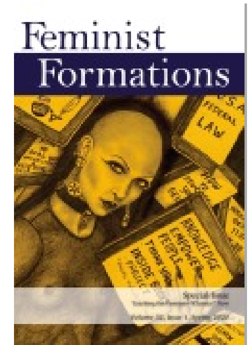
Teaching *The Second Sex* : A Conversation

Soyica Colbert, Amber Musser, Paige McGinley



Feminist Formations, Volume 32, Issue 1, Spring 2020, pp. 98-116 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0009*

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757520

[This content has been declared free to read by the pubisher during the COVID-19 pandemic.]

Teaching *The Second Sex*: A Conversation

Soyica Colbert, Amber Musser, Paige McGinley

In this published conversation, the authors discuss their teaching of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex *more than seventy years after its 1949 publication, paying particular attention to the text's potential significance for students in several different fields of study, including women, gender, and sexuality studies; American studies; African American studies; and performance studies. The authors share pedagogical strategies for encouraging students to read the text historically; which portions of the book they find especially useful to assign; and other texts and authors that pair fruitfully with Beauvoir. In addition to thinking about the text's historical significance, the authors discuss what* The Second Sex *may offer in the wake of poststructuralism, particularly for contemporary conversations regarding ethics, freedom, and the mattering of life.*

Keywords: civil rights movement / de Beauvoir, Simone / ethics / existentialism / feminism / pedagogy / race / *The Second Sex*

Soyica Colbert: I'm excited about this conversation about Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and how to teach it. One question that I've had is, how to teach *Second Sex* in an interdisciplinary classroom, because all of us teach in interdisciplinary units. How have you approached teaching the book in the interdisciplinary context?[1]

Amber Jamilla Musser: Because I've generally been teaching it within a women's/gender studies set of courses, in a lot of ways it's a natural fit. Which is to say, it's easy to situate within the history of feminism. It's often been a point where a course will start to establish, "Here are concerns that we're still thinking about that de Beauvoir laid out." I often assign students to read the intro and the last

few chapters. Because the middle's great but you just can't get all that in . . . what I try to impress upon students is the longer history of people thinking about feminism as not just about the body. So I emphasize the body being central to *Second Sex*, but also being attached to all of these different materialist concerns. I think this is easy to lose sight of, especially for students who are enrolled in an introductory level course.

Colbert: What other materialist concerns, besides the body, often come up?

Musser: Well, de Beauvoir talks about the importance of getting a good job.

Paige McGinley: I'm interested in teaching this book as part of intellectual history of the Black freedom struggle. Instead of situating it explicitly within a history of feminism, I like students to think about it within the history of SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], in particular, and the relationship between the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism.

The book helps us think about an important period—1964, '65, '66—when Black women and white women (but especially white women) in SNCC are reading de Beauvoir and being inspired by her. That is to say, we might look at the circulation of *The Second Sex* not as a diagnostic but as a crucible in this moment when things are starting to fragment between Black women and white women and between women in SNCC and men in SNCC. That this fragmentation is occurring particularly around the question of work is significant: who does what kind of work for the organization? Reading through the lens of SNCC offers a historical context that can amplify de Beauvoir's critique of labor in the last chapter. Focusing on the last chapter also draws attention to a different set of questions: How do people read books? How did people read *The Second Sex* then and how do they read it now? Is everyone reading the 800-pages of these two volumes? Are they reading the first chapter and the last chapter? What are the parts that are circulating among communities during the civil rights movement? One of the ways I like to frame *The Second Sex*, as well as other texts that pair nicely with it, such as Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, as well as Hansberry's critique of de Beauvoir, is as part of a practice of Black study. Or planning, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) would put it. This kind of group study, the kind that takes place outside formal institutions, is one of the engines that drove SNCC. How do these texts align with the generation of new ideas about Black self-determination, for example, as well as other important concepts in that period.

Colbert: I've only taught *The Second Sex* in a women and gender studies class. However, I have been thinking about it in terms of civil rights history and midcentury existentialist thought. One of the things that comes up for me, because most of the work that I've been doing has been evolving around the

playwright Lorraine Hansberry, is how the examination of the body, which comes up earlier in the book, intersects with the analysis of gendered labor, which comes up later. And erotics too.

The introduction and some of the early chapters raise a question about visibility and the issue of connecting with another. For Hansberry, it seemed . . . and this I think is part of the reason why the existentialist movement becomes useful for artists, that the physical encounter, or the narrative representation of the physical encounter became the metonym in different philosophical texts, specifically Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, of how subjectivity would emerge.

Encounter informed how we see one another and so the stage serves as a useful site to stage ideas that were central to philosophical, political, and artistic musings in the mid-twentieth century.

And this is where the body becomes important. Materialist concerns are supremely important for civil rights activists, specifically for Black women, and white women too.

