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Repeating Her Autonomy: Beauvoir, Kierkegaard, and Women’s Liberation

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(Received 9 May 2021; revised 6 January 2022; accepted 27 January 2022)

Abstract

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir diagnoses “woman” as the “lost sex,” torn between her individual autonomy and her “feminine destiny.” Becoming a “real woman” in patriarchal societies demands that women lose their authentic, autonomous selves to become the “inessential Other” for Man. To better understand this diagnosis and how women might *refind* themselves, I rehabilitate the influence of Søren Kierkegaard and his concept of *repetition* as *what must be lost to be found again* in Beauvoir’s account of freedom and, specifically, the liberation of women. Beauvoir offers a dual account of repetition, that of mundane repetition and sacrificial repetition, bringing them to bear *both* on her diagnosis of women’s oppression *and* her theorization of our liberation. Sacrificial repetition becomes a temporality for freedom—one must be able to *repeat* or *retake* their autonomy continuously toward an open future. For this to happen concretely, Beauvoir insists that we must sacrifice the (racist, classist) patriarchal ideals of the “real woman” and “real man” as we retake our autonomy and reconfigure the meaning of sex difference anew.

Simone de Beauvoir opens *The Second Sex* irritated. She is irritated at the topic of “woman,” the “volumes of idiocies” written about us, and especially at those who seem to think “real women” exist while lamenting in the same breath that “Woman is losing herself, woman is lost” (Beauvoir 2010, 3). To many feminist readers, whether of today or 1940s Paris, this worry about the “loss” of “real women” might seem absurd and blatant in its misogyny and transphobia (Bettcher 2007; Serano 2007; Manne 2017; 2020). But Beauvoir is also vexed at feminists of her day—namely, Dorothy Parker’s take on the admittedly “very irritating” Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham’s *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947)—who sought to lose the category “woman” altogether in their preferred framing of men and women as co-equal “human beings” (Beauvoir 2010, 4). These early feminists espoused a concept of gender equality that abstracted from the “total concrete situation” of women’s lived experience, for it is here where Beauvoir’s deeper philosophical irritation lies: that the concrete situation of becoming a “real woman” in patriarchal societies requires that women lose their authentic, autonomous selves in becoming the “inessential Other” for Man. As Beauvoir observes, “today it is very difficult for women to assume both their status

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of autonomous individual and their feminine destiny; here is the source of the awkwardness and discomfort that sometimes leads them to be considered ‘a lost sex’” (274). How might these “lost” women “find” themselves again?

Beauvoir’s irritation over the “lost sex” provides an answer to this question. To better understand what this answer is, I rehabilitate an often-overlooked figure of influence in Beauvoir’s existentialism: Søren Kierkegaard. I argue that Beauvoir appropriates Kierkegaard’s concept of *repetition* as *what must be lost to be found again* in her account of freedom and, more specifically in *The Second Sex*, women’s liberation. Turning to Kierkegaard’s influence elucidates a neglected dimension of Beauvoir’s concept of freedom.

Beauvoir scholars have long associated repetition in her work with the realm of immanence. They have excavated the way in which women too often live lives of mundane or “pure” repetition: the never-ending motions of housework, care work, beauty work, and so on. Repetition is thus typically understood as a temporality of oppression that *forecloses* rather than *opens* futures. But scholars have missed, or at least obscured, the way repetition in its *sacrificial* register is operative in Beauvoir’s philosophy of freedom. Therefore, our shared understanding of Beauvoirian freedom is currently lacking a key component.

It is perhaps paradoxical, disagreeable even (Mann 2018), to claim that Kierkegaard had much of anything to do with Beauvoir’s account of women’s liberation, since his own writings on women might be viewed as objectionable at best. Yet we know from Beauvoir’s personal writings how deeply influenced she was by Kierkegaard’s existentialism, turning to him when she herself felt “lost” in her darkest hours during and after World War II. So, despite Kierkegaard’s presence in *The Second Sex* as almost exclusively in the voice of his most sexist, voyeuristic pseudonym, Victor Eremita, Beauvoir “drew from [Kierkegaard] key insights about the human condition, ethics, and the relations between men and women” (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998, 3). I argue that the concept of repetition stands out.

Although Kierkegaard is a religious existentialist and Beauvoir a firmly secular one, she nevertheless appropriates repetition and the related concepts of faith and sacrifice in her philosophy. The secularization works since, as Kierkegaard scholar David Kangas notes, Kierkegaard’s concepts of sacrificial repetition and faith need not “presuppose or lead to the belief in the existence of the highest being” but rather reveal a more “radical structure” of subjectivity (Kangas 2018, 7–9). Namely, that the “project structure” of the self constituting itself-as-itself is undergirded by the very powerlessness of the self to do so (11). We can never fully predetermine our futures. No matter how hard we try, there is always a gap between the self-projected and the self-one-actually-becomes. “There is always a surplus” (19). For Kierkegaard, faith is the relation of the lost, powerless self to this as yet unknown future surplus of the self. It is a relation toward this open future and through which one becomes oneself. The self “repeats” itself. Otherwise, it risks “falling into multiplicity,” going through the motions of inauthenticity. Such a falling-outside-oneself is the “greatest evil” (24).

Beauvoir adapts this notion of Kierkegaardian repetition in her diagnosis of woman as a “lost” subject, fallen into multiplicity between her autonomous self and going through the motions of her feminine destiny. She *also* adapts repetition in her prescription for what must be sacrificed so that “lost” women might “retake” our autonomy, or reconstitute ourselves as ourselves, in an open future. Reading this dual account of repetition not only clarifies Beauvoir’s diagnostic and prescriptive projects but also reconceives the relation between immanence and transcendence in her philosophy: rather

than thinking them a dichotomous relation, Beauvoir offers a dialectical account.¹ I argue that the marker of freedom for Beauvoir is whether one is *repeating*, or *retaking*, their autonomy. For Beauvoir, a woman *repeating* her autonomy would mean that she grasps out into the world to accomplish herself through projects that open her future in her personal, social, and professional life, not just once and for all but rather continuously throughout her lifetime. That is, she throws herself over and again into her projects, embracing the fully unpredictable future self she will become.

At some level, this means that the woman who has lost her autonomy, say to motherhood, marriage, or traumatic experience, should be able to retake her autonomy, for example, in her education or career. Her worth should not be limited to her role in relation to her children, romantic partners, or abusers. It should not be limited to her relation to Man. Likewise, the professional woman should be permitted to lose herself—to love, care work, trauma—and find herself in her professional pursuits again. But more to the point, is the woman valued for abandoning herself and her daily preoccupations to focus fully on her own, autonomous pursuits? Following Kierkegaard, this is the height of freedom for Beauvoir: the woman should be able to lose herself *in her projects* so that she might find herself again.

Similarly, a trans woman who has made the sacrifice of throwing herself into transition should be able to retake herself as herself toward an open future. That is, her transition should open rather than foreclose her possibilities. Yet, as the character Reese from Torrey Peter's brilliant novel *Detransition, Baby* (2021) observes: if, despite decades of feminist activism, options for cis women's futures have remained constrained, then "trans women [have] defaulted into a kind of No Futurism" (Peters 2021, 9–10). Freedom requires that a woman be able to lose herself in her projects—to risk herself—toward a future beyond her wildest dreams. Her projects should not be dead ends. They should return her to herself.

