

The Possibility of Re-Form: Plasticity, Feminism, and Catherine Malabou

by Lucy Arnold

But above all, of course, I write for the women I love, those whom I do not know and who are mistreated, humiliated. Those whom I know and who keep, in their way of being, something like an unseen memory of those aforementioned women, a fragility which does not look to hide itself.

—Catherine Malabou, *Changer de la différence*

This is the list of female philosophers associated with poststructuralist thought generated by users on *Wikipedia*: Kathy Acker, Judith Butler, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Sarah Kofman. Every one of them is categorized as a “feminist” writer and thinker, that is, “feminism” or “feminist” is one of the keywords included in the description of the philosopher. In juxtaposition, none of the male authors noted on the same list, including Giorgio Agamben, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Umberto Eco, John Fiske, Félix Guattari, René Girard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, or Gianni Vattimo, is tagged as a “feminist” nor is mentioned in association with feminism. This observation about male philosophers not being particularly prone toward an examination of the default gender is not surprising; it is difficult to critique the system inside of which one exists, and this includes the system of masculinity and patriarchy. On the other hand, that all of the female philosophers listed are associated with feminism is intriguing. Does the desire to pursue philosophy coupled with a female sexual identity require one to engage with the philosophy of gender? It does seem apparent that many women would be interested in feminism, but the near-universality of the interest raises questions about the material conditions of female philosophers.

Catherine Malabou’s work emphasizes, complicates, and characterizes these questions about philosophy and femininity. Malabou is a French philosopher whose dominant theme is plasticity, to which we will return soon. The bulk of Malabou’s writings have concerned Hegel, plasticity, and Derridean deconstruction. In fact, she was a student of Jacques Derrida, under whom she wrote her dissertation on Hegel. She later co-authored several texts with Derrida. Her more recent work has veered toward the convergence of philosophy and neuroscience, and in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2008), she theorizes plasticity through the lens of neuroscientific understandings of the brain. She has also co-authored works with Judith Butler; in these

works she does theorize gender and femininity, but her other work quite noticeably does not pose questions of gender or femininity. In 2009, Malabou published *Changer de différence: le féminin et la question philosophique*, in which she analyzes the philosophy, femininity, and the material conditions of the female philosopher through careful analysis of philosophical theory and her own lived experiences.

Plasticity is a key term throughout Malabou's work. I will trace Malabou's evolution of the term later in this paper, but for now will note that she relies on several key connotations of plasticity in her work. Her first understanding of the term "designates solidity as much as suppleness" (Malabou *Brain* 15), indicating plastic's ability to hold a certain form. The second connotation upon which she relies is that of transformation; in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, she uses the example of stem cells, which are able to transform from nonspecialized stem cells to specialized cells of almost any type (16). The third connotation with which she toys is that of detonation, of explosiveness, of *plastique*. The central dichotomy she poses in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* is that between plasticity and flexibility; she sees flexibility as adaptability that succumbs instead of acting. Malabou then construes explosion as revolution, as a way to defy flexibility in favor of plasticity: "Perhaps we ought to relearn how to enrage ourselves, to explode against a certain culture of docility . . ." (*Brain* 79). Although on one hand an exploration of the possibilities of neuroscience and an evaluation of neuroscience's philosophical state, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* also theorizes the brain as a metaphor for human agency and for encouraging humans to see their own capacity for plasticity in the face of social domination that often asks, or requires, flexibility, which Malabou reads as submission.

