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Review Essay

Bodies in Control

*The Roots of Power:
Animate Form and Gendered Bodies*

by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone
(Chicago & LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing
Company, 1994)

Sondra Horton Fraleigh

Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking.¹

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone first explored a phenomenology of the body from an aesthetic standpoint in *The Phenomenology of Dance*. Mind as embodied through the tactile/kinesthetic occupied her further philosophical investigations of corporeality in *The Roots of Thinking*. Her new book, *The Roots of Power: Animate Form and Gendered Bodies*, is a most contrary and intriguing feminist critique of the patriarchy of early phenomenology, especially as it extended into psychoanalysis and attitudes toward (deconstructions of) the animate body. Infatuation with language, she holds, has been the undoing of the tactile/kinesthetic body. Feminism has not been immune. Textualist feminism (deriving from male mentors in postmodern semiotics) has also reduced the living body to mere words, and more words, denying the biological foundations for bodily being and human rootedness in nature.

Sheets-Johnstone's book presents a unique feminist view. It is an interdisciplinary study of the corporeal roots of power, applying history through the lens of evolutionary biology (principally through her extensive study of primatology) and philosophical/feminist analysis. Thus her task is formidable but delimited by the territory she eventually defines—a body-centered inquiry into our ties with nature amidst the cultural forces that define bodily powers. As interdisciplinary, her thesis is defended from various angles, but the work remains essentially philosophical. One grasps the phenomenologist at the heart of the inquiry, setting aside previous theory (in this case providing a thorough critique) to build from scratch.

Sheets-Johnstone exposes the oppression of women's bodies as rooted in unexamined cultural determinations that link control, power, and the phallus. What is not a matter of (phallic) control is not a matter of power. She effectively shifts away from tired philosophical issues of mind/body dualism, the mind in control of the body, to control as a cultural determinant. She broadens the meaning of the feminist dictum of the 70s, "the personal as political," to include the personal/political implications of bodily powers. Here we glimpse the body that wrestles with control and is driven toward exploitation and alternatively, the body that experiences power in reconnecting with its nature, including those disappearing feminine (family) values of relationship, care, and transformation.

Her Critique

This book is a critique of Jean Paul Sartre's ontology, Jacques Lacan's phallogocentric poststructuralist psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault's accounts of desire and sexuality, and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the body (his replacement of the animate form of the whole body with grammatological body parts—"fun and games with genital cut-outs"). It traces the gnarled connections between these theorists: the patriarchal Sartre (with his concrete corporeal descriptions) sets Foucault's work in relief, and Lacan's psychoanalysis is rendered next to Sartre, who is foundational. This complicated trio is trimmed to its most basic dance and ideological scandal—the preservation of patriarchy in a psychoanalytic of sexuality (supposedly friendly to women) that conceives of power as "penetration"—in Sartrean terms—"the filling of holes." Woman is never so powerfully present as when she is absent: defined as "the other," as Simone de Beauvoir was the first to recognize. Sheets-Johnstone blasts the simplistic notion and dysfunctionally enmeshed philosophic/psychoanalytic of woman as the receptive hole available for "year-round receptivity" that perpetuates woman as a docile body, that sells magazines, and that promotes violence and the victimization of women. She goes to great lengths to demonstrate this problem with examples from the animal "kingdom" (my word not hers, see the gender trouble everywhere?). And she carefully documents ties that ignore the personhood of woman in the thinking of Freud, Sartre, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida.

I am intrigued but left wondering whether there is a more straight-forward explanation for the problem of violence against women from the standpoint of the human body *simpliciter*, the author's own entrance into this study. Sheets-Johnstone finally makes the point that women are no more perpetually receptive than men are perpetually erect, and the evidence for this is simple observation. She calls into question our dependence on the interpretations of science concerning "year round receptivity." Yet she depends on socio-biology even while questioning it. (The sources here seem dated in any case.)

Sheets-Johnstone holds that bodily receptivity has psychic dimensions grounded in biological realities, but we construct the meanings we attach according to individual experience and cultural practices. Women are clearly not always ready for sex, and men have varying perceptions of the receptive in general. Sheets-Johnstone points out that caves (holes) may be foreboding (as for Sartre in his accounts of the "obscenity of the feminine sex") or inviting and mysterious (as for Leonardo da Vinci in his diary entry "before the great cavern") (11: p. 169). The feminine may be a "slimy hole," as it is for Sartre; but we may further

understand that genitals are not disembodied "sticky or dry" singular entities, nor interchangeable grammatological "cut-outs" as with Derrida. Genitals only exist as embodied, a part of the whole animate form and particular person. They are not abstract, interchangeable parts that language may construct and deconstruct.

