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The Example of Barbara Johnson

Pamela Caughie

Loyola University Chicago, pcaughi@luc.edu

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The Example of Barbara Johnson

Twenty-five years ago the first explicitly feminist issue of Critical Inquiry (Winter 1981), called “Writing and Sexual Difference,” opened with an epigraph from Barbara Johnson’s The Critical Difference (1980):

If human beings were not divided into two biological sexes, there would probably be no need for literature. And if literature could truly say what the relations between the sexes are, we would doubtless not need much of it then, either. . . . It is not the life of sexuality that literature cannot capture; it is literature that inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals. Literature is not only a thwarted investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality. (173)

Elizabeth Abel, editor of this special issue and author of the introduction in which this quotation appears, never comments directly on the epigraph, nor does she mention Barbara Johnson by name in her introduction, though with the hindsight of a quarter century, we can see that Abel’s second sentence, “Deconstructive criticism has made us attend to notions of textual difference,” indirectly addresses Johnson; for over the years, Johnson’s name has become identified with deconstruction. But that connection could hardly have been apparent to many readers then when Johnson’s first book had only recently been published.¹ Perhaps another place where hindsight might have us locate Barbara Johnson in this introduction is the last sentence of the first paragraph, for there Abel states that the volume presents the “scope of feminist inquiry” in essays that focus on the various ways sexual difference figures in the study of literary texts. And yet, would Johnson have been identified with feminism in 1981 given that her first book

focused on male writers and, as Abel says, difference had “only recently emerged as a focus of feminist criticism” (1)? It strikes me as significant that the first feminist issue of what is arguably the most prominent journal in literary theory begins with Barbara Johnson, and yet the significance of that epigraph remains opaque, raising the question of just why and how Barbara Johnson serves as an example in this text.

This question is taken up by Jane Gallop in “The Difference Within” (1982), her response to Abel’s special issue.² Gallop presents a close reading of the epigraph from Johnson, but quickly turns (in deconstructive fashion) from trying to figure out what the statement means to questioning its function within the volume. Johnson’s presence in this special issue, Gallop suggests, serves not just to illustrate but to produce the effects of “the difference within,” the very concept with which Johnson is now most clearly identified.³ The epigraph, Gallop says, functions as “a dis-Abel-ing ‘difference within’ the entire issue” (13), subverting “the very idea of identity,” such as the identity “feminist” that the volume represents (13). Commenting on the fact that Abel leaves the epigraph unexplained, Gallop notes the difference between what Johnson says in that epigraph and what Abel says in the sentence that comes closest to explaining the relation of the epigraph to the special issue: “The analysis of female talent grappling with a male tradition,” writes Abel, “translates sexual difference into literary differences” (2).⁴ Gallop responds, “Where The Critical Difference enigmatically implies that literature is already operative within sexuality, Abel suggests [. . .] sexuality is prior to literature” (15). Barbara Johnson, invoked in the epigraph as an authority whose insight captures the scope of this special issue, is actually saying something different from what the editor thinks, and thus, Johnson’s enigmatic presence in the introduction turns a difference

between into a difference within. It is Barbara Johnson's presence in the text, more than the meaning of her words, that produces a deconstructive effect, that makes a difference by assuring that the first feminist issue of Critical Inquiry, like feminism itself (contrary to what a special issue on feminism might suggest), isn't all the same.

Rereading Gallop's "The Difference Within" with my students this term, and thinking about this special issue of *Differences*, I was struck by how Barbara Johnson functions as an example, not just in Abel's issue and Gallop's essay but in so many other works as well. Although neither Abel nor Gallop is concerned with what Johnson's epigraph means, both reveal the profound effects that even a short citation from her writings can have on our reading of a text. From the beginning, from her first book (The Critical Difference), Barbara Johnson has served as an example. Yet what she exemplifies is never quite clear nor is it consistent from one context to another: deconstruction, feminism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, French theory, academic writing, women in theory, even theory as woman.⁵ It may be in the very diversity of these invocations that Barbara Johnson comes to stand for the difference within. Abel's early use of Barbara Johnson as an example may well have set the example for others.

