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Dominant Form and Marginalized Voices: Argumentation about Feminism(s)

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Feminism is not dead. It is alive and well in intercollegiate debate. Increasingly, students rely on feminist authors to inform their analysis of resolutions. While I applaud these initial efforts to explore feminist thought, I am concerned that such arguments only exemplify the general absence of sound causal reasoning in debate rounds. Poor causal reasoning results from a debate practice that privileges empirical proof over rhetorical proof, fostering ignorance of the subject matter being debated. To illustrate my point, I claim that debate arguments about feminisms suffer from a reductionism that tends to marginalize the voices of significant feminist authors.

David Zarefsky made a persuasive case for the value of causal reasoning in intercollegiate debate as far back as 1979. He argued that causal arguments are desirable for four reasons. First, causal analysis increases the control of the arguer over events by promoting understanding of them. Second, the use of causal reasoning increases rigor of analysis and fairness in the decision-making process. Third, causal arguments promote understanding of the philosophical paradox that presumably good people tolerate the existence of evil. Finally, causal reasoning supplies good reasons for "commitments to policy choices or to systems of belief which transcend whim, caprice, or the non-reflexive 'claims of immediacy'" (117-9).

Rhetorical proof plays an important role in the analysis of causal relationships. This is true despite the common assumption that the identification of cause and effect relies solely upon empirical investigation. For Zarefsky, there are three types of causal reasoning. The first type of causal reasoning describes the application of a covering law to account for physical or material conditions that cause a resulting event. This type of causal reasoning requires empirical proof prominent in scientific investigation. A second type of causal reasoning requires the assignment of responsibility. Responsible human beings as agents cause certain events to happen; that is, causation resides in human beings (107-08). A third type of causal claim explains the existence of a causal relationship. It functions "to provide reasons to justify a belief that a causal connection exists" (108).

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The second and third types of causal arguments rely on rhetorical proof, the provision of "good reasons" to substantiate arguments about human responsibility or explanations for the existence of a causal relationship (108). I contend that the practice of intercollegiate debate privileges the first type of causal analysis. It reduces questions of human motivation and explanation to a level of empiricism appropriate only for causal questions concerning physical or material conditions. Arguments about feminism clearly illustrate this phenomenon.

Substantive debates about feminism usually take one of two forms. First, on the affirmative, debaters argue that some aspect of the resolution is a manifestation of patriarchy. For example, given the spring 1992 resolution, "[r]esolved: That advertising degrades the quality of life," many affirmatives argued that the portrayal of women as beautiful objects for men's consumption is a manifestation of patriarchy that results in tangible harms to women such as rising rates of eating disorders. The fall 1992 topic, "[r]esolved: That the welfare system exacerbates the problems of the urban poor in the United States," also had its share of patriarchy cases. Affirmatives typically argued that women's dependence upon a patriarchal welfare system results in increasing rates of women's poverty. In addition to these concrete harms to individual women, most affirmatives on both topics, desiring "big impacts," argued that the effects of patriarchy include nightmarish totalitarianism and/or nuclear annihilation.

On the negative, many debaters countered with arguments that the same aspect of the resolution in some way sustains or energizes the feminist movement in resistance to patriarchal harms. For example, some negatives argued that sexist advertising provides an impetus for the reinvigoration of the feminist movement and/or feminist consciousness, ultimately solving the threat of patriarchal nuclear annihilation. Likewise, debaters negating the welfare topic argued that the state of the welfare system is the key issue around which the feminist movement is mobilizing or that the consequence of the welfare system—breakup of the patriarchal nuclear family—undermines patriarchy as a whole.

Such arguments seem to have two assumptions in common. First, there is a single feminism. As a result, feminism*s* are transformed into *feminism*. Debaters speak of feminism as a single, monolithic, theoretical and pragmatic entity and feminists as women with identical motivations, methods, and goals. Second, these arguments assume that patriarchy is the single or root cause of all forms of oppression. Patriarchy not only is responsible for sexism and the consequent oppression of women, it also is the cause of totalitarianism, environmental degradation, nuclear war, racism, and capitalist exploitation. These reductionist arguments reflect an unwillingness to debate about the complexities of human motivation and explanation. They betray a reliance upon a

framework of proof that can explain only material conditions and physical realities through empirical quantification.

The transformation of feminisms into *feminism* and the identification of patriarchy as the *sole* cause of all oppression is related in part to the current form of intercollegiate debate practice. By "form," I refer to Kenneth Burke's notion of form, defined as the "creation of appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (*Counter-Statement* 31). Though the framework for this understanding of form is found in literary and artistic criticism, it is appropriate in this context; as Burke notes, literature can be "equipment for living" (*Philosophy* 293). He also suggests that form "is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence" (*Counter-Statement* 124).

