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The Vanishing *Dialectic*:
Shulamith Firestone and the Future
of the Feminist 1970s

Firestone, as her name suggests, both lit the spark
and took the heat.
—Caroline Bassett, “Impossible, Admirable,
Androgyne: Firestone, Technology, and Utopia.”

In feminist theory, the 1970s has until recently
been most often remembered as something of an
embarrassment: the time when feminists essen-
tialized the category of woman, neglected race,
constructed maniacally totalizing theories, and
exposed themselves in public with their intemper-
ate speech, overwrought emotions, and utopian
dreams. Sometimes it is as if the whole period is
now recalled only within scare quotes; the daring
and ambition of feminist thinkers and activists in
the 1970s is often recoded in the historical mem-
ory of the field as naïveté and failure. This is not a
matter of mere inattention: the shame and dis-
avowal that often characterize feminism’s own
historiography suggest that a more active mode
of forgetting is at work. The flip side of this dis-
missal is the memorializing impulse animated by
the familial metaphors that have also been deployed
to construct feminist histories. While not disput-
ing the value of some of these familiar critiques
and occasional celebrations of 1970s feminist
theory, I want to experiment with other ways to conceive the relationship between the feminist present, its recent past, and its possible futures. Rather than conceive 1970s feminism as either a dead relic of a superseded past or a living legacy, I want to think about the temporalities of feminist theory in ways that can account for both continuity and rupture, for our attractions and repulsions, for the possibility that any moment could generate both inspiration and cautionary tales, and that each of these judgments could be leveled both backward and forward in time.¹

The focus of this exercise is Shulamith Firestone’s 1970 tour de force, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution. The discussion of feminist time that follows centers on four concepts designed to animate different dimensions of Firestone’s potential legacy, each of which offers a specific way to think about the relationship among past, present, and future. The first of these reads the Dialectics as a utopian manifesto; the second poses it as a vanishing mediator; the third casts the contrast between Firestone’s Dialectic and her second book, Airless Spaces, as an allegory of the present; and the fourth presents the Dialectics as an archive of the future. As it will become clear, this is intended as a contribution to feminist political theory rather than to the history of feminist thought; my readings are selective, my interpretations partial, and my preoccupations decidedly presentist. I want to use these conceptual tools to render an artifact of the past a means through which to examine the current condition of feminist theory and to suggest future lines of development.

Reading Genre: The Utopian Manifesto

The category of the utopian manifesto refers to the genre of Firestone’s first book, and my initial description of the genre also serves as an occasion to introduce the text. The Dialectic of Sex is a paradigmatic example of 1970s feminist theory, one that captures—and indeed, takes to an extreme—many of the contradictions at the heart of US feminism in that moment. In keeping with that unwieldy category radical feminism, the book is at once representative of the label and utterly idiosyncratic. As a manifesto it is a piece of ephemeral writing drafted in and for a specific historical moment, yet it is also considered a classic of the feminist canon. Perhaps even more than other texts of the period, the Dialectic is both an artifact of the consciousness-raising practices of activist groups and the creation of an individual thinker; it is the product of feminist common sense and an achievement of high theory.² Again, in ways not uncommon for that period, the author was
a proponent of horizontal organization and a charismatic star, committed to feminist egalitarianism and herself something of a rugged individualist. But most interesting to me, and the primary impetus for this essay, is how both the author and the text are simultaneously present in and absent from our histories, at once acknowledged as central yet marginalized: it is a text that can still make an entrance and is constantly exiting from the scene. By the time the Dialectic was published in 1970, Firestone had already left feminist politics, never to return, and the text itself has often been, as it was until only recently, out of print.3

By raising the text’s vanishing as a puzzle and, as I claim, a problem, I am not denying the accuracy of many of the critical judgments that have been leveled over the years at what Ann Snitow aptly names feminism’s most famous “demon text” (1991: 34). As a call for world-historical feminist revolution, the book is infamous for a long list of reasons, from its insistence on the value of a suspect source like nineteenth-century feminism to its brazen use of those icons of patriarchal thought, Freud and Marx; from its amusing idea of a smile boycott to its trenchant critiques of heterosexual love, sex, and romance; from its declaration that pregnancy is barbaric and support for artificial reproduction to its relentless attack on the family and spirited defense of children’s liberation. Interestingly, perceptions of the book’s major sins against feminism change over time. Thus, for example, what Sarah Franklin (2010: 50) calls Firestone’s “techno-optimism” is less a problem today when more feminists would rather be cyborgs than goddesses. By contrast, the text’s heteronormativity is as pernicious as ever, and Firestone’s reductive analysis of racism as sexism extended and presentation of racial stereotypes as psychological portraits are, if possible, even more noxious out of context of the 1960s black nationalist masculinity that she targeted.