Another essay that opens by invoking Barbara Johnson is Diane Elam's online essay, "Feminist Theory and Criticism: Poststructuralist Feminisms." It begins:

"The question of gender is a question of language." This statement is Barbara Johnson's (World 37), and her succinct formulation of the relationship between gender and language does much to characterize the approach of a group of feminists who draw upon the discourses of poststructuralism. This feminist work

takes as its starting point the premise that gender difference dwells in language rather than in the referent, that there is nothing “natural” about gender itself. Here Johnson represents a type of feminism rather than deconstruction more generally, but she still exemplifies the difference within. More to the point, it is her “succinct formulation of the relationship between gender and language,” just as it is her succinct formulation of the relationship between sexual difference and literature, that makes her serve so well as an example for Elam as for Abel.⁶ In this case, however, the quotation from Johnson is easily explained, while in Abel’s essay it remains mysterious. But like Abel, Elam never discusses Johnson’s writings in any detail, and cites her again only in passing, in a string of references to poststructuralist feminist works.

If the quotation Elam uses to open her essay is a “succinct formulation,” the quotation Jeffrey Nealon uses to close his book is positively minimalist. Nealon’s conclusion to Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction (1993) opens with an epigraph from Barbara Johnson: “Yes and no (what else?)” (160).⁷ This epigrammatic statement creates a similar effect as Abel’s epigraph, for like Abel, Nealon never mentions Johnson by name nor discusses her work (she’s even missing from the index, though she does appear in the Works Cited). He does, however, discuss the meaning of that epigraph in some detail, noting that “yes and no” are “three words that are expected from a ‘deconstructionist’” (161)—though “what else?”, I would suggest, is what we expect from Barbara Johnson. So in Nealon’s chapter, Johnson explicitly serves as an example of deconstruction, as she does implicitly in Abel’s essay. In both pieces, as Gallop says of Abel’s essay, French male theory is represented by an American woman writer (15). Again, Johnson’s presence figures the difference within.

It occurs to me that in a recent article I too have used Barbara Johnson as an example. In the introductory paragraph (which I quote here in full), I begin with an anecdote about Barbara Johnson to set up an essay that has nothing to do with Barbara Johnson, or at least, that never discusses her writing.

In 1990 Barbara Johnson gave a series of lectures at the University of Chicago on psychoanalysis and African American literature. In those days many feminists were exploring the question of whether or how post-structuralist theories could be applied to multicultural literatures. At the time I was an untenured assistant professor heavily influenced by Johnson's style of deconstruction, so you can imagine my discomfort when I learned that the second lecture in that series, entitled "No Passing," was to be a reading of Nella Larsen's Passing, the very novel I was then writing about in an essay that would turn out to be the inception of Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility (1999). So at the reception following the first lecture, I cornered Barbara Johnson and anxiously spewed out all the ideas I was exploring in that essay, seeking to convince her (and possibly myself) that I hadn't gotten my ideas from her lecture that I hadn't yet heard. I talked about the nature of our authority, as white feminist critics trained in a Eurocentric theoretical and literary tradition, in the African American literature classroom where, as Patricia Hill Collins and Diana Fuss remind us, knowledge derived from experience is given more credibility than knowledge acquired through training. How does racial difference inflect the process of transference that you have helped us to see as central to the pedagogical relation, I asked her? What does it mean to learn from the one presumed not to

know, from (so to speak) an unreliable narrator? In response to these questions that I found so urgent and complicated, Barbara Johnson replied with her characteristic composure: All I know is, she said, I don't want to be another Carl Van Vechten. (Caughie 385)

This anecdote sets up my essay about writing and racial difference just as Johnson's words set up Abel's introduction on writing and sexual difference. But neither of us has any more to say about Johnson in our essays. Still, her work functions as a powerful presence in both. For what could I possibly mean when I say that I needed to convince myself that I hadn't gotten the ideas for my essay from a lecture that I hadn't yet heard? How could someone's ideas be so powerful that they could be absorbed before they were even voiced? That paradoxical statement precisely describes my relation to Barbara Johnson, and I believe the relation many others have to her work as well. After all, Abel cites Johnson to capture the scope of her special issue on feminist criticism even though many readers had not yet read Johnson's first book, and her more explicitly feminist books, such as A World of Difference (1987) and The Feminist Difference (1998), had not yet appeared. Beyond the "apparent" meaning the invocation of her name suggests, there is, to quote Johnson on language, "a residue of functioning—which produces effects—that is not a sign of anything" (*World* 6; original emphasis).

