

## The Ellipsis: Affirmative Negations as (Feminist) Critique

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But ... those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it. – Woolf, *Three Guineas*

Curious as to what Woolf's *Three Guineas* would offer for the thematic directions of this workshop, I opened my copy of the book on a clear evening and began to read. The suggestions in the 'First Guinea' were not unfamiliar to me. Woolf's voice – incisive and at times politely irreverent – pointed out the privilege of the masculine class in its state-supported education, women's concomitant contribution to these educational opportunities for men, along with the restriction of women's professional occupations, pay, control of assets and, notably, their own compromised access to education and its consequences.

Without putting the issues Woolf identifies here too far to the side, what struck me most in her discourse arrived early, on the second page, its punctuation catching my eye. An ellipsis: a silence; an unspoken suggestion between the words 'but' and everything that was to follow; a suggestion that couldn't be superfluous, but that couldn't be stated either; a suggestion that, being all too pressing, its very silence marked the weight of its emphasis. So of what did this silence speak?

With Woolf's ellipsis we appear to be presented with an impasse, a stumbling point in the epistolarian's ability to reach across the divide that marks women's difference from men in the anticipation that her difference may not be comprehended. How to communicate to the dominant class, Woolf wonders, the knot of issues she reveals *for* her class that explain why they are precluded from having political influence? And how to do so from within the confines of a male dominated socio-political apparatus? How to understand or make visible the conditions under which this communication can take place?

Questions of translation and conditions seem to underscore the stuttering movements of the ellipsis, along with something else – an ability to speak or to act otherwise. In order to punctuate her position on the issue of how the war could be prevented, a question that, as Woolf points out, has generated from within a masculinist militarist machinery with all of its patriotic, nationalistic, and capitalist pursuits and disagreements, Woolf places in an envelope with her reply one guinea towards the college for women's education (as representative of her anti-war efforts).

With the ellipsis, Woolf takes up with, and attempts to address, the divide with which feminist voices have for so long been employed – the sexual differential that marks asymmetries in civic, educative, religious, and economic participation. And through it she raises the very possibility *for* address, for her own critical intervention and response to the systems that would also author the silencing of her sex as well as support her complicity with their political programs. The ellipsis hints at a paradox, then, and one that feminist critics have pointed to in other terms; how might a space of absence or negation also enable a space of intervention, or the capacity for different relations and different futures?

With Woolf's ellipsis as my point of departure I want to revisit this task of thinking through silence and negation as an affirmative practice of feminist critique. What I'm particularly motivated by in this exercise is to consider silence not as something held in reserve, excessive to the representative apparatuses or semiotic systems it might disrupt, but as an aporetic openness that demonstrates the already compromised identities of these systems, and therefore the already compromised identity of silence or negation. And it's from this point that I want to ask after the affirmative nature of our political interventions.

In undertaking this task, Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* proved a useful thinking tool. His critique of Integrated World Capitalism (IWC) and its possible address through a new ecosophy resonates with the other systems and processes to which I have referred – masculinist socio-political apparatuses and the possibility for their feminist interventions. In this, his critical aim is clear – how to cultivate dissensus in the form of 'new ecosophical assemblages of enunciation' (*TE*: 35) that interrupt the capitalist semiotic Universe and the modes of subjectification that it engenders.

Where these ecosophical assemblages take root is, therefore, a question to which Guattari's text addresses itself. There is no return to the past, Guattari reminds us a number of times. Complexification, the hallmark of global capitalism, refuses such a thing. The old formulas for social ties are inconceivable as ways to model new forms of collectivity,<sup>1</sup> but there are promising futures – opportunities to 'modify and reinvent the ways in which we live...' (24). Thus his ecosophy, finding its momentum in present conditions, discovers political and ethical possibilities to shift the generalized decline that accompanies existing economic, juridical, cultural, and (techno-) scientific semiotic regimes.

