
Articles: Gender Studies

Deconstruction and Feminism: The Politics of Undecidability

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Since its emergence deconstruction has had an ambivalent relationship with feminist cultural politics. This article examines Derrida's engagement with these debates via his reading of Nietzsche in Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles (1979). Derrida's reading ventriloquizes his thoughts on the deconstruction of the subject and what he calls the 'politics of undecidability'. These themes are then developed by Barbara Johnson's defence of the politics of deconstruction in A World of Difference (1987) and The Wake of Deconstruction (1995), where she turns to consider a deconstructive reading of the anti-abortion debate in the USA. Finally, Diane Elam's reading of the politics of undecidability is examined as an attempt to further resituate the debate on feminism and deconstruction.

The ethico-political relationship between deconstruction and feminist cultural theory has been central to important debates in Gender Studies.¹ Deconstruction has been simultaneously used to great effect by feminists as a political form of analysis and dismissed precisely because it 'refuses to take gender differences seriously enough and does not provide a proper ground for political action' (Elam, 1994, 18). This paper will explore this tension by examining Derrida's ethico-political discussion of 'the question of woman' in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (1979), where he ventriloquises his thoughts on the intersection of deconstruction and feminism. Following this, my intention is to see how the dialogue has continued in the work of two prominent feminist cultural theorists, Barbara Johnson and Diane Elam.

Johnson provides a particularly apposite example of a feminist analysis in her attack on the Yale deconstructionists as a predominantly 'Male School' of literary criticism (Johnson, 1987, 32). Consequently, her analysis of the 'politics of undecidability' will enable me to discuss Elam's theoretical concern with the deconstruction of the subject in her *Feminism and Deconstruction* (1994). Here, I will examine Elam's idea that the relation between deconstruction and feminism is one of 'groundless solidarity' rather than 'consensus' (Elam, 1994, 25). The notion of 'groundless solidarity' underpins her understanding of Kant's faculty of judgement as a bridge over an abyss (24).² That is to say, deconstruction's interrogation of normative assumptions brings about an 'infinite displacement ... of the subject, of identity politics, [and] of the subject of feminism and deconstruction' (25). The contemplation of the incalculable abyss beneath 'the proper' reinforces Elam's argument that deconstruction is an ethical duty that, without prior model or calculable mode of intervention, attempts to do justice to the singularity of the other. Deconstruction empowers women by unfixing their subject positions: 'Women are yet to be determined and so are their (political actions). We do not yet know what women can do' (27). In order to consider these themes in more detail, let us firstly turn to Derrida's discussion of female subjectivity in the works

of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche and the Question of Woman

In *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (1979) Derrida engages in an 'affirmative' (37), deconstructive reading of the German philosopher that establishes firm interconnections between questions of power, truth, textuality and gender. In a familiar deconstructive move, Derrida describes how Nietzsche's apparent misogyny is in fact repeatedly made and unmade by his texts. On the one hand, Derrida identifies Nietzsche's argument that 'truth is like a woman' (51). On the other hand, Nietzsche is fascinated by a concept of woman that is itself 'scepticism and veiling dissimulation' (57). This undecidable aspect of Nietzsche's conception of women allows Derrida to make a familiar connection with the abyssal movement of writing. *Spur*, the English translation of the French word, *éperon*, precisely conveys this movement of undecidability: spur means both the impress or mark of a stylate spur (also evident for example in the German, *die Spur*, meaning trace or wake), and a rapier such as a stiletto, which signifies a way of protecting truth or presence 'from the unveiling of ... difference' (39).

Having established this lever of undecidability, Derrida explores his notion of 'phallogocentrism', a term which associates logocentrism with patriarchal power and its symbolic representation of the phallus. Phallogocentrism, Derrida shows, is determined by a masculine, logocentric interpretation of self-present truth that erases the play of *différance*. While phallogocentrism attempts to impose a similarly metaphysical understanding of truth on 'woman', for Derrida, 'woman' is an undecidable term that cannot disavow the oscillating play of *différance*: 'There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman avers, she is averted of herself. Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable, she engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property' (51). In other words, 'There is no such thing as a woman, as a truth in itself of woman in itself' (101). Here the other, latent meaning of spur emerges: 'The stylate spur (*éperon stylé*) rips through the veil' of metaphysical closure and stability (107). As with Derrida's other undecidable non-concepts, woman destabilises the oppositions upon which logocentrism and Western metaphysics rest. This is particularly evident in relation to the opposition between truth and non-truth:

The question of the woman suspends the decidable opposition of true and non-true and inaugurates the epochal regime of quotation marks which is to be enforced for every concept belonging to the system of philosophical decidability. The hermeneutic project which postulates a true sense of the text is disqualified under this regime. (107)

Woman's disavowal of truth inaugurates an abyssal logic: 'There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because of that abyssal divergence of the truth, because that untruth is "truth". Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth' (51). The complexity of Nietzsche's representation of woman places the metaphysical notion of truth under erasure: 'Nietzsche's writing is compelled to suspend truth between the tender-hooks of quotation marks - and suspended there with truth is - all the rest' (57). At the same time, Derrida identifies how Nietzsche's abyssal style of writing is based on a feminine principle: 'Nietzsche's writing is an inscription ... even if we do not venture so far as to call it the feminine itself ... [of] the feminine "operation" ' (57).

In order that metaphysics maintain its notion of self-present truth it attempts to efface the role of writing, woman, and dissimulation. Throughout *Spurs* Derrida undermines the metaphysical notion of truth, connecting it with Nietzsche's conception of women, simultaneously

problematizing and confusing the popular anti-feminist reading of the German philosopher. Just as truth is subject to dissemination and iterability - *repetition* as *alteration* - female subjectivity cannot be possessed or appropriated. Derrida symbolises the status of the subject by multiplying the associations of woman with play, negativity, seduction and otherness in a potentially endless display of making and unmaking, inscription and reinscription. These words resonate with the theme of political resistance; woman cannot be grasped. 'Truth, unveiling, illumination', Derrida writes, 'are no longer decided in the appropriation of the truth of being, but cast into its bottomless abyss as non-truth, veiling and dissimulation' (119). The literality and essence of woman is replaced by an interminable movement of unveiling.

In the interview, "Choreographies", Derrida relates Emma Goldman's statement - 'If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution' (Cited, Derrida, 1995, 89) - to his notion of truth as unveiling. Goldman, something of a maverick feminist from the late nineteenth century, places an emphasis on dance that is similar to Derrida's mobile strategy of deconstruction. The notion of the dance indicates that Goldman was 'ready to break with the most authorized, the most dogmatic form of consensus, one that claims ... to speak out in the name of revolution and history' (93). Goldman's idea of the dance fastens onto a completely other history of the women's movement - one that emphasises its 'paradoxical laws and non-dialectical discontinuities', its 'absolutely heterogeneous pockets, irreducible particularities, of unheard-of and incalculable sexual differences'. Consequently, the *dance* can function as a precursor of deconstructive activity, which describes women who have always been concerned with 'inventing sexual idioms at a distance from the main forum of feminist activity with a kind of reserve that does not necessarily prevent them from subscribing to the movement and even, occasionally, from becoming militant for it'. The affirmative moment of the dance produces the deconstruction or *displacement* of the metaphysical conception of women (94). The joyous disturbance of the dance does not indicate either powerlessness or fragility, as much as the need for an incessant, daily negotiation that is 'always deprived of insurance, whether it be in private life or within institutions'. As the word choreographies itself suggests, deconstruction or the dance of making an unmaking resists monosexual discourse, affirming in its place 'the necessity for a chorus, for a choreographic text with polysexual signatures' (107). Elam has also seen that one of the most important features of the encounter between feminism and deconstruction is that it permits a rethinking of the temporality of the feminist movement, as 'something closer to the dance than to Mao's long march' (Elam, 1994, 9). This constellation of images is pursued by Johnson and Elam vis-à-vis the deconstruction of the subject.

Feminism and the Politics of Undecidability

Unlike a range of feminist critics who are antipathetic to deconstruction,³ Johnson interprets one of the main contentions of both de Man and Derrida - 'not that language is always absolutely random, but that we can never be sure that it isn't' (Johnson, 1987, 6) - neither as a 'conservative plot to talk radicals out of social change' or as a 'nihilistic desire to cancel out human meaning altogether'. Johnson rejects both charges in her detailed readings of gender in *A World of Difference*. This book is concerned with taking the analysis of *différance* out of the realm of linguistic universality and into contexts in which it is very much at issue in the real world. In *A World of Difference* Johnson attempts to challenge the popular idea that pedagogical institutions frequently maintain boundaries between inside and outside, the unreal and the real world. Whereas in her earlier study, *The Critical Difference* (1980), Johnson was motivated by questions of

