

# “Marie Goes to Japan”: Thinking, Praxis, and the Possibility of the New

Margret Grebowicz  
University of Houston-Downtown

*Why “do” philosophy, if not to contribute to social consciousness (our own and those of our students and readers), to develop ideas for change, to articulate the desperations of the present and the possibilities of futures which will help people, however loosely we define “people”? This is one of the most popular objections to philosophy: that it is not practical, and therefore not really politically useful. And in today’s philosophical arena, this argument is directed specifically against postmodern philosophies. However, there is another sense of the word “postmodern,” which we often forget when talking about postmodernism. Lyotard wants us to think about that which resists institutionalization, homogenization, academic taxonomies, economies, and genealogies. The postmodern is the moment of ideological instability and confusion, of radical undermining of foundations and transgressing of boundaries. It is just another name for thought. In this essay, I attempt to describe a sort of postmodern praxis in terms of the Lyotardian notion of thought, discussing the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Hardt and Negri, and June Jordan.*

According to Jean-François Lyotard, philosophy is the genre of discourse whose rule is to find its own rule. In other words, philosophy’s task is to find out what its true task is. What demarcates philosophy from all other discourses is this essential reflexivity, its continuous search for its own boundaries, functions, nature. We are left with the image of philosophy as a question folding back on itself, like a Magritte-inspired conceptual art piece, the kind which plays in an endless loop, even at the end of the afternoon, when the museum is closing.

Such an image is hardly conducive to visualizing action, activism, and political commitment. And yet this is where philosophy points today: the pressure to engage with political problems is ever stronger. Why, after all, “do” philosophy, if not to contribute to social consciousness (our own and those of our students and readers), to develop ideas for change, to articulate the desperations of the present and the possibilities of futures which will help people, however loosely we define “people”? This is one of the most popular objections to philosophy: that it is not practical, and therefore not really politically useful. And in today’s philosophical arena, this argument is directed specifically against postmodern philosophies. The postmodern protagonist appears to us as a sort of Major Tom, whose apparent acceptance of his loss

of contact with Ground Control makes his an unlikely political hero.

Perhaps the greatest dilemma for the postmodern thinker who considers herself political concerns the idea that everything is a cultural construct. Postmodernists write about the construction of everything from knowledge and values to identity and even desire. To top things off, they are critical of humanism and democracy. But if values are mere cultural constructs, and humanism and democracy are undesirable vestiges of the Enlightenment, then on what grounds can we dissent politically, and after what should we model our new political visions? Do we not need some kind of certainty about something, like the certainty that all humans are equal, or that war is wrong, for example—a foundation, some kind of “political platform?” What does it mean even to call myself a feminist, when I am at the same time always returning to a sort of contemporary skepticism? After all, the angel on my right shoulder reminds me, it is not merely an historical accident that modern feminist thought originates in 19<sup>th</sup> century British political philosophy. It is because those philosophers were committed to equality, democracy, and the agency of individuals—in other words, they had some solid, smart commitments, from which specifically feminist critiques of society could be born. Without such a foundation, the postmodernist can talk all she wants about diversity, difference, and openness to the other, but she has, literally, no ground on which to stand.

Interestingly, Lyotard takes on the question of how to do philosophy without foundations, even without commitments, in a short essay titled “Marie Goes To Japan.” The essay is the interior monologue of a fictional character, Marie, a middle-aged, French academic, traveling to Japan to give an invited presentation. Come to think of it, Marie’s situation is a lot like mine, here, today: she has come to deliver a paper. While resting up for her presentation, in her expensive hotel room, she expresses consistent disappointment with how self-indulgent and ineffective postmodernism has become. She complains that postmodernism has become a part of cultural capital, a sort of slogan for the commodified, institutionalized talk of the other, of becoming open to the other, experiencing difference. The idea of difference is not even different anymore, but the most predictable, least revolutionary thing one can say. Furthermore, the academy is so homogenized that her experience of delivering a paper in Japan is no different than her experience of France or anywhere else. Almost a decade after Lyotard’s essay appeared, at a conference in Rotterdam, I heard a more explicit articulation of this position in Slavoj Žižek’s declaration that postmodernism has taken