But in sorting through the many negative appraisals of the book, it is useful to recognize that many of them are in fact directed at its genre: the utopian manifesto. As a genre category, it invokes an interestingly hybrid temporality, one that holds in tension the urgent immediacy of the manifesto form and the deferred possibilities of utopian literature. Indeed, the Dialectic is in many ways paradigmatic of the utopian manifesto. As a case in point, consider Firestone’s decidedly undiplomatic tendency to go for the jugular, as in her infamous description of childbirth as akin to “shitting a pumpkin,” and her declarations that childhood is hell and love a holocaust (2003: 180–81, 93, 119). This rhetorical stridency is unadulterated manifesto-speak; she does not deign to address her skeptics, let alone meet them halfway. As in other manifestos, Firestone speaks to the feminist “we” that
she wants to provoke into formation and arm for action. Recalling Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, who respond to their critics who reproach them for intending to do away with their property with, “Precisely so; that is just what we intend” (1948: 25), on the opening page Firestone answers the claim of a different audience—“that? Why you can’t change that! You must be out of your mind!”—with the simple affirmation that yes, in taking on the biological basis of the sex class system, she was indeed “talking about something every bit as deep as that.” The final claim of that first paragraph, an instance of pure feminist bravado, exemplifies the tone and tenor of the entire text: “If there were another word more all-embracing than revolution we would use it” (2003: 3).

But the *Dialectic* is not merely a manifesto. Rather, as Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford observe, it is one of the more utopian manifests (2010: 2). This is best illustrated in the final chapter wherein Firestone explicitly defends speculation about “dangerously utopian” proposals and offers, for her contribution to that project, a vision of cybernetic postfamilial communism. To adapt Snitow’s observation about Firestone’s utopian writing to the more specific genre of the utopian manifesto, “part of the demonizing of the text arises out of a misreading of the genre” (1991: 34). This includes a too literal—or perhaps just humorless—reading of the manifesto’s theatricality, as well as a tendency to take its vision of the future as a blueprint rather than as an effort, as Firestone described her own intention, to “stimulate thinking in fresh areas rather than to dictate the action” (2003: 203).

To think further about how to read the text as a utopian manifesto, I want to focus on a moment on one of its signature moves: the insistence that the oppression of women is grounded in nature. For Firestone, the gender division of both productive and reproductive labor is fundamental to the sex class system, and by her account, the division of labor is founded on biological reproduction (196, 198). There are a number of ways to interpret this critical claim. One could, for example, read it as a simple case of confusing the social for the biological. By this reading, Firestone mimics antifeminism’s naturalization of inequality. The limitation of this analysis is its failure to do justice to Firestone’s more complicated understanding both of the social construction of gender and of the mutability of nature (Halbert 2004: 118; Sandford 2010: 240). Rather than a matter of falling for and replicating antifeminism’s biological essentialism, one could just as easily read Firestone’s claim as a smart political tactic: instead of swimming against the tide, she first accepts the argument that inequality is natural and then pulls the rug out from under it by characterizing it as a historical argument irrelevant
to the future. As Firestone explains it, “To grant that the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based is not to lose our case,” because—and it is important to register her use of quotation marks here—“the ‘natural’ is not necessarily a ‘human’ value” (2003: 10).

While I am sympathetic to both of those readings of Firestone’s argument about the natural foundation of women’s oppression, there is a third interpretation to consider as well. This one reads the assertion in the context of the utopian manifesto, a genre with its own reading protocols. For example, we can reinterpret the claim about the biological basis of gender oppression in relation to the two key functions of the generic form. The first of these is critical, to use the possibility of a better future to shed light on and raise questions about the present. From this perspective, the implication of Firestone’s argument, namely, that it may be more realistic and politically feasible to eliminate the biological division of reproductive labor than the social one, is thought provoking, to say the least. The argument invites us to consider whether the plasticity of gender makes it in some ways a more elusive target than the rather simple and innocent notion of “nature” that undergirds the antifeminist analysis. Rather than a capitulation to biological essentialism, the argument could be seen as the ultimate, because so literal, example of feminist denaturalization. The second function of the utopian text is to stimulate the imagination of a different future. From this perspective, one could read Firestone’s technological fix of the biological origin of inequality more as a means to kick-start the imagination of a radically transformed future than as an end in itself, a way to open a new horizon of thought rather than tether our thinking to a specific proposal. Consider her musing on the final page of the text—a dare to just try to imagine this—that someday, after the feminist revolution, pregnancy might still be “indulged in,” but only as “a tongue-in-cheek archaism, just as already women today wear virginal white to their weddings” (Firestone 2003: 216). By this reading, the possibility of extra-uterine reproduction (as one option among others) serves as a deus ex machina. Reproductive technology plays a role in setting the stage for her utopian vision of cybernetic, postfamilial communism comparable to that of a spaceship in a work of utopian science fiction that transports us to a different world from which we can look back on our own and imagine a possible alternative or, really, the possibility of an alternative. The vehicle, be it a future reproductive technology or a spaceship, is thus understood as a means to an end, namely, the production of what science fiction and utopian studies scholars characterize as an estrangement effect (see Suvin 1972), a distancing that can give us room to imagine on the basis of a
different set of givens. By bringing to the text a reading protocol more appropriate to the utopian manifesto form, we might linger somewhat less on the residual modes of somatophobia and techno-determinism that may animate or be fueled by her proposal than on where they take us and what modes of speculation they might enable.