Making clear what is at stake, Guattari poses a question about the capitalist modes of production that he wishes to shift with an eco-logic: 'productive forces can make an increasing amount of time for potential human activity', he says, 'But to what end?' (20). As I've understood it, so far we're aware that eco-logic emerges in response to IWC, and we understand that different ecological possibilities, possibilities that shift IWC modes of production, may become available. To ask after ends, then, whether they reach towards further forms of oppression or potentially better futures, introduces an important consideration, and an important moment of uncertainty in Guattari's argument. But we might also paraphrase Guattari's question for different ends. Specifically, in which direction does productivity or its interventions venture? What might it mean if we ask, along with Vicki Kirby (1999: 28), whether production is itself 'the infinite double-crossing that ruins' the integrity of these ends, and therefore their origins?<sup>2</sup>

I found this brief quote from Kirby's text in Mariam Fraser's 2002 essay 'What is the Matter of Feminist Criticism?' and it helpfully directed me to the longer passage from which it was taken. Returning to Kirby's essay, it was here that I found anew (as if for the first time, and certainly not the first time, maybe taking the title of 'anew' in its forgetting), the question that presses upon me through the ellipsis:

The identity of an error will always infect its correction, as the latin root *errare*—to wander, to be uncertain—suggests. Thus, to diagnose the presence of a binary structure as if it is a dangerous pathology and one that could be excised by this revelation, fails to attend to the workings of structuration that also enable critique. Cutting, or differentiating, is not a mistake: it is the implication that *is* productivity, the infinite double-crossing that ruins integrity. (Kirby, 1999: 27-28)

As the 'infinite double crossing-that ruins integrity' this bifurcating movement (that we could call production) cannot work towards ends alone because it insists that time itself is transversal. Origins and ends are interrupted here. Indeed, this bifurcating production ruins the integrity of any identity, including the monolithic Universes of Integrated World Capitalism or masculinist socio-political apparatuses. In this case, and I'll elaborate a little more in what follows, Kirby places dissensus directly at the heart of phallogentrism, or Integrated World Capitalism, in its transversal and self-interrupting capacities for division (or *différance*). 'Binary logic undoes its truths even as it affirms them', she claims, 'so that an effective way to displace and intervene into what appears to be a repressive mono-logic is to consider its essential perversity' (Kirby, 1999: 28).

Turning again to Guattari, I continue to wonder if the transversal connections and disjunctures he identifies 'at the heart of all ecological praxes' (*TE*: 30) travel as far towards the origins of IWC as Kirby's rethinking of dualism might. Certainly, Guattari does not join the crowd of those who would reject dualism. He embraces bifurcation as a productive gesture of a new ecosophy because it marks a capacity for ecological change in the form of a-signifying ruptures that are impossible to either anticipate or to represent, as such: these ruptures exceed semiotic closure and thus disrupt the relentless galloping forward of the four semiotic horsemen of the IWC apocalypse. A-signifying ruptures, perhaps similar to ellipses, are clearly complicated sites of intervention, as sites of intervention that complicate. But at this point in his text Guattari also potentially circumscribes their bifurcating tendencies in temporal terms:

This new ecosophical logic – and I want to emphasise this point – resembles the manner in which an artist may be led to alter his work *after the intrusion* of some accidental detail, an

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<sup>1</sup> I'd surmise, then, that they can only lead to a sort of nostalgia.

<sup>2</sup> As it appears in Fraser's (2002) argument, this excerpt is offered in the context of Kirby's response to the mediating and generative capacities of biology.

event-incident that suddenly makes his initial project bifurcate, making it drift [*deriver*] far from its previous path, however certain it had once appeared to be (*TE*: 35, emphasis added).

