

"First" and "Third" World Feminism(s)

Does Paul Ricœur's Philosophy Offer a Way to Bridge the Gap?

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Abstract

This essay considers how Paul Ricœur's philosophy, including his philosophical hermeneutics and narrative theory, could be employed to facilitate dialogue and understanding between feminists from different contexts. Authors such as bell hooks and Hélène Cixous frame feminist tenets of liberation from sexual oppression and validation of the body as a source of knowledge. Weaving together Ricœur's writing and theories with the work of two feminist scholars, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Grace M. Cho, illuminates the potential Ricœur's work has to play a part in feminist discourse.

Keywords: Narrative Theory, Philosophical Hermeneutics, Feminist Theory, Post-Colonial Theory

Résumé

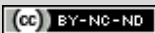
Cet article analyse comment la philosophie de Paul Ricoeur, y compris son herméneutique philosophique et sa théorie narrative, pourrait être utilisée pour faciliter le dialogue et la compréhension entre les féministes venants de divers horizons. Des auteurs tels que bell hooks et Hélène Cixous construisent les principes féministes de la libération à partir de l'oppression sexuelle et de l'évaluation du corps comme source de connaissance. Tisser ensemble les écrits et les théories de Ricoeur avec les travaux de deux chercheuses féministes, Trinh T. Minh-ha et Grace M. Cho, met en lumière le potentiel que le travail de Ricoeur est appelé à jouer dans le discours féministe.

Mots-clés: Théorie narrative, Herméneutique philosophique, Théorie féministe, Théorie post-coloniale

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"First" and "Third" World Feminism(s)

Does Paul Ricœur's Philosophy Offer a Way to Bridge the Gap?

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Introduction

In this century, when the voices and bodies of women from all over the world are demanding to be heard, one wonders what the thoughts of a white, male, Protestant, continental philosopher such as Paul Ricœur can offer. From this peculiar starting point, one wonders about the contribution his work can make to discourse taken up by feminists and post-colonialists aware of the privileges of dominant, first-world cultures. This paper considers feminism in general, especially as conceived of by bell hooks, and two specific feminists working in disparate disciplines from Ricœur's own: Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*¹ and Grace M. Cho in *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy and the Forgotten War*.² These texts address the feminist concern of sexist oppression, presenting different challenges to reading and interpreting texts, all while drawing attention to the body. Each does so in a different way. They do not speak to one another but offer to feminist scholarship instances of resisting sexist oppression in disparate contexts. Each communicates messages about bodies that are relevant to contemporary discourse.

Ricœur provides philosophical hermeneutics, a way of reading and interpreting texts that enhances readers' understanding of themselves, the texts, and the environment.³ For Ricœur, reading narratives, uncovering symbols, and interpreting stories facilitate comprehension of and engagement with the world. For instance, *Living Up to Death*, a small book written while his wife was dying and completed as he himself was dying, reveals Ricœur's confrontation with his own body in death. Written in a non-traditional way, *Living Up to Death* discloses a vulnerability that makes Ricœur's love of humanity palpable. When the sense of text expands to things likened to written words – like the experience of daily life, art, and even the body – Ricœur's hermeneutic has even greater implications.

Thus, this essay claims that Ricœur's theories and methods can act as a bridge across feminisms. According to Angela Pears, the term "feminisms" relates to the variety of encounters and/or contexts "in which feminist informed perspectives and criteria have been employed as the basis for critical and transformative engagement."⁴ Feminism's emergence from disparate contexts poses a challenge to feminists' understanding of each other. Ricœur's work can participate and facilitate dialogue among feminists/feminism(s), not only because of his method, but also because Ricœur's general philosophical argument, that the self comes to know itself and transforms itself through the world, shares qualities with feminist missives. A beginning point for communication among feminists with Ricœur's oeuvre is to utilize his hermeneutics to read and see themselves in the other – in the form of written texts and in the form of bodies.

Feminist Dispositions

An initial question this paper sought to explore concerned communication between "first" and "third" world feminists and whether or not Ricœur's theories and writing could help facilitate communication among them. However, the terms "first" and "third" world are philosophically and politically inadequate for this paper, although each does convey a meaning. This meaning is critical when reflecting upon how feminists hear and read each other. For instance, in reference to economic status, "first" is often a label meant to indicate developed countries, while "third" is a label meant to indicate underdeveloped countries. In addition, associations also emerge that link "first" to "white" and "third" to "non-white." In light of bell hooks's critique of white feminism (that white feminists reinforce white supremacy and are often racist in their own writing),⁵ how can first world feminisms self-reflect as well as understand, empathize, and struggle along with and for other feminisms, especially transculturally? Reflecting again on economics, when feminists attempt to understand each other, recognizing that there are "third" world feminists in "first" world countries, or that grossly vast gaps exist between women in various economic classes, is not only important, but it is also a responsibility. Furthermore, Trinh T. Minh-ha alerts readers, "Wo-appended to man in sexist contexts is not unlike Third World, Third, Minority or Colour affixed to woman in pseudo-feminist contexts. Yearning for universality, the generic woman, like its counterpart, the generic man, tends to efface difference within itself."⁶ "First" and "third" world are "affixed" and fixed terms; they attribute a condition and imprint an identity, one that Minh-ha seeks to challenge. Ricœur's useful insight amplifies Minh-ha's idea.

