

French
philosopher
Jacques Derrida
at home

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Derrida's Gift: Introductory Note

[W]e cannot be sure that there is ever
a gift.
—Derrida, “Women in the Beehive”

*W*ith this special issue, we mark Jacques Derrida's inestimable influence on the work of the Pembroke Center and on *differences*. But how do we make that mark? How do we place a value on the ways Derrida contributed to the work of feminism? And how do we think about his death? From their beginnings in the 1960s, what second-wave feminism and Derridean deconstruction had most in common, perhaps, was the desire on the part of numerous journalists and academic critics to declare them dead. In Derrida's case, the desire was so shamefully strong that at the time of his actual death, some mainstream American journalists could only repeat the desire, as if they feared that the author's literal death were not enough. As Avital Ronell has written, “Derrida, like all break-through thinkers and artists, continues to provoke rage and attract death sentences

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even after his announced death" (489). And what of a Derridean inflected feminism?

In the recent *PMLA* forum, "The Legacy of Jacques Derrida," Ronell brings to life Derrida's unique relationship to feminism:

He practiced, whether consciously or not, a politics of contamination. His political views, refined and leftist, knew few borders and saturated the most pastoral sites and hallowed grounds of higher learning. Suddenly color was added to the university—color and sassy women, something that would not easily be forgiven. [. . .] Derrida blew into our town-and-gown groves with protofeminist energy, often, and at great cost to philosophical gravity, passing as a woman. My first translation of his work was "Law of Genre," where he reworked the grid to the rhythm of invaginated punctures. Not all the folks at the reception desk were cheering such gender intrusions into linguistic pieties. (489)

This issue brings together some of the major feminist critics at the reception desk whose work was touched by the writings of Derrida. As editors of *differences*, we would say that we are indebted to Derrida, except that we learn from him that the economy of the gift is so much richer than that of the debt, especially as we look to the future. We know that feminism's foundational questions are still impossible ones and that they still look to the future for answers. Derrida posed one of those questions in his 1982 interview with Christie McDonald:

Must one think "difference" "before" sexual difference or taking off "from" it? Has this question, if not a meaning (we are at the origin of meaning here, and the origin cannot "have meaning") at least something of a chance of opening up anything at all, however im-pertinent it may appear? ("Choreographies" 98)

The impossibility of the question is its gift, for it is in the structure of the gift, Derrida tells us in "Women in the Beehive," that we can look for the impossible that is the future:

[Y]ou can't say that the gift must always produce something. The gift is not a production. But there are gifts which are gifts which only call upon repetition and not reproduction. To receive a gift, in the Nietzschean sense, is to say "I want it to begin again," that it happens again, not that it reproduces. (156)

The contributors to this issue were invited to address the engagement of their work and Derrida's; the range and distinctiveness of their responses engage the possibility of beginning again.

—*The Editors*

Works Cited

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