

conflict, montage, hesitation

RACHAEL GUYNN WILSON

Something like a chemical or electric charge surges into existence at the point at which incompatible perspectives collide.

—Lyn Hejinian

I know things older than Freud, older than gender.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

Conflict as a holding together of difference, conflict as montage, conflict as evolution, conflict as complexity, conflict as poetry, as criticality, as growth, as sensation, as thinking.

Conflict as feminist practice.

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It is not the category of “woman,” nor even a particular political attunement to this category, that underwrites feminism or constitutes its core. (What, anyway, would be the “core” of “feminism,” as if it were not always feminisms?) As with so many of our conceptual containers, the category of “woman” is at once ontologically and historically fraught: What is a woman? Who gets to be one? And who is thrown sharply,

uncomfortably, into womanhood by a word or gesture? Whatever the answers to these questions may be, they're sure to be numerous and conflicting: (un)certainly unstable ground for a political movement or theory.

Though it's such a basic and widely understood premise at this point, it still feels critical to recall directly, with a vigorous nod to Judith Butler, bell hooks, and the many queer and women of color feminists who shaped and continue to shape third and fourth wave feminisms, that "woman" is not a stable, given entity but is instead an always-mutable, ideologically shaped identity that is strategic at best. (At other times, it may be experienced as a constricting, garish, ill-fitting getup designed and disseminated by white supremacy and heterosexist patriarchy.)¹ How, or rather *why*, then, might one claim "woman" as an identity that is still central and centrally useful to a feminist practice conceived as radical politics?

I want to suggest that it's precisely insofar as "woman" is performed multiply across bodies, cultures, time periods, collectivities, and individuals—insofar as "woman" is unstable ground, an uncontained and uncontainable container, and furthermore, is both recognized and claimed as a site of self-contradiction, multiplicity, and conflict—that "woman" becomes an idea, performance, and identity adequate to feminism. The "woman" that animates a feminist practice is a scene of conflict.

¹ As Butler writes: "Certainly, it remains politically important to represent women, but to do that in a way that does not distort and reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to emancipate. [...] Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished..." (530-531).

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Throughout his extensive writings on film, Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein repeatedly establishes conflict as the *sine qua non* of film, and of art in general: "montage is conflict"; "Conflict lies at the basis of every art"; "*There is no art without conflict*. No art as process," he asserts (144, 145, and 156, emphasis in the original). Eisenstein approaches his subject from the position of a dialectical materialist, who understands social contradiction and class struggle as the engine of revolutionary action and desirable structural change (which entails, namely, the egalitarian redistribution of wealth and power). According to Eisenstein, art's "social mission" is to "reveal the contradictions of being" (161). Art should agitate and intensify the experience of existing social contradictions and, perhaps, in so doing, it spurs on political insurrection and the end of class oppressions. Art employs conflict as a formal technique (e.g. montage) to explore conflict as subject matter (e.g. social contradictions, *agon* in tragedy, etc.), in order to give rise to further conflict (e.g. revolution).

As distinct from socialism or communism, feminism is a political ideology rooted in struggle against patriarchy and the domination of women. If, however, we recognize "woman" to be a signifier whose meaning or attendant concept (i.e. its *signified*) is ever-shifting and, thus, whose referents (i.e. the persons to whom "woman" at any given moment refers) are similarly transitory, then feminism must be a political ideology, movement, and practice that advances a struggle against *all* forms of oppression—against domination *tout court*, whether it takes the form of sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, racism, class

oppression, religious hegemony, imperialism, ableism, or anthropocentric destruction of the planet. To practice feminism is to assume an oppositional stance; it is to recognize conflict within and without, and to explore it—even to cultivate it.

Feminism is conflict. Adapting Eisenstein's dialectical materialist statements on film once more: *There is no feminism without conflict. No feminism as process.* Like art, feminism cannot abide the benign continuance and preservation of the status quo. Feminist practices and art practices share the aim of changing material and social conditions²: both work to disrupt history as process—catalyzing, instead, histories of and as conflict.

