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# Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity

Joan W. Scott

The title of this paper is not a technical term. In origin it was a mistake, the result of a student's inability to understand some French words spoken in heavily accented English by a German-born professor of history. The student, who also had no familiarity with some of the grand themes of modern European intellectual history, tried to capture the sounds he had heard and render them phonetically, echoing imperfectly, though not unrecognizably, the professor's reference to the designation by contemporaries of the last decades of the nineteenth century as the *fin de siècle*. There were enough clues in the student's final exam for me eventually to figure out what he meant. (I was a teaching assistant for George Mosse at the University of Wisconsin then—it was 1964 or 1965). There was something about the student's choice of words that appealed to me—perhaps their sheer linguistic creativity or perhaps the fact that they

For me this paper was a challenge not only to give “fantasy echo” some substance and thereby pay George Mosse a tribute but also—in the wake of several years of reading and of teaching a graduate course called *Psychoanalysis and History* at Rutgers University—to see if I could find a use for a psychoanalytic term such as *fantasy* in understanding historically specific phenomena. For help in thinking these issues through, I'd like to acknowledge the students who worked incredibly hard in those courses, and especially to thank Joe Bonica, Brady Brower, Jennifer Pettit, and Sandrine Sanos. I am also grateful to Judith Butler, Gilbert Chaitin, Laura Engelstein, Denise Riley, Mary Louise Roberts, Sylvia Schafer, and especially Debra Keates for their incisive critical suggestions. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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could be construed to have a certain descriptive plausibility.<sup>1</sup> In any case, I never forgot them. Now, in the wake of our own fin de siècle, the words *fantasy echo* seem to have extraordinary resonance, offering a way of thinking not only about the significance of arbitrary temporal designations (decades, centuries, millennia) but also about how we appeal to and write history. Although I have no idea who the student was who coined the phrase (and I would bet that he has long since forgotten his desperate improvisation), it might be that *fantasy echo* could become one of those clever formulations that also does useful interpretive work.

### *Identity and History*

For a while I have been writing critically about identity, insisting that identities don't preexist their strategic political invocations, that categories of identity we take for granted as rooted in our physical bodies (gender and race) or our cultural (ethnic, religious) heritages are, in fact, retrospectively linked to those roots; they don't follow predictably or naturally from them.<sup>2</sup> There's an illusory sameness established by referring to a category of person (women, workers, African Americans, homosexuals) as if it never changed, as if not the category, but only its historical circumstances varied over time. Thus women's historians (to take the example I know best) have asked how changes in the legal, social, economic, and medical status of women affected their possibilities for emancipation or equality; but they have asked less often how these changes altered the meaning (socially articulated, subjectively understood) of the term *women* itself. Few feminist historians (Denise Riley is the exception here) have heeded the advice of Michel Foucault to historicize the categories that the present takes to be self-evident realities.<sup>3</sup> Even though, for Foucault, the "history of the present" served a clear political end (denaturalizing the categories upon which contemporary structures of power rested and

1. At the end of a century, all sorts of references echo back in assessments of the past and echo forward in predictions of the future; the whole exercise can be construed as fantastic.

2. See Joan W. Scott, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity," in *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rajchman (New York, 1995), pp. 3–12.

3. See Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis, 1988).

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so destabilizing those structures of power), those who resist his teaching have taken historicization to be synonymous with depoliticization. This synonymy is only true, however, if historical rootedness is seen as a prerequisite for the stability of the subject of feminism, if the existence of feminism is made to depend on some inherent, timeless agency of women.

While historians have been quick to acknowledge Eric Hobsbawm's reminder that tradition is an "invention" that serves to inspire and legitimate contemporary political action by finding precedents and inspiration for it in the past, they have been slow to apply this idea to categories of identity—or at least to categories of identity that have physical or cultural referents.<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm's writing on this topic came as part of the reassessment of Marxist (or more accurately Stalinist) historiography, with its ahistoric notions of workers and class struggle, and it had an important influence on the historicizing of those concepts (there has been little work, though, among labor historians on the question of *how* the "invention of tradition" operates). In the field of women's history Hobsbawm's intervention has been largely ignored; there, an increasing number of histories of feminism are producing continuous histories of women's activism, heedless, it would seem, to their own inventions. This may be a result of the fact that it is harder to historicize the category of women, based as it seems to be in biology, than it was to historicize the category of worker, always understood to be a social phenomenon, produced not by nature, but by economic and political arrangements. It may also stem from the greater difficulty those who write about women (as opposed to workers) have had in dispelling stereotypes about women's apolitical natures and their consequent lack of political participation. Thus there exists the temptation to pile up counter examples as demonstrations of women's political capacity and to neglect the changing, and often radically different, historical contexts within which women as subjects came into being.

But even those who grant that collective identities are invented as part of some effort of political mobilization haven't attended to how the process of invention works. In my recent book, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, I tried, in the last section of each of the biographical chapters, to demonstrate that feminist identity was an effect of a rhetorical political strategy invoked differently by different feminists at different times.<sup>5</sup> These sections constitute a critique of the notion that the history of feminism, or for that matter the history of women, is continuous. I offer instead a story of discontinuity that was repeatedly sutured by feminist activists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into a vision of uninterrupted linear

4. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm and Terrence O. Ranger (New York, 1983), pp. 1–14.

5. See Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

succession: women's activism on behalf of women. The identity of women, I argue, was not so much a self-evident fact of history as it was evidence—from particular and discrete moments in time—of someone's, some group's effort to identify and thereby mobilize a collectivity.

The argument I advanced in those chapter sections constituted for me a way of pursuing Foucault's genealogical agenda of critically intervening in disciplinary debates about identity and the writing of history. But it also left aside questions about how identity was established, how women with vastly different agendas identified with one another across time and social positions. What were the mechanisms of such collective and retrospective identification? How do these mechanisms operate? In looking for ways to answer these questions I am tempted to try to make fantasy echo do serious analytic work.