reading responsibly, the later text is concerned with showing how the 'constraints and opportunities afforded by gender, race, literary genre, or institutional context, for both writer and reader, can be located neither inside or outside the texts but are rather effects of the complex dynamism of an interaction' (1987, 4). Johnson moves toward a critique of the fallacious thresholds both within the text and between the text and the context of its reading or writing. Most significantly, she attempts to interrogate the sexual and racial exclusions and effacements of the western literary canon. Her indebtedness to both de Man's and Derrida's understanding of *différance* is directly related to a number of political questions, frequently posed by the literary left:

What are the political consequences of the fact that language is not a transparently expressive medium? What role does literature's radicalization of this fact play? How can the study of suppressed, disseminated, or marginalized messages within texts equip us to intervene against oppression and injustice in the world? Is a willingness to carry an inquiry to the point of undecidability necessarily at odds with political engagement? (7)

Such questions are not asked or addressed in such an explicit manner in the work of de Man or that of the other Yale critics, and so it is interesting to pursue Johnson's answers to these questions to see how deconstruction can empower feminist analyses. Firstly, it is necessary to clarify her understanding of deconstruction.

In her essay, "Nothing fails Like Success", Johnson criticises a number of arguments that have been levelled at deconstruction, focusing especially on the differences between the Yale critics and de Man's and Derrida's understanding of the word:

As soon as any radically innovative thought becomes an *ism*, its specific groundbreaking force diminishes, its historical notoriety increases, and its disciples tend to become more simplistic, more dogmatic, and ultimately more conservative, at which time its power becomes institutional rather than analytical. (Johnson, 1987, 11)

In this passage Johnson sharply rebuts a number of obvious misreadings of Derrida's thought - the idea that deconstruction attacks the logic of noncontradiction and thus the essence of western rational thought; that deconstruction relies on a limited understanding of textuality and applies 'its critical energy only within an institutional structure that does not question and therefore confirms' (14); and the mistaken notion that the phrase 'there is nothing outside the text' means that readers have no access to history or biography. In place of these critical clichés, she outlines a notion of deconstruction as a form of strong reading which 'propagates the surprise of otherness' (15). Derrida brings to his reader the surprise of a nonbinary, undecidable logic that must never remain static or fixed. Such an idea is based on the assumption that, rather than taking knowledge for granted, the necessary task of readers should be to *surprise* one's ignorance:

The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative. If the deconstructive impulse is to retain its vital, subversive power, we must therefore become ignorant of it again and again. It is only by forgetting what we know how to do, by setting aside the thoughts that have most changed us, that those thoughts and that knowledge can go on making accessible to us the surprise of an otherness we can only encounter in the moment of suddenly discovering we are ignorant of it. (16)

Johnson firmly rejects the idea that deconstruction should become a repeatable literary methodology. How, then, does Johnson use deconstruction in her politically committed readings of gender and race?

The essay "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" stands out as an example of Johnson's

critical practice. Johnson challenges the argument that 'to focus on undecidability is to be apolitical' (193). Johnson argues, 'on the contrary, [that] the undecidable is the political. There is politics precisely because there is undecidability' (194). Allied to this focus is her politicisation of rhetoric, an area of literary study which is normally annexed from such discussions. 'What ... could seem more dry and apolitical than a rhetorical treatise?', Johnson asks, and 'What could seem farther away from budgets and guerrilla warfare than a discussion of anaphora, antithesis, prolepsis, and preterition?' (184). The CIA manual on psychological operations in guerrilla warfare, however, which came to light during the American campaign in Nicaragua, contains an appendix on techniques of oratory which lists definitions and examples for these and many other rhetorical figures. Defining rhetoric in terms of a 'language that says one thing and means another', Johnson argues that 'Rhetoric clearly has everything to do with covert operations'.

Having established the political dimensions of rhetoric, the main focus of her analysis shifts to consider the debate about abortion, and the role that rhetoric plays in the politics of the debate. Are 'the politics of violence', she asks, 'already encoded in rhetorical figures as such? In other words, can the very essence of a political issue - an issue like, say, abortion - hinge on the structure of a figure? Is there any inherent connection between figurative language and questions of life and death, of who will wield and who will receive violence in a given human society?'. Johnson begins the discussion of these ethico-political questions by outlining her understanding of apostrophe, a common figure of lyric poetry, where it functions as a 'direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker' (185). The use of apostrophe describes the movement of digressing from straight speech and manipulating the I/thou structure of direct address in such a way that the absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Johnson cites Baudelaire's "Moesta et Errabunda" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind",⁴ but it is the latter which she presents as the ultimate example of an apostrophaic poem.

