

What Ails Feminist Criticism?

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Originally, when this essay was a talk entitled "Who Killed Feminist Criticism?" I relished the idea of a rousing arraignment in which I dramatically pinned the blame for the problems currently facing feminist criticism on a host of nefarious culprits, some of them the most prestigious people in the field. Hinting that the grave, rather than the bed, might furnish the final setting in this turn-of-the-century melodrama, I used a murder mystery title to fuel suspicion that feminist criticism's evolution would circumvent the happily-ever-after of the love plot to arrive at the demise demanded by its major narrative competitor. Yet, clearly, feminist criticism has not been mortally wounded or robbed of its stamina: prominent feminist scholars serve as the presidents of major professional organizations; feminist journals and books proliferate; and feminist methodologies routinely shape most literature programs. Besides, wouldn't my original scenario play into reactionary efforts to dismantle the gains the advocates of women's studies have made in higher education? And why would I be so ungenerous as to castigate individuals

This essay has profited from the comments of a number of readers who probably do not want to be identified with the points made in it. In particular, I would like to thank Vereen M. Bell, Linda Charnes, Thadious Davis, Mary Favret, Johanna Frank, Donald Gray, Marah Gubar, Carolyn Heilbrun, Tricia Lootens, Alyce Miller, Andrew H. Miller, Nancy K. Miller, Mary Jo Weaver, and Robyn Wiegman. At Indiana University, I have benefitted from working with a group of students so well inoculated against routinized or mirthless languages that they continually delight, surprise, and instruct me.

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whose extraordinary intellectual achievements have profoundly enriched my own thinking?¹

An equally serious drawback to my initial charge was the way in which the story I was telling could be misunderstood as a self-serving generational account, in which early feminist critics (prominent in the seventies) felt beleaguered by the attacks of their successors (in the eighties and nineties), a group that just happened to be comprised of theorists of color and of lesbianism.² Oh dear! The rank smell of racism and homo-

1. Important, too, would be the concern of politically savvy academicians who might urge me to cease and desist from such speculations, which could themselves contribute to the problems feminists face today in the profession (and so I hasten to add parenthetically that I risk these thoughts on my own behalf only—not with the usual G & G trademark). Fears that any approach to the problems of feminism within the academy will give aid and comfort to the enemy are explained by the proliferation of books attacking women's studies and feminist criticism, publications such as Christina Hoff Sommers's *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York, 1994). The most recent of these—Jean Curthoys's *Feminist Amnesia: The Wake of Women's Liberation* (New York, 1997)—views the evolution of women's studies and nonhumanistic forms of feminist criticism as "the unrecognized betrayal of [radical] earlier principles" promulgated during the rise of women's liberation (p. ix). Needless to say, I write as part of the enterprise, not from outside it, in the hopes of strengthening feminism within the academy.

2. Obviously, I cannot fully disengage myself from the generational argument. As Marianne Hirsch has pointed out,

there is a certain generation of feminist theorists who have really gotten it from all sides: Elaine Showalter, Nancy Chodorow, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Carol Gilligan. . . . When you go to a conference and get attacked by other feminists—and I don't just mean criticized, I mean trashed—the whole tone and range of the project changes and certain work gets disallowed. [Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy K. Miller, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York, 1990), pp. 364–65]

Consider also Janet Todd's remark: "It seems to me that my middle-aged generation has necessarily handed over the centre (if there can be one in what are still the margins) to the younger, whose aims and references are different because their experience of life and the state of the discipline are very different. But the older can still comment and prod and grumble as they have always done" (Janet Todd, "Anglo-American Difference: Some Thoughts of an Aging Feminist," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12 [Fall 1993]: 243–44). Yet the generational model "means privileging a kind of family history that organizes generations where they don't exist, ignores intra-generational differences and inter-generational

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phobia reeked from a script which might lead to insinuations that either menopausal rage or maternal rivalry had plunged me into a femicidal fury at the critical daughters supplanting their predecessors. The fact that most of my middle-class, white contemporaries had established quite comfortable niches within the academy only made my complaint seem more self-indulgently whiny. But, despite my anxieties about the misconstruction to which my argument may still be liable, despite my decision to lower the metaphorical decibels with a switch from death to disease, the revised title continues to express my apprehension about the state of feminist literary criticism.