over as the new hegemonic discourse.<sup>1</sup>

Marie suspects that there is something fake about all this talk of difference in such undifferentiated terms. She delivers her paper, accepts the questions, the applause, the honorarium, she does everything “right,” and knows, at the end of the day, that the academic institution called “post-modernism” and the lip service paid to alterity and difference have nothing at all to do with thinking. Thought, Marie muses, is unwieldy. It is slow, it takes time, it does not speak the language of production and consumption. Thought is reticent, stubborn and unmanageable, embarrassing. Thoughts are not “mine” to produce, copyright, own, sell, or exchange. Thought does not compete on the (appropriately named) “job market.”

In another essay, Lyotard describes the situation like this:

Thoughts are not the fruits of the earth. They are not registered by areas, except out of human commodity. Thoughts are clouds. The periphery of thoughts is as immeasurable as... fractal lines... Thoughts are pushed and pulled at variable speeds... When you feel like you have penetrated far into their intimacy in analyzing either their so-called structure or genealogy or even poststructure, it is actually too late or too soon... I then have the experience of how radically powerless I am to penetrate clouds of thoughts. As a pretender to being a philosopher and a writer, I confess I have no chance of avoiding being a shammer.<sup>2</sup>

We can imagine Marie, gazing out the window on her flight back to Charles De Gaulle, playing with this metaphor, knowing that all that expensive, technical, well-ordered talk of otherness, diversity, difference, hospitality, forgiveness, etc. had been performed by shamblers, fakes, herself included. Her colloquium, the global university system, even my own presentation, here, today—none of these things can accommodate thought. Thought is that which can't be evaluated or organized into degree plans. Thought doesn't graduate. Students are sometimes told that the university will turn them into “thinking adults,” or that thought is somehow connected to maturity, self-actualization, and agency. According to Lyotard, however, thinking is the opposite of adulthood, and he sometimes relies on the image of the infant: mute, unmanageable, and certainly an unsatisfying partner for conversation. I am reminded of a short story by Ray Bradbury called “The Small Assassin,” in which a mother suspects her newborn baby of trying to kill her. She returns from the hospital terrified of the child, begging her

husband to somehow dispose of it before it disposes of her. The husband chalks this up to post-partum depression, until, of course, she turns up dead one sunny afternoon. And so, eventually, does he: indeed, this turns out to be a killer baby, small but deadly. This, however, is the least interesting part of the story. Bradbury's genius lies in making us see the infant, and infancy in general, as something radically unknown and unknowable, unmanageable, unpredictable, and, at bottom, creepy:

She crushed his hand in hers, a supernatural whiteness in her face.

"Oh, Dave, once it was just you and me. We protected each other, and now we protect the baby, but get no protection from it. Do you understand? Lying in the hospital I had time to think a lot of things. The world is evil—"

"Is it?"

"Yes. It is. But laws protect us from it. And when there aren't laws, then love does the protecting. You're protected from my hurting you by my love. You're vulnerable to me, of all people, but love shields you. I feel no fear of you because love cushions all your irritations, unnatural instincts, and immaturities. But—what about the baby? It's too young to know love, or a law of love, or anything, until we teach it. And in the meantime be vulnerable to it."

"Vulnerable to a baby?" He held her away and laughed gently.

"Does a baby know the difference between right and wrong?" she asked.

"No. But it'll learn."

