Elizabeth V. Spelman

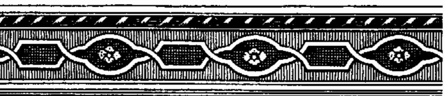
FRAMING OUR ATTENTION TO SUFFERING

Beacon Press

Boston

Chapter Five

CHANGING THE SUBJECT: ON MAKING YOUR SUFFERING MINE



One of the striking features of the campaign waged by nineteenth-century white suffragists in the United States was their comparison of the plight of women to the plight of slaves. A not untypical formulation was expressed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "The prolonged slavery of women is the darkest page in human history."[1] The white women in question not only wanted to make sense of their situation to and for themselves; they also wanted it to be understood by others as a condition crying out for and requiring a remedy. While they knew full well that plenty of men—and women—might disagree with them or ignore them altogether, they were eager to have the rights of women considered "a legitimate branch of the anti-slavery enterprise."[2]

These considerations point to certain constraints on the

ways in which these suffragists would have to describe their suffering. First of all, it would have to be presented as something systemic, a general condition of women (not a peculiar condition of a few anomalous poor souls) for which a general remedy could be found. And their suffering would have to be given an appropriate value in what, to borrow a phrase from the historian Martin Pernick, we may call a societal "calculus of suffering."[3] That is, on the one hand, they certainly would want to preclude a depiction of their situation that would allow others to trivialize their plight, by comparing them to whining spoiled children, for example; on the other hand, they would have to be careful not to overstate the severity of their situation. And they certainly would want to avoid what we now might call the medicalization of their pain—a reading of their misery that suggested individualized mental or physical rehabilitation as the most appropriate remedy. In short, their suffering had to be presented in such a light that it would be seen as a moral, social, and legal issue, that is, an issue of social injustice; that it be seen as remediable; and that its severity be neither under- nor overstated. In such a context, it is not surprising that Stanton and other white women active in the movement to abolish slavery drew heavily upon the language and imagery of the experience of slavery to make sense of and bring attention to the social, legal, and economic contraints under which they lived.

In *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*, Jean Fagan Yellin has examined in considerable detail what she describes as the "application of antislavery discourse to the condition of women."[4] Yellin describes the means by which the subject of the experience of slavery was changed—

from Black male and female slave to white woman and, in a later development, to "humanity in general."

Yellin makes clear that the linking of the condition of Black female slaves and white middle-class women often was not tendered simply or cautiously as a limited analogy. Some of the most vigorous and committed of white female abolitionists came to regard themselves as slaves, to describe their own experience in terms appropriated whole cloth from the language developed to depict slavery: as such women "expanded their discussions of the condition of slaves to include discussions of the condition of women, they continued to use the same discursive codes, but they connected them to new referends."[5] White women spoke not simply of being slaves, as in the quotation above from Stanton, but talked of being bound, fettered, having the oppressor's foot on their necks.[6] Yellin cites a passage from the diary of Angelina Grimké in which Grimké begins with a clear reference to a slave, but then proceeds, as Yellin puts it, to focus "on herself, describing her own transformation into a powerless slave. The passivity, the apprehension—the shaking knees, the sinking heart, the prayer for strength—all are her own. The suffering painfully recounted is Grimké's own. As she writes, the black woman recedes."[7] In the hands of Grimké and others, the subject changes not only from female slave to a particular white woman, but then to women in general, though that in practice meant white woman in general, or rather white middle-class Christian woman in general.[8] In either case, the female slave is made to disappear from view. Although presumably it was the female slave's experience that originally was the focus of concern, other women's experiences were made the focus.

