

Refusing to Smell the Roses: American Feminism as a Rhetorical Practice

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More than perhaps any other movement for social change, feminism has focused on voice, representation and style: on what is said about women, and how it is said. Historians would be hard pressed to name another social movement which counts a doctoral thesis on literature among the classic formulations of its ideology,¹ or one that has devoted quite as much energy to the rediscovery and reinterpretation of forgotten texts. Feminists have challenged patriarchal culture *qua* verbal tradition: questioning the uses to which some words (e.g. *natural* or *difference*) are put; proposing alternatives to the ways women are named or addressed (*Ms.* and hyphenated surnames being the obvious examples); insisting that certain linguistic practices be dropped (e.g. the *Mrs./Miss* distinction or the generic usage of the word *man* to signify *human*); and, last but not least, promoting the use of a specifically feminist vocabulary. Some of the movement's contributions to the lexicon (*sexism*, *her-story*) were freshly coined, while others (*discrimination*, *oppression*, *chauvinism*, *gender*) were "borrowed" from existing discourses. Some have made it into everyday usage, others continue to strike us as oddities, but on the whole the logic of these failures and successes reflects the extent of the movement's cultural influence.

¹ The book in question is *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett (New York: Doubleday 1970), defended as a doctoral thesis at Columbia University. It is a comprehensive attack on patriarchal culture as inscribed in the plots and language of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet. The books focus on language as a site of power is symptomatic of the phenomenon discussed here.

Clearly, no history of the women's movement would be complete without an examination of its efforts to rename reality.

Why is feminist discourse so often language about language? Is emphasis on matters linguistic a form of escapism – a symptom of meager influence on extra-linguistic reality? My claim in this paper is not just that language constitutes an important site of struggle over gender, or that linguistic change serves as a measure of social change. I argue that at the very heart of feminism there lies a conviction that women's oppression is not merely reflected in language, but somehow located within its structure, and that to change the way people speak is to change the way they think and act. Moreover, as I will try to demonstrate, feminists have tended to conceptualize their efforts in terms of communication – a view of the movement's identity that has had important consequences for its strategy and development.

This article is part of a larger project, which examines the rhetorical strategies of several generations of American feminists. I bring tools from literary theory and criticism, cultural studies, gender studies, and linguistics to texts which are usually read for ideological content, as documents of cultural history. Though I rely on several histories of the American Women's Movement (Davis 1999; Echols 1989; Rosen 2000), I treat the documents at hand as verbal events in themselves, i. e. as performatives meant to do a certain amount of cultural "work," rather than as verbal traces of events whose reality is extra-linguistic. In what follows I suggest the reasons for the centrality of language to feminism's construction of its own identity as a social movement, and examine the cluster of metaphors at the heart of this of this meta-linguistic self-definition: awakening, breaking the silence, naming the unnamed. By analyzing feminism's language, I hope to get at the conceptual structure of this movement's intervention into mainstream discourse, its ways of puncturing the accepted "common sense" approach to gender. My own theoretical framework relies on an equation between rhetorical systems and epistemologies, as developed in contemporary philosophy and cultural criticism, but I argue that such an equation has, implicitly or explicitly, been made by feminists at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Both as a social movement and as an intellectual tradition, feminism has its own distinct reasons for taking language seriously as a field of power.

1. Speech (and) acts

One of modern feminism's favorite figures of speech – well loved in the late 60s and early 70s, but later attacked for its epistemological naivete, and the underlying assumptions about the homogeneity of women as a group – is the metaphor of silence broken by voice. In fields ranging from medicine and psychology, to literature and art history, feminists have complained about the silencing of women, and demanded that their voices be heard. There was the general silence about women's position in society, occasionally broken by contemptuous remarks such as Stokely Carmichael's legendary one-liner about women's position in the SNCC². And there were the specific silences, the cultural taboos concerning domestic violence, rape, abortion, women's sexual pleasure, lesbianism. Feminists broke through such silences with actions consisting in more or less formalized talk: consciousness-raising sessions, public speak-outs, hearings, and speeches. Oppression was defined as silence – thus, to speak up or speak out was to act.