This book traces the depersonalization of sexuality, as projected through phallogocentric psychoanalysis, and the "othering" and "stifling" of female sexuality in accounts of Freud, Sartre, Foucault, and Lacan. (This will not sit well with many readers, including feminists, who have accepted the postmodern theories of Foucault and Lacan on gender.) If woman is a dark hole, an absence, then what accounts for her pleasure? This something, this presence, is noticed, and relegated to "the unconscious" by Lacan, prompting him to adopt an archetype of the female as "a she-devil who will not tell what she knows," as the author outlines (11: p. 287). Conveniently shelved in the Lacanian unconscious, the female is blinded, ultimately "outside" the sexual experience, an "excess" or *jouissance* (Lacan's positive and derisive characterization of feminine sexuality) in respect to phallic determination. It is sufficient to remind ourselves that there are still societies that practice the final solution in sexual blinding of women. Woman's pleasure, her orgasmic "excess," is not simply put on the shelf of the unconscious; it is physically removed—actually cut out. (Alice Walker's research reveals the horrifying details of genital mutilation and clitorrectomy of 90 million African women, which is now outlawed in Kenya.)

Sheets-Johnstone characterizes Lacan's version of love-making as a game of "Who has/is the phallus?" She writes:

There is no *body* home, so to speak. It is a game for a pure signifier. The act of copulation reduces to a linguistic amusement of "hide and seek the totem," an amusement that goes on and on in a comedy of misses, a rollicking diversion that is always foiled and has no end: if you have it, you want to be it; if you are it, you want to have it. . . . Once copulation is properly reduced to the whereabouts of the phallus, there is no doubt but that genitalia are alone on the scene, literally caught in the act. There are in fact no loving living bodies present. (p. pp. 319-20)

As in that absurd scene in the 60's musical *Hair* when the women are trying to find Claude's "thing": "I don't have it, I thought you had it. Well Sue had it last night, so maybe she knows where it is, unless she lost it and somebody else found it," and so on (as I remember it).

Sheets-Johnstone calls philosophy and psychoanalysis to the totality of the body/person, one that cannot be reduced to words, silencing the living body. She accounts for the body as it immediately refers us to the tactile/kinesthetic, and ultimately to "touch" and "connection," which she feels is ignored in postmodern/poststructuralist views that privilege an objectified body, views that prefer the patriarchal distance of language (writing the body) and optics (the body as seen).

Here Sheets-Johnstone is inconsistent with her critique of poststructuralist feminism. Luce Irigaray, a leading poststructuralist, also identified male pleasure as primarily visual and female pleasure as primarily tactile. As Irigaray put it: "Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere" (6: p. 28). In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray extends her argument to say that "woman takes more pleasure from touching than from looking" (6: p. 26). *The Roots of Power*

further feminism's theory of the cultural privileging of vision, the objectification and oppression of women that film critic Laura Mulvey popularized in "the male gaze." This theory was finally critiqued in the psychoanalytically informed work of Teresa de Lauretis and welcomed by feminists who resisted explaining away the visual/erotic. Drawing positively upon Lacan's work, de Lauretis used it to reclaim visual pleasure for women. Thus, her hermeneutic goes against the grain of Irigaray and Sheets-Johnstone who find the language of phallogocentric psychoanalysis inadequate to express feminine pleasure.

Still consistent with much of poststructural French feminism, especially Irigaray and Helene Cixous, Sheets-Johnstone values the motherhood that French existentialist de Beauvoir earlier found so oppressive. While the author's study of nature does not directly oppose de Beauvoir's antiessentialism (her shaking of the *assumed nature* of femininity at the foundation of contemporary feminism), it is more in agreement with Irigaray who says: "When we are women, we are always mothers" (5: p. 27). The present book is more in the stream of French philosophical theory than Anglo-American feminisms, which have been less concerned with the psychic constitution of gender and the individual and more involved with political action and social equality. Sheets-Johnstone breaks with the French tradition, however, in calling phenomenology and psychoanalysis to account, since Cixous (3: p. 156) relies upon psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction, and Julia Kristeva's (9) post-Lacanian psychoanalysis contends that there is no such thing as "woman." Sheets-Johnstone contests this.

Her Theory and Its Implication for "Movement and Body Culture"

Can culture replace nature? Doesn't nature (like culture) also have a history? Sheets-Johnstone is not alone in asking these questions. They are also central to Judith Butler's (2) work, but branch out differently. Sheets-Johnstone turns directly to a study of nature and the tactile/kinesthetic in her revaluing of the female (mother) principle. Her background in kinesthetic and dance studies comes to the fore here, as does her interest in cognitive development and studies of the "ecological self," immediately related to its environment through movement. Closely related to data on kinesthetic intelligence, Sheets-Johnstone also employs studies of the natural intelligence inherent in infancy (coherence) that contradict Lacan's "mirror stage" (incoherence) of infancy. Major resources for documentation of her arguments come through cognitive psychology as set forth in the groundbreaking work of J.J. Gibson and Elenor Gibson and the more popular but less rigorous research of Daniel Stern on infant development.

