She shares very Beauvoirian themes regarding the strange dance between body and culture, hormones and selfhood. For Steinke, menopause initiates a radical change in her subject position in relationship to her womanhood. Simply: “I’ve lost interest in *doing* my female gender, propping it up.” (2019, 78) Unlike contemporary celebrity menopause memoirs which seem particularly enthusiastic about HRT and the retention of youthful feminine sexuality that this supports, she declares herself willing to “accept responsibility for growth across the life span at every transitional phase” (2019, 68). However, admitting the crucial role of the body is at first challenging for her, as it is for many other feminists who have been schooled to deny the role of biology, seeing it as the kind of essentialism feminism was designed to combat.

There is also a suspicion *of the female body itself* common to Independent Women who have long been accustomed to controlling and suppressing it via the painkiller, the contraceptive pill, dieting, the gym, and more. Yet, faced with overwhelming change, Steinke is quickly able to accept the ‘animal’ nature of the metamorphosis (indeed the subtitle of her memoir is ‘Menopause and the vindication of natural life’), and from this position to view biology/embodiment as central to her selfhood. For example, she observes: “Recent brain research suggests that the female brain is very deeply affected by hormones, that the increase or decrease affects a woman’s reality. For a cycling woman, the days just before her period, when hormones drop, are most like the hormonal landscape of menopause.” (2019, 70–1) Searching for an understanding of the possibilities of this life stage in a culture where women’s ageing is portrayed as a disaster for her, she turns for inspiration to the natural world, to female elephants, gorillas and orcas. In terms of the latter especially, who are one of the three other animals who go through menopause, she feels a profound kinship which she reflects on movingly throughout the book.

Steinke shifts her subjective position gradually and uncertainly. At first, she feels as if menopause hollows her out, and she describes it as a “nothingness, a negation” and a “void” (38), as if there is only loss here: loss of value, loss of sexuality and fertility, of the end of the clamorous wishes of others, the pull

of desire, the imperatives of the body, and the “powers that submerge her” (Beauvoir 2011, 43). When all this is withdrawn, what is left behind feels like a nothing. When she can no longer take part in the masquerade, when she is no longer a ‘hollowed out’ space in which other’s desires are projected (in Chu’s words), she feels just emptiness. But this does not last and into the vacuum anger rushes which, shaped but not determined by, changes in the chemical composition of her blood, she experiences as a “gateway to authenticity” (88) and a crucible to change. This feeling is not unfamiliar; she had briefly experienced this state during episodes of pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), only at that time: “I was taught not to trust my feelings of frustration and fury in those days before my period when my hormones would drop. I was told instead that I was crazy, that the world I inhabited was not real.” (108–9).

By ‘authenticity’ (and here she explicitly takes inspiration from Beauvoir) Steinke is fumbling towards recognition of something real behind the mask of femininity. Similarly, the women in Emily Martin’s [(1987) 2001] study, in both PMS and menopause felt a clarity, a truth to their insights, and often felt able to express frustrations and tensions they repressed at other times. Steinke experiences her anger as agency itself, as an extending of herself, spirit and body, into the world, with all the velocity and heat of telekinesis. She reflects on how men have considered women’s anger to be akin to possession and traces a line between the persecution of witches and the response of contemporary husbands who, nostalgic for their former, compliant wives, see them as ‘possessed’ by malevolent forces and in need of the antidote of medicalization. But this ‘possession’ feels more like ‘self-possession’ to Steinke. Thinking back to Dworkin (1987) view of intercourse as possession (by men) underscores this idea of the freeing of the female self from patriarchal ownership.

Steinke’s anger, when it emerges, is particularly directed at her partner’s disinterest in domesticity—cleaning up after himself—and his enviable ability to single-mindedly focus on his own priorities, together with her own complicity in this: “I was as angry at him for making me bear the brunt of our shared domestic duties as I was at myself for feeling weighted by and responsible for them.” (2019, 97) Again, like Martin’s respondents she recognises: “For most of my premenopausal life, I pushed down and compressed my anger until I could almost convince myself it did not exist. I revelled in being split, diaphanous. It was a little like being high, having no singular self. Being weightless, like a ghost.” (98) Unsurprisingly, a change in sexuality goes hand in hand with liberation, as this weight, this ‘gravity’ in Machado’s words, ceases to exert a draw. In her youth, sex “held me under its spell for thirty years” (2019, 115), but has now slowly receded in importance in her life.

