**“Feminism, Progressivism, and the ‘New Normal’”**

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**Introduction: the “New Normal” and Derridean Hospitality**

As a theory of gender oppression, feminism today must address itself to the many ramifications of “the new normal.” Whereas “oppression” was a term that formerly conjured up images of blatantly unjust conditions regarding the working poor, women, minorities, immigrants, homosexuals, and the disabled, today the word resonates more broadly and profoundly thanks to the general sense of economic vulnerability that touches nearly everyone. “The new normal” and its attendant hardships designates a now disempowered “middle class,” and thus denotes a large swathe of the population wrongly identified as “normal people” or “people like us.” Indeed, the confidence of the middle class has been shaken by the distressing conditions that erode our trust in the stability of world markets, the promises of neoliberal and social democratic ideologies, and the conditions that allow the social fabric to cohere. If “the middle class” is now coterminous with the disaffected, struggling, often out-of-work 99%, does the term “middle” still carry meaning? Disheartening as this is, the situation forces us to think creatively about the new face of progressive politics and the directions in which theorizing might take us. For me, feminism must be part of this creative thinking.

For feminist theory, the challenges that emanate from the new normal demand that we reconsider how gender oppression fits into the larger picture of a destabilized world economy and the asymmetries of globalization. Some very fine scholarship has already been done on this topic, bringing the concerns of feminism together with the injustices created by economic instability and disproportion.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, as early as 1997, Michelle Sidler argued that economic insecurity must be added to feminism’s analytic purview, since gender equity means little in the context of a pervasive, crippling impoverishment that effects so many. In “Living in McJobdom: Third Wave Feminism and Class Inequality,” she insists that the hardships fostered by persistent sexism make sense only when considered against the backdrop of a disempowering joblessness that creates a sense of despair on a grand scale. The upside of a life sustained by mcjobs is that this gloomy situation forces us to think creatively about how we got here, and makes us willing to renegotiate the structures, processes, ideology, and culture that contributed to our malaise. Sidler writes:

We must overhaul feminism to operate within this “new world order,” recognizing not just the absence of work equality for women, but the absence of work for *everyone*. We need, as Derrida states, a new concept of sustained unemployment. Academics like me who face job shortages have a vested interest in addressing the theoretical issues behind our employment crisis and in translating those issues into a new feminist agenda.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Sidler is correct to point to Derridean philosophy as a propitious place that generates fruitful ideas for how to conceptualize the newer realities that confront us. Yet his “new concept of sustained unemployment” is but one direction in which we might go. In this paper, I would like to argue that Derrida’s concept of *hospitality* provides a needed framework within which feminist theory can operate as it confronts the ramifications of “the new normal.” For as I have argued elsewhere,[[3]](#footnote-3) the economic and intellectual paradigm shifts are effecting not only the outer reaches of society, but the mainstream and middle class, such that the latter must rethink its social identity in ways that reconceptualize – does it make sense even to state it? -- the “average American.” (But how did feminism ever become identified with the “average” person? More on that later.)

**“Giving Place” to the Other**

At the core of Derrida’s concept of hospitality is the mandate that we must “give place” to the outsider in ways that do not resonate with the time-honored liberal ethic of tolerance, nor the implications of a self-conscious magnanimity. In *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond,*[[4]](#footnote-4) Derrida insists that in order for true hospitality to inhere, the welcoming gesture must allow in the person, the idea, the cultural practice that differs so fundamentally from our traditional ways of life that it does not translate back into our familiar matrix. When someone is utterly foreign to us, unversed in our language and unaccustomed to our habits, the act of allowing that person in can no longer be read in terms that respond to our familiar grid. “[T]here would be an antinomy, an insoluble antinomy, a non-dialectizable antinomy between, on the one hand, *The* law of unlimited hospitality…and on the other hand…those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional….”[[5]](#footnote-5) The presence of the unknown raises questions and presents a dynamic that underscores the limits of our epistemological framework: the stranger is strange only when his or her culture shares no obvious cognate with our own and thus forces our well-worn practices into the at times playful, at times dangerous implications of *différance.* Thanks to the latter, knowledge claims no definitive stopping point nor settles into the comfortable realm of a normative imperative: it never becomes “average,” “normal,” or “the mean.” Instead, as it extends hospitality to something heretofore outside its boundaries, it forever defers to another, alternative reading whose impact unsettles its comfort zone. Being hospitable, then, engenders an encounter with alterity that necessarily reorients our (un)stable worldview and loosens our points of reference and former sense of entitlement. A discourse of rights, entitlement, and propriety gives way to the ingrained aporias of our worldview: we are made aware of what doesn’t translate. “The law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right…it is…strangely heterogeneous….”[[6]](#footnote-6)