### *Fantasy*

*Fantasy echo* has a wonderfully complex resonance. Depending on whether the words are both taken as nouns or as an adjective and a noun, the term signifies the repetition of something imagined or an imagined repetition. In either case the repetition is not exact since an echo is an imperfect return of sound. Fantasy, as noun or adjective, refers to plays of the mind that are creative and not always rational. For thinking the problem of retrospective identification it may not matter which is the noun and which the adjective. Retrospective identifications, after all, are imagined repetitions *and* repetitions of imagined resemblances. The echo is a fantasy, the fantasy an echo; the two are inextricably intertwined.

What might it mean to characterize the operations of retrospective identification as a fantasized echo or an echoed fantasy? It might mean simply that such identification is established by the finding of resemblances between actors present and past. There is no shortage of writing about history in these terms: history as the result of empathetic identification made possible either by the existence of universal human characteristics or, in some instances, by a transcendent set of traits and experiences belonging to women or workers or members of religious or ethnic communities. In this view of things, fantasy is the means by which real relations of identity between past and present are discovered and/or forged. Fantasy is more or less synonymous with imagination, and it is taken to be subject to rational, intentional control; one directs one's imagination purposively to achieve a coherent aim, that of writing oneself or one's group into history, writing the history of individuals or groups.<sup>6</sup> The limits of this approach for my purposes are that it assumes exactly the continuity—the essentialist nature—of identity that I want to question.

6. For an example, see R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York, 1956).

For that reason I have turned to writings, informed by psychoanalysis, that treat fantasy in its unconscious dimensions. Substantively, it may be that certain shared fantasies—the ones Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis deem “primal fantasies”—provide fundamental terms for sexed identities. These fantasies are the myths cultures develop to answer questions about the origins of subjects, sexual difference, and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Primal fantasies of sexual difference (which assume the female body has been castrated) may provide a ground of unconscious commonality among women who are otherwise historically and socially different. But this can’t account either for the subjectively different perceptions women have of themselves as women or for the ways in which at certain moments “women” become consolidated as an identity group. I want to argue that the commonality among women does not preexist its invocation but rather that it is secured by fantasies that enable them to transcend history and difference.

It seems more useful, therefore, to consider fantasy as a formal mechanism for the articulation of scenarios that are at once historically specific in their representation and detail and transcendent of historical specificity. There are three aspects of fantasy (not all of which are necessary characteristics) that are useful for my purposes. The first is that fantasy is the setting for desire. “Fantasy,” write Laplanche and Pontalis, “is not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene.”<sup>8</sup> In the fantasized setting the fulfillment of desire and the consequences of this fulfillment are enacted. Fantasy, Denise Riley defines as “sustained metaphoricality. To be in fantasy is to live ‘as if.’ Some scene is being played out; and any act of identification necessarily entails a scenario.”<sup>9</sup> The second formal aspect is that fantasy has a double structure, which at once reproduces and masks conflict, antagonism, or contradiction. In Freud’s classic essay “A Child Is Being Beaten,” fantasy simultaneously enacts the individual’s transgressive wish and punishes the wisher. The beating is both the fulfillment of the child’s erotic desire for the father and punishment for it.<sup>10</sup> In Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of ideology, filtered through a Lacanian lens, fantasy maintains and masks divisions within society. It does so in some instances by attributing to reviled others (Jews are one classic example)

7. See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London, 1986), pp. 5–34.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

9. Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Guilt, and Irony* (Stanford, Calif., 2000), p. 13.

10. Sigmund Freud, “A Child Is Being Beaten’: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions” (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 17:175–204.

the causes of one's own (or a group's) lack of satisfaction: "they" have stolen "our" *jouissance*. The we-versus-they construction consolidates each side as an undifferentiated whole and effaces the differences that produce hierarchy and conflict among "us;" it also articulates a longing for enjoyment that it is beyond the ability of any ideological system to provide. (*Jouissance* is crucial in Žižek's discussion of fantasy; it is that orgasmic sensation that exceeds articulation and seems, momentarily at least, to satisfy desire. But desire is ultimately unsatisfiable since it seeks to restore an imagined wholeness and coherence, the end of the alienation associated with the acquisition of individual selfhood.) In another of Žižek's instances, fantasy contains the libidinal "obscene supplement" upon which power is based—the underlying and usually unstated erotic appeal of, say, antipornography legislation that depicts exactly what it aims to regulate and/or repress.<sup>11</sup> A third formal aspect is that fantasy operates as a (tightly condensed) narrative. In Žižek's formulation, the narrative is a way of resolving "some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession" (*P*, p. 11). Contradictory elements (or, for that matter, incoherent ones) are rearranged diachronically, becoming causes and effects. Instead of desire/punishment or transgression/law being seen as mutually constitutive, they are understood to operate sequentially: the transgressions of desire bring about the law's punishment or, to change the example, the advent of modernity brings the "loss" of traditional society. In fact, the qualities said to belong to traditional society only come into existence with the emergence of modernity; they are its constitutive underside. The relationship is not diachronic but synchronic. Thus the imposition of narrative logic on history is itself a fantasy according to Žižek:

Actual historical breaks are, if anything, *more* radical than mere narrative deployments, since what changes in them is the entire constellation of emergence and loss. In other words, a true historical break does not simply designate the 'regressive' loss (or 'progressive' gain) of something, but *the shift in the very grid which enables us to measure losses and gains*. [*P*, p. 13]

Fantasy is at play in the articulation of both individual and collective identity; it extracts coherence from confusion, reduces multiplicity to singularity, and reconciles illicit desire with the law. It enables individuals and groups to give themselves histories. "Fantasy," writes Jacqueline Rose, "is not . . . antagonistic to social reality; it is its precondition or psychic glue."<sup>12</sup> Fantasy can help account for the ways subjects are formed, inter-

11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, 1997), pp. 26–27; hereafter abbreviated *P*.

12. Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford, 1996), p. 3.

nalizing and resisting social norms, taking on the terms of identity that endow them with agency. (For that reason it has informed both pessimistic and optimistic theories about human subjectivity.)<sup>13</sup> And it can be used to study the ways in which history—a fantasized narrative that imposes sequential order on otherwise chaotic and contingent occurrences—contributes to the articulation of political identity. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the history of feminism, when told as a continuous, progressive story of women’s quest for emancipation, effaces the discontinuity, conflict, and difference that might undermine the politically desired stability of the categories termed *women* and *feminist*.<sup>14</sup>

In fantasy, narrative operations are not straightforward, precisely because of the condensed way in which temporality is figured. There is always a certain ambiguity created by the coexistence of simultaneity and narrative. In the fantasy scenario, desire is fulfilled, punished, and prohibited all at once, in the same way that social antagonism is evoked, erased, and resolved. But the fantasy also implies a story about a sequential relationship for prohibition, fulfillment, and punishment (having broken the law that prohibits incest, the child is being beaten); and it is precisely narrative that evokes, erases, and thereby resolves social antagonism (“we” are responding to “others” who have taken away our *jouissance*). The sequence of events in the scenario substitutes (or stands in) for historical change (which, I would argue, is about the existence of difference in time). Repetition replaces history (or is conflated with it) because the narrative is already contained in the scenario. Writing oneself into the story being staged thus becomes a way of writing oneself into history. In this way the category of identity is retrospectively stabilized. What might be called the fantasy of feminist history secures the identity of women over time. The particular details may be different, but the repetition of the basic narrative and the subject’s experience in it means that the actors are known to us—they are us.

Still, there is a tension to be explored by historians seeking to analyze processes of identity formation, a tension between the temporality of historical narrative (which carries with it notions of irreducible difference in time) and its condensation in recurring scenarios (which seem to deny that difference). That is where echo comes in.

## *Echo*

In its most literal sense echo simply repeats what came before, multiplying copies, prolonging the sound—identity as reproduction of the

13. See Sean Homer, “The Frankfurt School, the Father and the Social Fantasy,” *New Formations* 38 (Summer 1999): 78–90.

14. See Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*.

same. But this literalness isn't even right as a description of the physical phenomenon. Echoes are delayed returns of sound; they are incomplete reproductions, usually giving back only the final fragments of a phrase. An echo spans large gaps of space (sound reverberates between distant points) and time (echoes aren't instantaneous), but it also creates gaps of meaning and intelligibility. The melodic toll of bells can become cacophonous when echoes mingle with the original sound; when the sounds are words, the return of partial phrases alters the original sense and comments on it as well. Poets and literary scholars have made much of this incomplete, belated, and often contradictory kind of repetition. In one translator's rendition of Ovid's story of Echo and Narcissus, where Echo's effect is to transform others' meaning, Narcissus cries, "Here let us meet, let us come together," and she replies (turning his search for the source of the voice he hears into her erotic proposition) "Let us come. Together."<sup>15</sup> Or, when Narcissus recoils from Echo's embrace and says, "may I die before I give you power over me," she responds, "I give you power over me," reversing the pronoun's referent and the import of the words.<sup>16</sup> Here an echo provides ironic contrast; in other instances an echo's mimicry creates a mocking effect. In either case, repetition constitutes alteration. It is thus that echo undermines the notion of enduring sameness that often attaches to identity.

Claire Nouvet reads the story of Echo and Narcissus as a commentary on the way subjects are constructed. When, rejected by Narcissus, Echo loses her body, Ovid tells us that she nonetheless remains alive as sound. ("There is sound, which lives in her.")<sup>17</sup>

Although Echo is now a sound, the text still posits her as a subject capable of containing a sound. But since Echo has lost her body, since there is 'no-body' left, how can the sound be *in* her? The disembodiment 'kills' Echo, the 'other,' by exposing the subjective other as the deceptive embodiment of an echoing Other. ["IR," p. 114]

Echo, in Nouvet's reading, is the process by which subjects come into being as "a play of repetition and difference among signifiers" ("IR," p. 114).<sup>18</sup> This emphasis on language is no doubt important, but it is also

15. Quoted in John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 25. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller and ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), pp. 150–51.

16. Quoted in Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*, p. 25.

17. Quoted in Claire Nouvet, "An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus," *Yale French Studies*, no. 79 (1991): 113; hereafter abbreviated "IR."

18. Nouvet rejects as too narrow and too literal a reading of Ovid a possible feminist interpretation that would take the bodyless Echo, who cannot initiate sound, as the representative of the feminine—derivative and secondary—in Western culture; see "IR," p. 109. See also Naomi Segal, "Echo and Narcissus," *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (New York, 1989), pp. 168–85.

limited for thinking about the historical processes involved in the formation of identity. It is precisely by filling the empty categories of self and other with recognizable representatives that fantasy works to secure identity. In my use of it, echo is not so much a symptom of the empty, illusory nature of otherness as it is a reminder of the temporal inexactness of fantasy's condensations, condensations that nonetheless work to conceal or minimize difference through repetition. (Inexact usages of echo capture this occluding operation when they imply that echo is an exact replication of the original sound.)

For historians, echo provides yet another take on the process of establishing identity by raising the issues of the distinction between the original sound and its resonances and the role of time in the distortions heard. Where does an identity originate? Does the sound issue forth from past to present, or do answering calls echo to the present from the past? If we are not the source of the sound, how can we locate that source? If all we have is the echo, can we ever discern the original? Is there any point in trying, or can we be content with thinking about identity as a series of repeated transformations?