**The Dialectic as Vanishing Mediator: Lighting the Spark and Taking the Heat**

I employed the genre category of the utopian manifesto to add another layer of interpretation to a familiar text. I borrow the second category I want to explore as a way to imagine the contemporary relevance of the legacy of Firestone and, through her, of radical feminism more generally, from Fredric Jameson’s analysis of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: the vanishing mediator. Jameson used the concept to describe Max Weber’s argument about the role of the Protestant work ethic, which helped create the secular spirit of capitalism that then undercut the religious basis of the original ethic. In the analysis that follows I want to think about Firestone’s radical feminist utopian manifesto as a vanishing mediator between feminist theory’s past and its present.

One attraction of using Jameson’s (1973: 72) concept to think about feminist time is that unlike other models of linear history—whether secured by narratives of progress or regress, metaphors of familial filiation or rebellion, or dialectical logics of recuperation and synthesis—the vanishing mediator can account for unexpected leaps and qualitative disjunctions. As Jameson (78) describes this aspect of Weber’s historical method, the Protestant ethic is not merely a transition figure or, with apologies to Firestone, a midwife that prepares the way for a future that supersedes it; rather, it serves the more dramatic function of a bearer of change that sows the seeds of its own extinction. What is so interesting and poorly understood is how and why early 1970s radical feminism—although partially absorbed into liberal feminism, transmogrified beyond recognition into cultural feminism, and incorporated into what was then a new project called socialist feminism—largely dies out. Instead of the midwife, perhaps the better familial metaphor, once again with apologies to Firestone, is the surrogate mother who is not just overlooked once the child is produced but is actively excised from the family photos. My point is that, in the case of Firestone and the brand of 1970s radical feminism that I am using her to represent, their removal from the present is too dramatic, too often affectively fraught, to be an accident of
history. It is more of a being disappeared than a becoming invisible, a result of both the author’s recalcitrance and later feminists’ active repudiation. As a way to explore this removal and to develop a critical account of the lingering effects of the disappearing that produced it, I want to consider Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex* as a vanishing mediator, a disavowed causal force that separates 1970s feminist theoretical arguments, agendas, affects, and subjectivities from their present equivalents.

Posed in the amplified rhetorical register of the manifesto genre, my claim is that in the *Dialectic of Sex* Firestone invented feminist theory. This is not to say that she did this alone; much of the analysis comes out of collective feminist work in which she participated. Nor is it to say that this is the only text that did this work, since many of her claims and perspectives are echoed in other analyses of the period. Rather, I want to take the *Dialectic* as exemplary of the brand of radical feminist theory that played such an important role in shaping the later history of feminist theory, directly in the radicalization of liberal feminism and invention of early socialist feminism, and indirectly as the foil for so many more recent developments in the field. One can find in the text a crash course in feminist theory, spectacularly clear and provocatively dramatic instances of many of the key elements that gave life to second-wave feminist theory and were subsequently disowned by its successors. In ways that are largely taken for granted today, early second-wave feminist theorists had to determine where to level their critical gaze, how to build a theory, whom to privilege as the subject of analysis and agent of change, and what to want from a feminist movement. The *Dialectic’s* answers to these questions, I want to argue, formed the initial building blocks of the project of feminist theory that subsequently rejected them. Let me touch on each of these elements briefly in turn.

In terms of where to target feminist critique, Firestone offers a clinic in how to read the personal as political. In refusing the apolitical quality of “private” life, the scope of critical inquiry covered in the *Dialectic* is dramatically expanded. Firestone was a master of this move, boldly taking on the “fog of sentimentality” that obscured more clear-eyed views of heterosexual love and romance, family and childhood, sex and eroticism. There is a fierceness and fearlessness in her willingness to take on these shibboleths of bourgeois propriety, but her critique of motherhood stands out even today. It certainly was not going to win her many friends, as she was well aware: “At the present time, for a woman to come out openly against motherhood on principle is physically dangerous” (Firestone 2003: 181–82). She exposed all
these sites of gender difference as machines of gender inequality, as together
generated by and constitutive of a systematic imbalance of power that is the
sex-class system.