McGinley: I find that something that's come up, especially in the last few years in the classroom for me, is the challenge of teaching texts like *The Second Sex* that are, in many ways, "out of date." From the point of view of twenty-first-century feminism, *The Second Sex* leaves a lot to be desired in terms of how it addresses (or fails to address) what the Combahee River Collective called the "interlocking systems of oppression" ([1977] 1982). How do you help students engage with texts from a historical point of view even if (especially if!) they don't measure up to contemporary expectations?

Colbert: It is important to clarifying the assumptions that underpin the conclusions we draw. Intersectionality is important. That's a given. But why is it important, how does it operate in the text, and what are the contexts that led to that conclusion. Also, looking through the moments where *The Second Sex* prevents intersectional coalition from happening are moments we would examine. Because it's not just that people are acting in bad faith. But what does it mean that people weigh competing investments and make choices that inform our ethics and politics.

One of the things that one of my colleagues, Robert Patterson, does in class to illustrate the competing desires that inform decision making in a concrete way is ask students if they think that all 18 to 22-year-olds should have a right to an education, like at Georgetown University. And, of course, they'll say, "Of course. We think education should be open." And so then he'll say, "Well, okay, that's good. Would you mind if you were sitting in here with 25 more students? And you had to share my attention in a group of 50 versus 25?" And then they start squirming a little bit, and so part of what he tries to get them to tease out is if you are invested in a more egalitarian access

to education, what are the material implications of that? And what sacrifices would you have to make?

And in our critique of *The Second Sex* as dated we may consider the constraints and contexts of its writing actually not being that different from our own, the historical context of writing a book like this in the 1950s, what does that mean? There are some specific ways that I've found for students to really engage in examining their own investments and the limits of their investments; that can help them to think through the context of production, like you were saying in these earlier pieces.

McGinley: Yeah, that's very helpful.

Musser: Sometimes I reverse the genealogy. I think it's easy if you start with these texts to establish what is problematic. Then produce a developmental narrative. But if you already acknowledge, "here is where some of these ideas end up, and now we're going to look at one of the places where they may have started." We already know the critiques, so reiterating existing critique is useless. Someone else has done that work. And then you can really tease out the types of intellectual connections that you want students to get out of examining *The Second Sex*. So, I think in that way it becomes more about intellectual pairing.

Colbert: I'm going to steal your method! One of the other things I like about that is, part of what we're all trying to do as scholars is think about how this line of thought has taken us down a path. But what have we overlooked, de-emphasized, overemphasized in canonical texts because we are all on this line of thought? If we go back, in this case to *The Second Sex*, we read it in a different context, with different interlocutors, does it produce a different kind of knowledge? Which doesn't necessarily undermine that other line of thought, but it's helpful in its own right.

Musser: Undergoing these practices of rereading.

Colbert: Exactly. And along the opportunity with the pairing model to do that. To say, "We've had this conversation, this is great. What other conversations can we have by rereading this important book?"

Musser: What's interesting for me about de Beauvoir is that on the one hand, she's incredibly sympathetic to all of these other struggles. But also is not willing to place the women's struggle alongside other midcentury movements for justice (i.e., civil rights and postcolonial). The way that she articulates what is specifically pernicious or difficult about being a woman presents womanhood as another category of otherness. So on the one hand, they're other others. And then there's the other that you think that you know, but can't quite . . .

McGinley: Yes. Our students are very sophisticated in being able to identify the ways in which de Beauvoir, in the introduction, sets up these comparisons with other struggles. The experience of the Jew, the experience of the Black American, the experience of the woman. But of course, she's always centering woman as white and middle-class. So, it is a parallel—but not intersectional—model that she's developing. And students nail that. They see that right away. How do you leverage that critique to take the conversation further?

Colbert: So in rereading the book for this conversation, there's this moment in introduction where she says, "Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing . . ." and she's talking about white women here: "Would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them" (Beauvoir [1949] 2011, 10).

We're all aware of the critiques of the lack of intersectionality in the book, and the understanding that *The Second Sex* presents parallels or analogies rather than an analysis of intersectionality. One of the reasons the quote resonates, specifically in this moment, is because in our current moment where we continue to bemoan why white women voted for Trump, for example, or maybe not bemoan for some people but just try to understand that, de Beauvoir gives us a really clear rationale for how power circulates via proximity. In the classroom, it is useful to consider moments in the text that demonstrate how power interrupts coalition formation, and how retaining power encourages certain modes of alliance where they might otherwise not exist. In de Beauvoir's critique of motherhood, for example, there is a place in the text where she's breaking from traditional beliefs in the 1950s for women in the Western world. Her critique makes a radical stand about women, their bodies, and labor. De Beauvoir clarifies that her choice not to have children would not be the norm for other women. And so that's a point of departure where she seeks an alliance that alienates her from the given power structures. But that would be somewhat impossible for other people to think in the mid-twentieth century.