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In her much discussed, critically debated book, *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, Sarah Schulman advocates for a reevaluation of cultural attitudes toward conflict.³ In Schulman's view, conflict is an inevitable byproduct of sociality: "Conflict... is rooted in difference and people are and always will be different," she writes (14). Conflict, then, is

² In different ways, of course: ethically, legally, phenomenologically, and so on.

³ While I don't take up the subjects of these debates, the following references should help to orient a reader within them:

Aviva Stahl, "Trust in Instinct," *The New Inquiry* (9 May 2017) <https://thenewinquiry.com/trust-in-instinct/>.

Sara Fonseca, "Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair by Sarah Schulman," *LAMBDA Literary* (17 Oct. 2016) <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/10/17/conflict-is-not-abuse-overstating-harm-community-responsibility-and-the-duty-of-repair-by-sarah-schulman/>.

Andy Lamey, "Conflict Averse: Power, the new victimhood and the disappearance of personal accountability," *Literary Review of Canada* (Oct. 2016) <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2016/10/conflict-averse/>.

Dave M. "Digesting Sarah Schulman's 'Conflict Is Not Abuse,'" *Medium* (10 Dec. 2017), <https://medium.com/@lordwillin/digesting-sarah-schulmans-conflict-is-not-abuse-b1a7064c545>.

not a state to be avoided at all costs. It may be uncomfortable, but deeper problems occur when people react to conflict with phobic aversion. The thesis of Schulman's book is that our contemporary culture conditions us to seek to avoid conflict—whether by withdrawing behind the distance and detachment new technologies afford, or by misrepresenting conflict in an exaggerated manner as abuse, which then "justifies" any number of extreme and often punitive responses, including silencing, shunning, incarceration, and even violent retaliation. Schulman contends that when we resort to evasive and escalating tactics in conflict situations, we forestall and foreclose the very possibility, and the potential rewards, of grappling with the "complexity, contradictions, and ambivalences" of the situation, as well as the complexities and contradictions of our own desires and actions (33). There's a lost opportunity in the avoidance of conflict, because conflict presents a situation from which we can grow, evolve, and learn—about ourselves, about others, about our needs and wants, and how these align, as well as how and where they diverge from the needs and wants of our friends, colleagues, peers, mentors, parents, children, families, communities, and so on. Through conflict, we can affirm our boundaries, while also affirming our ties. When a relationship is able to hold space for conflict—without bypassing it, smoothing it over, speeding to a resolution, or falling apart—we build trust in each other and in the strength of our affections. As we work on our capacity to be in states of conflict with others, we learn to "have honest relationships of depth" (Schulman 43).

Schulman's book goes a long way toward rehabilitating the notion of conflict—demonstrating its positive qualities and

deconstructing its routine demonization. Ultimately, however, in Schulman's analysis, conflict remains a state that should (or one hopes will) *progress* toward another state, which is that of resolution. In the practical, real-world conflict situations she presents as case studies throughout the book, this motive toward resolution makes good sense. Who doesn't want to make up with a friend or lover after a fight? Wouldn't the world rejoice over a true and just resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict? Resolutions are desired and desirable. From another angle, however, a lasting and just resolution will not void all conflict but will instead entail a degree of compromise—which might be, after all, another name for conflict. It's the conflict a relationship holds when at its strongest, a kind of sustainable conflict that abides as tolerable and even necessary—because our needs and desires do not align perfectly and at all times, because we are different people, and because “people are and always will be different” (Schulman).

To be clear, when I describe compromise as another face of conflict, and as necessary to conflict “resolution,” I do not mean to suggest that the disadvantaged party in a conflict need make further concessions to the party in a relative position of power. The powerful exhibit a tendency to quash conflict wherever it arises. *That* more or less describes the concept of hegemony. Compromise, which I'm defining as a state of balanced and respectful conflict, is intolerable to power that attempts to be absolute. In the same way the powerful misrepresent conflict as abuse in order to justify their states of exception, they also misinterpret compromise as concession, which they of course refuse to make (while forcing concessions from others).