The fate of this insight that the personal is political is a long and com-
cplicated story. But the feminist “sex wars” of the early 1980s, parts of which
were informed by competing interpretations of the slogan, stand out for
their continued impact on the present. To quickly summarize a multilayered
conflict, whereas earlier radical feminists had tended to approach the rela-
tionship between the personal and political as a description of what is, cul-
tural feminists were more likely to treat it as a prescription for what should
be and, moreover, to pose it as a mandate for individual rather than collective
action for change. Thus, in some quarters, the insight devolved into a reduc-
tion of the political to the personal, which opened the door to a personalized
politics and what Alice Echols labeled prescriptivism (1984: 58). In contin-
ued reaction against that move, feminist theorists seem today more reticent
to level their critical gaze at “private” life and institutions like marriage and
motherhood for fear that some will “take it personally,” concerned that a cri-
tique of marriage, motherhood, and the structures of desire that reproduce
them, for example, will be offensive to married mothers. As a consequence,
there is relatively less interest not only in leveling critical judgments at but
even in analyses of some of these political dimensions of personal life, thus
limiting everyday life as a political field of analysis and activism. Thus,
although feminism continues to explore new territories, the politics of these
personal experiences is less often taken as the object of inquiry.

Firestone also provided a model for how to theorize. More specifically
she presents a case for systematizing theory, theory with what Jameson once
described as an aspiration to totality (1988, 66). Totality is understood here
not as totalizing theory that relies on functionalist and reductive logics but,
rather, as a theoretical method informed by a mandate to relate and connect,
to situate and contextualize, to conceive the social systematically as a process
of different modes of relationship (see Weeks 1998: 5). This effort to make
connections is also a way for feminists to dig deeper. So, for example, radical
feminists like Firestone argued that women are not oppressed because they
are paid less, they are paid less because they are oppressed (see Price 1978:
94); to see this requires that we recognize the links between, among other
things, spheres commonly deemed separate, such as the domestic realm and
the waged workplace. Finally, the aspiration to totality, as Kevin Floyd
describes it, is “a rigorously negative practice” opposed to the fragmenting,
privatizing, and individualizing of social life under capitalism (2009: 6).
This model of systematizing theory is decidedly out of favor in these
days. The way that post-structuralist theory was introduced to the United
States in the 1980s played an important role in this development, and Nancy
Fraser and Linda Nicholson’s argument about the relevance to feminist the-
ory of Jean-François Lyotard’s charge to “wage war on totality” is a well-
known case in point. Their critique of false generalizations, essentialist cat-
egories, and reductive analyses in feminist theory helped expose the
limitations of some systematizing theories, including the Dialectic’s occa-
sional resort to a simple base-superstructure model that most Marxists have
abandoned, and the dimensions of the argument that are, as Elizabeth Free-
man describes it, also sometimes “evolutionary, linear, and moncausal in a
way that other feminists have decisively rejected” (2010: 268). That said,
there has also been a tendency to retreat reactively from the project of totality
tout court: the later feminist rejection of these approaches is aimed not just at
universalizing and functionalist models but also at the “large historical nar-
ratives” and the focus on “societal macrostructures” that even Fraser and
Nicholson argued in favor of preserving (1990: 34). Since Firestone’s time,
feminist theory has been all too willing to marginalize systematic structural
analysis and overprivilege work that centers on the individual, local, specific,
and contingent.

Perhaps the most pressing and most difficult task that radical femi-
nist theorists faced in the 1970s was that of conceptualizing the subject of feminism—understood then under the name of women—as a collectivity.
The problem was how to theorize women as gendered beings rather than
mere individuals, but also not as women as they have been imagined hith-
terto. It is important to remember just how difficult it was to think women as
a group, in common, against what Firestone brilliantly described as the pow-
ers of “sex privatization”: the “confusion of one’s sexuality [read: heterosex-
ual gender] with one’s individuality” that militates against women’s solidar-
ity (2003: 134, 24). This process “blinds women to their exploitation as a
class, keeping them from unifying against it” (135). For example, the institu-
tion of marriage as a force of sex privatism is the source of “a defiant ‘we’re
different’ brand of optimism” (200); even “though the institution consist-
tently proves itself unsatisfactory, even rotten, the blinkers they wear allow
them to believe that somehow their own case will be different” (201). In this
way, “the privatization process functions to keep people blaming themselves,
rather than the institution, for its failure” (200–201). In opposition to this,
Firestone understood the job of a theorist as a matter of locating patterns of
common gendered experience—Firestone settled on the category of sex
class to describe women’s subject position—and raising women’s collective consciousness. Of course we are well rehearsed in the failures of exclusive and essentialist brands of identity politics that were often produced, aspects of which can be found in this early articulation of the project. Wary of the exclusions they can enact, feminist theorists today tend to be suspicious of collectivities. But once again, to reject essentialist models of collective identity need not entail, as it too often has, abandoning the project of conceiving forms of feminist solidarity and commonness against the depoliticizing forces of sex privatization in particular and liberal individualism in general.