Thinking historically can be helpful to draw students' attention to the radical nature of the text in its time period and the ways it continues to challenge social norms today. Asking students, what was going on at the time, what's going on now, and how that historical perspective informs our understanding of the text.

Musser: I haven't taught *The Second Sex* since the Trump moment. But I really love the way you laid that out because I think you're absolutely right that she gives a clear way to understand how people find themselves embedded in power relations. Which is really important in figuring out how to critique them. I would say that in thinking about which text that we pair them with, one of things I have often done is think about her in terms of Audre Lorde and think about

how one can have similar ideas. One may understand, in this example, de Beauvoir as an antecedent, but pairing them also leads to a different conversation.

McGinley: Looking at what the book can say to us today, as well as what it might have suggested in its own time—and the gap between the two—feels essential to me. I'm still tied to a notion of intellectual history and helping students to have a conversation about what is possible to think in any given historical moment, which might help move a classroom conversation beyond endless debates about whether or not this is a "good" text or inadequately intersectional, which it obviously isn't by today's standards.

One way that I have approached these issues pedagogically is to pose the question of utility: how, why, and when does an intellectual paradigm or intervention become a useful tool, regardless of its deficiencies? Existentialist thought in general becomes a useful tool for civil rights struggles in midcentury regardless of whether or not people reading agree with every stipulation that's laid out.

Colbert: The critical genealogy is important in terms of how it establishes conversations in another interdisciplinary field that we share, performance studies. *The Second Sex* sets up a lot of questions that emerge in performance studies, specifically in terms of the body and gender. Positioning the book in that historical genealogy of performance studies highlights the influence of de Beauvoir's work on Judith Butler and asks contemporary readers to rethink the history of performance studies when we account for other existentialist thinkers, including Hansberry and Fanon. All the questions that Butler works through in a deconstructionist mode are anticipated in *The Second Sex*.

Thinking in terms of genealogy also informs how de Beauvoir's text may animate conversations within Black literary history, and how we situate Audre Lorde as a part of third-wave feminist genealogies. But the piece that I've been increasingly curious about, no surprise, are these questions of how de Beauvoir's contemporaries of color grapple with some of the claims of existentialism.

I found a publication of this speech that Hansberry gave during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1963). And she's drawing really deeply in this speech from existentialism. And of course, for me, this is the perfect moment to think about an existentialist crisis, you are in the middle of not knowing what's going to happen? So, in this speech, she ties the idea of world destruction to a longer history of native rights and slavery.

The speech offers insight into how people felt in that moment, post–World War II, on the heels of the Holocaust and in the midst of a moment where the Cold War was really hot. Hansberry's speech offers insight into how to conceptualize a moment when many people thought the world could end. And how that fear and urgency drove pragmatic choices versus a context in which existentialism describes a philosophical position rather than a material one.

And so, in thinking some about teaching this Spring [2019], I wonder how students in our contemporary moment feel about environmental questions, specifically around the impact of the United States leaving the Paris Agreement? And how they may have, not as immediate a feeling of urgency about the fate of the planet, but certainly might be having feelings of dread and limited agency that parallel the feeling of crisis that emerged post–World War II.

In terms of pairing, I've been playing with genealogies, just to put a bow on the end of that thread. Both genealogies as well as mid-twentieth-century conversations and thinking about how *The Second Sex* is in conversation with other existentialist thought, including the work of Fanon, Sartre, and Hansberry.

McGinley: In terms of teaching, I find myself asking, What do our students need? What do they need these works to do for them now? I do agree that dread is a predominant affect for all of us right now, especially our students. What kind of tools might we offer, which they can accept or reject or manipulate or do whatever they want with? This feels pressing to me as a teacher.

I think many of our students know how the deck is stacked against them, right? I mean, they're good Foucauldians. They've been raised in this environment. And so what's compelling about existentialist thought now is that it poses some radical questions around freedom. I'm curious to know how students think about that at this moment. Do they find it useful? Do they find it hopelessly naïve?

Musser: Well, I mean, it's interesting. Because I think one of the things that I'm realizing through our conversation is what emerges when we center existential texts are certain categories that would not come out of a Foucauldian analysis. So, the question of responsibility, the question of what we owe to each other becomes more central.

McGinley: Ethics?

Musser: The questions, they're much more microscale. It is important to come back to this in a moment when everything at a macrolevel feels so overwhelming, to get back to thinking about the actual choices that one is making when one approaches other people. And these thinkers are actually creating lives and theory out of that. I think that makes sense actually as a good way to give students something that they would not necessarily focus on when thinking primarily about Foucault's sense of power dynamics.