Given the penchant for some trans-exclusionary feminists to appropriate Beauvoir for their "gender critical" perspectives, a word must be said regarding Beauvoir's focus in *The Second Sex* on (white)² cisgender women (Beauvoir 2010, 15). Beauvoir expresses a frank openness to the disappearance of the gender binary in the opening pages of *The Second Sex* (4), which is not to say that she eliminates sexual differences, as Luce Irigaray has charged (Irigaray 1993). Indeed, Beauvoir shared the concern about the presumed masculinity of a sex-neutral concept of humanity and was deeply critical of liberal, American feminists—especially Betty Friedan and the aforementioned Parker—in their attempts to "be just like men" rather than seeking meaningful structural change (Jardine 1979). Beauvoir maintains her focus on cisgender women in large part because she was one and was motivated by the question of what it meant for *her* to be a "woman" (Beauvoir 1983, 282; Kirkpatrick 2019, 220; Simons 2019). And what it meant for her was to have become one while navigating patriarchal ideals of the "real woman," the kind of subject valued precisely for losing her autonomy. These are the reasons Beauvoir demands we sacrifice the patriarchal meanings of "real woman" and "real man" along with their social, political, and economic underpinnings (Beauvoir 2010, 764–65). And though Beauvoir might have been more explicit on this front, this sacrifice means to also dispose of racist, classist, and other social hierarchies with a faith toward a future in which the very meanings of autonomy and sexual and embodied differences might be reclaimed.

In the first section of this article, I review the scholarship tracing Kierkegaard's influence on Beauvoir. I then highlight Beauvoir's biographical reception of Kierkegaard before offering a primer on his existential concepts of sacrificial repetition and faith.

Finally, I explicate the concepts at play in *The Second Sex*, emphasizing how Beauvoir draws on sacrificial repetition in her account of freedom relevant to the liberation of women and other “lost” subjects.

Missing the Sacrificial for the Mundane

Despite the literatures detailing the influence of Kierkegaard and his concept of repetition on other important figures in the Continental tradition (Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, Derrida, and even Irigaray), surprisingly little has been cohesively written about his influence on Beauvoir. Sometimes, the influence is presented as having been filtered through her life-partner, Jean-Paul Sartre, even though her personal writings indicate the filtering likely flowed in the opposite direction (Simons 1981; 1999). In most cases, the discussion of Beauvoir’s reception of Kierkegaard has rightly focused on the influence of his rejection of Hegelian systematic philosophy (Kruks 1990, 10; Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998, 29; Arp 2001, 48; Heinämaa 2003, 10–11; Altman 2007, 67; Deutscher 2008, 27; Green and Green 2011, 19; and Kirkpatrick 2019, 392).

In perhaps the most widely cited discussion of the influence of Kierkegaard on Beauvoir, Sara Heinämaa argues, “Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel is the primary context for understanding Beauvoir’s mistrust in systematic philosophy” (Heinämaa 2003, 10–11). But despite this observed importance of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel, Beauvoir scholars have yet to offer a deep analysis of his proposed alternative concept: repetition. Instead, when tracing Kierkegaard’s influence on Beauvoir, most have focused on the inheritance of the concept of ambiguity³ or the shared preference for a performative, literary writing style.⁴ And when scholars *do* attend to the concept of “repetition,” the tendency is to associate it with immanence and women’s domesticated oppression rather than transcendence and women’s liberation.

For example, although Heinämaa concludes that the “idea of repetition is central to the solution Beauvoir offers to the problem of the sexual hierarchy,” she finds the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “conversion” more dominant and leaves Kierkegaardian repetition underanalyzed (103).⁵ Instead, she renders Kierkegaardian repetition a device to explain the sustenance of patriarchy through sedimentations of habit, thereby focusing on *mundane* repetitions. She argues that “the core” of Beauvoir’s argument “is the claim that women’s subjection is a human formation founded on and sustained by nothing else than repeated acts of devaluation and oblivion” (103). Heinämaa connects this to Beauvoir’s “theory of projection” and attributes Kierkegaard’s influence: men identify themselves with infinitude and absolute transcendence, projecting their finitude and immanence onto women. Thus, for Heinämaa, Beauvoir’s solution is that if the sexual hierarchy is to be undone, it is necessary for both sexes to learn to endure these existential tensions and accept the ambiguity of existence (127–32).

As a result of following Heinämaa, Penelope Deutscher similarly reduces the influence of Kierkegaardian repetition to an account of new habit formation. This brings her to wonder “whether to read, as Beauvoir herself does, repetition as repetition” (Deutscher 2008, 112–13 and 115). Deutscher is left to conclude that the mundane repetitions of immanence must simply be integrated into existence, taking an “appropriate place” within the “proper activities relating to transcendence” (100–1). I do not dispute that Beauvoir suggests such an integration, but I recommend taking these observations a step further.

Refusing to conflate mundane repetition with the *sacrificial* dimension offered in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, I suggest that freedom entails a repetition of

autonomy after one has lost it. One might lose it to the mundane repetitions of immanence or, importantly, sacrifice it within the very projects of transcendence that might enable one to reclaim their autonomy. Will you be able to refine yourself after you have lost yourself? Holding tight to the Kierkegaardian line of influence helps us to better understand the dual account of repetition in Beauvoir and challenges our assumptions of the relation between immanence and transcendence in her work. It is not just a matter of integrating mundane repetition within its proper place of transcendence: Kierkegaard's idea of sacrificial repetition structures Beauvoir's concept of transcendence itself.

Beauvoir's Kierkegaardian Turn

Highlighting the “father of existentialism's” concept of repetition in the “mother of feminist philosophy's” (Young 1985, 173) existentialist morality is important since she was deeply influenced by his work. Though she had previously been acquainted with his thought, Beauvoir only began her rigorous study of Kierkegaard after a dinner party in late 1939. It was there that she met Jean Wahl, the scholar responsible for introducing the Dane's philosophy to the French scene (see Kirkpatrick 2019, 169). Beauvoir subsequently immersed herself in the study of Kierkegaard such that he became an intellectual companion during the Nazi-wrought horrors of the coming year, resulting in a personal transformation that would mark her work for the next decade and longer. Kierkegaard's philosophy was one to which Beauvoir “could adhere without reservation,” integrating his existentialism into her own (Beauvoir 1962, 373–74).

By March 21, 1940, Beauvoir writes to Sartre, “that fellow [Kierkegaard] did realize what an existential ethics was—and you can already sense there what Kafka owes to him” (Beauvoir 1990, 304).⁶ There is then a gap in her correspondence until July: Beauvoir's circle had become embroiled in French resistance to encroaching Nazis. Her lover, Jacques Bost, narrowly avoided death; a friend, Paul Nizan, was killed; and Sartre became a prisoner of war. Beauvoir eventually fled Paris with her ex-lover, Bianca Bienenfeld, and Bianca's Jewish family.⁷ When Beauvoir returned to Paris in July, she found Nazi flags hanging over the Senate and, to her lifelong embarrassment, signed the Vichy oath declaring that she was not Jewish (Beauvoir 1990, 311; Kirkpatrick 2019, 175–77). Beauvoir sought comfort studying Hegel in *la Bibliothèque nationale*, describing it in her July 6, 1940 diary entry as “the most soothing activity I could find” (Beauvoir 2009, 304).

Beauvoir returned to Kierkegaard by winter. She first describes a passionate joy in this repetition in her December letters to Sartre (Beauvoir 1990, 355 and 357). But she soon became suicidally depressed after having been thwarted in her attempt to visit Sartre for the holidays in prison camp. Three days into the new year she writes to him, “My little one, I'm living in dread again” (363).