Malabou's interest in social revolution, exemplified by her use of the "explosive" meaning of plastic discussed above, results in attention to gender issues, particularly the constraints and allowances of femininity and how these constraints and allowances apply to the academy. The problem with theorizing gender in a deconstructionist framework, which is Malabou's seminal framework via her association with Derrida, is that gender itself as a dichotomy becomes, necessarily, an object of deconstruction as well. Derrida, who deconstructed the binary between self and other, philosophically eulogizing the notion of the "author" (Barthes's literary interpretation of deconstruction, which became quite pervasive in the United States) also critiques the gender binary. Following through with this line of reasoning and adding to the mix Judith Butler's revelations regarding the socially constructed nature of gender/sex, feminism is left in rather a bind. If there is no reality to the concept of self, author, or even woman, then how can one be a "feminist writer"? Why does it even matter how feminine identities are construed in writing or in utterance, if there is no essentially feminine element? Plus, any attempt to construe such a uniquely feminine voice or being would be doomed to exist in the same binary of the current masculine/feminine discourse. In an interview with Malabou conducted by Noelle Vahanian, Malabou construes the problem: ". . . an ontology of the feminine would no doubt bear all the symptoms of the traditional ontology — that is, an exclusion of the feminine itself. As we know, the discourse of and on property, propriety or subjectivity is precisely the discourse which has excluded women from the domain of Being (and perhaps even of beings)" (4).

Since I am immersed in poststructuralist philosophy myself, this is where I wind up at the end of this particular intellectual rope: there is no author and no essential feminine being. But philosophy here collides with the irrational, the ephemeral, the socially-constructed, the embodied, and the fully subjective "truth" of my lived experience as a woman. I am that female academic, completely convinced by Butler and

Derrida, but equally certain that my lived experiences as a woman in the academy have been impacted by the fact of my self-acknowledged and socially perceived sex. As I look ahead to my career in academics, I can see that as recently as 1989 a study found that female college professors make \$10,000 per year less than male college professors (Pounder). This study has been substantiated by David Glenn's report in 2008 for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Laura Kirkpatrick's 2010 article in *Time*. Kirkpatrick's article, which covers the gender gap in pay across jobs in the United States, not focusing specifically on higher education, even notes that women who go through sex changes to become men then make more money after the change and that men who have sex changes to become women make less money afterwards. Furthermore, there is the far less quantifiable problem of authority and credentialing that I, as a female intellectual, face as a student, a teacher, and a writer. By "credentialing," I mean the process of establishing one's authority to speak on a certain subject; there are many ways in which scholars credential themselves, including source citation, institutional associations, previous publications and academic positions, and general mien. Credentialing is a part of academic discourse, and I do not here intend to critique that element of the discourse. The question is whether that process of credentialing is different for female intellectuals than it is for males and thus an instance of gender injustice. The ubiquitous musings on femininity by female intellectuals (as I discussed in reference to the poststructuralist thinkers listed on Wikipedia) might be one indicator that this process of credentialing is indeed a material concern. Malabou herself discusses the barriers she has faced as a female intellectual:

My teacher said, you will never succeed because you're a woman. I have been told that philosophy was a masculine domain or field. And, ever since, I am always introduced in reference to deconstruction, even today, even if it is at a distance with deconstruction or by the question of my being a student of Derrida. People associate my name to a man's name all the time, I am thought of as a specialist of Hegel or as a specialist of Derrida; I'm never myself . . . I am still a *Maître de conférences* in Paris (and not a full professor even if I have written much more than all my colleagues). (Vahanian 5-6)

Indeed, in the reviews and literature on Malabou I will discuss, Malabou is almost constantly mentioned as "Derrida's student." And this is why a study of Malabou's reception in the United States seems particularly important, not just to me personally, but for our intellectual community. Though gender has been endlessly problematized and often rendered moot by discussions of essentialism, in practice the material conditions faced by female intellectuals remain difficult.

