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Review of Meryl Altman, *Beauvoir In Time*. Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2020. 580 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. Open Access (eb). ISBN 9789004431218; \$171.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9789004431201.

Review by Elaine Stavro, Trent University.

Beauvoir In Time provides one of the most thorough defenses of Beauvoir that I've encountered. It is a hefty book but not a philosophically heavy book, which is not to say it is philosophically thin. Over 500 pages in length, much space is taken up with extensive quotes in the text and original French footnotes. These would be useful for students or enthusiasts of French, though I rarely referred to them. Nevertheless, the long quotes within the text give readers a real taste of Beauvoir's literary and philosophic approach. So, unlike many scholars who get trapped in debates over interpreting Beauvoir's ideas (establishing that she is a phenomenologist or a Hegelian or arguing that she was influenced by Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, for example) this book conveys a strong feeling of the scope and complexity of Beauvoir's oeuvre. Altman takes on Beauvoir's feminist critics and does an admirable job. She rightly believes that critics often judge Beauvoir's ideas from their own philosophic perspective, and hence misjudge her. Altman provides the context (primarily intellectual) to challenge narrow or self-serving readings. In seeing both Beauvoir and her critics in their context, Altman draws out in meticulous detail important influences beyond the usual suspects (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Hegel, Fanon, and Wright) as well as historical and cultural reference points.

Though Altman's approach is descriptive and expository for the most part, it is not without philosophic grounding. Altman upholds Beauvoir's idea that we are singular beings and yet we share the world; this warrants her exploration of our shared worlds. In addition, she supports Beauvoir's distinctive existentialist idea of authentic choice, stressing that freedom has conditions of action. Altman is concerned that many recent critics have ignored Beauvoir's theory of intersubjectivity and freedom, specifically post-structuralist, postcolonial, and posthumanist theorists. Not only do they do an injustice to Beauvoir, but they problematize feminist ethics. Here I wholeheartedly agree with Altman, "it would be hard to speak of feminist ethics or politics without some conception of women as agents making choices" (p. 75). Avoiding the pitfalls of voluntarism and social determinism, Beauvoir believes we are relational and situated beings who make choices within differential contexts. This philosophic approach is timely.

One common "misreading" that Altman addresses is the assumption that Beauvoir espouses a politics of identity. Since existence precedes essence, women only become active agents and form identities through collective struggle, hence identity does not drive struggle but possibly follows

it. Altman could have extended her interpretation by drawing conclusions from the fact that women are singular, thereby strengthening her anti-identitarian position. For Beauvoir, women are neither self-identical nor are their situations the same. There is always a gap that stands in the way of identity, however her embodied agency with its materialist sensibility provides the basis for solidarity and collective action. Coalitional rather than identity politics is supported.

Altman spends much time defending Beauvoir from critics across time and continents. Given the thoroughness of her study, I will select only a few of the debates Altman engages. In each chapter she approaches a significant aspect of Beauvoir's work that has drawn popular attention. In chapter one, "Unhappy Bodies: The Frigid Woman in the Second Sex", Altman expends much energy on the ideas of Wilhelm Stekel who coined the term "frigid woman." Although we no longer use this term, Altman notes, many readers get turned off by Beauvoir's usage. Altman speculates that Beauvoir used Stekel eclectically, as a psychoanalytic authority who identified women's sexual dissatisfaction without relying upon the unconscious. She contends that Beauvoir would not have supported his misogynist ideas. In fact, one has the feeling that Altman has done more work on Stekel than Beauvoir did. Further, by historicizing Beauvoir's comments on the body, she defends Beauvoir from those who claim she hates women's bodies. This is not an original take, but it does the job. In fact, Altman endorses the insights of other feminists who believe Beauvoir entertains a sexual ethics of mutual recognition and reciprocity.