Days later, on her thirty-third birthday, January 9, 1941, Beauvoir credits Kierkegaard for helping her move beyond a Hegelian “rationalist false optimism” about the direction of the war, including her anguished separation from Sartre, to instead grapple with the suicidal despair that had overtaken her (366–67).⁸ Significantly, Kierkegaard enabled Beauvoir to stick within the turmoil, despair, and anxiety of her lived experience; to hold onto the importance of her own individual, emotional life within a collectivity. This helped her to move from a Hegelian resigned complicity to a Kierkegaardian affirmation of freedom in resistance: to recreate values by which to live and die, to retake meaning after it had been lost. Beauvoir narrativizes

this transformation in *The Blood of Others* (1945 [Beauvoir 1948])⁹ and it is crucial to the philosophy offered in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947 [Beauvoir 2000]). As I argue in the following sections, it remains integral to *The Second Sex* (1949 [Beauvoir 2010]).

Beauvoir returned to Kierkegaard throughout the postwar period. Worse than the Nazi occupation of France, Beauvoir describes this early Cold War era as “the darkest of my life” (Beauvoir 1983, 264). The assumption of the “triumph of Good over Evil” that accompanied French liberation and WWII’s end was not only thrown into doubt but “even seemed gravely threatened” as the “horror” of humanity became commonplace (Beauvoir 1983, 274 and 282). There was a growing awareness of the atrocities of the Holocaust, and US heroism waned after unleashing nuclear disaster in Japan and “vociferously racist” wars in the Koreas and Indochina (Beauvoir 1983, 244). The French feared Russian invasion and, with it, feared for Sartre’s life. Beauvoir was also devastated by the disappearance of the “third way” of democratic socialism between Russian communism and American capitalism, struggled with the difficulties posed by her celebrity after *The Second Sex*, and had a breast cancer scare after witnessing her typist’s degrading femininity and eventual death to the disease. Finally and significantly, her romantic relationship with the American novelist, Nelson Algren, disintegrated.

Beauvoir deliberately wrote this postwar period of her life into her prize-winning novel, *The Mandarins* (1954), which is dedicated to Algren (Beauvoir 1983, 203). Importantly, Beauvoir explains, “One of the principal themes that emerges from my story [*The Mandarins*] is that of *repetition* in the sense in which Kierkegaard uses that word: truly to possess something, one must have lost it and found it again” (Beauvoir 1983, 282; her emphasis). In a pessimistic return to themes from *The Second Sex*, it is in the male characters that Beauvoir explores the sacrificial repetitions of freedom—repetitions of autonomy—whereas the female characters forever lose themselves to never retake themselves (Beauvoir 1983, 278; see Scholz 2017, 380). Resolutely defending this literary choice, Beauvoir claims she depicted “women as, for the most part, I saw them, and as I still see them today: divided” (Beauvoir 1983, 278).

Kierkegaardian Repetition

To understand the significance of forever losing oneself and what it would mean to *retake* oneself for Beauvoir, we must turn to Kierkegaard’s notion of “repetition.” Appropriately translated as “repetition,” the Danish word “*Gjentagelsen*” might also be translated “the retaking” or “the taking again.” For Kierkegaard, sacrificial repetition is the temporality for adequately conceptualizing freedom in its “highest form.”¹⁰ This “highest” form of freedom is supremely concerned with taking what was lost back again: to become oneself, to get one’s head above water. As John Caputo articulates, “[r]epetition is the exacting task of constituting the self as a self. . . to forge his personality out of the chaos [and] press forward, not toward a sheer novelty” disconnected from their past, but rather “into being which he himself is” (Caputo 1987, 12 and 21). It is the freedom to become oneself, to choose and repossess oneself from the situated place in which one presently stands. As Kangas explains:

A repetition may be described as a self-intensifying becoming. . . it grows through its own immanent force. . . No new program of life is at issue, no new end-goal at stake. What is rather at stake is entering into a becoming in which one “does not know what we shall become.” (Kangas 2018, 61–62)

Repetition transforms present existence by its very inertia, what is and has been, into freedom by virtue of its being toward an open future. There is no other goal in becoming free than in becoming free (62).

In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard explains the importance of the eponymous Danish concept by situating it in relation to Hegelian reconciliation and Platonic recollection (Kierkegaard 1983, 148–49). Against the Parmenidean metaphysics of systematic philosophy, Kierkegaard sticks within the Heraclitean flux of lived experience and resists both Platonic and Hegelian attempts to resolve it. Kierkegaard finds the Hegelian account of movement not only incoherent but also trapped within the circumstance of immanence. As Kangas explains, in Hegelian mediation “one is reconciled in a retrospective glance, a gathering up of the whole as a meaningful whole. In faith one is not gathered up into a wholeness of meaning, but into an unreserved welcome of the future” (Kangas 2018, 15). Or as Jean Wahl may have insisted to Beauvoir:

the Hegelian tends to reduce every question to a historical search, to a study of origins and development, and thereby causes the meaning of essential problems to vanish; and on the other hand he leads people to believe that they need only look to their times, to their place in history, in order to guide their action; how convenient that feeling of being carried, supported, by universal spirit! . . . [T]urned toward the past; it forgets living. . . . It is . . . not a matter of being able to be delivered to the simultaneously compact and transparent world of concepts, but of existing temporally in the world of anguish, of despair, of trembling, and of hope. There is no possible system of all these movements. There is no system of existence. The idea of existence is united to the idea of being. Christ does not teach; he is. (Wahl 2017, 93 and 97)

In Hegel’s attempt to freeze lived time into its Eternal, Rational, and Necessary place in History, he misses the anxiety of lived experience. By contrast, Kierkegaard holds onto the fear and trembling of the present toward an uncertain future.

Kierkegaard’s account of movement, that is, sacrificial repetition, requires a concept of “faith as a modality of expectancy” (Kangas 2018, 15). This is not a naïve pining for a determined representation of what will be. As Kangas explains, faith remains open to the fact “that the tomorrow we anticipate is never the tomorrow that arrives. There is a surplus” (18–19). Yet faith is also grounded in the present, it “immediately expresses itself as a relation to the present . . . a way of taking up time, of inhabiting time, a task that demands constant renewal” (23). It is precisely faith as modality of the present toward an open future—to time as such—that maintains the self *within* itself. It prevents the self from succumbing to the “greatest evil” . . . falling outside themselves into the multiplicity of time phases. Faith is saved in its complete abandonment to the present” (23–24). This faith keeps us from “giving up” on ourselves, but it is not without its trepidation. Kierkegaardian repetition sticks within lived experience, whereas Hegelian reconciliation requires an impossible metaphysical standpoint.

Despite Plato’s similar flight to metaphysics, Kierkegaard respects the present-past movement of his ancient theory of recollection over Hegel. Plato begins with the loss, with the subject’s amnesiac fall from the Forms. This produces a nostalgic, unhappy consciousness that pines for a lost paradise never to be realized again. Paradoxically, this offers reprieve from turmoil: beginning with loss, “it has nothing to lose” (Kierkegaard 1983, 136). Repetition, however, begins not with loss but rather

the commencement of becoming and therefore sticks within the turmoil. As the pseudonymous Constantin Constantius explains:

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. . . . [T]hat which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. (Kierkegaard 1983, 131 and 149)

Repetition represents Kierkegaard's philosophical development from Plato. As a "recollection forward," repetition brings what was lost into existence again.