That Barbara Johnson is so often invoked as an example, and yet never the example of any one thing, attests to her powerful presence in the academy. At the risk of exaggerating, I am tempted to say that she may be more often invoked than read, although, of course, she is invoked only because she has been read. What I mean by

saying she is invoked more than read is that Johnson's name carries a certain cachet that transcends the specificity of her writing, so that she is often cited even when she is not discussed, yet it is the very specificity of her reading practice that allows her to be cited as an example of so many critical positions.

Lee Edelman in "Homographesis" quotes Barbara Johnson to define deconstruction and the difference it makes for lesbian and gay theory:

Lesbian and gay critics might do well to consider Barbara Johnson's description of a deconstructive criticism that would aim "to elaborate a discourse that says 'neither/either/or,' nor 'both/and,' nor even 'neither/nor,' while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either. (741)

Here Johnson comes to exemplify another kind of difference (of sexuality) and another practice (lesbian criticism). In her essay "Lesbian Spectacles," Johnson sets herself the task of reading as a lesbian, a practice she had not previously employed. However, in doing a lesbian reading of the film The Accused, Johnson realizes that her desire may well be structured by the very patriarchal power relations that such a reading would presumably disrupt; for what she finds erotic in the character of Murphy (Kelly McGillis) is her role as the phallic mother "whose appeal arises from her position in a power structure" (Feminist 163). Thus, reading as a lesbian may not be liberating or radical, Johnson says, but may instead expose "the possibility of a real distinction between my political ideals and my libidinal investments" (164). So while Johnson's practice is invoked by Edelman as enabling for gay and lesbian criticism, Johnson's effort to read as a lesbian ends up exposing the "political incorrectness" of her fantasy life (163), and thus functions as another "dis-abel-ing" (or dis-Edel-ing) difference.

As in Edelman's citation, Barbara Johnson is most often invoked as an example, and exemplar, of deconstruction, both an "ideal model" and a "typical specimen" of that theory. Indeed, Barbara Johnson has come to define the theory. In a recent response to criticism of The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Johnson takes issue with critics who lament the lack of any attempt to define theory in that volume. What they think of as a weakness Johnson she sees as a strength: "I like the fact that each reader will have to work with the materials for himself or herself and not be given some reassuring but ultimately dated and ideological answer" (Responses 471). Yet despite her resistance to definition, Johnson is frequently cited as offering a succinct definition of deconstruction. M. H. Abrams and Carl Leggo, among many others, quote the same passage from The Critical Difference, and slightly modified in her introduction to Derrida's Dissemination, specifically identifying it as an "often cited" explanation of the theory:

The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion [generalized skepticism], but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. (qtd. in Abrams 60; Leggo 187)

It would be no exaggeration to say that passage has been quoted hundreds of times. Johnson herself repeats this often cited definition in "Teaching Deconstructively" (140-141), citing the very passage from her earlier work that has become an authoritative definition by its frequent citation.⁸ So is she really so resistant to definition?

Well, “yes and no.” If Barbara Johnson has come to define the theory, she does so not just constatively but performatively. What Johnson does in her writings is to put deconstructive analysis into practice; she performs performativity, and that creates a certain amount of undecidability. Her essays, one might say, don’t “mean” but “be”: “A poem should not mean/But be’ [is] a sentence which disobeys its own prescription,” writes Johnson, “since, in saying what a poem should do, it is 'meaning' rather than 'being.’” (Feminist 131). In saying what a deconstructive reading should do, Johnson may be defining rather than doing deconstruction, but the double bind of meaning and being also calls attention to the very difficulty of teaching or writing about deconstructive theory: If you perform the theory in specific examples, you risk that your readers or students won’t get it and that you may be seen to endorse the positions you put into play in your writing or teaching; if instead you spell out the theory, telling the students or readers what it is and what they should get, your practice goes against the very practice you want to teach, and thus you are the one who doesn’t get it.⁹ Deconstruction, writes Johnson, “can teach [students] how to work out the logic of a reading on their own rather than passively deferring to the authority of superior learning” (“Teaching” 141). In performing deconstruction, then, Johnson puts into question the very authority attributed to her through her often cited definition.

