Derrida and the Question of “Woman”

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This essay resumes after an anacoluthic interruption.¹ It returns to the question of “woman” which I raised but left unanswered in a paper presented at the Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy conference.² When I presented that paper, my discussant asked, with acute perceptiveness, why I had concentrated in the end on grammar—the figure of the anacoluthon—and left undeveloped the question of “woman.” My answer was instinctive and immediate: “Because grammar’s easier.” I still hold by this assertion. The question of “woman,” both in Jacques Derrida’s writing and beyond, is difficult and complex. It consists, as I understand it, of two interrelated parts: the first is the question of the relation between “woman” and women, that is, between a philosophical or ontological concept of

¹. [Anacoluthic, adj., a syntactical inconsistency or incoherence within a sentence, esp. a shift in an unfinished sentence from one syntactic construction to another (e.g. “you really ought—well, do it your own way”); from, n., anacoluthon. —Ed.]

“woman” and the political and everyday realities of embodied female subjects; the second is the question of the relation between women and men, the question of sexual difference. My issue in the earlier paper was with the first aspect of this question—Derrida’s use of “woman” in his writings. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak elaborates in her review essay of Derrida’s *La carte postale* (1981)—“Love Me, Love my Ombre, Elle” (1984)—Derrida uses “woman” as the figure of deconstructive undecidability, part of a process of resexualizing phallogocentric discourse that is integral to his deconstruction of Western metaphysics.³ This raises the question, however, of the relation between “woman” and women, and how, if at all, Derrida’s philosophical use of “woman” is any different from the fetishization of “woman” in Western metaphysics. The answer to this question, I now understand, lies in what Derrida repeatedly talks of as the two phases of deconstruction. As I will show in this essay, Derrida’s use of “woman” *does* repeat, in that it merely reverses, the philosophical gesture of phallogocentrism, but this is only a necessary stage in the first phase of deconstruction, which simply reverses the oppositional hierarchies of metaphysics: i.e., previously, the masculine has been privileged philosophically, so now Derrida will philosophically privilege the feminine. Derrida uses “woman” at this stage precisely because of, and for, her oppositional power. However, he does not use “woman” in the second phase of the deconstruction of sexual difference in order to rethink (sexual) relationality otherwise than as opposition, for if that relation is no longer one of opposition, “woman” no longer retains any oppositional power. Consequently, Derrida does not use the word “woman” in a context in which he is also, at the same time, dealing with the lived experience of actual women, so to speak. Rather, in this context, he introduces the thought of the “gift,” and the time and movement of “dance,” in order to refigure and displace (sexual) relationality in a way that not only deconstructs the oppositional relationship between man and woman, but also the oppositional relationship between philosophy and politics, i.e., the abstract and the concrete, which has been the grounds for the initial challenge to his use of the figure “woman.”

Derrida’s treatment of the question of “woman” occurs in three types of texts: the first are those texts in which he analyzes the question of “woman” in the writing of previous philosophers, most notably, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Lévinas; the second are those texts in which he himself uses the figure of the “woman”—or related concepts, such as the hymen and double invagination—in order to theorize the (feminine) operation of deconstructive undecidability; the third are those texts which themselves occupy an undecidable generic position—“somewhere between speech and writing,” as the original preface to “Women in the Beehive” (1984) has it—in which Derrida is asked directly about the question of “woman.” In the written interview with Christie V. McDonald, “Choreographies” (1982), Derrida’s response to McDonald’s first question is a reflection upon the very genre of their exchange:

Will I be able to write improvising my responses as I go along? It would be more worthwhile, wouldn’t it? Too premeditated an interview would be without interest here. I do not see the particular finality of such an endeavor, its proper end. It would be interminable, or, rather, with respect to these questions—which are much too difficult—I would never have even dared to begin.  

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5. The first category of texts includes: *Spurs* (1978) on Nietzsche; “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” (1984) on Lévinas; and “Geschlecht” (1983) and “Geschlecht II” (1984) on Heidegger. The second includes, perhaps most obviously, texts where Derrida employs terminology associated with the female body, such as hymen in “The Double Session,” *Dissemination* (1981), and double invagination in “Living on: Borderlines” (1979), but this category also contains the majority of Derrida’s texts in which one finds, more or less explicit or implicit, the feminine operation of deconstructive undecidability. One such example is the deconstruction of the Western metaphysical concept of “friendship” via an analysis of its exclusion of the woman to be found in *Politics of Friendship* (1997), but there are many more, some of which are considered later in this essay.  
The genre of the interview allows Derrida to be (im)provisional; it functions as a unique dance; “it should happen only once, neither grow heavy nor ever plunge too deep, above all, it should not lag or trail behind its time” (C 66); its peculiar time and place, as well as its very etymology, allow us, along with Derrida, to “take a glimpse” (C 66) into the question of “woman.” Reading “Choreographies” and “Women in the Beehive”—the transcription of a seminar—in dialogue with each other prolongs the fleeting moment of that “glimpse” and clarifies how this question is negotiated in Derrida’s writing and thought and how it leads to a queer reinterpretation of (sexual) relationality.

