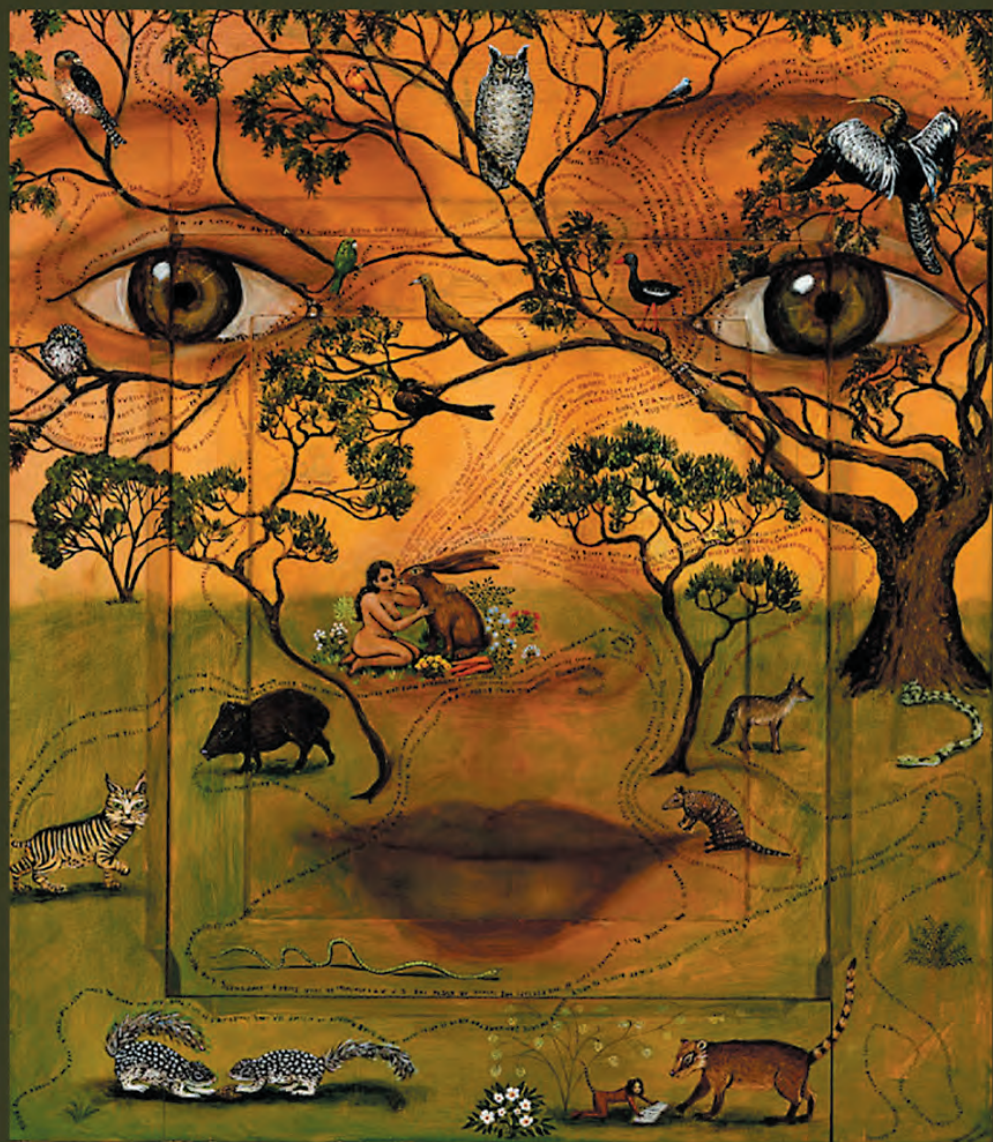


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WOMEN'S VOICES



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Charlene Spretnak explores the difficulties women tend to encounter when trying to express their inner perception of the dynamic interrelatedness in the gestalt of any situation yet having to work in an Indo-European language system, in which nominalization (naming things), rather than process and interrelatedness, is central. She discusses the pioneering insights of two French feminist theorists, Claudine Herrmann and Luce Irigaray, into the ways in which female subjectivity is curtailed and how it might be cultivated. Even with the obstacles in a “manstream” culture, Spretnak notes, many exemplary women artists in literature and other arts have brilliantly succeeded in creating from a matrix of female subjectivity.