Through his various pseudonymous authors and characters, Kierkegaard provides several levels of "repetition" in the "stages on life's way." This demands that the reader, in their work of interpretation, situate themselves in relation to the pseudonym and the "repetition" at hand. Is the pseudonym an aesthete, even a voyeur, whose search for "variation" depends on circumstance to find the interesting? An endless cycle of "rotating the crops"? And who is the reader? A seducer? Or the seduced and scorned?¹¹ Perhaps the pseudonym is Judge William. His Hegelesque "ethical repetition" transcends aesthetic variation through self-reliance but lacks an account of human vulnerability and dependency. Instead, it maintains the patriarchal illusion that "repetition lies within its power" if one simply works hard or logically enough (Caputo 1987, 30–31). A woman reader is oddly positioned in relation to this stage. Kierkegaard maintains "ethical repetition" is inappropriate for thinking our subjectivity: the autonomy of the 1840s Danish woman had no value in the "ethical" sphere of patriarchal sociality. Instead, her worth was as wife and mother for Man.¹²

I admit that the pseudonyms that have most struck me are *Repetition's* Young Man and Constantin Constantius, externalizations of Kierkegaard's tormented inner dialogue regarding reunifying with his ex-fiancée, Regine Olsen. It was published on the same day, October 16, 1843, as both *Fear and Trembling*, whose religious pseudonymous character so affected Beauvoir in his articulation of an existentialist ethics, and *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (Kierkegaard 1990b), nonpseudonymous "edifying discourses" on the concept of faith.¹³ Companion pieces, these three works articulate the related concepts of faith and sacrificial repetition. Sacrificial repetition transcends the self-reliant delusion of patriarchal sociality by picking up precisely at the point of vulnerable despair, that is, the very incapacity of the subject. It articulates the faith of this "lost" self "retaking" itself in an absolutely open future (Caputo 1987, 11–12 and 21).

It is when haunted by too much nostalgic recollection that repetition becomes dull or mundane. Reminiscing on past glories can become an "excuse to sneak out of life again" (Kierkegaard 1983, 131). For example, Constantin tries to repeat the magic of a previous trip to Berlin and seeks a repetition when he returns home by throwing himself into housework (151–72). These are precisely the wrong kinds of repetition: they thwart freedom. They fail to open his future: the trip was a disappointment because Constantin sought to predetermine the future as an exact replica of the past, and the calm drudgeries of housework will need to be repeated *ad infinitum*. However, if one has the stomach or "vital force to slay this death and transform it into life," it might be possible to realize past paradises again, to retake one's own self (137). This "true expression" of the movement of repetition is intensely passionate: in fear and trembling, it is a courageous faith that what is lost—autonomy, relationships—will be retaken a thousand-fold in an unpredictable, open future, if only by virtue of its very absurdity (302, 132, and 56).

Kierkegaard admits he lacked faith, writing in his journal, “If I had had faith, I would have stayed with Regine” (Kierkegaard 1978, 233).¹⁴ It is a trope in Kierkegaard scholarship to discuss his relationship with his ex-fiancée, largely because most of his writings were written with her in mind as a specific reader. Their relationship was also the (very relatable) grounds from which his concept of repetition emerges. After two years of courtship, Kierkegaard proposed to Regine only to break the engagement eleven months later—by letter, no less—in October 1841. Far from a decisive rejection, it is from within this anxious, ambivalent despair that Kierkegaard philosophizes.

His *Either/Or*, published in February 1843 under the pseudonymous editorship of Victor Eremita (“victorious hermit”), presents the first of a personal “either/or” for Olsen: *either* he was just a seducer *or* the fleeting miracle of their love could be realized again in the context of marital life (Kierkegaard 1987). It seems this indirect communication worked since Regine began initiating several “chance” meetings later that spring (though perhaps only to signal she had moved on). Is it possible to maintain autonomy within the institution of marriage? Or would they have been doomed to forever *lose* themselves in the gendered destinies of “husband” and “wife”?

Seriously pondering reunification, *Repetition with Fear and Trembling* represents Kierkegaard’s second personal “either/or” for Regine: *either* she had simply been his muse, making him unsuitable to become her husband yet incapable of living without her, *or* they might repossess what was lost and have both their relationship and their autonomy, too. The impossible might be possible. It is this faith in the *or* that is taken up explicitly in *Fear and Trembling*.

Fear and Trembling retells the biblical story of Abraham’s incommunicable, alienated willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, whom God promised was destined to produce the chosen lineage (Gen. 17:1–2). Though the angel thwarts Abraham at the last possible moment, the resolution to obey God’s command presents a temporal rupture where Isaac was lost and found again. Abraham comes away with an altered relation to Isaac, a renewed faith in God, and retakes the gift of Isaac into the thousand-fold generations promised.

As Isaac to Abraham, so might Regine be to Søren. Though he sacrificed her in calling off their engagement, by a miracle they might be reunited and live a life beyond their imaginations.

In his personal writings, Kierkegaard insists that he broke his engagement out of love for Regine; it was for her own good (Kierkegaard 1987, 233–34). Today, we might be able to hear his reasoning: he loved her such that he would spare her the fated patriarchal social destiny of forever losing *her* autonomy as *his* wife, what with all his unique anxieties and perceived shortcomings. A romantic resignation. Yet, had the Young Man maintained faith in life’s repetition, he and his intended might have maintained their love while also emerging, even if fleetingly, as individuals beyond the realm of prescribed social destinies (Kierkegaard 1983, 145–46).

Repetition concludes by indicating a clear preference for the *or* of *Fear and Trembling*, that is, that the Young Man should have faith in reuniting with Olsen and reclaiming the meaning of their relationship and their autonomy. But as Kierkegaard was finalizing these new indirect love letters for publication in July 1843, he learned Olsen had become engaged to her tutor, Johan Frederik Schlegel. Faced with a new situation, Kierkegaard revised both his personal possibilities and *Repetition*: rather than having the Young Man commit suicide at the end, Kierkegaard made him a poet. He published *Fear and Trembling* unrevised.¹⁵

Having been so impressed by him, Beauvoir could have chosen *Fear and Trembling*’s Johannes de Silentio to sit as pseudonymous representative for Kierkegaard at her

“dinner party” of *The Second Sex* (Deutscher 2008, 13).¹⁶ Instead, she exclusively invites the sexist voyeur, Victor Eremita, as he appears at his own dinner party in “In Vino Veritas” of *Stages on Life’s Way*. Not only does Beauvoir seat Eremita next to her beloved Sartre in the epigraphs to volume II of *The Second Sex: Lived Experience*, but she gives him the privilege of speaking first: “What a curse to be a woman! And yet the very worst curse when one is a woman is, in fact, not to understand that it is one” (Beauvoir 2010, 277; from Kierkegaard 1988, 62). Rather than reading Kierkegaard’s presence in *The Second Sex* as merely an ironic stand-in for nineteenth-century misogyny, I suggest that Beauvoir uses Eremita’s observation along with Kierkegaard’s broader philosophy of repetition to analyze the situation of woman from her own perspective throughout volume II.

Beauvoir would later write that if *The Second Sex* accomplished anything for her, it was “help[ing] the women of my time and generation to become aware of themselves and their situation” (Beauvoir 1983, 202). How had these women she observed and loved come to lose their autonomy, to become the mystical prop to men’s egos? And what dangers did this continue to pose to Beauvoir’s own autonomy? And to others? To ours? How might we women reclaim ourselves? Prioritizing Kierkegaard’s philosophy and reappropriating his concept of “repetition” for a secular and feminist existentialism, Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* articulates that our misery is not an ontological inevitability but a social reality (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998, 71–73; Arp 2001, 23–24). That social reality has been changing and will continue to do so in yet unimagined ways, if only we have the courage to make a sacrifice.