This reorientation may be exhilarating, devastating, curious, or bewildering. Yet such emotional responses matter less than the humbling intellectual effect of the supplemental logic that is always contained in the reality of difference, and that always points toward an ethical response. Otherness by definition underscores the deviant rationale already contained in my own thinking, the parergonal expression that my iteration engenders, since even the most linear thinking necessarily puts into play its own errant alternative. The supplemental logic that lies hidden within an outward expression -- a culture, a political position, a way of life, an opinion – has the power to deconstruct that expression’s hubris and thereby point out the extent to which its claims to authority have always been dialectically implicated in alternatives. Supplemental logic allows the received wisdom to be read against itself, to turn back on its own power such that its deviant other is given equal expression. Thus a potentially subversive encounter with the foreigner nevertheless carries with it an ethical dimension since it breaks the circularity of the self-referencing, self-aggrandizing worldview that reads so much of life in terms of its own conceptual matrix. When we allow for *le différand,* that which does not translate back into our matrix, we no longer rely on the self-same point of reference that we formerly used, for the other clearly shares no cognate with us. This failure to identify, to identify with, opens up critical theory’s affirmative possibilities in that it breaks the circularity and self-referencing of the status quo. Derrida asks:

[W]e have come to wonder whether absolute, hyperbolical, unconditional hospitality doesn’t consist in suspending language, a particular determinate language, and even the address of the other. Shouldn’t we also submit to a sort of holding back of the temptation to ask the other who he is, what her name is, where he comes from, etc.?[[7]](#footnote-7)

Central to the hospitable gesture, then, lies the willingness to suspend a time-honored conceptual matrix that has served our purposes, and a willingness to recognize the limits of those intellectual horizons that have guided our lives. A truly hospitable gesture is one that moves away from the self-referencing circularity that so often guides our claims to magnanimity even as we impose our own horizons on the world. This insistence on suspending identitarian logic similarly guides Derrida’s writings on friendship, which argue that the one I call friend need not reflect me back to me. As against the traditional readings of friendship proffered by, for instance, Aristotle, Derrida maintains that the gesture of friendship does not reside in those moments when I see myself in another, or feel that, as per Aristotle, we are in truth one person who inhabit two separate bodies. Indeed, in *The* *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes that “all friendship has as its object something good or pleasant…and is based on similarity between the parties.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition to this, Derrida observes that Aristotle’s *The Eudemian Ethics* “inscribes friendship, knowledge and death, but also survival, from the start, in a single, *selfsame* configuration.”[[9]](#footnote-9) It is this insistence on the selfsame, the circular, and the narcissistic that Derrida dismisses from his own political vision. For although Aristotle concedes that friendship resides more in loving the other than in being loved (“friendship consists more in loving than in being loved”[[10]](#footnote-10)), still Derrida detects an essential reciprocity that cannot simply affirm the other on its own terms and in its own manner. Yet for him, the genuinely friendly gesture is one that allows for *le différand* such that identification with the other becomes impossible: instead of reconfirming one’s meanings, friendship deconstructs our parameters and so underscores the need for hospitality. Derrida highlights this ethical component of deconstruction in *The Politics of Friendship,* wherein the one who is loved should often remain unaware of this fact, and not implicated in a relationship of reciprocity. Ideally, he or she “has nothing to know, sometimes nothing to do.”[[11]](#footnote-11) As with hospitality, then, something incommensurate is at work here if the friendship is genuine. Derrida writes:

This incommensurability between the lover and the beloved will now unceasingly exceed all measurement and all moderation – that is, it will exceed the very principle of a calculation. It will *perhaps* introduce a virtual disorder in the organization of the Aristotelian discourse. (This ‘perhaps’ has already marked the hesitant gait of our reading.) Something trembles, for example, in what Aristotle calls the natural (*phúsei*) hierarchy….[[12]](#footnote-12)

The disorder alluded to in this passage clearly holds creative potential, for to disrupt any existing hierarchy, however traumatizing, allows for a new order of things – at least in theory. It allows us to think differently about our politics even if our manner of executing our newfound creative insights has not fully come into view (the “perhaps” alluded to by Derrida). Thus, in considering Sidler’s claim that feminism today must widen its purview to include other forms of oppression, clearly Derridean philosophy proves a useful ally. Sidler argues for a concept of “sustained unemployment,” and while the Derridean notion that I prefer, hospitality, does not relate directly to one’s status within the workforce, it nevertheless carries some of the same implications invoked by Sidler. Being outside the established parameters and so capable of taking a different view of things; having distance on the norm in ways that permit an alternative vision; being made aware of the existing matrix as it both sustains certain relations of power and simultaneously excludes other: these are the qualities that hospitality shares with Sidler’s concerns regarding the unemployed. Importantly for my purposes, they make possible our ability to exit the logic of the selfsame, which I see as a crucial component of feminist theorizing in the twenty-first century. Because of the critical distance provided by hardship, strangeness, and the inability to understand, they allow us to rethink where we are going as we promote women’s empowerment. Empowerment, yes, but for whom and according to which model? In what ways should “the normal” – assuming there is such a thing -- be made “new?”

**Leaning In and Getting Down In the Dirt: Is this Feminism?**

It is not only the hardships of the domestic economic scene that necessitate this shift in paradigm. The *global* setting of an increasingly interpenetrated, interconnected world marked by economic asymmetries signals the need for feminism to think creatively about its intended purpose and understanding of oppression.[[13]](#footnote-13) Because this globalized setting so amplifies the realities of difference – cultural, economic, ethnic, religious -- as well as the asymmetries that separate them, the need to let go of identitarian logic that reconfirms the self-same and to grasp the importance of a deviant, supplemental logic becomes all the more pronounced. The Euro- and America-centric mindsets and policies that have given rise to the more sinister dimensions of globalization must be revisited in such a way that life in the industrial North, the Western intellectual tradition, a Judeo-Christian ethos, and the premises of classical liberalism no longer function as the norm. Phrased differently, the injustices of global capital mandate that we must rethink our ingrained notions of Europe and the United States as the model for humanity against which all else is to be measured. To my mind, such attention to difference must not only be incorporated into feminist theorizing, it should function as its signature. Exiting a circular logic that continually reaffirms the self-same should comprise the “feminist” moment in feminism, not be an add-on as we strive to affirm a standardized, Euro- and America-centric, Caucasian, *masculinist* norm. Winifred Woodhull thus insists that “it is crucial that feminism be conceived and enacted in global terms.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This subsequently leads her to bemoan the fact that

women in the global North…are typical of third wave feminists, who appear to have forgotten second wave feminism’s roots not only in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement but also in third world liberation movements…it is disappointing that new feminist debates arising in first world contexts mainly address issues that pertain only to women *in* those contexts, as if the parochialism and xenophobia of the economically depressed 1980s were still hanging over feminism like a dark cloud.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This is a propitious time for Woodhull’s desired intellectual shift to occur, and for the sensitivities and humility that accompany Derridean hospitality to prevail. For indeed, the vulnerabilities of those hurt by global capital are undoubtedly more readily grasped and more readily empathized with when the “average American” -- if he or she ever existed -- no longer feels “average.” The current malaise that has grasped the middle class and made the American dream increasingly difficult to attain therefore makes this a teachable moment to engage in the kind of creative thinking needed to go from identitarian logic to the kind of theorizing that incorporates Derrida’s notion of hospitality.