In "Violence and Language," Ricœur claims that violence emerges in individual speech, even in (and perhaps especially in) the speech-act of identity claiming.⁷ A critical problem in violence conceived as such is that it inhibits agency and relationality. The way of avoiding such violence is by recognizing plurality, which evolves as a part of a process of forgiveness whereby the agent is unbound from its act of labeling originating in language. Minh-ha asks, "Why do we have to be concerned with the question of Third World women? After all, it is only one issue among many others. Delete the word 'Third World' and the sentence immediately unveils its value-loaded clichés."⁸ Minh-ha draws attention to the question of women, and Ricœur points to the problem of labeling in general as a violent act. For Ricœur, such labeling immediately squelches possibility of communication between self and other, indeed, among feminists. Considering the violence of labeling echoes and amplifies Minh-ha's assertions, as mentioned above; even feminists do violence to each other by labeling. Resisting labels, or even being aware of labeling as a form of violence, would help bridge the gap and make feminism, or feminism(s), an inclusive idea that encompasses the whole experience of women.

Avoiding labeling poses a challenge; self-reflexivity and communication of self in lieu of classifying others can serve as an alternative. In *Living Up to Death*, Ricœur makes an attempt to communicate to others his selfhood and his personal confrontation with reality. His starting point is self-reflection not the "other." He talks about death and dying, resurrection and forgiveness, God, and life as God's gift. His efforts are for the "other." He writes, "To love the other, my survivor...It is the *openness and being available for the fundamental* that motivates the transfer of the love of life to the other."⁹ *Living Up to Death* reveals a liberatory message, one of "openness" and freedom. The insistence on openness to love, and a freedom in and with the "other," supports the liberatory notion of feminism proposed by bell hooks in her fundamental feminist text: *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. She emphasizes the importance of a feminist theory that would

offer everyone, men and women alike, a liberatory vision of love and sexual expression.¹⁰ From what humanity is freed differs for each author, but that something exists from which to be liberated, and that liberation involves love, remains a constant for both. For Ricœur, liberation is for the Essential, the deepest vicissitudes of life, which he relates to religious experience; for hooks, liberation is from sexist oppression and towards freedom in life from patriarchal systems.¹¹ Furthermore, Ricœur does not take order or some preordained sense of absolute knowledge for granted, and he does this with an eye on what it means to be a human, mortal, body, struggling for self-knowledge and capability. As a white, male, protestant philosopher, Ricœur exposes his own vulnerability, his own lack of control, and struggles with his own process. In an honest and vulnerable way, Ricœur explores a liberatory aim, heralding the desires of feminism. Feminists identify with confronting vulnerability and lack of control, seeking to recover self-knowledge in a world where sexist oppression is an “everyday” affair. Minh-ha reveals this in grappling with the narratives of colored women as they reveal their lives and their bodies. In each case, the goal is similar: liberation of the other and liberation for the other.

In negotiating feminism, Ricœur’s philosophy of liberation is a worthy point of analysis, not because he espouses liberation from sexual oppression, but because he sees in liberation a sense of approaching the Essential. Ricœur reflects upon facing death, where the loss of one’s own life highlights the importance of service to and love of others, specifically of “the other.” Ricœur writes of a struggle inherent in morality: life includes death, and detachment from death or detachment from the reality of loss of life is “the transfer of the love of life to the *other*.”¹² For Ricœur, liberation for the Essential is liberation for what is most basic, indispensable, and necessary, such as “the *other*,” mortality and fragility, featured in *Living up to Death*, emphasize the liberatory aim. Ricœur’s negotiations with and reflections on death can be useful resources for feminists, not because these reflections say something new for feminists, but because the message of liberation for and of the other echoes feminist agendas and supports feminist values. Minh-ha’s work shows that this liberation for the Essential happens in the lives of everyday women; assistance to and love of “the other” are paramount and constitute the essence of living. In Minh-ha’s work, philosophy at its finest emerges in the lives of the Senegalese women.