I

In “Choreographies,” Derrida summarizes the critiques of Lévinas and Heidegger in relation to the question of “woman” that he works through in detail in “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” (1984), and “Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference” (1983), respectively. In the first text, he exposes the way in which Lévinas’ argument that sexual difference is secondary to “humanity in general” (C 73) risks restoring “the classical interpretation” which “gives a masculine sexual marking to what is presented either as neutral originariness or, at least, as prior and superior to all sexual markings” (C 73). In the second text, he indicates that Heidegger’s neutralization—or, as Derrida suggests in “Women in the Beehive,” “neuterization” (WB 194)—of Dasein also risks participating in exactly the same classical interpretation in that, “to the extent which universality implies neutralization, you can be sure that it’s only a hidden way of confirming the man in his power” (WB 194). Derrida explains that his use of terms such

7. As McDonald glosses for us, “In French, to take a glimpse is to look into the space between things, entrevoir, that is, inter-view” (C 66).
as *hymen* and *invagination* which, as McDonald carefully puts it, “in their most widely recognized sense pertain to the woman’s body” (C 71), is part of a process of “resexualizing a philosophical or theoretical discourse, which has been too ‘neutralizing’ in this respect” (C 75). This resexualization of philosophical discourse via specific terms such as hymen and invagination is part of a wider operation in relation to “woman” performed across Derrida’s writings. In “Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle,” Spivak traces this operation in order to argue that “‘woman’ on the scene of Derrida’s writing, from being a figure of ‘special interest,’ occupies the place of a general critique of the history of Western thought” (LM 22). She substantiates this claim with reference to a range of Derrida’s texts in which “woman” represents the possibility of a critique of Western phallogocentrism by enabling the very possibility of deconstruction. In *Spurs*, for instance, Spivak notes that “woman is taken, via Nietzsche, as a name for citationality” (LM 22) and thus becomes (as also happens in “The Double Session”) the figure via which Derrida performs a critique of the proper.10 Moreover, in “To Speculate: On Freud” (1980), when “Derrida uses the concept of semi-mourning (*demi-deuil*) to describe the conduct of the text, once again the abyss-structure that can be named ‘woman’ is invoked” (Spivak, LM 23).

Under the heading of “Sexual Difference,” Geoffrey Bennington provides further examples of this movement in his “Derridabase” (1993), pointing to the intervention of a “female” voice “in dialogues or polylogues such as *R restitution*, . . . *Pas*, . . . the ‘reading’ of *Droit de regards*, or *Feu la cendre*.”11 He also notes that in *Glas* (1974), “the ‘déjà’ (but also the signature and the counter-signature) is associated with the mother” and that, in “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,” it is in “a dialogue also involving a female voice” (DB 204) that Lévinas is suspected

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of the phallogocentric consequences of neutralization. It is this movement to which I am responding in “Life After Derrida” (2006), when I comment on “the femininity of Derrida’s idea of fidelity—a following that is also a not following—which is key to his concept of inheritance” in “Le Parjure, Perhaps: Storytelling and Lying,” and to which Nicholas Royle was responding in a discussion recorded in life.after.theory (2003), when he notes that the figure of "woman" functions in Derrida’s work as “a kind of anacoluthon.”

I have included all this to demonstrate the full extent to which what Spivak calls “the ‘feminine operation’ of undecidability” (LM 23) is at work in Derrida’s corpus. From the weight of textual evidence, it seems unquestionable that the term “woman” takes (its) place in Derrida’s work alongside other terms, such as “différance,” “parergon,” “writing,” “the supplement,” but Spivak goes even further, arguing that “it is by no means one among many Derridean themes” (LM 23). Rather, for Spivak, “it is perhaps the most tenacious name for the limit that situates and undermines the vanguard of every theory seeking to be adequate to its theme” (LM 23). For Spivak, “woman” is a “privileged figure” (LM 24) in Derrida’s writing, a necessary consequence, it seems, of his critique of Western thought as phallogocentrism.

Spivak’s text, however, is marked by an ambivalence that betrays itself at certain moments in her discussion. This ambivalence circulates around the question of the relation between “woman” and women, between, one might also say, philosophy and social reality. Spivak first opens this question in her discussion of La carte postale, when she asks: “why should we read an elaboration of such a problematics given the urgency of ‘the rest of the world’?” (LM 20), a question which, as she indicates, she returns to in her conclusion. Spivak argues that La carte postale can be considered a feminist text, given its sympathetic treatment of love letters, its emphasis on the figure of Freud’s daughter/mother, Sophie, and its critique of Lacan’s phallogocentrism. Repeating the resexualizing gesture of

Derrida’s own discourse, Spivak in fact posits that “the structural project of this book can itself be called invagination” (LM 21). She is all too aware, though, of the critiques of such a description:

The pragmatic style of North American and English criticism (feminist or masculinist) might find such appellations “a kind of word play . . . detached from what we have to struggle with” [Colette Gaudin et al., “Introduction,” *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 10]. This presupposes a three-part description of reality: practical complexity (what we have to struggle with)—responsible theory (in touch with that complexity)—irresponsibly word-playing theory. In this view, good theory is seen to abstract the principles of the concrete struggle, leading to efficient understanding. (Spivak, LM 21)