Burke observes that there are several aspects to the concept of form. One of these aspects, conventional form,

> involves to some degree the appeal of form *as form*. Progressive, repetitive, and minor forms, may be effective even though the reader has no awareness of their formality. But when a form appeals as form, we designate it as conventional form. Any form can become conventional, and be sought for itself—whether it be as complex as the Greek tragedy or as compact as the sonnet (*Counter-Statement* 126).

These concepts help to explain debaters' continuing reluctance to employ rhetorical proof in arguments about causality. Debaters practice the convention of poor causal reasoning as a result of judges' unexamined reliance upon conventional form. Convention is the *practice* of arguing single-cause links to monolithic impacts that arises out of custom or usage. Conventional form is the *expectation* of judges that an argument will take this form.

Common practice or convention dictates that a case or disadvantage with nefarious impacts causally related to a single link will "outweigh" opposing claims in the mind of the judge. In this sense, debate arguments themselves are conventional. Debaters practice the convention of establishing single-cause relationships to large monolithic impacts in order to conform to audience expectation. Debaters practice poor causal reasoning because they are rewarded for it by judges. The convention of arguing single-cause links leads the judge to anticipate the certainty of the impact and to be gratified by the sequence. I suspect that the sequence is gratifying for judges because it relieves us from the responsibility and difficulties of evaluating rhetorical proofs. We are caught between our responsibility to evaluate rhetorical proofs and our reluctance to succumb

to complete relativism and subjectivity. To take responsibility for evaluating rhetorical proof is to admit that not every question has an empirical answer.

However, when we abandon our responsibility to evaluate rhetorical proofs, we sacrifice our students' understanding of causal reasoning. The sacrifice has consequences for our students' knowledge of the subject matter they are debating. For example, when feminism is defined as a single entity, not as a pluralized movement or theory, that single entity results in the identification of patriarchy as the sole cause of oppression. The result is ignorance of the subject position of the particular feminist author, for highlighting his or her subject position might draw attention to the incompleteness of the causal relationship between link and impact. Consequently, debaters do not challenge the basic assumptions of such argumentation and ignorance of feminisms is perpetuated.

Feminisms are not feminism. The topics of feminist inquiry are many and varied, as are the philosophical approaches to the study of these topics. Different authors have attempted categorization of various feminisms in distinctive ways. For example, Alison Jaggar argues that feminisms can be divided into four categories: liberal feminism, marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism. While each of these feminisms may share a common commitment to the improvement of women's situations, they differ from each other in very important ways and reflect divergent philosophical assumptions that make them each unique. Linda Alcoff presents an entirely different categorization of feminist theory based upon distinct understandings of the concept "woman," including cultural feminism and post-structural feminism. Karen Offen utilizes a comparative historical approach to examine two distinct modes of historical argumentation or discourse that have been used by women and their male allies on behalf of women's emancipation from male control in Western societies. These include relational feminism and individualist feminism. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron describe a whole category of French feminisms that contain many distinct versions of the feminist project by French authors. Women of color and third-world feminists have argued that even these broad categorizations of the various feminism have neglected the contributions of non-white, non-Western feminists (see, for example, hooks; Hull; Joseph and Lewis; Lorde; Moraga; Omolade; and Smith).

In this literature, the very definition of feminism is contested. Some feminists argue that "all feminisms are united by a commitment to improving the situation of women" (Jaggar and Rothenberg xii), while others have resisted the notion of a single definition of feminism. bell hooks observes, "A central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is (or accept definitions) that could serve as points of unification" (*Feminist Theory* 17). The controversy over the very definition of feminism has political

implications. The power to define is the power both to include and exclude people and ideas in and from that feminism. As a result,

> [b]ourgeois white women interested in women's rights issues have been satisfied with simple definitions for obvious reasons. Rhetorically placing themselves in the same social category as oppressed women, they were not anxious to call attention to race and class privilege (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 18).

Debate arguments that assume a singular conception of feminism include and empower the voices of race- and class-privileged women while excluding and silencing the voices of feminists marginalized by race and class status. This position becomes clearer when we examine the second assumption of arguments about feminism in intercollegiate debate—patriarchy is the *sole* cause of oppression.