In the first three sections of the poem, Johnson shows how Shelley invokes the wind as a figure of animation, describing it as the 'breath of being', 'moving everywhere', 'blowing movement and energy through the world'. Conversely, the wind has a violent underside: it is destructive and brings death and winter in its wake. The evolution of the poem traces the birth or reanimation of the speaker's lost or former self. In the first three sections, the poem moves from the speaker's attempts to make the wind listen to him, to the fourth where he begins to inscribe his own identity - his own 'I' - in place of the wind's 'thou'. Through time a loss of animation and similarity between speaker and wind has occurred. This tension is continued into the final section by reversing the structure of apostrophe, as the speaker attempts to reanimate the lost sense of proximity to the wind as inspiration, muse or authentic former self. The possibility of achieving reanimation, however, is what precisely remains in doubt. The speaker's hope of achieving this depends on the notion that the wind is the giver of death and also of life. This rhetorical question - does life entail rebirth, regeneration, reanimation? - remains, tellingly, unanswered. 'The rhetorical question', Johnson writes, 'in a sense, leaves the poem in a state of suspended animation', a state which for the poem, is one of 'maximum potential'. This phrase recalls de Man's striking conclusion to the Proust section of "Semiotics and Rhetoric": 'We seem to end up', de Man writes, 'in a mood of negative assurance that is highly productive of critical discourse' (de Man, 1979, 16).

Turning to Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "The Mother", Johnson describes how apostrophe can also be linked, through the theme of abortion, to the lost life of another person. Foregrounding the first line of the poem, "Abortions will not let you forget", Johnson argues that unlike Shelley, who

sought to reanimate his lost self, Brooks 'represents the self as eternally addressed and possessed by the lost, anthropomorphised other' (Johnson, 1987, 189). Consequently, the 'you' of the first line shows that the 'I' is already 'alienated, distanced from itself, and combined with a generalized other'. This confusion blurs the traditional boundaries between 'subject and object, agent and victim'.

In the second section, Brooks replaces the first word 'Abortion', with an 'I', and the first line reads: "I have heard the voices in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children". Consequently, Brooks' use of apostrophe moves from the inanimate concern evident in Shelley to the boundary between animate and inanimate life. The boundary, of course, concerns the point at which an unborn fetus achieves personhood. For Johnson, however, the stakes are even higher. The transition signalled by Brooks concerns the:

rewriting [of] the male lyric tradition, textually placing aborted children in the spot formerly occupied by all the dead, inanimate, or absent entities previously addressed by the lyric.

Now, in line 14 of the poem - "I have said, Sweets, if I sinned" - Brooks' speaker suffers from 'an inability to forget' rather than the desire for union, that was the case with Shelley. The poem thus dramatises the attempt to clarify the tension between 'I' and 'you' - a conflict which, for Johnson, 'succeeds only in expressing the inability of its language to do so' (190). The 'I' here is always conditioned by the inescapable memory of the other - the 'you'. Though the poem is frequently interpreted as 'an argument against abortion' (191), Johnson contends that its complex use of apostrophe is in fact a powerful example of undecidability:

the poem makes no such claim [against abortion]: it attempts the impossible task of humanizing both the mother and the aborted children while presenting the inadequacy to resolve the dilemma without violence. (191)

Drawing on Carol Gilligan's discussion of the ethics of abortion in her book, *In a Different Voice* (1982), Johnson reiterates that the choice of whether or not to have an abortion cannot efface violence. The choice is not between violence and nonviolence, but between simple violence to a fetus and a complex, less determinate violence to an involuntary mother and/or an unwanted child. Furthermore, the figure of apostrophe plays a central role in the structure of the abortion debate. 'What I would like to emphasize', she writes:

is the way in which the poem suggests that the arguments for and against abortion are structured through and through by the rhetorical limits and possibilities of something akin to apostrophe.

