FEMINISM AND THE ABYSS OF FREEDOM

LINDA M. G. ZERILLI

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CHAPTER THREE

Feminists Make Promises: The Milan Collective's *Sexual Difference* and the Project of World-Building

> It is more important to have authoritative female interlocutors than to have recognized rights. An authoritative interlocutor is necessary if one wants to articulate one's life according to the project of freedom. . . . The politics of claiming one's rights, no matter how just or deeply felt it is, is a subordinate kind of politics.
>
> —MILAN WOMEN'S BOOKSTORE COLLECTIVE, *SEXUAL DIFFERENCE*

THIS REMARKABLE CLAIM appears in *Non credere di avere dei diritti: La generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne* (Don't Think You Have Any Rights: The Engendering of Female Freedom in the Thought and Vicissitudes of a Women's Group), a text collectively written in 1987 by the Libreria delle Donne di Milano (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective) and published in English under the title *Sexual Difference* in 1990. Now out of print, *Sexual Difference* is a deeply challenging work which never found much of an audience among American feminists—it is virtually missing in the so-called category of women debates of the 1990s.[1] This absence is significant. As the text's cotranslator and editor, Teresa de Lauretis, succinctly puts it, "A freedom that, paradoxically, demands no vindication of the rights of woman, no equal rights under the law, but only a full, political and personal accountability to women, is as startlingly radical a notion as any that has emerged in Western thought."[2]

What does it mean for freedom to consist not in claiming equal rights, but in developing a political and personal accountability to women? And, if such a practice is indeed as radical as anything we might find in the history of Western thought, why was *Sexual Difference* more or less ignored by American feminist theorists? Reflecting on these questions, feminists might consider their own entanglement in the conception of freedom, inherited from the Western tradition, as a phenomenon of the will, a property of the subject, and a means to an end whose name is sovereignty. On this account, dominant in liberal democracies like our own, freedom is defined in highly individualistic terms, housed in constitutionally guaranteed rights, and experienced as something that begins where politics ends.[3] For the Milan Collective, however, freedom is

something quite different: it is a creative and collective practice of world-building, fundamentally inaugural in character, which establishes irreducibly contingent, politically significant relationships among women as sexed beings who otherwise have none apart from their place in the masculine economy of exchange.

Rejecting the frame in which freedom has been claimed by most first- and second-wave feminists, the Milanese refuse to justify women's demand for freedom in terms of their likeness to men (sameness) or their special contributions qua women (difference) to the general welfare of society. Indeed, the Milanese refuse not only the fantasy of sovereignty that characterizes inherited understandings of freedom but also the logic of utility or expediency that presses women's claim to freedom into the service of their social function. It is a logic that, in their view, has fatefully governed historical iterations of the woman question and arguments for women's rights: namely, what is a woman *for*? Casting aside the logic of the social question in feminism, the collective's "unusual way of doing politics" (*SD*, 51) recasts the whole project of Western feminism in terms of "the practice of [engendering] free relations among women" (*SD*, 79) or what the Milanese call "the politics of sexual difference" (*SD*, 145).[4]

I've suggested that the Milan Collective's text may have been dismissed by American feminists due to our entanglement in a problematic view of freedom as sovereignty. But that assumes too much. Notwithstanding its Italian subtitle (The Engendering of Female Freedom in the Thought and Vicissitudes of a Women's Group), *Sexual Difference* was never received by American feminists as a political manifesto on women's freedom. Rather, it was received (in the context of the category of women debates) as an argument about the irreducible difference between the sexes, a symbolic asymmetry between masculine and feminine that trumps relations of class, race, sexuality, and national belonging.[5] Notwithstanding dissenting voices, which warned against the hasty dismissal of (mostly European) feminist texts as "essentialist," American feminists have by and large thought that claims to sexual difference, when they do not "lead us back to the myth of woman," as Monique Wittig caustically comments, foreclose serious discussion of other categories of social difference, their political origins and effects.[6]

My purpose in this chapter is not to rehearse the now familiar arguments that can be brought either for or against feminist accounts of sexual difference.[7] If we (feminists) have reached a point of exhaustion in this debate—as we clearly have in the one about foundations—that is not least because we have genuine difficulty in thinking about sexual difference as anything other than a subject question. Within the frame of the subject question it is hard to see sexual difference as anything other than the impossible choice of masculine or feminine that defines the very condition of subject formation within the social matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. Accordingly, we have thought sexual difference as either constitutive *of* the social (that is, quasi-transcendental) or as constituted *by* the social (that is, historically contingent).[8] Taking up the project of feminism in a freedom-centered frame that is focused on the problem of world-building, the Milan Collective invites us to think sexual difference as *political*: that is, as a *claim* to sexed being that has to be articulated, that is, brought into a *public* relation with other such claims in a *public* space.

So as not to miss (yet again) the challenge posed by the *practice* of freedom whose name is sexual difference, we must remain attuned to the task of world-building that is at the center of the Milan women's politics.[9] This task is a response to what the collective calls the debilitating state of (symbolic) indifferentiation in which women find themselves in masculinist cultures: all women are the same. This sameness is not limited to the image of Woman that was the focus of Simone de Beauvoir's powerful critique of sex/gender difference, but carries over into the feminist politics organized around the principle of sex/gender equality which is associated with her legacy. Within feminism, says the collective, equality strengthens "the female demand for a commonality based on gender"—"do not forget that you are a woman like all the others"—but neglects each woman's "need for her own personal distinction" (*SD*, 137, 135), her desire to be considered as more than an equivalent member of a set, that is, to be considered in her particularity. "A neutral justice ordered women not to compare themselves to one another, promising to bring them to equality with men, with the result that female experience stayed imprisoned in itself, without social translation" (*SD*, 113). What was lacking was the means to recognize, value, and mediate different experiences. Without "a space-time in which to locate [herself]" (*SD*, 26), each woman is trapped in her own experience, which is a radically subjective one: "with whom, after all, can she exchange [signs]?" (*SD*, 26).

Tearing Up the Social Contract

Naming the absence of interlocutors and a symbolic structure of mediation (a worldly in-between) entails "getting to the gendered foundations of the social contract" and discovering first that "there is no social contract between men and women," and second, that "women were a herd

on the symbolic level," but in "social life . . . they were mostly isolated from each other" (*SD*, 134, 129, 134). The other face of the masculinist social contract is not simply men's property in women, as Carole Pateman has persuasively argued and the Milan Collective would agree, but also the "savage state of female humanity" (*SD*, 137), in which women lack the skills and "rules of social exchange" (*SD*, 134).[10] Relations among women, with the exception of those that interfere with the regulation of men's relations, constitute what the collective calls the "blind spot in male political thought" (*SD*, 136). It is no use to search "among the age-old male pronouncements on the relation between individual and collectivity for an answer to the problem each woman encounters in reconciling her wish for personal distinction with her sisters' demand that she not leave the women's commonality" (*SD*, 136).

The masculine social contract cannot serve as a model for free relations among women, the Milan Collective holds, because its central principle of equality traps feminism in the losing logic that Luce Irigaray reveals with her simple question: "Equal to what?"[11] That a masculine measure is the barely hidden standard behind women's historical struggle for equal rights is well known.[12] That this standard forces on them an impossible choice, equal *or* different, is a problem that has haunted feminism from the start.[13] It is a problem that has divided feminism into opposing camps (equality feminists versus difference feminists) and that seems to be irresolvable.[14] And perhaps it is. Within the frame of a feminism organized around the apparently contradictory principles of equality and difference, our only options would appear to be either (1) to follow one of these camps and make the impossible choice or (2) to accept the impossible choice, in Joan Scott's words, as "the constitutive condition of feminism" itself.[15]

But perhaps there is another option: what if instead of thinking about and practicing feminism under the banner of equality or difference (or both), we thought about and practiced it under the banner of freedom?

Wagering that feminism will not in any way advance, but rather be crushed under the weight of the impossible choice, the Milan Collective foregrounds freedom over equality, even makes a feminist practice of disparity, thus putting itself at enormous risk and at odds with our common understanding of Western feminism. The collective comes to this conclusion only after a long and failed attempt to realize the historical aspirations of feminism for equality. To suppress the principle of equality in the name of freedom, as the collective outrageously suggests feminists do, means "tearing up the social contract" (*SD*, 143), refusing its political form. But why would feminists, assuming that they may have good reason to question the principle of equality, want to tear up a contract which, after all, has also been a call to freedom?

The Italians are not deaf to the rhetoric of freedom that has been central to the idea of a social contract, but it is not a model of freedom they think worth emulating. Apart from its historical formulation as the freedom of (some) men, it is a freedom construed as a fantasy of sovereignty. This fantasy, uncritically adopted by many first- and second-wave feminists, has kept feminism tethered to a certain form of the social contract (liberalism), which tends to reduce political freedom to negative liberty and the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the individual (*SD*, 136–37). In the absence of the practice and symbols of free horizontal social-symbolic relations among women, liberalism gives rise to the "terrible invitation" to pursue freedom and equality with men by repudiating one's sexed body and one's affiliations with women. This repudiation of sexed being, far from enabling female freedom, destroys it. "[T]he woman who wants to leave [the] commonality, and who does not know, does not want to acknowledge, that she needs her fellow women" (*SD*, 135), the collective claims, ends up like the mythical Proserpine, "imprisoned in the realm of the petrified symbols of male power, in need of other women but incapable of negotiating with them for what she wants" (*SD*, 137). Recognizing that freedom as sovereignty is empty, an "I-will" without an "I-can," the collective holds that if women wish to be free, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.[16]

"Tearing up the social contract" means refusing not only freedom as sovereignty but also any attempt to justify women's freedom in terms of its contribution to the community or the higher good (that is, in terms of the social question). "A female politics has been grafted onto this mental attitude, a politics planning to change the social order by invoking the values embodied in female, rather than male, behavior such as doing volunteer work, taking care of the weak, shunning the use of violent means, etc." (*SD*, 125). Rejecting the idea that women's freedom should depend on "the contents of an ethical nature, or, for that matter, on any other content," the collective declares: "Our politics does not aim at bettering society, but at freeing women and their choices—that is, freeing them from the obligation of justifying their difference, with all the forms of social servitude that obligation entails" (*SD*, 126). Female freedom is radically ungrounded: neither foundational nor consequentialist, its only raison d'être is itself.