Spivak, however, understands Derrida’s project “as an undoing of such oppositions” (LM 21). What Derrida’s work reveals is the extent to which “even the most abstract-seeming judgements are arrived at by way of, even constituted by, unwittingly value-laden story lines” (LM 21). Derrida’s writing exposes the habitual and thus unquestioned narratives—“so practiced that they seem self-evident logical propositions” (LM 21)—that determine the very structures that create “social reality” and that determine the actions of “subjects” functioning in that reality. Accordingly, by drawing attention to the values of such narratives, and by creating counter-narratives—such as the resexualization of philosophical discourse under the name of “woman”—Derrida’s writing performs a twofold function: it undoes the division between the philosophical and the social, between, as Spivak calls them, the concrete and the abstract; and it provides alternative grounds for judgements and decisions, alternate philosophical narratives that can determine social structures and actions otherwise.

This, at least, is Spivak’s explanation of the relationship between the thought of “woman” and the concrete reality of women in Derrida’s writing. But the scene of writing of Spivak’s own text betrays an uncertainty on this point. Following her summary of Derrida’s treatment of “woman” and the hymen in “The Double Session,” there occurs a passage in which the grammar is revealing:
Of course, these deductions are based on a curious view of woman and an implicit identification of (male) pleasure (“sem(e)-ination”) as the signified, however besieged. To see indeterminacy in the figure of women might be the effect of an ethico-legal narrative whose oppressive hegemony still remains largely unquestioned. Yet it must be recognized that the deduction allows Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche and Mallarmé to make woman the mark of the critique of the proper. (Spivak, LM 22)

The power and import of the opening “of course” is unclear—why should this be so evidently the case? In the second sentence, the use of the infinitive form of the verb “to see” removes the necessity for a grammatical subject; it thus remains undecidable who is performing this act of seeing, which leaves unquestioned, indeed perpetuates, the oppressive hegemony of a certain ethico-legal narrative. The careful grammatical undecidability of Spivak’s own text alleviates the necessity for her to formulate a direct critique of Derrida—since the subject here could equally be Mallarmé—and his figuration of the woman as “indeterminacy,” a critique that could raise the question how, if at all, this movement in Derrida’s text is any different from the essentializing gesture of Western metaphysics, an essentialism that remains, paradoxically, both necessary to the action of identity politics and insufficient in representing the diverse realities of the subjects on whose behalf such action is taken. That this question might indeed be troubling Spivak’s text is revealed in the anomalous use of the plural “women” in the second sentence of this passage, rather than the singular “woman” which is used consistently in the rest of the text. “The word ‘woman’” (Spivak, LM 23) may well take its place in Derrida’s writing—in a chain of terms such as différance and writing—but what is the relation between “the word ‘woman’” and women? Even as Spivak recognizes the feminine operation of undecidability in Derrida’s text, she cannot but ask, if only in a footnote, “does such a ‘generalization’ of woman negate ‘woman in the narrow sense’?” (LM 24, n. 9).

14. There are several further moments where Spivak’s ambivalence regarding her account of Derrida and the question of woman betrays itself. In her discussion of “Plato’s Pharmacy,” for instance, she notes that “the
At the beginning of “Love Me,” Spivak promises that her conclusion will “offer some criticism of such a use of the figure of woman” (LM 25). It is to this section that we will now turn:

What we have in La carte postale, then, is a spectacle of how a male philosopher trained in the School of Plato and Hegel and Nietzsche and Heidegger acknowledges the importance of sexual difference and tries to articulate the name of woman. He does not deny that he is tied to the tradition. He cannot show his readers womankind made heterogeneous by many worlds and many classes. Although such a philosopher can wish to deconstruct the methodological opposition between empiricism and structuralism [Grammatology 162], in fact it is a binary opposition he often seems to honor, with the privilege going to structure . . . . Thus it would be unwise to look in Derrida for a deconstruction of the history of the concept “it-woman”—as opposed to “we-men”—where the line between empiricism and structuralism would shift and waver. Yet we might want to attend to him because the [bastard] mother’s son is directly related to another name for undecidability: writing . . . the phallocentric philosopher systematically resists the possibility that all discourse is dependent upon the producer’s absence, and thus irreducibly illegitimate—a mother’s son” (LM 25)—she adds, but only as a undeveloped parenthetical aside: “(The daughter is not in sight.)” (LM 25).