The complexity of the speaker's role derives from her knowledge that she cannot escape 'without violence' (192). Apostrophe makes the children she addresses human and she is unable to forget her role in their death. On the other hand, by reanimating them, she can attempt to stave off the final act of abortion. The moment of undecidability is part of the very nature of language itself: 'It becomes impossible to tell whether language is what gives life or what kills'.

The same problems arise in juridical debates about the point at which a fetus achieves personhood. Johnson's discussion of the abortion case *Roe v. Wade* (192-193), leads her to agree with Kristin Luker's argument that both pro-life and pro-choice activists fail to represent substantial proportions of Americans. Her point is that the debate depends on different understandings of the key terms involved, from motherhood to personhood. Johnson is thereby led to reiterate the point, based on her discussion of Brooks' complex understanding of shifting

address-structures, that 'There is politics precisely because there is undecidability' (194); all decisions must pass via the trial of the undecidable.

The Deconstruction of the Political

In "The Deconstruction of Politics" (1989) Bill Readings further refines deconstruction's relationship with feminist cultural politics, principally by developing Johnson's understanding of the deconstructed subject. The main target of Readings' essay is Terry Eagleton's and Edward Said's rather myopic charge that deconstruction erases the subject and therefore the chance of political agency.⁵ Readings recognises that such critics totally – some would say, deliberately – misunderstand Derrida's notion of the deconstructed subject. Derrida does not argue that there is no subject: 'I have never said that *there is not* a "subject of writing." ... It is solely necessary to reconsider the problem of the effect of subjectivity as it is produced by the structure of the text' (Cited, Readings, 234).⁶ Like Johnson, Readings' subsequent notion of the ethical subject is based on the rejection of a familiar misreading of deconstruction, that is, the idea that deconstruction rejects the real or literal world for an all embracing notion of textuality (Readings, 1989, 224).⁷

The traditional metaphysical conception of the political relies on an opposition between the real (or literal) and the textual (or figural). Readings shows that Derrida's argument that these realms cannot be opposed in this fashion often leads to the charge that deconstruction is not concerned with 'real people' and 'real struggles' (227). Here the literal grounds 'critical insight' and political action as 'pure *knowledge*' (224). Readings rejects deconstruction as a 'critical method *before* politics' because it is not a transcendental strategy that attempts to 'ground in some sense the insights that it offers as "real" ' (224-225). Readings is quite clear about his rejection of this strategy: 'The attempt to lend deconstruction the status of demystification and then to seek to empower it for social change in a literal sphere of agency is futile' (225). Readings emphasises the literal sphere in this passage because Derrida rejects the idea that the literal can be detached from the 'rhetorical sphere of signifying practices'. In other words, Derrida's reconsideration of the opposition that grounds the metaphysical notion of the political is not tantamount to a withdrawal from political thinking.

The real strategic force of Readings' understanding of the contamination of the literal by the figural is to be found in his attempt to shift the emphasis of the debate from the 'question of deconstruction *and* politics' (224) to the 'deconstruction *of* politics'. Readings' lucid and intelligent intervention argues that the force of deconstruction is to be found in 'the extent to which it forces a rethinking of the terms of the political' (225).⁸ The privilege normally reserved for the literal sphere sets up an opposition between textuality (or books in general when the argument is stated in its crudest terms) and exterior reality. According to this view, 'literature is political only to the extent that the political is in some sense the *referent* of the text, a referent that is conceived literally, as something exterior to the text' (227). Derrida's rethinking of the question of reference, linked to the idea that he denies the existence of an extra-linguistic reality, are usually taken as evidence of his withdrawal from politics. In this passage from "Deconstruction in America" Derrida rejects all of these claims:

Not only is there reference for a text, but never was it proposed that we erase effects of reference or of referents. Merely that we re-think these effects of reference. I would indeed say that the referent is textual. The referent is in the text. Yet that does not exempt us from having to describe very rigorously the necessity of those referents.⁹