Given the prominence of The Critical Difference in essays that use it to define deconstruction, one of the most interesting examples of the use of Barbara Johnson as an example is Johnson’s own reading of The Critical Difference. In both the introduction and the fourth chapter of her second book, A World of Difference, Johnson reads and critiques her first book, the book that has come to define deconstruction for so many.

After critiquing the use of gender in male Yale school theorists, Johnson turns to “a Yale daughter,” Barbara Johnson of The Critical Difference, and finds, surprisingly, that “no book produced by the Yale School seems to have excluded women so effectively as The Critical Difference. [. . .] In a book that announces itself as a study of difference, the place of the woman is constantly being erased” (World 39). Although she does cite places where the “rhetoric of sexual difference” is depicted, such as the passage cited in Abel’s epigraph (40), she notes that “woman” is repeatedly erased: “The Critical Difference may here be unwittingly pointing to ‘woman’ as one of the things ‘we do not know we do not know’” and thus the book demonstrates “an ignorance that prefaces Western discourse as a whole” (40-41).¹⁰ Thus, The Critical Difference is the example par excellence of a deconstructive practice, for it both describes and employs the practice, illustrates and exemplifies the “difference within.” Johnson quotes from The Critical Difference:

Reading, here, proceeds by identifying and dismantling differences by means of other differences that cannot be fully identified or dismantled. [. . .] The differences between entities [. . .] are shown to be based on a repression of the differences within entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself. But the way in which a text thus differs from itself is never simple: it has a certain rigorous, contradictory logic whose effects can, up to a certain point, be read. (qtd. in World 2; original emphasis)

And beyond that point of readability, those effects produce “a residue of functioning” (World 6). That Barbara Johnson produces effects that do not signify any one thing

shows that the way in which a text differs from itself is never simple. Her ubiquitous citations are the residue of her own readings.

Barbara Johnson so often represents deconstruction in other people's texts perhaps because she so eloquently defends it. Throughout her writings Johnson has explicitly addressed the charges leveled, from both the right and the left, against deconstruction (and thus implicitly, against herself): its nihilism and its narcissism, its obscurity and its jargon, its denial of the world outside the text and its inability to engage in social change.¹¹ And she has risen to these challenges by carefully demonstrating, in reading after reading, what difference deconstructive concepts of language and writing make, and how this theory might "equip us to intervene against oppression and injustice in the world" (World 7). In Mother Tongues, she defends deconstruction's attention to the text at the seeming expense of attention to the world:

The danger is that the attention paid to the operation of the signifier will have necessary referential consequences. While you are parsing a sentence [. . .] you are not paying attention to what is going on in the world. The question I would like to ask is whether not paying attention to the signifier automatically keeps you there. [. . .] Why is the fear of forgetting reality so great? (3; original emphasis).

She even defends bad writing, so often attributed to theorists: "But the real mystery is why 'I don't understand it' should condemn the author rather than the reader" (Mother 30; original emphasis). Although she also critiques deconstruction, as in her feminist readings of Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and J. Hillis Miller, among others, even in these critiques, Johnson has been the most patient, persistent, and articulate defender of this theory.¹²

She can also stand for something very different, however, stand apart from that theory, an exception to the rule. The criticisms of deconstruction that Johnson addresses extend beyond that theory as they have come to be applied to the academy in general, and to the humanities in particular. In a recent article in The Harvard Advocate, Jeremy Reff condemns not simply deconstructionists but literature departments generally for becoming too obscure, too absorbed in their own narrow interests, and thus unable to reach out to a general audience or to make any intervention in the world outside the academy. Given the attacks on deconstruction and Johnson's identification with that theory, one would think Reff would include Johnson in this hermetic universe. But no, Barbara Johnson is the one Harvard professor he exempts from his indictment of literature departments. Here Johnson represents not obscure theory but engaged work. Reff cites her as an example of interdisciplinary work that "facilitates communication between differing schools of thought and critical disciplines," praising in particular her "generosity and breadth." In Reff's essay, Johnson appears in the company of critics with whom she is rarely aligned, such as Louis Menand or Lionel Trilling, those who take a critical interest in the world, not just in the text or in theory, narrowly conceived.