Though the above list of "silenced" problems is one drawn by radical feminists, the conceptualization of the movement as a voice which breaks through silence is not unique to radicals. Half a decade before the emergence of radical feminism, Betty Friedan had relied on the same figurative framework to diagnose middle-class women's sense of loneliness and aimlessness. In the opening chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) we read:

[...] on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, "the problem." And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized that they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it (Friedan 1974: 15).

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- 2 An important early statement about the position of women in the New Left was circulated at a November 1964 meeting of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). Stokely Carmichael, a male leader of the movement, asked rhetorically: "What is the position of women in SNCC?" and proceeded to answer his own question: "The position of women in the SNCC is prone." He then "threw his head back and roared outrageously with laughter" (Echols 1989: 31). The comment was not intended as hostile – it was supposed to be funny and outrageous. Yet, it came to symbolize male arrogance towards women and women's liberation. Arguably then, the birth of radical feminism in the 60s was triggered by an incompatibility of styles: the movement women made a conscious and collective decision to stop engaging in an exchange which framed their problems as marginal and funny.

Friedan was a key figure of liberal feminism, and ever careful not to appear radical. Yet, the underlying metaphor of her book – *naming the problem that has no name* – is a figure which animates some of the most radical feminist statements of the late sixties. The above-quoted passage constitutes a prime example of what I see as modern feminism’s identity narrative: a tale about women’s awakening through talk. The plot moves from isolation to togetherness, and the transformative moment is a revelation of the common nature of women’s experience. The unnamed – and thus apparently private – sense of deprivation can be named only after it is acknowledged as a shared problem. As such, it enters the realm of collective discourse and consciousness. It suddenly becomes clear that what had seemed personal is, in fact, political.

Within the feminist framework *language* does not function as an opposite to *action*. Rather, it stands in opposition to *silence*, and so signifies the public sphere itself. The sense that the all-important breakthrough (awakening) takes place in the realm of communication, and the tendency to dramatize the “feminist moment” is something that various strands of American feminism have in common. A group of women talking about their individual problems and suddenly “clicking”³ to the recognition that their problem is a common one – this image is at the very heart of feminist poetics, and the feminist re-definition of politics. Arguably, it is also the movement’s allegorical self-portrait. The rhetorical power of this image consists in its ability to draw the reader – especially a female one – inside the narrative frame, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of sentimental fiction. Women are talking about their lives, and you are invited to join, to add your story to theirs, to identify, to feel with and for them, and finally to share in their interpretation of female experience.

In 1966 Friedan became the founder and first president of the National Organization for Women. In its “Statement of Purpose” NOW pledged to “take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men” (“National...” 1995: 96). Radical feminists, of course, rejected the very idea of joining the mainstream: the movement they built was transformative, not assimilationist. Rather than dwell on these differences, however, I want to suggest a common ground between liberal and radical feminism – a specific conceptualization of the interface between language and reality. *Naming the problem* is here

3 The onomatopoeic “click” – feminism’s code word for change of consciousness caused by an everyday occurrence – originates in Jane O’Reilly’s much reprinted essay *The Housewife’s Moment of Truth* (first published in the Spring 1972 issue of *Ms.* magazine).

more than a preparatory step to be followed by *action*. It is an important act in itself, one that defines the logic of the struggle, and serves as a metaphor for the movement itself. In a culture that relies on a firm distinction between the private and the public sphere, and defines women as private beings, such a self-definition cannot but exert radicalizing influence. The link between speech and action, with its implications for the private/public distinction, has led many theorists to foresee “a radical future of liberal feminism” (Eisenstein 1981). Nonetheless, the history of the movement itself, and the functioning of feminist vocabulary within ordinary language, also suggests a reverse pattern: radical insights, once incorporated into the mainstream, tend to lose much of their radical edge.

