

Elizabeth V. Spelman

Repair: The impulse to restore in a fragile world

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*Reviewed by Falguni A. Sheth, 2004*

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For Elizabeth Spelman, the theme of repair manifests itself in virtually every practice in the world. As *Homoreparans*, human beings fix cars, paintings, fabrics, families, feelings, social relations. As she states, "Repair wouldn't be necessary if things never broke, never frayed, never splintered or fell to pieces—or if we didn't care that they did" (5). Repair, as an act or an attitude, is a response to the accidents and ruptures of the variety of contexts in which we find ourselves. The practice of repairing attests not only to the fallibility of human beings, but the historical, psychological, and cultural bridges by which we mark our interdependence and our hopes in the possibility of social, political, and personal renewal.

To repair is to acknowledge and respond to the fracturability of the world in which we live in a very particular way—not by simply throwing our hands up in despair at the damage, or otherwise accepting without question that there is no possibility of or point in trying to put the pieces back together, but by employing skills of mind, hand, and heart to recapture an earlier moment in the history of an object or a relationship in order to allow it to keep resisting" (5-6).

Spelman writes in the style of the best of literary essayists, moving seamlessly from anecdotes about Willie the Saab mechanic in upstate New York, Fred Haefele who restores Indian Chief motorcycles, to art repairers Louise Wijnberg, Elisabeth Bracht and Irenda Glanzer in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam who proceed to "mend invisibly" the Barnett Newman painting *Cathedra*, which was slashed by an unsatisfied patron in 1997. She points to each practice, Willie's and the art restorers, as having a different telos. For Willie, the purpose of repairing old Saabs is functional, whereas Fred sees his task as returning classic motorcycles to a "classic" condition, where others can both know and yet not be conspicuously aware of how the restoration takes place. For the art restorers, mending is part of the project of erasing tears and returning a piece of art to its close to "original" condition.

In each case, repair has not only different functions, but different manifestations, meanings, implications, and roles in the world, depending upon the practice. Spelman uses this insight to raise questions about the authenticity of a particular "reparative" practice that has a larger social and political resonance. Building upon these more concrete examples, Spelman turns to more complex, subtle, and less tangible forms of repair in order to examine the advantages and disadvantages of them. In chapter three, she

explores the reparative practices that occur in the home. Distinguishing between "masculine" reparative practices of the kind listed above from more "feminine" practices that range from mending torn clothes, to healing bruised feelings, and care ethics as popularized by Carol Gilligan, Spelman shows that the notion of repair has analogical functions in the domestic and ethical arenas. She points to the anxiety embedded in teaching women and men to repair things typically considered to be beyond their gendered domains (27-8), as well as the inherent burden imposed upon women to fix "damaged relations" between other members of their families and communities (42). She also refers to the obligations of care and repair that were disparately imposed upon black women (and their children) by engaged in "reparative" housework for white women (38-40).

In chapters four, five, and six, Spelman delves more deeply into the reparative work that happens in real communities, as well as the monetary and symbolic reparations that have been proposed to heal historical rifts that resulted in government endorsed-practices such as slavery and unjust medical experiments, among other events. In chapter four, Spelman raises the issue of restorative justice, and the impetus of repair that is embedded in the project of mending the social fabric of a community torn by individual criminal acts. Comparing "repair" to "punishment" as two possible attitudes towards crime, Spelman alludes to the problems of the latter comportment: punishment is merely a responsive practice, rather than one that attempts to identify how harms occur in communities or to prevent harms or mend those social rents. In contrast, repair can be undertaken in the name of restorative justice as a more "constructive" or "positive" practice, such as "community service," or those that attempt to heal social rifts by processing the hurts and injuries through a range of more subtle practices such as those that figure in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigative hearings after the end of apartheid (59ff). She points to the possibility that certain rifts may never be healed, but also that repairs may begin to be undertaken through public gestures such as government-issued apologies, such as that which President Clinton offered during his tenure to the families of the victims of the Tuskegee Study, where black male patients with syphilis were deliberately left untreated (87-90).

By raising a variety of contexts in which the practice of repair has its relevance, Spelman raises a theme that has connections to a variety of issues in political, social, and feminist philosophy. Yet, Spelman appears to eschew an analysis that explains why repair should be compared analogically across so many locations, contexts, and functions. This is where the literary ease and eloquent grace of Spelman's prose is both alluring and constrained in its philosophical aspirations. It is constrained because there is a marked absence of a sustained exploration of the role of repair as it implicitly manifests itself across a range of philosophical literature on the same topics upon which she touches. It would have been useful,

for example, to discuss some of the criteria by which repair as "fixing" an object has different implications from "repair" which "reconstitutes" certain social or cultural fabrics, or which "heals" collective psychic or emotional bruises while also attempting to serve as a form of justice.

Fleeting attention is given to the implications of repair for the philosophical world. For example, while Spelman makes clear that repair can be understood as a form of historical restoration, or caring labor practices but also as a paradigm of moral and political healing, she elides a discussion of those conceptual bridges by which the same concept can be understood in such radically disparate ways. Such a discussion might have enabled the reader to transpose Spelman's important reflections onto other pressing issues and problems of the day, thus allowing for the possibility of changing the etiquette and the utensils by which conversations take place. How is repair both embedded and disruptive in conversations about welfare, the prison-industrial complex, or the post-9-11 domestic and foreign policies that the current American Presidential Administration is deploying to "heal" this country? It also would help *Hypatia* readers such as myself to consider how to protect dependency-work and other marginal and reparative labor practices from being penalized and ostracized in an epoch marked by the increasing international valorization of the free-market.

Nevertheless, I think I understand some of the reasons why Spelman selects the pleasurable, literary genre that she employs: through it, she invites the reader to ruminate with her on the range of arenas in which the role of repair is crucial to political and ethical bridge-building and maintaining the social fabric despite the invisibility of past rents in the same fabric. It is an invitation without strings. By subtly allowing us to reflect with her without determining which other doors may open for us, Spelman smoothes, eases, and indeed repairs the reader's sense of anxiety that the problems of the world might remain unfixed.

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