Beauvoirian Repetition

Repetition as *what must be lost to be found again* guides Beauvoir’s inquiry in *The Second Sex*. Sacrificial repetitions of freedom require that one once had autonomy in order to repeat it. So Beauvoir must investigate whether women have ever had their autonomy such that they might *retake* it. She concludes by articulating that for women to concretely retake our autonomy and the very meaning of sexual difference, we must “sacrifice” the ideals of the “real woman” and the “real man,” or “liege” femininity and “virile prestige,” alongside significant material revolutions in labor (Beauvoir 2010, 764). In this section, I explicate how repetition structures her diagnostic and prescriptive projects throughout volumes I and II of *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir opens volume I with her annoyance at patriarchal laments over the so-called loss of femininity as well as early feminists’ abandonment of the term “woman” for the abstract “human being” (Beauvoir 2010, 3–4). Beauvoir observes that the myth of the “real woman” or “eternal feminine” exists, shaping our values and behaviors, the very institutional fabric of society. Yet it is not enough to have a certain kind of body to be considered a “real woman”; instead, one “must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity” (3–5). Thus, becoming a “real woman” is an existential project that, in patriarchal societies, demands women renounce our own autonomous grasp on the world to make ourselves docile prey.

Since it is all too easy to claim that the “real woman” is a happy one—indeed, it is an easy way out of the anguished responsibility of autonomy—Beauvoir creates a new standard by which to judge morality: freedom.

The perspective we have adopted is one of existentialist morality. Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its

freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into “in-itself,” of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil. (16)

You can hear Kierkegaard’s concepts of repetition and faith resonating here. The free self becomes a free self through its projects toward an “indefinitely open future.” And the free self becomes oppressed when it falls outside itself. Rather than freedom becoming freedom, “transcendence lapses into immanence.” When the sacrificial repetitions of freedom lapse into the mundane, the self comes outside itself into multiplicity. Authenticity falls into inauthenticity: one just goes through the motions of what a “real woman” would do, the mundane repetitions of domesticity. For Beauvoir, like Kierkegaard, this fall outside of one’s free, autonomous, authentic self is an “absolute evil” (compare Kangas 2018, 24).

Beauvoir goes on to explore men’s construction of this myth of the “real woman” throughout volume I. In the “History” chapters, Beauvoir uses the distinction between sacrificial repetition and mundane or “pure” repetition to explain the creation of “feminine reality” and woman’s complicity with it (Beauvoir 2010, 73–74). According to Beauvoir, primitive woman was doomed to domesticity by the burdensome mystery of pregnancy, dangers of childbirth, and demands of child-raising. Yet she recognized the existential import of primitive man’s reaching out into the world and risking his life: by sacrificing his survival, he created reasons for living. Procreation reduces the woman to a natural Xerox machine, the dullness of which might lead one to suicide. Herein lies her complicity: because woman is a human subject, she respects and celebrates the freedom exhibited by men. His risk creates values for living that childbirth alone could never provide. Those who think otherwise, cautions Beauvoir, should consider that “female values” are derived from the “feminine domain” men have constructed “only to lock women in it” (74). Without informed wisdom, reclaiming femininity may risk losing your autonomy.

Beauvoir’s irritation over the “lost sex” and how women might refind themselves bookends volume I. It is helpful to quote its conclusion at length as Beauvoir succinctly summarizes her irritation over the “lost sex” and what is necessary for women to repeat our autonomy:

“Woman is lost. Where are the women? Today’s women are not women”; we have seen what these mysterious slogans mean. In the eyes of men—and of the legions of women who see through these eyes—. . . the “real woman” is one who accepts herself as Other. . . . For man, . . . the more he asserts his grasp on the world through action and work, the more virile he looks; human and vital characteristics are merged in him; but women’s own successes are in contradiction with her femininity since the “real woman” is required to make herself object, to be the Other. . . .

What is certain is that today it is very difficult for women to assume both their status of autonomous individual and their feminine destiny; here is the source of the awkwardness and discomfort that sometimes leads them to be considered “a lost sex.” . . . What must be hoped is that men will assume, without reserve, the situation being created; only then can women experience it without being

torn. . . . Then will she fully be a human being, “when woman’s infinite servitude is broken, when she lives for herself and by herself, man—abominable until now—giving her her freedom.” (273–74)

Those men and women who believe in the myth of the “eternal feminine” hold that what it means to be a “real woman” is to renounce your autonomy and accept your role as inessential Other. In contrast, the “real man” becomes such by virtue of his autonomy, of his grasping out into the world. His activities in the boardroom and the bedroom alike mark his manhood. The “real woman,” however, becomes such by virtue of renouncing her autonomous grasp on the world. It isn’t her activity that is valued, but rather her passivity. Indeed, her activity is a becoming-passive. She therefore lives in contradiction. Despite the changes wrought by feminists and the men who love us, the “independent women” of Beauvoir’s day and ours remain torn. To repair our torn subjectivity, to become ourselves, we need to sacrifice the meaning of the “real woman” as Other.

This conclusion to volume I is immediately followed by the Kierkegaard epigraph to volume II. It is in this volume that Beauvoir unfolds the difficulties for women “overthrowing the myth of femininity” in pursuit of our freedom (279). Because male supremacy still stands on firm economic, social, and political foundations, women must contend with its persisting values wrought by the myth of the “real woman.” Volume II examines the way women are conditioned for and experience the anticipation and loss of their autonomy through the stages of their lived experience, cradle to grave.

The first chapter, “Childhood,” opens with Beauvoir’s most famous sentence: “One is not born woman, rather one becomes one” (my translation; see 283).¹⁷ To be a woman is to have become one by living a particular situation as a sexed human subject within a world of values. In this patriarchal world of values, woman has become lost. But we were not born lost. We possessed our autonomy, paradoxically enough, in infancy and childhood. As Beauvoir observes, the sexes are existentially identical in early development. Regardless of sex, a newborn infant is “already an autonomous subject transcending himself [*sic*] toward the world,” and children of both sexes “apprehend the universe through their eyes and hands, and not through their sexual parts” (283–84).¹⁸ Despite any of the early social mutilations the girl may endure, her future passivity is, as yet, only imaginary. She “nonetheless grasped herself as an autonomous individual” (341).

The sexes begin to differ based on the social opportunities offered for fleeing their fundamental existential abandonment. The boy is pressed to pursue his independence and thereby acquire his manly social value, his “virile prestige,” whereas the girl is encouraged to “renounce her autonomy” to please others and take up the paradoxically narcissistic task of becoming a “living doll” (294–95). This becoming-object-for-others divides her “human condition and her feminine vocation” (348). At first, she appears privileged. Yet it becomes clear that the boy’s imposed early independence implies “a higher estimation,” and the masculine supremacy begins to take hold (286). The girl realizes that she lives in a world of “virile prestige” and soon joins the chorus singing her most important goal: to become a being-for-Man. As she waits for him, she learns the skills of mundane repetition: cooking, cleaning, sewing, shopping, self-styling, and so on.

Beauvoir speculates that if the girl were spared her patriarchal fate of becoming a “living doll” and were instead encouraged to explore her body and the universe around

her, she would prove herself peer and equal to the boy. The world would become her oyster, since it is. But her preoccupations with herself as a body-object hamper her sense of wonderment, undercut her daring, and impede her freedom. Never having pressed the boundaries of her physicality or enjoyed the efficacy of her ability to create change, the young woman becomes docile and resigns herself. She *loses* herself (344).

Patriarchal sexual difference reaches its apex in adolescent and young adult heteroeroticism. Whereas the young man finds no contradiction between his autonomy and “taking” the other with his erect penis, she is immediately split: she must invest her autonomy into making herself prey to another (McWeeny 2017). If she doesn’t do it, he might force her (383). Haunted by the very real and even likely possibility of rape, the young woman fears men (335). Too often, her heterosexual initiation is a rape, even when she consents to it: her erotic life had been clitorally based, but the heterosexual “ravishing” of her vagina marks her conversion into womanhood. She does not *take*, she is *taken*. She does not *fuck*, she is *fucked*. There is no reciprocity (396–97; compare 386 and 442). This trauma exacerbates the rupture between her past autonomy and future submission (383–84). She falls further outside herself, losing what little she had left: her own body. Survival within heteropatriarchy demands her loss (691–92).