Colbert: I love that thought because the other way that this text has re-emerged for me is the ongoing conversations in Black thought about nihilism, Afropessimism, the mattering of life. And one of the things that continues to be

a consternation for me is that many Afro-pessimists' evidence draws from individual human experiences. I think that Afro-pessimism would be better if it actually drew evidence in a scale similar to that of Foucault.

However, conversations about Afro-pessimism often operate at the scale that existentialists use. And for me, this thought is less compelling in those terms. And as a result, I do think that there is a way to consider how we might use existentialist thought to intervene in analysis about freedom and ethics. In *The Second Sex*, one could turn to the end where she's talking about freedom and possibility and ethics. The classroom provides an opportunity to consider if de Beauvoir's rendering of ethics offers a compelling response to students' feelings of angst because of economic precarity, racialized violence, or environmental precarity.

I've found Afro-pessimism resonates with students in really profound ways because it articulates the despair they feel on a day-to-day basis of feeling like the deck is stacked against them. So, I am curious about experimenting in bringing *The Second Sex* into conversations with African American studies because for activism midcentury, there was this buy-in to individual economy as a way to restructure institutions. And that individual action did matter.

And so it is that the party, to reference Josh [Chambers-Letson (2018)], has ended and the idea of individuals as change agents no longer compels students. Or, is there something else that is going on in terms of our national rhetoric that's at stake here? Or a combination of both?

Musser: I hate to condemn poststructuralism, but I think it's become hard. No one wants to talk about what the individual can do. Because then you're resurrecting all of these scholarly conversations that seem to be settled. But hesitance to revisit conversations about poststructuralism has meant disempowering students and lots of other people. I think we're in an interesting moment where television shows are focused on ethics like *The Good Place*. The show is not necessarily centered on existentialism, but the premise is how to be a good person. There is an emerging, national investment in trying to resurrect the subject without resurrecting the subject, per se. Or autonomy, but really trying to think through what is ethics? What framework can I use to approach these things?

McGinley: For a long time in academic settings, scholars questioned how to enjoy the good, meaningful, and ethical life. We are now revisiting these questions, in a different way, and they are being asked outside the academy. And here, looking to the midcentury freedom struggle can be a model, insofar as you have both people who are highly educated, and people with very little formal education coming together in an activist model that's grassroots and that's built from the ground up. How do these texts, like *The Second Sex*, like Camus's *The Rebel*, circulate in those activist scenes?

Furthermore, how are those ideas transmitted or shared in an "organic intellectual" way outside of formal institutions? One anecdote that I really love about Bob Moses is that he walked around rural Mississippi with a copy of *The Rebel* in his back pocket. But the circulation of these ideas posed dangers to everyone: if someone was arrested and he had a copy of Sartre or Camus or Fanon on him, Mississippian white supremacists could use this fact to bolster their claims about "outsiders" intruding on state politics.

Thinking concretely about how the physical object of the book circulated in these settings is something that I find really interesting to ponder with students in our current moment, when ideas and texts are so instantly available. The practice of sharing informed the practice of reading. For example, in freedom houses and literacy houses, there was one copy of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* that everybody shared. One could only read when the other person wasn't reading it. Thinking about how these objects circulate provides us with an opportunity to think about how ideas circulate too.

Colbert: Hansberry writes a review essay in 1957 (1995) and the first pages contain her lament that there haven't been any good reviews of *The Second Sex*. And she talks about how—this is to your point about circulation—no one is taking up the most important work about women in philosophy, how important this book is, and why isn't anyone taking it seriously. And this lack of attention is clearly sexist.

And so it goes to this idea about circulation and about feminists' rereading of de Beauvoir as a philosophical force in her own right, that in many ways might have been leading the conversation rather than falling behind Sartre. So how we position her is also important. And so, I'm curious about this question of circulation, too.

And going back to Amber's earlier point about translation, from Hansberry's small window in New York that the book does not seem to get just consideration in the '50s. Yet, we know by the '60s, it's being taken up more. But certainly, in its earliest years, it was not getting its due.

Musser: I also think that when de Beauvoir was also taken up more widely, it was less as philosopher and more as protofeminist. And I feel like that makes a big difference if you're already assuming the trajectory of her ideas and where they'll go, versus reading her, like the way it sounds Hansberry was, for an actual philosophical intervention. And I think part of that obviously has to do with the legacy of Sartre. It's just sort of interesting how the politics in a lot of ways overdetermines or occludes the philosophical.

Colbert: So, this question of how the historical contexts inform the reception of texts is perfect to tease out in class. One of the things that Paige and I have discussed is how some of the writings of civil rights activists address the central

challenges of the philosophical texts they were reading. And nevertheless, they were making primary choices about how they would integrate the thought into activist work even if those choices contradicted the theory.