2. *Sexism* – a case study

If the act of naming “the problem that has no name” (in more or less political terms) is the paradigmatic feminist act, the names themselves vary significantly. Friedan invented the catchphrase *the feminine mystique* – a construct reminiscent of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s use of the word *womanliness* in an 1890 speech of that title. Like *womanliness*, the *mystique* is a term carefully designed to challenge the existing model of femininity as somehow fake and false, but without ruling out the possibility that a more natural, and thus somehow truthful, model might be found. The term is also meant to evade the question of male power. Friedan is careful not to blame men directly, but rather to hold elusive forces of consumerism and the media responsible for force-feeding women the lie of domestic self-fulfillment. Later, liberal feminists will use words emphasizing injustice rather than power, so as to gesture at men as potential allies: *discrimination* and *gender inequality* are meant to do just that. Radicals, on the other hand, preferred terms which directly focused attention on male privilege and power: i.e. *patriarchy*, *sex-caste system*, *exploitation*, *oppression*, *male chauvinism* and *sexism*.

It is interesting to note that the last term in this list, though intended as uncompromising, turned out to be the one most palatable to mainstream culture – more so than the gentler and kinder *discrimination* or *inequality*. As Fred Shapiro argues in his study of the vocabulary of the women’s movement, the word *sexism* filled the “central terminological need” of the movement, i.e. “to find a label for the oppression it was to fight” (Shapiro 1985: 3). Feminism’s most successful coinage was not without competition: *male chauvinism*, *male supremacy* and *sex discrimination* were the contenders. Shapiro cites a number of early feminist comments on the intended meaning of the word *sexism*, and the “work” it was hoped to perform.

One recurrent theme is that, as Pauline Leet succinctly noted, “[s]exism is intended to rhyme with racism. Both have been used to keep the powers that be in power” (qtd. in Shapiro, 6).

The race-gender analogy has become highly controversial in recent decades, due to its re-examination by African-American women, but in the sixties it had an important task to perform: it legitimized feminist claims for an audience which had already been trained by the Civil Rights Movement to despise racism, a social problem that also operates on the level of individual psychology and behavior. The parallel drawn between *racism* and *sexism* should be considered in the context of the sixties redefinition of politics (as a realm of intense personal commitment, and self-expression), and of power (as a force operating in the personal realm no less than in the public one). From there it was only a short step to the idea at the heart of radical feminism itself, namely, that “the personal is political.” By calling up the context of racial prejudice, the coinage *sexism* was meant to locate anti-woman behavior within a broader system of oppression, to suggest that hostility towards women is a norm, not an anomaly, a political pattern, not a personal flaw. Much like the feminist plot of awakening, the word *sexism* was to lead from personal experience to political consciousness, to build a bridge between the personal and the political.

In her foreword to Alice Echols’ history of radical feminism *Daring to Be Bad*, Ellen Willis, a cultural critic and an important figure in the radical feminist movement (co-founder of Redstockings) explains:

Radical feminists coined the terms *sexism* and *sexual politics* to express the idea— novel and even shocking in the contemporary American context, though in fact it had ample historical precedent — that sexuality, family life, and the relations between men and women were not simply matters of individual choice, or even custom, but involved the exercise of personal and institutional power and raised vital questions of public policy. Sexism, the movement contended, was neither the natural expression of sexual differences nor a set of bad attitudes or outmoded habits but a social system — embedded in law, tradition, economics, organized religion, the mass media, sexual morality, child rearing, the domestic division of labor, and everyday social interaction — whose intent and effect was to give men power over women (Willis 1989: ix-x).

The above passage is hardly a dispassionate summary of a radical theory of gender relations. Implicit here is the claim that feminists not only “coined” the terms in question, but also that they turned this “coin” into legitimate cultural currency. One could argue further, that along with the word *sexism* the theory of sexual politics has penetrated the American mainstream, becoming part of cultural competence,

the very ground of communication. Whenever a speaker of English (or, for that matter, Polish, French or German) uses the word *sexism*, he or she brings into public discourse not just the word, but also the impulse which brought it into being, i.e. the need to have gender inequality acknowledged as systemic, and to challenge it. The speaker, thus positioned, does not have to accept the idea that systemic oppression of women by men exists (s/he may, in fact, consider the idea an absurdity), but the fact that the word is uttered in itself constitutes a feminist victory. In order to deny the validity of an idea, one has to invoke it, and thus legitimize it as a viable option. Communication requires shared context – in this case the shared context requires acknowledgement that inequality is real, or at least that it is experienced as such by certain members of the linguistic community. This acknowledgement is precisely what feminism is after. It is not enough, but it is the all-important beginning.

