Feminism and the Human:
Remarks on a Singular Universal

Carla F. Scott
College of Geneva

Abstract
Feminism has always been concerned with what it saw as a particular conundrum present in the concept of the universal. Man poses as the universal subject, but nevertheless constructs a gaze of desire that parcelizes women into a precarious dialectic. For feminists the human becomes, at that moment, an imposter for man. As bearers of the task of both physical and cultural reproduction, women have access to the universal only through motherhood. By contrast, women who do not give birth are hazardous and uncertain, and thereby confined to the particular. This initial critique of the universal will nevertheless lead to ambivalence within feminist thought. Must it be abandoned definitively or is it possible to reclaim it in feminist terms? Is it possible to impose a rigorous discussion of the body on the universal imposter that tries so hard to ignore it? This paper engages the question of who speaks for the human in contemporary feminism by examining the call for a return to the universal by scholars like Naomi Schor, Julia Kristeva, Lucy Irigaray, and others.

Keywords
the universal, the particular, French feminism, humanism, de Beauvoir, Schor, Irigaray, Spivak, Kristeva, Ehrenreich, Abu Ghraib
Recent developments in feminism have demonstrated what is to be gained by diversification, but also what is to be lost by a premature renunciation of the universal, not the least of which is the cultural authority derived from speaking as a universal subject. . . . Reinscribing universalism on the agenda of feminism is, relatively speaking, the easy part. Determining what might constitute a specifically feminist universal for our time, which would, it appears, have something to do with a certain freedom of determination by women regarding what is done to their bodies (rape, sati, clitoridectomy, enforced sterilization, and enforced reproduction are some of the dubious practices that come to mind as necessitating a feminist universal to be combated) presents a far more daunting challenge. We must not let our fear of the old universalism prevent us from meeting that challenge. (Schor 27)

This passage concludes Naomi Schor’s courageous and controversial essay “French Feminism Is a Universalism.” It illustrates, in no uncertain terms, the contentious relationship that feminism has with the universal and, by extension, humanism itself. What is the “old universalism” that she critiques in the conclusion of her essay? In other words, what exactly is the relationship between feminism and the human?

Here the answer is a nod to the work of feminism and its relation to the universal within the history of thought. By nature a universal is the total or the entire. It is all-encompassing, unlimited, and all-reaching in collective and/or distributive terms. The task of feminism, however, turned to proving that the history of thought has undermined the integrity of an all inclusive universal. The universal was, in fact, a mask for a male gaze that resulted in the subsuming of female difference under the rubric of the political and cultural subject. Old universalism, in short, precluded the promise of the universal by excluding anything that differed from it, particularly in material terms. The task of feminism turned to intervening into this male gaze by forcing it to foreground female difference. The universal, which is supposed to embody the total, has, in fact, held the female body at bay.

Schor nevertheless realizes a problem with certain elements of this critique of the old universal. How does one restore this promise of total inclusiveness to it? Her answer lies in restoring a “freedom of determination” in the universal to which women would have access. Reconstructing a universal as a possibility for the diverse would allow women to become a political body of determination in most
forms of the state. Under the old universal this possibility has been thwarted. Reconfiguring the universal as a possibility for the diverse allows women to speak from a position of "cultural authority." Instead of subsuming difference, a feminist universal would recognize difference as essential to its totality.

Schor, both in this essay and throughout the body of her work, makes it clear that the abandonment of humanism explicit in the feminist critique of the universal has its limitations within the contemporary political framework. An anti-universalist position can no longer contend with the "dubious practices" of the state that women face as human beings in material terms. French feminism, in Schor’s view, is an important departure for why engaging the universal is essential to feminist thought.

I want to engage Schor’s essay on French Feminism not only because of the narrative of feminism that she gives, but also because of her commitment to “the freedom of determination by women regarding what is done with their bodies” (27). It is impossible to understand the complex relationship that feminism has to the human without reviewing a certain understanding of the universal within the history of feminist thought. My initial questions are what is at stake in the portrait of feminism that Schor constructs? Second, what is she implying in her understanding of subjectivity? Finally, why is a feminist universal essential to achieving a freedom for a female body that would determine its own political and cultural authority?

What’s Potentially Wrong with French Feminism?