Important feminist thought has resisted this assumption for good reason. Designating patriarchy as the sole cause of oppression allows the subjugation of resistance to other forms of oppression like racism and classism to the struggle against sexism. Such subjugation has the effect of denigrating the legitimacy of resistance to racism and classism as struggles of equal importance. "Within feminist movement in the West, this has led to the assumption that resisting patriarchal domination is a more legitimate feminist action than resisting racism and other forms of domination" (hooks, *Talking Back* 19).

The relegation of struggles against racism and class exploitation to offspring status is not the only implication of the "sole cause" argument. In addition, identifying patriarchy as the single source of oppression obscures women's perpetration of other forms of subjugation and domination. bell hooks argues that we

> should not obscure the reality that women can and do participate in politics of domination, as perpetrators as well as victims—that we dominate, that we are dominated. If focus on patriarchal domination masks this reality or becomes the means by which women deflect attention from the real conditions and circumstances of our lives, then women cooperate in suppressing and promoting false consciousness, inhibiting our capacity to assume responsibility for transforming ourselves and society (hooks, *Talking Back* 20).

Characterizing patriarchy as the sole cause of oppression allows mainstream feminists to abdicate responsibility for the exercise of class and race privilege. It casts the struggle against class exploitation and racism as secondary concerns.

Current debate practice promotes ignorance of these issues because debaters appeal to conventional form, the expectation of judges that they will isolate a single link to a large impact. Feminisms become feminism and patriarchy becomes the sole cause of all evil. Poor causal arguments arouse and fulfill the expectation of judges by allowing us to surrender our responsibility to evaluate rhetorical proof for complex causal relationships. The result is either the marginalization or colonization of certain feminist voices. Arguing feminism in debate rounds risks trivializing feminisms. Privileging the act of speaking about feminism over the content of speech "often turns the voices and beings of non-white women into commodity, spectacle" (hooks, *Talking Back* 14). Teaching sophisticated causal reasoning enables our students to learn more concerning the subject matter about which they argue. In this case, students would learn about the multiplicity of feminisms instead of reproducing the marginalization of many feminist voices in the debate itself.

The content of the speech of feminists must be investigated to subvert the colonization of exploited women. To do so, we must explore alternatives to the formal expectation of single-cause links to enormous impacts for

> appropriation of the marginal voice threatens the very core of self-determination and free self-expression for exploited and oppressed peoples. If the identified audience, those spoken to, is determined solely by ruling groups who control production and distribution, then it is easy for the marginal voice striving for a hearing to allow what is said to be overdetermined by the needs of that majority group who appears to be listening, to be tuned in (hooks, *Talking Back* 14).

At this point, arguments about feminism in intercollegiate debate seem to be overdetermined by the expectation of common practice, the "game" that we play in assuming there is such a thing as a direct and sole causal link to a monolithic impact. To play that game, we have gone along with the idea that there is a single feminism and the idea that patriarchal impacts can account for all oppression.

In making this critique, I am by no means discounting the importance of arguments about feminism in intercollegiate debate. In fact, feminisms contain the possibility of a transformational politic for two reasons. First, feminist concerns affect each individual intimately. We are most likely to encounter patriarchal domination "in an ongoing way in everyday life. Unlike other forms of domination, sexism directly shapes and

determines relations of power in our private lives, in familiar social spaces. . . ." (hooks, *Talking Back* 21).

Second, the methodology of feminism, consciousness-raising, contains within it the possibility of real societal transformation. "[E]ducation for critical consciousness can be extended to include politicization of the self that focusses on creating understanding the ways sex, race, and class together determine our individual lot and our collective experience" (hooks, *Talking Back* 24). Observing the incongruity between advocacy of single-cause relationships and feminism does not discount the importance of feminisms to individual or societal consciousness raising.

A large part of the problem of the mutation of feminisms into feminism is conventional expectation on the part of judges. However, conventional expectation is not set in stone. Debaters can influence judges perceptions by arguing about what conventional expectation should be. Debate is an educational laboratory in which everything is subject to a dialectical struggle, including what should constitute audience expectation. Debaters can argue about the appropriate decision-calculus of the judge. In addition, we can teach debaters how to articulate the limitations of reasoning that assumes direct and sole causal links to monolithic impacts. We can teach them the role of rhetorical proof in debates about causality. Most importantly, we can refuse to abandon our responsibility for evaluating those rhetorical proofs. If we achieve these goals, argumentation about feminisms would not reproduce the marginalization of women who do not exercise race and class privilege found in mainstream feminist movement. We can teach our students *how* to learn more about the subject matter they debate. We can teach them more about argumentation than how to count the number of nuclear wars possible in a one-hour-and-thirty-minute debate.

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