Significantly, allowing our own vulnerability and our own hardship to encourage such oppositional thinking goes against the grain of so much in Northern Third Wave feminism. For as I’ve argued elsewhere,[[16]](#footnote-16) certain strains within Third Wave feminism identify strongly with traditional readings of money, sex, and power, endorsing what appears to be a newfound feminist freedom that is in fact a mere replaying of American rugged individualism. There is an endorsement of “masculinist” elements here, with “masculinist” intended to denote the embrace of neoliberal premises (climbing the corporate ladder, emulating a Donald Trump-style aggression, exhibiting a single-minded toughness which is anything but deconstructive in its tenacious outlook) accompanied by a sexual libertinism which, to my mind, does not always spell freedom for women.

Of course, I have no argument with women earning more money or being free of oppressive double standards: that was never the issue. But if women merely replay expressions of power from within the corridors of power, rather than reconsider them from a now-distanced positions made aware of *le différand,* nothing has really changed. Moreover, if feminism simply identifies with the status quo regarding money, sex, and power, it can hardly claim to be progressive. The media attention recently paid to Sheryl Sandberg’s new book, *Lean In*, captures this perfectly.[[17]](#footnote-17) Invited to assess Sandberg’s central thesis that women are not pushing hard enough to break the glass ceiling, Jody Greenstone Miller argued on *The News Hour* that the issue is not *women*, but the what rising to the top in corporate America offers in the first place. Miller disagrees that feminism is “stalled” due to exhaustion or apathy: “the problem is women aren't leaning in not because they don't know how to, but because they don't like the world they're being asked to lean into.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Miller’s critical distanceon how we evaluate success – or, more broadly speaking, empowerment – constitutes the key element in future feminist theorizing that is sadly missing from much Third Wave expression. Such recent exponents of “feminist” activity as “grrrl power,” “stiletto,” lipstick,” and “babe” feminisms, the Riot Grrrls, the aggressive, highly sexualized female action hero, and the many ways of celebrating sexual libertinism – what Ariel Levy calls “female chauvinist pigs”[[19]](#footnote-19) – merely replay the basic tenets of many a rough-and-ready American cultural icon: John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger (well, immigrant-turned-cultural-icon). This celebration of female power so touted by earlier critics of what they termed “establishment feminism” is to my mind merely a replaying of a masculinity conception of power. To a limited degree, I agree with Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfeld, Christina Hoff Sommers, and Naomi Wolf [[20]](#footnote-20) who vehemently argued in the 1990s that establishment feminism had become too mired in women’s victimization, and subsequently too eager to convince women of their need for institutional supports. These authors’ criticisms of “establishment” feminism, at times vitriolic, is well known, for they complained loudly about how women need to toughen up, be strong, and take advantage of their newfound power. Paglia’s excoriation of academic feminism, with its focus on female suffering and an ingrained, pervasive misogyny, resulted in her exhorting women to “be prepared to go it alone, without the infantilizing assurances of external supports like trauma counselors, grievance committees, and law courts. I say to women: get down in the dirt….”[[21]](#footnote-21)