Schor first situates her discussion of the universal within the larger paradigm of feminist thought since the French Revolution. One of the key aspects of feminism has been its attack on the principles of Enlightenment. Given her engagement of these questions in political terms, Schor compares and contrasts the relationship that both France and the United States have to the concept of the universal in national terms. What has been neglected in noting the difference between the two versions is what she calls “the purchase of the universal in both national discourses and ideologies” (Schor 4). Citing the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Schor sets the terms for her initial reading of the universal. “Whereas America . . . stakes its claim to representing the universal on the moral superiority vested in it by God and the constitution, France stakes its claim on the relationship to the universal revolution” (qtd. in Schor 5). French universalism, in other words, is the original paradigm and thereby gives it a privileged historical relationship to the universal.

1 Here the reference is made to Schor’s book entitled Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular.
Its national particularity is to embody the universal. Most importantly it is the political universal “on which others, notably America’s is modeled” (Schor 6).

Schor’s initial definition of the universal is posited in the event of 1789, the French revolution, and its promise of extending equal rights to all rational human beings. With 1789 we get the materialization of the body politic as modern democratic state emerges under the guise of the Rights of Man. Schor, to summarize, equates 1789 as a given that produces consciousness of a political subject with the authority to speak from an authorized position of culture and nation.

For women, however, this emergence of the body politic was not necessarily inscribed on the female body. The materiality subsumed under the word “woman,” as other to “man” posed a series of problems for the body politic captured in the term “1789.” Simply put, women were denied the right to vote and confined to the domestic sphere. Mary Wollstonecraft, with The Vindication of the Rights of Woman, and Olympe de Gouges, with The Declaration of the Rights of Woman respectively, would be the catalysts for what Schor calls the first wave of feminism. These women were the first to call for an extension of the Rights of Man to all rational beings, women included. To exclude women from the universal rights of Man was to undermine the promise of the political universal.

The initial problem that the universal posed for feminist thought prior to the 20th century was one of extension. Wollstonecraft and others exposed the uneasiness that the political universal had with female sexual difference. The task of feminism was to push for a universal to remember its initial premise of inclusion and promise. At this point a brief digression is in order as far as memory is concerned. Remembering at this point extends beyond the question of remembering a particular event as one’s personal or collective history. Remembering also has an initial meaning in the surgical re-attaching of a member to a body. Memory is a process of “re-membering” a series of events and re-attaching, in both personal and collective terms, different narratives to that process of remembering. It is that process of remembering that constitutes both memory and forgetting. Remembering is essential to memory itself for it calls to mind not only what we remember, but also to how we do so. This process of remembering and forgetting is essential not only to understanding a feminist narrative of the human but also the human itself. Early feminist thought would “re-member” the political subject that the universal already seemed intent upon forgetting.

We now close that digression by moving to the dramatic destabilization of the universal launched in the 20th century by Simone de Beauvoir in her classic work, The Second Sex. Schor summarizes Beauvoir’s intervention in the following way:
“It is not because of some deficiency remediable by education that women shy away from a tête-à-tête with the “given” but because men have preempted this cozy dialogue” (7). In Schor’s narrative, one can say that Beauvoir fully unmasked the human in the form of the political universal as an imposter. The human is really man posing as the universal at the expense of women who, as bearers of the task of reproduction, are denied that realm. She is always already gendered because she is defined as such. Beauvoir exposes the universal, in other words, as an inflated particular. What passes for the universal is the male gaze that confines women, within the definition of “woman.”

Just as feminists reproach the universal for its failure to take sexual difference seriously, the universal would also be attacked from the vantage point of racial difference. Schor will contrast the feminist contentions of the universal with ethnocentric critiques of it. She refers to the French approach to colonialization, for example, as a “universalism without guilt.” The wickedness and wit of Schor’s characterization is important and prescient at this point in her narrative; important because in the promise to extend equal rights to all rational human beings, colonialism was viewed by the French as an act of generosity. It saw itself as not colonizing the racial body, but rather deploying its own universal and giving others the chance to become subjects of its democratic ideal. Her remark is prescient because the price for that adherence is a disavowal of all that was not French. The process will further lead to the beginnings of a dominant universal that will, in political terms, hierarchize the particular.