Indeed, there are reasons to consider a number of developments in the eighties and nineties a hazard to the vitality of feminist literary studies. In stating my case against what (not who) has enervated our undertaking, I do not wish to mount a generational argument because generations remain hazy phenomena, their chronologies varying greatly depending on how they are defined. More to the point, the problems that trouble me cross generational lines, no matter where they are drawn. Nor do I want my essay to play into the racism and homophobia of a culture all too willing to exploit disagreements among women in a backlash against all or some of us. In the hope of making my comments constructive, I switched the metaphor from murder to illness in order to argue that—appearances of vigor to the contrary—feminist criticism suffers from internal ailments about which one can postulate possibilities of recovery. As important, when I point to individual thinkers whose stylistic strategies have made the practice of feminist criticism perplexing, I want not to berate the writers but rather to diagnose the disorders their idioms inculcate. At the risk of protesting too much, I need to add that the scholars on whom I focus were chosen precisely because their innovative work has played such an influential role in our discipline. The rhetorical complaints their prose exhibits concern me because they have proven to be catching (among some populations, in epidemic proportions).

In particular, I hope to show that a number of prominent advocates of racialized identity politics and of poststructuralist theories have framed their arguments in such a way as to divide feminists, casting suspicion upon a common undertaking that remains in dispute at the turn of the twentieth century. What does it mean that otherwise sagacious proponents of these two at times antagonistic camps—African American as well as postcolonial materialists, on the one hand, and Foucauldian as well as Derridean theorists, on the other—have produced discourses that in various ways hinder the tolerance and understanding needed for

commonalities, and thrives on a paradigm of oppositional change," as Judith Roof has shown (Judith Roof, "Generational Difficulties, or The Fear of a Barren History," in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, ed. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan [Minneapolis, 1997], p. 72).

open dialogue? About the language crisis at which feminist theory has arrived, Nancy K. Miller notes the predicament related to pronouns of subjectivity:

Between the indictment of the feminist universal as a white fiction brought by women of color and the poststructuralist suspicion of a grounded subject, what are the conditions under which as feminists one (not to say "I") can say "we"?³

In its most recent phase of metacritical dissension, rhetorical indictments of the feminist universal and the grounded subject constitute my major consideration because the maladies I treat—what I will call critical election (with its analogue, critical abjection) and obscurantism—threaten the relationship feminists within the academy have sought to maintain with one another and with women outside it. This will be the rather depressing substance of my speculations about the development of feminist criticism, which will conclude by historicizing its current contentiousness in order to hold out the hope that we might be emerging out of it. To return to the metaphor of my revised title: we may be in the process of clambering out of the sickbed to surmise the possibilities of hopping into more exciting berths.

Critique, Recovery, and the Engendering of Differences

Many Western narratives begin with Edenic scenes, so let me start the story of feminist criticism in the paradise of a roused, indeed, "raised," consciousness—when we dead awakened, to recycle Adrienne Rich's famous phrasing.⁴ Since this part of the tale has been told so often and since happiness tends to be brief, if not boring (at least in the provenance of narrative time), I will keep this section to a minimum. During a series of moments in the seventies, as I tell my undergraduates (who were busy being born during this same decade), female academics brought the women's movement into such departments as English and history, anthropology and psychology, fine arts, film, religion, and education. Outside the field of literature, one thinks of the now classic works of Gerda Ler-

3. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York, 1991), pp. 74–75.

