

## BARBARA JOHNSON FROM A DISTANCE

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I never met Barbara Johnson. I never heard her speak, never saw her at a conference. I had no idea what she looked like. For many years, I knew nothing at all about her person, her life, her situation. I am not here, then, to pay tribute to Barbara Johnson as a person, as a friend, or as a teacher. I am here because I want to pay tribute to a woman who in my eyes will remain forever a young, brilliant star on the blazing firmament of deconstruction.

For me, then, to think about Barbara Johnson is to think about the 1980s, for that was when her work made a difference to me. I didn't hear about Barbara Johnson until around 1980. In the fall semester of that year I spent some months at Cornell University, the first time I had the chance to experience life on an American campus. I should explain that I wasn't at Cornell in any official capacity: I was there simply as the unemployed Scandinavian girlfriend with a brand new Ph.D. from Bergen, whose major privilege on campus was a library card.

At Cornell in 1980, everyone was reading, breathing, living, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. My own early essay on Freud's Dora was inspired by Neil Herz's seminar on Freud, a seminar which also attracted Cynthia Chase, Mary Jacobus, Nelly Furman and many other brilliant women. This was a new world to me. In Bergen, Derrida had yet to make landfall, and nobody had heard of Paul de Man. A year in England had

vastly improved my knowledge of Althusser, Lacan, and Trotsky, but I still didn't really know who Paul de Man was, let alone why everyone was going on about him. To get my bearings in the American poststructuralist landscape was not going to be easy. At the same time, my first allegiance was not to this or that literary theory but to feminism. And looking around me as a feminist it was impossible to avoid the facts: the poststructuralist master thinkers were as male as the New Critics, the structuralists, the existentialists and the phenomenologists they replaced.

For years, moreover, I had been a student in a department without a single female teacher. However exciting the new theory was, I was heartily fed up with the patriarchal business as usual in the theory world. Into this testosterone soup, a name was suddenly dropped: Barbara Johnson. Apparently, this young woman, not so very much older than me, while still a graduate student, or maybe she was just out of graduate school, I wasn't sure, had written an essay in which she cleverly outwitted Derrida's immensely clever outwitting of Lacan. Or maybe it was the other way around. Whichever way around it was, everyone thought she was the most brilliant thing, a new comet, a young star.

This was thrilling news: Barbara Johnson, whoever she was, was evidence that women, even young women, could be taken seriously as intellectuals. I sat down to read "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida", published in the legendary issue no 55/56 of *Yale French Studies* called *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (1977), which everyone at Cornell appeared to be clutching under their arm as they dodged the squirrels on their way across campus.

My first effort to read “The Frame of Reference” was a failure: Barbara Johnson’s essay was incomprehensible, at least to me. Also, it had no women in it. By the time I reached the punchline, which appeared to be the claim that: “What is undecidable is whether a thing is decidable or not” (p. 146 in *The Critical Difference*), I was exhausted. It was only too obvious that I lacked the frame of reference required to read “The Frame of Reference.” It was going to take me years to “get” it, I thought. In fact, the heady atmosphere at Cornell sped up the process, and only a few months later I reread “The Frame of Reference,” and was duly impressed. So young, so clever, so learned!

*The Critical Difference*, Barbara Johnson’s collection of brilliant essays appeared in 1980. It contained sentences like “A deconstructive reading is a reading that analyzes the specificity of a text’s critical difference from itself” (p. 5). I was awed, but skeptical, too. A feminist from a hamlet by a Norwegian fjord is not a natural born deconstructionist. I knew in my heart that I didn’t really see the point of analyzing the text’s critical difference from itself. But I wasn’t going to say that, not then, and not for a long time, for I also knew that I lacked the frame of reference to say it without giving my more sophisticated colleagues good reasons to dismiss me for sounding like a character out of Fargo.

I spent the next five years mostly in England, mostly working part time and looking for a job, and mostly wondering whether to give up literary criticism for something more likely to pay the bills, but also, in between all that worrying, writing my first book, *Sexual/Textual Politics*. The year that book was published, in 1985, I finally found a job, and moved back to the University of Bergen. Around the same time, I heard that Barbara

Johnson had moved from Yale to Harvard. Looking at Barbara Johnson from across the North Atlantic, I thought that Pierre Bourdieu had a point: Barbara Johnson had massive amounts of symbolic capital, she was the very incarnation of distinction: her tastes were refined, she wrote about Mallarmé and Baudelaire, she moved among the most famous intellectuals in the world, and had, apparently, never set foot outside the most elite educational institutions. For me back then, as for so many other academics who work outside the charmed circle of American elite universities, inside and outside the United States, Barbara Johnson began to represent something more than just a brilliant woman intellectual: she was becoming the very image of the privileged American academic. Admired, but also slightly under suspicion, she was then as other to my world as I was other to hers.

Yet Barbara Johnson didn't let herself be confined to that elitist image. Out of all that refined French poetry and supremely self-conscious deconstruction a different voice began to emerge. There was, early on, a witty talk on "Gender Theory and the Yale School," where she set the tone by remarking that "Like others of its type, the Yale School has always been a Male school" (*A World of Difference*, p. 32), and acknowledging that "The Frame of Reference" did indeed suffer from some gender trouble.

She moved out of the Male School, into an outspoken concern with gender and race, with psychoanalysis and social justice. I loved her 1986 essay "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," which I often used in my teaching in Bergen. In her collection of essays from 1987, *A World of Difference* she ranged widely across questions of gender and race, and

showed genuine concern for political questions, for the historical situation of individual speakers. In my review of that book I stressed its brilliance and lauded the author's explicit turn to politics, yet I also felt that there was an untheorized tension between her frequent invocations of American feminists such as Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Carol Gilligan, Nancy Friday and Dorothy Dinnerstein and her largely Lacanian and Derridean theoretical framework. (In fact, I *still* wonder how it is possible for a deconstructionist to agree with Audre Lorde's famous dictum that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.")

By the time I moved to America, in 1989, I had begun to lose touch with Barbara Johnson's writing. Just as I began to work on Simone de Beauvoir, she turned her attention to American and African-American writers. By the time I returned to writing theory, in the mid-1990s, I was reading Wittgenstein: if I had an idol at Harvard then it was not Barbara Johnson, but Stanley Cavell.

I always saw, and still see, Barbara Johnson from a distance, in the 1980s from across oceans and cultures, and now from across time: the Barbara Johnson I pay tribute to today remains the woman engraved in my memory as the shining young star, the trailblazing woman intellectual, the witty and incisive writer, the inspiring example whose very existence encouraged me, and so many other women, to think for ourselves, to find our own voice.