In American feminism, Beauvoir’s unmasking of the universal’s patriarchal aspects would merge with a critique of the American version of this ethnocentric notion of the universal. The valorization of rights vested in the moral is tainted with the legacy of slavery in the United States. Just as Beauvoir exposes man as the sole incarnation of the universal, American feminism would also be affected by its racist effects. One of the consequences of the universal is its demotion of not only women, but also blacks and other people of color to the particular. Schor states, “Ultimately it is power that underwrites the hierarchy of the particular and the universal” (10). Racism has the violent effect of preempting the universal for whites and relegating blacks and other people of color to the margins. The universal is also unmasked as a dual ethnocentric/patriarchal particular.

That coupling will, of course, produce a relentless attack on universalism that Schor refers to as second-wave feminism in the American context. What resulted was a series of chain reactions that took apart the power relationships spawned from

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2 Beauvoir’s work will be discussed in detail in latter paragraphs.
this ethnocentric and patriarchal universal. In the 1980’s, for example, black feminists “accused feminists of pre-empting feminism.” Schor reminds us that in the 1980’s black literary critics and feminists like Barbara Christian, bell hooks, and Hazel Carby denounced white feminists “for universalizing the category of white woman without taking into account the racial and class difference that distinguish and divide women” (10). What is of interest to Schor, however, is that this attack did not lead to a complete renunciation of the universal by black feminists. For Christian, in particular that investment in the universal was situated in aesthetic terms. Irked by the refusal of the American university to take Afro-American writing or studies seriously, Afro-American theorists engaged in the project of building a counter canon of black women’s writing; a process that entails some allegiance to the notion of the universal.

Let’s take inventory of the parcels that Schor has presented thus far. The first is the feminist parcel of exclusion as a failure of extending the universal. On the one hand, early feminism critiqued the universal because it failed to extend this promise to women. It would not recognize the feminist body in political terms. Excluded from the promise of the rights of man, 1789 is also that given that produces a political consciousness in women of themselves as agents for political change.

The problem of race and the colonial subject, on the other hand, introduces a different problem of extension. The (colonial) political subject is included in the universal. He can have rights on the grounds that a historical specificity other than 1789 is disavowed. The terms of promise and inclusion are consequently imbued with a different tension. To disavow a historical specificity in the name of a universal is to create the grounds by which the colonial subject can enter the realm of political universal. The inclusion of the racially different within the universal clearly necessitates a “re-membering” of the universal political in order to forget racial difference. To promise, in short, is to colonize. This racial parcel now introduces a different series of problems. The goal for feminists is the promise of inclusion. The racial subject, however, is promised inclusion as long as he understands that to disavow is to universalize.

Schor’s ordered political subject can now be renamed, provisionally the “universal human.” Why does it promise and what does it need to extend? The conflict over the old universal will provide an initial answer. That is the universal is reconfigured as a two-tiered universal/diverse configuration. There a universal configuration of the universal/diverse where the diverse is equated with the male gaze in the form of patriarchal structure. The particular that is excluded is female sexual difference. Second, there is a universal/diverse axis where the problem of the
particular is rooted in the disavowal of ethnos. In short we see the emergence of a revolution where what is at stake is not real change but an elliptical or circular process. Expose the problem of the universal, liberate those from this exclusion so they may become part of its workings, and incorporate that very liberation into an understanding of the universal human.

Schor, in my view, recognizes these problems within the old universal. She is reluctant nevertheless to embrace the early work of Judith Butler, who, on these grounds, disavows gender itself as a universalism. Butler, in Schor’s view, proceeds to part ways with the universal human on the grounds that the political subject that it produces is by default heterosexual. According to Schor, Butler hopes to direct her critique at politics, or the hypothetical female subject for politics. Schor argues, “the feminist subject, in other words, is constructed by the very juridical power to which she addresses her claim to emancipation” (14). What Butler calls for is an anti-foundational approach to the political that would have its roots in questioning coalitional identity politics. The problem, for Schor, lies not so much with Butler’s constructionism, but the fact that “she instantiates a decisive rupture with the ideals of feminism as constructed around the Enlightenment concept of human universals” (14).

With Butler’s anti-humanist critique a certain evolution of critiques of the Universal now reach their culmination. The movement from the mixture of a patriarchal, then ethnocentric, and then heterosexist critique produced two moments: “on the one hand the promotion of those subjectivities whose marginalization underwrites the classic Enlightenment production of the universal, and on the other, the loss of commonality, of any positive access to the universal” (Schor 14-15).