And yet, in her December 2005 essay in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Lindsay Waters cites Barbara Johnson as an example of a literary scholar who does not reduce a text to meaning, as one might expect of someone taking a critical interest in the world and speaking to a general audience. In "Literary Aesthetics: The Very Idea," Waters makes Johnson the example par excellence of aesthetic criticism, which Waters directly links to deconstructive theory and explicitly opposes to the writings of those she

calls the “meaning-mongers.”¹³ Revisiting, and reconsidering, the “culture wars,”

Waters states:

What gets lost in this disdain for things “foreign” [French theory] is that theorists were concerned with the artwork itself, with responding to it on many different levels — with the aesthetic experience. They wanted to process their own engagement with a text, finding clues in their difficulties with it to take them deep into the heart of its darkness. To a critic like Barbara Johnson, the division between form and content did not exist. (B6-B7)

Later she writes:

Literary theory — as promoted by writers like de Man, Derrida, Johnson, and Shoshana Felman decades ago had been an effort to devise new defenses for literature, by updating and developing the idea that the arts proceed in their own ways, different from those of society, politics, and the economy. The fact that those theorists have been so eclipsed by the meaning-mongers has been much heralded as a return to clarity and common sense in literary criticism. (B7)

Waters laments the return to clarity and common sense that Reff favors.

Although she appears to be using Johnson differently from Reff, using her as an example of the very theory that is often accused of creating the obscurity that separates literature departments from the general public, Waters actually makes a similar argument. For both use Johnson as an example of “best practices,” so to speak, the kind of writing literary scholars should be producing, whether that writing is specifically literary (for Waters) or generously interdisciplinary (for Reff). Moreover, in reconsidering the culture wars, Waters says the problem is not French theory but its institutionalization

in literature departments (those Reff indicts) where critics promoted “a no-nonsense business, a legalistic parsing of meaning that masks a deep contempt for what a text is or might be to us” (B6). The reign of interpretation, “the reduction of literature to an idea, a moral” (B7), is a reaction against “the rebellious, destabilizing, liberating aspects of art” (B7) that theorists like Johnson are attentive to.

In calling this practice “aesthetic criticism,” however, Waters seems to align Johnson with the kind of formalism deconstruction came into the academy opposing. Waters writes that the meaning-monger “rules out of court the most important task of a critic, which is to discern artistic forms and make judgments about them as things of beauty or ugliness” (B8). This Kantian aesthetics seems at odds with deconstruction and its liberating potential. Or is it? Johnson herself raises this question:

Why is the taboo against focusing on rhetorical structures without grounding their effects in the world so strong? [. . .] [I]t was when I realized that the Nazis were just as opposed to the play of forms for their own sake as contemporary critics are—including myself—that I began to wonder why I had bought into the universal disparagement of Art for Art’s Sake. (Mother 4)

Here Johnson positions herself as both an anti-formalist and a born-again aesthete. But while she reads texts in terms of their physical effects on the reader, leading Waters to use her as an example of aesthetic criticism, Johnson never reads to judge them as things of beauty or ugliness. Still, I think what Waters is getting at when she defines the task of the aesthetic critic is the necessity of close reading, the practice Johnson employs so brilliantly.

So what is Johnson exemplifying in these two works? Are Reff and Waters responding to the same elements in her writing? Is Johnson an example of the exception to the rule (the deconstructionist with a conscience, so to speak), or is she an example because she is a typical specimen (this is what deconstructive theory or literary criticism really is)? And if the latter, if she were an exemplar because she is typical or ordinary, would we be honoring her in this special issue?