Derrida's main point is not to deny reference or the existence of an extra-linguistic reality. Rather he acknowledges that there can be no referent that is not subject to textuality, no access to the real that is not textually mediated. Just like de Man, Readings argues that Derrida astutely 'avoids any easy deferral of the question of politics by the invocation of strategic claims that always tend toward transcendence' (228). The prime example of the figurative contamination of the literal is the idea that the literal is itself a metaphor. 'The referent is in the text', Readings argues, 'in the sense that reference is a figural necessity of the fiction that language is the vehicle of a communication or an expression, a vehicle that can transport, can move outside itself to the properties of things ... can function *literally*' (229). In other words, the 'literal is a trope within rhetoric, rhetoric's trope of the absence of rhetoric' (230). In a similar way, 'The referent is the text's fiction of the absence of text, the text's fiction of its own outside'. The resulting failure to acknowledge the mutual contamination of the literal and the figural underpins the traditional empirical conception of the political in western metaphysics. The transparent notion of representation - which Derrida deconstructs in "Declarations of Independence" for example - shows that domination works by denying its politics, by establishing its particular politics as an empirical or prepolitical real, so that domination is invisible. Derrida's emphasis on undecidability and mutual contamination is thus a direct attack on a totalitarian conception of the political.

Readings proposes to replace the traditional subject of politics with the subject of a tradition of ethical thought in order to rethink the question of political agency. For Readings, the tradition of ethical thought offers a displacement of the subject/object distinction that may produce a subject under deconstruction. Furthermore, the ethical subject which emerges from the deconstruction of the subject/object distinction is aligned with a conception of justice that derives from Levinas:

The subject of ethics is the subject who judges without criteria, who practices a justice that cannot be justified. The just person cannot be described justly, since to describe his or her prescriptive function would be to fall in with the injustice of reality.

Consequently, judgements are made without reference to existing criteria and thus 'the process of judging can never reach the point where a final account can be given of it'. This is a notion of justice without present realisation, of a justice to come. Readings' ethical subject or subject under deconstruction does not 'deny the possibility of agency but merely disrupts its status in ways that precisely allow the possibility of a political resistance that might escape confinement to the field of a political real, which is always already defined by the State as the state (of things)' (235). In *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme* (1994) Diane Elam attempts to apply both Readings' and Johnson's understanding of the ethical subject in a feminist context.

The pun in Elam's subtitle - 'Ms. en Abyme' rather than the familiar post-structuralist *mise en abyme* - gives us an immediate clue as to her understanding of the deconstruction of the female subject. In poststructuralist writings the figure of *mise en abyme* derives from the heraldic effect of infinite regression whereby a shield contains representations of smaller shields. The strategic effect of *mise en abyme* thus relates to the 'structure of infinite deferral' or 'a spiral of infinite regression in representation' (Elam, 1994, 27). Elam's argument is based on the idea that *mise en abyme* is the 'condition of "women" '. Rather than provoke the familiar criticism that this effect would lead to paralysis or uncertainty, Elam sees it as an empowering strategy which 'upsets the assumed relationship between subject and object in the scene of representation' (28). It is therefore possible for the subject and object to change positions, making it feasible to challenge stable representations of female identity, either in relation to the traditionally negative role of object or even as a potentially empowered or active subject. As Elam explains, 'the *mis en abyme*

acknowledges the subject/object positions assumed by representation, but it also makes those positions infinite and ultimately incalculable. Women ultimately will never be determined as either subject or object' (29). Feminism must assimilate the notion of infinite deferral if it is to be just to the possibilities of female subjectivity. The concept of woman remains a '*permanently contested site of meaning*' (32).

Elam seeks to develop Johnson's notion that undecidability is the condition of politics by outlining a politics which is not grounded in subjective experience and is thus based on the assumption that, 'The political remains the realm of the undecidable, which will not yield a theory of what women should be'. Consequently, Elam thinks of deconstruction in a similar way to Readings as a questioning of the terms in which we understand the political, rather than as a simple negation of the political. Deconstruction has much in common with the feminist refusal to accept the terms within and by which politics is conventionally practiced. For Elam, then, deconstruction is not concerned with the working out of a particular politics but rather with the insistence that the nature of the political must remain open to modification. This understanding also applies to what counts as politics and both feminism and deconstruction thus conceived do not cease to ask this question. Elam is not concerned with attempting to account for how deconstruction and feminism stand on certain political questions of everyday significance. Elam's attempt to rethink the political relates to her own rethinking of the essentialist conceptions of identity that underpin traditional forms of feminist praxis. This leads Elam to outline a notion of the subject that opens up *différance* within identity by:

explor[ing] the political practices made possible by solidarity which is not based on identity. The solidarity to which I am referring would, in fact, be a coalition built around a suspicion of identity as the essential grounding for meaningful political action. (69)

The resulting notion of groundless solidarity springs from the deconstruction of the fixed notion of subjectivity. This is accompanied by a move from politics to ethics that also names a shift from politics conceived as a regime of truth.