At this point I would disagree with Schor’s characterization of Butler’s work. Despite Butler’s recognition of the problems inherent in the universal human and her attempt to escape them, she nevertheless creates her own two-tiered version of this same problem. Butler does not enact a rupture with the universal precisely because she identifies gender itself as part of its overall schema. Butler consequently reconstructs a two-tiered scheme: the universal is equated with gender, where gender is synonymous with a heterosexual identity, verses bodily practices, be they gay, transsexual, or linked to performance as a sexual modality. Can the marginalization that Butler calls for be outside of the universal? In my view, we once again have a two that presupposes a synthesis into one. Despite Butler’s calls for a rupture from the universal, implicit in her critique of juridical power via the category of gender is her implicit acceptance of a universal human as an ordered political subject.
Schor will create an interesting transition in the shift from her recounting of feminist renunciations of the universal to her turn to French feminism as a way of defending the need for it. She is in agreement with the attacks that have been launched on the universal as that which has not made room for the complexity of the singular. In fact the “old universal” as she calls it, has not lived up to its promises. What she refuses to accept, as her critique of Butler illustrates, is a definitive break with the ordered political subject. To renounce the authority of that position is to renounce the freedom of determination for the female body. Can that part of the universal be recuperated? Schor’s subsequent turn toward the project of French feminism is offered as a possible solution to that question.

**Schor, Irigaray, and Hegel**

Schor characterizes the French feminist project as an attack on the place of women within the universal. This attack will differ from the preoccupations of American feminists in that the French feminists concerned themselves with the place of the female body within the history of thought. Just as American feminism attacked the ethnocentric relationship of the universal, French feminism contended with its phallocentric aspects as illustrated in the work of Hegel. Schor, in other words, will connect the exclusion of women from the universal human with Hegel’s concept of language as mediation. Luce Irigaray’s preoccupation with Hegel will become central to Schor’s defense of French feminism, and thus her call for the recuperating of the universal.

What brings Irigaray to Hegel, according to Schor, is “Hegel’s philosophical legitimation of the ideology of gender set into place by the French revolution in the wake of such Enlightenment philosophies as Rousseau’s” (18). Hegel’s insistence on woman’s confinement to the private realm is responsible, at the level of the state, for women’s status as secondary citizens. Irigaray consistently returns to Hegel in order to get a better understanding of the nature of this exclusion. It is clear that implicit in Irigaray’s critique of Hegel will be a continuation of certain aspects of Beauvoir’s project of unmasking of “Man” in the human. Schor characterizes Hegel’s universal as phallocentric because woman “has no access to the public universal, except through her husband, what she lacks is the ability to desire, to love which is always particularistic” (19).

At stake in Irigaray’s engagement with Hegel is his preoccupation with language, as well as his presupposition with woman having access to the universal through marriage exclusively. “Whereas the universal that Beauvoir wants to access
is gender neutral, Irigaray’s is gender specific.” (Schor 19; Irigaray 45). Irigaray’s parole feminine must be seen in light of that project. That is to say, women, in order to have access to a universal of their own, need a gendered access to language.

What marks the project of French feminism is its insistence on a split universal. Schor looks to the projects of both Luce Irigaray and lesbian writer Monique Wittig, precisely because of their relationships to language. Irigaray seeks to feminize the universal by “imprinting personal pronouns with the stamp of the feminine.” Wittig’s aim, on the other hand is to “experiment with personal pronouns in order to free writing by women and especially by lesbians, of the restrictive regime of gender, of the shackles of the universal (straight) mind” (Schor 24).

It is precisely this engagement of the universal, and its place in history, that is of interest to Schor. She states, “in short what is missing in Hegel is (among other things) any notion of a sexual difference that would inhabit the universal, split in two, producing what Gayatri Spivak nicely calls a ‘bicameral universal’” (20).