IN THE ABSENCE OF A MOTHER TONGUE

CHARLENE SPRETNAK

What was exhilarating about the bursting forth of feminism in the 1970s was the *naming* of all that had been unarticulated—or noted only sporadically, or considered an isolated incident rather than a widespread pattern. The most obvious injustices were easy to name: the widespread practice of unequal pay for equal work; the refusal of banks and stores to issue credit to married women in their own name; the banning of women, or league sports for women, by universities that received federal aid; and many more. Then there was the entire complex of prejudicial attitudes that blocked women from admission to graduate schools, fellowships, jobs, promotions, leadership or management positions, and appointment to public office. These too were easy to name as the feminist momentum built. Very soon, though, many of us came to realize that there was an even more vast and complex *cultural context* underlying all these injustices, a foundation on which they rested securely: the language, premises, systems of knowledge, and societal norms in our culture had evolved as a comfortable fit with the general preferences of the male psyche.

“Reason,” for instance, was seen to be abundant in men and lacking in women, as it was characterized by the ability to separate out a few pertinent facts from the gestalt of a situation as the only elements worth considering and then to pass judgment on them by employing values

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derived from a hierarchical, abstract belief structure and by stiff-arming any inklings of empathy or care, regarded as a weakness that damages the rational thought process. We began to see that the legal system, religion, and the academic fields of Western philosophy, psychology and the other social sciences, history, and analyses of literature were built on an infrastructure of male-oriented premises and practices that were presented as the natural, competent, and accomplished way for humans to think. In every direction we looked, we saw that the male and his druthers were the norm. We increasingly perceived that numerous concepts taken for granted were actually loaded expressions of patriarchal culture—that is, an orientation in which men are regarded as the cultural grown-ups and, therefore, are seen as superior to and properly dominant over the cultural minors: women and children. Some articles in grassroots cultural feminist journals featured quotation marks around nearly every phrase, term, and noun to signal the freighted meaning of those supposedly neutral linguistic components. Collectively, we mounted an exposé of the extensive and surprisingly deep ways in which our very language was supporting a profoundly rigged system.

INSIGHTS FROM THE *SORORITE*

In France a number of feminist authors exposed the patriarchal biases in various fields and suggested ways to cultivate modes of being that were not molded by patriarchal socialization. Two theorists in particular illuminated the ways in which language and thought are shaped in a patriarchal culture, providing an analysis that we cultural feminists in the United States found relevant.

The first, Claudine Herrmann, earned two law degrees and practiced law in Paris for many years. In 1976 she wrote *Les Voleuses de Langue* (*The Female Thieves of Language*, translated in 1991 as *The Tongue Snatchers*), in which she analyzes the ways in which men tend to operate linguistically within the public systems they have created. This orientation she calls “the virile system” (not intended as a complimentary label, she notes) and illustrates its operation in the French Civil Code as well as in numerous examples from French literature. Herrmann’s book was introduced to me by Terry Tempest Williams when we met at a conference in 1995, and I have since shared it with others.

Here are a few of Herrmann's observations. Every word has a different meaning for men and women. Man generally prefers himself to what surrounds him, to the extent that he places his mental categories before those of objective reality. His structures of thinking are external to him (and are entirely foreign to women); he is, therefore, stunned by everything and seeks to impose control over it. Man is profoundly syntactic. He acts only as a function of his spatial, temporal, social, and economic position. If a word bothers him, he replaces it immediately with a synonym. Moreover, every man has a tendency to organize the world according to a system in which he is the center. Men's space is a space of domination and hierarchy, of conquest and expansion.