In a more explicit moment of critique, she refuses Derrida the benefit of the doubt in relation to his masculinist treatment of orgasm—“although I know that Derrida might be parodying that Platonism which, identifying orgasm with semination—as in the male—declares in the Laws that the law of nature is coupling destined for reproduction, I cannot not think that, like Normal Mailer and his thousand ancestors, he might also be repeating it; and repeating his own critique of Freud, I would withhold the benefit of the doubt: ‘description takes sides when it induces a practice, an ethics, and an institution, therefore a politics assuring the tradition of its truth’” (LM 27)—and draws attention to a lack of “a deconstititution of the sedimentation” (LM 28) of metaphors derived from such terms as “generation” and “reproduction.” At the same time, she is quick to insist that commentary such as this does not constitute a critique of Derrida: “I am not necessarily faulting Derrida here. I am restraining the enthusiasm of readers like the two (woman) intellectuals in France who maintained in pedagogic discussion that Derrida ‘wrote like a woman’” (LM 28).
tradition that he is thus “feminizing,” or opening up, has been the most prestigious articulation of the privileging of man. He thus shows us the dangers of borrowing the methodological imperatives of that tradition uncritically. (LM 35)

Thus, for Spivak, Derrida’s position in relation to the question of “woman” is delimited by his gender, his training, and the location of his thought firmly within the Western philosophical tradition he, nevertheless, deconstructs. Accordingly, given such (dis)enabling limitations, Derrida should be valued for what he does manage to achieve—a feminizing of phallogocentric discourse—and acquitted for what he cannot: “he cannot show his readers womankind made heterogeneous by many worlds and many classes.” Despite his wish to deconstruct the opposition between empiricism and structuralism, Derrida is still (poor helpless male philosopher) bound by it, and thus it would be unwise (unfair, unkind) of us, his readers, to expect from him any sustained critique of the philosophical reduction of women to the word “woman” in which his refigurations partake. In attempting to excuse Derrida here Spivak in fact leaves him exposed and vulnerable, dependent upon the wise generosity of his readers to forgive him his philosophical-political shortcomings. In doing so, she undermines the very case she put forward for him in defense of critics like [Colette] Gaudin, and reinstates the division between the concrete and the abstract, the socio-political and the philosophical, “woman” and women, which she is at such pains (at the start of her essay) to demonstrate that Derrida’s writing deconstructs.

Is it Derrida or Spivak who is at fault here? Or, to phrase it differently, which Spivak is right? The one who ends the passage above, or the one who ends “Love Me” with the observation that “we academic women of the First World” can learn from Derrida “that sexuality, ‘the woman’s role,’ is not in simple opposition to ‘real politics,’ and that a vision that dismisses a man’s conduct in love as immaterial to his ‘practical’ stands would not be able to see the generally warping legacy of masculinism implicit in the . . . polarizations” we find in texts such as Marx’s love letters (LM 35). This, she says, “is why Derrida reads great men’s love letters and writes about them as he writes about their ‘serious’ work” (LM 35). In the following section, I will address the question of methodology
alluded to by Spivak in the passage above in order to draw attention to the two phase movement in Derrida’s thought, which he refers to in both “Choreographies” and “Women in the Beehive.” Here, “woman” does not bear—and is not required to bear—any actual relation to women. Rather, in this respect, Derrida introduces two new concepts—the “gift” and the “dance”—which together function as deconstructive counter-narratives rewriting both the abstract and the concrete realities of sexual difference and heteronormativity.

II

In addition to the question of the relation between “woman” and women, there is a second question that arises in relation to Derrida’s use of the figure of “woman,” namely, how, if at all, is Derrida’s repeated use of “woman” as a figure of undecidability any different, in its methodology, to the various other figurations of “woman” that have occurred throughout the history of Western metaphysics, and, one might add, Western literature? At the end of “Women in the Beehive,” one of the seminar participants addresses this question directly to Derrida:

This question is related to something you said earlier. You said that in Western culture, the word “man” means

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15. This also accounts for Derrida’s insistence on a division between the concepts of “woman,” the hymen, and invagination, and their physical counterparts in embodied female subjects. He has insisted on this division in Spurs, for instance, where he performs the feminine operation of deconstructive undecidability in relation to truth—“that which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth—féminine”—but warns that “this should not, however, be hastily mistaken for a woman’s femininity, for female sexuality, or for any other of those essentializing fetishes which might still tantalize the dogmatic philosopher, the impotent artist or the inexperienced seducer who has not yet escaped his foolish hopes of capture” (S 55). In “Choreographies,” where Derrida is perfectly aware that terms like “hymen” and “invagination,” as McDonald puts it, “pertain to the woman’s body” (C 71)—and where he is using them precisely because of this, as part of his resexualization project—“that being said,” he qualifies, “‘hymen’ and ‘invagination,’ at least in the context into which these words have been swept, no longer simply designate figures for the feminine body” (C 75).
“mankind” and the word “woman” means “truth.” But in your own writings woman seems to be theorized as a whole list of things mentioned earlier, in the quotation from Gayatri Spivak. And to use one phrase from “The Law of Genre,” a “random drift” which affects the masculine genre and threatens to make it other. I guess I’m asking you to explain how woman as man’s “random drift” is different from woman as man’s “truth.” (WB 203)

In his answer, Derrida misses the import of the seminar participant’s question, focusing on the difference in content between what he and previous philosophers do with “woman,” rather than responding to the question of methodology. “This is an abyssal question,” he says, “for there is a certain determination of truth which permits one to answer that woman as truth is that which stops the drift, that which interrupts and assures truth” (WB 203).16 Derrida does not address the question of how his treatment of “woman” differs from the fetishization of “woman” that occurs in Western metaphysics.17 This is perhaps because he has addressed this question earlier in the seminar—when reference is first made to Spivak’s discussion—where he identifies his use of “woman” as only the first strategic phase in a deconstruction of phallogocentrism and the hierarchical opposition of man and woman. At this moment, in answer to the participant’s question about “the difference between woman and ‘woman’ and the deconstruction of subjectivity and subject/object around woman” (WB 194), Derrida does finally address methodology:

Of course, saying that woman is on the side, so to speak, of undecidability and so on, has only the meaning of a strategical phase. In a given situation, which is ours, which is the European phallogocentric structure, the side of the

16. Given that Spivak argues that ‘woman” to some extent represents the abyssal in Derrida’s writing, Derrida’s response—that “this is an abyssal question”—is also interestingly tautological.