But what happens such that women are never able to *retake* their autonomy? In what ways is she both “victim and accomplice” (277; from Sartre 1949) to the perpetual loss of her freedom, of her *self*? Simply: the bad faith of male supremacy. Becoming a “real woman” under patriarchy concretely demands the woman renounce herself, that she fall outside herself. A woman in the world struggles to find the concrete, material resources to pursue her autonomy because the patriarchal world doesn’t value her for it; it values her as being-for-Man.

Repeatedly, Beauvoir reiterates her diagnosis that women’s oppression rests in their understandable submission to mundane or “pure” repetition.

The goals the housewife is offered fail to open any futures for her. They are instead mundane repetitions of the same, lapsing her freedom into oppression (Beauvoir 2010, 266–67). This makes the wife existentially dependent on her husband’s freedom to elevate her own (443 and 481–86). Far from love, their relationship becomes a “gilded mediocrity with neither passion nor ambition, days leading nowhere, repeating themselves indefinitely, a life that slips toward death without looking for answers” (468). Lacking the faith, courage, and means to retake her own self, the woman identifies with her possessions. Alienating herself into things, she becomes utterly dependent: “linens turn gray, the roast burns, china breaks; these are absolute disasters because when things disappear, they disappear irremediably” (483). When things disappear, so does she.

Children become vessels through which the woman might vicariously live her freedom and fulfill her feminine destiny (566). To her own horror, the young girl looks to her mother and recognizes her own fate of mundane repetition:

her destiny appears to be the prototype of bland *repetition*: with her, life only repeats itself stupidly without going anywhere. . . The girl will be wife, mother, grandmother; she will take care of her house exactly as her mother does, she will take care of her children as she was taken care of: she is twelve years old, and her story is already written in the heavens. (309 and 312; Beauvoir’s emphasis)

The girl might lose respect for her mother and rebel against her fate, but most submit.

In her womanhood, she might longingly recollect her girlhood autonomy without faith for its return (671). Finally as an old woman, she finds “no goals in the world toward which she could project herself in a free and effective movement” (621, compare 627) and sees in the future nothing “but a duplication of the past. . . time’s sole becoming is slow degradation” (640). She is incapable of creating new values, is never *for* anything but always against, and is often more stubbornly beholden than her male brethren to past values: racism, sexism, and classism (641). Having spent a lifetime practicing the art of “killing time,” the old woman maintains the same (635).

Even if a woman “tries to win back her autonomy” after losing herself as a wife and mother, she is still in a man’s world (497). She discovers she is less cultured, traveled, or familiar with law, politics, and unionism. She is less practiced in debate. She has become less capable than even the most mediocre of husbands and, thus, is easily dominated. Neither fashion nor beauty offer her avenues to retake her autonomy, they “thwart them” (572). Even those women who pursue careers often do so half-heartedly because “they know the interests of their work will most often be sacrificed to their husband’s career” (523).

Perhaps the woman manages to remain independent. Even then, she *must also be a proper woman*. She is torn between a desire to become human and a desire to pursue her femininity. Beauvoir writes, “She wants to live both like a man and like a woman” and thus “her workload and her fatigue are multiplied as a result” (725 and 736). Keeping a clean house, finding a man, having children, and staying fashionable take time from projects that might carve her name. Her family and customs still pressure her to make “a place in her life for the man, for love. She will often be afraid of missing her destiny as a woman. . . . She does not admit this feeling to herself: but it is there, it distorts her best efforts, it sets up limits” (381–82). Refusing to abandon her femininity, the independent woman must simultaneously claim and renounce her sovereignty. Thus, her becoming is in contradiction with itself (723). Indeed, her very success in her career may demand success in her femininity. For her male colleague, the respect is assumed. His clothes also tend not to snag.

The tension between the independent woman’s humanity and her femininity makes it nearly impossible for her to truly retake herself, to repeat her autonomy. She is content to simply have a career in this man’s world. She plays the part to fit in, unable to fully throw herself into the projects that would create a new world of values. Preoccupied with herself, she is unable to lose herself. She has not refound herself in a world that would value who she might become in so doing:

she does not passionately lose herself in her projects; she still considers her life an immanent enterprise. . . . To do great things, today’s woman needs above all forgetfulness of self: but to forget oneself one must first be solidly sure that one has already found oneself. Newly arrived in the world of men, barely supported by them, the woman is still much too busy looking for herself. . . . As long as she still has to fight to become a human being, she cannot be a creator. (740–41 and 750)

The Kierkegaardian perspective here is striking. For women to refind their autonomy, we must be able to lose ourselves, to forget ourselves in the project at hand with a faith toward an indefinitely open future. Only then can we truly retake our own selves. But one must have found oneself to lose oneself in one’s projects. And the independent woman is still very much lost. She plays the part of the professional, the creative, rather

than becoming one. What will it require for her to be able to *lose* herself so she might repeat her autonomy?

For too long, women have made the wrong sacrifice: “she was assured that if she abdicated her opportunities into the hands of the man, they would be returned to her a hundredfold, and she considers herself duped” (646).

Thus, Beauvoir proposes a different sacrifice: we should sacrifice the myth of the “real woman.” Provocatively comparing this to the historical sacrifices of the institutions of American slavery¹⁹ and the Sistine castrati, Beauvoir conclusively argues:

It is true that by doing away with slave markets, we destroyed those great plantations lined with azaleas and camellias, we dismantled the whole delicate Southern civilization; old lace was put away in the attics of time along with the pure timbres of the Sistine castrati, and there is a certain “feminine charm” that risks turning to dust as well. I grant that only a barbarian would not appreciate rare flowers, lace, the crystal clear voice of a eunuch, or feminine charm. . . . Does such a fleeting miracle—and one so rare—justify perpetuating a situation that is so damaging for both sexes? The beauty of flowers and women’s charms can be appreciated for what they are worth; if these treasures are paid for with blood or misery, one must be willing to sacrifice them. (764)

Because the value of the “real woman” is paid for with the blood and misery of her abjection, we must be willing to sacrifice it along with the value of the “real man.” This sacrifice must be conducted with an authentic faith that we will reclaim both our autonomy and the very meaning of sexual difference. This is not easy: one cannot sacrifice the values of male supremacy without sacrificing its social, political, and economic foundations. Women *must* have economic autonomy for any other changes to take hold so they might “effectively participate in the building of a better world” (636; compare 381, 513, and 721).

Far from eliminating sex difference, we are guaranteed its repetition by virtue of both the very facticity of embodied sexual differences as well as our human capacity to create meaning. Indeed, Beauvoir calls attention to the changes already happening in her time. Far from denying women relationships with men, women and others will be able to enjoy them without being reduced to them. Embodied differences of sex will not disappear, nor will the uniqueness of our relations across difference. Rather, authentic, interhuman relations between women and men and others might be born (765–66).