Herrmann further observed that education [in the virile system] often represses language in women, dooming them to silence and idle chatter. If woman remains herself and continues to think in terms of harmony and not struggle, of gift and not exchange, she will get herself pitilessly crushed in the virile system. In her role as lover and mate, any individuality and self-reflection in a woman appears to be in excess of what the role requires. Deprived of emotional and social identity, women spend their lives looking for themselves. All women are deceived [that the virile system acknowledges the fullness of their being], and most of them perpetually and obstinately reconstruct the self-image whose reality they are always refused by the virile system. Allowing women to participate in society is nothing if it consists of plundering what makes them different—and men cannot even imagine, without contempt, what is not like themselves. Therefore, woman must maintain a distance between herself and the men she has not chosen. She must lay out a preserve for herself in relation to them that constitutes precisely that part of her that men do not understand and often attribute to stupidity. In this virile and pitiful world, a woman who refuses to alienate herself in virile values is often considered mentally ill.

Herrmann, then, sought to name the ways in which most men she observed tend to think, which is far different from what women usually assume. After all, male behavior is associated with reason, a premise that serves well to mask prejudicial and self-absorbed motivation.

Another French feminist theorist whose work was particularly illuminating for those American feminists pondering the male-oriented conceptual character of the entire public sphere is the philosopher and psychologist Luce Irigaray. After dismantling the virile premises

underlying Lacanian psychology and much of Western philosophy, Irigaray wrote *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977); *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984); and numerous other books, including her summation, *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings* (2004). She envisions a societal model she calls a Culture of Intersubjectivity in which male subjectivity and female subjectivity would be in dynamic dialogue—*if only* the female half of the dynamic were present, *if only* female subjectivity were cultivated, articulated, and respected as necessary for the full unfolding of every area of a culture's development. Irigaray sees the role of the women's movement as correcting injustices and creating new possibilities in every sphere *while thinking, speaking, and acting from an orientation of authentic female subjectivity*. Clearly, we are presently very far from such a model and can barely imagine it, though she makes many pragmatic suggestions in several areas of modern life. Regarding a language of female subjectivity, though, Irigaray, like Herrmann, only alludes to what could be.

THE DISAPPEARING WOMAN

The insights and observations that Herrmann and Irigaray began to articulate in the mid-1970s have subsequently been placed in a category called *difference feminism*, which holds that there are significant differences between the male and female sexes. In 2014, however, nothing could be further out of vogue. The long arm of social constructionism, which dominated American academia in the 1980s and 1990s, now reaches into the culture (especially via many people under 45 or so) with the premise that the social or cultural construction of identity, language, knowledge, and beliefs is far more important than mere physicality. Consequently, the freedom to express gender fluidity is considered far more significant than the presence of any material sex differences. In fact, the very mention of sex differences is dismissed in many feminist circles as “essentialist,” a charge derived from a straw-man argument mounted by social-constructionist feminists in the 1980s: they accused difference feminists of believing that all females share some sort of fixed, essential personality structure. In fact, our point was simply that passing through life in a male or female body (cognitive structure, endocrine system, nervous system, etc.) strongly affects the ways in which one perceives and experiences life. We hold that every

individual is unique but that the dynamics of embodiment influence perception and cognition. Today that observation is widely considered pathetically benighted—to the extent that even using the word *woman* is disallowed by some feminists on the grounds that it oppressively curtails total freedom of gender fluidity.¹