Thus, although Yellin in no way underestimates the considerable hardship and violence to which white, nonslave women were subject, her work invites us to consider to what degree such women appropriated the experience of Black slaves, and Black female slaves in particular, that is, the extent to which they presented themselves as occupying the same experiential territory as slaves while erasing signs of the slaves' occupation of that territory. Yellin's concerns here are not unlike those expressed by the contemporary Black feminist bell hooks, who, in the opening pages of her *feminist theory: from margin to center*, insists that "feminist emphasis on 'common oppression' in the United States was less a strategy for politicization than an appropriation by conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary that masked the extent to which they shaped the movement so that it addressed and promoted their class interests."[9]

Many of us no doubt share these concerns. But, as Yellin's work illustrates, there is a host of important issues that remain unexamined if all we say here is that white women illegitimately appropriated the experience of Black women. Yellin's book gives us the chance to take a close look at some of the early moments in the long history of the tension between white and Black women active in abolitionist, civil rights, and women's struggles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States as they tried to make sense of their own and one another's suffering. Along the way, too, Yellin encourages us to look at some perplexing issues that arise when we think about the complex social and political conditions in which claims about the shared subjectivity of experiences typically are made. For as Yellin's work makes clear, some white suffragists' use of the lan-

guage of slavery to describe the situation of women had a complicated and contradictory relation to the institutionalized white racism of the time: in some ways it undermined, in some ways it sustained such racism. This paradoxical relation took at least three closely related forms, which I call the paradox in appropriation, the paradox in identification, and the paradox in universality.

THE PARADOX IN APPROPRIATION

What I am calling "paradoxes" represent ways in which white women's comparison of themselves to slaves could both subvert and sustain the institutions of white supremacy in the context of which the comparisons were made. The first of these paradoxes, the paradox in appropriation, serves as a reminder that while the self-interested appropriation by white women of the experience of Black women was and is noxious, so surely would be a failure or refusal by white women to find or make anything in common with Black women.

For example, Linda Brent, the voice of the ex-slave Harriet A. Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*,[10] hoped that the northern white women she addressed would understand the significance of their shared experience as mothers, even while she expressed keen awareness that there was much about slavery the white women could not understand.

June Jordan recently expressed her astonishment at a well-meaning white woman's resolute inability or unwillingness to

see or imagine that she and Jordan have any shared experiences or concerns. Jordan describes the white woman sitting across from her in her office, "friendly as an old stuffed animal, beaming good will" toward her as she recites with bizarre envy the important problems Jordan, as an African American, has to face: "poverty, violence, discrimination in general."[11] Such envious glorification of Jordan's experience turns Jordan into an exotic and alien sufferer. In this connection it is instructive to remember María Lugones's reference to the "complex failure of love in the failure to identify with another woman, the failure to see oneself in other women who are quite different from oneself."[12]

Perhaps now the paradox is becoming clear: while there certainly seems to be something repugnant in seeing so much of oneself in another's experience that one completely obscures the existence of that other subject, there is something similarly repugnant in so distancing oneself from the experiences of others that one cannot see oneself as having anything to do with such an experience or with anyone who has had such an experience.[13]

Similarly, the idea that one can put on another's experiences, the way in which you might slip on her coat, is an almost incoherent notion that can take grotesque expressions, as in designer "homelessness" fashions displayed on storefront manikins draped in sleeping bags: make a fashion statement by putting on the experience of homelessness; or, perhaps, as an ad in the *New York Times* suggests: men, wear Calvin Klein blue jeans, and make people think you've had the experience of being one of the workers who dug the subway tunnels of Manhattan. There are experiences we desperately don't want to have had,

but we seem ready to attach ourselves, at a safe distance, to any glamour that is associated with such experiences. To borrow a phrase my mother used in another context, some of us use others as "spiritual bellhops," relieved that they actually have had experiences we simply want to have the appearance of having had.[14]

And yet, despite the ever-present possibility of such exploitative sentimentality—and here again is the tension, the paradox, in appropriation—it would be absurd to deny that in some important sense people can and should try to put on the experiences of others.

To return to the historical moment about which Yellin is writing, the hope of slaves that others might understand the trouble they had seen, and be moved to do something about it, seems to be linked in some way with the possibility that others could be the subjects of such suffering even though in fact they were not.[15] Slaves, and the abolitionists who hoped to relieve their plight, certainly counted on the possibility that those who were not slaves could both understand claims about the horrors of slavery and be moved to act out of the belief that the experiences undergone by slaves were the kind that *no* subject should have. That is, slaves and abolitionists presumably thought that others could know enough about what it is, or what it would be, to be the subject of such experiences, that they would act to prevent those experiences being those of *anyone*.