17. [Here, one must not forget Derrida’s remarkable analysis of (the metaphysics of) “fetishism” in Glas (1974), especially his often overlooked queer provocation of a “general fetishism.” See Jacques Derrida, Glas, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 206-211. —Ed.]
Sarah Dillon

Derrida’s reference to phases recalls the section of “Choreographies” where McDonald describes deconstruction as a two-phase process: first, a reversal of the hierarchical binaries of Western metaphysics; second, a forging of a new “concept.” McDonald does not explain what this new concept is forged for, nor what it does, but simply goes on to list such concepts as they appear in Derrida’s writing: differance, trace, supplement, pharmakon, hymen, double invagination. Thus the question she eventually poses to Derrida—“do we have in your view the beginning of a phase two, a ‘new’ concept of woman?” (C 72)—may seem, at first, to represent a misunderstanding of the second phase of deconstruction, until one puts it into dialogue with “Women in the Beehive.” For if, in relation to the question of sexual difference, Derrida privileges one term of the binary—woman—in order to deconstruct the binary in phase one, it might well be assumed he’ll use the same term as the “new concept” of phase two. Thus “woman” would come to have two distinct meanings in his work, as he explains below by analogy with undecidability:

There is one kind of undecidability which is a kind of calculus, a kind of logic, a kind of programming or unprogramming a program, but with a symmetrical relationship to the program. And then there is another undecidability which is totally heterogeneous to the former one, which is totally foreign to the realm of calculus, to the

woman is the side from which you start to dismantle the structure. So you can put undecidability and all of the other concepts which go with it on the side of femininity, writing and so on. But as soon as you have reached the first stage of deconstruction, then the opposition between women and men stops being pertinent. Then you cannot say that woman is another name, or a good trope for writing, undecidability and so on. We need to find some way to progress strategically. Starting with deconstruction of phallogocentrism, and using the feminine force, so to speak, in the move and then—and this would be the second stage or second level—to give up the opposition between men and women. At this second stage “woman” is clearly not the best trope to refer to all those things: undecidability and so on. (WB 194)
realm of opposition, to the realm of programming and so on. By analogy, we could say the same about “woman.” There is one meaning to the word “woman” which is caught in the opposition, in the couple, and to this extent you can use the force of woman to reverse, to undermine this first stage of opposition. Once you have succeeded, the word “woman” does not have the same meaning. Perhaps we could not even speak of “woman” anymore. (WB 195)

Derrida does use “woman” in the first phase of deconstruction in a symmetrical relation to the man-woman binary in order to reverse the hierarchy of that binary. In this sense, his use of “woman” is methodologically no different from the procedures of Western metaphysics—it is merely an inversion of those procedures that challenges their content but not their structures. Spivak’s argument holds, then, in that “woman” is used in Derrida’s writing by analogy with the first kind of undecidability which is still necessary within “a given situation in which you have an opposition or a dialectical logic” (WB 194–5). “Woman” is also used, as we have seen in the textual examples above, in Derrida’s writing in the second phase of deconstruction by analogy with the second kind of incalculable undecidability of which Derrida talks above. “Woman” does then, in Derrida’s work, figure as a motif for the refiguration of relationality performed by deconstruction, the thought of difference beyond or otherwise to “difference determined as opposition” (C 72). But, crucially, in relation to the question of sexual difference, “woman” does not function in this way. Derrida does not, as McDonald seems to be prompting him to do here, use “woman” in the second phase of the deconstruction of sexual difference in particular. In Derrida’s writing, “woman” is not the motif for the relation between man and woman thought otherwise than as opposition. Instead, in this role Derrida puts forward the thought of the gift and the time and movement of the dance. In using such alternative terms, Derrida, at least in relation to the deconstruction of sexual difference, does not repeat the methodological gesture of metaphysics, which uses woman merely as a philosophical signifier, but uses alternative concepts which enable us to conceive of actual male and female subjectivities, and the relation between them, otherwise.
Nearing the end of his response to McDonald’s first question in “Choreographies,” and in the context of a discussion of Heidegger, Derrida raises an enigmatic but suggestive question about the relation between the thought of the gift and sexual difference:

The question proceeds, so to speak, from the end; it proceeds from the point where the thought of the gift [le don] and that of “propriation” disturbs without simply reversing the order of ontology, the authority of the question “What is it,” the subordination of regional ontologies to one fundamental ontology. . . . From this point, which is not a point, one wonders whether this extremely difficult, perhaps impossible idea of the gift can still maintain an essential relationship to sexual difference. One wonders whether sexual difference, femininity, for example—however irreducible it may be—does not remain derived from and subordinated to either the question of destination or the thought of the gift. (C 70)

In “Women in the Beehive,” one of the seminar participants cites this passage and asks Derrida to “unpack” it for them (WB 198). Derrida’s response contains the most sustained thinking of the deconstruction of sexual difference that we find, I think, anywhere in his corpus. It is here that he offers that which Spivak is searching for—and does not find—in her reading of La carte postale: “an accomplished displacement, whatever that might be,” of the “opposition man/woman,” rather than a “mere reversal” (LM 29). Let us, then, unpack Derrida’s unpacking.

Derrida begins by distinguishing the gift from exchange by questioning the idea of destination. The common assumption is that when individuals speak to, or communicate with each other, “that they are identifiable subjects, and that between them there exists an exchange” (WB 198). These subjects would be determined prior to the communication, prior to “the messages, the gifts, caresses, desires, objects, etc.” (WB 198) that would then pass between them in a movement of exchange. The idea of destination, then, of the existence of predetermined subjects who are givers and receivers, provides the crucial difference between the gift and the exchange.
For, “in as much as a gift has an assignable destination, it is an exchange—therefore, it is not a gift” (WB 198):

If there is, from the man to the woman, or from the woman to the man, a destination of whatever kind, of an object, of a discourse, of a letter, of a desire, of jouissance, if this thing is identifiable as passing from subject to subject—from a man to a woman, or from a woman to a woman, or a man to a man, etc., etc.—if there is a possible determination of subject—at that moment, there is no longer a gift. (WB 198)

The consequence of this, according to Derrida, is that the possibility of the gift depends on the non-pre-determination of subjects. If subjects are already determined, especially if they are already sexually determined, there can be no possibility of the gift. The randomness and chance of the gift depends upon the absence of this pre-determination of subjects and, consequently, the absence of an oppositional relation between man and woman. For, if subjects are not already sexually determined (classically, as man and woman) then the relation between them (classically, an oppositional one) also remains undetermined. One is therefore able to, perhaps even required to, think the difference between subjects beyond the binary opposition man/woman. The classical dual oppositional relation of man and woman forbids the gift as Derrida understands it, precisely because he is using the thought of the gift in order to (re)figure a relation between the sexes that is not one of opposition: “if there is the gift, it can only be on the condition—not of non-sexuality—but of sexual nondetermination, in the sense of opposition” (WB 198). The gift, as a figure of (sexual) relationality, is not a structure that is sexually indifferent—Derrida is not here repeating the neutralizing gesture of Western metaphysics—but one which allows us to think “sexuality completely out of the frame, totally aleatory to what we are familiar with in the term ‘sexuality’” (WB 198). In this sense, the gift can figure an “indefinite number of sexes” (WB 198) and sexual relations, heterosexual, homosexual and beyond:

At that point there would be no more sexes . . . there would be one sex for each time. One sex for each gift. A sexual difference for each gift. That can be produced
within the situation of a man and a woman, a man and a
man, a woman and a woman, three men and a woman,
etc. . . . (WB 199)

Similarly to Heidegger’s understanding of Ereignis, the gift “gives
itself the right to determine” (WB 199)—that is, subjects come to be
determined by and in the moment of the gift, that is, by and in the
moment of their relationality to each other. That is why, via the
gift, sexual relations are “absolutely heterogeneous” (WB 199), since
each subject is determined (and determined differently) in each gift
moment, thus opening up the possibility for an incalculable array of
sexual relations, of sexualities, and of sexually determined subjects.

This understanding of the structure of sexual relationality
does not determine a priori the nature or content of sexual relations,
in the sense that, in each gift moment, that content will be different,
and its value will be judged, as Derrida says, by the receiver of the
gift (WB 202). Derrida is not proposing here a fixed alternative to
oppositional sexual relations in terms of, say, “equality.” Rather, what
he is saying, and I believe this fits very much with lived experience,
is that each time one comes into relation with another, one’s gender
and sexuality are determined by that moment of relationality, and
that determination could be an acceptable or unacceptable one:

There is no value before it has taken place. Once it has
taken place, one will see what is the worth. If you are
receiver of the gift which makes you “woman,” you will
see. You will say if it has positive or negative value. It will
be your evaluation of the gift. (WB 202)

For Derrida, this thought of the gift functions as a deconstructive
narrative that rewrites our “abstract” (pace Spivak) understanding
of the relationality between men and women, but also our under-
standing of how that relationality might happen in “concrete” lived
experience. In doing so, the thought of the gift also deconstructs the
oppositional difference between the abstract and the concrete itself.
The problem in “Women in the Beehive,” however, is that the
“concrete” examples Derrida gives of the performativity of the gift
are not ones which demonstrate its operation in relation to sexual
difference, in the relations between men and women, men and men,
women and women, etc. Instead, he gives two textual examples: the first with reference to his own text, “Télèpathie” (in *La carte postale*), in which he repeats the thought of the gift he has just elaborated; the second, the example of the performativity of the *Declaration of Independence* in bringing into being the American people. Both texts are examples of “a gesture which, at the limit, produces the receiver, and, at the same time, produces the sender” (WB 200). The only example Derrida offers of the way in which the thought of the gift might work in relation to sexual difference is in an almost throw-away comment at the end of the paragraph:

> It is by the gift that the Law is produced. It’s this signature which engenders the sender, the receiver, the signer. It is a performative act . . . of the gift which produces the giver and the receiver, who at that time become determined, determine themselves as such. It happens all the time, when one says “yes” in marriage, for instance. (WB 200)

The thought of the gift allows for an understanding of marriage not as an economic structure of exchange, but as one example of the taking place of a mutually disclosive belonging together by and through which subjects become determined. This act, the “yes” of marriage, is nothing if not *iterable*, and in each *iteration* lies the trajectory of a subject and the power for radical change. As one of the seminar participants neatly summarizes it, in every moment of relationality, “we get a new configuration of subjects, objects, of identities. That is, with each occurrence of the gift . . . one could occur as male or female in a certain configuration of subjects. In every production of this gift situation . . . all of us could appear as something different” (WB 202). For Derrida, the types of (sexual) relationalities figured by the gift are thus “incalculable” (WB 199), a term which recalls and illuminates the “incalculable choreographies” (C 76) to which Derrida refers in the complex final paragraph of “Choreographies.” It is to this interview that I want to return now, in closing, in order to explore the way in which the idea of dancing pursued throughout that text anticipates Derrida’s thought of the gift in “Women in the Beehive” and provides an even more palpable example of its figuration of (sexual) relationality.
In the closing paragraph of “Choreographies,” Derrida responds to McDonald’s final question—“What are our chances of 'thinking difference' not so much before sexual difference, as you say, as taking off 'from' it? What would you say is our chance and 'who' are we sexually?” (C 75)—with a series of questions and speculations which for many years have impressed me with their rhetoric yet defeated my understanding. Placing this complex paragraph in the context of Derrida’s thought of the gift, however, opens up these enigmatic reflections and illumines exactly what Derrida might be proposing here. The dissymmetry Derrida sees as essential to sexual relations—and which “perhaps goes beyond known or coded marks, beyond the grammar and spelling, shall we say (metaphorically), of sexuality” (C 76)—is a consequence of the randomness and chance of the gift, a characteristic of the incalculable possibilities of relationality that the thought of the gift opens up, rather than the symmetry which might be produced by a predetermined fixing of relationality as opposition or, even, equality. The thought of the gift elaborated above provides the structural answer to the questions Derrida poses here: it describes “a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating” (C 76); it describes a relationship that is not asexual, but “sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes” (C 76); it is the possibility of “the chance” (C 76) of which Derrida dreams. In “Choreographies,” the thought of the gift remains a dream. Derrida has not yet arrived at the deconstruction of sexual difference the gift provides. So, while dreaming of the second phase of deconstruction, he remains rooted in the first phase, that of the resexualization of phallogocentric discourse under the name of “woman” in opposition to the neutralizing and neuterizing gestures of Western metaphysics. This accounts for the confusing final paragraph of “Choreographies,” since Derrida there is attempting to move into the second phase of deconstruction while at the same time retaining the language and structures of the first.

Thus at the end of “Choreographies,” Derrida still wonders if understanding (sexual) relations otherwise is only a dream which protects us “from an implacable destiny which immures everything for life in the figure 2” (C 76). But Derrida immediately goes on
to interrogate that doubt with an argument that we find repeated, interestingly, in relation to the dream and sexual difference as it is manifested in the texts of the queer poet and writer, H.D. In that context, Claire Buck argues that in H.D.’s quest for an unmediated language and an autonomous subjectivity, “the impossibility of either . . . is in a sense beside the point.”

“By holding the fantasy open,” Buck argues, “H.D. also represents and sustains the desire itself, which in turn represents the possibility of a subjectivity not reducible to the terms of a phallic organization of sexual difference” (HD 54-55). In the same way, Derrida suggests here that the dream of a sexuality beyond binary difference holds open this possibility, even if its actuality remains impossible: “does the dream itself not prove that what is dreamt of must be there in order for it to provide the dream?” (C 76).

“Choreographies” does not end with the thought of the dream, though, but with a return to the idea of dance, and the appearance of two key terms which relate inextricably to the thought of the gift: “incalculable” and “exchange.”

The idea of dance is at play throughout “Choreographies,” from its very opening in which McDonald cites the apocryphal slogan of the 19th-century maverick feminist Emma Goldman, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution” (C 66).