Minh-ha struggles to understand voices of those labeled as “other,” such as Senegalese women, challenging her readers to do the same. In doing so, she renders valueless systems of domination that diminish the worth and significance of women’s lives. Feminist scholarship and feminism(s) concern an upturning of systems of domination reflected in Minh-ha’s work, while focusing on the development of the whole person. bell hooks writes, “Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.”¹³ Although Ricœur does not directly address such themes in his writing, he anchors his philosophy in the development of the human person. For Ricœur, capability includes not only the ability to speak and to do, but also the capacity to remember, to forgive, and to realize human worth. Ricœur says that in his own analyses of acting and suffering he addresses “common humanity” with a “sexually neutral thesis,” while at the same time he acknowledges that his thesis suffers “the limits of a male way of thinking and writing.”¹⁴

In addition to recognizing common human worth, Ricœur’s philosophy seeks deeply to conjoin theory and practice, illustrated in *Living Up to Death*. Ricœur’s writing in this text is his own approach to other texts (biblical) and to other bodies (his wife’s and another dying friend’s).

His philosophy of the arc illustrates the consistent negotiation between self, text, and the world, and he practices this negotiation and interpretation. In reading, according to Ricœur's hermeneutic arc,¹⁵ the reader approaches a text, appropriates the text to him/herself, and interprets the text in order to ground interpretation ontologically. What was initially alien, the text, becomes actualized, integrated, and part of the reader's own experience.¹⁶ Ricœur's hermeneutics keeps this appropriation from becoming a subjective interpretation that isolates other interpretations because of his insistence on continued engagement with the world. A reader moves from an epistemological basis toward an ontological basis, from knowledge to being, converting an experience into something more concrete. In such a way, narrative provides a practical way for dealing with present, real-life problems that feminists confront. Reading itself becomes a practice for Ricœur, and this practice must relate to self-transformation and love towards others. In feminist thought, bell hooks refers to the real and immediate need for theory and practice to be united in feminism so that political commitments and individual lifestyle choices merge for feminists.¹⁷ Ricœur's idea of appropriation of the text to oneself, always in light of the world, suggests that the individual has a relationship and responsibility to the world. Thought and practice reflect one another. In addition, Ricœur's theory conveys that feminist proponents of specific feminisms can read the works of others and make them their own; both writer and reader benefit. Using Ricœur's theory of hermeneutics, feminists from disparate and distinct points of view can read each other.

Ricœur's hermeneutics leads to differing levels of understanding (of a text, of everyday living, of bodies), as does feminism. Thus, hermeneutics contributes to consciousness. For hooks, feminism requires developing a political consciousness that re-centers the focus of feminism on the diversity in the social lives and political realities of women, ceasing to locate men as the "enemy," while forcing feminists to "examine systems of domination and our role in their maintenance and perpetuation."¹⁸ Ricœur's hermeneutic arc can assist a thorough "reading" of such systems. In addition, Ricœur claims that with consciousness comes intentionality, especially when consciousness is involved with the "other." Consciousness in this case is a kind of awareness, both of self and other. Thus, theory and practice, so critical to hooks in the feminist enterprise, as well as liberation towards an Essential, nearly mystical unity and equality, are deeply embedded into Ricœur's thought.

One other point of contention to raise regarding feminism and the validity of Ricœur's theory has to do with the dearth of critical attention that has been given to *Living Up to Death* compared to other texts in Ricœur's oeuvre. Precisely why the book has been marginalized remains unknown; however, the text differs from Ricœur's other works. Instead of setting forth propositions or philosophical matrixes, *Living Up to Death* is reflexive, often poetic, and written non-linearly; the second part is written in fragments. This book is the location in which Ricœur practices his own theory; it is here that he writes himself. Feminist readers everywhere will recognize this dynamic from "Laugh of the Medusa" where Hélène Cixous insists that "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies."¹⁹

The Body, the Figure, and Grace M. Cho

For feminists, the body is a critical locus and intersection of writing, power, and experience. For Ricœur, the body is the starting point of capability and, similar to a narrative, functions as a mode of access to the other.²⁰ In addition, Ricœur's approach to narrative or texts

can be applied to the body as a text embodied. Through the application of Ricœur's hermeneutics, the body can be recognized, recovered, and reconstructed as meaning incarnate. The narrative manifests when the body tells the story; both the body and verbal constructs establish the reality of the past and share the narrative qualities of fiction and story. The body testifies to the past, to trauma, and to joy creating, as in Jacques Lacan's concept of the word, a presence of absence.²¹ The body signifies by means of its homological structure those who are absent, or "other" than ourselves, as present. The body brings with it to the present, the experiences of the past, just as narrative does. Cixous writes, "Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text. History, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body."²² Stories utilize the body as a means of communicating: artists figure emotional experience; the poet incarnates truth and perceptions of the real; choreographers use a public space to create and communicate through movement, writers, like Cixous and Ricœur, write with and through their bodies. The body entails its own narrative, taking place in history, knowing, remembering, and speaking. Ricœur's theories help express the synthesizing aspects of the body engaged in a discourse, a lived, shared experience that involves an intentional relationship with the world.