Once again a pause is in order to take into account the parcel that Schor offers as a solution to the problem of the old universal. Given Schor’s investment in the freedom of determination for the female body the double nature of the term “bicameral” here captures the central problem in what her concept of the universal implies. Bicameral, in political terms, suggests two legislative chambers. As I have argued previously, Schor has an understanding of 1789 as the given that produces a consciousness of the universal as the ordering of the political subject. In this way the universal would always already have a two-tiered structure: universal/diverse, that then undertakes a constant circular revolution that could be summarized in the following terms: difference, formerly excluded from the patriarchal/ethnocentric universal is subsequently liberated and thereby incorporated into a singularization of the universal on feminist terms. This new, improved universal then leads to an ordering of a political subject who is a body that determines. What we have in short is the universalization of the singular.

Yet notice what happens in this elliptical movement. We see the shifting of the problem of the universal onto Schor’s two-tiered solution of universalization. Are we truly free of the universal in this instance? What I now propose is a response to this question via an examination of the second sense of the term “bicameral.” What must be examined at length is the French Feminist project in so far as it has been an attempt to construct a bicameral transcendental subject. What is the nature of this two-tiered subject that French feminism has advocated and what it its relationship to humanism?
A return to Hegel presents us with an initial series of answers. Hegel conceived of language as a mechanism of mediation. Language expresses the “true content” for the autonomous and internal process of coming to consciousness that occurs within the subject. Language, according to Hegel, is an expression of “pure being” for the subject (Hegel 58-66). Language takes on a totality that would bring time itself under the sway of the subject, thereby becoming a vehicle of mediation. Language is subsequently detached from the immediacy of time and the event. This displacement of language plays a vital role in his configuration of the master/slave relationship: whereas the master is equated with spirit or true consciousness, the slave is dependent upon immediate consciousness. What Hegel constructs, in short, is a bodiless and ungendered subject of knowledge.

Put simply, we can return with this (all too) brief revisitation of Hegel to this question of the given and its place within the relationship between feminism and the human. As stated earlier the given presents the modern subject with a certain dilemma. We can provisionally define it as the direct, immediate irreducible material in the form of presentations, feelings, and appearances that become the foundation for knowledge. The given is that which leads to the production of consciousness. The relationship to that coming to consciousness is essential to the “human” in humanism.

Beauvoir, Kristeva, and the Human

In The Second Sex Simone de Beauvoir will expose a certain conundrum in the relationship women have to the given. As bearers of the task of reproduction, “Woman” presents metaphysics with the doubleness of deception and disappointment, as illustrated in the quote below.

She is all the Other. And, as the other, she is other than herself, other than what is expected of her. Being all, she is never quite this which she should be, she is everlasting deception. The very deception of that existence which is never successfully attained nor fully reconciled with the totality of existents. (Beauvoir 279)

Of interest to me here is Beauvoir’s phrase “other than herself.” Beauvoir creates a split in the process of how women come to consciousness of themselves as “woman.” What Beauvoir calls the existent is a bodiless, ungendered subject of knowledge. Women, however, are plagued with a split consciousness. As bearers of
the task of reproduction, women are confined to the realm of immanence. A woman’s capacity for this realm of a pure gender-free consciousness is thwarted by her immanent relationship to sexual difference. On the inside women have the capacity for this existent realm as bodiless, ungendered subjects of knowledge, on the outside, however, they are bodied and gendered as subjects of experience. Women, in everyday life, are subsumed within the humanistic concept of “woman.” At this point there will be ramifications in Beauvoir’s project that go unrecognized in Schor’s discussion of French feminism. Beauvoir connects the universal to this capacity of the subject to come to a transcendent consciousness. The human is an imposter for man’s capacity to imprison women within the realm of reproduction. Women, in Beauvoir’s view, can step out of the prison of immanence only by disavowing the womb and its function.

The split consciousness that Beauvoir produces is what needs to be understood, in my view, as the initial attempt by feminists to understand a male gaze. The universal was not inclusive but rather a ruse for man to confine women within the realm of subject of experience. “Woman,” is the category that captures how humanism sees the female body as a scandal to its very workings. In contemporary terms a scandal is oversimplified as a cause of moral stumbling that will produce a series of effects or events that discredit a person. Essential to the genealogy of this term its original ground in ecclesiastics as something that hinders reception of the faith or obedience to the divine law; it is an occasion of unbelief. A scandal, in short is a trap in thought, or something that hinders its reception. Beauvoir, in short, reveals how this construct of “woman” produces a trap in thought for humanism. It does not have to deal with the materiality of woman as long as they are confined to the realm of experience.