It strikes me that the relation between Waters's and Reff's positions is like the relation between "aesthetics" and "rapport" that Johnson discusses in Toni Morrison's Sula. Aesthetics, she writes, is the "domain of the contemplation of forms, implying detachment and distance, and rapport is taken as the dynamics of connectedness" (Feminist 84). Noting scenes where Nel and Sula watch with interest the suffering of others, Johnson comments that interest (the kind of aesthetic interest that seems to deny rapport by being absorbed in texts) and disinterest (what Kant attributes to the realm of aesthetics) are difficult to tell apart (85). What Morrison makes clear, Johnson continues, is that "the domain of the aesthetic is both profoundly political and impossible to make politically correct. [. . .] Thus she shows that it is not a matter of choosing between politics and aesthetics but of recognizing the profoundly political nature of the inescapability of the aesthetic within personal, political, and historical life" (86-87).

That kind of analysis allows Barbara Johnson to be invoked as an example of both contemplation and engagement, aesthetics and its deconstruction, theory and politics, discipline-specific writing and interdisciplinary work. What her readings demonstrate is "the difficulty of getting any of [our] terms"—such as aesthetics, politics, theory, feminism—"to settle into reliable starting points for the formulation of ethical or

moral imperatives” (Wake 68). Just as “literature is already operative within sexuality,” as Gallop reads Johnson’s epigraph to “Writing and Sexual Difference,” aesthetics is already operative within politics, as Johnson reads Morrison’s Sula. Political understanding (rapport) requires close reading (aesthetics).

Perhaps Johnson is persistently called forth to represent both sides because she consistently refuses to reduce a debate to only two sides. Explaining the double meaning of her title, The Feminist Difference, Johnson says that on the one hand, feminism has “made a difference” (3; original emphasis), as evident, for example, in special journal issues devoted to it as well as in media attacks on it. On the other hand, “[o]nce women begin to speak, we begin to differ with each other” (3). That difference within feminism is seen by some feminists as the cause or sign of feminism’s failure, producing a crisis in feminism. Johnson, in contrast, eschews the narrative of theoretical or generational strife among feminists and instead puts the blame for feminism’s failure to bring about real change elsewhere—not on feminist differences but on the broader political and cultural indifference to the institution where feminists have made the most inroads, the university: “just at the moment when women (and minorities) begin to have genuine power in the university, American culture responds by acting as though the university itself is of dubious value” (3). Later she puts this argument slightly differently. The real differences among women create the “indeterminacy” or “incoherence” in the very concept of “woman” that is seen to be the ground of feminism. This “lack of fit,” she says, between the concept and the reality of women is the political problem for feminism, its very condition of possibility. “Indeterminacy, then, is not the property of a sign—the word ‘woman’—but the outcome of an analysis and a politics” (193; original

emphasis). In other words—namely, Patricia Williams’s words—“theoretical [. . .] understanding and social transformation need not be oxymoronic” (qtd. on 175).

Barbara Johnson quotes these words in her reading of legal theorist Patricia Williams, responding to a critic of such “jargon-laden” writing who asks, “Why doesn’t [Williams] simply say that scholars can be activists too?”¹⁴ Johnson points out that the critic thinks she knows what Williams meant to say, but that what Williams is actually talking about is rhetoric, not reality. Williams’s object of analysis is language and representation, Johnson says, and “the ways in which they allow certain things to be sayable and other things erased” (Feminist 176). The critic, she continues, thinks Williams is or should be addressing readers outside the academy, but, Johnson asks, does that mean the academy should not be addressed? “If an argument has public implications, must it conform to a rhetoric of the common reader?” (176) Johnson goes on to point out that Williams’s writing overall “lays bare the network of constraints and censorships that attempt to produce ‘plain, readable prose’” (177)—that is, there may be no such thing as a plain style that is free of discursive or institutional constraints. Yet, Johnson writes elsewhere, “the moral imperative always occurs as an imperative to move ‘beyond formalism,’ beyond the questions necessarily raised by the language of the text” and to the “real” world (World 22).