Thus, the body can also be written upon. When the body is a text, Ricœur's hermeneutic arc becomes a tool to assist in our interpretation. Exegesis of the body becomes a grounding point for appropriation. Initially, finding the meaning of the body or the suffering body as a text leads to discovering its significance. Although finding meaning in the traumatized body poses a challenge, exploring the body's story as one would a text assists intellectual understanding. The fixation of text in a medium, or the body as a text, endows the text/body with a life that is separate from the owner or author, ostensive references, and its original audience. The nature of linguistics provides the body with a phenomenology that can be analyzed. Thus, the body as a text becomes an object of exploration. Cixous and Catherine Clément insist that, "Everything expresses itself, comes out of the body."²³

This analysis and exploration of a body as text is exemplified in Grace M. Cho's work *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*. In this book, Cho traces something there and not there in the form of the figure of the *yanggongju*.²⁴ The *yanggongju* is both a central and subjugated figure emerging during the Korean War. She is a transnational product upon which is written the trauma of war and division. *Yanggongju* is a label thrust upon women as well as a ghost of the Korean Diaspora. Multiple narratives inform what is understood about this figure; they produce a constellation of bodies that Cho attempts to distinguish.

Although the *yanggongju* was generally absent from official discourse, she held a place both in the diasporic unconscious and in conscious, physical lives of Koreans, especially immigrants to the United States. She was both absent and unavoidably present. Considered as either a shameful sex daughter, a symbol for a colonized nation, or as a diplomat successfully making her way to America, the *yanggongju* received names of "Yankee whore," "GI bride," and "Western Princess."²⁵ Branded and consciously forgotten (or repressed), she continued/continues to haunt Koreans, revealing how the past has a way of infiltrating the present through a body or bodies upon which the past is written. In most diasporic families, she is still hidden in the gaps, as she was the primary vehicle for immigration from Korea into the United States, via her American husband. Children produced from the union, Cho reports, often when asked about their parents' histories say, "I don't know."²⁶ But Cho says that the *yanggongju* can be traced back through the body.

The new construction of a female subject as *yanggongju* came from the product of wounded histories. Onto her Koreans write their feelings of fear and resentment of the United

States as well as a longing to become a part of the American dream. According to Cho, family members settling in the United States as a result of the *yanggongju's* immigration rejected her and refused to acknowledge her influence on their lives; she and what she stands for were erased. Exiled from the Confucian concept of virtue, she was and is shamed by Koreans. Regulated as a prostitute by the US and Korean Government during the war, she was branded with a pass that established her sexual cleanliness, that marked her free from disease.²⁷ In all cases, she is configured by unresolved trauma. As a ghost, she haunts the present composed by a series of erasures, gaps, and silences. She is there and not there, and Cho wants to make her visible. Cho writes that the *yanggongju* figures in her own story, as her mother was a Korean war bride: "I am struggling to recover the pieces of some willfully forgotten story, to make sense of what happened in that space of absence."²⁸ Similarly, Ricœur respects the power of story, noting throughout his work how narrative, myth, and symbol shape meaning.

Ricœur tells Peter Kemp in an interview, "Telling a story is the most permanent act of societies...in telling their own stories cultures create themselves."²⁹ In Cho's attempt to recover a story, she recovers language in its symbolic fullness and writes a story herself. She helps to recollect the past and recount her culture, naming a female body. The mythopoetic imagination of Ricœur's narrative theory, thus, helps realize the hidden sense of collective history. The "rootedness of narrative in memory," for Ricœur is "rootedness in the imagination," and the link between to two – memory and imagination – is corporeality.³⁰ This link can be applied both to individual and collective identity.

Cho's writing reflects collective identity when she marks the dynamic haunting by *yanggongju*; this haunting (where memory and imagination meet) is a kind of transgenerational trauma, which lives on for Korean immigrants. The *yanggongju* takes up multiple voices as she unearths the memory of the *yanggongju* and establishes her body and her excess of *han* (Cho calls this "accumulated rage and grief") that reverberates through the collective unconscious of Koreans.³¹ She is fragmented as a ghost, as a silenced figure, but she also opens up for Cho new sites of resistance, new ways of thinking about trauma and what to do with *han*, drawing attention to the subversive power of Korean military wives. Cho's approach echoes the efforts of feminists to resist sexist oppression. Cho does this by revealing *yanggongju* in all of her dimensions. Cho also figures herself in this drama, never hearing the word "*yanggongju*" at home but acknowledging her heritage, saying that she was haunted by this figure and had to write about her, about her body. Cho's work alerts readers and feminists to the fact that the body tells a story and that some stories are not fully revealed.