The key difference that I can see between this embrace of bifurcation and Kirby's is found in its point of entry. For Guattari, the error that would bifurcate – to offer another path or the opportunity to drift (to wander) – *intrudes*. Perhaps this is the result of an accidental slip of the brush. Certainly the shift takes place within a scene that doesn't locate the originary agency of this bifurcation before its productive splitting onto a new path. But the temporal commitment is here nevertheless. And with this, Guattari introduces an *a priori* temporal distance between the canvas-painter and the productive error of bifurcation that produces transformation.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, for Guattari, where a *new* ecosophy might promise lines of reconstruction of human praxis, or an ethicopolitical aim that disrupts *existing* forms of racism and phallogentrism (23), the double crossing movements of critique to which Kirby refers promise that this reconstruction emerges as an always already possibility of any universal discourse, of the IWC itself. With no capitalist time *prior to* ecological futurity, then (bifurcating) errors, as sites of rupture, silence, and transformation, are the very mode of production of globally/locally differentiating systems. In its errant generativity, the nature of bifurcation that Kirby presents insists that these systems-processes are *always* dynamic morphologies.<sup>4</sup>

I want to discuss this point a little further so that the productive implications of Kirby's thinking can be sedimented here, especially as her argument is very proximal to Guattari's, as I read it. Guattari acknowledges, too, that ruptures are readily available. He suggests that there is always potential for 'barbaric implosion', and the wish for ecosophical revival is itself already grounds for its antagonisms to emerge – forms of 'racism, religious fanaticism, nationality schisms that suddenly flip into reactionary closure' (24). But there, with that word 'reaction', again lies a subtle difference between Kirby's and Guattari's positions. For Kirby, the double crossing of bifurcation is so ubiquitous that it renders any capitalist hegemony *or* ecological process already cross-cut and contaminated *at its origin*. Antagonism is not a *reactionary* closure that comes 'after the event' of a move towards a different ecology. Nor can antagonism only be found rising up on the other side of the divide, of the ellipsis, as a (feminist) response to masculine modes of domination. Instead, these antagonisms can be found within the capitalist or phallogentric machinery itself, in its thorough discomposure. In Kirby's reading, so great would be the systemic perversity of something like IWC that its potential to undercut itself is both the possibility and the problematic of ecosophy, its goals equally heterogenous.

In this sense 'a new ecosophy' cannot not offer an 'escape from major crises of our era' as Guattari has proposed (45). It would not necessarily 'move away from the old forms of political, religious and associative commitment' (44) as much as it already resides within these systems as their doubling gesture, the possibility of their being otherwise. Guattari explicitly rejects the idea that ecosophy could involve a discipline of 'refolding on interiority' on the grounds that it may renew earlier forms of 'militancy' (35). However, for Kirby (1997: 157-8), it is precisely this refolding, doubling and redoubling of binarism that attests to its morphogenetic ubiquity. Bifurcation, Kirby says 'invades whatever it is defined against', so it is both enduring yet 'constantly opening itself to reinscription' in a gesture that we could liken to a form of self-negotiation (of the alien within).

In this reading, Woolf's ellipsis represents this doubling moment in which the tension of her response is delivered also in the possibility of its silence/ing through the gulf between the sexes, in their access to education, and therefore also in their access to the representational apparatuses that have helped to naturalize forms of masculine domination. The silence in Woolf's ellipsis represents the 'success' of its exclusions as much as it also represents the antagonisms and tensions endemic to this success. In other words, this thinking through the ellipsis is precisely an acknowledgment of how, even in the dialectic of masculine (socio-political, militarist) domination, its sites of transgression, of the possibility for speaking otherwise, emerge in the errata, the cuttings, that both complicate, render dependent, and

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps their difference in argument lies more explicitly with the difference between Guattari's notion of a-signification and Kirby's own reading of language as the systemic differentiations of the world in conversation with itself. In a longer version of this paper I would like to take the time to explore this suggestion.

<sup>4</sup> I make this point regarding systems as processes in response to the oppositional division drawn by Guattari between systems (IWC?) and processes (ecologies?). See p.30

yet energise any capacity for mastery. We could call this ellipsis the constitutive tension in the (sexually differentiated) dialectic that is its im/possibility, its doing as its undoing – an unruly generativity that actualizes masculine authority as it discovers its feminist voice.