Feminism is forever indebted to the brilliance of Beauvoir’s challenge to humanism, but it also would react against what was conceptually presupposed in her framework. The first wave of feminists will be uncomfortable with Beauvoir’s complete acceptance of the inside/out split in the process of women’s coming to consciousness. That is, women are subjects of knowledge on the outside and always, already subjects of desire on the inside. This inside/outside split in the process of coming to consciousness does indeed go unchallenged in Beauvoir’s work. That very formulation is essential for understanding the universal human.

This problematic in Beauvoir’s work is what Schor classifies as the “old universal.” Beauvoir’s framework forms the basis for women’s exclusion from the universal human and the possibilities afforded to the political subject. What Beauvoir does, is make the internal womb an external marker for female difference.
By calling upon women to disavow immanence, she implicitly accepts the presupposition of the universal human: namely, that female sexual difference should be displaced. It is that implication within Beauvoir’s reading of metaphysics that French Feminism reproaches.

Schor looks to Irigaray and Wittig due to their investment in language. Given the concept of the bicameral that she has sketched out, however, it is also necessary to consider Julia Kristeva’s response to Beauvoir in her essay *Stabat Mater*. Kristeva will intervene into Beauvoir’s disavowal of reproduction by confronting the precarious place of woman within an ethical construction of “woman” as having access to ethics only by imparting culture upon her child. There is a moment in that essay where Kristeva characterizes woman as a being of folds in pregnancy that is useful in our discussion of French feminism.

Although it concerns every woman’s body the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child’s arrival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility but not the certainty of reaching out to the other, the ethical.) These particularities of the maternal body compose woman into a being of folds, a catastrophe of being that the dialectics of the Trinity and its supplements would be unable to subsume. (Kristeva, 182-83)

In Kristeva’s framework the maternal body as a “being of folds” becomes the bio-physiological entity that escapes the symbolic. Kristeva defines the signifier as that which is “always meaning, communication, or structure” (ibid). As a “being of folds,” she is a material entity that cannot be contained exclusively within the terms of nature set by the boundaries of language, meaning, and structure. Kristeva reconstructs pregnancy as a given that produces consciousness in women of themselves as a two-tiered subject of knowledge. She is bodied and gendered in pregnancy, bodiless and ungendered in motherhood once the child is born. Kristeva challenges the refusal of the universal to deal with the materiality of women. It is clear that she intends to fracture Beauvoir’s inside/outside formulation of the universal subject.

Kristeva tries to construct an altogether different possibility from Beauvoir’s resignation to the idea that “woman” has access to the realm of the ethical only by raising her infant after she gives birth to it. As a catastrophe of being in pregnancy,
women are at the threshold of nature and culture. Pregnancy makes her a bodied and gendered being of folds. She becomes a “body-lect”—a scandal to the bodiless, ungendered notion of intellect. That is to say a bodied and gendered subject of knowledge that knowledge, grounded in the notion of the universal human, does not know.

Furthermore what is at stake in this critique of Beauvoir is what she calls a “herethics” (Kristeva 185). A “herethics” or, “heretical ethics” is an attempt to think through a formulation of motherhood that is not caught within a notion of the ethical that would exclude feminine difference. Reproduction is reformulated as a heretical ethics that represents the “matter” of ethics and its relationship to the universal human. The task is not to accept the male who poses as the universal, but rather to reinvent women who choose to reproduce as imposters. That is to say if woman is “other than herself” because she is defined by the gendered, than so be it. We gladly embrace this role of deception as “other” to the subject of knowledge. As bearers of the task of reproduction we embody a “bicameral universal” that legislates a split of the subject of knowledge in two.

I am insisting on this difference between the French concept of bicameral legislation and Schor’s subsequent appropriation of it because that appropriation leads Schor to dismiss the anti-humanism implicit in what the French feminists were attempting. Her characterization of French feminism as a universalism is nevertheless correct. The French feminist project does indeed end up recuperating the notion of the transcendental subject in its re-reading of humanism in feminist terms. Kristeva’s project critique’s Beauvoir’s displacement of the material by offering a herethics grounded in the physical difference of women as those who reproduce the species. Kristeva foregrounds, in other words, the difference that Beauvoir tries so hard to displace.