Just as we cannot choose between politics and aesthetics, we cannot choose between the academy and the “real” world. In the Introduction to A World of Difference, after stating that her purpose in this collection is precisely to take the analysis of difference out of the context of “linguistic universality” and into “contexts in which

difference is very much at issue in the ‘real world’” (2), she questions that assumed distinction between theory and the “real world.” Johnson writes:

Nothing could be more commonplace than to hear academics speak of the “real world” as something lying outside their own sphere of operations. [. . .] Suddenly it became clear to me that the “real world” was constantly being put in quotation marks, always being defined as where “we” are not. [. . .] the real world seems to be the world outside the institution. [. . .] Yet institutions are nothing if not real articulations of power. (World 3)

As Johnson puts it, paying attention to the signifier, to the play of language—that is, being interested—is no guarantee that one’s practice will produce effects (World 26), but not paying attention to the signifier offers no greater guarantee (Mother 3).

Her kind of deconstruction of binary oppositions (such as that between language and world, theory and practice) allows Barbara Johnson to exemplify different kinds of practices as well as the practice of deconstructing those differences. The undecidability between whether she is defining a theory or practicing it, serving as the rule or the exception, may have something to do with why she is so often invoked but not explained, cited but not addressed. My analysis here is itself an indirect citation of Barbara Johnson; for Johnson’s reading of Zora Neale Hurston points to the impossibility of knowing whether Hurston is “describing a strategy or employing one” (World 180; original emphasis) in Hurston’s stories about collecting folktales. This undecidability comes not from any indecisiveness on the part of the writer or the reader, but, says Johnson, from changing “structures of address”—who’s addressing whom and why. Thus Barbara Johnson’s own problematic structures of address mirror Hurston’s:

In preparing to write this chapter [“Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston”], I found myself repeatedly stopped by conflicting conceptions of the structure of address into which I was inserting myself. It was not clear to me what I, a white deconstructor, was doing talking about Zora Neale Hurston, a black novelist and anthropologist, or to whom I was talking. [. . .] Was I talking to white critics, black critics, or myself? (172; original emphasis)

Johnson goes on to say that she found in Hurston’s writing questions she did not know how to ask. While some critics might dismiss such a tribute as pandering to the other, here Johnson puts into practice what she states in “Teaching Ignorance”: namely, the importance of learning from more than one teacher, such as Hurston and de Man.

This is a lesson I had often taught yet had to learn. Fifteen years ago I co-taught a course in contemporary theory with a colleague from the German department. I vividly remember our first open dispute in the classroom. My colleague was going over an essay by a German philosopher in excruciating detail when I interrupted to point out that he was well into the second half of the seminar, when I was supposed to teach an essay by Barbara Johnson (appropriately, “Teaching Ignorance”). My colleague looked up sharply and said, “Surely Barbara Johnson isn’t as important as this primary theorist.” While I took umbrage at his disparaging remark—not just for putting down a theorist I admired so much, but in setting up a hierarchy of theorists, relying on the very binaries our course in poststructuralist theory called into question (e.g., original and derivative)—I also understood what he meant. Johnson draws explicitly on other theorists in her writing, such as de Man, Derrida, and Lacan. Thus, to him her ideas

were not original, were not as worthy of attention as the ideas of those primary theorists themselves. She wasn't exemplary but ordinary, not the exception but the rule.

In thinking that way, however, I realized we missed the difference that Johnson's writings would teach us. On the one hand, as Johnson writes, "with rare exceptions . . . the phenomenon of the critical 'school' as such" is a "Male School" (World 32), and by privileging the primary (male) theorist over the derivative (female) one, we had replicated that gendered structure. But another difference at issue here is that between ideas and practice, definition and performance, or, in Johnson's words, the didactic and the mimetic (81). In privileging the ideas in the male theorist's essay over the practice in Johnson's, we missed the opportunity to critique the very structure of our seminar and to articulate what was happening in the classroom at that moment. The students were learning something, but not necessarily the abstruse concepts of the primary theorist. They were learning to comply "with the contradictory demands of two ardent teachers" (World 80; original emphasis). In "Teaching Ignorance," Johnson writes, "Learning seems to take place most rapidly when the student must respond to the contradiction between two teachers"—a lesson I frequently cite in my classes but here was putting into practice, however unconsciously. "And what the student learns," she continues, "is both the power of ambiguity and the non-innocence of ignorance" (83). While I may have felt that defending the female theorist over the priority of the male was a feminist gesture, Johnson suggests that the feminist practice lies precisely in those "warring forces of signification": "To retain the plurality of forces and desire within a structure that would displace the One-ness of individual mastery could perhaps be labeled a feminization of authority" (85).