The bold account of female freedom advanced by the collective emerges in a series of vignettes that recount the development of voluntary associations, "between 1966 and 1986, mainly in Milan," in which

something new appeared: a groundless practice of free relations among individuals who had little or no social intercourse with each other apart from their traditional function in the male economy of exchange.[17] These associations, so crucial to the history of Western feminism, are vital to the constitution of a realm and practice of public freedom for women not exhausted by the realm of rights. Telling the mixed story of these associations, their successes and failures, the collective shows it is possible to have formal equality and constitutionally guaranteed rights without the experience of substantive political freedom. Indeed, it is deeply problematic, for democracy and for feminism, to confuse the constitution and practice of political freedom with formal equality and the institutionalization of rights. *Practices* of political freedom are fundamentally inaugural in character; they create, through speech and action, a subjective in-between that discloses differences and sometimes exceeds the institutional space of equal rights. I hasten to add, however, that to say as much is not to say that the practice of claiming one's rights cannot be a practice of freedom. Rather than set up yet another false choice (like equal *or* different) between rights and freedom, we must ask, how are the creative and disruptive features of political freedom and the quotidian practice of world-building, the creation of a new social contract, related to the struggle for, or exercise of, equal rights? To this question and its unusual answer in the politics of sexual difference I now turn.

The Desire for Reparation

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective does not restrict the question of freedom to liberation from oppression. Rather, it is centrally concerned with freedom understood as the capacity to found new forms of political association. From the perspective of the Italians, however, these forms cannot be thought apart from the difference of sex, for "to be born a woman is an accident that conditions all of life" (*SD*, 128). A contingent fact that has the force of necessity, the difference of sex is not to be destroyed or transcended, but rather resymbolized, transformed "from a social cause of unfreedom into the principle of our [women's] freedom" (*SD*, 122). This transformation is always "constrained, to some extent, by the human condition of the female sex" (*SD*, 119–20). A human condition that must be changed yet cannot be gotten around, willed out of existence, or violently destroyed, sexual difference, as the Milanese see it, presents the problem of the new, only this "new . . . cannot be forced into being."

> Social revolutions destroy in order to force one to think the new. But destroying is of no use to the revolution of female thought because the new to be thought is a difference. . . . Subversion has to do with the way things are arranged, that is, their meaning. There are new arrangements which render a given reality meaningless, and thus change it by making it *deteriorate*. . . . Physical destruction would not be as effective because there are arrangements which, even if destroyed, retain their meaning, and one can be sure that they will turn up again. (*SD*, 120)

The idea that "those individuals who are today defined as women must eradicate their own definition. . . , in a sense, commit suicide," as Ti-Grace Atkinson once famously declared, is utterly foreign to the Italian women's project of freedom.[18] If what is past is the condition of what is and thus of one's own existence, the wish to destroy can lead to what Nietzsche diagnosed as the self-loathing and enervating features of the impossible wish to will backwards. According to Nietzsche, the "It was" is crushing—for the past does not budge. The will's relationship to what is past is "I will and cannot." Because it can be neither forgotten nor changed, the past must be redeemed. To redeem the past one must alter one's relationship to it: "To redeem what is past and transform every 'It was' into 'Thus I would have it!'—that's what I take to be redemption."[19]

Like Nietzsche, the Italians hold that to redeem the past is to give oneself value, to create new values. But what would redemption look like in the context of a feminist practice of freedom, a politics of sexual difference? How might feminists affirm sexual difference without reinstating what Monique Wittig calls the "category of sex"? Wouldn't the affirmation of sexual difference entrap us in "the familiar deadlock of 'woman is wonderful'" or harbor what Wendy Brown calls "wounded attachments," that is, "attachments to unfreedom," to the historical injuries that constituted feminine identity in the first place?[20]

When read through the frame of the subject question, *Sexual Difference* exemplifies what Brown calls the "paradoxical" entanglement of modern struggles for freedom, like feminism, in "the very structure of oppression that freedom emerges to oppose."[21] The paradox of freedom, as Brown defines it, mirrors critical accounts of the paradoxical character of subject formation, which hold that the subject is, if not compelled, deeply constrained to reiterate the very social norms that constitute it as subject/ed. Absent such reiteration, the subject would have no sense of its own realness, no social existence at all. Drawing on Nietzsche's account of the reactive and reflexive structure of identity, Brown writes

> In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion, augments or "alters the direction of the suffering" entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it. But in so doing it installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity.[22]

Caught in a vicious circle, the subject's political demand for recognition and reparation repeats, in the form of a compulsion, the very experience of injury that subjugates (but also constitutes) that same subject.

The Milan feminists, too, see the dangers involved in the desire for reparation when they write, "as long as a woman asks for reparation, no matter what she may obtain, she will know no freedom" (*SD*, 128). Like Brown, the Milan Collective sees how claims for reparation leave the past unredeemed, entrapping women in an endless pursuit of social recognition of their pain, which, in turn, only further constitutes "women" as an injury identity. Writes the collective,

> [S]ociety has no problem in admitting that women are victims of a wrong, although it then reserves the right to decide according to its own criteria how they will be compensated, so the game may go on forever. But we well know that the demand is so indeterminate, the feeling of damage so deep, that there can be no satisfaction unless this consists precisely in the right to recriminate forever. (*SD*, 128–29)

That is what made second-wave feminism a "politics of victimization," which "need[ed] housewives, women with abortion problems, raped women—not flesh and blood women, desiring and judging, but figures of the oppressed female sex and, as such, avatars of everything female" (*SD*, 103). Is that not precisely what a "wounded attachment" is all about?

Although the collective agrees that the demand for reparation reinstalls injury as identity, the Italians notice something curious about feminism's politics of victimization: the position of the victim seems impossible for any flesh-and-blood woman to occupy. Accordingly, the one who figures "the wretchedness of the female gender" is always the "other woman," including the woman who came before, not least of all one's own mother.[23] "Projected onto another woman, the figure that no woman could make her own" became the core symbol of second-wave feminism, which needed those iconic "housewives, women with abortion problems, raped women."

In the collective's account, then, the "wounded attachment" Brown speal about looks rather like an injury identity inhabited by none *and* "a ma identification with the suffering of some" (*SD*, 102).

According to the Milanese, the tendency to deny and affirm freedoı at once is a political problem of symbolic practice: "free relations amon women had no symbolic figuration" (*SD*, 70). Accordingly, writes the co lective, what "the women's movement lacked [was] a representation (free female thought as that which comes *before* consciousness [(women's subjection] and makes it possible. [Instead] [i]t was believed tha freedom came *from* consciousness" (*SD*, 103; emphasis added). Wha allows a woman to become conscious of oppression, in other words, i not the bare fact or truth of oppression but a symbolic representation c female freedom.

But not all figures of freedom are equally enabling for feminism Consider the idea, important in early second-wave feminism, of aı ancient matriarchy as the lost object of women's freedom. Such an objec incites the desire for freedom only to turn that desire against itself in th impossible wish to will backwards.[24] Nothing compares to the absolut freedom of the past, and nothing but a return to the past can regain tha absolute freedom. The present must be either transcended or destroyed This idea of an ancient past, comments the collective, led certain Italiaı feminists to "falsif[y] the accounts of even the most recent and best known events, such as the determining role that some women had in th formation of groups or common projects. This role was passed over ir silence. Otherwise, it was resented as an impediment to the full expansior of each woman's freedom" (*SD*, 104). In other words, the free actions o women were either denied, for they paled in comparison to the absolute freedom of ancient women, or they were seen in terms of sovereignty: the freedom of the one or the few against the many.

What was missing, then, was not the experience of freedom (that is, the practice of forming new political associations with others through action and speech) in Italian feminism, but its symbolic figuration. In the absence of such figuration the experience of freedom was always beyond reach and incapable of serving as a resource to future innovation. This symbolic figuration of female freedom is crucial: to cast "women" as an injury identity *tout court* is, in the Milan Collective's words, to "end up delineating the problems of one category of women, obviously the most disadvantaged, and present them as typical of the female condition in general. This levels the condition of women to their least common denominator, keeps people from perceiving women's different choices as well as the real opportunities they have to improve situations for themselves, and

thus denies the existence of the female gender—only a 'female condition' exists, with which probably no one really identifies" (*SD*, 68). Worse yet, such a condition is an uninhabitable subject position whose symbolic figuration is hegemonic: missing is an alternative to the iconic image of woman as victim.

What traps feminism in the logic of reparation is not an injury identity shared by all its members, then, but the absence of the figure of female freedom. Consequently, woman as victim provides the only figure around which to mobilize politically. The same society that is quite willing to recognize women as the victims of a wrong, so the game can go on forever, is less willing to recognize them as bearers of a desire that seeks social inscription but no reparation. And feminism, which has put forward representations of women as victims of a wrong, keeps the game in play, insofar as it offers no alternative symbols of female desire. Missing, in other words, is not the nonrecriminative desire itself—although *some* women at any given point in time may not have it, not all women are *always* without it—but the "symbolic authorization" of a female desire that does not "signify itself only in this negative form."[25]

If the problem of an injury identity, far from definitive of the actual desire of a whole social group, is a problem of a one-dimensional political representation, then what it calls for is not work on the subject—or not just that—but what the Italians call "political work on the symbolic" (*SD*, 106).[26] Rather than call for a return to a moment in the development of subjectivity prior to injury, as Brown herself does, the Italians call for the creation of a new symbolic practice, a practice "which sees outlined in failing or lack, not the wrongs of others [which call for reparation] but the something more which a woman wants to be and can be" (*SD*, 101). This "something more" is no mere desire for equality with men and thus no desire to be compensated for a harm. The Italians' wager is that feminist politics can be forged under the figure of freedom rather than injury, the desire for "something more" rather than equality. A reactive protest to eliminate forms of discrimination (addressed to men) could be transformed into a proactive practice to create a new social contract (addressed to women). Let us now see what this "practice of free relations among women" is.[27]

The Problem with Equality

As the name of the collective suggests, the stories told in *Sexual Difference* unfold primarily in relation to the space of the Women's Bookstore, which

opened in October 1975 in Milan. The bookstore is described as initiating "the practice of doing," which builds upon the "speech groups" that were formed in the early 1970s around the practice of *autocoscienza*. Akin to the consciousness-raising of early second-wave American feminism, "[t]he practice of *autocoscienza*," writes the collective, "presupposed and promoted a perfect reciprocal identification. I am you, you are me; the words that one of us uses are women's words, hers and mine" (*SD*, 42). *Autocoscienza* was without doubt empowering, but its power was also its limit: "it could not show differences between women because 'I am you and you are me'" (*SD*, 45). Although many of the women who began the practice had turned their back on the possibility of equality with men, in reaction to continuing and pervasive sex discrimination (*SD*, 40), *autocoscienza* sustained the logic of equality, albeit among women: "If differences arose, they were noted insofar as they were able to bring about reciprocal change, so that reciprocal identification could be again set up" (*SD*, 44).