Ricœur's work on metaphor and symbol in narrative relates to Cho's sensibility to read further to uncover all that the *yanggongju* embodies. In Ricœur's hermeneutic philosophy, the text itself introduces existential and political possibilities. What Cho shows is precisely the same, that a word, *yanggongju*, and the reading of that word as text implicate individual and national narratives. In the *Symbolism of Evil*, Ricœur's method of language analysis, including his analysis of symbols and myths in the form of intricate narratives regarding evil (not dissimilar to the methodological analysis of *yanggongju*), illustrates that language abounds with a multiplicity of meaning. Ricœur's oeuvre manifests the belief that philosophical exploration should address this multiplicity.

Further, Ricœur illustrates how to read bodies and figures as embodying something more than what is revealed about them by hegemonic systems. He insists that philosophy revolves around the duty of memory in an ocean of meaning, a duty to reveal and imbue power, a duty that through *yanggongju* emerges in Cho's work. To hermeneutics, Ricœur adds

affirmation of critique renouncing certainty and espousing a genuine hope of a yielding discourse: the impossibility of absolute knowledge. In fact, Ricœur distrusts anything that demands a final judgment.

Cho raises into memory this figure that she cannot know absolutely, this woman *yanggongju*, while through her writing she mourns. This loss, a loss which many women share, is complicated by the fact that different aspects of women are lost: their own memories, families, relationships, and old identities and self-constructs. To this loss, Ricœur offers reading narrative, where memory and imagination converge, again, in the body. Further, Ricœur might say that hope emerges in this memory and mourning. The hope is not for a redemptive end, but it is rather a hope that Oliver Abel, in the preface of *Living Up to Death*, says, “transforms itself into that low-key, almost Franciscan fraternity of ‘being among’ creatures, yet without renouncing being oneself, to the end, of taking one’s place at the very moment one yields it.”³² In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Ricœur refers to the Exodus and the Resurrection as the most liberative of acts; he continues to posit that without these, the anticipation of hope and freedom would dissolve from the history of mankind.³³ In haunting ways, Cho’s work represents an exodus from the past, from a stigma, and a resurrection of a body into the present, rectified and validated.

Displacement, Ontology, and Trinh T. Minh-ha

According to Ricœur’s hermeneutics, ontology is a project. Being is thus a process/project itself of understanding that entails the archeology and teleology of the subject. The subject negotiates between past and present, like *yanggongju*, to create new meaning. Narrative facilitates this negotiation in Ricœur’s famous maxim, “The symbol gives rise to thought.”³⁴ Therefore, the subject looks to tradition and history but also stands outside of it, critically interpreting it. As mentioned, the hermeneutic method is applied to the text and to the body as a text. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricœur parallels this method with psychoanalysis.³⁵ Both in hermeneutics and psychoanalysis, a process of self-attestation takes place as a moment of constituting self-identity: we are, we act, and we suffer. The “other” reifies identity consistently, especially through memory. As a result, identity, repeatedly reified, changes through the “other.” Further, narrative identity as the evolving story of the self compliments personal identity; incorporated, the individual in this dynamic is led ethically to action.

This kind of negotiation between past and present (as seen in Cho), a feminist and human enterprise in self-formation, characterizes Trinh T. Minh-ha’s book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Minh-ha draws from literary criticism, anthropology, theology, post-colonial theory, feminist studies, and women’s studies using film, photography, creative writing, and analytical tools to challenge male normativity and subsequent hegemonic systems. Her examination of the post-colonial process of displacement has a psychoanalytic tone. She reveals the participation of different kinds of silence that perpetuate racial and gender oppression. She conjoins text, reader, and world in an interplay where reading, to use Ricœur’s words, requires capability and responsibility. She writes, “Bound to one another by an awareness of their guilt, writer and reader may thus assess their positions, engaging themselves wholly in their situations and carrying their weight into the weight of their communities, the weight of the world.”³⁶ Minh-ha’s demand, though articulated differently, retains the feminist precept of political consciousness and parallels Ricœur’s narrative theory: reader and writer

share an experience through the text which changes each and leads each to a responsibility in engaging the world.

Ricœur articulates this responsibility in terms of becoming, memory, and forgiveness, where as Minh-ha articulates it in terms of "carrying weight."³⁷ She presses forward asserting that writing should raise consciousness – as an "unsettling process" although the author should not impose her views on another.³⁸ Ricœur's words in *Oneself as Another*, "To be sure, the self is 'summoned to responsibility' by the other,"³⁹ constitute a global, inclusive statement highlighted in the more specific feminist assertion of bearing a load together in sisterhood. Although Ricœur does not directly articulate the importance of developing a political consciousness in the face of sexist oppression as hooks and Minh-ha do, he nonetheless radically demands theory that emerges in the practice of mutuality where each loves the other for being the person that he/she is. Ricœur's use of the broad and inclusive terms of "self" and "other" can certainly be read to be the basis for the formation of a political consciousness by any so inclined person. His theory and his specific "call to responsibility," in a way, anticipate and encourage such political consciousness.