Activists were able to clearly separate political theory from political action and in so doing conceptualizing themselves as political actors. In some of the writing, I don't get the sense that there is a lack of understanding about some of the shortcomings of the work that they're referencing, or the ways that it is implicated across different demographics. But rather them taking collective part, which is characteristic of Black studies.

Hortense Spillers gave this great talk last year where she was talking about how she had to pull from different theories to do her work, because it would have been impossible for her to do her work otherwise. Similarly, activists pull from these different theories, but I don't necessarily know if we only look at their political action that we get the full story. So that's why I love the work that you're doing, both of you are doing, some of the thinking about the writing of the activists during that time period alongside some of the moments, whether it's activist protests, or performance, or the outcomes.

Musser: That's what I think is fascinating about reading *The Second Sex* in its entirety. It's deeply interdisciplinary. De Beauvoir's really culling, she draws from the work of biologists, historians, and fiction writers to offer a comprehensive story about women as a Western idea. It's actually really amazing.

McGinley: It is amazing. How then, to communicate or expose students to this radical interdisciplinarity that nobody else is really doing around this question of women without assigning an 800-page book? We talked about some of the ways in which the introduction of the book and the last chapter of the book become excellent launching points for classroom discussion. But to assign only those parts of the book feels like it does violence to this radical, interdisciplinary project. It's a practical question. How do we make the radicalness of her interdisciplinarity apparent to students, especially in an academic and intellectual climate where this kind of interdisciplinary work is now taken for granted?

Colbert: I don't think it's feasible to assign the whole book. Particularly in an undergraduate classroom in the twenty-first century. One of the things that the book invites us to do in our current moment is assign, in addition to the beginning and the end, a chapter or two from the middle that might align with the subject matter of the class, particularly given that one of our takeaways is the potential usefulness of *The Second Sex* in black, performance, and women's and gender studies courses. The chapter on psychoanalysis offers historical context for assumptions about how psychoanalysis underpins women's and gender studies and feminist thought.

Or assigning the chapter on historical materialism or the married woman chapter because they both offer an entry point to examine how do we talk about being a married woman in the 1950s? How do we have that conversation? How does the social constraint of marriage in the mid-twentieth century resonate in the twenty-first century or fail to do so?

Musser: I really like when she lays out girlhood to teenage years . . . I like that sequence. And partially because I think one of the things that it does, especially now when "woman" is such a complicated term. "Woman" has always been an unstable category, but I think now students are especially allergic to it, and imagine that it has always been essential. But I think looking at the way de Beauvoir actually positions becoming, and what becoming means—even though she is not specifically talking about trans-ness, there are ways one could lead a productive discussion about what this philosophical concept means. And just the way she talks about it, that is not about biology. To students who want to disrupt categories, focusing on Beauvior's idea of becoming could make the text also feel more alive and relevant by showing how actually unstable these things were for her.

McGinley: Absolutely. I really would love to talk about how this text functions in a performance theory course, or introduction to performance studies or in a performance studies graduate seminar. I've not assigned it in those courses, but preparing for this conversation has encouraged me to do so. I felt this urge so strongly when reading chapter 3 of the "Myth" section, which concludes volume 1. De Beauvoir asks, "The myth of woman plays a significant role in literature, but what is its importance in everyday life?"

Of course, these questions of the performance of the everyday and the customs of the everyday are completely animating the field that's coalescing as performance studies at exactly this historical moment. To think about de Beauvoir as part of an intellectual current in midcentury that gravitates toward the everyday disrupts the singularity of Erving Goffman. This disruption can offer new genealogies of the field—genealogies that include existentialism and protofeminist thought. Also, in this chapter, de Beauvoir returns again and again to the theater, which is a recurring scene throughout this book, as well as a key site of inquiry for Camus and Sartre. The interest in performing—of all kinds—is very pronounced.

For example, on the performance of womanhood, de Beauvoir says, "Furthermore, like all oppressed people, woman deliberately dissimulates her objective image. Slave, servant, indigent, all those who depend upon a master's whim have learned to present him with an immutable smile or an enigmatic impassivity. They carefully hide their real feelings and behavior. Woman is also taught from adolescence to lie to men, to outsmart, to side-step them. She approaches them with artificial expressions. She is prudent, hypocritical, playacting" (Beauvoir, 271).

In terms of the intellectual history of performance studies, she's developing these ideas of performance and the everyday, contributions that I certainly have not acknowledged in my histories of the field as I teach it. But maybe we should all start considering that.

Colbert: No, that is really great. And the next time I teach Intro to Performance Studies, I'm going to teach the "Myths" chapter next to Goffman (1959). What performance studies provides for us is this way of thinking about becoming. But one of the things that de Beauvoir opens up as well is the claim that structures were created, and therefore they can be recreated. And so how to understand the historical pull and force of power dynamic. Every time I reread Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, I note that she cautions against understanding her theory of gender as operating outside of power relations or historical contexts.