The problem of indifferentiation—all women are alike—and its reproduction in early feminism is the departure point for the practice of doing, which elaborates the "material side of the life of speech" and counteracts the tendency to practice feminism as a sisterhood, a mode of kinship in which commonalities are given in advance of politics. "For it [the practice of doing] gathered together women who were not necessarily bound to one another by affection or familiarity, or rallied by succinct slogans, but who were unified instead by a common project, to which each of them was committed for her own reasons, her own desires and abilities, putting them to the test of collective implementation" (*SD*, 86). Although the Italians, from early on, put the idea of "doing" at the center of their politics, they did not reject the importance of the exchange of personal experiences, which characterized the first speech groups, or the initial political value of *autocoscienza*, that is, the affirmation of "women's common identity" (*SD*, 42). Nor did they reject the examination of fantasy or issues of psychic life, "the practice of the unconscious," which also formed a moment in their history.[28] What gradually emerged, however, was an awareness of the limits both of the politics of equality and of work on the subject. They saw that the problem of an injury identity demands a transformation of the worldly conditions that keep women unable to symbolize their differences. In the practice of doing, "a new theme is introduced: the theme of a female politics no longer centered on access to consciousness and speech [that is, language]. . . . The new terms are *create* and *transform*—create female social spaces in order to transform the given reality" (*SD*, 84). This creation and transformation begins with developing the political skills to

deal with the differences among women, which have heretofore been rejected as a threat to a form of feminism organized around the principle of equality and women's common identity.

Although there is nothing novel in the claim that feminism's greatest problem is its "not wanting, not knowing how, to come to terms with the differences which divide women from one another" (*SD*, 86), unique to the Italians is their discovery that differences among women are meaningless unless there is some way to relate them to each other, to evaluate or judge them. Not *wanting* to acknowledge differences is, on their account, a problem of not *knowing how* to acknowledge them. Learning how will require developing the political ability to relate and judge differences among women, which, in turn, requires another political skill: the feminist symbolization of sexual difference. Like the Italians, American feminists have seen the symbolization of differences among women as the needed corrective to the politics of identity that was associated with consciousness-raising and early feminism. Whereas American feminists have tended, by and large, to associate the symbolization of sexual difference with the effacement of differences among women, the Milan Collective holds that such differences will be effaced in the absence of the political symbolization of sexual difference.

The Milan women develop a politics of sexual difference as a quotidian practice of doing in the space of the bookstore itself. A central project in the practice of doing, the bookstore is conceived as one of several "*luoghi delle femministe*": feminist spaces, at once "physical and symbolic," in which free relations among women can take shape (*SD*, 96, 93).[29] Describing a poster announcing its opening, the collective writes, "The Bookstore is a shop open to the street. . . . Anyone can enter. It was made for women by other women. The women who enter are not asked who they are or what they believe. Here they can establish relations with others, 'if they so wish.' The bookstore is a political space because in it, women meet publicly and freely. 'To be among women . . . is the starting point of our politics'" (*SD*, 92). It was there that "a new practice was . . . elaborated: it was called the practice of relationships among women" (*SD*, 50). This practice "was an unusual way of doing politics, which revealed to many women that the system of social relations could be changed—not in the abstract, as we have all learned is possible, but in the concrete, inventing new ways to spend our own energy" (*SD*, 51).

A space where women who share similar interests (for example, in texts, authors, genres, criticism, and so on) can get together, the bookstore functions initially as the minimal condition of politics. It is a shared

worldly interest which, as Arendt puts it, "constitute[s] in the word's most literal significance something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together."[30] On Arendt's action-centered account of politics, this in-between has the double function of binding men together *and* separating them at once. This "physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly *to* one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible," writes Arendt, "[since] the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the 'web' of human relationships."[31] The Milanese call it the "practice of relationships among women."

The subjective in-between, political relations themselves, "owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking *to* one another," observes Arendt.[32] This is a simple but important point, one of which we are forever in danger of losing sight. Speaking *to* another person requires, of course, the presence of other people—another simple point—which is to say, it requires interlocutors. But an interlocutor is someone who sees from a standpoint not my own. An interlocutor is only possible on the condition of human plurality. Within the context of American feminism, it is has been assumed that this plurality is "the differences among women." On this account of plurality, then, one would discover one's interlocutors by recognizing the social differences (for example, of class, race, sexuality, and so on) that appear like significant demographic facts prior to their political articulation.

The Italians, too, had thought that recognizing social differences was the answer to feminism's identity politics. That was the whole point behind "the practice of doing." But the practice of doing, learning how to deal with the differences among women, had failed. Why? Posing this question, the Milan Collective turns to another practice of doing, the Women's Library in Parma, and analyzes its founding document.

> To explain their project more clearly, the founders of the Library chose to "transcribe every woman's opinion," to report, that is, some portions of a debate leading to the "document" which would present their venture. The reason given for this choice is the need to [in the Parma women's words] "compose a political document which may reflect all our points of view," for, as one woman said in the course of the debate,

"the diversity of the women in the group and their nonhomogeneity is a political guarantee that no one will be erased and everyone will 'exist.'" (*SD*, 94)

But that egalitarian way of framing the project ran into problems: the guarantee failed. The Collective explains: "It is here that an intricate problem appears. The theory is that differences are necessary for the existence of the female sex, but making judgments is not allowed" (*SD*, 94).[33] The unspoken taboo on judgment allowed certain differences to be spoken, but left them meaningless. In fact, says the collective, the Parma document (and others of its kind) "reduc[es] to nothing the heap of speeches about the value of differences among women" (*SD*, 99). In the absence of judgment, a way to evaluate and articulate or relate those differences, the latter will not amount to anything. Duly noted, even celebrated, but not judged, differences are no more significant for feminism as a "practice of doing" than they were for the practice of *autocoscienza*, in which they were either ignored or denied.

Recognizing how the "differences among women" became, as in American feminism, an empty slogan that, albeit paradoxically, concealed "the really significant differences," so much so that they "became sources of guilt" (*SD*, 99), the Italians come face to face with the limits of the practice of doing: "without relation to the other than herself, female desire [is] without interlocutor" (*SD*, 99). It is not the social differences among women, which are there from the start, that constitute the plurality necessary for the existence of an interlocutor. Plurality is not a demographic or existential fact, but a political relation to social differences; it requires that I do something in relation to such differences, that I count them in some politically significant way. The presence of female interlocutors is irreducible to the indiscriminate recording of each and every woman's opinion. Such recording appears to take account of differences but actually holds them in a crushing equality. The idea that to "transcribe [and refuse to judge] every woman's opinion," far from providing "a political guarantee that no one will be erased and everyone will 'exist,'" as the Parma feminists assumed, destroys the space in which such existence could attain reality: the worldly in-between of feminist politics itself.

"A woman can and must judge other women. A woman can and must face the judgment of other women" (*SD*, 142), declares the collective. The suspension of judgment in early feminism (for example, *autocoscienza*, the practice of doing) was in no way liberating: on the contrary, if the need for approval prevails, if women dare not subject their desires to the judgment of other women, female desire will wane. Unable to judge the various opinions, the Parma feminists could not say why a women's library was a better project of doing than any other project. The Milan Collective comments, "What remains, as a foundation, is that we like doing this" (*SD*, 95). That the foundation is nothing but a desire (rather than, say, a well-grounded argument) is not the political problem, as far as the collective is concerned. "But a desire that is exhibited along with the fear of judging and being judged generates a feeling of superfluousness that damages the foundation [which is desire]." What remains is little more than a female desire which is hither and thither, "without ever attaching itself to anything" (ibid.). Unable to "force female desire out of its reticence and induce it to put itself at stake" (ibid.), let itself be judged, the politics of doing had created the spaces in which different desires could in principle be expressed, only to be leveled by the taboo on judgment. That failure would lead the Italians to put something at stake: they broke with the logic of equality and discovered the political value of disparity.

Discovering Disparity

Chapter 4 of *Sexual Difference* describes the turning point in the collective's history. It opens with a section titled "From women's literature, the first figures of freedom" and relates the "story of the Yellow Catalogue [*Catalogo giallo*]—because of the color of its cover, this was the name given to a pamphlet entitled *Le madri di tutti noi* [The Mothers of Us All] published in 1982 by the Milan Bookstore and the Parma Library." This pamphlet "is about disparity, about the simple fact that women are not equals even among themselves, and about the possible social interpretation of this fact by women themselves" (*SD*, 108). In terms of its project, "the Yellow Catalogue was unlike others of the kind because it privileged literary writing, especially novels, and because it took the reader's side" (*SD*, 109). It was focused, in other words, not on the artistic genius who produces the creative work, but on the readers who judge it.

Although it was expected that this engagement with women's literature would reveal a distinctive literary form, it turned out that what could have been seen as "an example of women's contribution to human culture" was of almost no interest. The search was for something that could not be defined, that had no name: "what human culture does not know about the difference in being a woman" (*SD*, 109). With "the need to find a meaning for the things that concerned us most directly" (*SD*, 110) and nothing but a vague sense "that women writers could help us in one way or another," writes the collective,

requires the introduction of a third term or party, a *tertium comparationis*, which, as Gerhard writes, "can never simply be 'man' or the status of men; it must be a standard that is fair to both genders."[39]

In the next two chapters we shall see what it means to think about equality as a problem of political judgment rather than, say, "argumentative logic." For now, however, we might consider how thinking about a practice of equality as requiring a third term allows us to make sense of what appears to be the profoundly anti-egalitarian practice of disparity. Although the Italians do not really see the possibility of refiguring equality such that it would not reduce to sameness, that is exactly what their practice of disparity achieves: it enables the development of the third term just mentioned.