In addition, calling attention to power dynamics by using such labels as “patriarchal culture” or “the virile system” has long since been eased aside in favor of the more neutral term “the gender system,” which is more acceptable to male ears in academia and elsewhere. After all, who would hire or promote an aspiring assistant professor who wrote analyses of patriarchal dynamics in various fields? In studies of gender-linked patterns in language usage, the same progression can be seen over the years. In *Language and Women's Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff identified a “women’s register,” or socialized speech habits, that reflected a social position more insecure and inferior than that enjoyed by men. Other feminist linguists continued this “dominance approach” to reveal the power dynamics in language usage that are inherent to our patriarchal culture. This approach, however, was followed by the “difference” approach, which shifts the focus from cultural patterns of dominance to a neutral observation that the genders use language differently, such as Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand* (1980). As she put it—with no mention of power dynamics—men simply tend to interrupt women a lot, to set the topic of conversation in a mixed group, and to use a “report style” in conversation, while women tend to use a “rapport style.” Today the hippest approach in the linguistics of gender difference is known as the “dynamic,” or social-constructionist, approach, which rejects the notion of any categories in favor of the recognition that negotiating multiple dynamic factors to express a socially appropriate gender construction is merely a matter of “doing gender.” *All the world’s a stage*.

For these reasons, many young women today are further from exploring the insights of Herrmann, Irigaray, and other cultural feminist theorists of the 1970s on female voice and subjectivity than we were forty years ago. As young people were inculcated in college courses with the notion that “it’s all just social construction,” and as the female preferences for intimacy and relationship were devalued as mere gender posturing, the male preference for a hook-up culture came to dominate, and a growing rape culture found a protective home on many university

campuses. At the time of this writing, young women are speaking out about the extreme situation on campuses where the worst elements of virile values have been allowed to become the norm. Perhaps the decades-long drift into “this virile and pitiful world” will be halted as more women find their voice. They are not theorizing about donning and doffing gender roles as a fluid societal game: they are *naming* brutal domination and sexual assault.

EMBODIMENT, AGAIN

Bodies do matter. At the same time that extreme social constructionism has captured the hearts and minds of many young feminists, evidence challenging that ideology has appeared in the numerous discoveries about sex differences that are being made in physiology. Unless one is aware of the recent emergence of the new field called female physiology, though, it is difficult to escape the ubiquitous conceptual premises of extreme social constructionism and to be able to appreciate the wisdom of the feminist authors on women’s voices whom we will consider presently. It is now clear that—at every organizational level of the human body, from genes and cells to organs to the whole organism—sex differences shape our reality appreciably.

In physiological and medical research, as in the culture at large, the male has been considered the norm, which has caused research findings and drug testing to reflect the functioning solely of male bodies and to be significantly incorrect with regard to female bodies. Thanks to a group intervention by nearly all the women in Congress in the early 1990s, researchers receiving grants from the National Institutes of Health have been required to include adequate numbers of women in their studies. Also, for the first time grants were given to study more of the female body than the reproductive organs. Within the first decade of this new research, sex differences were identified at every level of structure and functioning within the human body. The first wave of these findings in female physiology and medicine was delineated by Marianne Legato, M.D., in *Eve’s Rib* (2001).

Women remained underrepresented, however, in clinical trials carried out by pharmaceutical corporations and medical device makers. Consequently, women experience more severe side-effects from new treatments, and many drugs—from aspirin to anesthesia—are not as

effective in women. To address this situation, the National Institutes of Health released a new policy in May 2014 requiring all researchers to alter long-standing basic research methods such that an equal amount of testing is done on female and male cells, tissue samples, lab rats, and human participants; also required is that the sex-specific testing be separated so that the respective results can be studied. As Janine A. Clayton, director of N.I.H.'s Office of Research on Women's Health, explained, "Each cell is either male or female, and that genetic difference results in different biochemical processes within that cell."²

Our species, like others, is dimorphic down to the cellular level, regardless of what sort of gender identity one decides to adopt and maintain. Not surprisingly, then, sex differences are apparent in brain structure. In December 2013 the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* published maps of the brain's so-called connectome, showing that women have stronger left-to-right links between the hemispheres and between areas of reasoning and intuition, while men have stronger back-to-front circuits and links between perception and action.³ In tests, women did better at attention, word and face memory, and *cognition*, while men did better at spatial processing, motor skills, and sensorimotor speed. Women also have stronger connections among "modules," or subregions, while men have stronger connections within such modules. In addition, women also have more interconnections across the frontal lobes. These findings bring to mind the widely replicated tests of perception conducted initially in 1954 by Herman Witkin, which find cross-culturally that women tend to instantly perceive the interconnected whole, or gestalt, of a design flashed on a screen, while men tend to see the foreground figure rather than the gestalt in which it is embedded.⁴