The scope of Sheets-Johnstone's book is staggeringly broad but is held together through her persistence to elucidate the lived body as "animate form," and even more as "gendered animate form." She sees a trap in the feminist disavowal of biology, its fear of "essentialism," leading to a loss of nature and of what may be learned from studying the deeper structures of the body in its evolution through nature. Culture writes itself into the body, yes; but this is only half of the story of animate form and empowerment. In this book, it is not the most important half.

Once recognized, cultural dominants upheld in the language of philosophy and psychoanalysis can no longer exert phallogocentric control. *The Roots of Power*

is premised on this hope. It exposes Lacan's veiled patriarchy in his otherwise liberal theories and prompts a rereading of postmodern semiotics as a whole to grasp how Lacan's psychoanalytic reflects the equation of control and power, covering over male fears of loss of control (the ego cannot control the unpredictable penis) and projecting supposed deficiencies onto females. What is more unpredictable than a female?

Sheets-Johnstone's study is unfailing in its valuing of the female body, birth, and differentiation of a "core self" at the heart of infant life. The unfolding of nature and nurturing are viewed as transformative and powerful. This is not a popular topic in a culture that valorizes "penetration" as the determinant of power in the competitive arenas of culture—where men and women alike approach "the feminine" with anxiety, especially its implications of an ethics of care and intimacy. Where is the power in silence, touch and intuition, waiting, listening, or empathy for another in the wake of our own inevitable vulnerability? The author argues against penetration (intrusive doings that may even threaten and harm) as the determinant of power. We penetrate space (spaceships and guided missiles with war heads) and praise penetrating thought. We like penetrating minds, and we penetrate enemy territory (making war and spying). The penetrating penis is called a gun, it has power to shoot, is equated with control and conquest—sexual and otherwise.

This densely packed text shows that in our cultural milieu, control and conquest are the roots of power. They are subtly sustained (thus all the more insidious) in the psychoanalytic of feminist and postmodern thought that continues to valorize the phallic (instrumental, extraverted, extended, penetrative, acquisitive) as the measure of the vitally human. The author points toward a neglect of a more positive aspect of maleness—its power to couple through penetration (rather than to possess and inflict pain), to pair, to affect "relation" (typically attributed to the female). This male power remains largely unacknowledged. In an original (and sensible) symbolization of genitalia, Sheets-Johnstone posits the establishment of cooperative relationship as intrinsic to, in the nature of, maleness. Conquest and domination are not male universals; neither are they necessary in procreation and the nurture of life. Coupling is.

Where do human feelings of empowerment form?: in the animation of our human form and from cultural "I Can's" associated with that form, as this book holds. And the animate form we are is gendered, differentiated by sex. What, one may ask then, is animating the form and its gender differentiation? (I don't mean to invoke Aristotle here.) We can observe that nature is given, but unevenly, in talents and health, in sexual persuasions and gender dispositions within and between the given sexes, and in countless other ways. In addition, the play of culture is so immediate as to seem natural. From birth on, no one is their naked newborn body. Even before birth the fetus is subject to cultural conditions. Is the sway of culture so vast in human life that nature, especially the nature of the body, totally overcome, unyielding to any conscious attempt to recover it in action or in concept?

The Roots of Power, like Paul Ricoeur's *Freedom and Nature* (9) (the first phenomenological study of the *nature* of the body), stems from the belief that nature never leaves us, not does the biological gender we inherit through nature. Nature and gender are not passive, however—they are powerful. In addition, they are subject to the play and constraints of culture. Concerning the latter,

Ricoeur developed the concept of "second nature." Sheets-Johnstone develops a thematic of the evolutionary body in the social order. She holds that popular feminist disavowals of gender differences cannot be defended in light of biological or evolutionary evidence. The body that springs into script without foundation in biology or history, such as Judith Butler's culturally constructed and linguistically worked body, the body without "a being" in *Bodies that Matter*, is not animated flesh and bone for Sheets-Johnstone (11: p. 68). Her purpose, however, is like Butler's—to show how bodies are empowered and controlled. But she does it through showing how evolutionary heritage generates corporeal archetypes that are culturally reworked, then individually elaborated, entrenching even more deeply the reigning conceptions of power. Butler, a rhetorician and phenomenologist, challenges the discursive limits of gender politics, stretching the imagination toward radical (root) cultural inscriptions of the body—how bodies come to matter, and which ones matter most.