In the Italians' account, the third term begins to emerge in relation to women authors, like Austen, "who . . . were named 'prototypes.'" The purpose of these prototypes was "to characterize the position of that which comes first and offers us the means by which to know and differentiate ourselves" (*SD*, 112). It would not be difficult to see the prototype as an iconic female figure whose stature no flesh-and-blood woman could begin to approach. Keenly aware of this problem, the Italians observe that the figure of the superior woman is the other face of the iconic figure of the victim, with which no flesh-and-blood woman could identify, and both are symptomatic of a missing "female social economy." Both of these ways of symbolizing (horizontal and vertical) relations among women indicate that they are no real relations at all, but only an unmediated link to what is the same (and wretched) or what is different (and superior). Neither of these iconographic positions (the victim or the superior woman) is inhabitable by flesh-and-blood women themselves.

The tendency to idealize, then, is one practice of disparity that is *not* enabling for feminism. The possibility of giving oneself value required a power, a "female plus" (*SD*, 127), that valorized *both* the female gender and the individual woman in her difference from other women. What the Italians were looking for, and found initially in prototypes, is better understood as an example with which to relate particulars, rather than a rule (or ideal type) with which to subsume them. Unlike the superior women that the politics of equality has also, however paradoxically, generated, prototypes authorize those women who authorize them: "Attributing authority and value to another woman with regard to the world was the means of giving authority and value to oneself. . . : 'In defending [Gertrude] Stein, I am defending myself'" (*SD*, 112). If what authorizes a feminist practice of freedom is nothing but women themselves, as the Milan Collective declares, then such a figure must remain

part of the practice, that is, subject to judgment, argument, and debat Otherwise, it threatens to become a transcendent source of authority th denies freedom. That risk was minimized when it came to prototype which were numerous (Austen, Stein, Morante, Woolf, Bachman, Plat etc.). But what happens when the "gendered figure of origin" and fre dom is named "the symbolic mother" (*SD*, 113)?

On the face of it, the "symbolic mother" as a figure of missing fema authority can seem like the "female duplicate of the authority of male or gin" (*SD*, 111). How could the figure of the *mother* possibly organize feminist practice of freedom? Wouldn't this figure symbolize the relatio of kinship that have crippled feminism from the start? Taking up Lu Irigaray's claim that within masculinist cultures the relationship betwee mothers and daughters is missing ("the mother always carries a son in h arms"), the collective asserts that "there are no forms of symbolic bon between a woman and the woman greater than herself, who is her mothe Only a natural relationship exists between the two, variously overla with affect . . . but without symbolic translation" (*SD*, 127). The very ide of a *symbolic* mother, therefore, could be at once radical—whatever mother is in masculinist cultures, she is never symbolic—and ordinary.

A symbolic mother is a gendered figure of origin around which t organize a feminist practice of freedom, a new social contract. A centr problem identified by the Italian feminists, we recall, is "the real difficul which a woman encounters in acknowledging the immensity of a desi she has no way of putting forward, openly, in full sight of society, wit out the disguise of some female virtue" (*SD*, 115). In politics this disgui takes the form of claims to make society better. These claims resona within the larger frame of the social question, which requires that wome express their political demands in the language of social utility or exp diency. Some of the Italian feminists, for example, were unable to disti guish "a new, freer social interpretation of female difference" from wh "is consonant with the social good." Confusing "being different wit being better," they "objected that this plus is not qualified; it does n express positive values, and hence it cannot qualify, give value, either t female difference or to a female politics" (*SD*, 124). Caught in the eco omy of use, they are still trying to provide a raison d'être for the femal sex and for female freedom: the betterment of society. They cannot ima ine a social practice that seeks the freedom of women without investin it with "some positive social quality" (*SD*, 125). The Milan Collectiv responds: "[T]he female plus expresses nothing but the concept of th irreducible difference owing to which being a woman is neither subo dinable nor assimilable to being a man" (*SD*, 124). That is to say,

following rules, exemplified in syllogistic reasoning, are of no use in aesthetic or political judgments, where we are faced with the particular qua particular. As Arendt puts it, "If you say, 'What a beautiful rose!' you do not arrive at this judgment by first saying, 'All roses are beautiful, this flower is a rose, hence this rose is beautiful.'"[34] Likewise, you do not move in the other direction, as it were, from the judgment "*This* rose is beautiful" to a general claim about other roses or all roses. The same goes for the political realm, argues Arendt, in which we are confronted with the singularity of objects and events.

It might be merely fortuitous that the discovery of disparity among women emerged only once the Milan Collective had turned to works of literature. Or it might be significant: in the expression of preferences and exchange of opinions about authors like Austen, one discovers the "it-pleases-or-displeases-me," which has no anchor in truth (or truth discourse: ideology) and cannot in this way compel agreement. Unlike ideological (syllogistic) reasoning (for example, all women authors are wonderful, this author is a woman, hence this woman author is wonderful), which secures the monologic of a "proper" feminist viewpoint and with it the unity of the group, judgments of taste reveal differences of opinion that cannot be subsumed under a rule. In the practice of (aesthetic or reflective) judgment, one becomes aware of the existence of *significant* differences among women. This awareness positions others to become genuine interlocutors: those women who have preferences like and unlike mine, who see from a standpoint not identical with my own, and whose opinions I am called upon to judge or by whom my own dearly held opinions will be judged and perhaps unsettled even to the point of crisis.

Discovering differences of opinion that cannot be adjudicated by a rule, the Milanese discovered disparity. They discovered that they were not equal among themselves. But to discover disparity is one thing, to practice it is another. There are, after all, numerous forms of social disparity, many of them unjust. "The practice of disparity is a necessary test," they declare. "It will make it possible to distinguish unjust forms of disparity from others which are in any case unavoidable" (*SD*, 132).[35] The practice of disparity is a necessary first step for "making the difference speak in free social forms" (ibid.). Although we do not yet know what this practice would look like, we might nonetheless wonder how it could be consistent with the democratic ideals of feminism.

Let us return to the problem of equality. The Milan feminists take up the deeply skeptical view of equality held by many third-wave Western feminists, including American feminists who have by and large accepted a rights-based legal strategy of social change. Apart from the obvious gap

that exists between the ideal of equality and the reality of pervasive discrimination, the principle of equality appears to establish sameness, in relation both to men and to other women, as the condition for women's political and social rights. But sameness is not what the political principle of equality is supposed to achieve, for sameness, observes Arendt, is "antipolitical." Arendt writes, "The equality attending the public realm is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being 'equalized' in certain respects and for specific purposes. As such, the equalizing factor arises not from human 'nature' [nor from man's] but from outside."[36]

In historical practice, however, the political principle of equality has tended to level all social and sexual differences and to force the assimilation of women to a masculine standard disguised as neutral and universal. But this way of thinking about equality, as Ute Gerhard reminds us, is based on the Aristotelian principle of "treating likes alike." Like Arendt, Gerhard inspires us to think about equality as a political principle that must *relate* different beings, not make them the same. Rather than think about equality as sameness or identity ($a = a$), she argues, we can think of it as a relational concept ($a = b$). Seen as relational rather than fixed or static, equality is a political principle that, far from denying differences (only likes can be treated alike), takes them for granted as things that must be brought into a certain kind of relation with each other (unlikes must be treated alike) for specific purposes. The important question becomes, "who or what decides which characteristics or particularities suggest comparison or equal treatment?"[37] This is a political question, argues Gerhard, the answer to which "cannot be determined at the level of doctrinal formulas or 'argumentative logic'; it can only be determined by taking into account the conditions under which the question of equality is posed."[38]

This simple but decisive move entails a change in perspective, for now we are asked to focus not on the (social) objects being compared (for example, a and b; men and women), as if they alone determined the standard of comparison in a logical operation, but on the subjects making the comparison, their capacity for reflection (that is, thinking the particular in the absence of a universal) and the sociohistorical context of their judgments. To emphasize the importance of standpoint and context to feminist accounts of equality, in other words, is to consider the specific circumstances in which a claim is made as well as the social location both of those who make it and those who decide what shall count as the standard of comparison. If that standard does not inhere in the object itself, then every claim to equality calls for a political judgment, that is, a judgment that relates particulars (things which are unlike). A feminist practice of equality, then,

[we] began with our choice of women writers and novels to be read. We
immediately decided to read our favorites. It was the only decision pos-
sible, since more objective criteria [that is, rules of aesthetic judgment]
did not exist. But it was not the innocent decision it seemed to us at that
moment. . . . The fact of one woman's preference for another woman
outside a relationship of friendship or love was not something for which
we were prepared. (*SD*, 109)

On the contrary, such preferences were virtually forbidden insofar as they revealed differences that were dangerous to the identity of the group. "The act of preferring, with its latent 'harmfulness,' was destined to unbalance that schema of female politics which kept every female desire in a tormenting equilibrium, as if crucified." Not all readers had the same preferences, some had no preferences, and some had strong preferences. "It was precisely this circumstance, which one would tend not to consider at all, that brought about the crisis" (*SD*, 110). The crisis broke out in the midst of a quarrel over the figure of Jane Austen.

> This happened when the number one opponent of Austen, in the mid-
> dle of a discussion where she was again in the minority . . . stopped argu-
> ing and said, as if she were making an observation: "The mothers [who
> prevent their daughter's freedom] are not the writers; they are really here
> among us, because we are not all equals here." When this simple truth
> was put into words that first time, the words had a horrible sound. . . .
> But their meaning was crystal-clear. No one doubted that they were
> true. . . . It did not take long to accept what for years we had never reg-
> istered, though we had it in front of our eyes. We were not equal, we
> had never been equal, and we immediately discovered that we had no
> reason to think we were. The horror of the first moment changed into
> a general feeling of being a bit freer. (*SD*, 110–11)

Why would a sense of freedom result from the discovery of inequality among women? And, further, what if anything does this have to do with the practice of making aesthetic judgments?