As for what feminists want, radical feminism traded liberal feminism’s goal of equality for liberation and, in so doing, opened up new horizons of social change and a Pandora’s box of revolutionary desire and imagination. More specifically, Firestone in the Dialectic did not want the mere equality of the genders, but a liberation from gender. “The end goal of feminist revolution must be,” she declares, “not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally” (Firestone 2003: 11). Visions of revolutionary change in general, and this vision in particular, are, needless to say, now rare in feminist theory. Our capacities to think forward into the future have withered from lack of exercise, as have our abilities to imagine beyond ourselves as subjects of a radically different future. More specifically, as Mandy Merck observes, “Firestone’s ungendered utopia is virtually forgotten by the women’s movement” (2010: 21). Rather, feminist theory has by and large limited its aspirations to a new version of the liberal feminist project of winning recognition for and equal treatment of a nonetheless richer diversity of genders.

As a vanishing mediator between the prefeminist past and the feminist present, the Dialectic and radical feminism more broadly have been disavowed by the project they helped create. In this instance, the basic building blocks of the project that is feminist theory remain, but the original content is refused. My focus has been on what I think may have been lost in this revenge of the feminist future on its past, with this more wholesale rejection of the contents of early radical feminism. Feminist theory since the 1970s has—and with this formulation I owe even more apologies to Firestone—thrown out too many babies with the bathwater: the critique of personal choices along with prescriptivism, systematizing structuralist analyses together with totalizing theory, collective feminist subjects as well as essentialist and exclusive identity categories, and the possibilities of a genderless future in defense of gender diversity and inclusivity.
An Allegory of the Present: From Manifesto to Diary

So far I have argued that Firestone’s Dialectic, to borrow words from the epigraph, lit the spark of second-wave feminist theory and later took the heat for its failings. But there is at least one other interpretation of the epigraph I want to consider. This one grafts the two metaphors, lighting the spark and taking the heat, onto the two monographs that Firestone authored. By this reading, Firestone in the Dialectic lit the spark, and in her second and final book, Airless Spaces, published in 1998, recounts how she took the heat. In this section I will continue using a particular conception of the past to critique the present. But for this new line of argument to work, the rather exaggerated causality I claimed for the Dialectic as active mediator among past, present, and future in the previous section must be set aside, as the author of Airless Spaces is no longer an agent, or by this point even a subject, of feminist history. The culpability I attributed to contemporary feminist theory will be suspended as well.

Airless Spaces presents a stark and poignant contrast to the Dialectic of Sex. Whereas the earlier text was a theoretical and political guide from the patriarchal past to a feminist future, the later text is a loose series of stories about Firestone’s own and others’ struggles with mental illness and the conditions and aftermath of their institutionalization. One can read the relationship between the two texts in many ways. After Firestone’s death, some read the passage between the earlier and later books as a cautionary tale about the fate of a critical outsider who, excluded from the two key institutions of social inclusion that she once hoped to move beyond, work and family, died alone, not to be found for days. These were stories of high hopes and crushed, or crushing, dreams. It is easy to take from this the lesson that that refusal (in this case, of work and family) without alternatives, critique without vision, can be unlivable. But I want to read the relation between the two texts less as a tragic narrative of the author’s life or of the failures of the feminist movement (see Faludi 2013) and more as an allegory of the fate of contemporary feminist theory. The term allegory, as a specific kind of narrative device, is useful for me insofar as it foregrounds the interpretive practice of judgment at work in my narrative. The relation I create between the two texts, and between these two texts and two periods of feminist theory, are meant to be heuristic rather than historical, diagnostic rather than causal.

Many of the specificities of the two texts can be captured in generic terms as the contrast between a manifesto and a diary. The differences between the two genres include their scope, temporalities, subject, epistemologies, and affective textures. The scope of the two texts offers one of the
most telling contrasts: the reach of the first text is world historical, the second focuses on daily life; the central preoccupation of one text is revolutionary militancy, the other therapeutic adjustment. Their tables of contents are instructive on this point. The vignettes that make up Airless Spaces are largely unsystematic, minimally organized under the following headings: “hospital,” “post-hospital,” “losers,” “obits,” and “suicides I have known.” The narrative becomes progressively narrower, moving from confinement to failure and death. The Dialectic is the inverse. Its contents explode outward, from tools gathered from feminism, Marx, and Freud, to a ruthless criticism of everything existing, to the final chapter on “the ultimate revolution.” The two-page table in the penultimate chapter of the latter text speaks volumes about its breadth of inquiry, mapping as it does the “dialectics of culture,” including the means of production, architecture, law, government, religion, art, magic, prophesy, history—with an et cetera tossed into the middle for good measure (Firestone 2003: 160–61).