In chapter two, "Simone de Beauvoir and Lesbian Lived Experience", Altman addresses Beauvoir's reception in America. She recalls how she and her students immediately disliked Beauvoir's representation of lesbian experience as inversion, or part of transitional identity. Engaging several American feminists "who fault Beauvoir for refusing to take on the possibility of lesbian identity" and for failing to appreciate their collective identity (p. 97), she argues they fail to acknowledge Beauvoir's strengths. They neglect to understand her theory of the body and her theorization of conditions of choice. Avoiding the binary of biologism and voluntary choice and acknowledging conditions of choice, Beauvoir has made a significant contribution to lesbian thinking. Without endorsing Beauvoir's ideas on the lesbian experience, Altman argues that Beauvoir unsettled "heterosexist common sense" (p. 115) and initiated social constructionism: an achievement that is rarely acknowledged. While neither her novels nor philosophy can be read as lesbian, Altman offers a queer interpretation of *L'Invitée*, which clashes with the more conventional readings of the novel.

In chapter three, "Nothing to Say about Race and Class?", Altman takes a similar tack. Delving into Beauvoir's book *America Day by Day*, she draws out her attention to race and class differences in America. Similarly, she mines *The Second Sex* to establish Beauvoir's materialist sensibility, which American feminists (predominantly liberal in disposition) have ignored. Altman challenges those feminists who claim Beauvoir is Eurocentric and solely concerned with gender oppression. She believes Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman* has done much to lend support to these readings. When Beauvoir speaks of woman in general, Spelman argues, she speaks from the position of a white bourgeois woman. Drawing upon Beauvoir's texts, Altman provides numerous examples to shore up Beauvoir's critique of bourgeois women and her differentiation of women according to their race and class. For those who believe Beauvoir should have consulted Black women thinkers, Altman shows what a challenge that would have been. The only Black woman to earn a PhD from the Sorbonne in that era—Anna Julia Cooper—did so while Beauvoir was in high school. And in any case, Cooper's religious leanings had little in common with Beauvoir's emancipatory ideas. This chapter supports Altman's claim that Beauvoir was a nascent

intersectional thinker, which is not a novel idea, but it is important to counter those critics who see Beauvoir as exclusively a gender theorist.

In chapter four, “Beauvoir and Blackness”, Altman turns to conversations between Beauvoir, Richard Wright, and Frantz Fanon. Far from Beauvoir being influenced by Fanon, Altman convincingly shows that Fanon was influenced by *The Second Sex*. Similarly, many have argued that Beauvoir’s attention to race was shaped by Wright. Altman makes the case that Beauvoir was predisposed to think alongside Wright. During the war, Beauvoir and Sartre were close friends with Michel and Zette Leiris (admirable post-colonial thinkers) and Beauvoir’s postcolonial attitudes preceded her encounters with Fanon and Wright. Altman also addresses Beauvoir’s reception in the United States by the New York intelligentsia: given their anti-communist sentiments, they had little time for her sympathy with revolutionary struggles and did not appreciate her attention to racism in America. Altman also addresses the reception of Wright’s later work. Wright did not support Negritude, a position popular in America, and hence was ignored. But his position was shared by Fanon, Sartre, and Beauvoir. In addition, Altman defends Wright against the charge that he was a misogynist.

In chapter five, “The East is Real: Orientalism and its Enemies”, Altman confronts allegations of Orientalism. She deals specifically with Sally Markowitz whose critique, she believes, relies heavily upon two passages where Beauvoir mentions life in a harem and Muslim women. Altman acknowledges that Beauvoir differentiates Bedouin and Muslim Women, thereby challenging the Othering that Markowitz presumes Beauvoir is guilty of. Retrieving passages from her autobiography, on her visit to the Maghreb, Altman notes that Beauvoir witnessed women who were enclosed in a harem. Rather than interpreting this as a Eurocentric sentiment, Altman reminds us that it was based upon her perception of an actual situation and is consistent with her belief that women’s agency depends upon their material situation. For Beauvoir, women who reside in a harem are more constrained and less free to act than working class women.

In the final chapter, “Beauvoir and China”, Altman tackles one of Beauvoir’s least appreciated texts, *The Long March*, written after her visit to China. Without trying to understand her support for China’s revolutionary politics, Altman looks to present-day Chinese feminists to analyze their reception of Beauvoir. This brings me to a criticism of an otherwise solid piece of work: Altman is so preoccupied with defending Beauvoir from critics that she glosses over Beauvoir’s revolutionary optimism. Throughout her life, Beauvoir not only believed in the emancipation of women and minorities, but she supported democratic socialism and revolutionary politics; not without qualification, but nevertheless with passion and hope and the belief that these political forces could resolve their shortcomings and bring forth revolutionary change.

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