Teaching Barbara Johnson this term, I was asked by a student, “How do you do a Johnsonian reading?” I never thought of Barbara Johnson as an adjective, never thought of myself as consciously imitating her. But I found myself giving this student my chapter on Nella Larsen’s Passing, the same piece I gave to Barbara Johnson before she presented her paper on Passing at the University of Chicago lecture series 16 years ago, the paper that I worried would turn out to be plagiarized from a talk I hadn’t yet heard. What my anxiety in that University of Chicago lecture hall reveals is my indebtedness to the writings of Barbara Johnson, how much I have adopted her language, have taken up her subjects, and have been won over by her ways of moving through a text. In all I have ever written, it seems to me now, I have tried to follow the example of Barbara Johnson. But, to adopt her language again here, I wonder how much any of us can write like Barbara Johnson even as we try to read and write as she does. At the same time Barbara Johnson serves as an example and an exemplar, she is also, paradoxically, sui generis, truly one of a kind.

Pamela L. Caughie

Loyola University Chicago

¹ Of course, her first book wasn’t her first publication. Johnson had published deconstructive essays in *Yale French Studies*, *diacritics*, and *Studies in Romanticism* before 1980.

² Gallop’s essay appeared in *Critical Inquiry* the following year (1982) and in Abel’s collection by the same title, *Writing and Sexual Difference* (1982). I am using the slightly revised version of Gallop’s response published in *Around 1981*.

³ Mary Jacobus attributes this concept to Johnson in her contribution to that Critical Inquiry issue (206).

⁴ I would also suggest that the first part of Abel’s sentence invokes Barbara Johnson, for *The Critical Difference* is an example of “female talent grappling with a male tradition.”

⁵ I’m thinking here of her Bucknell lecture series that she discusses in *The Wake of Deconstruction*, where the poster advertising her lecture bore Joshua Reynolds’s representation of theory as a woman.

⁶ It may well be the very succinctness of her formulations that makes her an example. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999), for example, M. H. Abrams refers to Johnson's famous quotation (discussed below) as a "succinct statement" of what deconstruction (60).

⁷ Johnson explains where this enigmatic epigraph comes from in *The Wake of Deconstruction* (53).

⁸ That same passage is cited as well in the Introduction to the collection in which Johnson's essay appears: "Among the most helpful and useful definitions of deconstruction is ... that of Barbara Johnson, who characterizes it as 'the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text'" (Atkins and Johnson 2). René Wellek cites this passage in "The New Nihilism in Literary Studies" as does Jonathan Culler in *On Deconstruction* (213) and again in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (127). Indeed, sometimes the phrase is attributed to Culler, as in Sam Solecki's review essay, or cited without attribution, as in the abstract of Nancy Miller's 'What difference does difference make?': The Creative Deconstructions of Jean Rhys and Aimé Césaire." A Google search of the keywords in this passage turns up around 508 hits, though not all of these are references to Johnson's definition.

⁹ I describe the difficulty of performativity in these terms in *Passing and Pedagogy* (95-96).

¹⁰ Similarly, in the Introduction Johnson acknowledges that her discussion of differences in that first book "was taking place entirely within the sameness of the white male Euro-American literary, philosophical, psychoanalytical, and critical canon" (*World 2*).

¹¹ Her most explicit treatment of these charges is in *A World of Difference*, Part I: "The Fate of Deconstruction."

¹² See, for example, Part I of *A World of Difference*. Johnson, as we will see, has also critiqued her own examples of deconstructive reading.

¹³ Johnson challenges meaning-mongers in *The Wake of Deconstruction* when she analyzes the "resistance to opening up meaning as a question" and the "ideology of the law review style" that attempts "to create a world saturated with meaning, intention, and consciousness" (39).

¹⁴ This question reminds me of a line from Gertrude Stein. During her 1934 U.S. lecture series, someone asked her, "Why don't you write the way you talk?" and Stein replied, "Why don't you read the way I write?" (cited in "Loving Repeating: A Musical of Gertrude Stein").