The temporalities of the two texts provide a second point of contrast. Each genre works within a specific temporal horizon: the time of the diary is constricted, spanning the most recent past to the immediate present; the manifesto, on the other hand, considers an expansive temporality extending from the distant past to the far-off future. To return again to the two-page diagram in the Dialectic, which is also meant to cover all of human history, more than half the chart takes place in the future, its stages marked under the headings of revolution, transition, and ultimate goal (160–61). In the Dialectic we ride with Firestone on the revolutionary front toward an open future; the subjects in Airless Spaces are so crushed by the burdens of the present that they are barely able to see beyond the next day or week.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the later diary form and the earlier manifesto is the unit of analysis privileged by each: the individual psyche in one, the feminist collective in the other. The preoccupations of the diary are individuals and their struggles with daily life. Each short essay in Airless Spaces is crafted as a pain-filled and painstaking effort to document moments in the daily lives of individuals and their encounters with shame, humiliation, fear, loneliness, and anxiety. All lead agonizingly precarious lives—emotionally, socially, psychologically, and economically, each one teetering near the edge of the abyss and most doing what they can to hold on. The Dialectic was a manifesto in the classic sense, one that models the collective power it hopes to incite and addresses the audience it wants to enlist in its revolutionary project. The Dialectic both records and evokes a process of becoming feminist, an empowering process of feminist subjectiv-
ization. As a diary, *Airless Spaces* is committed to narrating the specific contours of individual lives, to account for their singularity as part of a struggle against their desubjectification—against those forces that would rather merely diagnose, classify, institutionalize, and thereby be done with them. Although the text’s aim may be to enlighten beyond merely to witness, there are no overt politics, no effort to organize or propose, incite or empower. One cannot but be struck by how the tragic arc that links the *Dialectic* to *Airless Spaces* is propelled by Firestone’s own privatization. Brutally cast out of the revolutionary history she tried to live and imagine, she was left to live on the margins as a lone individual responsible for her own—once again merely private—“failures.”

The epistemological underpinnings and affective textures of the texts are equally divergent. Whereas the *Dialectic* flaunts the searing clarity, and also stunning hubris, of enlightenment reason and the demystificatory potential of ideological critique, *Airless Spaces* reads more like a treasury of signs and wonders that the author strains to wrestle into order and meaning. One text pontificates in the register of objective truth, the other observes in the more subjective modality of small fictions. The foundational certainty that enabled the biting critique, penetrating analysis, and knowing sarcasm of the earlier work, what Snitow describes as the *Dialectic*’s “unequivocal voice” (1994), is replaced by the struggle for accurate description. One text searches below the surface of things for their reality; the other toils to record the apparent level of everyday events. But more than anything else, it is striking just how affectively different they are. Rage and joy permeate the *Dialectic*, drive the prose and roll off it in waves. While *Airless Spaces* is certainly hard-hitting, it is also remarkably spare and neutral, leaving readers to their own affective devices.

By reading the present in relation to these two options, I want to highlight, or rather, dramatize, the ways in which contemporary feminist theory, having undergone its own privatization with the decline of the feminist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, comes to resemble more an “airless space” than it does a “case for feminist revolution.” In making this (admittedly excessive) claim, I do not hold “the case for feminist revolution” as an ideal to approximate. Nor am I siding with those who lament the fate of feminism locked away from the “real world” in an ivory tower; I am not referencing feminist quarrels over the effects of feminism’s institutionalization. Finally, I am not assigning blame. On the contrary, that we live in nonrevolutionary times is no more the fault of feminist theorists than the mental illness that Firestone was fated to endure was her own doing. Different historical
circumstances present their own openings for and barriers to feminist thinking; we are left to theorize the moment we are in by making use of its own resources. Rather, I intend to use this story of Firestone’s own experience of privatization over time as an allegorical diagnostic not only of feminist theory’s retreat from structural analysis, tendency toward methodological individualisms, and abandonment of visions of radical change that were addressed in the previous section, but also of the narrowed and largely backward-looking temporalities and affects that have been cultivated in tandem with them. Perhaps the times we are in are more favorable to the study of melancholy, abjection, trauma, and anti-utopian anxiety, and less conducive to the capacity to think beyond ourselves, toward a future wherein who we have become might be radically transfigured.

An Archive of Feminist Futures

Although a perhaps somewhat perverse decision given the book’s title, I want to refuse a dialectical reading of this historical narrative about the fate of Firestone’s radical feminism. Rather than conceive the present as a synthesis of feminism’s past achievements minus its missteps, I want to think about this historical development in terms of a more incomplete, sometimes accidental, logic of risks and retreats, gains and losses, remembering and forgetting. Above all, to make use of this text today we must be selective; some of its elements we cannot access, others we would not wish to.