Interpreted otherwise, and in the way I understand it, compromise entails that the powerful learn to live with a degree of mundane conflict; that is, they learn *to be compromised*, to be mutually vulnerable, not to “have it all.” Compromise is a resolution that suspends victory and defeat; instead, it holds and calibrates conflict.

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In her essay “The Illiad, or Poem of Force,” Simone Weil describes how slaughter, warfare, torture, and other brutalizing performances do not, in fact, result from conflict (for example, as between Paris and Menelaus over Helen's affections) so much as they result from the very lack of conflict, in the form of *conflictedness*. Weil describes the killers in an armed “conflict” as essentially dead, without conscious will or desire: They become “inert matter,” “pure passivity,” “pure momentum,” “a thing,” “like a scourge of nature” (22). These fighting beings are not participants in a conflict, they are not *conflicted*; instead, they are simple forces—pure passivity or pure momentum. In them, conflict has given way to force. Weil writes:

The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence. (13)

Force is what results, not from conflict, but from the absence of conflict. In *The Illiad*, there's no pause between insult and retaliation, no source of friction

to hamper the distillate force that gives way to slaughter. To be clear, it's not that nothing or no one has the ability to resist violence—to interpose between a violent aim and its execution. If Patroclus carves a path of destruction through the Trojan army, Hector can face off with Patroclus, and then Achilles can pursue Hector—while the gods, if they so desire, may bring down Achilles, and then each other. This kind of resisting and interposing can go on forever. If we look closely at what Weil says about force, however, it's that “nothing has the power to interpose... the tiny interval that is reflection.”

To Weil, who was writing her essay from France at the beginning of World War II, *The Iliad* represents a penetrating poetic study of the machinations of war and brutality—how they arise from and what effects they render on a human psyche or spirit. So Weil observes that by the time the Greeks and Trojans have been simplified into instruments of pure force on the battlefield, it appears that nothing can introduce the smallest quotient of self-conflict that would give rise to a hesitation, an interval for reflection. This is why the Trojan War drags on to complete devastation. The lack of internal conflict, conflictedness, is what dehumanizes—transforming people into pure forces and inert matter—while the friction that could grind the gears of force to a halt issues from conflict that arises between the self and the self, internally, doubled and torn in simultaneous willing and nilling.

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This “tiny interval” is also what, elsewhere, Susan Howe refers to as the “stammer” or “stutter,” a quality of writing she posits as

a cornerstone of a feminist poetics. Howe finds the stammer at work in many of the writers she studies, but especially in Emily Dickinson's fragmented verse, with its dash-punctuated lines, and variants littering the margins. As Howe writes:

Emily Dickinson... built a new poetic form from her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders, where confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse... [She] audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking... Hesitation circled back and surrounded everyone in that confident age of aggressive industrial expansion and brutal Empire building. (*My Emily Dickinson* 21)

For Howe, the stammer—this moment of hesitation, of uncertainty, of internal conflict—acts as a counter (as does the “interval” for Weil) to despotism. Whereas “masculine” discourse, like “aggressive industrial expansion and brutal Empire building,” is confident and fluent, a feminist poetics and politics circles back on itself, listening while it speaks: looping, caught between past and future articulations, between presence and absence, it stutters. “I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty,” Howe intones (*The Birth-Mark* 181). Uncertainty is the expression of a conflict that calls the feminist writer to re-traverse old ground in her attempt to draw out and amplify the myriad muted voices, stifled counter-hegemonies, and suppressed oppositions.

If this stammering speech is a feminist language, then, for Howe, women are its native speakers: “women... are in the stutter.... We have come on to the stage stammering,” she writes (*The Birth-Mark* 181). I don’t believe that Howe is advancing gender essentialism here—the idea, in this case, that women have an innately privileged relationship to the “stammer.” Rather, it seems what Howe is saying, and what I certainly am arguing, is that one gets to be (or play at being) a woman *because* one has *come onto the stage stammering*.