The historian who writes about women participates in this echo effect, sending forth and picking up sounds. Women, as a designated topic of research, is a plural noun signifying differences among biological females; it is also a collective term that occludes differences among women, usually by contrasting them with men. Women's history implies smooth continuity, but also divisions and differences. Indeed, the distinctive word *women* refers to so many subjects, different and the same, that the word becomes a series of fragmented sounds, rendered intelligible only by the listener, who (in specifying her object) is predisposed to listen in a certain way. *Women* acquires intelligibility when the historian or the activist looking for inspiration from the past attributes significance to (identifies with) what she has been able to hear.

If the historically defined subjectivity that is identity is thought of as an echo, then replication is no longer an apt synonym. Identity as a continuous, coherent, historical phenomenon is revealed to be a fantasy, a fantasy that erases the divisions and discontinuities, the absences and differences that separate subjects in time. Echo provides a gloss on fantasy and destabilizes any effort to limit the possibilities of "sustained metaphoricality" by reminding us that identity (in the sense both of sameness and selfness) is constructed in complex and diffracted relation to others. Identification (which produces identity) operates as a fantasy echo, then, replaying in time and over generations the process that forms individuals as social and political actors.

## Two Fantasies of Feminist History

Although many fantasies have been produced to consolidate feminist identity, two seem to me particularly prevalent, at least in Western feminist movements since the late eighteenth century. One, the fantasy of the female orator, projects women into masculine public space where they experience the pleasures and dangers of transgressing social and sexual boundaries. The other, the feminist maternal fantasy, seems at first to be contrary to the orator in its acceptance of rules that define reproduction as women's primary role (an acceptance of the difference the equality-seeking orator refuses). But the fantasy, in fact, envisions the end of difference, the recovery of "a lost territory" and the end of the divisiveness, conflict, and alienation associated with individuation.<sup>19</sup> It is a utopian fantasy of sameness and harmony produced by maternal love.

These fantasy scenarios are neither permanent fixtures of feminist movements, nor does the use of one preclude an appeal to the other. In fact, in the examples I cite below, the same woman places herself at different moments in each scenario. (This may be because they are related fantasies, the one seeking separation from, the other a return to the mother.)<sup>20</sup> The fantasies function as resources to be invoked. Indeed, they might be said to have the quality of echoes, resonating incompletely and sporadically, though discernably, in the appeal to women to identify as feminists.

### Orators

In the annals of the history of feminism, one iconic figure is that of a woman standing at a podium giving a speech. The scenario is similar whether the depiction is reverent or caricatured: the woman's arm is raised, she's talking to a crowd, their response is tempestuous, things might be out of control. The tumult acknowledges the transgressive nature of the scene, since in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women were excluded, by law if not social convention, from speaking in public forums. The scene itself might be read as a trope for feminism more generally: an exciting—in all the senses of that word—intervention in the (masculine) public, political realm.

In French feminist history the primal scene was staged by Olympe de Gouges: "If women have the right to mount to the scaffold, they ought equally to have the right to mount to the tribune."<sup>21</sup> De Gouges's fate—

19. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *The Kristeva Reader*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Toril Moi (New York, 1986), p. 161.

20. See Miglena Nikolchina, *Meaning and Matricide: The Tradition of the Mothers in the Light of Julia Kristeva* (unpublished manuscript).

21. Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (Paris, 1791), article X, p. 9.

execution by the Jacobins in 1793—linked the possibility of punishment by death to women's demands for political rights and their exercise of a public voice (substituting for her logical argument a story of transgression and its subsequent punishment). Her own experience with public speaking was not remarkable, and it rarely seems to have literally approximated the fantasized scenario that echoed down the generations of feminist militancy. It is reported that she unsuccessfully tried several times to gain the podium in the National Assembly in the early 1790s and that she addressed a largely female audience at a meeting of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women in 1793. De Gouges's most noted interventions were her voluminous writings, especially her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* of 1791. Of course, writing is also an exercise of public voice, and it was for de Gouges a source of enormous pleasure (she had, she once said, "an itch [*démangeaison*] to write").<sup>22</sup> Moreover, de Gouges saw nothing transgressive in her own public activity because she did not accept the gendered boundaries of public and private (politics and sex, reason and emotion) that the revolutionaries were implementing, nor did she seek to remove sex from political consideration. Women needed freedom of speech so they could identify the fathers of the children who resulted from sexual encounters, she argued in her *Declaration of Rights*. The revolution could use women, she pointed out elsewhere, to "inflame the passions" of young men being recruited for the army. The Jacobins, however, defined her actions as inversions of nature and, when they guillotined her, they explained that she had "forgotten the virtues that belong to her sex."<sup>23</sup> It was in this way that de Gouges's words about the scaffold and the tribune became the caption for a feminist scenario enacted by succeeding generations.

When Jeanne Deroin campaigned as a democratic socialist for a seat in the legislature in 1849 (despite the fact that women could neither vote nor run for office under the rules of the Second Republic), she told the readers of her newspaper, *L'Opinion des Femmes*, that her speech (to a crowd of mostly male workers) had met with "kind reception." Yet her deep conviction that equality between the sexes was the foundation of socialism was not enough, she confided, to prevent her being overtaken in the course of her speech by "une vive émotion," which she feared might have weakened the development of her ideas and the force of her expression. Indeed, for a moment these feelings of pleasure and danger caused her to lose her voice. At another meeting the circumstances were different. As she ascended to the lectern, "a violent uproar burst forth, at first toward the entrance to the hall, and soon the entire assembly joined in." Though fearful, Deroin held her ground (imagining herself, I imagine,

22. Quoted in Béatrice Slama, "Écrits de femmes pendant la Révolution," in *Les Femmes et la Révolution française*, ed. Marie-France Brive, 2 vols. (Toulouse, 1989), 2:297.