In the modern era politics has been founded on the idea of a subject that is free to make its own laws. For Derrida there can be no subject prior to logocentrism (Derrida, 1985, 16). Derrida disputes the idea that the subject exists prior to the political realm in a stable and coherent form. The deconstruction of the subject amounts to the same problematisation of the subject/object relation as *mise en abyme*. Similarly, Elam argues that feminism must begin to consider the implications of doing politics without a stable subject and therefore redefine what 'might constitute politics' (Elam, 1994, 77).

At this point Elam turns to Johnson's discussion of abortion in "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion". In opposition to those feminist critics that remain resolutely opposed to Derrida's emphasis on undecidability, Elam shows that Johnson is acutely aware of the way undecidability can empower new political possibilities: 'The specificity of feminism is thus its insistence that the politics of undecidability (among multiple determinations) must be understood from a standpoint of indeterminacy, of political *possibilities*' (84). In the context of the abortion debate, Elam argues that Johnson's emphasis on undecidability 'stands to make clear ... that it is precisely feminists who wish to preserve abortion as a difficult decision, a decision that is a woman's choice, that is not decided in advance'. In order to do justice to the debate on abortion it is necessary to 'allow the *undecidable* in so far as abortion would be neither a decision which could be made in advance or made once and for all for all women'. The undecidable is related to the surprise of the other. Politics is reconfigured via this notion of the subject as an encounter with *différance* and the

attempt to handle differences.

This reading returns us to the thesis that, in order to understand Derrida's thinking of the political, one must understand the deconstruction of metaphysical temporality. Politics lapses into totalitarianism when it forgets the undecidable and the ethical subject. For Derrida on the contrary, 'the present does not *ground* a politics any more than do the past (conservatism) or the future (technocracy). The past can only be recalled as a promise (it still awaits fulfilment), and the future fulfilment is dependent upon a past promise' (86). Elam outlines a precursor of Beardsworth's (1996) idea of originary repetition and a non-horizonal notion of justice. The understanding of politics as undecidable is not therefore about refusing to make decisions, it is about refusing to ground the decisions with reference to existing universal laws. For both Elam and Johnson, then, deconstruction and feminism are ethical activities that require that judgements be made, yet which do not supply the means of legitimating those judgements. There can be no reference to self-present subjects, natural rights, or transcendental truths. The politics of undecidability amounts to an 'insistence that we have to *make* a decision, each time, in each case - that we cannot avoid making a decision by just applying a pre-existing universal law' (87).

Derrida's reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs* complicates any simple attempt to dismiss deconstruction as anti-feminist that disavows a confrontation with the political. Using Nietzsche to ventriloquise his own concerns with the politics of undecidability, Derrida cleverly intervenes in the debate about the German philosopher's misogyny to show his concern with the interminable oscillation of veiling and unveiling. Johnson's and Elam's subsequent understanding of deconstruction continues to carefully tease out the responsibilities evident in this engagement and to foreground the inherent concern with the ethico-political resonance of undecidability. From the carefully argued close readings of both Johnson and Elam, the deconstruction of the feminist subject emerges as precisely attuned to the anti-totalising political resonance of Derridean deconstruction: as a critique of aesthetic ideology and all forms of universalist thinking, reference and legislation. To reiterate Johnson's principal argument, always as a singular event in itself: there is politics precisely because there is undecidability.

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1. For thorough summaries of the discussions, see in particular Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (1992), and Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme* (1994).
2. This abyss is a reoccurring trope in Derrida's works, and is especially evident in his essay, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils" (1983).
3. See, for example, Elam's summary of the criticisms levelled at deconstruction by feminists in "Unnecessary Introductions" (1994), 1-26.
4. Johnson refers to Baudelaire (1976) and to Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" from *The Complete Poems* (1981).
5. Readings refers to Eagleton's discussion of deconstruction in *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981), 140; and Said's in *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (1984), 159, 292.
6. See Derrida, *Positions* (1981), 88.
7. Readings also considers the charge that deconstruction provides no ground for political action (1989, 223, 230-233).
8. This argument is most notably developed by Bennington (1994) and Beardsworth (1996).
9. This passage is quoted by Readings (1989, 227-228) from Derrida's interview, "Deconstruction in America" (1985), 15-19.