The career of the term *sexism* within everyday American English can be interpreted as a feminist success story, as I have done above, developing Willis's argument, but it is also illustrative of the capacity of the conservative mainstream to assimilate radical ideas, while depriving them of their radical edge. In her preface Willis goes on to use the word *sexism* without quotation marks, assuming it to be a well integrated part of her readers' vocabulary. Indeed, by 1989 the word would have been unlikely to raise an eyebrow. It had done its work – but perhaps it had also lost much of its rhetorical power. Any claim about the transformative impetus of feminist verbal strategies ought to be qualified by reflection on traditional culture's capacity to assimilate and co-opt dissenting voices. The most common usage of the word *sexist* – as rude towards, or prejudiced against, women – can hardly be used as evidence of public awareness of the radical feminist view of social relations. In fact, the *political* implications of the word seem to be all but forgotten.

Still, words such as *sexism* have clearly left a mark on mainstream culture. Willis comments on “the profound difference between a society in which sexism is the natural order (...), and one in which sexism is a problem, the subject of debate, *something that can be changed*,” and proceeds to exemplify this difference with examples of “everyday gains” brought by feminism. Interestingly, all her examples are drawn from the field of language; “...that it is now commonplace for married women to keep their names; that ‘people working’ signs are no longer unusual; that a politician who couldn't care less about feminism nonetheless feels constrained to speak of ‘his or her’ something-or other” (Willis 1989: xv). The progress Willis is noting here is somewhat paradoxical. She does not deny that women enjoy more equality today than they did in the fifties, but it is not satisfaction with such gains

that interests her. On the contrary, the movement's power lies in its ability to evoke dissatisfaction: what counts is visibility of inequality. Hence, I would argue, the centrality of linguistic, rather than, say, economic, "facts" in her argument: the names, the signs, the forms of address. "It's the constant accretion of such 'trivia' that creates the texture of our lives, increases our impatience with its contradictions, and promotes our expectation of larger changes. The history of radical feminism is, above all about a dramatic launching of this process (...)" (Willis 1989: xv).

3. Names and roses

An influential criticism of the modern women's movement – made both from within and without – is that its fixation on language is excessive, that it blinds activists to "real" (i.e. economic) inequalities, and transforms activism into a solipsistic intellectual game for the privileged few. Focus on language, such critics contend, is not only a sign of the movement's elitism, its penchant for abstraction, but also – this argument was made in the mid-nineties in several books which received much media attention – a symptom of ladylike over-sensitivity, oddly reminiscent of Victorian femininity. "Feminists need to recover their senses and *smell* the roses, rather than worry so much about what to call them" – write the authors of *Professing Feminism*, a scathing attack on women's studies in America (Patai, Koertge 1994: 134, emphasis original). Similar "advice" is offered, among others, by Naomi Wolf in *Fire with Fire* (1993) and by Christina Hoff Sommers in *Who Stole Feminism* (1995).

These attacks on the position of language within contemporary feminism are, in my view, rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the movement's intellectual roots. The critics rely on a nostalgic view of a supposedly no-nonsense past, when the movement steered clear of abstraction, self-reflection, and analysis of language, focusing only on "reality," demanding nothing more and nothing less than "equality" for "ordinary" women. The trouble with this view is that it has no grounding in historical reality. The classic figures of feminism – Wollstonecraft, Fuller, Stone, Cady Stanton, Goldman, Gilman – were hardly practically-minded activists. They were thinkers and writers who produced sophisticated arguments in often convoluted, self-reflexive prose. They dwelt at length not only on language, but on such "impractical" matters as mythology, Christian doctrine, or Darwinism. Their "activism" consisted, to a great extent, in redefining words (often as abstract as *soul* or *self* – two First Wave favorites), and re-writing texts (such as the traditio-

nal marriage contract, adjusted by Lucy Stone and others to fit the feminist agenda).