The moment of being a bit freer is initially associated with liberation, the collective observes, from "an ideal of equality which neither grew out of our history nor corresponded to our interests" (*SD*, 111). This ideal crushed every nonrecriminative female desire (that is, not expressive of an **injury identity**) and articulation of difference in the name of a common-**ality based on mem**bership in an oppressed group. Because of this neu-[illegible] ideal. "[W]e had forced ourselves to imagine what did not

exist and had forbidden ourselves to take advantage of what did. As if ou
problem had ever been that of finding a remedy for a possible rival
between strong competing desires. Our problem was, on the contrary, th
uncertainty and the reticence of our desires, which were recognizab
underneath the so-called power conflicts between women as that whic
made them painful and endless" (*SD*, 111).

What did exist were differences of talents, abilities, and social positic
among women, which, if feminists had the political skills to deal wi
them, could enrich their practice even while also sometimes throwing
into crisis. What did exist were differences of taste, which were n
reducible to social differences. All women are not alike, not only becau
they are members of different social groups that divide them from eac
other—which is how recent American feminism has typically understoo
the idea of differences—but also because they have different likes and di
likes, which, though related in some way, are not exhausted by their men
bership in any particular social group whatsoever.

The debate over Austen made visible a mode of difference that is irr
ducible to social differences (for example, gender, race, class, sexualit
and that was occluded in the practice of doing. The "practice of doing
had generated no alternative to the representation of universal fema
wretchedness; not because feminists were blind to these differences, b
because they did not know how to deal with them, how to evaluate an
judge them. Lacking this political skill, they tended to suppress differenc
and deep conflicts of opinion. Perhaps they never developed this ski
speculates the Milan Collective,

> because they thought that in order to signify the female difference,
> order not to be assimilated by men, every woman had to be the same
> every other—more exactly, as every other woman in the movement.
> this way, diversity, quarrels, and different levels of consciousness cou
> exist among women, but not contradictions, or radical objections lil
> . . . "I don't care at all about the women who must deal with the pro
> lem of abortions." (*SD*, 69)

Without a space for strong conflicts or disagreements, there was r
space for strong desires and no possibility of genuine politics. At th
point in their history—each woman "without relation to the other tha
herself, female desire without interlocutor" (*SD*, 99)—the Milanese for
closed the need for judgment with "a feminist point of view": an "idec
ogy" or "a pre-constituted, ready-made discourse" which "no longer h
ties with reality" (*SD*, 85). Ideology provided the rules for judgment. B

This phrase, in its utter simplicity and multiple, quotidian articulations, symbolizes, however modestly, an exit from the impasse of feminism's freedom of the will. It symbolizes the transformation of the empty freedom of "I-will" into the worldly freedom of "I-can." To say or to hear "Go ahead," and *to act publicly* in accordance with that phrase, is to take leave of feminism's injury identity, its politics of victimization, without denying one's membership in a group called women. The woman who could not find herself represented in the image of "a homogenous, socially oppressed group," we recall, is easily tempted by that denial, caught in a fantasy of sovereignty. The woman "who does not know, does not want to acknowledge, that she needs her fellow women" (*SD*, 135) ends up "imprisoned in the realm of the petrified symbols of male power, in need of other women but incapable of negotiating with them for what she wants" (*SD*, 137).

Rereading this sentence now, we can see that acknowledging is not a mere synonym for knowing. From my knowing I owe a debt, it does not follow that I acknowledge I owe a debt—otherwise the relations among women would be different than they are (to paraphrase Stanley Cavell). "One could say [with Cavell]: Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.)"[42] That is why the debt to other women must be paid in a visible, public manner. It is not enough to carry silent knowledge of that debt around in my head: thoughts alone do not alter the texture of reality—actions do. Thus, the Milan Collective boldly declares, "Simple gratitude in the relation between women is what female freedom is practically founded on. Everything else, in theory as in practice, is either a consequence of that or has nothing to do with freedom. One woman who is grateful to another for giving her something is worth more for the liberation of the female sex than a group or a whole feminist movement in which this kind of gratitude is missing" (*SD*, 130). Gratitude is an expression not of hierarchy but reciprocity; it is a mutual acknowledgment of the nonsovereign conditions of female freedom, the imbrication of claims to community and claims to individuality. The woman who refuses to pay this debt "will never be free," for "[t]he world will always be for her a thing thought up and governed by others from whom she can extort one advantage or another, but in the forever subordinate position of one who petitions" (*SD*, 129). For a woman, then, the only way out of the apparent impasse of the logic of reparation or woundedness as the condition of modern political subjectivity described by Wendy Brown is to acknowledge what one owes to other women, to acknowledge, that is, community.

"The female price for freedom is the payment of this symbolic debt" (*SI* 129), the collective claims. And such acknowledgment can never obta if a woman relinquishes her ability to make judgments or her claim individuality.

When read as a *political* claim to membership in a genealogy women, sexual difference is a means of reconciling oneself to what h been given without in any way condoning how it has been given. It is a attempt to escape the *ressentiment* that attends the wish to rid oneself "the 'causal' datum of being female," to will backwards. "In the socia symbolic order thought up by men, to be born a woman is an accide that conditions all of life. She has no personal destiny in life; there is n way for her to make freedom and necessity coincide. For her necessit means to submit to the social use of her anatomy (maternity, virginit prostitution . . .), while her freedom merely means to evade all of this (*SD*, 127–28). Sexual difference is not "the factual premise that ou belonging to social life is determined by our belonging to its female com ponent." It is the "political practice . . . [that] transform[s] this factu premise from a social cause of unfreedom into the principle of our free dom" (*SD*, 122). "In other words, a woman is free when she chooses t signify her belonging to the female sex, well knowing it is not an objec of choice" (*SD*, 138).

The politics of sexual difference as the Italians understand it, then would transform the I-will that remains bound to necessity, caught in fantasy of self-sovereignty, and filled with *ressentiment*, into the I-can tha experiences freedom in a community at once conditioned and chosen: " social contract . . . based on the principle of gratitude and exchange wit other women" (*SD*, 142). This new social contract is based not on a se of rationally agreed upon principles that are supposedly apodictic but o a *promise* to make good a claim to community and acknowledge a debt Articulated around a figure (the prototypes, the symbolic mother), th basis of this kind of feminist community is not a compact rooted in cer tain truths that would bind its signers and their posterity forever, an whose legitimacy reduces to little more than what the social contract theorists tactfully called "tacit consent." Sexual difference has no existence whatsoever, and no guarantee, apart from the daily practice, in a visible and public manner, of acknowledging the women who come before one and who say, "Go ahead." It is a quotidian political practice of making and keeping promises.

The ability to make and keep promises, as Arendt argues, is crucial to a nonsovereign practice of freedom. For this ability attenuates the unpredictability that characterizes human action, the fact that we act in ways

expresses no social value, no social use whatsoever, but only a desire for freedom that seeks no reparation and cannot be subsumed under the banner of equality.

The new social contract called feminism "must give a foundation to women's freedom" (*SD*, 32), declares the collective. This foundation is no ground composed of rational premises upon which all would-be members of the feminist community would have to agree. Organized around a trope, the symbolic mother, this contract authorizes women in their desire for freedom not by appealing to rationality or timeless principles, but presenting the appeal "in the context of political practice through the words and gestures of daily life, in one's relationship with this or that woman, in the quickening of desires, in proximity to everyday things" (*SD*, 111). No totem like the primal father—who must be killed in the "other" story of the social contract, whose murder is the condition of relations of political equality among men, and whose immanent return haunts them—the symbolic mother, the collective writes, comes "to indicate the source of social legitimacy for female difference, as concretely embodied for a woman by those women who validate her desire and support it in the face of the world" (*SD*, 107). That is another way of saying that this figure of gendered mediation cannot be an absolute: it will have no existence apart from the material and symbolic practice of free relations among women.

A Political Practice of Sexual Difference

The name of the practice that puts the plus of female origin, the symbolic mother, into circulation, so that it may become collective wealth, is *affidamento*, or entrustment. Discovering *examples* (not rules) of entrustment in the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi, in the relationship between the poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961) and Bryher (a pseudonym) in Greece (as described in H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud*), in the friendship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, among other exemplary relationships between women, the collective declares, "[T]he entrustment of one woman to another is the stuff of political struggle" (*SD*, 31).

In its most crystallized form, the person to whom one entrusts oneself is the woman (or women) who supports one's desire for freedom, who says, "Go on" (*SD*, 33–34).[40] "It [this experience] gave H. D. the feeling that she had a poetic vocation, together with the certainty that all this was possible because of the woman who was beside her and who, at the decisive moment, said to her: 'Go on'" (*SD*, 33–34). "Clearly, we do not think that to give oneself authority is an individual act. Authority is received originally from another human being who is in the position to give it, who has the authority to give it. But she cannot have it if the person who needs to receive it does not acknowledge it in her. 'Go ahead,' answers Bryher to H. D. [in Hilda Doolittle's *Tribute to Freud*], giving back to her, in the form of symbolic authorization, the maternal authority which H. D. had attributed to her by turning to her" (*SD*, 126). In contrast with the idealized figures of early feminism, the vertical relation of entrustment is also a horizontal, reciprocal one: the authority that legitimates women's desires is nothing without the acknowledgment that confers it. (Besides, "the woman who is truly respectful of entrenched hierarchy . . . entrusts herself to a man or to the male enterprise" [*SD*, 133].)[41]

Entrustment is not a private matter: "That is why we say that the relation of female entrustment is a social relation, and we make it the content of a political project. The symbolic debt toward the mother [that is, the women who support us in our desires] must be paid in a visible, public, social manner before the eyes of everyone, women and men" (*SD*, 130). Entrustment is not sisterhood: "Entrusting oneself is not looking to another woman as in a mirror to find in her a confirmation of what one actually is. . . . In the relation of entrustment, a woman offers to another woman the measure of what she can do and what in her wants to come into existence" (*SD*, 149). Entrustment is not a rule or a timeless political form: "There probably are, or will be, other possible answers, better ones, for that matter" (*SD*, 121). Entrustment is a contingent political practice, which developed as one possible response to women's symbolic homelessness and their lack of relation among themselves, in Milan, between 1966 and 1988. It is a contingently necessary practice, for it could have been otherwise, yet it answered to a need that was experienced as necessary: the absence of authoritative interlocutors.