But when people read her, at least in the late twentieth century, we didn't attend enough to the context in which she was framing her argument. There are all these cautions that Butler gives us that in the taking up of her work, have not been attended to as carefully as possible. And as such, I think that in retreading this ground, there's an opportunity for us to have a more nuanced understanding of the implication of poststructuralism for questions around ethics that might have been there waiting for us all the time, but we weren't focused on because of the political moment or because of how we were trying to rethink gender. Or because of how we were trying to rethink identity categories.

De Beauvoir lays the foundation for both, she . . . although there are certainly critiques that can be made of *The Second Sex*, and certainly I don't want to underplay that aspect, there's something really powerful about her opening up the idea of self-presentation as a manipulation of power or what Darlene Clark Hine calls dissemblance (1989), because it shifts the power dynamic that's presumed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example.

Musser: That's my favorite part about de Beauvoir. She gives such a rich account of complicity. Which of course it makes sense that France in the 1950s is going to be really invested in that question of what happens when the dominant power is complicit in ethical failure.

McGinley: Yes—students need to recognize that from the position from which she's writing, the question of complicity has incredibly high stakes. And we need to think about what that means for women in this moment of a retrenchment of gender roles. Which is something Hansberry is really responding to. And I think it's part of the reason why both de Beauvoir and Hansberry are so exciting to read right now. Do you think so?

Colbert: Yeah. I think so. One of the things that I love is that Hansberry is very clear that she doesn't fit into any of the existing genealogies. She's always trying

to pull from different sources to situate herself. Hansberry sees de Beauvoir as one of those sources in terms of her identifying as a woman, but also a queer woman, although Hansberry doesn't use the term "queer." She identifies as a lesbian in a heterosexual marriage, which is what I guess maybe de Beauvoir might have identified as—so they have that shared sense of being in the world. In Hansberry's review essay ([1957], 1995), she talks about women's dress and what is considered acceptable and self-fashioning in the 1950s. In so doing, she returns to de Beauvoir's assertion that everyday life becomes an opportunity to exercise power, will, and even ethics. These ideas about the everyday explain why Hansberry invests in grassroots politics and activism by going to marches, giving speeches, as much as she does in aesthetics.

Musser: I'm so curious about the pedagogical implications of reading *The Second Sex* in relation to some of de Beauvoir's novels or short stories, or other writing. Many of her texts make similar arguments, but in the novel form, the aesthetics are amazing. It's just this other mode of thinking about what work the book is doing and what other ways that de Beauvoir is also doing that work in a different genre.

McGinley: I love that you brought that question of her creativity and aesthetic practice, both in *The Second Sex* and elsewhere, to the table for us—in part because that last chapter, "The Independent Woman," really explores the question of the woman artist and what's at stake for the woman artist. This chapter, then, sits alongside other works, like Virginia Woolf's, that explore what's at stake for the woman creator, as well as for how the expressive arts have functioned as a kind of holding ground for women's dissent. De Beauvoir suggests that a woman needs to express herself because she has no power. Self-expression, then, emerges as a double-edged sword in *The Second Sex*, and is therefore so interesting to think about alongside more explicit works of de Beauvoir's creative self-expression in fiction, drama, et cetera.

Colbert: Agreed, and one of the things that I think is useful in that book is that she takes up the question of collectivity in really explicit ways. I think often existentialism is understood as being about self-willed individuality and sometimes, as emerged in the absurdist tradition, it can be about the unpredictability of the world and trying to make sense of the world and form an outcome that is ultimately going to be unsatisfying.

But in her earlier book on ethics, one of the things that she articulates is that meaning can only emerge out of mutuality. And so, the idea of being in communion with others, and I think this is where the erotic can come up in really interesting ways too, is essential to any type of becoming or any type of self-articulation or self-determination.

And so, it's a useful framework in trying to bridge the ground between these ideas of philosophy and pragmatic political choices. Because thinking about political possibility would require some question of coalition even if fundamentally you don't think that that is how things operate in a philosophical realm.

McGinley: De Beauvoir is taking us in that direction more explicitly than Sartre does. Often, when one talks about "existentialism," it is often popularly understood as the "self-willed individuality" that you are talking about, Soyica—a Sartrean model of existentialism.

But by constituting women as a class, de Beauvoir takes us to this place of collectivity—even as she's philosophically engaged with the questions of existence, freedom, and possibility for transcendence, which has been denied to women.

Colbert: Well, one of the things that it makes me think about is all the ways that our actions are constantly curtailed and/or there are structures in place that anticipate them and encourage predictable outcomes. But there are also moments of insurgency. Hansberry talks about insurgency. Hansberry examines a moment in *The Second Sex* where de Beauvoir talks about presenting one's self in a way that was not arbitrary, because self-presentation, if it's not strategic, can cause a lot of policing for women. And so they have to think about when they're breaking with social norms and the long-term implications of acts of defiance.