A thousand-fold miracle, Beauvoir argues that sacrificing the myth of the “real woman” would significantly improve the lot of women and girls as well as men and boys. Though men are privileged, patriarchal institutions harm *both* men and women. He would be relieved of her existential burden in marriage “by giving her something *to do* in this world” (522–23 and 760). Girls and women would thus not become so preoccupied with men and “would be far less obsessed with their femininity; they would become more natural and simple and would easily rediscover themselves as women, which, after all, they are” (726). We might begin to take pride rather than shame in our bodily functions—especially menstruation—and treat it as simply part of immanent experience rather than as a hindrance to transcendence (329–30 and 340). No longer placing men upon a pedestal to whom we have concrete, material motivation to subordinate ourselves, women would become autonomous equals in partnership. Beauvoir also suggests that without “male superiority” (734), the ubiquity of sexual violence might diminish and instead establish the grounds for “authentic love” (694,

706, and 763). Further, the sacrifice would make for better mothers. Far from diminishing the value of motherhood, as some have charged, Beauvoir argues that raising children is too important to abandon to someone who has subordinated her humanity. A fully human woman would be the best mother; she would neither be abandoned to her child nor her child to her as both would be fully integrated and supported by human society (566–68).

Thus, Beauvoir articulates both her diagnosis of women's oppression and her philosophy of women's liberation utilizing the structure of Kierkegaardian repetition. Women's oppression lies in their falling outside of themselves into mundane repetition, divided between their autonomy and their destiny for-Man. Liberation entails sacrificing our investment in the value of the "real woman" with a faith that we will reclaim our own autonomy and the very meaning of sexual difference. Reading this dual account of repetition—that of the mundane and the sacrificial—in *The Second Sex* brings a dialectical relation between immanence and transcendence: can women, men, and others retake our autonomy after we have lost ourselves to the mundane repetitions of immanence (childbirth and rearing, domestic labor, and so on)? Can we lose ourselves in our projects of freedom to retake ourselves in unimagined ways? Only if we sacrifice the myth of the "real woman." The question remains whether we have the courage to do so, continuously (755–56).

Toward an Open Future

I have argued that Beauvoir appropriates Kierkegaard's concepts of repetition and faith in her conceptualization of freedom. Kierkegaardian repetition provides an alternative to the Platonic and Hegelian attempts to flee the flux of lived experience for the comforting shores of metaphysics by embracing our anxiety, our being-toward-the-uncertain-future, with a concept of faith. We can never fully project ourselves into the future, there is always an unpredictable excess. Nevertheless, with faith, we repeat ourselves in time. We become who we are. Or else we fall outside ourselves into multiplicity, into the inauthenticity of mundane repetition: we go through the motions of life rather than living.

Beauvoir observes that there are many barriers that remain for women repeating our autonomy. Patriarchal society demands that women, in becoming "real women," fall outside ourselves into inauthenticity. That we abdicate our selves, our autonomy, for our feminine destiny as for-Man. Beauvoir scholars have noted that these mundane repetitions characterize a temporality of oppression, but repetition is not only aligned with immanence in Beauvoir's work. Kierkegaard's concept of "sacrificial repetition" informs the very structure of her concept of freedom, especially how "lost women" might be liberated and "refind" ourselves. Understanding freedom along the temporality of *what must be lost to be found again* helps us to understand the relation between immanence and transcendence in a dialectical manner rather than a dichotomous one.

Can you refind yourself after you have lost yourself and can you lose yourself after you have found yourself? Have you found yourself at all?

The societal pressures that bring women to "lose" themselves, whether by choice or by force, make it difficult for women to achieve Beauvoir's "highest" repetition of freedom: the freedom to lose yourself in your projects, the projects that open your future and define who you are over and over again, the projects through which a "genius" becomes so named (Beauvoir 2010, 750). These are not the projects of the break-out album. This is Beyoncé's *Renaissance* (2022). For this "highest" freedom to take place

concretely and more universally for women than the exceptions of Beyoncé or even Beauvoir herself, Beauvoir insists that we must sacrifice our material, political, and social investments in patriarchal notions of the “real woman” and the “real man.”

Contrary to the bad faith upon which patriarchal values thrive, this sacrifice is a matter of courage that must be accomplished in the spirit of living an authentic, fearful faith toward an open, unknown future. “Faith sees best in the dark,” as US President Joe Biden quotes Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1993, 238; quoted in Biden 2020). For Kierkegaard in his use of the Abraham and Isaac story, this meant a revitalized relation to Isaac and a renewed faith in God—or a reengagement with Regine. In Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, this is a renewed faith that we will reclaim our autonomy and the meaning of sexual difference anew.

This work has been well underway. In Beauvoir’s time, it meant women emerging as leaders in their workplaces and redefining heterosexual marriage as a co-equal partnership based in authentic love rather than idolized fantasy or even choosing to forego it all together. This continues today. For example, in her candid piece “How I Demolished My Life: A Home-Improvement Story,” *Atlantic* senior editor Honor Jones admits that she lost all sense of her identity to her husband in her young marriage:

How much of my life—I mean the architecture of my life, but also its essence, my soul, my mind—had I built around my husband? Who could I be if I wasn’t his wife? Maybe I would microdose. Maybe I would have sex with women. Maybe I would write a book. (Jones 2021)

She and her soon ex-husband put their house on the market and move their young family to New York City where they “nest”²⁰ until they finally sell and afford separate apartments. In redefining herself, Jones decenters herself and her family from the white picket fence and recenters them around the playgrounds of their new community. As she ends the piece, “Maybe I’m deluding myself. Maybe I’m not free of anything. . . . Maybe I’m starting the same story all over again. . . . But I don’t think so. I think I’m making something new” (Jones 2021).

Of course, feminists have continued to challenge and redefine what it means to a “real woman” in ways more radical than a culturally powerful, bourgeois white woman buying a New York City apartment. Angela Davis has spent her career of abolitionist work calling for us to sacrifice the racialized myths of the “real woman.” In her work on the myth of the Black rapist, Davis argues that our carceral justice system relies on a cultural imaginary of damsel-in-distress white femininity in need of heroic white masculinity to protect her from the urges of the Black-man-as-rapist. This serves to obfuscate the violence against Black women, especially as historically perpetrated by white men. The myth of the “real (white) woman” traps our imaginary, keeping us beholden to the blood and misery of police brutality and mass incarceration (Davis 1981).

And, explicitly indebted to the philosophical lineage of Beauvoir, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity has inspired generations to challenge conventional gender norms in a feminist embrace of queer lives (Butler 1990). In a recent interview, Butler clearly articulates, “The category of woman can and does change, and we need it to be that way. . . . So we should not be surprised or opposed when the category of women expands to include trans women” (Butler, in Gleeson 2021). Indeed, trans feminist philosophers and activists have long challenged our notion of the “real woman” and recreated its meaning repeatedly. Not only have they undermined the heteropatriarchal

assumption of the biological grounding of gender but also the overgeneralized presumption in masculine physical superiority, of “virile prestige.” As Veronica Ivy has argued, sacrificing these cis-normative ideas of the “real woman” along with the accompanying presupposition in the inherent athletic superiority of male bodies and bodies previously assigned male would liberate both trans women and cis women in their participation in sport (Ivy and Conrad 2018).