"But a baby is so new, so amoral, so conscience-free." She stopped. Her arms dropped from him and she turned swiftly. "That noise? What was it?"<sup>3</sup>

Alongside this image of the infant, quite different from the one we get in ads for diapers, Lyotard develops his technical notion of the "inhuman," and this is precisely the level on which, he tells us, thought takes place. The "inhuman" is that part of experience which escapes the systems and institutions which render one "human," or fit to take part in the community of civilized humanity, however that is defined in one's particular historical moment. If we could take for granted that we were human, never experiencing an "inhuman" moment, we would not have to "struggle constantly

to assure [our] conformity to institutions. . . ,” or suffer from the doubts, the nagging feelings that we are not cut out for this world, not quite grown up, imposters in the community of adult humanity.<sup>4</sup> Of course, we do suffer from these doubts, consistently reminding ourselves and each other to grow up, be adults, be “people.” In one of my favorite passages, Lyotard writes, “If humans are born human, as cats are born cats, . . . , it would not be . . . possible to educate them. That children have to be educated is a circumstance which only proceeds from the fact that they are not completely led by nature, not programmed. The institutions which constitute culture supplement this native lack.”<sup>5</sup> So humans are not born human, but some sort of mixture of humanity and its other, the mute, reticent, resistant, unmanageable, the *infans*, the inhuman—and the role of culture, education, institutions is to close the gap between them, to socialize and normalize the a-social, abnormal part.

Lyotard concludes that this infant, inhuman part, this resistant part, thought as resistance, is the condition of the possibility of politics. “And what else is left to resist with but the debt which each soul has contracted with the miserable and admirable indeterminateness from which it was born and does not cease to be born?—which is to say, with the . . . inhuman?”<sup>6</sup> But now we see the problem even more clearly: we all know that infants can’t get anything done. They are dependent, passive, vulnerable, messy. How can this helpless, “inhuman” image of thought, of confusion and instability, be useful for political pragmatics and action?

There is another sense of the word “postmodern,” which we often forget when talking about postmodernism. What Lyotard wants us to think about is that which *resists* institutionalization, homogenization, academic taxonomies, economies, and genealogies. According to Lyotard, the postmodern is not an epoch in history, the epoch which comes after the modern. He writes that every epoch has its postmodern and modern moments, and the postmodern moment actually comes before the modern. The postmodern is the moment of ideological instability and confusion, of radical undermining of foundations and transgressing of boundaries. It is just another name for thought.

This is important in light of the sort of critique of postmodernism put forth by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in *Empire* (Negri and Hardt, 2000). *Empire* proposes that postmodern political theories are impotent in today’s world because they are so strongly directed against the Enlightenment, when the latter is in fact no longer the power we ought to be worried

about resisting. They write,

We suspect that postmodernist and postcolonialist theories may end up in a dead end because they fail to recognize adequately the contemporary object of critique, that is they mistake today's real enemy. What if the modern form of power these critics . . . have taken such pains to describe and contest no longer holds sway in our society? What if these theorists are so intent on combating the remnants of a past form of domination that they fail to recognize the new form that is looming over them in the present?<sup>7</sup>

Negri and Hardt argue that the hegemony of the new form of power, which they call "Empire," is greater than that of the Enlightenment, more totalitarian than any hegemony has ever been. "Empire" is more hegemonic because it is invisible, because we are being fed globalization and capitalism as if they were the *telos* of humanity, humanity freely constituting itself, finally, all relevant questions answered. The book, *Empire*, presents a vision of power for which consent will have been manufactured so effectively that resistance will be close to impossible.

However, this is precisely where the postmodern, understood in Lyotard's sense, can play a role: the more airtight the hegemonies, the more resistance needs a postmodern "fear of commitment," the moment of thought, or of what Geoffrey Bennington calls "radical passivity before the event."<sup>8</sup> Lyotard's notion of thought is not merely a rejection of rationalism, and his notion of the "inhuman" is not merely a critique of Enlightenment humanism. Both are central to his analysis of the conditions of the possibility of the kind of political subjectivity necessary for today's particular politics of resistance.