And so it would be odd to hope that nonslaves would understand and have compassion for slaves and yet at the same time not allow that nonslaves might themselves be or become the subjects of such suffering or something very much like it. As Lawrence Blum has argued, compassion involves simulta-

neously both a difference in the actual situation of the sufferer and the compassionate person *and* a sense of their shared vulnerability to suffering. In compassion, I am moved by what *you* are going through, not what *I* am going through, concerned about *your* condition, not about *mine*.[16] At the same time, while I need not have gone through what you have, your "suffering . . . is seen as the kind of thing that could happen to anyone, including [my]self insofar as [I] am a human being."[17] My sense that I too could be a subject of such suffering, far from occluding or erasing your status as the subject of suffering about whom I am concerned, expresses my belief in our shared humanity. I see you not only as a subject of suffering but your susceptibility to it as something we share. In fact, following Blum, we can say that my acknowledgment of the possibility that the subject of suffering can change distinguishes the person who has compassion from the one who merely pities: in pity, Blum says, "one holds oneself apart from the afflicted person and from their suffering, thinking of it as something that defines the person as fundamentally different from oneself."[18] While I in principle could be the subject of the kind of experience you are having, insofar as I pity you, I wouldn't be caught dead, in fact, having such an experience, presumably because of a belief I have that goes like this: certain kinds of experiences are had only by certain kinds of people, and by gum, I'm not *that* kind of person, or at least not insofar as and in the respects in which such a person is pitiful. We will return to this interesting alleged connection between kinds of experiences and kinds of persons.[19]

In sum, the paradox in appropriation reminds us that seeing one's own experience in the experience of others can all too easily lend itself to the expropriation of the experiences of others, to putting their experiences to one's own use while erasing the fact of their having been subjects of those experiences. But at the same time, our thinking of one another as possible subjects of the same kinds of experiences can be an important piece of our thinking of one another as members of the same human community.

But if our thinking of one another as possible subjects of the same kinds of experiences is part of our thinking of one another as members of the same human community, it ought not to be surprising to find that individuals or groups who wish to distinguish themselves from other individuals or groups try to do so by insisting that they would never be subjects of the kinds of experiences the others have, and the others could never be subjects of the kinds of experiences they have. Philosophers need turn no further than Plato and Aristotle for telling examples.

Many of the paeans to Love produced by the near-tipsy revelers in Plato's *Symposium* insist that the capacity for experiencing real Love is not distributed equally among human subjects. The idea that real Love involves a kind of experience only intelligent and educated subjects can have, alluded to first in Pausanias' distinction between Common and Heavenly Love, is given more explicit articulation in Socrates' account of the lessons he learned from Diotima. There is an experience that the lover can have only after much preparation, and Diotima's description of this culminating experience is really quite glorious: "You see [she says to Socrates], the man who has been thus far educated in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of

a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors" (210e–211a). This experience is that of "see[ing] the Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality" (211e).[20] This kind of promise isn't anything like what one of the major television networks offered up in an advertisement a few years ago for its broadcast of the upcoming World Series: "the memories are waiting." The experience of the Beautiful that the thoroughly prepared Socratic lover will have is not something just anyone can have, not something democratically awaiting any and all who happen to turn their eyes and ears a given direction at a given time. Love is a laborious enterprise, not an experience either a couch potato or a person otherwise making use of a couch can be guaranteed to have.

But Diotima's point is not simply that some experiences can only be had after long and difficult preparation. Some people just *cannot* experience the Beautiful itself. While the lover, in "unstinting love of wisdom," that is, in *philosophia* (210d), finally catches sight of Beauty itself, a servant thinks beauty can be beheld in "a single example." Like the "boys and women" referred to in the *Republic* (557c) "when they see bright-colored things," the servant will "favor the beauty of a little boy or a man or a single custom" (210d). Diotima explains: "being a slave, of course, he's low and small-minded" (210d) and doesn't know, can't know, the distinction between a beautiful thing and Beauty itself.