One of the things that Hansberry says is that she sees moments of insurgency as part of a long history. And so even if they don't produce a favorable outcome in that moment, they produce effects that ripple down the road. And so, she uses the example of men wearing Bermuda shorts and how they're harassed in New York when they first start wearing them and then they become all the fashion. And now men aren't walking around with hot legs. And it's a normal thing.

But one of the things that it drew my attention to is this scope of historical frames that differs for Hansberry and de Beauvoir. Hansberry's always thinking about the movement beginning with slave interactions. When she talks about The Movement, she's talking about centuries of history. Whereas de Beauvoir seems to be thinking about a shorter frame of history within the modern era, World War II and its aftermath perhaps.

And so going back to spontaneity might open up some questions about how we see the effects of certain modes of action. A breaking out of norms. But yes, the Bermuda shorts example was . . .

McGinley: I love that it's connected to fashion. De Beauvoir talks a lot about fashion choices too. Wouldn't it be exciting to pair pieces of *The Second Sex* with Tanisha Ford's *Liberated Threads* (2015)? That pairing offers a chance to consider different opportunities for self-presentation and being in the world,

and the way those opportunities are sometimes distinct for white women and Black women in the public sphere. These questions of fashion and beauty and image circulation can also intersect with the question of why an interracial women's movement didn't develop in the way that some members of SNCC imagined that it might.

Colbert: So, do you think that in contexts where women are empowered and/or have power, it's easier for interracial coalitions to emerge? I was just thinking about this question because that's one of the things that I lament about SNCC and find it useful to read about the history of SNCC. Because even though ultimately it didn't result in a woman's interracial coalition, the concept of SNCC was always that the organization would operate for a finite period and that it was, therefore, an experiment. That they were trying to figure out how to do this thing that no one else was doing, that it was young people. All of these ways that they were setting up conceptually, with the help of Ella Baker, provided possibility even though the result wasn't what we might have wanted. I do think that there's something there . . . and so it's great to think about some of those organizational questions now. Because in figuring out what worked and what didn't work, we can also figure out what would be the conditions under which we might see a different coalition in our current context. Or if those conditions are possible within the United States.

Musser: One of the things that de Beauvoir makes me think, is the inescapability of women being an object, so that in a lot of ways it's part of the problem of patriarchy. It's why there's disempowerment. Empowerment does not necessarily solve that problem.

As long as patriarchy is at play, then the problem is the desire to be an object and occupying the space of object. I think that's always going to be a fricative point for interracial coalition building. What could the possible solution be, right?

McGinley: I think what de Beauvoir would raise is the reality of material independence generating the conditions of possibility for existential freedom. De Beauvoir's not talking about interracial coalition, but I think she would suggest that, yes, if one achieves material independence, what you call material positions of power, then that's possible.

But of course, to achieve material independence and positions of power, one is required to become embedded in certain institutional forms. And then we come back to that question of complicity again. So, in what ways do the conditions of our material independence ultimately make possible or hamper these kinds of coalitions in institutions that were historically set up to impede those kinds of collaborations?

Musser: Yeah, you know. It's not like existentialism leads to a happy place.

Colbert: But it does, in different iterations, lead to a different understanding of how one can maneuver in the world. Which I think is part of why it's exciting to read the book anew in this moment. Both because it gives us a different insight into some genealogies that we might not have explored that she offers us insight to, but then also how the years following WWII, for ways that are a bit sad, might resonate more profoundly with our current moment than we would want. But can be instructive for us at the same time.

Musser: And I think that that might also be another kind of present usefulness. The book asks what does it mean to really take responsibility as an actual ethical, philosophical endeavor? This is a deeper act than naming somebody else's issue. I would like students to think about that.

Colbert: What does it actually mean to take responsibility? A student asked me at a symposium, what is the most historic clap back that I know of? And I was like, "I guess I would say Audre Lorde's 'Uses of Anger'" (1981).

Musser: That's a good answer. Really good answer.

Colbert: In this context, what is helpful about that is that Lorde doesn't just name the injury. She then gives us a set of ways of making use of the, in her case, anger that emerges from the injury. Once we've named this moment of injury, or this moment where ethics are falling apart, then what do we do? *The Second Sex*, similar to the "Uses of Anger," offers us that next move.

McGinley: I like our experiment of doing this together. I mean, there's a funny irony in this great 800-page solitary mind at work. But the idea of a collective conversation around the book mirrors where I want to go in the classroom.