Indeed, the future of feminism is one of the issues Malabou examines in the introduction to *Changer de la différence*, published in English in 2011. She points out some of the current debates, including feminism versus post-feminism or Queer studies and essentialism versus anti-essentialism but concludes from a position clearly influenced by her background in deconstruction: "Woman is perhaps only negatively defined, with regard to the violence that is done to her, to the blows struck against her essence, but this negative definition nonetheless constitutes the resistant root which distinguishes the feminine from all other types of fragility, of overexposure to exploitation and brutality." Contrasting directly with thinkers like Baudrillard and Lacan who also attempt to construe the feminine, Malabou takes a materialist and deconstructive approach to defining the feminine. She then contends that the key aspect of difference is interpreting it not just as sexual difference but as individual differences among individual women and provides herself as an example: "This is why I begin from a

concrete situation, which is mine, that of the 'woman philosopher', French" She also states her desire to "reorientate the course of deconstruction" and proposes the way to do this is by "plastiquer," which, as in her earlier work on plasticity, indicates contains a double meaning of exploding and of making into "plastic," something that changes but does not merely adapt. The concept she proposes to both explode and turn into plastic is difference (and/or *différence*). By this, she means challenging ideas of sexual difference while recognizing the plurality of women's experiences.

Malabou's first book is a reading of plasticity in Hegel, developed from her doctoral dissertation under Derrida at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*. In his introduction to this book, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, Derrida toys with Malabou's revival of plasticity from Hegel and distinguishes her interpretation of Hegel as well: "Perhaps this is one of the most discreet motifs of this book, which ends, as a matter of fact, on an allusion to the atomic bomb (Plastik-bombe) and on these other technical figures of death, of the non-living, of the artifice and of the synthetic, all of which are the plastic, the *plastification*, the plastic matter" (xxxiv). Derrida alludes to Malabou's interest in that third connotation of plasticity discussed above. He further develops the connection between death (or not living) and plasticity later in the introduction:

This plasticity, would it not consist in saying farewell to itself while always giving and receiving for itself yet another form, while always interiorizing, incorporating, *sublating*, idealizing, spiritualizing that which we abandon or which abandons us? The dialectical would be this plastic of mourning . . . May we not say that all plasticity is engaged or involved in some sort of mourning, in a mournful experience or a work of mourning, and to begin with the very one which divides and opposes to itself the expression "to see (what is) coming"? (xxxix)

Derrida's writing exemplifies deconstructive thinking about plasticity in that he engages the reverse of the "formation" meaning of the term to suggest that plasticity also always means a leave-taking; if a new form is being taken on, then some other form is being abandoned. Yet in other ways, the work of Derrida's introduction is to connect Malabou's new version of plasticity to the traditional Hegelian perspective, while also essentially credentialing Malabou's work by verifying it with his own use of deconstruction. The very act of writing the introduction to her book is a credentialing move, in fact.

Derrida's credentialing of Malabou's work continues in Gabriele Schwab's collection of essays, *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*, to which both Derrida and Malabou contributed pieces. Malabou's essay in this collection is an interpretation of Derrida, to which Schwab refers in his own essay: "According to Malabou, the stakes for Derrida lie in 'the immense question of a polymorphism of difference'" (13). Her inclusion in this collection and the way in which her work is framed as specifically an interpretation of Derrida is indicative of her reception in the United States. She has achieved her professional status as a colleague of Derrida and an interpreter of his work; Derrida and his ideas of deconstruction attained considerable popularity in the United States, at least in literary fields, so Malabou's work, coming as it does from a close colleague, seems to be accorded interest.

Malabou's interest in the concept of plasticity and in a post-Marxist re-visioning of human agency ultimately brought her to connect neuroscience with philosophy in writings that differentiate her from Derrida and have received a much more ambivalent reception in the United States. In the foreword to *What Should We Do with Our*