It is no secret that Plato thought there were different kinds of humans and that though an ideal human community is

made up of many kinds—philosopher-rulers, guardians, artisans, and (Socrates barely notes it) slaves—the type of person you are is determined by your mental capacity, including the capacity for certain levels of education. Those whose natural capacities and careful education mark them out as real lovers of wisdom will have experiences that just will not be available to others.

This doesn't mean Plato thought there were *no* experiences of which both philosophers and others could be subjects. Nor did Aristotle, though in his work, as in Plato's, distinctions among humans are mirrored in distinctions among their possible experiences (a "natural slave" of Aristotle's surely is not a possible subject of tragic experience as understood by Aristotle[21]). A danger always lurking for both Plato and Aristotle is the possibility that rationally well endowed individuals will have experiences of a kind that will erode or distort or leave underdeveloped their rationality. As Terence Irwin has reminded us, Aristotle "prohibits the citizens of his ideal state from menial work, because such work is inconsistent with the virtue that is required for a happy life ([*Politics*] 1328b–1329a). In [Aristotle's] view, someone who must spend most of his time and effort working for a precarious living, or in dependence on the favor of another, will never develop the right virtues of character for a citizen."[22] Aristotle insists that "no man can practice excellence who is living the life of a mechanic or laborer" (*Politics* 1278a20; cf. 1319a27)—leisure is necessary for that (*Politics* 1329a11).[23] So even though well-educated citizens could in principle have some of the same experiences as free laborers and artisans, or as slaves, they could do so only on pain of eroding cru-

cial differences between themselves and those more "lowly" types. "Certainly the good man and the statesman and the good citizen ought not to learn the crafts of inferiors except for their own occasional use; if they habitually practice them, there will cease to be a distinction between master and slave" (*Politics* 1277b4–7).

Our inquiry into the possibility of one person or group appropriating the experience of another individual or group has led us to some reflections on both the ontological status of experience as something that can have more than one subject, and the moral significance of different human beings thinking of each other as possible subjects of the same kinds of experience. We have just seen recognition of these features of experience in the insistence on the part of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle—for whom metaphysical differences in kinds of human subjects justify claims for maintaining political distinctions among them—that some humans have important kinds of experiences that other humans just can't have, and that while there are some kinds of experiences any human can have, some humans should not have them. Slaves just can't have the experiences only true lovers of wisdom can; while good citizens can have the experiences menial laborers have, they should not, on pain of eroding the distinction between these types of human beings. (An advertisement in *The New Yorker* reminds us of yet another way in which claims to exclusive access to certain kinds of experiences are meant to distinguish some kinds of people from others: there are, the resort ad tells us, "pleasures few will know," since "our number of guests are limited."[24])

Having seen the investment in the idea that there are sorts of experiences only certain kinds of people can have, and experiences only certain kinds of people should have, let us return to the world in which the Black and white women about whom Yellin writes lived and thought and did political battle. In particular, let us return to the ways in which white women's attempted identification with Black female slaves had a paradoxical relation to the white supremacy of the time, both subverting it, by conflating the experiences of whites and Blacks, and yet also expressing it, by obscuring the white women's own role in the maintenance of slavery.

THE PARADOX IN IDENTIFICATION

The comparison of the situation of women and slaves, which of course doesn't make sense at all as a comparison unless the women in question were *not* slaves, occurred in a context in which whites' alleged superiority over Blacks was being affirmed in and through every major institution of the society. Even white abolitionists, male and female, did not necessarily seek to undermine white supremacy. For ending slavery was fully compatible with maintaining segregation and systematic inequality between whites and Blacks, with outlawing mixed-race marriages and imposing heavy sanctions on mixed-race alliances. The use of the image of slavery to describe the situation of white women involved a powerful trope intended to point to deep, significant, and compelling similarities in the experiences of two groups of people whose differences it was the main busi-