This is hardly a new idea. In the feminist classic, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes that if feminism has not been as revolutionary as we had hoped, this is because women are unique as a political minority: unlike any other minority, women cannot claim an historical origin for patriarchy. There is no moment in history about which we can say, "there, prior to that moment, there was no patriarchy," which makes it particularly difficult to think outside of male supremacist ideology. We cannot, for example, call for a nation of women, the way that ethnic minorities can try, however successfully, to establish nationhood in the face of oppression. Neither can we claim, as the proletariat can, that our situation is the result of identifiable

historical developments. Because the world has always been patriarchal, feminists have a uniquely difficult task—to try to think outside of a power difference which is an essential part of every significant discourse in the world and throughout history—philosophy, religion, science, economics, political theory, discourses of visual and written representation, and so on.

If Beauvoir is right, a feminist subjectivity develops only on the condition that things could be different than they are, than they have ever been, different, even, than we can presently see, think, imagine. We could even say that feminist subjectivity is a postmodern subjectivity. Feminist subjectivity has, as its condition of possibility, the postmodern moment—not as a particular thinking of resistance, but in the notion of thought itself as resistance. More than it needs the belief in democracy and equality, feminism needs the belief in the instability of everything, in the possibility that everything is essentially refutable, even democracy and equality. The condition of a committed feminism, it seems, is the sort of fear of commitment that Lyotard describes as thought. And this commitment to the possibility that things can be radically different than they are is nothing more than skepticism's idea that holding beliefs too firmly can only get us in trouble, that every claim is, at bottom, false, in the sense that it is refutable.

Why was Beauvoir, a middle class, white feminist from France, so interested in the problems faced by African-Americans? In her travel memoir from 1947, *America Day By Day*, she describes her outrage at American segregation, and her experience of being a white woman, walking around Harlem on the arm of her longtime friend, Richard Wright. In *America Day By Day*, Beauvoir systematically does what first and even second wave feminism was systematically accused of failing to do. She discusses at length not only racism, but different kinds of racisms in America (noting the differences between the situations of African-Americans in Harlem, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in California, and Native Americans in New Mexico), the effects of class difference in different kinds of race-based communities (from Manhattan to the rural South), and the vast cultural differences between American and European attitudes to race difference, gender, war, sex and sexuality, and the list goes on. All of this in a book which a friend of mine described recently as “not philosophical.” “It’s such a great read,” she said wistfully, “too bad it’s not philosophical.” And indeed, Beauvoir herself introduces the book by saying that this is not a theoretical, analytical book, but merely a travel memoir. It is not a book of positions and agendas. Perhaps that’s the point—that this writing is closer to thought than it is to

philosophy, closer to the postmodern than to the modern, to bearing witness to the inhuman than to articulating the human—and so we encounter a Beauvoir who is often lost, angry, confused, awestruck, and relentlessly, politically engaged throughout, in questions concerning the conditions of the possibility of change.

Questions of social change are different from questions of social equality. Of course, the former is more threatening to social stability, and for that reason, some thinkers are written out of the histories of movements. We've all heard of Susan B. Anthony, but probably few American college students have heard or ever will hear of Victoria Woodhull, the entrepreneur, activist, and feminist thinker. Woodhull spoke publicly about the right to divorce and about sexual freedom for women, but her speeches were really meditations on the nature of love, monogamy, desire, embodiment, and subjectivity—not just for women, but for people. Her speeches on the right to free love as a fundamental human right pose the question: *what does it mean to desire, to be alive, to be a person?* Not only was she the first publisher of *The Communist Manifesto* in English, she was also the first woman to run for president. The year was 1871, and the man she chose as her running mate was the writer, activist, and former slave, Frederick Douglass. Late at night, when I recall poor, misunderstood, brilliant, crazy Victoria, I have to wonder: what on Earth was she thinking? Decades before African-Americans and women could vote, there was never even a remote possibility of her winning the presidency. Come to think of it, even today, decades after African-Americans and women were given the vote, there would still be no possibility of her winning. This gesture was not the result of a desire for power, so what was it? Should we call it “symbolic,” and if so, “symbolic” of what? Or was it, on the contrary, the practice of thought?