Brain?, the text that explicates her metaphorical understanding of brain plasticity and its connection to human agency, Marc Jeannerod positions Malabou within the two (often disparate) discourses of 1. Neuroscience and 2. Continental philosophy. He writes: "Malabou rightly draws a parallel between illnesses of social connection, such as depression, and neurodegenerative illnesses, such as Alzheimer's dementia" (xiii), a move that may also be seen as credentialing Malabou's points about neuroscience, since Jeannerod is a cognitive scientist himself. But after providing some substantiation for Malabou's understandings of neuroscience, he then situates her thesis firmly in the realm of philosophy: "Thus the problem is, rather, that of understanding how an individual brain can respond to the challenges of its social environment. Malabou positions her book at the center of this questioning" (xiv). Like many forewords and introductions, Jeannerod's foreword situates the writer in the conversation in which he sees her interacting. In contrast, however, to such introductions as Rex Butler and Scott Stephens's introductions to Slavoj Žižek's *Interrogating the Real*, Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens's introduction to Alain Badiou's *Infinite Thought*, and Cary Wolfe's introduction to Michel Serres's *The Parasite*, Jeannerod provides a cognitive science ethos for Malabou's work and introduces her major themes, but he does not engage critics of Malabou's philosophy, as Butler and Stephens do with their introduction of Žižek, provide in-depth neuroscientific grounding, as Feltham and Clemens do mathematically in regard to Badiou's use of set theory, or orient Malabou's theory with other thinkers or his own, as Wolfe does in the introduction to Serres. Jeannerod's introduction seems to be more a matter of credentialing without attendant matters of meaning-making or critique. In part, this could be construed as a function of the liminal field in which Malabou is working; by attempting to bridge cognitive science and philosophy, she is mapping territory unfamiliar to either position, as Peter Skafish points out in his review of the book. On the other hand, Badiou also pushes the boundaries of philosophical thinking, while scholars (or perhaps editors) seem to see less need to provide an ethos for his work, instead making space for further thought and elucidation with the type of introduction presented. These examples are not meant to be representative or all-encompassing; they do at least imply, however, that the material conditions under which Malabou has published her work are different from those conditions encountered by her male counterparts.

Reviews of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* also point to the material circumstances that frame the publishing and reception of Malabou's work in the United States. Jan Slaby, quoting Boltanski and Chiapello, argues that Malabou's attempt to map this new territory is the most crucial aspect of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*:

It is the chief merit of the book that Malabou links, probably for the first time, the sociological and the social-political discourse on 'the new spirit of capitalism' with the discourses in neuroscience and naturalistic philosophy of mind With the cultural hegemony of the neural and cognitive sciences steadily increasing in Western societies, it is high time to explore these uncanny entanglements and start a debate about these things (238)

Slaby's review of Malabou's book emphasizes the "spirit" of her work and applauds her for beginning this discourse. His critique of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* is arguably quite fair; he contends that it is a thesis and a scholarly diatribe but lacks the hard theoretical work necessary to make it meaningful and juxtaposes her loosely theoretical work with his own research project:

In our own project of critically engaging with the neurosciences we have learned how hard it can be to follow-through with detailed, fact-based critical analyses of the forces and factors that stabilize today's neurocentric discourses, how complex the academic landscape, how varied the discourses, how complicated the science, how polyvalent the influences, how tricky the philosophy, how diverse and varied the interests, attitudes, orientations, technical expertise and local cultures of the scientists. (239)

He points out that Malabou leaves out certain newer advances in neuroscience and wonders where philosophy should go from here. Slaby, however, concludes his biting critique of Malabou in this way: "Her *little* book is in the end no more than a call to arms without much of a battle plan" (239-240) [*italics are mine*]. The connotative choice of "little" here, while a technically appropriate way to refer to a book of only 94 pages, is still historically unfortunate. That a male reviewer should refer to the work of a female writer in a field traditionally dominated by men as a "little book" triggers all kinds of antiquated references to male condescension: "little lady" and "little girl," for instance. Particularly when this reference is juxtaposed with the rest of Slaby's critique, which seems to applaud his group's "hard work" at "engaging the current neurosciences" (239), the (perhaps unconscious) pejorative adjective is more striking. To juxtapose Slaby's way of delivering this particular critique of Malabou, I would note Skafish's review, which I will return to shortly, in which he succinctly organizes Slaby's criticism without a derogative, gendered stance: "Such an approach, an abbreviated version of this criticism would run, attempts to understand the relations between scientific discourse and socioeconomic institutions through a textual interpretation of how dialectical themes are at work in them, one making little to no reference to concrete practice..." (763).