Further, Minh-ha values writing, reading, and the communication of life through narrative as do Ricœur, Cho, and Cixous. In fact, if Minh-ha proposed any solution to the politics of displacement, it would be a solution bound to the act of engagement and listening to story. Engaging and listening to story is precisely the practice to which feminism(s), across divides, needs to attend. Minh-ha's last chapter begins, "Let me tell you a story. For all I have is story. Story passed on from generation to generation, named Joy."⁴⁰ She continues, "The story depends on every one of us to come into being."⁴¹

Ricœur would agree with Minh-ha, as he believes that telling stories is one of the most permanent acts of any society.⁴² For Ricœur, both telling and reading stories, as mentioned in narrative and in analysis, contribute to self-formation. Minh-ha's work in celebrating women of color, in lifting up their stories, in some ways follows Ricœur's four points of narrative articulated in *Time and Narrative*.⁴³ The first is the formation of identity through the plot. Both characters and the self, by way of the arc, form through reading. In Minh-ha's chapter "Grandma's Story," she says that every woman partakes in the transmission of story and, in that partaking, creates a new story and an evolving self.⁴⁴ In this process, Ricœur recognizes both order and disorder. Bodies and stories are messy; they converge and diverge. Minh-ha's text captures this interplay. Second, in this evolution of story both the self and others become intertwined, and each is, thirdly, both distinct and full bodied. Mothers and daughters repeat grand-ma's story, not identically, because with retelling the story, each forms a new story leaving traces of herself. Last, the narrative process as a whole implies or has an ethic where the other is over the self. The self and others participate in narrative in a kind of mutual sharing, where the arc prevents sole appropriation of a text; instead it allows for a kind of mimesis where one's experience does not become one's own but changes one's own. Minh-ha writes in reference to sharing story, "The entire being is engaged in the act of speaking-listening-weaving-procreating...Let her weave her story within their stories, her life amidst their lives."⁴⁵ And so together the story is told, lived, and recounted.

A dialectic occurs between living action and a poetic narrative; it is precisely this which the narrative arc traces. The tension of the narrative arc is between concordance and discordance. A reader in narrative theory completes the text. For Ricœur, "narrative is a redefining of what is already defined, a reinterpretation of what is already interpreted."⁴⁶ The narrative, free for interpretation, offers new shape to existence. The arc becomes a bridge between participation and

doubt that could be used by feminists to locate where they stand in relation to and in identification with other feminisms.

An interesting example of this surfaces in Minh-ha's 1983 film *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* where she documents women's lives in Senegal.⁴⁷ In the process, she recognizes, as Ricœur does, both order and disorder. In the evolution of the characters' stories, which she films frequently without narration, both the self and others (as viewers/readers of the image) become intertwined, and each is both distinct and full-bodied. The narrative process as a whole, according to Ricœur and reflected in Minh-ha's film, implies or has an ethic where the other emerges as equal to the self. Thus, the self and others participate in narrative in a kind of mutual sharing, where the arc prevents sole appropriation of a text, allowing for a kind of mimesis where one experience does not become one's own but changes one's own. In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricœur states that the non-verbal and verbal co-operate in language.⁴⁸ The autonomous flesh engages in the function of the poetic imagination, juxtaposing the real and the unreal, and ultimately, moving through the "other" to the self. Minh-ha's narration and lack of narration in her film visibly produce in the cooperation of the verbal and non-verbal the convergence of real and unreal. Her examination of women's writing in *Woman, Native, Other* performs a similar function, revealing poetic imagination that reaches out towards another to change him/her.

For Ricœur, the narrative arc traces the dialectic that occurs between living action and poetic narrative. The tension of the narrative arc is between concordance and discordance. Minh-ha's film displays this concordance and discordance in her use of narration, sometimes present and helpful, at other times absent and disconcerting, leaving the viewer on his/her own to make meaning. Thus, the viewer/reader, as in narrative theory, completes the text. For Ricœur, "narrative is a redefining of what is already defined, a reinterpretation of what is already interpreted."⁴⁹ Narrative is free within a text to be appropriated not as an individual possession but as a shared notion that contributes to change; the film and the stories in it of the Senegalese, once interpreted by Minh-ha, are open to interpretation by the viewer and are freed to change the viewer. Ultimately, though, stories offer new shape to existence. The arc becomes a bridge between participation and doubt to help the reader locate where he/she stands in relation to and in identification with the "other". Minh-ha's assertion that writing includes participation with the reader as a "releaser of meaning" concurs with Ricœur's narrative arc. She states, "Charged with intentionality, writing is therefore a disclosing (a secret), and reading is believing. The writer as a personified releaser of meaning produces envelopes whose more or less brilliant colors serve to decorate 'the (theological) message.'"⁵⁰ Feminists, reading each other, mindful of Ricœur's narrative theories can share one another's stories to shape and color their own existence. His theories, complimented by Minh-ha's writing, not only act as bridges in communication between feminists but also have the potential to adhere political consciousness to everyday practice.