As should be apparent, women have nothing to fear from these scientific discoveries about sex differences in mental tendencies. Although neither sex should ever be limited in opportunity because of interpretations of such statistical findings, it is simply not true that acknowledging these discoveries leads straight to a biological determinism that would remove women from the public sphere and limit them to the domestic sphere. On the contrary, women's talent for grasping the gestalt, or big picture, in any situation, as well as for perceiving an awareness of the dynamic interrelatedness that is involved, makes us logical candidates for any position in which such

skills are crucial, such as presidents, directors, managers, lawmakers, judges, and diplomats.

The fact that women tend to experience a more palpable sense of dynamic interrelatedness than do men does not mean that they live in a fantasy world of imagined idyllic relationships. To have a relational orientation is to perceive the quality of the relational gestalt of a situation, whatever that might be—harmonious and pleasant, infused with wariness and distrust, or wrenchingly shattered. It is simply a matter of having acute powers of perception and awareness. For instance, when subjects in a test of perception are shown a series of projected photographs of human faces, each for a very brief amount of time, women have far greater success in identifying the particular emotional state being expressed. Most male subjects just can't see it.

“FRENCHWOMEN, STOP TRYING!”

That is the delightful title of an essay by Luce Irigaray. With the realization that sex differences strongly influence female or male perceptions of the world, one can better grasp the insistence by both Irigaray and Herrmann that women damage themselves, repeatedly, if they attempt to hew closely to the premises and expectations of the virile system, or mainstream culture, which is an extension of male subjectivity but is passed off as being neutral. One could analyze this dynamic in every sphere of life and every field of endeavor. Here we will consider the difficulties it causes in the areas of language, style, and received concepts.

First, English, like all other languages in the Indo-European group, is characterized by nominalization. That is, the main focus is on nouns, or the naming of things, rather than on process, or stages of becoming, or subtle aspects of interrelatedness. It is a language group that evolved in the early Indo-European nomadic cultures on the Eurasian steppes, which had a patriarchal social structure, a chieftain system (reflected in their burial patterns), and glorification of warriors and weaponry. Second, the concepts and phrases in which we are socialized in school and elsewhere are built on premises that felt natural to the dominant group: men. For instance, in Aristotle's foundational philosophy of nature, naming and categorization are central, rather

than attention to the complex dynamics of process or interrelatedness. Third, the style of expression, both orally and in print, that has long been the admired norm is, in general, reductionist in its logic: it ignores the whole of a gestalt other than those elements deemed noteworthy by virile values. In the logical progression A, B, C, *ergo* D, for instance, an underlying premise at the stage of A guides the identification of what is to be considered and what ignored, such that the subsequent steps follow neatly—and *Voilà!* The supposedly sole rational outcome is attained.

How tiresome it is. I suspect that the silences observed in many female lives follow not only from the futility of trying to fit a relational mentality into a system designed by and for hierarchical, competitive mentalities but also from the chasm that exists between our nominalized language and the female inner perception of a richly complex gestalt of dynamic interrelatedness. What we perceive and know cannot be articulated without significant diminution. Even the interior monologue in our minds is curtailed by the nominalized language system into which we were born.

There are no doubt many reasons for women's silences, but perhaps some of the women who opt for silence are not merely exhausted mentally and emotionally by the gap between their inner life and the way the outer world is structured and functions in a patriarchal culture. Perhaps they are Linguistic Lysistratas performing a principled act of non-cooperation with the dominant situation. Perhaps they reached a point at which their personal integrity demanded of them that they *stop trying*. I do not know if this was a possible motivation in the mystery on which Terry Tempest Williams reflects in *When Women Were Birds*. She tells the reader that her mother purchased many blank journals, as Mormon women are expected to do so that they can record information about their lives and family for posterity. Her mother kept them together in an orderly fashion on shelf in a closet. Shortly before she died of cancer, she told her daughter that she was leaving the journals to her. A few weeks after her mother's death, Terry Tempest Williams opened the journals and found that every one of them was blank. Has any woman reading this account felt that such a silence, although surprising, is entirely unfathomable? Not likely. Silence is our refuge, our very private preserve.