We need not limit ourselves to the history of feminist activism in order to explore this kind of praxis. It is unlikely, for example, that Joan of Arc would have called herself a feminist, had such a concept been available to her. The story of Joan is so incredible, that throughout my childhood, I was convinced that it was merely a legend, that Joan of Arc was no more real than King Arthur, or “Amazons” who cut off their own breasts in the name of archery. I could not imagine that a woman, no, a girl, no, an illiterate peasant girl had one day refused to dress as a woman and led French armies into several battles, which they won under her command. The year was 1429. She was 17. (Can we imagine this taking place today?) Again, I wonder: what kind of mind was this?

Cultural theorists and artists are fascinated by Joan as the possibility of the ultimate transvestite. This is easy to do, given that her resistance of her English captors was, famously, her “relapse” to wearing male clothing. In these narratives of her life, as Andrea Dworkin writes, “Joan’s defiance, her rebellion, is trivialized as a sexual kink, more style than substance, at most an interesting wrinkle in a psychosexual tragedy of a girl who wanted to be a boy and came to a bad end.”<sup>9</sup> But it seems strange to suggest that Joan would have suffered so much torture and such a death for the sake of the right to dress as a man, a right which seems insignificant by comparison. The official answer offered by the Catholic Church, which burned her at the stake for witchcraft, and eventually canonized her, doesn’t quite seem like enough: she didn’t have to think, because she was an instrument of God. This way, we don’t have to imagine her actually performing these actions on her own. She can remain feminine in our imaginations, as mystics are feminized in the discourse which describes them (and in which they describe themselves) as passive, receptive, “penetrated,” and “filled” by God. However, according to the few existing accounts of her life considered accurate, Joan precisely refused to be feminized, dressing exclusively in men’s clothing, publicly refusing to marry, rejecting every last trapping of femininity, passivity, and penetrability. In Dworkin’s reading, Joan’s obsession with dressing like a man has nothing to do with a desire to be a man, and everything to do with the desire to *not* be a woman. In other words, she refused to live as a being whose boundaries are denied, to whom physical and spiritual integrity and self-actualization are denied.

. . . The rights she demanded—rights of privacy over her conscience and her relationship to God—were contained in a right to physical privacy that was fundamental but had not yet been claimed by any woman, the right to physical privacy being essential to personal freedom and self-determination. . . . This right of physical privacy was never articulated as a right, and for women it barely existed as a possibility: how did Joan even imagine it, let alone bring it into physical existence for so long?<sup>10</sup>

According to Dworkin’s reading, Joan’s desire was not to have sex with women (the Joan-as-lesbian reading), or to look and live like a man (the Joan-as-transgendered reading), or, even to be the instrument of God (the mystical reading), but for something like freedom, or for a life in which

change is actualized—two things which contradicted the construction of femininity then, as well as today. I echo Dworkin’s question: how did Joan even imagine it? What kind of thinking does it take to live this far outside, this far beyond one’s reality?

The question forces us to continue taking seriously Lyotard’s demand that philosophy return to a thinking engagement with the world. My point is not that the fictional Marie is the same as Simone De Beauvoir, who is the same as Victoria Woodhull, who is the same as Joan of Arc, or that mysticism is the same thing as feminism, which is the same thing as critical race theory, which is the same thing as postmodernism. These “texts” do, however, have in common something important: a radical revisiting and questioning of the nature of resistant subjectivity, of intellectual engagement, and most importantly of a praxical engagement which does not betray thinking. For the postmodern philosopher, this questioning is at the heart of the political.