Given the centrality of sexuality in the ambiguity and ‘division’ within the independent woman noted by Beauvoir, the lessening of the grasp it has on her is highly

significant. It is also unnerving at first for Steinke and deeply threatening to her self-identity: “Since early adulthood, desire had been the main way I’d oriented myself. Without it, I often feel now that I’ve lost the thread.” (124) But, in fact the thread is still there, less visible at first, connecting her to what has gone before and to the authentic self which was repressed or suppressed beneath the elaborate ‘drag act’ of femininity when for years: “I rose at 6.00 am to wash, blow-dry, hot-curl, and hair-spray my hair every single day ... [but]I was always at the edge of popularity, barely holding on, and my femininity was under constant surveillance.” (2019, 80) Yes, this is definitively performative, as Butler would say, but even here the pressure to comply makes the degree to which it is voluntary deeply uncertain.

Furthermore, as a young woman unconfident in her femininity, uncertain in her relationships, she saw erotic communion, specifically “coming together” as “a hook, as if the proximity of orgasm made an actual link that bound me to my partner” (2019, 133). This was especially meaningful in the context of relationships with withholding, moody and uncommunicative men (her favourite ‘type’). Moving into her own space, removing the hook (a painful image), in turn leads to the restoring of wholeness or, as she puts it, ‘an earlier fragmentation created by cycling and the male gaze is finally mending’ (2019, 139). She feels kinship for the “fierce girl” (139) she once was; the one who disappeared beneath the hair rollers and hairspray. Now, she is able to look back over her shoulder and see the sexual self she had once been: “Like O in *The Story of O*, I’d often gotten off on self-negation, wanting to be a zero, an emptiness” (142). That is all gone. Orgasms, in this dance of change, also reflect her new subject position, grasping her body in a more gentle, muted way: “Some stars surge, others flicker, and a few are completely blown out” (131). There is no more decentring of the self to submit to the will of the other; no self-abnegation; she and her body indeed are one, embedded in a physical and emotional relationship of equals.

Returning to Steinke’s comments about her early sensation of how the *end* of the masquerade led to a feeling of nothingness makes particular sense if juxtaposed with the sensation of the nameless heroine of Nolan’s novel. She, like the young Steinke, fixates on someone aloof who keeps her preoccupied; too much existential anxiety threatens otherwise to overwhelm. She reflects: “The hysteria, the upset was bad, but its absence was -was. It was absence. It was the great nothing of my heart, my own boundless greed and inability to be sated reflected back at me.” (199) Freeing oneself from this void, from the need for personal authenticity and self-responsibility via an obsessive fixation on another overly reinforces the very sense of lack. But moving to recover oneself, to build a whole self, directed from within, *self-possessed* at last, constitutes a different sort of freedom altogether, and one associated with the occupying of a new and powerful subject position.

Steinke's relationship with her (second) husband whom she married later in life was never centred upon sex, a fact which she resented at first but now feels hugely grateful for. She wants him now, not as a woman wants a man, but because of his human qualities, which, she feels, are more apparent now he is ageing. These sentiments point to a new kind of eros defined by existentialist psychotherapist Rollo May as a yearning towards other people 'in relation to whom we discover our own self-fulfilment' but also to the world and to society in terms of the ethical, "noble and good life" (1969, 74). It is also the libidinal force that leads through self-development to maturity, in Jungian terms (Pratt et al. 1982). Similarly, for the free woman, as Beauvoir says, "eroticism and love would be a free surpassing and not a resignation" (2011, 778). Referring back to Griffin's observations, these views of eros are in direct opposition to the pornographic gaze.

The implication here is that women are free both to reveal something that they normally hide or muffle (vocalising only through bursts of anger, for instance) and, further, to grow and develop as free subjects. Freedom, Beauvoir suggests, requires the end of 'femininity' as it currently is which will require an androgynous world where exaggerated and constraining gender performances are a thing of the past. If little girls were raised like their brothers, with parents equal to each other in child rearing as well as work, then in that the child "would feel an androgynous world around her and not a masculine world" (2011, 778) she would not need to wait till post-menopause to experience the freedom Steinke is describing.

Until those socio-cultural changes occur (which include changes to the feminine self) post-menopausal women, like Steinke, can provide younger women with a vision of what the free woman can look like when she emerges, the obstacles she has overcome in achieving this, and how this may feel. Of course, as an older woman her situation is inevitably different from that of a younger woman but, as in Beauvoir's methodology, common structures apply across the vastly heterogeneous circumstances of women's lives, including the heterogeneity of age and life stage. What Steinke portrays phenomenologically is the end of that feminine experience of alterity whilst still living a full and fulfilled life which is hard for women in today's culture to imagine earlier in the life course.