The centrality of language to the feminist project is not a by-product of the twentieth century intellectual preoccupation with the relationship between language and reality. Language-based arguments about gender inequality can be found at the very roots of organized struggle for women's rights. Consider, for instance, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (1848), the founding document of the nineteenth century American women's movement. Echoing the Declaration of Independence, it announces: "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights..." ("Declaration..." 1992: 77-78). By replacing the original *men* with *men and women*, the early feminists (Stanton, Mott and others) were not only making the demand that women be included in the democratic process, but also challenging the shape of existing political discourse, pointing at its semantics as the evidence of injustice and hypocrisy. The philosophical grounding of their argument was Locke'ian: men and women are equal, because equality stems from natural rights given by God to all individuals, regardless of their sex (Hoffert 1995: 38-42). But before this argument is made discursively in the "Resolutions," it is performed (as a speech act) by the introduction of the word *woman* into the Declaration's preamble. Such a rewriting of the Declaration of Independence is meant to expose the internal inconsistency of the original, to make it embarrassingly evident that the word "men" in the founding document of American democracy is exclusive while it pretends to be inclusive.

In a comment on the Preamble of the American Constitution Stanton makes this point directly, revealing a profound awareness of the complex relation between language and power:

This is declared to be a government "of the people." All the power, it is said, centers in the people. Our state constitutions also open with the words, "we the People." Does anyone pretend to say that men alone constitute races and peoples? When we say parents, do we not mean girls as well as boys? When we say people do we not mean women as well as men? (qtd. in Eisenstein 1981: 149)

Stanton's strategy was to focus on words such as *men* or *people* so as to expose the hypocrisy at the heart of the American democratic idealism: an ideology which extended freedom and equality to the *people*, then proceeded to conflate the inclusive category *people* with the ambiguous noun *men*, and finally allowed the latter to slip into its gendered meaning. Stanton ventures to do more than just reshuffle

the concepts already on the table (equality, citizenship, freedom, natural rights, people), and make them applicable to women. Her strategy is far more dramatic, and – I would argue – poetic in its very nature. It is to make the dominant language expose its own nature as a language, a construct, a game – one marked by awkwardness and inconsistency. The trick is to introduce a concept which, due to the way the game is played, had been pushed off the table as irrelevant. Its sudden appearance must be dramatic, so as to make its previous absence appear as a scandal, a blatant violation of the rules of the game. The game is, of course, democracy; the missing term is *women*.

In short, the feminist intervention into public discourse – of which the preamble of the Seneca Falls Declaration is paradigmatic – consists in making women’s invisibility visible. The Declaration of Sentiments did not necessarily convince people that women ought to be made equal. But it certainly made it evident that they were unequal, and that the political discourse of republicanism was designed to obliterate this inequality from public view. After Seneca Falls it was impossible to read the line “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence in quite the same innocent manner. A similar logic is at work in rhetorical strategies of Second Wave feminism. To return to our test case – the word *sexism* in ordinary language – one does not have to believe we all live in “social system (...) whose intent and effect [is] to give men power over women” (Willis x), or ever use the word *sexism*, to be affected by its very presence in the linguistic code. With the word *women* placed next to it, the word *men* does not sound quite so universal and democratic any more. With *sexism* around, *sex* is just not the same any more.

Rhetorical devices designed to expose and undermine habitual ways of seeing, and thus to affect the very process of perception, have a name and a classic theorization in formalist poetics. This name – coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay *Art as Technique* – is *defamiliarization*. As Shklovsky used it, the term refers to specific rhetorical devices, but also to the very essence of poetic language, or, more generally still, of art as such. Shklovsky defines art in terms of cognition (rather than imagery), as a form of representation which counteracts habitual, automatic, unconscious modes of perception:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. (...) And art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception... (Shklovsky 1991: 20).