ness of the dominant racial ideology otherwise to insist upon. Thus there is good reason to believe that in the eyes of those wishing to maintain white supremacy, the conceptual miscegenation (the concept is borrowed from Toni Morrison[25]) conflating the experience of white women with that of Black female slaves could have been seen as almost as damaging to the alleged purity of white experience and its crucial distinctiveness from Black experience as the sexual union of whites and Blacks would be to the alleged purity and distinctiveness of white blood. As Yellin reminds us,[26] taking seriously the identity of the situation of white and Black women would mean that there were no significant differences between them—at least for the purposes of the antislavery campaign. Now, as mentioned earlier, such a claim would seem to undermine pervasive racist ideology, which can't allow for any occasions in which skin color doesn't make a difference. It is difficult for dominating groups to maintain their sense of superiority without both having and believing an ideology according to which those allegedly inferior to and in fact subordinate to them are not as fully human as they themselves are. And, as we saw in our brief foray into the work of Plato and Aristotle, such an ideology is well-nigh impossible if the more powerful group seriously entertains the idea that the experiences of the subordinates are a rich human resource, rich enough in any event to serve the superior interests and describe the superior lives of the dominant group. The more intent a dominating group is on maintaining its difference from and superiority to a subordinate group, surely the less likely it is to allow that the experiences of the subordinate group are adequate to describe the dominant group, let alone in any way preferable to its own such resources.

But on the other hand—and hence the paradox in identification—such assertions of identity also served to reinforce racism, to the degree that the claim of identity obscured the real difference that race made to the situations of the two groups of women. In particular, it obscured the role of white women themselves in maintaining the institutions of white supremacy, in helping, through their everyday interactions with Black slaves, to add to the suffering. For the representation of one as a cosufferer obscures whatever role one plays as a perpetrator of the misery.

THE PARADOX IN UNIVERSALITY

Finally, let us turn to the third version of the paradox, which goes something like this: in the context of institutionalized racism, claims about the "universality" of a dominated group's experience can be used both to subvert and to sustain those institutions.

At least one reason for a group's calling upon the experiences of other people, even those the group considers their cultural inferiors, is to try to make sense of one's own painful situation: maybe somebody *has* known the trouble I've seen. And, as Toni Morrison has said in a related context, "comparisons are a major form of knowledge and flattery."[27] The very facts that allowed us to see the white female abolitionists' comparison between themselves and female slaves as a brazen affront to white supremacist ideology also invite us to see the comparison as a kind of flattery—the kind of flattery no doubt intended by the

editors of the *Boston Globe* when they described the photography exhibit "I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America" as "speak[ing] to the potential inside everyone";[28] the flattery no doubt intended by a biographer of the artist Frida Kahlo when the writer said in the pages of the *New York Times* that when Kahlo "displays her wounds we immediately know that those wounds stand for all human suffering";[29] the flattery no doubt intended by those who insist that descriptions of the experiences of a historically marginalized group don't just capture their particular lives but in fact tell us something significant about the lives of all people. In this connection, Mary Helen Washington has noted the trivializing effect of the treatment of Black women's writing as "singular and anomalous, not universal and representative."[30] It may then seem churlish to subject the white female abolitionists' comparison between themselves and female slaves to the kind of scrutiny it has gotten in Yellin's book and in my comments. The white women were, after all, trying desperately to make sense of and give voice to what was without doubt a difficult existence, and by comparing themselves to female slaves they were also suggesting that the lives of the slaves had significance beyond the slaves themselves.

However, an analysis like Yellin's demonstrates that the comparison tended neither to promote anyone's knowledge nor to honor anyone's experience. First of all, the comparison for the most part was not the fruit of discussions among white and Black women about their relative situations and the meaning or meanings of their suffering. Collaboration of sorts was not entirely out of the question: Harriet Jacobs was helped by Amy Post and Lydia Maria Child, both white abolitionists; Harriet

Beecher Stowe offered to include an account of Jacobs's life in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, though Jacobs demurred because she wanted to write her own story.[31] But for obvious reasons discussions among Black and white women were not likely to take place, or to involve much mutual comprehension even if they did. In the absence of exchanges between the two groups of women, there was no way for white women to test their interpretations of the meaning of slavery for Black women, especially when white women portrayed Black women as reduced, either by nature or by circumstance, to virtual speechlessness about the matter.[32]