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The performance of this hiccupping, conflicted state of being is an expression of the process cultural theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification. Muñoz describes disidentification as the means by which individuals and communities create “identities-in-difference [that] emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere” (7). More particularly, it designates the various “survival strategies... the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Muñoz draws on psychoanalytic theory in order to articulate disidentification in relation to the process of identification, which, according to foundational psychoanalytic theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Jean Laplanche, functions as a mechanism of normative ego constitution, whereby subjects learn to calibrate their desire toward “proper”

object choices and compulsory heterosexuality (7-8, 12-15). Processes of identification are rerouted as disidentifications when the subject confronts “ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site” that diminish or negate the self—for example, misogynist proscriptions on gender performance, racist beauty ideals, or heteronormativity (7 and 15).

I remember attending a seminar led by a poet-scholar, maybe five years ago, in which the poet discussed how she was fascinated by encounters with texts that negated her very presence as a possible reader—moments where a text addressed her with the presumption that she must be a man, a Christian, a white European, of a certain age, etc. She explained how these sites of friction—passages that threatened to eject her from the text, to foreclose her engagement with the language, with the ideas and conversations—were in fact the very points that, for her, opened onto writing. In a manner that exemplifies strategies of disidentification, the poet found clandestine⁴ means for writing into these sites of conflict, inevitably transforming them in the process.

In her essay “Aristotle’s Lantern,” feminist theorist, poet, and novelist Louky Bersianik similarly employs strategies of disidentification to write through the misogynistic logic of psychoanalytic theory, which she ties back to a pithy bit of “wisdom” originating with Aristotle—namely, that “woman is female because of a certain lack

⁴ Or, we might say *fugitive* means, with a nod to cultural theorist and poet Fred Moten, who develops a theory of “fugitivity” that is very much in conversation with Muñoz’s writings on disidentification. See, especially: *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013); *Black & Blur* (Duke University Press, 2017); and “The Case of Blackness” in *Criticism* 50.2 (Spring 2008): 177-218.

of qualities” (70).⁵ As Bersianik delightfully and painfully reminds us, to identify as a woman is to assume the role of one defined by an essential and constitutive, even a pathological, lack.⁶ As “woman” is defined thusly against the norm of man, to align oneself with and as “woman” is to assume a negative identity⁷—constituting the self through negation—a process, I would argue, that entails (or describes) disidentification. It is to *come onto the stage stammering*.

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Of course, one also wants to say: not all women.

One wants to add that disidentificatory feelings can be and often are suppressed. That, perhaps, not all disidentifications are radical, or transformative of the ideological strictures/structures into which, and due to which, they arise.

As I sense myself circling back to the beginning of this essay, to the question of what sort of figure is “woman”—she who is seemingly indispensable to, or at least implicit

5 Though Bersianik does not cite this quotation, she likely finds it in this passage from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*: “‘The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,’ Aristotle said. ‘We should regard women’s nature as suffering from natural defectiveness.’ And Saint Thomas in his turn decreed that woman was an ‘incomplete man,’ an ‘incidental’ being. This is what the Genesis story symbolizes, where Eve appears as if drawn from Adam’s ‘supernumerary’ bone, in Bossuet’s words” (5). De Beauvoir also does not give a full citation, but the quotation comes from Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*, where he writes: “Now a boy is like a woman in form, and the woman as it were an impotent male, for it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female, being incapable of concocting the nutriment in its last stage into semen” (25).

6 I have written about this idea elsewhere, in an essay titled “Without Measure: The Indispensable Time of Feminism” in *Re: Theory, A Sunday*, eds. Anna Moser and Rachael Wilson (Brooklyn, NY: OrganismforPoeticResearch, 2015), 19–23.