I hear the best articulation of this in one of my favorite essays by June Jordan, titled “We Are All Refugees.” She writes,

Eighty percent of the 100 million displaced people on the planet are women and children. Overwhelmingly, the face of displaced humanity is a female face. Overwhelmingly, her female predicament of multifaceted oppression remains not recognized as a political predicament. And, so, overwhelmingly, most refugees do not qualify for political asylum. But what if we women everywhere arose to demand political asylum from the personal and the institutional violence and domination that scar our existence everywhere? What if we demanded political asylum for ourselves—on the job, on the block where we live, in the bedrooms where we want to find and make love? What if we declared ourselves perpetual refugees in solidarity with all refugees needing safe human harbor from violence and domination and injustice and inequality?... In this American space disfigured by traditions of hatred and selfishness, we are all alien, and we are, none of us, legitimate.<sup>11</sup>

Jordan’s point is not that middle class, American college students are in the “same situation” as political refugees, because, obviously, there are many senses in which they are not. Instead of focusing on that, however, she gives voice to the feelings of those of us who are displaced right here, at home, because we do not claim these traditions of hatred and selfishness as

our own. She gives voice to those of us who are displaced because we are persecuted, abused, or forgotten, but do not leave, because there is nowhere “better” to go.

If Negri and Hardt are right, and all existing strategies of resistance depend on the possibility of an outside, of being a refugee, an expatriate, then there is no *existing* strategy of resistance to Empire. Empire is a structure of power which has no outside: nowhere to run and no exterior point from which to see, compare, critique. Thus, the notions of “refugee” and “expatriate” lose meaning, and the authors reject existing strategies of resistance as ineffective. In Jordan’s world, however, even if there is nowhere to go, this does not mean that we stop moving. On the contrary, she seems to be saying that we keep moving precisely *because* there is nowhere to go. This is what I think Hardt and Negri have in mind when they demand that we invent new strategies of resistance. June Jordan would never have described herself as a philosopher, but her political writings call for the praxis which Lyotard describes under the name “thought.” She puts it differently, again, in the poem, “Calling on All Silent Minorities,” where she writes, “WE NEED TO HAVE THIS MEETING/ AT THIS TREE/ AIN’ EVEN BEEN/ PLANTED/ YET”.

For Jordan, the notion of “refugee” changes dramatically when we apply it to ourselves, right here, in the place we’re supposed to call home, and the notion of “political asylum” changes dramatically when we demand asylum from the government which claims to be of and for us. They begin to signify in a way which is essentially unstable, and that, for Jordan, is their very power. It is precisely the postmodern notion of thought which exploits the power of instability, claiming that the instability of meanings is the condition of the possibility of politics. Most importantly, for Jordan and many others, this instability has everything to do with praxis. This is the hope for politics, for activism, action, thought, writing: the tree which has not been planted yet. How can we begin to understand the meaning of this, without the help of the classic postmodern resources: paradox, *aporia*, the impossible, the instability of texts, radical alterity, and, finally, the idea that our knowledge, values, identity, and desire are constructed, historically contingent, and never more than provisional? It is time to take the lessons of postmodernism back from the philosophers, who commodify it in order to perform exchanges in the marketplace of ideas. Today, for philosophers concerned with the political, the relevant incommensurability is not between academic philosophy and praxis, but between academic philosophy and thought.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Žizek's keynote address at International Association for Philosophy and Literature meeting, Erasmus Universitaet, Rotterdam, May 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Clouds," in *Peregrinations* (Columbia University Press, 1988), 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Bradbury, "The Small Assassin" in *The Small Assassin* (Grafton, 1976), 15-6.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Bennington and Bowlby (Stanford University Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard Univeristy Press, 2000), 137-8.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, "Index," in *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction* (London: Verso, 1994), 293-4.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (Free Press, 1987), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 102.

<sup>11</sup> June Jordan, "We Are All Refugees," in *Affirmative Acts* (Doubleday, 1998), 94.