23. E. Lairtullier, *Les Femmes célèbres de 1789 à 1795*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1840) 2:140.

to be de Gouges) and derived great satisfaction from it: “fortified by the intimate sentiment of the grandeur of our mission, of the holiness of our apostleship and profoundly convinced of the importance . . . of our work, so eminently, so radically revolutionary . . . we accomplished our duty by refusing to leave the tribune . . . to appease the tumultuous crowd.”<sup>24</sup> Later Deroin explained that “she was excited [*excitée*] by a powerful impulse [*une impulsion puissante*]” that overcame her natural timidity.<sup>25</sup> Although she attributed this impulse to external influences and explained her action as the performance of duty in the service of a cause, there seems little doubt to me that the excitement experienced in both scenes is that *jouissance* evoked by Žižek—the excess of pleasure associated with the fulfillment of an illicit wish and its punishment, a punishment that confirms the transgressive nature of the desire.

Madeleine Pelletier (psychiatrist, socialist, suffragist) provides a version of the scene in her autobiographical novel of 1933. The protagonist (dressed, like Pelletier, *en homme* in pants, a collar and tie, with short cropped hair) nervously takes the podium and forcefully urges a hooting crowd of male socialist workers to support women’s rights. (The pleasure at assuming the male position is enhanced and offset by fear.) When she’s later told by sympathetic comrades that she’d be more effective if she dressed appropriately—as a woman—her reaction to “these brutal words” is shock: “It felt like a sort of moral rape.”<sup>26</sup> The clothing of the speaker and the fact that she is speaking signal her inappropriate femininity, which is punished by disapproval so strong that it feels like rape. The violation of normative standards of gender—for Madeleine Pelletier, the joyful ability to transcend the limits of sexual difference—brings violation in its turn, a violation that restores gender boundaries.

There is no doubt that Pelletier had read Deroin’s accounts of her experience, as there is little doubt that Deroin had de Gouges in mind. Pelletier, in fact, had given her protagonist the *nom de guerre* of Jeanne Deroin, though Deroin’s notions of womanhood and feminism were radically different from her own. Moreover, de Gouges, whose formulation became a cherished slogan of French feminism, was a courtesan, a playwright, and of uncertain political sympathies (she was a monarchist until the king’s execution in 1792 when she switched her loyalties to the Gironde and federalism). Opinionated, seductive, verbose, she was not at all the woman—whose chaste maternity was exemplified by the Virgin Mary—that Deroin sought to embody in the mid-nineteenth century with a gentle loving demeanor, or the *femme en homme*, striding to the podium, that Pelletier enacted in the early twentieth century. These details—of

24. Jeanne Deroin, “Compte-rendu du résultat de notre appel aux électeurs,” *L’Opinion des Femmes*, supplement to no. 4 (May 1849), n.p.

25. Michèle Serrière, “Jeanne Deroin,” *Femmes et travail* (Paris, 1981), p. 26.

26. Madeleine Pelletier, *La Femme vierge* (Paris, 1933), p. 186.

great importance for the historicizing of identity in general and of women and feminist in particular—were incidental to the collective identification enabled by the fantasy scenario. Indeed, one of the ways in which feminism acquired a history was that successive generations of women (activists and historians) were able to write themselves into these similarly structured scenarios. It was the shared *jouissance*, not the specific historical details, that provided common ground.

Another version, one that shows the international reach of these fantasy echoes, comes from the German socialist and feminist Lily Braun, who worked in a political, national, and social context very different from the French. “It is so very hard to develop my innermost thoughts in front of strangers,—it is as if I had to show myself naked to the whole world.”<sup>27</sup> Nakedness—the exposure of femininity—is at once pleurably triumphant (her mere presence says: look, there’s no mistaking it, a female in male space) and erotically provocative (undermining the feminist effort to deny the importance of sexual difference). A variation of this scenario comes from psychoanalyst Joan Rivière describing in a 1926 article one of her patients, an accomplished professional and public speaker who, after an impressive performance at the podium regularly abjected herself by flirting with older men in the audience. “All her life,” Rivière wrote,

a certain degree of anxiety, sometimes very severe, was experienced after every public performance, such as speaking to an audience. In spite of her unquestionable success and ability, both intellectual and practical, and her capacity for managing an audience and dealing with discussions, etc., she would be excited and apprehensive all night after, with misgivings whether she had done anything inappropriate, and obsessed by a need for reassurance.<sup>28</sup>

By masquerading as a woman, Rivière’s patient sought to deny the castrating effects of the impressive and, for her, exciting display of her intellect. The details of Rivière’s fantasy reverse Braun’s: while Braun imagines herself exposed as an imposter who only pretends to have the phallus, Rivière’s patient wants to disguise her possession of the phallus and the pleasure it gives her by donning the mask of “womanliness.” But in both of these cases the fantasy permits the evocation and containment of pleasurable excess associated with breaching the boundaries of sexual difference.

The contemporary feminist historian, herself grappling with the joys and anxieties of exercising a public voice, easily reads herself into these scenarios even though good historical sense warns that important differ-

27. Lily Braun, “Memoiren einer Sozialistin: Lehrjahre,” *Gesammelte Werke*, 5 vols. (Berlin, 1923), 2:455.

28. Joan Rivière, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, p. 36.

ences are being ignored. There is de Gouges, whose eighteenth-century aristocratic pretensions included glorying in her sexuality; Deroin, democratic socialist of the 1840s, who adored the idea of maternal chastity; Pelletier, psychiatrist and anarchist at the end of the nineteenth century, deriving erotic pleasure from passing as a man; and Rivière's patient, one of the New Women of the 1920s, unable to resolve an apparent conflict between her professional and sexual identities. In all these instances the very notions of sex and sexuality—to say nothing of women and feminist—are different, and it behooves the historian of women and feminism to point this out. Yet there is also no denying the persistent fact of identification, for echoing through the turns and twists of history is the fantasy scenario: if woman has the right to mount to the scaffold, she has also the right to mount to the rostrum. It is in the transgression of the law, of historically and culturally specific regulatory norms, that one becomes a subject of the law, and it is the excitement at the possibility of entering this scenario of transgression and fulfillment that provides continuity for an otherwise discontinuous movement.