7 Of course, this is just one among many other possible negative identities.

in, the modes of thinking, relating, and acting in the world that might constitute a “feminist practice”—I find, once again, that I want to assert with renewed emphasis that “woman” is not particularly useful as a positive figure around which to rally, or to organize a politics. Going a step further, I would add that “woman” can even be quite oppressive as such. I am admonished by Muñoz recalling his readers to the foundational work of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1981 anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*—to how this work “represented a crucial break in gender studies discourse in which any naive positioning of gender as the primary and singular node of difference within feminist theory and politics was irrevocably challenged. Today,” Muñoz continues, “feminists who insist on a unified feminist subject not organized around race, class, and sexuality do so at their own risk, or, more succinctly, do so in opposition to work such as *Bridge*” (22). As Muñoz rightly points out, the force that has been the productive engine within feminist discourse is a politics of disidentification. Those who have kept feminist practice responsive and responsible to the social, political, and economic realities experienced by actual, positioned/situated women and the collectivities and communities to which they belong, have done so through ongoing disidentification with the “identificatory site”⁸ of “woman.”

If I find it difficult to write on feminism, on what a feminist practice might entail, what it might achieve, on why we should pay attention, and cultivate one, it is because I am conflicted. My identification as a woman, and as a feminist, is conflicted.

8 An admittedly inelegant term borrowed from Muñoz, but I can think of no better.

I disidentify daily, in a thousand gestures, a million habits, countless utterances. And this feeling—an uncertainty about everything except the certainty that I have come onto the stage stammering, speaking hesitantly on topics about which I'm only sure that I know next to nothing—this feeling, oddly enough, coaxes me on. It confirms me in my desire, and decision, to write into this topic, or *topos*.

I put my fingers to the keys, and the sentences come haltingly. They disappear under the pressure of the backspace, and then reappear, bearing the likeness of those other sentences, but with a difference. This essay is riddled with myriad “tiny intervals” of reflection. It is a record of conflict held together in compromise: all the minor adjustments, the back-and-forth, the second-guessing and self-doubt that are stewards of criticality.

I move the phrase “Keep stammering” from the bottom of the page, where I tucked it away weeks ago as written reminder, and where it had become lodged in the detritus of half-formed ideas and articulations shook loose from paragraphs above, to this sentence. Keep stammering, as in: I want “woman” as a site around which to *disorganize*, fall asunder. I want a feminist practice rooted in particulars that get jumbled. The political body should be excessive, not ideal. Rabelaisian. Conflict needs not to be overcome but held in dynamic tension, ever-evolving. Conflict encompassing complexity, contradiction, ambivalence, producing emergent situations.

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In the end, a further opening :

In her essay in *Bridge*, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” Audre Lorde asserts that “difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (107). As with Lorde’s “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” also from *Bridge*, it is her unflinching and generous disposition toward holding conflict that creates an opening for social and political transformations. Difference recognized as generative—a catalyst that *sparks like a dialectic*. Conflict, from the Latin *con-fligēre*, to strike together, make sparks,

and from sparks,

fire

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SUGGESTED TEXTS

After Ursula K. LeGuin died in 2018, my sister shared a story about the time she wrote LeGuin a letter in her second-grade class. In her letter, my sister told LeGuin how much she loved her book, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and she asked LeGuin what other books she should read. In radical feminist fashion, LeGuin responded: "I would never tell you what books you should read." I love this story and all it conveys about the idea of reading as a space of radical, anti-authoritarian, unformed possibility—as a space of creative invitation and encounter. On the other hand, I also deeply appreciate when the people I love and respect share with me what's moving them. So, with that caveat, and culling only from recent encounters, I want to note the following works that have stirred me with excitement for the spaces of thinking and feeling they open or promise:

Etel Adnan, *Of Cities and Women: Letters to Fawwaz*. The Post-Apollo Press, 1993.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Milkweed Editions, 2013. (Called to my attention by Natalie Diaz & Ada Limón's "Envelopes of Air" in *The New Yorker*.)

Rosa Luxemburg, "Letter to Sophie Liebknecht (Breslau, before Dec. 24, 1917)," in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* (NY: Verso, 2013): 453-458.

Cauleen Smith, *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2009*. Gouache and graphite on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 7/8" each. (This piece, a series of paintings of book covers, is both a thing to study in itself and a resource for so much further exploration.)