Dance, like undecidability, functions in two ways. In the second phase of deconstruction, dance, particularly dance as the movement of bodies in space and time, is analogous to the thought of the gift. But, in the first phase, Derrida uses the idea of dance in terms of


19. The possibility of the dream functions here in a similar way to the gift in that both seem to be connected, as one of the “Women in the Beehive” seminar participants notes, with “the conception derived from Heidegger of a kind of limit-notion that might never even exist but points beyond and might also liberate into a kind of non-role-specific diversity of sexualities” (WB 200).

choreo-graphy, by definition, the written notation of dancing. This is in line with a strand throughout Derrida’s corpus in which dancing becomes a metaphor for the movement of deconstructive reading and writing. Thus, he can describe such texts as “Pas,” La vérité en peinture, “En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici,” and Feu la cendre as “choreographic” (C 76), texts which, in their “polysexual signatures” (C 76), perform a kind of deconstructive dance with phallogocentricism. For Derrida, the deconstructive possibility of a “multiplicity of sexually marked voices” (C 76) is part of the first phase of deconstruction. The idea of the voice, however, cannot stand for the second phase, “this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each ‘individual,’ whether he be classified as ‘man’ or as ‘woman’ according to criteria of usage” (C 76). Rather, it is the second meaning of dance (which, in “Choreographies,” anticipates the language and structure of the gift) that allows for this possibility of an incalculable number of sexual determinations.

The metaphor of dance, then, is used to re-think the question of “woman” by suggesting the deconstructive potential of a dis-placement of time and space that is not reducible to the topo-economical concerns with woman’s “place”; to “dance otherwise” (C 69) is thus to “challenge a certain idea of the locus [lieu] and the place [place] (the entire history of the West and of its metaphysics)” (C 69). As Sandra Kemp observes:

However well you may be acquainted with the history of, say, a dance piece (every technique involved in it, the choreographic design), at the time of watching, something else is at stake. This “something else” exists in the moments of the dance as they happen. It doesn’t exist before or after, and is not susceptible to existing forms of critical analysis. . . . To take time and space as self-evident phenomena, as so often happens in dance, is to fail to perceive that movement creates its own time and space, that time and space are not containers which movement fills to varying degrees.21

Dance makes explicit the performativity of the gift, the way in which it is neither “conservative” (relying on conventions), nor “subversive” (since “subversion is also a program” [WB 201]), but, in fact, “totally heterogeneous to both subversion and conservation. That is, if it takes place, which is never guaranteed” (Derrida, WB 201). The challenge dancing represents is, and Derrida here explicitly uses the language of the gift, “very rare, if it is not impossible, and presents itself only in the form of the most unforeseeable and most innocent of chances” (C 69). The randomness and chance of the gift is also the randomness and chance of the dance: through both, relationality is conceived as “an incessant daily negotiation—individual or not—sometimes microscopic, sometimes punctuated by a poker-like gamble; always deprived of insurance, whether it be in private life or within institutions” (C 69). In each moment of the gift or the dance, in each moment of relationality, sexual or otherwise, “each man and each woman must commit his or her own singularity, the untranslatable factor of his or her life and death” (C 95).

For Derrida, the recognition that “the truth value (that is, Woman as the major allegory of truth in Western discourse) and its correlative, Femininity (the essence or truth of Woman) . . . are the foundations or anchorings of Western rationality (of what I have called ‘phallogocentrism’)” (C 69) permits “the invention of an other inscription, one very old and very new, a displacement of bodies and

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22. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a more extended analysis of the significance of dance in relation to refiguring (sexual) relationality in particular, and in relation to contemporary theory in general. With regard to the latter, however, see André Lepecki, ed., Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), in which “each author proposes different ways of thinking on how, and with what political and aesthetic effect, dancing rethinks both itself and the social order” (2), as well as Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, eds., Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1995), and Susan Leigh Foster, ed., Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power (New York: Routledge, 1996). With regard to the former, see my essay “Time for the Gift of Dance” (2011) on the Hollywood film Shall We Dance? (2004), in Ben Davies and Jana Funke, eds., Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 109-31, in which dancing complexly queers the anticipated heteronormative narrative.
places that is quite different” (C 70). The thought of the gift and of dance, as they take place in Derrida’s texts in the second phase of the deconstruction of sexual difference, are exemplary of this kind of reinscription, and not, as is often presumed, a mere resexualization of philosophical difference under the name of “woman.” Indeed, the thought of the gift and dance, as figures of relationality in which the subjects in relation are determined in and as a result of that relation, also provides a way of understanding “the complicated relationship of a practical politics to the kinds of analysis that we have been considering (specifically the ‘deconstructive’ analysis implicit in your discussion)” (C 70). At the end of “Choreographies,” McDonald returns Derrida to the metaphor of dance in order to introduce her final question to him, regarding the chance (and here again we have the language of the gift) of thinking sexual difference otherwise. Derrida concludes his reply by asking, “what kind of dance would there be, or would there be at all, if the sexes were not exchanged according to rhythms that vary considerably?” (C 76). Dance serves here, as it does throughout “Choreographies,” as a figurative analogy of the gift. “In a quite rigorous sense,” Derrida argues, just as the thought of the gift is inimical to the idea of exchange, in the dance of the sexes, “exchange alone could not suffice” (C 76). In a mere structure of exchange, the subjects of an oppositional relationality would already be predetermined. Instead, in “Women in the Beehive,” Derrida comes to offer the thought of the gift, which satisfies the queer “desire to escape the combinatory itself, to invent incalculable choreographies” (C 76).