The worry remains, as it did for Beauvoir, that in our deeply sexist, ageist culture, the knowledge older women possess will be discounted; that even though we are no longer silent, we will not be heard. It is thus not surprising that Steinke (and many other mid-life women report this) look to orca matriarchs for their imaginative sustenance and guidance. As she says: "No one calls the female whales *roadkill* or *dried-up cunts*. No doctor offers hormone therapy or vaginal rejuvenation." (2019, 215) To her, and I agree, this suggests that the problem is not the menopause, or ageing womanhood, but society's view of both. It also suggests that the will of the body is a fact of significance; and setting aside any consideration of the veracity of

the ‘grandmother hypothesis’ (Matterns 2019) in menopause, that the body itself is implicated in freedom—for women as it always has been for men.

6 Discussion and Concluding Comments

Deconstructionism and post-structuralism share a long lineage of patriarchal thought going back to Aristotle. Although Aristotle propounded a theory or ontology of essences, these essences were lacking in women, he believed. Although deconstructionist and poststructuralist thought, in which I include Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, starts with a very different set of assumptions, both end at the same place: at the discovery that women are *nothing*. This idea, I have argued, dovetails today with the pornographic gaze embedded in post-feminist culture to lock women more tightly than ever in a position of pure alterity (since women consider this ass a choice). By contrast, to start with Beauvoir is to end in a very different place, with the prospect of women losing their Otherness and becoming *something*.

For many compelling reasons, Beauvoir was more focused on demonstrating how biological processes natural to women gave patriarchal forces the leverage to oppress us. Although she hinted at it, Beauvoir never developed the positive possibilities of the ageing women’s embodiment in any greater detail or described how this underpinned phenomenologically the experience of full subjectivity (albeit hampered by a societal devaluing). In developing Beauvoir’s ideas in this direction it seems to me more important than ever to emphasise body and culture as co-constitutive in this process, to recognise that the body performs us, in other words, just as much as we perform it (which is very different from Butlerian performativity). It also seems to me important to acknowledge the positive dimensions of female embodiment that enable us to access certain forms of knowledge associated with intersubjectivity, care, and so on. The space that is free of alterity is one that younger women may also be able to achieve involuntarily at times in their menstrual cycle; meanwhile methods to reclaim the self earlier in the life course—the kind of relationships to aim for, the technologies of the self that one might apply to inculcate habits of independence—are all present for younger women in Beauvoir’s own writings.

We can see this too in contemporary auto-ethnographic literature that advocates ‘spinsterhood’ or the ‘emotionally independent’ woman, among other things (see Pickard 2018). Yet the possibility of such an achievement in maturity directly counters the discourses that associate ageing femininity with loss and decline and so for that reason are also important for feminist theory to acknowledge more widely. I would go as far as to say that this possibility is almost certainly unknown

to younger women and that the sexual and emotional transformations discussed by Steinke as associated with this life stage is also uniquely insightful in this regard. An alliance between older women and younger women, should it occur over such knowledge, would certainly appear extremely threatening to the patriarchy.

The loss of connection of Butlerian feminism with the facts of our embodiment as women has significant consequences. It confuses and undermines our ability to fight for sex-based rights and to reject gendered stereotypes (Rustin 2020); there is no resistance possible from a position of ‘nothing’, no toehold to be found in the sheer textual abyss from which to marshal one’s resources to fight back. It also bespeaks of a destructive and abusive relationship to the planet unfolding before us now in a full display of all the pornographic horrors of commodification, violence and exploitation. Humanity, or at least global capitalism, seems to be stuck in what was once a “necessary stage in the history of humanity” when man needed to free himself from nature and build civilisation. But we have long outgrown this, as well as the accompanying requirement, through associating women with nature (due to the “natural mysteries’ she incarnates”), to oppress both (Beauvoir 2011, 86). The redress, however, is not through a further splitting of men and women’s full range of expression into distinct and narrow gender identities but of integrating feminine and masculine properties into a whole. Direk notes: “If woman is something we become, the same can be said for humans in general.” For Beauvoir, she says, this ‘human’ comprises transcendence and immanence, both immersion in the elemental and in the spiritual: “One becomes truly human if it is possible to realize oneself in both dimensions of one’s being.” (2020, 42)

In this respect the flight from sex echoes the quest for agelessness, the denial of age and change, of finitude and ultimately the rotting that lie beyond the individual will and mark us out as part of the animal world. Chu’s sneering: “Getting fucked makes you female because fucked is what a female is” (2019, 77) reveals the ugly logic of a patriarchal tradition in which ‘progress’, including in dazzling post-modern and post-structural social theory, has favoured men over women, and men over every other life-form. What we need now in feminism, I suggest, is a powerful vision to resist this and equally to remind us of what we can become, and that vision can be found, I believe, through a return to Beauvoir.

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