

REVIEW ESSAYS

FEMINISM'S FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

FEMINISM, THE FAMILY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE CLOSET: LESBIAN AND GAY DISPLACEMENT by Cheshire Calhoun. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000. 172 pp. \$29.00.

LINE DRAWINGS: DEFINING WOMEN THROUGH FEMINIST PRACTICE by Cressida J. Heyes. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000. 223 pp. \$17.95.

Staging two new interventions into the relationship of feminist theory and practice, Cheshire Calhoun and Cressida Heyes invoke the figure of the family to explore the limits of antiessentialist critique. While Heyes plays on Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances to recast feminist theory's attachment to feminist political practice, Calhoun's analysis emphasizes the power of the family as an institution for lesbian politics. The two authors share a concern over forms of antiessentialism that remain detached from particular political problems and agendas, while employing very different strategies to transform the stalemate between antiessentialism and political organizing into the possible creation of new categories and practices of public and private association. Heyes and Calhoun appropriate, respectively, the conservative traditions of linguistic philosophy and familial politics. Together, these strategies raise the central question of whether the figure of the family can be effectively appropriated for radical transformation of the coercive institutions and traditions these authors (and feminism more broadly) seek to unsettle.

In an insightful and persuasive intervention into feminist essentialism debates, Cressida Heyes's *Line Drawings: Defining Women through Feminist Practice* offers what she dubs a Wittgensteinian genre of theorizing in order to save antiessentialism from a gender skepticism that strips feminism of its political relevance and conceptual tools. Animated by the anxiety that there is a growing gap between theory and practice in antiessentialist criti-

cism, Heyes seeks a third alternative to the undesirable choice between a principled but politically bereft commitment to antiessentialism and the overgeneralized deployments of the category “women” conducted in the name of empirical research and political practice. Heyes adapts Wittgenstein’s critique of how philosophy’s “craving for generality” erases the particular case (p. 5) to show how both essentialist claims about who constitutes “women” and antiessentialist claims to “difference” for the sake of difference do just that: erase the particularity of power relations and political claims in feminist theory and practice. Heyes is sympathetic to the critiques of essentialism lodged by Elizabeth Spelman and Maria Lugones, but she also worries that responses to these critiques may pull the rug out from under feminist practice if a commitment to difference and fragmentation are divorced from analysis of social realities. She advocates a return to the particular case not as a flight from theory to practice, but as a relocation of antiessentialist criticism onto the “rough ground” (p. 63) of feminist practice.

Offering her own feminist philosophical investigations in fourteen related but disjointed paragraphs interwoven with passages from *Philosophical Investigations*, Heyes invokes Wittgensteinian philosophy stylistically as well as conceptually in an engaging experiment with Wittgenstein’s aphoristic style. Adapting a quote from Wittgenstein, she says,

We extend our concept of women as in spinning a thread we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers. (P. 80)

Here, Heyes creatively invokes a concept in theoretical and political projects while at the same time articulating her own style of feminist engagement with philosophy, unapologetically pushing Wittgenstein’s insights in directions entirely different from what he would have envisioned.

Heyes’s two-pronged approach seeks to strengthen feminists’ commitment to antiessentialism while also countering the gravitation within such criticism toward the frictionless terms of epistemology and ontology (p. 63). This craving for frictionless generalization appears in claims to “difference” that are divorced from an examination of which lines of difference are most salient to particular relations of oppression. As an example, Heyes compares the claims to represent and include men and poor women of color in organizations against sexual violence. Drawing on empirical patterns of sexual violence, Heyes justifies the particular organization’s decision to acknowledge the latter claim but not the former. The provisional and narrowly situated nature of these judgments counters essentialist tendencies towards universalizing claims about women and sexual violence.

In order to better navigate the middle ground between overgeneralization and endless fragmentation, Heyes invokes Wittgenstein's admonition to philosophers to return to the field of practice, to the uncooperative and messy sites of language use in which meaning is produced. Heyes provides us with two Wittgensteinian tools to stage this return from ontology to politics—purposive line-drawing and family resemblances. Adopting Wittgenstein's rejection of concepts as a priori constructions that provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for speech, Heyes proposes that we understand "women as connected to each other by a network of overlapping similarities . . . but no single characteristic" (p. 84) as in Wittgenstein's fiber analogy. Consequently, the delineation of contested concepts like "women" becomes the product of political and strategic practices of conceptual line-drawing rather than epistemological problems that must be solved prior to political action.