If we read Beauvoir as a scholar of Kierkegaard, we can understand that her approach to freedom neither brings her to eliminate sexual difference nor binds her to the binary but rather offers something much more nuanced and interesting. Like Kierkegaard, Beauvoir broadens the concept of repetition from its original and deeply personal derivation to something more. For Kierkegaard, it meant sacrificing the meaning of his relationship with Olsen. For Beauvoir, it meant sacrificing the meaning of her relationships to Sartre and Algren. But these individual sacrifices must also be accompanied by communal sacrifices, a concrete revolution of values. Conclusively, Beauvoir argues that we must collectively sacrifice the value of what it means to be a “real woman” and a “real man” so that women, men, and others might retake our autonomy and live the fundamental ambiguity of our humanity in generous reciprocity: so that the sexes might “unequivocally affirm their *fraternité*” (Beauvoir 2010, 766).²¹

Acknowledgments. This article has been over a decade in the making, and I would like to thank my many patient supporters. Thank you to the members of the International Simone de Beauvoir Society and the 2021 Feminist Perspectives on Sexual Violence Workshop. In particular, I thank Margaret Simons and Meryl Altman for their early enthusiasm and Debra Bergoffen for her generous assistance in later revisions. I am deeply indebted to the mentorship of Bonnie Mann and George Connell and the friendship of Megan Burke: each have graciously read and provided discerning feedback on many drafts. I am also thankful to the two anonymous referees whose insightful comments pushed me to deepen my analysis and clarify my framing. Importantly, I am grateful to my partner, John Valdez. Our relationship has given meaning to the concept of “repetition” and provided invaluable tenderness and support in writing about it. Finally, thanks to Mom and Dad for your love and encouragement. Both this article and I have been vastly improved by all your care. Thank you.

Notes

1 Thanks to Debra Bergoffen for helping me to highlight and deepen this claim.

2 Beauvoir wrote much of *The Second Sex* in the United States and was deeply influenced by her friendship with playwright Richard Wright and his wife Ellen Poplar Wright. While hosting her, they discussed American racism and literary resistance during tours around Harlem and introduced her to Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* from which she borrowed for her own famous thesis. For critical commentary on Beauvoir and race, see Simons 1999; 2002; Belle 2010, 35–51; Bernasconi 2019; Kirkpatrick 2019, 227; Altman 2020, 116–236; and Heter 2021.

3 Scholarship notes that Beauvoir accepted Kierkegaardian ambiguity in several ways. First is the anxious, doubting character of uncertainty involved in our ambiguous state between past and future (Arp 2001, 48; Heinämaa 2003, xiv; Green and Green 2011, 14–15). Second is the ambiguity of our existence as both internality and externality, which establishes both our individuality and our relations to others (Heinämaa 2003, 10). This ambiguity is immediately connected to other ambiguities of our lived experience, including immanence and transcendence, finitude and infinitude, and being and not-being (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998, 53–54, 61–62; Heinämaa 2003, 10–11). Significantly, Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook elaborate the importance of Kierkegaard’s existential perspective to Beauvoir that there is a separation between who we are now, who we are becoming, and who we project ourselves to be becoming and that the moment of our decision within the particular context of our present lived experience makes all the difference.

4 Heinämaa writes that Kierkegaard’s nonsystematic philosophy “inspired Beauvoir not just in its content but also its form,” enabling her to endure and pursue the tensions between “her philosophical and literary

aspirations” (Heinämaa 2003, 7). This literary style enabled Beauvoir to invite the reader into dialogue with the text as well as capture the temporality of lived experience as it is unfolded through moments of decision in the face of an uncertain future (see also Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998, 44; Klaw 1998; Kirkpatrick 2019, 288, 431, n. 28. Compare Lundgren-Gothlin 1996, 187; Walsh 1998).

5 It might be helpful for some scholars to think of “repetition” as “conversion,” especially those familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s influence (Deutscher 2008; Mann 2014). Heinämaa footnotes the resonance between Merleau-Ponty and Kierkegaard, briefly writing that both emphasize a suspension in the givenness of reality (Heinämaa 2003, 19, n. 11; compare 5–6). (See also Lundgren-Gothlin 1996, 129; Deutscher 2008, 14, n. 35).

6 Though Beauvoir and Sartre were hesitant to publicly identify as existentialists, only doing so in 1945, we can see a clear interest in “existential ethics” by 1940 (see Lundgren-Gothlin 1996, 36, 40 and 128).

7 Bianca Lamblin (née Bienenfeld) later characterized her relations with Sartre and Beauvoir as sexually exploitative in her 1993 memoir, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille dérangée (A Disgraceful Affair)*. (See Kirkpatrick 2019, 137–59).

8 In her diary, Beauvoir writes: “I turned back to Kierkegaard and began to read him with passionate interest. The type of ‘truth’ that he postulated defied doubt no less triumphantly than Descartes’ use of ‘evidence.’ Neither History nor the Hegelian System could, any more than the Devil in person, upset the living certainty of ‘I am, I exist, here and now, I am myself.’ . . . Now I had learned of philosophical systems that stuck to the fact of existence and gave my presence on this earth its proper significance: to these I could adhere without reservation” (Beauvoir 2009, 319–20).

For more on her return to Kierkegaard and Jean Wahl’s scholarship, see December 21, 23, and 25, 1940 letters to Sartre (Beauvoir 1990, 355 and 357). She also writes of this period extensively in *The Prime of Life* (Beauvoir 1962, 373–74). Also compare her November 19, 1940 diary entry (Beauvoir 2009, 318; see Kirkpatrick 2019, 179).

9 Chapters 10 and 12 of *The Blood of Others* are explicit in the Hegel versus Kierkegaard narrativization (Beauvoir 1948, 236, 240, 249–50; 256, 282–86). In the character Hélène, these themes are explicitly connected to questions of gender that are further developed in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir also provides her own commentary on the novel (Beauvoir 1962, 429; Beauvoir 2009, 320; see Kirkpatrick 2019, 180).

10 As Kierkegaard’s Constantin explains in a supplement to *Repetition*: “Now freedom breaks forth in its highest form [where its] supreme interest is precisely to bring about repetition, and its only fear is that variation would have the power to disturb its eternal nature. Here emerges the issue: *Is repetition possible?* Freedom itself is now the repetition. If it were the case that freedom in the individuality related to the surrounding world could become so immersed, so to speak, in the result that it cannot take itself back again (repeat itself), then everything is lost” (Kierkegaard 1983, 302).

11 To be more precise, there are two types of aesthetes: the immediate aesthete seeking instant satisfaction (Don Juan) and the reflective aesthete who lives in the anticipatory mode of delayed gratification (the seducer of “The Seducer’s Diary”).

12 Compare Kierkegaard 1983, 143; Kierkegaard 1988, 166; Beauvoir 2010, 455–56. Also see Heinämaa 2003, 9. For those interested in further reading, a good place to start is Léon and Walsh 1997.

13 As Ronald M. Green and Mary Jean Green have well documented, although we know when Beauvoir read *Fear and Trembling*, we can’t be certain that she read *Repetition*. Nevertheless, it is helpful to discuss *Repetition* for clarity. Moreover, Beauvoir may have been familiar with *Repetition*: not only was Paul Henri Tisseau’s 1933 French translation available, but she utilized Jean Wahl’s comprehensive Kierkegaard scholarship in her own study (see Adam 2017, 23, n. 11; also Wahl 1938; 2017).

14 See entry 5.1.5664 (*Pap.* IV A 107, May 17, 1843) in Kierkegaard 1978; quoted in the introduction to Kierkegaard 1983, xix. Kierkegaard published *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (Kierkegaard 1990a) agonizing on the concept of faith just the previous day, May 16, 1843.

15 See Hong and Hong’s introduction to *Fear and Trembling; Repetition* (Kierkegaard 1983, ix–xxxix).

16 Deutscher omits Kierkegaard from her initial VIP list.

17 See Mann and Ferrari 2017.

18 For further reading on the freedom of the child for Beauvoir, see: Grosholz 2004; Kearney 2009; Scholz 2010; Levy 2016.

19 See Kathryn Belle’s critique in Belle 2010.

20 “Nesting” is the practice of co-parenting in which the children remain in a central family home and the parents, rather than the children, take turns moving in and out.

21 On Beauvoir’s masculine word choice, see Burke 2019.

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