For Minh-ha, writing is an ongoing practice, much like reading and hermeneutics is a practice for Ricœur, a practice that benefits the relation of oneself to another. Minh-ha says writing is "concerned not with inserting a 'me' into language, but with creating an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go." Minh-ha's statement echoes Ricœur's enigmatic writing in *Living Up to Death*. "I survive on borrowed time...I yield my spirit to God for the others. This bond, this transmission has its meaning beyond me and a meaning is concealed there by which God will perhaps join forces with me in a way I cannot imagine; what remains: continue living up to death."⁵¹ But this living is not for the "I" as subject, absorbed for

Ricœur in fidelity, but for the others, and in contribution to the life of the other. Yet, Ricœur recognizes a certain narcissistic quality inherent in living like this; he is self-reflective and conscious. He understands that in this process of facing death, he is simultaneously preoccupied with himself, thoughts of "the others," and his changing being where detachment, presumably from death, is "the transfer of the love of life to the *other*."⁵² As Minh-ha says, "'I' is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. 'I' is, itself, infinite layers" and "the natures of I, i, you, s/he, We, we they, and wo/man constantly overlap."⁵³

Ricœur confronts the situation of one and the other's natures overlapping in his own way in *Living Up to Death* to determine what is essential, that is, humanity reconciled with its essential conditions. In *Freedom and Nature*, this overlap illustrates a kind of hope, being among others and being self. In *Living Up to Death*, the work of hope is consummated in memory, which has to "unite the work of memory [itself] and the work of mourning."⁵⁴ The body figures in this work as mourning, united with memory, and by implication with imagination, happens corporeally.

In fact, Ricœur sheds light on the strangeness of human finiteness, sealed by embodiment, called primary otherness. As "oneself as another," an individual interprets him/herself through touch and through the other; the burdensome character of existence and the task of having-to-be come to light. The flesh is both a body and a body among bodies. Flesh is otherness in the "I am," but "my flesh appears as a body among bodies only to the extent that I am myself an other among all the others."⁵⁵ Positing the self is a task that requires both effort and desire. Ricœur tells us in *Oneself as Another*, "With the decrease of the power of acting, experienced as a decrease of the effort of existing, the reign of suffering, properly speaking, commences."⁵⁶

Ricœur sets forth several presuppositions regarding the body in *Oneself as Another* that guide the argument about the affiliation of the text with the body.⁵⁷ In *Living Up to Death*, he reveals that body as his own. The person, Ricœur himself, as an ontological body, functions within linguistic constraints, as does any text. One's own body is the place of belonging both to events that happen in the world and to self-referential designation of the subject in that event. A text embodied records an event, reveals an event, extending beyond itself to the interpreter but always in a self-referential manner; a body, and a body as text, always refers back to itself. An appropriation of the text, never completely leaves the text itself; it grounds a new experience, but that experience always imputes the text. The self finds an anchor in the body; the body connects it to the world, and like any story, chronicles experience. Bodies record, remember, and respond.

Minh-ha's words reinforce the importance of the body as holding a story, "Every gesture, every word involves our past, present, and future. The body never stops accumulating."⁵⁸ She writes further, "The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched."⁵⁹ Minh-ha says we can exalt the body but must also preserve its integrity. This is because, "The Body, the most visible difference between men and women, the only one to offer secure ground for those who seek the permanent; the feminine 'nature' and 'essence,' remains thereby the safest basis for racist and sexist ideologies."⁶⁰

Minh-ha alerts us to the delicacies of bodies, their differences, their similarities, and to how the female body serves as the basis for sexist oppression. Minh-ha also recognizes a tension between erasing difference and asserting it. First, erasing difference is a kind of assimilation, a blending in, therefore, a kind of disappearance. And second, claiming difference is a recollection

of roots and an assertion of ethnicity/authenticity, a labeling of sorts. Minh-ha asserts, “Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak.”⁶¹ And while she recognizes the potential for racism and sexism in regards to women’s bodies, Minh-ha also alludes to what Ricœur emphasizes: a common humanity.

Conclusion

Paul Ricœur’s philosophy, his own personal reflections, and his approach to narrative offer much to feminist dialogue. This reveals itself in Ricœur’s *Living Up to Death* and *Oneself as Another*, where Ricœur’s commitment to and love of the other and common humanity is palpable.