In many ways, this mandate to toughen up, go it alone, and be self-sufficient – so reminiscent of many an American cultural heroes – has given rise to much of the toughness, aggression, and sassiness that inspires Third Wavers. Indeed, getting down in the dirt is now a staple of so many “feminist” expressions in the global North. The media offers ample examples of quick-witted, tough-minded, ambitious women who are supposedly the by-product of Second Wave inroads: Patty Hewes of *Damages*, for instance. And to take but one example from my own life, I draw from the fact students in my feminist theory course are required to do twenty hours of community service with organizations we call “partners.” These partners all feature some connection to the gender theory that we discuss in the classroom, so that students can ultimately write a paper that brings their hands-on experience in the community together with the academic treatment of gender that we have discussed together. One such partner is Girls, Inc., an organization aimed at building confidence and high self-esteem in young girls in their early teens through after-school activities, e.g. homework, sports, organized games. According to my students’ rendition of what goes on, Girls, Inc. clearly valorizes a tough, energized, math-and-science type approach to the world at the expense of qualities more traditionally aligned with a feminine outlook. The tweens who attend the organization, in other words, are not encouraged to pursue activities that dwell on emotions, cultivate aesthetics, or generally encourage what de Beauvoir categorizes as “the reproduction of everyday life.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Based on my students’ accounts over several semesters, young girls attending Girls, Inc. are actively discouraged from expression of any caring, interpersonal, or passive activities such as listening, reading, and caretaking. They are instead exhorted to take an interest in sports and science, to express aggression and anger, and to eschew the sensitivity that is seen as a sign of weakness. Traditionally feminine things – like caring and empathizing – are seen as a sign of weakness. To get ahead in this world, the girls are told, they must learn early to play hardball and to excel at those activities that de Beauvoir aligns not with female immanence but with male transcendence: those activities and professions that allow one to leave a mark on the world. They are told to “lean in,” to toughen up, and get down in the dirt.

In their essays, then, my students consistently query whether or not this organization’s deriding of traditionally feminine qualities and activities really makes it a “feminist” organization. For because my course of course begins from the premise that gendered attributes are culturally determined and not naturally ordained, we are free to consider what social values we find most desirable. We are free, in other words, to separate a value from its time-honored relegation to either the “feminine” or “masculine” spheres, and to evaluate it on its own merits separate from its cultural reception thus far. And I for one am not ready to let go of those qualities deemed “feminine” so that money, sex, and power can be replayed along masculinist lines, but this time described as “feminism.”

How did we get here, to a place where we valorize a traditionally masculinist reading of power at the expense of what the Second Wave termed the “ethic of care”? How did we come to a place where we tell young girls not to seem to empathic, not to listen or exhibit care, but to esteem the status quo without first evaluating, critiquing, deconstructing its values? This is, of course, a question whose complicated answers lie beyond the purview of this essay. Nevertheless, the economic instability that has so impacted the American cultural imaginary since 2008 makes this a propitious time to discuss a new norm in ways that might diminish the allure of masculinism, allowing for a new sensibility. For while I of course recognize that there are situations that call for an aggressive stance and a heavy dose of instrumental rationality, today we are called upon to reconsider victimization in ways that employ the Derridean notion of hospitality. The “average American” should no longer be the point of reference within feminist theory; instead, the interpretation of money, sex, and power that have prevailed in neoliberal societies must be rethought in light of the vulnerabilities that we all confront, and the sense of foreignness that now pervades everyday life should cause us to take victimization seriously. For to merely replay an old version of things in John Wayne fashion, enjoying victory culture and the trappings of first world success, sells short what I feel are some of the most creative, insightful, exciting legacies of Second Wave feminism. Paramount among these are the insistence that we need not mimic traditional versions of power, that “feminism” is synonymous with a creative approach to the social order, and that we can create a different world based on “feminine” values that are not biologically determined but normatively endorsed.

**Obamacare and Arugula Salad: An Ethic of Care Made Mainstream**

The “ethic of care” represents one such set of values that, for some “power” feminists, epitomizes the Second Wave’s excessive focus on victimization. Casting the world in terms of a “feminine” “web of relationship” wherein human interdependency functions as the keynote, it stands in opposition to its more abstracted, “masculine” “ethic of justice,” which views life in terms of law, principles, and guiding maxims. This distinction, made famous in Carol Gilligan’s *In A Different Voice*,[[23]](#footnote-23) was of course variously received and roundly criticized by many for its tendency to reinscribe femininity and masculinity into traditional readings of gender. Positing a caring, nurturing femininity in opposition to an abstracting, principled masculinity, it was everything that power feminism eschews. Even if Gilligan’s revered “feminine” qualities were seen as socially constructed rather than biologically determined, still the focus on vulnerability leads us away from the muscled-up stance that typifies the rugged young “feminist” eager to enjoy her newfound power.