### *Mothers*

The woman as mother is the antithesis of the female public speaker. While the orator wrestles with her inappropriate masculinity, the mother embodies acceptable femininity, fulfilling as she does her designated reproductive role. Despite its apparent endorsement of normative gender relations, maternity has sometimes served to consolidate feminist identification. (Of course, hostility to maternity has also united feminists, sometimes at the same time, sometimes at different moments from the positive identification I will describe here.) Appealing to prevailing ideas of maternity, often in contexts of pronatalist political pressure, feminists have argued that mothers deserve rights because they guarantee the future of the race or the nation or the species. In these strategic interventions the incentive for collective mobilization has often rested on the physical sameness of women's (reproductive) bodies. De Gouges spoke in the name of "the sex superior in beauty as in courage during childbirth" when she delivered her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* in 1791. Deroin equated womanhood with an idealized mother, one overflowing with selfless love: "Women are the mothers of humanity, the most important of all work is the production of the human being."<sup>29</sup> And some of the organizers of the most powerful international feminist networks at the dawn of the twentieth century used maternity as the common ground for their antiwar movement. French delegate Maria Vérone called for unity at the International Council of Women meeting in Rome in May 1914 by

29. Deroin, *Almanach des femmes, pour 1853* (London, 1853), p. 73.

appealing “to all women of all nations, who suffer childbirth with the same pain and who, when their sons die in war, shed the same tears.”<sup>30</sup>

There has been much debate among feminists about the wisdom of invoking maternity as a collective identity. In 1908, as her feminist compatriots claimed rights based on their motherhood, Pelletier warned against this strategy: “Never will childbirth give women a title of social importance. Future societies may build temples to maternity but they will do so only to keep women locked up inside.”<sup>31</sup> More recently, feminists have worried about whether and how a validation of maternity might endorse essentialist visions of womanhood. In this connection there has been no shortage of writing by feminist philosophers and historians wending their way between a recognition of, on the one hand, the strength of feminist arguments based on motherhood and, on the other, the danger such arguments pose for confirming social stereotypes that attribute gender discrimination to nature.<sup>32</sup> In most of this work (with the exception, as I will discuss in what follows, of some feminists’ attempts to reformulate psychoanalysis) the figure of the mother is taken literally. I want to suggest that when she indeed becomes the basis for feminist mobilization (and this is not always the case in the history of this movement), she is better understood as a fantasy echo, as the key to a scenario in which women merge into a vast, undifferentiated collective, the many becoming one through the power of maternal love.

The paradigmatic scenario is contained in an account by English suffragist Emmeline Pethick Lawrence of the International Women’s Conference held at the Hague to oppose war in 1915. There was, she said,

similarity in personality and dress of the delegates who occupied the body of the hall. There was nothing in general appearance to distinguish one nationality from another, and looking into our own hearts we beheld as in a mirror the hearts of all those who were assembled with us, because deep in our own hearts lies the common heart of humanity. We realised that the fear and mistrust that had been fostered between the peoples of the nations was an illusion. We discovered that at the bottom, peace was nothing more or less than communal love.<sup>33</sup>

Though this writing can surely be explained simply as good feminist rhetoric in the context of massive imperialist warfare on an unheard-of scale, such an explanation misses the emotional force of the appeal. The de-

30. Quoted in Christine Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne: Histoire des féminismes 1914–1940* (Paris, 1995), p. 45.

31. Pelletier, *La Femme en lutte pour ses droits* (Paris, 1908), p. 37.

32. See for example *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Maher Kaplan (New Haven, Conn., 1994).

33. Quoted in Jane Addams, Alice Hamilton, and Emily Greene Balch, *Women at the Hague: The International Congress of Women and its Results* (New York, 1972), p. 143.

scription condenses the process by which women recognize their commonality; they are already similar in personality and appearance, but they are also involved in a process of identification that melds them into one. By beholding themselves and one another “as in a mirror,” they realize that “fear and mistrust” (difference) is “an illusion,” and they “discover” that peace is “communal love.” What the women share is “the common heart of humanity,” a metonymic displacement of the womb. The communal love that emanates from this heart is the all-encompassing, selfless, seemingly sexless love of mothers for their children. In the scene, everyone loves like a mother and is loved as a daughter—the reciprocity of love and desire is assumed. The dissolving of the boundaries between mothers and daughters constitutes the reclaiming of a certain “lost territory,” the pre-oedipal love of the mother, and it provides what Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva refer to as a nonphallic (and, in the context of patriarchal symbolism, subversive) *jouissance*.

Kristeva and Irigaray have suggested (following Lacan on this point) that it is the “murder” not of the father but of the mother (the obliteration of her body and the relegation to nature of her undeniably social role of reproduction) that is the founding act of Western civilization. The maternal fantasy offered by Pethick Lawrence restores the social role of mothers, for they are responsible for life, while men wage war and cause death. The love that emanates from these mothers, the positive community it generates, is only one side of the dual perception (good and bad, loving and hateful, life and death) of mothers that Melanie Klein theorizes,<sup>34</sup> and it is radically different from, and in tension with, the misogynist fantasy that psychoanalysts tell us associates loss of identity and even death with a mother’s engulfing love.<sup>35</sup> Fantasies that provide the terms of political identification are undoubtedly selective; the one I have been describing sets itself against the other options (bad mothers, the mortal danger of incorporation) in its appeal to community. In addition, the feminist maternal fantasy, unlike the fantasy of the female orator, works to reconcile contradiction (in the way that the pregnant mother’s body signifies and contains difference) and seems to lack the punishing dimensions of “A Child Is Being Beaten,” perhaps because it calls on pre-oedipal associations between mothers and children.