Feminists’ commitment to overturning sexist oppression can best be achieved by reading and listening to each other. Ricœur’s hermeneutics suggests a means of doing just that. The different contexts and worlds that feminists bring to the table sometimes collide, but when such contexts are appreciated and read as stories, interpretation and appropriation can be possible. All involved in the exchange have the potential to be changed.

Ricœur and feminists alike see the importance of dialogue, the necessity of communication, the need for sharing stories among peoples, between oneself and another, and throughout generations. The story is endless, regardless of who or whose body is doing the telling. And each story deserves to be told, and every story alters the reader’s experience of the world. This is not to dissolve complex contexts into singular, coherent homogenous narratives, but rather to emphasize the potential of reading each others’ lives and bodies through an interpretive lens, a lens that believes in transformation as a result of such reading. Such transformation would also, in hope where memory and mourning collide, be liberatory.

- ¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- ² Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008).
- ³ I want to be careful here of presenting Ricœur as an authoritative white, male voice offering to feminist scholarship ways of reading each other. This is in fact what I am offering, but I do not think of Ricœur as "authoritative." Instead, his hermeneutics and his message as a writer help to bridge conversations among feminists that are isolated from one another. Feminist literature and different versions of feminism abound, so feminists' reading each other is not only important but critical, and if feminists can think better how to do this, feminist scholarship will benefit.
- ⁴ Angela Pears, *Feminist Christian Encounters: The Methods and Strategies of Feminist Informed Christian Theologies* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 1.
- ⁵ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press Classics, 2000), 3.
- ⁶ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue,'" *Feminist Review* 25 (Spring 1987): 16.
- ⁷ Paul Ricœur, "Violence and Language," in *Political and Social Essays*, eds. David Stewart and Joseph Bien (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974), 34.
- ⁸ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue,'" 11; *Woman, Native, Other*, 85.
- ⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 42.
- ¹⁰ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 63. Here hooks goes into a deeper discussion of love with reference to Paolo Freire. See also bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Books, 2000).
- ¹¹ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 40.
- ¹² Ricœur, *Living Up to Death*, 42. Ricœur's sense of "the other" which takes such a major role in his work includes one's dependence on others for the formation of self, where shared fallibility and mortality makes communication possible. Such vulnerability is a grand equalizer. Furthermore for Ricœur, identity is understood through the other. See also Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Washington: Henry Regnery Company, 1965).
- ¹³ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 26.
- ¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, "A Response by Paul Ricœur," in *Paul Ricœur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*, ed. Morny Joy (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), xli-xlii.
- ¹⁵ Ricœur's hermeneutic arc and narrative arc are similar and different. Ricœur himself does little to distinguish them according to Dan Stiver in *Theology After Ricœur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 56-7. I assume in this paper that the

hermeneutic arc is foundational to Ricœur's thought as a whole, where the narrative arc more specifically explains the negotiation of a text and the incorporation of its meaning.

- ¹⁶ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 185.
- ¹⁷ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 30.
- ¹⁸ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 27.
- ¹⁹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1:4 (Summer 1976): 875.
- ²⁰ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991) 49, 135, and 215; and *Oneself as Another*, 326.
- ²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton & Company, 2002), 228.
- ²² Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing" and *Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 52.
- ²³ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 17.
- ²⁴ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 5.
- ²⁵ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 3.
- ²⁶ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 35.
- ²⁷ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 111.
- ²⁸ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 89.
- ²⁹ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 58.
- ³⁰ Ricœur, "Response," xlii.
- ³¹ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 82.
- ³² Ricœur, *Living Up to Death*, xii.
- ³³ Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 99-100.
- ³⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 237.
- ³⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).
- ³⁶ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 11.
- ³⁷ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 40.
- ³⁸ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 40.

- ³⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 189.
- ⁴⁰ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 119.
- ⁴¹ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 120.
- ⁴² Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur*, 58.
- ⁴³ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative: Volume I*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52-73.
- ⁴⁴ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 119-151.
- ⁴⁵ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 127-8.
- ⁴⁶ Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogue with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain, Ltd., 1995), 224
- ⁴⁷ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Digital, Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*, directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha (1982; New York: YouTube, 2012).
- ⁴⁸ Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello, SJ. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 246.
- ⁴⁹ Kearney, *States of Mind*, 224.
- ⁵⁰ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 30.
- ⁵¹ Ricœur, *Living Up to Death*, 85.
- ⁵² Ricœur, *Living Up to Death*, 42.
- ⁵³ Ricœur, *Living Up to Death*, 94.
- ⁵⁴ Ricœur, *Living Up to Death*, 38.
- ⁵⁵ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 326.
- ⁵⁶ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 320.
- ⁵⁷ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 319.
- ⁵⁸ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 122-3.
- ⁵⁹ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 121.
- ⁶⁰ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 100.
- ⁶¹ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 94.