In each instance, however, both Kristeva and Beauvoir presuppose that woman is other than herself. That is, other than what is expected by the male gaze. Both Beauvoir and the French feminists who critique her presuppose a notion of gender where woman is defined as other to man. What we are left with, in both discussions of the universal, is a universal/particular formulation that is opposed to power. We have a universalization of the singular in French feminism where woman is always already gendered because she is defined as such. Gender and/or materiality are exclusively the parcel or property of the female.

It’s at this point that we must return to the provisional definition of the given that led us to Beauvoir’s framework of thought. The given is that which is presented to us in immediate consciousness. It becomes the basis for knowledge that
humanism has presupposed as autonomous and internal within the subject. In other words, what we see played out in her understanding of the ethical or gendered human is a notion of universal subjectivization. I’m now conscious of my “self” as the political subject and/or gendered subject that is an agent in the world. I am denied this possibility of existence and I will renounce reproduction for it means my imprisonment within immanence and repetition. Or, in the case of Kristeva, I am conscious of my “self” as the subject responsible for the perpetuation of the species. Therefore, I will embrace a concept of a bodied and gendered subject of knowledge as exclusively female. This bicameral notion of the subject of knowledge in French Feminism can now subsume Schor’s narrative. That is to say, I am consciousness of my “self” as part of a community that strives for the freedom of determination. In political terms I strive to become a body that determines.

This examination of both the political human in Schor’s narrative and the ethical human in French Feminism reveals that feminism has yet to get out from under the old universal. In the quest to engender the transcendental subject, feminism has never intervened into its workings. Instead it has embraced its very project of subsuming materiality under its ordering of knowledge. What has been the stumbling block in that process of grappling with the transcendental subject? Feminists were right to begin with Beauvoir’s premise: “Woman is always, already gendered because she is defined as the gendered.” Woman, in other words, is defined as gender as such.

Conclusion: By Way of Abu Ghraib

Let’s think out this process by revising the definition of the given presented earlier. Even though the given becomes the basis of knowledge it is not something that we ask for. It’s just there and we must contend with it. It is the materialization of something that will bring us to knowing, but also remind us of what is unknowable. Both are inextricably bound up together and that is what humanism, as articulated in modernity, has been unable to face. It seems to me that the future of feminism lies in confronting this parcelization of materiality that humanism has tried so desperately to repackage as knowledge independent of experience. Feminism has constructed a narrative of the human in which it tried to grapple with the problem of gender, but instead misread this term as being confined exclusively to female difference. In this way it has fully accepted the presupposition of the subject as bodiless and ungendered. Feminism leaves unquestioned the necessity of the subject of knowledge thereby foreclosing any engagement with this problem of
unknowability. By contrast what would it mean to think about the presentation of
gender immediately rather than transcendentally?

Contemporary feminism, in short, has stopped short of a true interrogation of
materiality and we can see the repeated surfacing of these problems as witnessed in
the tragedy of Abu Ghraib. What occurs there is just one of many possible
examples that illustrates the material and cognitive effects of ignoring these
questions.

Just as this paper opens with a call for a feminist universal as a way of
protecting women and their bodies, Barbara Ehrenreich, in her important essay on
Abu Ghraib Prison, “Feminist Assumptions Upended,” beautifully captures the
limitations of this discourse. Furthermore she presents the reasoning for why the
transcendental universal cannot speak for the human today. A feminist universal
did not preclude the material effects of violence generated by Mega Ambuhl,
Lynndie England, and Sabrina Harman—the three women among the seven U.S.
soldiers charged with prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib. Both Harmon and England are
the women present in arguably the most widely distributed photos of this shameful
tragedy. It was Harmon who was photographed smiling and giving the thumbs up
sign behind a pile of hooded and naked Iraqi men as if to say, Ehrenreich states,
“Hi Mom, here I am in Abu Ghraib!” (65). England, in turn, was photographed
holding a leash with a naked Iraqi man at the other end. Ehrenreich is outraged by
the possibility that this event could have taken place. This event and its
ramifications did something to her as a feminist: it broke her heart. “A certain kind
of feminist naiveté,” she asserts, “died in Abu Ghraib.” She argues,