I have tried to proceed with caution here in order that my suggestions won't be misconstrued as supporting the very dominations that render subjection palpable, even palatable if its mechanisms are obscured. I worry as I'm writing this paper that my suggestions sit too close to being interpreted as an affirmation of the 'cycle of deathly repetition' (*TE*: 27) that might defeat re-inventiveness, as Guattari laments, and reintroduce a logic of the same. However, when we consider that the norms, the dominant vocabularies, the elegant and educated gestures of men who would inquire into a woman's perspective on how to halt the war, are *essentially* perverse, perverted at their origin, divesting of themselves, then we're reminded again that these deathly repetitions that lead to 'dramatic dead ends' (20) cannot be straightforwardly deathly (or perhaps death could be said to be productive?), nor capable of achieving their dead ends. It is this logic (of openness) that Guattari appears to reserve for his eco-logic; a logic that I am attempting, via Kirby, to extend to all notions of system and process in my thinking through affirmation.

Speaking of affirmation, how might we understand the strange stutterings and silences of the ellipsis, of the repetition of a binary logic that is transversal in all ways, to be the productive space of affirmation? Affirmation, in this thinking, would not simply resemble a unidirectional progressivism, nor the absence of process (as if that were possible), but the very movement – the errant wanderings – of socio-political production. It becomes the nature of transformation itself, not always with specific direction, but always productive (even in its un-productiveness). Absences and negations, the silence that delivers and receives the punctum of what it hesitates to pronounce, are the substance of this production.

If we think of the ellipsis as the terra critica of a feminist voice, then with Kirby and Guattari we are also drawn to address what it is that Woolf attempted to spell out: the conditions of/for (its) critical inquiry, the mode of its production as a contaminated *and* relational gesture that emerges through negation or absence. This *errans*, the erratum of bifurcation, reveals itself as a politically and critically productive movement in Woolf's discourse. The internal cuttings and double-crossings of the ellipsis draw Woolf to a response even in the very fact of her being unsure how this speech might be conveyed. Both her silence and the possibility to speak (otherwise), to voice the unknown, emerge from within and across that divide.

It's not simply *against* negation, then, that we should pose our critical interventions, but with it and through it. Only in a subjectivist paradigm (that returns us too fully to 'the subject' as interlocutor and arbitrator) can an indifferent indifference and a 'fatalistic passivity' (*TE*: 28) take root. It's here that subjective *awareness* of the silences and repetitions that mark and sustain capitalist and masculine militarist programs is required *as a precondition for* affirmative interventions; interventions understood in the sense of addressing and repairing the current state of decline.

But if continual reinvention is the nature of ecology, as Guattari understands it, and if we could generalize his eco-logic a little further, as I have attempted to do here with Kirby, then our ecologies form something more of an ethicopolitical morphology in which the limit of subjectivity, and of sexual difference, emerges as a 'torsional differential' of becoming, to use Kirby's (2009: 121) words: an affirmation of an identity already in and as its negation. The work of our affirmative critique cannot only be distilled, then, in the program that Guattari suggests for us: one of an ethical responsibility of necessary 'engagement' 'to intervene in individual and collective psychical proceedings' that might disrupt the insensitivity of the semiotic machinery of proliferating 'signs, images, syntax and artificial intelligence' under IWC (*TE*: 27). Our affirmative critique must also turn to exactly that capacity *for* the IWC or phallogocentrism to produce its limit(s) – whether masculinist authority, women's subjugation, or capitalist subjectification. This limit, the ellipsis that marks the sexual differential in its asymmetrical configurations, for example, is one that *presses upon* us. It *presses through* us. Its insistence, insisting on us, demands our attention and our response, as much as it might demand our indifference, which, in this thinking, is also a form of response, and one not lacking in accountability.

## References

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