For example, the text’s affective arsenal and some of the critical modalities it sustained are arguably no longer accessible today. The joy and rage that course through the Dialectic cannot be wished back into existence in this moment when the dominant affects fueling and circulating around feminist theory are decidedly more muted. The critical affect of anger has been replaced by a comparatively tame skepticism, and one of Firestone’s most important critical modalities, sarcasm, has been replaced in these post-foundationalist times by irony. When it is increasingly clear that ideological critique will not set us free, the political investments that fueled Firestone’s theoretical work cannot be nourished to the same extent by knowledge production. It is also the case that one of the text’s charms, its willingness to take risks and to fail, are no longer possible when feminist theorists are responsible for addressing—incorporating or rebutting—such an extensive history of relevant scholarship. Snitow notes that Firestone was not only “shamelessly willing” to generalize and to speculate, she was also shameless in her willingness to make mistakes (1994; see also Echols 2002: 108). As
attracted as I am to this DIY approach to, and ethos of, theoretical work, I suspect that my enjoyment is merely nostalgic at this late date in, or after, the second wave of feminist thought. Similarly, Firestone’s fierceness and fearlessness, her uncompromising and sometimes even cavalier treatment of her enemies, are also less sustainable and less productive in these non-revolutionary, postparty times. While I enjoy, and sometimes even admire, these qualities in Firestone’s writing, I have no expectation that they can or should be resurrected.

But one can reject the traditional manifesto’s affective textures and epistemological pretensions and still defend the genre. One can even, I would argue, disassociate the form from the model of revolution-as-punctual-event that occasionally haunts the *Dialectic*, as when she describes the future cultural revolution as “a matter-antimatter explosion, ending with a poof! culture itself”—followed, with typical deadpan humor, by the observation that “we shall not miss it” (Firestone 2003: 174). The rich history of the manifesto form, including Firestone’s contribution to it, encompasses a variety of stylistic practices and knowledge claims, in addition to political ambitions that are pedagogical and reformist as well as revolutionary in the traditional sense.

What I do want to defend from this historical text as relevant to feminist theory’s future is at once the scale and objects of Firestone’s critique and its temporal range, both its critical targets and utopian visions. As to the first point, the scale and objects are related: the focus on large-scale theory led her to advocate major structural change. Rather than set her sights on specific instances and minor if perhaps immediately attainable goals, Firestone insisted on the importance of radical change. What we need, she claimed, and what I argue we still need today, is “qualitative change in humanity’s basic relationships to both its production and its reproduction,” which requires at once the destruction of work and family (183). This kind of critique that takes aim at the fundamental structures of the political economy, once the mainstay of feminist critics, is less prevalent today. It may well be the case that the recent inattention within feminist theory to work and family as key institutional nodes of the system of social reproduction is in part a reaction against the Fordist analysis that authors like Firestone adhered to, with its relatively simple models of separate spheres and binary genders. But although it is important to recognize that efforts to construct critiques of work and family today must map a far more complex set of connections, the project itself need not be abandoned.

The second element of Firestone’s thought I want to recuperate, and the one I concentrate on here, is her insistence that these critical projects be
informed by speculation about what might take their place. Changing our basic relation to the systems of production and reproduction requires as well the imagination of alternatives, or at least alternative imaginaries. “We’re talking about radical change,” Firestone reminds us. “And though indeed it cannot come all at once, radical goals must be kept in sight at all times” if our political energies are not to be siphoned off by small reforms (185). The utopian vision she offers is an attempt to make the possibilities of feminist revolution “vivid” (216), a deliberately “sketchy” effort to stimulate the reader’s imagination (203). It is not an attempt to prescribe—to “dictate the action” (203)—so much as it is a provocation to participate in imagining, desiring, and making a better future.

I am, however, as intrigued by the content of Firestone’s vision as by the political imagination it seeks to demonstrate and inspire. I want to suggest that the most reviled aspect of the text, the content of Firestone’s utopian vision, might be of most relevance to us in the current moment. So my claim is that the text is valuable not only as a provocation to think the future but also as a potential archive of now timely political demands. Like the category of the utopian manifesto, the archive of the future is meant not only to conjure a paradoxical and unstable temporality, the dead past of the archive together with the not yet of the future, but once again to highlight my own interpretive intervention: archives are actively constructed rather than passively found and simply recorded.