The Roots of Power runs beneath the cultural body while including it. It posits gender differences that have a basis in nature and evolutionary history. These generate corporeal archetypes that are subjected to cultural controls. The penis in its erectile and penetrating character is equated with control and power; but power (the author believes) is not necessarily rooted in control, nor even desirably so. She points toward the immense work of empowering from a basis of *transformation*, the transformative character of the penis, of the birthing female (a biological universal and inherent potential), of coherent infant development and human evolution. If power were no longer the power to control, might "change" itself, as inevitable as the cycles of nature, ever be culturally valued? Might aging then be welcomed rather than feared?

New phenomenology (which should benefit a great deal from Sheets-Johnstone's study) investigates experience and intercorporeity and provides a critique of its own roots and development. Phenomenology has been based in respect for the body, and as such it has appealed to those who take the body-as-lived into the heart of their work and thought: actors, athletes, dancers, physical educators, and somatic (bodywork) therapists. The latter deal most directly with Sheets-Johnstone's concern for the tactile/kinesthetic body, the intrinsic "power" of the body/mind to change toward health through functional movement and healing touch. Philosophies of the body inhere in the practices of sport, dance and movement arts, and kinesiological sciences. These vehicles of "body culture" could provide concrete means toward the new definition of power that Sheets-Johnstone calls for—transformation through a body-ethics of care and healthy human interaction.

The phenomenological method itself also provides a paradigm case for a reconceptualization of power. It is founded in open-minded observation: letting go of the need to judge, to be right, to force solutions, to have one's own way. Similarly, somatic transformations are affected through listening to (and trusting) the perfect attunement of the body that science teaches us is well warranted. Augros and Stanciu (1) elaborate in *The New Biology: Discovering the Wisdom in Nature*, "Every living thing is beautifully attuned to its environment. Effort is . . . minimal because each animal and plant is so well designed" (p. 278). But this does not mean that we should not recognize when soft boundaries need to declare a clear "yes" or "no," respecting body wisdom at another level. I refer to the power to differentiate and discriminate.

Such power may be drawn most clearly through competition, a problematic of the Darwinian survival body that is often misunderstood. Competition might be interpreted as a neutral existential until it is culturally invested with meaning and practice. What competitive means? Toward which ends? In defining bodily powers through competition, which "I Can's" will be culturally validated? The answers have implications for cultural practices in competitive sports and for the more elusive, but just as compelling, competitions that operate in pursuit of excellence in dance and movement arts. Will we draw lines of competition purposefully toward (cultural) movement forms that do not oppress the body? We notice that in nature, life forms evolve (and survive) through cooperation as well as competition. The problem of "animating" positive forms of competition toward joyful interaction and pleasure in excellence is the central ethical/aesthetic issue for those who teach and practice body culture. (Not to mention competitions that arise in the workplace.)

There is implicit in Sheets-Johnstone's work a philosophy of nature that examines differentiation *per se*, using gender differentiation and body at its "root." She shows that kinesthesia, as manifest in movement, is the very basis for discriminating renditions of bodily life. Where movement and its effect is missing in accounts of human development, there is not persuasive accounting for the living body. The adult is her/his body history, one with kinesthetic memory. This link we have with ourselves and with nature through our movement memory is also made explicit in Andrea Olsen's experiential anatomy, *Body Stories*. Our body holds our history and our future unfolding. We carry the self that Sterns calls "the core self" and the self that Gibson calls "the ecological self," related to its environment in our memory from infancy on. But we are yet an unfinished story in Butler's terms, coming "to matter and to mean" (2: p. 32). Women and men are both changing. Sport sociologist Donald Sabo and philosopher Glen Mazis are beginning to speak to men with feminist identified voices to explain how the suppression of male pain erupts in violence. (Strong men don't cry; they endure pain and sacrifice their bodies on the altars of war and sports [8].) "Be a buddy to your body," is Sabo's (10) practical advice toward a more positive social evolution of masculinity.

We are on a continuum with nature and all life—especially in our changing and transformation—even (and especially) when experiencing pain and illness. In speaking and writing about the body, we need maps that will not substitute words for experience but will find the words in the experience. As such a map, Sheets-Johnstone's book calls phenomenology back to the body, its nature, its gender, its culture, and possible future. I cannot judge this book's value to science, but I recommend it as a unique philosophical/feminist analysis. Its message is important for somatic therapy (in its interruption of acquired movement habits to uncover the natural body) as well as dance and theater (where the body mediates and is the message). And it has a direct message for a philosophy of sports in search of humane competition and transformative body culture: It is *cooperation*—not control and domination—that opens up the miraculous. For "the miraculous eludes our control," as Sheets-Johnstone states. "That is indeed what makes it miraculous" (p. 335). This is a book for all who are concerned with our cultural problems in equating power and control.

Note

¹Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Microbial Evolution* (New York Summit Books, 1986), pp. 14-15.

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