Shklovsky defines defamiliarization as an aesthetic phenomenon, but his theory anticipates (and can be applied to) rhetorical strategies which employed the same effect to political ends – most famously, the technique of “estrangement” (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in the theater of Bertold Brecht, which imposed emotional detachment on the audience. Can this formula be usefully extended to feminist verbal practices? I believe that it can. Feminism is a critical discourse aimed to reveal the repressive nature of the existing social order, and the “ways of seeing” it favors. The goal is to drive a wedge into customary modes of perception and communication, so as to make women’s invisibility visible. In order to achieve it – to make patriarchy appear strange – feminism developed its own variety of poetics of defamiliarization. Writes Shklovsky: “*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is unimportant*” (1991: 20, emphasis original). Viewed in this way, feminism is a way of experiencing the “artfulness” of patriarchy as a conceptual framework which makes women invisible. We are to see “the object” – an everyday instance of sexism, the concept of *natural difference*, the word *men* used to signify humanity, etc. – as though for the first time. Our surprise will lead us to an insight about the way patriarchy produces its own sanctions, makes itself appear natural, obliterates itself from our field of vision.

Clearly, such an “estrangement” effect requires an attitude towards reality more complex than that suggested by advice that feminists “smell the roses.” The point of feminism is not to confront roses (or anything else) directly, but to re-examine the cultural assumptions which produced our sense what a rose might be. Now, roses happen to occupy a rather precarious position between the natural and the cultural, the real and the imaginary, and have a symbolic affinity with blushing, romanticized femininity, with innocence on the one hand and desire on the other. Given all this, the admonition that feminists stop worrying about names for roses and smell the roses themselves appears, to put it gently, a rather unfortunate figure of speech.

Sylvia D. Hoffert argues convincingly that ante-bellum feminists developed a sophisticated rhetorical style, drawing their metaphors from the language of architecture, war, party politics, religion, and abolitionism, but consistently avoided vocabulary associated with the home. Their strategy, she claims, was designed to rhetorically remove women from the realm of domesticity – i.e. from the cognitive and metaphorical framework which determined women’s position, and framed the limits of 19th century cultural debates about gender roles (Hoffert 1995: 53-72). The language of modern feminism, too, is aimed to bring about a certain “removal,” or – to recall Shklovsky again – estrangement. Marked by a “unique combination of anger and optimism” (Baxandall & Gordon 2000: 6), feminist language aims not so

much to convince, as to engineer a radical change in the very terms of debate. It tampers with the all-important distinction between the private and the public, and extricates the reality of culture (gender and inequality) from generally held ideas about nature (sex, and the supposedly natural differences that follow from it). The estrangement effect is achieved through repetition, self-reflexivity, and such narrative devices as reversal, and shifting perspectives (e.g. *I Want a Wife* by Judy Sifers [1973] or *What If Freud Were Phyllis?* by Gloria Steinem [1994]).

Conclusions

If feminist politics is so conspicuously a poetics, it is because the feminist project defines itself in terms of communication. Breaking into a conversation from which one has been excluded and making the exclusion itself a subject of the conversation – this is the logic of the feminist intervention into culture. This claim may appear to blur important historical and ideological distinctions within American feminist discourse: between the First, the Second and the Third Wave; or between liberal, radical and cultural feminism. It is a diagnosis, however, that consciously overrides these differences. Focus on language – and the deconstructive rather than constructive logic of feminist thought – is a feature that goes back the farthest in the movement's history, and brings together feminists of disparate strands. Meta-linguistic reflection accompanied feminist claims at least since Seneca Falls. The metaphor of “awakening” is implicit in many early texts, explicit in throughout Second Wave discourse, and nostalgically (or ironically) evoked by Third-Wavers. The idea that “the personal is political” and the parallel between racism and sexism also cut across factions, wings, and stages of the movement. Above all, the inclusive narrative about a collective female *voice* breaking the *silence* of patriarchal disregard for women has, again and again, allowed alliances to be built across ideological divides. Within this scenario – one reflected in the slogan “sisterhood is powerful” – Friedan's NOW could co-operate with “those radicals” in building an effective, though heterogeneous, movement, while at least some of the radicals cooperated with the mainstream feminist magazine *Ms.* As Kathie Sarachild generously admitted, it was a “molotov cocktail that looked like a martini” (qtd. in Echols 1989: 154).