If "feminism must give a foundation [of sorts] to women's freedom" (*SD*, 32), but no rational or social justifications for that freedom (for example, the betterment of society, and so on), entrustment is that foundation. In the practice of entrustment, "female freedom is guaranteed by [nothing other than] women themselves" (*SD*, 142). What authorizes a woman's actions and claims, then, is neither an absolute, a figure whose authority is self-evident and requires no agreement or action on one's own part, nor (as second-wave feminist theory tended to assume) a political epistemology, a defense of political claims as truth claims. Rather, it is the women whose desire for freedom one authorizes and who in turn authorize one's own desire, daily—who say, "Go ahead."

whose consequences we can never foretell with certainty. The faculty of promising, she writes,

> is . . . the only alternative to a mastery which relies on domination of one's self and rule over others; it corresponds exactly to the existence of a freedom which was given under the condition of non-sovereignty. The danger and the advantage inherent in all bodies politic that rely on contracts and treaties is that they, unlike those that rely on rule and sovereignty, leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are, using them merely as the medium, as it were, into which certain islands of predictability are thrown and in which certain guideposts of reliability are erected. The moment promises lose their character as isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty, that is, when this faculty is misused to cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions, they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating.[43]

The faculty of making and keeping promises, far from a way of overcoming contingency and unpredictability, is a way of making them more bearable, lest we be tempted "to turn away with despair from the realm of public affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom."[44] Like a "force" that keeps people together even when they are not acting in concert, promising gives sovereignty a certain limited reality. The very peculiar kind of "sovereignty of a body of people bound and kept together, not by an identical will which somehow magically inspires them all [as contract theorists like Rousseau held], but by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding," writes Arendt, is far superior to the supposed sovereignty of "those who are completely free [in the traditional sense], unbound by any promises and unkept by any purpose."[45] It is the limited sovereignty of an I-can achieved through the promises that bind rather than the illusory sovereignty of the I-will that acknowledges no debt or community at all.

The ability to make and keep promises transforms the bare fact of differences among women into something politically significant: authoritative interlocutors. It transforms a notion of equality based on the "unfortunate mirroring among women" (*SD*, 126) into something more dangerous but less spectral—reciprocity. Insisting that a feminist transform what she knows into what she acknowledges, the Milan Collective brazenly asserts, "It is more important to have authoritative female interlocutors than to have recognized rights." Does that mean feminism, once

it has created authoritative interlocutors, should no longer be concerned with rights?

Refiguring Rights

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that *Sexual Difference* may have been ignored by American feminists because, when read through the frame of the subject question, the text could easily be mistaken for an argument about an essential sexed difference. We are now in a better position to see why that critique is off the mark. In the resolutely political formulation given by the Italian feminists, sexual difference is a practice of freedom centered not on the production or destruction of an identity, but on entrustment and acknowledgment, the making and keeping of promises, and the capacity to make judgments. Focused on world-building, on feminism as a new social contract, the political practice of sexual difference seeks to bring about a change in the texture of worldly reality. When understood as the creation of a political space—that is, a worldly in-between defined by relations of distance and proximity, organized around figures of the newly thinkable (for example, "the symbolic mother"), and subject to reorganization and judgment—sexual difference does not apply across the board to all women qua women (however one defines membership in that class). It only applies to those individuals who make a political claim to membership in a genealogy of women. That political claim is the acknowledgment of a debt, that is, the signification of the nonsovereign conditions of female freedom in a public, visible manner.

But even if we grant that *Sexual Difference* is not an essentialist text—or, at the very least, not *simply* so—there is yet another concern that might lead us to discount it: namely, what appears to be a wholesale rejection of feminism's historical struggle for equal rights. Indeed, within our rights-based framework, *Sexual Difference*—leaving aside the scare of essentialism—was almost destined to be received as a feminist text non grata. The politics of freedom (sexual difference) *versus* the politics of equality (sexual indifference) could easily be read as a zero-sum game: equal rights *or* female freedom. Deeply critical of the former, the Milanese seemed to choose the latter, eliminating the possibility of both.

There is, however, another way of reading this text, one which foregrounds the practice of freedom as the condition of claiming one's rights and the claiming of rights as a practice of freedom. "The politics of sexual difference does not come *after* the equality of the sexes has been

achieved; it *replaces* the much-too-abstract and often contradictory politics of equality in order to fight against every kind of sexist oppression from the place of an achieved female freedom, founded on social relations between women" (*SD*, 145; second italics added). Although we could take that sentence to mean that the politics of equality is a dead end for feminism, we could also interpret it to mean this: The belief that the politics of sexual difference comes *after* the equality of the sexes has been achieved is mistaken, not because the politics of equality ought to be *replaced* by the politics of sexual difference, but because the former will remain substantively elusive in actual practice without the latter.

When read through the lens of the subject question, this alternative interpretation would appear to be a claim about the need to inscribe sexual difference in law. And Luce Irigaray, probably the most important feminist thinker for the Italians, has argued just that.[46] But both Irigaray and the Milanese also call our attention to another feature of rights, namely their tendency to deteriorate into dead legal artifacts and even dangerous political instruments when they lose their connection to practices of freedom.[47] Indeed, the deeply juridical and institutional orientation of much contemporary feminism, like that of American society at large, shows how we have lost track of the idea of political freedom which the radical claim to rights once encoded. If, as Irigaray argues, women require sexed civil rights, that is because those rights, like equal rights, are a demand for both participation (not mere representation, political or juridical) and the entrustment of citizens to one another ("not to some leader, male or female").[48] When rights become institutionalized, we tend to forget their origin in a radical, ungrounded claim to freedom, to nondomination and to equal participation in public affairs. We tend to become invested in securing them as such, rather than in maintaining our investment in the sometimes less stable practices that created them in the first place. The call for the return to civil rights is a reminder of that origin: political struggles such as feminism, Irigaray writes, "did not wait for legal judgment, nor even that of state representation, in demanding changes to rights."[49] Freedom lies in the exchange of words and deeds that may or may not issue in a demand for rights. Freedom does not consist, not as such, in the political representation that follows from the successful institutionalization of such a demand.

There is an ineliminable tension between the political representation that rights secure and political freedom, argues both Irigaray and the Milan Collective. Feminism is a deeply diverse political movement, organized around a gender rich in diversity, which no notion of "women in general" can possibly represent (*SD*, 74). This is no more an argument

against representation than it is one against rights, being, rather, a shar
reminder that it is deeply mistaken for feminists to confuse the experienc
of freedom with representation and the institutionalization of rights. Th
Italians have shown us the cost, for women, of having representation an
institutionalized rights without genuine political freedom. In the absenc
of freedom, equal rights tend to come at the cost of assimilation or wha
Irigaray calls the "law of the same." But equality, as Arendt reminds us
is a political and therefore humanly constructed principle that ought t
support the experience of human plurality, that is, the experience of mov
ing freely among one's peers, hearing and judging different points of view
To foreground freedom and the subjective in-between that sustains it, a
both Arendt and the collective in their different ways do, is to reject nc
equal representation or equal rights, but rather a notion of both tha
seems to demand sameness because it has hardened into an abstract prir
ciple or rule and thus detached from its origin in practices of freedom.

When brought back into relation with their origin in practices of free
dom, rights may be used to do more than affirm *what* we already are (tha
is, members of various groups with ascribed social identities). They ca
and should affirm our desire to be something more. Understood in th
way, rights are political instruments of freedom that say, "Go ahead." "
is more important to have authoritative female interlocutors than to hav
recognized rights," then, not because rights don't matter, but because the
only matter if we can claim them, use them, move beyond them to ne
claims and new freedoms. They only matter if, like those interlocutor
they inspire us to go ahead. Indeed, rights, as Ute Gerhard argues, "ca
not be imported or prescribed; they apply only if the people involved a
in a position to claim or defend them as rights."[50] The creation of such
position, the Milan Collective shows, assumes practices of freedom,
worldly in-between, and authoritative interlocutors. "An authoritati
interlocutor is necessary if one wants to articulate one's own life accor
ing to a project of freedom and thus make sense of [produce meaning fo
one's being a woman [a contingent fact]," something "[n]either laws n
rights can give" (*SD*, 31). Rights claims addressed to the state, in oth
words, can never substitute for the political claims feminists address
one another.[51]

Thus, when read not through the subject question but through t
practice of freedom that was its original home and aspiration, a claim
rights is not—or not simply—a demand for recognition of *what* one
it is a demand for acknowledgment of *who* one is, and, more importa
of who one might *become*. So understood, equal rights are not legal ar
facts that can be applied in a rule-like fashion to all subjects who fall in

a certain identity category. Rights are not things to be distributed from above, but a demand for something more made from below.[52] Rights are not things, but relationships. As such they are not something we *have* but something we *do*, they not only constrain but also enable us in our relations with others.