It was a feminism that saw men as the perpetual perpetrators, women
as the perpetual victims, and male sexual violence against women as
the root of all injustice. Rape has repeatedly been an instrument of
war and, to some feminists; it was beginning to look as if war was an
extension of rape. There seemed to be at least some evidence that
male sexual sadism was connected to our species’ tragic propensity
for violence. That was before we had seen female sexual sadism in
action. (66-67)

It is the “perpetual” in Ehrenreich’s statements that is of interest to me here.
She must confront the failure of a feminist perspective that situated the problem of
the universal on the grounds that it excluded female gender difference. That
difference has been the justification for both the perpetuation and the ignoring of
violence against women. She recognizes that the problem has been trying to assimilate gender into the universal political human. What is needed, therefore, is a reconfiguration of feminism that does not settle for the universal/diverse paring of the political human, but rather truly intervenes into the male gaze, defined here in terms of the political institutions of the state. “In short,” she argues, “we need a certain kind of feminism that aims not just to assimilate into the institutions that men have created over the centuries, but to infiltrate and subvert them” (70).

Ehrenreich is lamenting the death of the sort of feminist narrative that Schor articulates. The question of subversion that she proposes, however, fails to deal with the problem of Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman. Their sexual torture of Iraqi men is rendered possible by a notion of the universal that is meant to displace the materiality of the body. The material is subsumed under the autonomous and internal workings of the political subject. These Iraqi men were no longer seen as human beings with bodies that were vulnerable but as enemies of the state. What Ehrenreich is sorting through is how women could do this in light of a feminist project of political determination. How could women do this to male bodies given what is done to female bodies all over the world? Rape is an instrument of war sanctioned by many states. Are these women conscious of their betrayal of feminism?

In my view these implicit questions do not go far enough. The mistake of feminism was to see the problem of gender in the history of thought as exclusively the problem of female difference in relation to men rather than as a given for the materiality of gender, both male and female. “Woman” in other words is a problem for the human in so far as the transcendental refuses to admit that materiality itself is a problem. The political and ethical human has always envisioned knowledge of the body as a process that contains matter within the movement of consciousness as autonomous and internal within the subject. In short, what I am asking is this: since Harmon and England are the products of a certain notion of the ordered political subject, are we surprised that they would ignore the materiality of the men that they tortured particularly when those actions were legitimated by the state? Second, isn’t this process of displacing the materiality of these Iraqi men essential to understanding of the universal human in transcendent terms? Finally and I think that this is the most painful question to ask, but it needs to be put out there—could we see the actions of Harmon and England as an example of transcendental feminist humanism in action? If gender is just a new name for the transcendental, than of course women would be agents of and participants in torture. The crucial point that I want to make is that it is the transcendental human in all of its forms that we need
to address and act against. What we see, with Harmon and England is self-imposed colonization of the body in action.

One can see why Schor’s call for a universalization of the singular simply reinvents the circular, revolutionary axis of universal/singular that is opposed to power. The project of the two-tiered universal imposter now loses the freedom associated with Kristeva’s imposter as a disguise of deception. What is exposed in its place is a self-imposed regulation of the female subject on the state’s terms. Women are not imposters in the sense that there was never a freedom to posit something different. The two-tiered universal subsequently reveals itself as a recuperation of a transcendental decay that is too tired.

So how do we begin to work our way out of this problem? We need nothing less than to begin to replace the question “who is acting?” with “what is acting?” At this point we could finally bury the feminist concept of the universal, for a much more important question: how do we make a world in which women are not second-class citizens materially possible. Our task, in short, is to contend precisely with this materialization that humanism felt the need to displace. The question is not “who speaks for the (feminist) human?” but “how can we listen to what speaks to human beings?” A body can never be made knowable to a transcendent subject of knowledge. Instead, we must ask “what is the mode of knowing for a body?” To step into that space is to move toward an active given.

At this point maybe we can truly enter into an immanent and temporal notion of difference that “matters” to human beings.

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

Carla F. Scott received her Ph.D. from the University of Geneva, Switzerland in 2000, where she was a Lecturer in both English and Comparative Literature until 2002. Her research interests include: world literatures in English, literatures of the African diaspora in the epoch of globalization, and theories of gender and sexuality. She is currently working on her manuscript entitled *The Post Erotic Woman: Intelligence and Agency in Contemporary Feminism*. A freelance researcher, she teaches English language and literature at College of Geneva in Geneva, Switzerland.

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