
Derrida's Gift. Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 16.3.
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Volume 16.3 of the journal of feminist cultural studies *Differences* is a special issue commemorating the recent death of Jacques Derrida in 2005. Contributions by some of today's best known critics honor Derrida's memory while reflecting on his generous theoretical gift to the field of gender studies and post-critical theory as a whole. Each of the essays contained in this short volume acknowledges its critical debt to Derrida's work in its own way, taking up one or several of the many questions, concepts, and figures of everyday thought that Derrida addressed in his remarkably encompassing work. Some essays, focusing for example on "death," "survival," and their fundamental relation to the structural concept of the "trace," ponder the way to properly mourn the passing of one who never ceased reflecting on the spectral quality of life itself (Kamuf, Gallop, Butler, Bartkowski). Others focus more specifically on Derrida's contributions to the thinking of gender and feminism analyzing how "difference" played and continues to play a critical role in gender constitution (Berger, Grosz, McDonald, and the transcript of a 1984 Pembroke Seminar session published by the editorial board of Brown undergraduate journal). Others again, concentrating on such seminal concepts and practices as "time," "metaphor," and reading, expose the general economy of contamination at play in each of these conceptual "gifts" (Cheah, Bernstein, Spivak). Finally, two essays (Cornell and Scott), voicing a common indignation about the obscene mediatic onslaught unleashed upon Derrida's memory at the time of his death, take this opportunity to remind us how the gift of his legacy continues to open for us the "promise" of a future, a future in which thinking may be engaged not only philosophically but also politically and ethically.

Given the number of contributions enclosed in this volume, I will not be able to give more than a general overview of a few texts. Trying to summarize the entire collection of essays would be futile; and since the analysis of the two main questions I mentioned above—those of mourning and feminism—allow for the broadest overviews, I have chosen to give a more detailed account of the essays which directly concern those. I apologize to the authors whose texts I leave aside. In their concision and general rigor, they are all equally deserving of a critique. I particularly admired Pheng Cheah's essay "Obscure Gifts: On Jacques Derrida" for his remarkably clear elucidation of the general—and necessarily "obscure"—economy at play in the Derridian conceptualizations of "time" and the "gift."

Like the collection itself, I will begin my overview with those essays attempting to show how the event of Derrida's death resonates with the legacy of a work so intimately bound with the questions of survival, inheritance, and the testamentary structure of writing. Peggy Kamuf and Judith Butler's essays are of particular note as they expose with clarity and elegance the structural equivocation of life and death—"survival" in its double meaning. Kamuf, reflecting on the difficult task of mourning the death of a friend and maintaining alive the legacy of another's life, shows how survival and mourning have always already begun with the impossible promise of friendship. Derrida, she reminds us, showed us that "No relation with the other begins except with (an) impossible double, at least double survival, destining and promising the relation to infinite repetition" (2). This structure present at the very core of our experience is what compels us, she adds, to the repetition of "writing" as well as the always already present duty of memory.

Butler, commenting Derrida's last interview with *Le Monde*, presents a similar argument showing how survival is a structural dimension of being. But her analysis, based on a careful analysis of the fundamental, and fundamentally Socratic, question of "learning how to die/live" (27), allows her to add a needed counterview to this apparently mournful philosophy of "spectrality." To those who would deplore the petrified and aporetic aspects of his thinking and its alleged inability to open to any kind of theoretical future or practical legacy, she shows how this very thought is, before all, an affirmation of life in its most difficult aspects. The most important legacy of Derrida's life and work is contained, she says, in the last words read at his funeral—"affirmez la survie" (34)—and it is up to us to maintain ourselves open— theoretically, ethically, and politically—to the difficult legacy of this imperative.

It is precisely this imperative for openness—what Derrida also thought of as "hospitality"—its call for maintaining open the critical space of a future and/or otherness, which compels the cultural concerns of those studies attempting to understand what role the Derridian concept of "difference" has played in recent feminist and gender studies. The three essays of Christie MacDonald, Emmanuelle Berger, and Elizabeth Grosz take up this question through a common analysis of what has been Derrida's main contribution to feminist theory: the deconstruction of a feminism based on gender identity and opposition. Christie MacDonald, while addressing the question of the theoretical choices she made in her intellectual journey, reminds us of what was at stake in her 1982 famous interview with Jacques Derrida "Choreographies," namely Derrida's seminal questioning of a dualistic model opposing man to woman and his radical displacement of this duality through the invention of "an incalculable choreography" of "sexually marked voices" (38). Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, taking as her point of departure a question asked by Derrida in the same

seminal interview—“Must one think ‘difference’ ‘before’ sexual difference of ‘taking off’ ‘from’ it?” (52)—gives a subtle reading of the ambiguity of the question’s wording and guides us once again through the interview’s radical meditation on the connection between dance, difference, reading, and sexuality. Finally, Elisabeth Grosz, whose careful recapitulation of the history of feminist theory gives a very useful context to the questions raised above, analyzes how feminism has moved in the recent years from a diacritic to a plural understanding of “difference” and how it has become a “new kind of critique” committed to the “full elaboration of difference and its uncontrollable and uncontainable movements of differentiation or becoming” (92). The import of this questioning is not only to take up again the theoretical question of the construction of gender but also, as the transcript of the Pembroke Seminar clearly shows, to continue thinking the political and cultural role of Women Studies and their place in today’s institutions of learning.

Beyond its rigor and intelligence, the real merit of this collection lies in the depth and intimacy of each contributor’s engagement with Derrida’s teachings. It shows us that, beyond philosophy and academia and far beyond polemics, Derrida’s work deeply affects the lives of those who read him. This is the infinite generosity of Derrida’s gift. ✱