To think about rights in this way is to question accounts of women's historical claims to equal rights which foreground claims to equality over practices of freedom. Perhaps feminists do well to turn the story around, recalling rights' original home in a radical claim to freedom. This claim is irreducible to the struggle for women's liberation, which is typically construed in social terms and as something that rights are taken to encode. There is nothing inevitable about the extension of rights to disenfranchised groups like women, for the claim to rights as a practice of freedom does not flow necessarily from the liberation from oppression. Rather, freedom, like rights, is something that can only be guaranteed by those people who claim it. As the Milan Collective observes,

> For female freedom to be guaranteed by itself—without which it is not freedom, but emancipation, as it is rightly called—it is indispensable that the historical circumstances which favored our [women's] liberation from the outside be rendered superfluous, so to speak; that they be translated into, or replaced by, a freedom which reproduces itself parthenogenetically and produces the material conditions necessary for its exercise. If, as has been written, it is true that the pasteurization of milk contributed more to giving women freedom than did the struggle of the "suffragettes," we must act so as never again to let it be true. Similarly for medicine, which reduced infant mortality and invented contraceptives . . . or for the progress in societal life which induced men no longer to consider women inferior beings. *Where does this freedom come from that arrives in a bottle of pasteurized milk?* What roots has the flower which is offered to me as the sign of a superior civilization? Who am I if my freedom lies in this bottle, in this flower someone placed in my hand? (*SD*, 144; emphasis added)

Neither bestowed nor inherited, freedom can only be claimed by women themselves. And what will secure it, ground it, justify it? "[F]emale freedom is guaranteed by women themselves" (*SD*, 142).[53]

What appeared to be the Milan Collective's deep skepticism if not outright rejection of rights and the politics of representation has allowed us to see the limits of a principle of equality that is not part of a practice of freedom. The Milan feminists needed, perhaps, to state their case in such

uncompromising terms in order to open our eyes—which tend increasingly to be blinded by juridical and state-centered answers to political questions—to what women can and cannot achieve in their struggle for, and exercise of, rights. Whether rights can be part of such a practice must be decided in context and in relation to the particulars of the case in which rights are at stake. Insofar as the demand for rights is a claim to equality, it is not a demand based simply on argumentative logic, for such a demand can only be answered by taking into account the contingent conditions under which it is posed. Demands for equality need not—as logic would have it—exclude demands for difference. As Gerhard argues, once we see that equality is neither a firm standard (with man as the measure) nor an absolute principle (a logical truth we are bound to accept) but a dynamic, evolving concept that entails the articulation of two terms by means of a third, a *tertium comparationis*, we will see that the precise meaning of equality depends on what *we hold*. Indeed, deciding what shall count and what not for the means of comparison is "by no means a logical operation, but is instead the result of an assessment, a value judgment," writes Gerhard, and this will vary on the basis of time and place. Irreducibly contingent, "the respect in which people are to be considered equal depends on the 'reflective standpoint.'" It is neither a logical matter nor (simply) a legal problem but rather "a political issue."[54] What rights call for, then, is neither our blind acceptance nor rejection, but rather, our political judgment. In the next chapter we will see what this faculty of (reflective) judgment is and why it is crucial to a freedom-centered feminism.

75. Ibid., 100.

76. Rosi Braidotti with Judith Butler, "Feminism by Any Other Name," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2–3 (Summer–Fall 1994): 27–61; quotation is from p. 51.

CHAPTER THREE

1. According to Teresa de Lauretis, co-translator of *Sexual Difference*, "Italian feminism is not well known in North America. With very few, very recent exceptions, its critical texts are not translated, discussed, or cited by American and other anglophone feminists." "The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy: An Introductory Essay," in The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, trans. Patricia Cigogna and Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990 [*Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987)]), 1–21; quotation is from p. 1. Hereafter cited as *SD* in the text and notes with page references. This fact was not altered by the English translation of *Sexual Difference*. In the 1980s and 1990s, the situation looked rather different in Europe, where Italian feminism was not, as it is in the United States, equated with—or, as Rosi Braidotti complains, reduced to—that of "the women's bookshop in Milan and the Diotima collective in Verona," but hotly debated. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 209. In Germany, for example, a wide array of responses to the Italian concept of sexual difference appeared. For a good review of the debates see Heike Kahlert, *Weibliche Subjektivität: Geschlechterdifferenz und Demokratie in der Diskussion* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1996); Britta Kroker, *Sexuelle Differenz: Einführung in ein feministisches Theorem* (Pfaffenweiler, Germany: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1994).

2. de Lauretis, "Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy," 12. As de Lauretis explains, this claim

> is bound to appear reductive, idealist, essentialist, even reactionary unless one keeps in mind, first, the paradox on which it is founded and which has been the first task of feminist thought to disentangle—the paradox of woman, a being that is at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and yet unrepresented; a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled. And hence the task of feminist philosophy: "thinking sexual difference through the categories of a thought that is supported by the non-thinking of difference itself."

This paradox, she continues, has an explicitly political dimension: it "is not solely discursive, but is grounded in a real contradiction for women in a world designed and governed by men," and only feminism has sought fit to address this contradiction (ibid., 12). It is the Milan Collective's concern to bring together the symbolic and political aspects of the paradox as it bears on the question of freedom that makes the absence of their text in American feminist discussions both curious and disturbing.

3. For a powerful critique of the Western conception of freedom, see Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 143–72.

4. In the introduction I argued that feminism has been caught in two different but related frames for thinking about freedom: the "social question" and the "subject question." Within the frame of the social question, feminist claims to freedom get articulated in terms of expediency and social utility (e.g., women as free citizens will make society better). Within the frame of the subject question, these claims get articulated in terms of problems associated with subject formation (e.g., the project of freedom is to transform femininity as a compulsory social identity). Both frames, I argue, take for granted a means-ends conception of politics that excludes the possibility of freedom as action.

5. The Milan Collective is deeply indebted to Luce Irigaray's attempt to inscribe sexual difference into culture, society, and law. Irigaray's more recent work on changes in the Italian civil code has not dispelled the concern that she continues to rank the difference between the sexes as somehow of a different order than other forms of difference. In *Democracy Begins between Two* she writes, "Sexual difference is perhaps the hardest way, but it is also the key, to achieving civil coexistence between other forms of difference. An apprenticeship in respect for the other at the most instinctive, emotional level, leads to peaceful coexistence with all forms of otherness." Such claims are rooted in Irigaray's belief that the fantasy of sovereignty that, in her view, continues to pose the greatest threat to humanity and to nature is sustained primarily by the denial of sexual difference, by the exclusion of the feminine as the condition of the masculine subject. That is why sexual difference is "the most radical limit opposed to the totalizing will of the subject." Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins between Two*, trans. Kirsteen Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12, 6. A similar worry arises in her more recent writing on the relationship of cultures in *Entre Orient et Occident: De la singularité à la communauté* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1999). For a critique of the quasi-transcendental idea of sexual difference in Lacanian-informed theory, see Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); "Competing Universalities," in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2000), 136–81, esp. 143–48. Butler argues that, "as a transcendental claim, sexual difference should be rigorously opposed by anyone who wants to guard against a theory that would prescribe in advance what kinds of sexual arrangements will and will not be permitted in intelligible culture" (ibid., 148). I agree. The question is, can we imagine another claim to sexual difference that would not be transcendental, but rather political and therefore contingent and contestable?

6. See the issue on "The Essential Difference: Another Look at Essentialism," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 1 (Summer 1989). Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 9–20; quotation is from p. 13.

7. For a good overview of what is at stake in this debate, see Rosi Braidotti with Judith Butler, interview, "Feminism by Any Other Name," *differences* 6, nos. 2 and 3 (Summer–Fall 1994): 27–61.

8. For a good example of these two ways of framing sexual difference, see the

essays by Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*.

9. *Sexual Difference* does not pretend to offer a master theory of feminist world-building that could be applied in rule-like fashion to other contexts or cultures. "[P]utting a political practice into words," recounting the emergence of a "genealogy of women . . . who were legitimized by referring to their female origin," the text relates an experience that is "only one of the many historical vicissitudes of the fragile concept of woman" (*SD*, 25).

10. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988). According to Pateman, the classic tale of the social contract cannot accommodate the demands of feminists, for there is no way to add women to a pact that was made (albeit metaphorically) in their absence and is premised (historically) on their exclusion: "to begin to create a free society in which women are autonomous citizens, the story must be cast aside" (ibid., 220).

11. Luce Irigaray, "Equal or Different," in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 30–33; quotation is from p. 32.

12. For an account of the occlusion of sexual difference in political thought, see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992). For an account of its occlusion in law, see Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography, and Sexual Harrassment* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

13. As I argue elsewhere,

> The difference versus sameness debate tends to assume that equality claims confront and are at odds with claims about difference. We are thus faced with an either/or proposition: to claim equality is to eliminate difference, and vice versa. . . . [Ute] Gerhard argues that equality claims do not (simply) eliminate difference but (also) articulate it, that is, they shape what will count as socially and politically significant difference. Equality claims, in other words, do not confront and oppose a static field of already existing differences; they transform socially recognized differences of sex and gender into politically meaningful ones that are contestable and thus subject to change, and, further, they bring into existence new social differences which, in turn, may be transformed into political ones.

Linda M. G. Zerilli, foreword to Ute Gerhard, *Debating Women's Equality: Toward a Feminist Theory of Law from a Feminist Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), ix–xiv; extract is from p. xi.

14. The locus classicus of the feminist argument for equality and against difference is Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

15. Refusing this choice, Joan Scott holds that feminism is characterized by a paradox—the need both to accept and to refuse "sexual difference"—that cannot be solved, but only accepted as "the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history." Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3–4. Likewise, Nancy Cott argues that "feminism asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference." Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 5.

16. Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," 165.

17. Although it has roots in separatism, this social contract demands a political space which calls into question "the space of a presumed female authenticity, which has *no social consequences*" (*SD*, 79). Separatism is "a political form invented by feminism, . . . [which] functions as protection and shelter for an otherwise insignificant difference, and in the group one thinks in terms of an inside and an outside" (*SD*, 116). Separatism reproduces the sameness among women that feminism set out to combat.

18. Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Links Books, 1974), 49.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, bk. 2, "Von der Erlösung," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 4:179.

20. Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," 13; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), xii.

21. Brown, *States of Injury*, 7. "Ideals of freedom ordinarily emerge to vanquish their imagined immediate enemies, but in this move they frequently recycle and reinstate rather than transform the terms of domination that generated them" (ibid., 16).

22. Ibid., 73–74.

23. Think of feminism's figure of the "Third World Woman" as the embodiment of female wretchedness. For a vivid critique of this figure in Western feminist texts, see Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51–80.

24. Cynthia Eller rightly argues that the myth of a matriarchal past has been used in feminism to give women a sense of their own value in a society that despises femininity. But the myth of an ancient matriarchy works "to flatten out the differences among women; to exaggerate differences between women and men; and to hand women an identity that is symbolic, timeless, and archetypal, instead of giving them the freedom to craft new identities that suit their individual temperaments, skills, preferences, and moral and political commitments." Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of a Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 8.

25. "[W]omen are afraid of exposing their own desire," writes the collective, "and this induces them to think that others prevent them from desiring; thus they cultivate and manifest desire as that which is prohibited to them by an external authority. Female desire feels authorized to signify itself only in this negative form. Just think of the politics of equal rights, carried out by women who never put forward a will of their own but always and only claim what men have for themselves and is denied to women" (*SD*, 54).