Second, if the white women's situation really was the same as that of Black women, the white women could just as well speak about it as the Black women. If the experience of Black women is treated as the experience of everybody, this can easily diminish rather than enlarge the significance of it: how can they have anything special or particular to say, if their experience is really no different from universal human experience? One can't here but think of the anger and worry expressed by those historians of the Holocaust—many of whom are from families who directly suffered under it—who are alarmed by what one has called "the glib equation of the murder of the Jews with any disaster or atrocity, with any state of affairs one abhors or even merely dislikes."[33] The point Lucy Dawidowicz wishes to make here is not that no suffering matches that of the Holocaust; rather, she says, the facile equation of the destruction of the European Jews with any and all other atrocities "obscur[es] the role of anti-Semitism in accomplishing that murder."[34]

To the extent that white women saw themselves as identifying with Black women they perhaps were in effect asserting

what Karl Morrison describes as the central proposition of empathy: "I Am You."[35] Morrison makes some telling points about the nature of the relationship that is affirmed thereby. The empathetic participation "in the affliction of another, making it [one's] own,"[36] is compatible with, indeed may itself enact, an imposition of the person feeling the empathy on the person for whom the empathy is felt. As Morrison reads the history of the claim, there were two powerful paradigms for understanding how an "I" can become a "You": a biological one, which involved male dominance over female; and an aesthetic one, involving "the imposition of form by the artist on recalcitrant matter."[37]

This characteristic of empathy is related to what Morrison calls the "non-dialogic" aspect of it—when empathy is "one-sided" rather than "interpersonal," when one person participates in the experiences of another but not vice versa, when the identity affirmed is so complete as to negate the possibility of a distinction between two different people.[38] There is always the danger that the person claiming to participate in the experience of another is simply a ventriloquist.[39]

In sum, if Morrison is right, empathy does not necessarily reflect or encourage knowledge; having it does not require recognizing another as separate, nor hearing what they may have to say about the empathetic gesture or about what is claimed to be understood. Inequality along most any dimension is not at all ruled out by empathy; indeed, if Morrison is right, the paradigms out of which the understanding of "I Am You" was shaped historically are ones of domination and imposition.[40]

The point here is not to mount a campaign against empathy but simply to note some of its features. Empathy of this sort

does not require trying to elicit from the afflicted their view about their pain. Early in her book Yellin points out ways in which white female abolitionists seemed to assume that the meaning of the slave's suffering was obvious. But at the same time, anyone presented as in need of empathy in this way is presented as in need of a ventriloquist, should any questions arise about her state or what ought to be done about it. To say this is not to condemn empathy but only to point out why it differs from what one party feels toward the other when both are actually in the same situation, when each is in a position to offer her own interpretation of her situation and to act in her own behalf.

The work of Jean Fagan Yellin and others has led us to think about the idea of one group's appropriation of the experience of another group. What is involved in such appropriation, and under what conditions is it troubling?

I have sketched out three paradoxes to footnote Yellin's sense of the complexity of answers to such questions. The paradox in appropriation suggests that while a danger in assuming the experiences of others is that they as subjects of such experiences will be erased, a danger in *refusing* to do so is that one may thereby deny the possibility of a shared humanity. The paradox in identification reminds us that while the formula "women are slaves" tended to subvert white supremacy by denying differences between Black and white women, the formula sustained white supremacy insofar as it obscured white women's roles in supporting slavery. And the paradox in universality cautions that while calling on the experience of a marginalized group to represent "human experience" can be an important way of hon-

oring that group's experience, it also can be a way of trivializing and thus further marginalizing them.

In short, there seems to be nothing inherently disturbing in a person's thinking of herself or himself as the subject of the same kind of experience that another person has had. Indeed, the possibility of shared experience seems in some circumstances to be part of an expression of shared humanity.

But humans are ingenious in devising ways to deny such shared status even when appearing to affirm it. Whites in the United States have made Blacks undergo experiences meant to mark them as different from whites, and one of the most powerful of these was slavery. Despite the severe difficulties of their own lives, for the white women Yellin discusses to have used the language of slavery to depict their own condition was to try to reap something useful for themselves from the experience of slavery without having endured its horrors in the ways that slaves did. It no doubt was a measure of their desperation that they presented themselves as subjects of such suffering. But it was also a measure of their relative power that they could so readily put on the mantle of slavery to make sense of their own condition.[41]