Musser: I mean, it's interesting that you call it solitary. Because it's a part of what's also happening in the text itself. In de Beauvoir's culling, bringing together of all of these sources, she does assemble a lot of women, and deliberately everyday women's experiences. Which is just interesting how that is actually an important part of her text. And thinking about that in relation to say, Fanon, who draws from a singular incident, and will extrapolate outward. Whereas for de Beauvoir, there's so much more evidencing of what she claims based on the experiences of a wide array of women.

McGinley: There is a crowd here.

Musser: It was a crowd.

Colbert: And the necessity of having, as a woman, to produce an evidentiary crowd to make her point. And thinking about the protocols of knowledge production is also something that is worth noting.[2]

Soyica Colbert *is the vice dean of faculty and Idol Family Professor of African American studies and performing arts at Georgetown University. She is the author of* The African American Theatrical Body *and* Black Movements. *Colbert edited the Black Performance special issue of* African American Review *and co-edited* The Psychic Hold of Slavery. *She is currently working on two forthcoming book projects,* Becoming Free: An Intellectual Biography of Lorraine Hansberry, *and a co-edited collection*, Race and Performance After Repetition.

Amber Jamilla Musser *is an associate professor of American Studies at George Washington University. Her research focuses on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and aesthetics. She is the author of* Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and M*asochism (New York University Press, 2014) and* Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance *(New York University Press, 2018).*

Paige McGinley *is an associate professor of Performing Arts and American Culture Studies studies at Washington University in St. Louis where she teaches courses in twentieth-century theater and performance history and directs the graduate program in theater and performance studies. She is the author of* Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism *(Duke University Press, 2014), and is currently at work on* Rehearsing Civil Rights, *the first in-depth examination of rehearsals for direct action and self-determination in the midcentury black freedom struggle.*

Notes

1. Although our essay focuses on teaching *The Second Sex* in interdisciplinary contexts and in the wake of poststructuralism, foundational critical examinations of *The Second Sex* continue to inform our thinking about Simone de Beauvoir's text, including: Pilardi 1995, 29–44; Bauer 2001; Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; LeDoeuff 2007; Imbert 2006, 3–21; Simons 1999; Lundgren-Gothlin 1999, 83–95; and Moi 2005.
2. We offer here a number of suggestions for further reading, particularly for those planning to teach *The Second Sex*: Bakewell 2016; Butler 1990; 1988, 519–31; 1986, 35–49; Collins 2017, 325–38; Cotkin 2003; Hansberry 1995, 128–42; Khanna 2003; Moi 2005; Marson 2017; Salamon 2010; and Simons 1999.

References

Bakewell, Sarah. 2016. *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails.* New York: Other Press.
Bauer, Nancy. 2001. *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1986. “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.” *Yale French Studies* 72: 35–49.

———. 1988. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December): 519–31.

———. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Chambers-Letson, Joshua. 2018. *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*. New York: New York University Press.

Cotkin, George. 2003. *Existential America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

de Beauvoir, Simone. (1949) 2011. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Cheavlier. New York: Vintage Books.

Camus, Albert. (1956) 1992. *The Rebel: An Essay of Man in Revolt*. Translated by Anthony Bower. New York: Vintage Books.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2017. “Simone de Beauvoir, Women’s Oppression, and Existential Freedom.” In *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer, 325–38. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Combahee River Collective. (1977) 1982. “A Black Feminist Statement.” In *But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, 13–22. New York: The Feminist Press.

Fanon, Frantz. (1963) 2005. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

———. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.

Ford, Tanisha. 2015. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*. Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hansberry, Lorraine. (1957) 1995. “Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex: An American Commentary*.” In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 128–42. New York: The New Press.

———. 1963. “A Challenge to Artists” *Freedomways* 3, no. 1 (Winter): 31–35.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.

Hine, Darlene Clark. 1989. “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance.” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer): 912–20.

Imbert, Claude. 2006. “Simone de Beauvoir: A Woman Philosopher in the Context of Her Generation.” Translated by Emily Grosholz. In *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Emily Grosholz, 3–21. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Khanna, Ranjana. 2003. *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

LeDoeuff, Michele. 2007. *Hipparchia’s Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc*., Translated by Trista Selous. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Lorde, Audre. (1981) 1997. "The Uses of Anger." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer): 278–85.

Lundgren-Gothlin, Eva. 1999. "Simone de Beauvoir's Notions of Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity and their Relationship to Jean Paul Sartre's Notions of Appeal and Desire." *Hypatia* 14, no. 4 (Fall): 83–95.

———. 1996. *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Marson, Lori Jo. 2017. *Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in Encounter.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Moi, Toril. 1999. *What Is a Woman?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2005. *Sex, Gender and the Body: The Student Edition of* What is A Woman? New York: Oxford University Press.

Pilardi, Jo-Ann. 1995. "Feminists Read *The Second Sex*." In *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Margaret A. Simons, 29–44. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Salamon, Gayle. 2010. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Simons, Margaret A. 1999. *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.