26. In some respects, the direct work on the self, what the collective calls the practice of the unconscious, had taken up this task. "However, since it was confined to the female sex and aimed at the transformation of each individual woman, it provided political knowledge useful in developing relations between women, but not

between women as members of the social body." Although it was assumed "that relations would consequently change in that direction," it turned out that the changes in female experience, brought about in feminist practices, still had "no social inscription." An altered female desire still had no place in the social world, and had either to conform itself to traditional female roles or to become neuter and evade them (*SD*, 106–7).

27. Defined in terms of the subject question, it is difficult to imagine freedom as anything but paradoxical, unless one alters the nature of modern subjectivity. Accordingly, Brown's proffered solution, "the replacement—even the admixture—of the language of 'being' with 'wanting,'" takes the form of work on the self: "a recovery of the more expansive moments in the genealogy of identity formation, a recovery of the moment prior to its own foreclosure against its want, prior to the point at which its sovereign subjectivity is established through such foreclosure and through eternal repetition of its pain" (Brown, *States of Injury*, 76).

28. Although it had a more limited number of participants than *autocoscienza*, this practice was focused on female desire, and women's reluctance to express it in anything but negative form, i.e., reparation. Apart from "keeping feminism from turning into an ideology which served as a front for a politics of equality," the practice of the unconscious was deeply limited: it "tended to end up in interpretation and commentary instead of direct social change" (*SD*, 58).

29. These included not only women's bookstores in a variety of other Italian cities (Turin, Bologna, Florence, Pisa, and Cagliari), but also the founding of publishing houses, in Rome (Edizioni delle donne) and Milan (La Tartaruga), devoted exclusively to women's literature; women artist collectives (e.g., Via Beato Angelico); the Women's Library in Parma; and the "Virginia Woolf Cultural Center was established in Rome, offering regular courses and its own publications" (*SD*, 93).

30. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 182.

31. Ibid., 182–83.

32. Ibid., 183.

33. "In *autocoscienza*, its solution consisted in the possibility of reciprocal modification: juxtaposing women's differences is significant in itself, even without judgment, insofar as it induces each woman thus confronted to change. The practice of doing . . . balanced, on the one hand, the natural tolerance of things—I do this, you do that—with, on the other hand, the words that tell the meaning of things and that, in order to tell it, cannot avoid judging" (*SD*, 94).

34. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13.

35. "Disparity in social relations appears in intricately confused forms. Our need for others is confused with exploitation by those who have more power; unjust forms of disparity are valorized, or at least resist elimination by piggybacking on those differences which we feel are unavoidable and even beneficial in certain cases. . . . Among the productive forms of disparity, the one between adult and child is the only one which can be cited as an example in our culture, but others exist or could exist. There are forms of disparity, in beauty or health, which often cannot be eliminated; it is senseless to call them unjust even if they unfortunately provide the occasion for some of the worst injustices—think of the condition of the sick or of the old who do not have the power of money" (*SD*, 132).

36. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 215.

37. Ute Gerhard, *Debating Women's Equality*, 8. I make these points in the foreword, ix–xiv.

38. Ibid., 165.

39. Ibid.

40. In *Tribute to Freud*, H. D. relates what she told Freud in 1930 about her 1920 trip to Corfu with a young acquaintance, whom she calls "Bryher." At the center of the analysis, writes H. D., was a "series of shadow—or of light pictures I saw projected on the wall of a hotel bedroom in the Ionian island of Corfu, . . . [which] belong in the sense of quality and intensity of clarity and authenticity, to the same psychic category as the dream of the Princess, the Pharaoh's daughter, coming down the stairs." Continuing the story, H. D. writes,

> But it was no easy matter to sustain this mood [which became more and more intense], this "symptom" or [poetic] inspiration. And there I sat, and there is my friend Bryher . . . I say to Bryher, "There have been pictures here—I thought they were shadows at first, but they are light, not shadow. They are quite simple objects—but of course it's very strange. I can break away from them now, if I want—it's just a matter of concentrating—what do you think? Shall I stop? Shall I go on?" Bryher says without hesitation, "Go on." (*SD*, 33)

Tribute to Freud: Writing on the Wall—Advent (Boston: David R. Goodine, 1974; reprint, New York: New Directions, 1984).

41. The women who first put forward the idea of entrustment were criticized for supporting hierarchy among women. The collective remarks that the charge—which is deemed "laughable" for the reasons just outlined in my text—"originated from the difficulty of attributing authority, in acknowledging superiority without associating it with domination, with the sanction of power, with the form of hierarchy" (*SD*, 133).

42. Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 238–66; quotation is from p. 257.

43. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

44. Ibid., 233.

45. Ibid., 245.

46. See Luce Irigaray, "Towards a Citizenship of the European Union," in *Democracy Begins between Two*; "Comment devenir des femmes civiles?" and "Droits et devoirs civils pour les deux sexes," in *Le Temps de la différence: Pour une révolution pacifique* (Librairie Générale Française, 1989); "Why Define Sexed Rights," in *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993).

47. For a lucid account of this point in relation to the recent work of Jürgen Habermas, see Bonnie Honig, "Dead Rights, Live Futures: A Reply to Habermas's 'Constitutional Democracy,'" *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (December 2001): 792–805.

48. Irigaray, "The Representation of Women," in *Democracy Begins between Two*, 174.

49. Ibid., 175.

50. Gerhard, *Debating Women's Equality*, 176.

51. Refiguring rights, as Kirstie McClure argues, entails "a politics of direct

address rights claims to the state, but opens rather with the object of addressing such claims to each other, and to each 'other,' whoever and wherever they may be." Kirstie McClure, "On the Subject of Rights: Pluralism, Plurality, and Political Identity," in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (New York: Verso, 1993), 108–27; quotation is from p. 123.

52. This demand for something more may be part of what animates the charge that gay and lesbian people seek "special rights" when they claim equal rights. Whatever the homophobic sentiment behind that charge, it is also the case that this most recent and divisive struggle for equal rights confronts us with a demand for something that equality as such can never satisfy—namely, freedom.

53. The Milan Collective emphasizes this point time and again. Aware of the unprecedented character of their actions, they were also aware of the lack of a guarantee. "The action of those women who met only with other women, and consequently changed the methods and contents of their politics, is an example of liberating transgression. Their example legitimized others, but nothing and no one guaranteed that what they were doing was right. The value of female difference is not inscribed in the system of social relations, nor does anything which has to be done so that it will exist appear with a guarantee that it is the right thing to do. We, in flesh and blood, have to take the place of the missing guarantee" (*SD*, 126).

54. Gerhard, *Debating Women's Equality*, 10.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. "Human action, projected into a web of relationships where many and opposing ends are pursued, almost never fulfills its original intention," writes Arendt. "Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable." Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 41–90; quotation is from p. 84.

2. Cited in ibid., 85.

3. "To our modern way of thinking nothing is meaningful in and by itself. . . . What the concept of process implies is that the concrete and the general, the single thing or event and the universal meaning, have parted company. The process . . . alone makes meaningful whatever it happens to carry along" (ibid., 63–64).

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Alan Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), B171.

5. The basis for all cognition, recognition requires that the faculties of reason, imagination, and understanding form a "common sense," i.e., that they collaborate with each other to produce "a form of the Same," in Gilles Deleuze's apt formulation. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 137. Common sense is a harmony of the faculties that makes the object I now see the one I now touch or smell, securing this object as recognizable under a concept, i.e., something already known.

6. Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994), 307–27; quotation is from p. 325, n. 8. For Arendt, totalitarianism was the paradigmatic example of a new event that demands our judgment, for "the death factories erected

in the heart of Europe" confront us with an unprecedented sense of meaninglessness. How are we to judge an event that has brought to light the ruin of "our categories of thought and standards of judgment"? she asks (Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 313). Nonetheless, we are reluctant to relinquish inherited rules. This reluctance suggests that what we have gotten used to is not so much the substance of any particular rule for subsuming particulars but the sheer fact of having rules under which to subsume. Rules are like a mental crutch to which we cling for fear of not being able to understand or judge at all. The real threat of nihilism is not the loss of standards, in Arendt's view, but the refusal to accept the consequences of that loss. Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research: Fiftieth Anniversary Issue* 38, no. 3 (Autumn 1971): 416–46; see especially p. 436.

7. On the relationship of judgments (*Urteile*) to prejudices (*Vorurteile*) see Hannah Arendt, *Was Ist Politik?*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1993), 17–23. Hereafter cited in the text and notes as *WIP* with page references. All translations are my own.

8. "Maybe it is preposterous even to think that anything can ever happen which our categories are not equipped to understand," quips Arendt. "Maybe we should resign ourselves to the preliminary understanding, which at once ranges the new among the old, and with the scientific approach, which follows it and deduces methodically the unprecedented from precedents, even though such a description of the new phenomena may be demonstrably at variance with the reality" (Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 313). Arendt is not willing to concede this point, for that would deny human freedom. She does not dispute here the idea that there is no place outside our preliminary understanding from which we could judge. The precognitive basis of our capacity for judgment belongs to the world-disclosing function of language associated with the linguistic turn carried out by thinkers like Heidegger. In his challenge to the philosophy of consciousness and its idea that language is a mere tool for expressing prelinguistic thoughts, Heidegger held that the meanings already given in a language are constitutive of what we can think or of anything we could encounter as an object. We do not *first* encounter an entity given independently of language and *then* take it—in a cognitive judgment—as something (e.g., first as a bare object, then as a door). Rather, we encounter every entity from the start as an object of such-and-such a kind; our prepredicative seeing already exhibits an "as-structure."

9. Arendt, *WIP*, 21.

10. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 136.

11. As Sonia Kruks summarizes this problem,

> [I]dentity politics tends toward what I call an epistemology of provenance. By this, I mean it tends toward an epistemological and ethical relativism. . . . [T]his tendency is grounded in claims about group specificity of experiences and the exclusive capacity of particular identity groups to evaluate those experiences. Although important in enabling previously marginalized and silenced groups to speak, an epistemology of provenance can also be problematic. For it threatens to undercut notions of shared (or even communicable) experience to such an extent that possibilities for a broadly based emancipatory politics are de facto subverted.

Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 85.