Skafish's 2009 review of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, published in *Cultural Anthropology* offers a more sympathetic approach to Malabou's work. He rather fully explores the issue of plasticity and theorizes that resistance to her work will come from thinkers who do not wish to shift the focus of philosophical thought from difference to plasticity, a move that would also mean a move from a focus on language to a focus on neurobiology. He argues that many in the United States will be unwilling to give up the idea that the study of language and literature is a path to change in culture and society. For Skafish, however, Malabou's perspective offers a useful path toward social change, envisioning as she does the common political ground of the brain (of neurobiology). Still, even in this thoughtful and engaged review, Skafish includes what seems to be the requisite clause regarding Malabou and her relationship to Derrida, "whose student, friend, and close collaborator she long was" (763). Skafish's reference to Derrida functions as a sort of defense for Malabou in this review, since Skafish saves the information for the section of the review in which he defends Malabou from two major critiques of her work.

Malabou's reception in *Hypatia*, a feminist journal, while positive, is not without patriarchal influences. In her article on Malabou's particular brand of Hegelianism, Lisabeth During forefronts the ways in which Malabou attempts to rehabilitate Hegel, particularly through the concept of plasticity. During also situates Malabou among other female poststructuralists:

For her, Hegel is not an interesting "maitre" worth a passionate but irritated conversation (as he is for Irigaray), nor a source of philosophical guidelines who can be absorbed and then moved beyond (as he is for Judith Butler), but someone who must be followed to the very limits (*jusqu' au bout*), to the extremities of his unexpected though, in order that the risk and challenge of his ideas be recognized and aspired to. (193)

Still, even with a fully engaged portrayal of Malabou's work, During genders Malabou in noticeable ways. When describing the ways in which Malabou defends Hegelian philosophy from the critique that he leaves no room for the local or the idiosyncratic, During writes: "But the virtue of Malabou's attractive Hegel is that, without glossing over any of the most intractable concepts in the Hegelian repertory, she can save Hegel from such a fate" (192). During's romanticized version of Malabou's philosophical endeavor casts Malabou in the role of rehabilitating a "bad boy" (Hegel) through her "virtue." And even During cannot resist credentialing Malabou in her conclusion, noting that Malabou's achievements in Hegelian interpretation were "Inspired by her teacher and collaborator Derrida" (194).

I can conclude from the above analysis that Malabou's work on Hegel, plasticity, and neuroscience has tended to be ungendered, yet responses to her work, at least in the United States, have been remarkably gendered. Except perhaps in the case of Derrida himself, writers have generally construed her as a philosopher with feminine tropes, as demonstrated above. Even in the case of Jeannerod's terse introduction, the absence of deepened explication, engagement, and critique differentiates Malabou's reception from that of other French post-poststructuralists being translated for audiences in the United States.