I see the ethic of care as a progressive force not only for its affective emphasis on human interconnection, but also for its epistemological focus: it forces us to exit victory culture and consider the one whose dependency on others leaves them vulnerable. Even without saying it, various feminist scholars have long affirmed that an ethic of care indeed instantiates the principles of Derridean hospitality and should therefore replace the injustices of a neoliberal order. There are many authors worth citing here, the most obvious being Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Eva Feder Kittay, and Virginia Held.[[24]](#footnote-24) Yet the work of Joan C. Tronto also stands out, and I highlight her contribution to this scholarly corpus because of its centrality to politics and to political theory. Indeed, the political ramifications of an ethic of care -- an ethic that takes seriously Derridean hospitality’s commitment to *le différand* and all that remains incommensurate, untranslatable, and outside the logic of the self-same – are many, and often go against the grain of the American mainstream. Because an ethic of care highlights a common interdependence and pervasive human vulnerability, it underscores the degree to which we are all potentially “foreign” to the high life promised by the American dream: we can all grow sick, lose our job, become widowed or orphaned, suffer from dementia. This painful awareness of vulnerability that threatens us all may not be a staple of the American cultural imaginary,[[25]](#footnote-25) but it has by now gained considerable ground within our public discourse.

Tronto’s work on health care considers carefully the political ramifications of our shared vulnerability, and illustrates the need for a changed discourse in the industrial north (and especially in the United States). Her *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for An Ethic of Care* argues persuasively that the manner in which health care typically enters our discourse in the United States already bears the problematic traces of a logic of the self-same, a logic reflecting the more powerful position of the “average” American unattuned to those on society’s margins. Eager to incorporate these heretofore incommensurate voices into the conversation, Tronto explains that those in positions of power must be willing to negotiate on behalf of those whose everyday existence is unknown to them. She therefore highlights the degree to which an ethic of care meaningfully makes visible the suffering that was otherwise off our collective radar, and brings center stage the ramifications of institutionalized suffering. Forcing us to confront the aporia of our worldview, Tronto’s argument bears striking resemblance to Derrida’s plea for hospitality as she writes:

[W]e need to see the world differently, so that the activities that legitimate the accretion of power to the existing powerful are less valued, and the activities that might legitimate a sharing of power with outsiders are increased in value. An initial step in this process is to recognize that the current boundaries of moral and political life are drawn such that the concerns and activities of the relatively powerless are omitted from the central concerns of society.[[26]](#footnote-26)

I see strong parallels between Tronto’s eagerness to alter the moral boundaries of our discourse and Derrida’s please for hospitality. Insisting that “[t]he world will look different if we move care from its current peripheral location to a place near the center of human life,”[[27]](#footnote-27) Tronto maintains that the ethic of care should be more broadly endorsed in the West rather than viewed as an ethos that pertains only to women. On the contrary, by deconstructing the worldview of those in power and allowing in the vantage point of the vulnerable, disempowered “foreigner,” the ethic of care greatly enriches all of society given the changed perspective that accompanies it. For just as Derrida’s hospitality “gives place” to the other in ways that disrupt the logic of the self-same, so too does the ethic of care give standing to the one who reorients the purpose and meaning of victory culture (and so potentially alters the global vision of the industrialized north vis-à-vis the less developed south). If we can go from enjoying the money to following the money, from being in the game to critiquing the game, then feminist theory will truly have taken on a new direction.