There are three parts to the vision, each of which has something to offer contemporary feminist political and theoretical agendas. The first is Firestone’s alternative to the present organization of work, both waged and unwaged. Whereas she imagined this alternative as a model of cybernetic communism made possible by technological advances, we might reimagine it today as a form of communism made possible by the ongoing accumulation of two forms of social wealth: the scientific, communicative, and social knowledges of the general intellect (see Virno 2004), and forms of cooperation across the spheres of production and reproduction that some contemporary authors identify as the common (see Hardt and Negri 2009). The key for Firestone’s (2003; 211) vision, and the one I would defend as well, is work divorced from wages, a vision of change that would, at least in the transition, involve a guaranteed basic income paid to all individuals, including children. The second element, an effort to combat “the peculiar failure of imagination concerning alternatives to the family” (203), Firestone imagines as a variety of options of postfamilial household formation, options that people enter into on the basis of personal preference for unspecified periods of time and
with no set expectations about the interpersonal relations of the participants (207). In our current situation, when it is becoming ever more clear that neither the system of waged work nor the privatized family function adequately as mechanisms of income distribution, labor organization, care provision, or social inclusion, Firestone’s vision of alternative models of economic cooperation and sociality are not just important exercises in cognitive estrangement; taken up as demands for basic income and the deprivileging of the family, they are also timely political projects. Finally, she offers a vision of a postgender social world characterized by polymorphous sexuality, that is, the possibility of a world beyond gender and sexual identities as we now know them. Of course her claim that gender and sexuality would—to borrow her earlier formulation—“go poof” once work and family are abolished betrays the reductiveness of her understandings of the wellsprings of gender and sexual identities and the nature of our investments in them (or their investments in us). Nonetheless, I appreciate both the content of a vision that requires us to imagine ourselves as radically other and also, in this instance too, her insistence on collective and structural rather than individual and personal change. “It is unrealistic,” she argues, “to impose theories of what ought to be on a psyche already fundamentally organized around specific emotional needs. . . . We would do much better to concentrate on overthrowing the institutions that have produced this psychical organization, making possible the eventual—if not in our lifetime—fundamental restructuring (or should I say destructuring?) of our psychosexuality” (216).

Conclusion

Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex* poses both significant problems and interesting possibilities for thinking about contemporary feminism’s relationship to the 1970s. First, perhaps more than any other writing from that period, it contains both the best and the worst of radical feminist theory. In this single text one can locate examples of every negative characterization of feminism’s disgraced past, from its remarkable inability to think adequately about race and sexuality to its essentialist formulations and universalizing claims. But for this reason, this example can help remind us to be selective in our use of the feminist past—an insight that the temporal models of legacies, inheritances, and foremothers, whether honored or disowned, cannot as effectively sustain. Second, the problem of how to read 1970s feminism today is particularly complicated given the genre of the *Dialectic*. The utopian manifesto is a prime example of what Jacqueline Rhodes (2005: 1) calls a “temporary text,” written
to a particular audience and from a specific location. At the same time, however, it may be that the importance of approaching all historical texts not only selectively but also within a contemporary horizon of problems and possibilities is only more obvious in the case of a text that is so clearly of its time. Finally, while it is certainly valuable to study this artifact of the feminist past from the perspective of the accumulated knowledge and experience available to us in the present, I have tried to demonstrate that it might also be worthwhile to reverse our critical gaze, to use the past as a standpoint from which to see the present from a different angle of vision. The Dialectic offers, I think, a rich storehouse of possibilities for this project. This would be one among myriad ways to approach the archive of feminist theory as, to borrow Joan Scott’s formulation, “a provocation” (2011: 147). Rather than, as Nietzsche despairingly describes it, “stand our ground over history to see that nothing comes out of it except more history,” the history of feminist theory can be continually, and by a variety of methods, made untimely, so that it might act in our time and for the benefit of times yet to come (1997: 84, 60).

Notes

1 Like Victoria Hesford, I am interested in accounts of the feminist 1970s that will make possible “less limiting and more surprising articulations of our attachments and disattachments to the unsettling eventfulness of that time” (2013: 211).

2 Firestone cofounded three of the most important radical feminist groups in New York City—New York Radical Women, Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists—and helped edit the influential series Notes from the First Year (Sinitow 1994).

3 It was first published in 1970 and reissued in 1993 and again in 2003. But as early as 1972 Kathie Sarachild observed that the text was being left off of feminist reading lists, and then noticed it with increasing frequency (1978: 28). Some of this, it should be noted, is a result of Firestone’s own reluctance to make her work available. She demanded that the publisher of the 2003 edition of the Dialectic take the book out of print only a few years after she had agreed to its reissue (Baumgardner 2012). And a 1967 documentary that featured a young Firestone, cast as a representative of the “new generation,” was never released at Firestone’s request (Freeman 2010: 259).

4 Stella Sanford presents this argument in compelling terms: “The foundation of Firestone’s radical politics of change is the mutability of sex itself, the urgent conviction that the natural is more immediately and radically changeable than the social. Forty years after the publication of The Dialectic of Sex it begins to look like she may have had a point” (2010: 240).

5 Clare Hemmings (2011) documents some of this stance toward the 1970s.

6 My analysis bears some interesting resemblances to Judith Grant’s (1993) account of the invention of feminist theory. Both of us focus on radical feminism in this same period; Grant locates in the key concepts of radical feminism reactive reversals of New Left commitments; I focus on contemporary feminism’s reactive disavowal of some of radical feminism’s innovations.
7 This use of the vanishing mediator can thus be contrasted to Weber’s account of how the building block, ascetic Protestantism, drops out while the content, the capitalist work ethic, lives on in new form.

8 Dayna Tortorici makes a similar point about Firestone’s intellectual risk-taking: “She ‘dared to be bad’—as she declared women ought to in an editorial for Notes from the Second Year—which meant not just disobedient, but willing to fail” (2012).

References