Here it may be helpful to follow Irigaray’s reasoning. Offering a feminist variation on Lacan’s suggestion that woman was associated with “a *jouissance* beyond the phallus,” Irigaray seeks to detach woman from her definition as a function of man.<sup>36</sup> She posits instead a sharp distinction

34. Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein* (New York, 1964).

35. See for example Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1999).

36. Jacques Lacan, “Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972–1973,” *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan—XX*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1988), p. 74.

between the “world of the flesh” (the body of the mother) and the “universe of language” (the law of the father). “The problem is that, by denying the mother her generative power and by wanting to be the sole creator, the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language and symbols” that subsume women to men.<sup>37</sup> Irigaray looks for a way of establishing an autonomous realm for women by bringing to light the “*jouissance* beyond the phallus” that patriarchal law repressed. She particularly emphasizes the attractions of the mother-daughter relationship and the positive aspects of identity between these two:

Given that the first body [we/they] have any dealings with is a woman's body, that the first love they share is mother love, it is important to remember that women always stand in an archaic and primal relationship with what is known as homosexuality. . . . When analytic theory says that the little girl must give up her love of and for her mother, her desire of and for her mother, so as to enter into the desire of/for the father, it subordinates woman to a normative heterosexuality, normal in our societies, but completely pathogenic and pathological. Neither little girl nor woman must give up love for their mother. Doing so uproots them from their identity, their subjectivity. [“BE,” p. 44]

Much of Irigaray's writing is prescriptive; the future conditional articulates what always seemed to me an original late twentieth-century utopian vision: “But if mothers could be made women, there would be a whole mode of a relationship of desiring speech between daughter and mother, son and mother, and it would, I think, completely rework the language [*langue*] that is now spoken” (“BE,” p. 52). In fact, I think there are historical precedents for Irigaray's formulations, evidence that corroborates her theoretical insights in the maternal fantasies that have at certain historical moments consolidated women under the banner of feminism. These fantasies don't evoke the maternal body and its flesh directly, if at all; rather, they refer to the ineffable quality of love. This love both avows and denies an explicitly sexual longing of and for the mother. As if in deference to patriarchal rules, it covers over its own transgression.

The invocation of the feminist maternal fantasy is evident in the 1840s and 1850s. In France, romantic Christianity blended with Saint-Simonian socialism to inspire Flora Tristan and Derooin in their rapturous visions of messianic maternal salvation. Tristan called upon women, whose moral likeness, rooted in motherhood, erased differences of class,

37. Luce Irigaray, “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,” *The Irigaray Reader*, trans. David Macey, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford, 1991), p. 41; hereafter abbreviated “BE.”

education, and wealth to take the lead in establishing the “universal union of working men and women.”

Women, whose souls, hearts, spirits, senses are endowed with such sensitivity that . . . you have a tear for every sorrow, —a cry for every groan of anguish, —a sublime enthusiasm for every generous action, —a self-sacrifice for every suffering, —a consoling word for every affliction: —women, who are consumed by the need to love, to act, to live; who *seek everywhere* for an outlet for this burning and ceaseless activity of the soul which inspires you and consumes you, torments you, kills you; women,—will you remain silent and *hidden* forever, while the *largest* and *most useful* class, your brothers and sisters the proletarians, those who work, suffer, weep and groan, come and implore you to help them overcome misery and ignorance.<sup>38</sup>

The passion described is attributed to the soul, but the erotic quality of this “burning and ceaseless activity . . . which inspires . . . consumes . . . torments . . . kills” is undeniable.

Tristan urged the male workers in her union to submit to women’s leadership. “I pointed out,” she reported, “that we had reached the reign of women,—that the reign of war, of brute force, had been that of [men] and that now women could achieve more than men because they had more love, and today love alone must rule.”<sup>39</sup> Here was the theme of “communal love” and the end of all difference that would sound again in new form in 1915. In a similar voice, and in Tristan’s wake, Deroin predicted a future characterized by harmony. Everyone would live peacefully in a large, social family, united by pure, maternal love:

The time of the reign of woman is near and humanity will quit the fatal path of progress through pain, of progress through struggle and poverty, to follow the providential path of peaceful and harmonious progress, led by the mother of humanity, Woman regenerated by liberty.<sup>40</sup>

For Deroin and many of her associates, the *jouissance* of the fantasy came precisely from the juxtaposition of sex and purity, and the use of romantic, even erotic language to characterize chaste and selfless maternal love. The mother, like the saintly mother of Christ, “acts because she loves. Love of humanity is eternal love.”<sup>41</sup>

38. Quoted in Susan K. Grogan, *French Socialism and Sexual Difference: Women and the New Society, 1803–44* (London, 1992), p. 187.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

40. Quoted in Michèle Riot-Sarcey, *La démocratie à l'épreuve des femmes: Trois figures critiques du pouvoir 1830–1848* (Paris, 1994), p. 275.

41. *La Voix des Femmes*, 28 Mar. 1848, n.p.

A later, more secular example of this feminist maternal fantasy comes from the call of the African American Mary Church Terrell in 1899 to white women to come to the aid of their black sisters, whose circumstances denied them the same thrill of joy at the contemplation of their children. "So rough does the way of her infant appear to many a poor black mother that instead of thrilling with the joy which you feel, as you clasp your little one to your breast, she trembles with apprehension and despair."<sup>42</sup> Overwhelming pride in one's children and the sensual pleasure of holding them ("thrill" and "joy" are signifiers of *jouissance*) are the feelings women are presumed to identify with across the vast differences of race and class. Mother and child, different and the same, women black and white, are to recognize one another through maternal love and then join in loving union—all differences effaced.