In the end, it is Derrida's work that may shed light on these questions about femininity and philosophy. In her essay on gender in Derrida, Peggy Kamuf examines Derrida's reading of Heidegger, in which Derrida notes Heidegger's refusal to connect the words "sexual" and "power." Derrida points out that by attempting to silence the binary of sexuality, Heidegger only reinscribes that particular polarity and thus power dynamic. For Kamuf, this move is just as evident in Judith Butler's work; she argues that Butler's work on gender and sex is just as vulnerable to deconstruction as, say, Heidegger. But Kamuf also notes that Butler's assertions about sex and power, in contrast to Heidegger's, are "in the open: it is overtly a discourse of sexual politics, rather than always only potentially or in secret" (102). To follow Kamuf in her musings on Derrida and gender, whether one discusses the binary of sex or gender or attempts to avoid said binary, one is still continuing to inscribe the cultural binary, and hence power/powerlessness dynamic. Malabou seems to choose to vocalize her thoughts about sex over silence, realizing that either choice inscribes the male/female binary; in any case, male and female philosophers continue to inscribe gender power dynamics on their works, whether they overtly choose to do so or not. In *Deep Time of the Media*, Siegfried Zielinski does not mention the issue of gender politics in relationship to his idiosyncratic history of art, science, and media; yet, by including no women among his protagonists, he makes a statement of sexual politics nonetheless. Zielinski is rather like Cesare Lombroso, one of his roguish protagonists, who defies others to make use of his work in denigrating and subjugating women by registering a political objection to his own work: "he defines the relationship between the sexes as production for the benefit of the male" (Zielinski 221). Even though Lombroso spares one sentence to attempt to avoid ill effects from his entire body of work, Lombroso's work, which does actually denigrate the position of women, still stands. As does Zielinski's silence on gender politics, which inscribes the cultural binary of power/powerlessness.

If Malabou were to make no comment at all on gender, she would still be inscribing the binary power structure of gender. If she does comment, the same result occurs, except that by the overt proclamation of her experiences and theory, she might have some impact on the material conditions of women in philosophy or otherwise. Indeed, her version of plasticity offers hope for what Malabou describes as freedom.

She describes plasticity as re-visioning the relationship between form and itself, first citing Hegel: “Hegel shows that the subject is plastic in the sense that she or he is able to receive form (passivity) and to give form (activity)” (Vahanian 4). Malabou then argues that this relationship is not based on difference but on metamorphosis, that the “Hegelian subject *trans-subjects* itself constantly” (Vahanian 4). Malabou takes this idea of transsubjectivation and re-visions the gender binary as not based on difference but change. Her interpretation of Foucault elaborates transsubjectivation: “This transsubjectivation doesn’t mean that you become different from what you used to be, nor that you are able to absorb the other’s difference, but that you open a space within yourself between two forms of yourself. That you oppose two forms of yourself within yourself” (Vahanian 5). She argues that this interpretation of transsubjectivation, which absorbs from Hegel and Foucault, might also be called plasticity and implies the ability of the subject to re-form itself. In an article on neuroscience that relies on Malabou’s work to ground the intersection between understandings of the brain and political agency, Victoria Pitts-Taylor argues that Malabou “claims the possibility of controlling our neuronal destiny—and perhaps our broader social and political life” (638). The potential for such re-form is at the heart of Malabou’s concept of freedom as well; in the introduction to *Changer de la différence*, she writes:

These four texts [the essays in *Changer de la différence*] each contain, in their own ways, an address to Jacques Derrida, who accompanied me for so long and first showed me the type of difficulty awaiting a “woman” when she intends to become a “philosopher”. Another difficulty being precisely how to manage to distance myself from him, Jacques Derrida, in order to be able to remain both, “woman” and “philosopher”. To be able, too, as the last text shows, to be neither one nor the other, in taking a decision not incumbent on anyone but me and which presents itself as a pure, radical affirmation, without a single concession, of my freedom.

It is the concept of plasticity that allows Malabou to envision such possibility for freedom and re-form, the radical ability to not choose femininity or philosophy but to be both and to be herself; it is this radical possibility for self re-form and perhaps cultural re-form that she offers her readers. Though she does not state it directly in her introduction to *Changer de la différence* there still lingers in the connotation of plasticity that this cultural re-form may entail *plastique*, or revolution. Though she does not hint at gender in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, we might still read into this work a potential feminine audience, the women for whom she wrote *Changer de la différence*, when she writes: “To ask ‘What should we do with our brain?’ is above all to visualize the possibility of saying no to an afflicting economic, political, and mediatic culture that celebrates only the triumph of flexibility, blessing obedient individuals who have no greater merit than that of knowing how to bow their heads with a smile” (79).

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