The dramatic tale about a voice breaking a silence is not merely one of the stories feminism tells about itself, but *the* feminist plot, the image organizing the movement's sense of what it is all about. The feminist self-narrative is one about starting “from scratch”: awakening, with amazement, anger, and exhilaration, to the reality

of one's situation. Thus defined, feminism appears to thrive on contrast: between numbing habit and sudden perception, between complacency and rebellion. In conclusion, let me suggest that the built-in problem of feminist rhetoric is not its excessive focus on language—such focus being unavoidable in a serious critique of culture—but rather its overwhelming reliance on a specific set of metaphors, namely, ones emphasizing contrast, breakthrough and identity. The figure of awakening is productive while it lasts, but it cannot be exploited endlessly. How many times can something be done “as if for the first time”? At which point does surprise (defamiliarization) change into an empty ritual? As I have argued elsewhere, the idea of “awakening” has, in recent decades, presented a serious challenge to a new generation of feminists (Graff 2002). The silence, Third-Wavers seem to feel, has been broken, and yet reality has refused to change. This realization has produced a whole new feminist rhetoric, one that is ironic, self-reflexive, and far less optimistic than the language of the Second Wave. The central dilemma (and self-defining metaphor) of the Third Wave of feminist writing is belatedness. Second Wave feminists often complained about the way their own predecessors had fallen into oblivion, but it now turns out that being endowed with knowledge of one's history can also be a burden. A sense of continuity is hardly an asset within a rhetorical tradition whose organizing figure include “breaking the silence,” “starting from scratch” or “awakening from slumber.” Unable to draw on feminism's central metaphors, Third Wavers thematize their own belatedness. But finding oneself where others have been before is hardly a narrative capable of supporting a politically viable identity. Indeed, both as a movement and as a rhetoric, the Third Wave appears to be in a perpetual state of crisis, and in search of a new metaphorical framework.

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O odmowie włączania róż: feminizm amerykański jako praktyka retoryczna

Dlaczego w tradycji retorycznej amerykańskiego feminizmu tak wiele uwagi poświęca się językowi i co z tego wynika? Ruch kobiecy sam postrzega się w kategoriach językowych, jako „głos przerywający ciszę”. W jego metaforycznej auto-narracji grupa kobiet osiąga świadomość wspólnoty losu poprzez rozmowę, dochodzi do politycznego „przebudzenia” i „przełamania milczenia”. Ta wizja, ukazująca mowę jako działanie, stanowi oś feministycznej tożsamości, łącząc feminizm liberalny z radykalnym. Celem jest przededefiniowanie kategorii *prywatne* i *publiczne* oraz nazwanie na nowo społecznej rzeczywistości, tak by ukazać jej represyjność wobec kobiet.

Drużga część artykułu dotyczy słowa *seksizm*, w zestawieniu z rywalami (*dyskryminacja*, *szowinizm*) i pierwowzorem (*rasizm*). Kluczem jest specyficznie rozumiana kategoria polityczności, którą feministki starają się wprowadzić do głównego nurtu kultury. Wraz *seksizm* się przyjął, powstaje jednak pytanie o mechanizm „wchłaniania” radykalnych

idei przez tradycyjną kulturę: na ile zmienia się kultura, a na ile sens przyjmowanych słów.

Część trzecia odnosi się do zarzutu, iż zainteresowanie językiem to współczesna choroba ruchu kobiecego, który powinien “zająć się wężaniem róż, zamiast martwić się, jakże nadać im imiona.” Meta-językowość jest integralną częścią tradycji feministycznej, a nie wynaturzeniem. Widać ją w już w *Deklaracji Sentymentów* z Seneca Falls (1848): jej *Preambula* to ironiczna przeróbka *Preambuli Deklaracji Niepodległości*, wskazująca na wpisana w język oryginału męską perspektywę. Feministyczna strategia retoryczna, polegająca na ukazywaniu na nowo dobrze znanej rzeczywistości, odpowiada zjawisku poetyckiemu opisanemu przez Szklowskiego jako ‘udziwnienie’. W konkluzjach pada pytanie o problem wyczerpania retoryki, która w znacznym stopniu opiera się na wizji przełomu, zdziwienia i przebudzenia.