With Tronto, then, I argue “against the view that ‘women’s morality’ is about women.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Rather, it is about the foreigner in us all, the part of us that will one day drop out of American victory culture because we are incapable of enjoying its profit. Tronto writes:

Vulnerability belies the myth that we are all autonomous, and potentially equal, citizens. To assume equality among humans leaves out and ignores important dimensions of human existence. Throughout our lives, all of us go through varying degrees of dependence and independence, of autonomy and vulnerability. A political order that presumes only independence and autonomy as the nature of human life thereby misses a great deal of human experience, and must somehow hide this point elsewhere.[[29]](#footnote-29)

As stated earlier, now is a propitious moment to consider the ramifications of Tronto’s argument, given the success of President Obama’s health care plan. Chief Justice Roberts’ upholding the legality of Obamacare perhaps explains why it has now garnered more approval than it enjoyed earlier. Of course, many Americans still condemn this health care plan roundly, and view it as a first step toward an encroaching socialist government that will ruin the American economy, destroy our signature ingenuity, and dampen the can-do spirit of which we are so proud. Yet a Pew Poll on July 12, 2012, finds that higher numbers of Americans now approve of Obamacare, and see its efforts to overhaul our chaotic health care system as sound.[[30]](#footnote-30) Tellingly, Florida Governor Rick Scott’s recent shift in stance on the plan reveals the manner in which comprehensive health care is slowly being embraced by some who were formerly its staunch opponents. In February, 2013, Governor Scott argued that

This country is the greatest in the world and it's greatest largely because of how we value the weakest among us. Quality health care should be accessible and affordable for all Floridians. It shouldn't depend on your zip code or your tax bracket. No mother or father should despair over whether they have access to high-quality health care for their sick child.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Ideally, this recent success concerning comprehensive health care coverage which exhorts us to “value the weakest among us” will eventually become but one instance of the way in which American strength at home and in the world arena morphed into something founded on an ethic of care – that is, on Derridean hospitality. For if the “average American” can move away from idealizing our position as number one and develop an eagerness to listen to what is radically other, excluded from the corridors of power and disadvantaged on the world stage, then a new sensibility will be present in our society at large. Of course, it’s a tall order, and this new sensibility may never fully develop. Yet a recent cartoon in *The Los Angeles Times* gives me hope.[[32]](#footnote-32) Having invited his Republican adversaries to dinner in hopes that sharing a meal might facilitate the debates regarding the federal budget, President Obama sits at the table with his colleagues waiting to be served. A waiter appears, and in hopes of clarifying the table’s dinner order, states that twelve rare sirloin steaks are on their way…and one arugula salad. Who ordered the arugula salad, he wonders? All the Republican Congressmen point to Obama. The cartoon reveals a good deal about the meanings that surround the administration of the president who crafted our comprehensive health care plan (and who has many other policy issues that exemplify an ethic of care – e.g., immigration, downsizing the military, strengthening community colleges, to name a few). Salad, of course, suggests vegetarianism, and stands in stark contradistinction to the twelve rare steaks. Vegetarianism not only invokes a sensitivity toward the lives of animals and caring for the environment (with its fight against global warming), but – when contrasted with steak – invokes the effort to fight the meat packing industry and other corporate giants who deliver harmful foods to Americans. Arugula suggests something foreign, European perhaps, and thereby sets in play the resonances of the European welfare state wherein citizens in so many countries are covered from cradle to grave. And that, in the cartoon, Obama represents the only person at the table to have ordered an arugula salad clearly indicates that he is out of step with the tastes and habits of his colleagues, whose love of red meat surely represents a staple of rugged American individualism. Yet he is the leader of new world, and without wishing to sound ageist, there is meaning in the fact that all his Republican adversaries are elderly, white-haired, portly men none of whom seem to have may years left on Capitol Hill. Times are tough for Obama at the moment, we might conclude, but he certainly represents the future at least where this cartoon is concerned. For now, he is singled out and made to feel silly: arugula salad, *really*? But when studied closely this little scene surely suggests that the future is with him, and that a future America will more readily accept the many metaphoric resonances of a country “fed” on arugula. It will be a country more open to the meanings of Derridean hospitality, and less wed to our long-standing position of power at the top. To my mind, this is feminist theory’s new direction.

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