CULTIVATING AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION

What would language and expressive forms be like that were an extension of the female mind's tendency to experience the world as a dynamic gestalt of interrelatedness and process? That rich complexity and fullness might first bring to mind the nonverbal possibilities—music, dance, and the visual arts. The catalogue of an extraordinary exhibition titled *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States* (2012), for example, presents scores of intriguing works by celebrated artists who were particularly interested in expressing the female psyche. (Hardly any of them applied the label *Surrealist* to their work, though others sometimes did.) In music, Lisa Gerard not only composes hauntingly powerful songs but creates and sings her own language of lyrics on CDs including *Mirror Pool* and all those by the Dead Can Dance duo.

Even when limited to box-car linear constructions of a nominalized language marching across the printed page in orderly rows, women of great talent have found ways to break through. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Virginia Woolf created complex characters who vibrate in fields of resonant embeddedness, whether painful or sustaining. *What a lark! What a plunge!* In the years shortly before World War I, Gertrude Stein thwarted linguistic expectations and composed playful romps delivering expositions that are never frivolous. Then, too, there are poets among us who can place a few words on a page and instantly manifest the unbounded relational gestalt we feel within—Elizabeth Bishop, Rosanna Warren, Annie Finch, Mary Szybist, and many others. Such works engage with a reality that we know experientially but do not otherwise see reflected in the culture.

To draw us out of the received constrictions and stretch our options, we might well consider the creative language-building in *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (1987) by Mary Daly with Jane Caputi. Luce Irigaray's groundbreaking and poetic essay on voice and female subjectivity, "When Our Two Lips Speak Together" (1976), also remains inspiring. Finally, to see a searching, uncompromising female literary mind on the page, swim into "Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose: A Lifelong Conversation with Myself Entered Midway" (1994) by the novelist Carole Maso. At one point, she cites Virginia Woolf's

declared intention “to saturate every atom. . . to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. . . . It must include nonsense; fact; sordidity; but made transparent.”⁵

To give the moment whole—this is the aim of a writer who possesses an acute awareness of the embeddedness of every atom in every moment in a complex of dynamic relationships, a writer who would never even consider writing as if she were a person who perceives the world as composed of separative, isolate elements bumping into one another now and then, in need of a hierarchical ordering for coherence. The *world* is coherent. *Every moment* is coherent with interrelatedness. This we know as women. To find ways to give voice to our experience is an existential imperative: authentic lives require authentic voice. Sadly, the pioneering efforts mentioned above were all created long ago, after which further developments have been modest in comparison. Most of us have been on drift, having largely settled, with regard to our linguistic choices and creativity. Perhaps we will regain our momentum, though. Perhaps we will yet bring forth our mother tongues.

NOTES

1. Social constructionists who reject categories of male and female as the only two sexes point out that a small number of people are born with indeterminate genitals. This is true, and not only in our species; environmental toxins are suspected of disrupting the delicate process of conception and gestation. What is not clear is whether the brain and all other organ systems, cells, and genes also have indeterminate structure in such cases.

2. Roni Caryn Rabin, “N.I.H. Tells Researchers to End Sex Bias in Early Studies,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2014.

3. Geoffrey Mohan, “Brains of women and men show strong hard-wired differences,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 2013.

4. See the discussion in Charlene Spretnak, *Relational Reality: New Discoveries of Interrelatedness That Are Transforming the Modern World* (Topsham, ME: Green Horizon Books, 2011), pp. 189-193.

5. Virginia Woolf, cited in Carole Maso, “Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose,” *Break Every Rule* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 2000), p. 23.