The full account of the scene I referred to earlier—Vérone's 1914 appeal to "all women of all nations, who suffer childbirth with the same pain"—illustrates the concrete unifying power of this vision. When Vérone spoke, we are told, "A formidable cry of approval came from the audience, and it redoubled when a German delegate threw herself into the arms of Vérone, and kissed her on both cheeks."<sup>43</sup> The reconciling force of maternal love brings a sisterly embrace; the scene is suffused with love, the healing, binding love of and for the mother. Through it, the women on the stage and in the audience become one.

Echoing forward, we find Robin Morgan searching for the common ground of *Sisterhood Is Global*. Despite geographic, ethnic, religious, social, racial, and other diversities, she asks, "do we not, after all, easily recognize one another?"

The underlying similarities emerge once we begin to ask *sincere* questions about differences. The *real* harem tradition included intense female friendship, solidarity, and high culture . . . The *real* 'belly dance' is a childbirth ritual celebrating life; the *Raqs al Sharqi* . . . is meant as an exercise in preparation for labor and childbirth. . . . The examples could go on and on. . . . It is any wonder that such words as daring, rebellion, journey, risk, and vision recur throughout *Sisterhood is Global* like refrains punctuating the same basic story: one of deep suffering but also of a love—for life, children, men, other women, the land of one's birth, humanity itself—a love fierce enough to cleanse the world?<sup>44</sup>

"A love fierce enough to cleanse the world": though the terms and practices of motherhood varied profoundly from mid-nineteenth-century

42. Quoted in Eileen Boris, "The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the 'Political,'" *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 2 (1989): 36.

43. Quoted in Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p. 45.

44. Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (New York, 1996), p. 36.

France to late twentieth-century America, they were subsumed—literally, in the fantasy scenario—by this idealization of love. What I have been calling a feminist maternal fantasy allowed the return of (what Irigaray and Kristeva differently think of as) a repressed *jouissance*. Its rearticulation served to consolidate feminist solidarity in the moment when it was invoked, as well as in history and as history. Maternal love referred to a desire (her own, her children's) distinct from and potentially prior to that which is associated with heterosexuality, with phallic economies, with men. The world of women conjured by feminists in this fantasy is one in which women find pleasure among themselves, or “*jouissent d'elles mêmes*” in Irigaray's words (“BE,” p. 63). The historian's pleasure, it might be added, is in finding herself a party to this scene of feminine *jouissance*.

I am not seeking to discredit feminism by pointing to the importance of fantasy in enabling identifications that transcend history and national specificity. Instead, I want to argue that thinking about the operations of fantasy deepens our understanding of how a movement like feminism works and, at the same time, avoids attributing essentialist qualities to it. I am also not suggesting that these women were not really affected by discrimination, which disenfranchised them and denied them public access. The anxiety in the repeated scenes of female public oration, of course, comments on relations of power in the “real” world. My points are that power is produced in concrete and particular relationships, that subjects are structured as a function of those relationships, and that these subjects cannot transcend the specificity of their circumstances without the simplification fantasy provides. Similarly, I do not mean to argue that mothers lack real concern for their children's lives, though I do not think they have a natural (or indeed even an experientially based) antipathy to conflict and war. Instead, concepts of motherhood, and the very experience of being a mother, have varied by class and culture and historical epoch and have done so in many more ways than I have been able to discuss in this short essay. The fantasy of maternal love has provided feminists a way of establishing a commonality based in unconscious associations, despite their differences, and this has been its efficacy.

If, as analysts of identity, we think of these fantasy scenarios also as echoes and thus look for the distortions and diffractions—the individual variations of detail and figuration in them—we will be able to take into account the profound differences in the very being of women that it is the function of fantasy to efface. In that way we will deepen our appreciation of how some political movements use history to solidify identity and thereby build constituencies across the boundaries of difference that separate physical females from one another within cultures, between cultures, and across time.

I have restricted my attention in this essay to feminism, whose his-

tory is most familiar to me. But I think fantasy echo has much wider applicability, and not only to movements built on collective identities. The term usefully describes the figure of the “white sheik” detailed in the work of anthropologist Steven Caton. The white sheik was a figure used by successive generations of European and American men to elaborate their relationships (variously as adventurers, entrepreneurs, spies, and clandestine military operatives) to the East by identifying with T. E. Lawrence as depicted (phantasmatically) in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. These men resonate especially with the scene in which Lawrence dances, clothed in the flowing robes of a sheik (that endow him, if not with outright femininity, then with an ambiguous alternative to Western masculinity). Here, in the staging of his *jouissance*, Lawrence presents the lure of the Orient. The recurring fantasy scenario, as Caton has described it, was adjusted and adapted—in the mode of an echo—to different historical moments in the changing geopolitical ties between East and West.<sup>45</sup>

Fantasy echo is not a label that, once applied, explains identity. It is rather the designation of a set of psychic operations by which certain categories of identity are made to elide historical differences and create apparent continuities. Fantasy echo is a tool for analysts of political and social movements as they read historical materials in their specificity and particularity. It does not presume to know the substance of identity, the resonance of its appeal, or the transformations it has undergone. It presumes only that where there is evidence of what seems enduring and unchanging identity, there is a history that needs to be explored.

45. See Steven C. Caton, “The Sheik,” in *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870–1930*, ed. Holly Edwards (Princeton, N.J., 2000), pp. 99–117. See also Caton, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film’s Anthropology* (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 153, 208–9.