Heyes's Wittgensteinian tools push feminists to engage in political judgment as a contingent and contextual practice rather than as a practice guided by determinately fixed categories. Fragmenting categories through anti-essentialist critique can be a powerful tool of feminist analysis in both theory and practice, but attention to difference alone does not dictate which groups should be included in various social identities and coalitions. At times particular political aims and contexts may be strengthened by breaking down restrictive categories, at others the circumstances of political claim making may also require that we more narrowly delineate concepts to make particular claims more useful and strategic. Central for Heyes is the question of what political ends may be served by fragmenting categories since fragmentation can be used against feminist political agendas as well as in support of them: "Feminist antiessentialism is a political method for avoiding the reinscription of relations of oppression, not a justification for ignoring them" (p. 172). By detaching antiessentialist critiques from analyses of power in particular contexts, we fail to differentiate between the essentialism of oppressive practices and the essentialism entailed in the creation and use of any category. The latter essentialism is part of an effacement of difference that is characteristic of language itself. For Heyes, these two forms of essentialism are not equally deserving of our attention as feminist theorists and the difference lies in the issues and implications for particular political contexts.

Heyes's argument is animated by her own set of examples from feminist politics, including feminist organizing against sexual violence, the inclusion of male-to-female transsexuals, and Carol Gilligan's work on girls' voices. These examples not only make apparent the political stakes of her conceptual moves; they also situate Heyes's concerns within a tradition of feminist theory and practice to which she remains committed, albeit critically. Heyes

finds much to appreciate in these examples and holds to the hope of “excavating and restoring those projects that have been buried underneath the disapprobative rubble of theoretical anti-essentialism” (p. 136). These rereadings tend, however, to produce relatively intuitive conclusions that do not fully capture the sweep of Heyes’s contribution to rethinking antiessentialism. Her conclusion that feminist organizers against sexual violence may have good reason to address the concerns of poor women but do not need to offer the same participatory roles to male volunteers as female does not fully dramatize the zero-sum stakes that can arise in particular political contexts. This criticism does not undermine the valuable and innovative quality of Heyes’s analysis, but her case would be more compelling with examples that demonstrated the differences between her Wittgensteinian feminist reading and ontological or epistemological approaches.

Cheshire Calhoun’s critique of the terms of lesbian inclusion in feminism’s category of “women” in *Feminism, the Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement* provides a more complicated terrain for reconceiving our political and theoretical categories. Calhoun claims that feminist theory has become yet another closet in which lesbian identity is subsumed under heterosexual categories. With this challenge, she seeks to delineate the particular nature of lesbian oppression at the price of a single feminist standpoint on the family. Her line-drawing through the subject of feminist theory is motivated by a concern over the effacement of lesbian and other agendas that may conflict with those of heterosexual feminists. In this way, Calhoun engages in Heyes’s politically motivated redrawing of the category of women, albeit without explicit debt to Wittgenstein.

Citing Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum as a paradigm of lesbian theorizing within a feminist frame, Calhoun argues that feminist theory emphasizes commonalities among women rather than differences between heterosexual women and lesbians, thus obscuring a separate axis of heterosexual oppression. At issue in this separate axis is the question of whether heterosexual oppression can operate independently from, as well as in tandem with, gender oppression. Calhoun wants to unsettle the assumptions that heterosexism is a subset of gender oppression and that it obeys the same logic as gender, race, and class oppression. Disrupting the organic and analogous relationship between heterosexual and gender oppression opens up the possibility that countering gender oppression may not always call for the same political goals and strategies as fighting heterosexist oppression.

Calhoun claims that emphasizing shared political goals among all women, heterosexual and lesbian, reinstantiates the heteronormative pressure to subsume a distinct lesbian identity under the category of heterosexual women. The failure of feminism to make space for the “lesbian not-woman”

(p. 160) by assuming that what is good for women is always good for lesbians has obscured the particularities of lesbian oppression, specifically their exclusion from the politically foundational institutions of marriage and the family. At the same time, she wants to challenge the inference from racial and gender oppression to heterosexist oppression, arguing for a fundamental asymmetry between identities that are “readily identifiable” (p. 80) like race and gender and those that can be concealed. Calhoun draws a new dichotomy of forms of oppression between the “disadvantageously placed” position of raced and gendered subjects, who occupy visible but disadvantaged social locations, and the “displaced” position of gay men and lesbians, whose subordination is marked by their absence from public and protected private spheres (p. 16).

The political agendas of lesbians may differ from agendas of heterosexual women. The former are denied access to family and marriage while the latter see traditional family and marriage as a site of oppression. Although Calhoun denies that gaining access to marriage and family must mean access to the traditional, oppressive forms of those institutions, she also insists that “strategies designed to resist lesbian subordination . . . are not guaranteed to counter gender oppression” (pp. 154-55). Advocating a break with gender as the primary category of analysis, Calhoun proposes that lesbians must join with gay men in an uncompromising prioritization of access to family and marriage. Calhoun closes her book with the sentiment that the future of lesbian feminism depends upon the potential within feminism to recognize that for now lesbian oppression must be analyzed and addressed through the lens of heterosexism rather than sexism. Her critique emphasizes sharp lines of distinction between axes of oppression that seem to demand a choice from lesbian feminists between one identity category over another. But the rhetorical force of Calhoun’s argument, in fact, lies in the incommensurate nature of lesbian oppression, which garners a sense of urgency to her political claims but also threatens to refuse even partial political and theoretical alliances. As an example Calhoun might have taken up literature on racial passing to develop the particular nature of the phenomenon of political displacement. Similarly, the situation of single mothers on welfare might constitute an overlapping group—also construed as outlaws to the family—without necessarily obscuring the heterosexist axis of oppression.

The value of family resemblances as a supplement to conceptual line-drawing comes to the forefront when Calhoun acknowledges but cannot accommodate the claim that pursuit of family and marriage rights for gays and lesbians may lead to privileging of married couples and families over nonmarried lesbians and gay men. Once Calhoun’s lines are drawn around lesbians and gay men as political allies, she is unresponsive to the differential

impact of her familial politics. As Heyes and Calhoun would both argue, not every line of political difference can or should be accommodated, but surely the effects of a familial politics on those who choose not to marry or have children carries important consequences for both feminist and gay and lesbian politics.

Calhoun's profamily agenda puts her at great pains to demonstrate why her argument is not a conservative repudiation of feminist and queer theory. Her uncompromising position stems from a recognition of the foundational role the family has traditionally taken in political life. The foundational status of the family justifies Calhoun's prioritization of access to the family and marriage, but her position threatens to ally her with antifeminist and antigay politics. To get out of this bind, Calhoun proposes an alternative definition of the familial institution she endorses. Late in the book, Calhoun seeks familial status for gays and lesbians, which includes more than formal inclusion in a traditional nuclear family. It entails as well the authority to participate in and thereby potentially redefine what form(s) marriage and family may legitimately take in our cultural and legal practices.

Calhoun points to a history of heterosexual deviation from traditional family forms that are nonetheless contained within legal and cultural norms in order to demonstrate that marriage and family rights are rights to redefinition as well as inclusion. With this brief historical account, Calhoun draws on overlapping definitions of family that suit her political agenda and the particular form of oppression she targets. Buried within her analysis are the traces of a family resemblances approach, one that enables Calhoun to articulate a vision of gay and lesbian inclusion in the family while shifting the family from prepolitical foundations onto the terrain of political contestation and the redefinition of lived practices. While Calhoun's argument hinges on a pluralization of the concept of family, she does not use this insight to move her agenda toward dislodging the foundational and prepolitical role for the family.

Although Calhoun claims to be content with the inclusion of gays and lesbians in family as a foundational institution, her prescriptions imply a much broader desire to unsettle the prepolitical position of marriage and family in our political culture. On her own account, Calhoun's commitment to redrawing the boundaries of family and marriage to include same-sex partners and parents does not translate into a one-time formal declaration, but rather entails the same ongoing possibility of redefinition that characterizes heterosexual familial practices. Her vision of familial status as the right to engage in redefinition of the family does not fit, however, with her continued insistence that our familial practices are natural, prepolitical, and foundational. Calhoun's claim that familial status can be attained through a political agenda

that either endorses or opposes the family as a natural and prepolitical institution is at least in tension with her own conception of the family as contingently defined.

Bringing Heyes's feminist family resemblances approach to bear on this analysis of familial politics would enable Calhoun to find a broader set of allies in her opposition to exclusionary tendencies in dominant forms of the family. Furthermore, a Wittgensteinian aversion to rigid concepts and categories might provide greater resources in opening up the fixed institution of the family to more inclusive and liberatory redefinitions.

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