4. See Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York, 1979), pp. 33–49. To be sure, as Evelyn Fox Keller has pointed out, "a focus on the supposed coherence of seventies feminism obscures the fact that, from its earliest days, feminist theory was in fact characterized by a marked multiplicity in its goals, and in its stated functions"; however, I am arguing that there was more solidarity and coherence in the seventies than in its later evolution (Hirsch and Keller, "Conclusion: Practicing Conflict in Feminist Theory," *Conflicts in Feminism*, p. 382).

ner, Gayle Rubin, Sherry Ortner, Juliet Mitchell, and Nancy Chodorow; of Linda Nochlin, Laura Mulvey, Mary Daly, Angela Davis, and Carol Gilligan. Imbued with the exuberance of pioneers, this group of scholars revised disciplinary-bound models generated to explain masculine ways of being. They examined how such paradigms excluded or marginalized female experiences and then reinvented them so as to account for the uniqueness of women's cultural situation.

The first stage of feminist criticism, which Elaine Showalter has called "critique," undercut the universality of male-devised scripts in philosophy as well as science, in intellectual as well as social history.⁵ Within the specifically literary context that is my subject, critique meant the proliferation of books about the uses to which male authors had put images of female characters and feminine imagery. From Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* to countless interpretations of the gendered narratives at work in canonical texts by Shakespeare, Milton, Faulkner, and Mailer, feminists produced fresh readings that stressed the manner in which the work of art participated in the construction of debilitating or liberating sexual ideologies, influencing or influenced by authors, publishers, and readers. Important volumes produced by such thinkers as Toni Cade Bambara (*The Black Woman: An Anthology*), Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (*Woman in Sexist Society*), Mary Helen Washington (*Black-Eyed Susans*), Lillian Robinson (*Sex, Class, and Culture*), and Tillie Olsen (*Silences*) were based on Simone de Beauvoir's insight into women's alterity and spawned numerous analyses of the images and stereotypes of "the second sex" in male-authored literature.⁶ This work continues, as does the related task of approaching noncanonical texts that are used to lay bare the relationship between gender and genre (in, say, the western and science fiction, film noir and hip-hop, fashion photography and television journalism).

Although critique remains a vital aspect of feminist analysis, it was quickly followed by the second stage produced by the scholars Showalter dubbed "gynocritics."⁷ The recovery of female literary traditions began in the late seventies with books whose bold, inclusive categories appear evident in their titles. *Literary Women* (by Ellen Moers) and *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (by Margaret Homans), *Black Women Novelists* (by Barbara Christian) and *Reinventing Womanhood* (by Carolyn Heilbrun) sound upbeat, monumental in their generalizations about the previously ne-

glected subject of female literary achievement.⁸ The images or themes or lexicons to which women writers appeared especially drawn, their uses of a recurrent cast of characters, their attraction to certain authorial strategies, gender-related standards at work in the publication or reception of their books, the distinctive reading patterns of female readers: all sustained the attention of feminist scholars.

Concern about individual authors previously neglected or out of print invariably drew scholarly attention to the narrative of literary history with its interest in aesthetic evaluation and periodization. Therefore, books began appearing about the specificities of women's cultural situation within, say, the Renaissance or the modernist period. In East Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, in Spanish and German departments, as well as in English and in American Studies, the methodologies of recovery continue to produce major publications.⁹ The heady influx of French feminist thinking may have appeared more epistemologically glamorous, less dowdy than some Anglo-American empirical studies; however, two of its major proponents relied on comparable strategies of critique and recovery. Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray decried Western culture's identification of masculinity with rationality and vision, femininity with emotionalism and embodiment. To such speculations they appended meditations on a recoverable and empowering *écriture féminine* or *parler-femme*.¹⁰

8. See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976); Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton, N.J., 1980); Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, Conn., 1980); and Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* (New York, 1979). If *The Madwoman in the Attic* seems unusually gothic in this context, both its subtitle—*The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*—and the title of the collection of essays Sandra Gilbert and I edited that same year—*Shakespeare's Sisters*—participate in the exuberant universalizing so common in the late seventies and viewed with so much suspicion today; see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn., 1979) and *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington, Ind., 1979). I have placed Barbara Christian's work in this stage rather than the next because of its early date of publication and also because it used the rhetoric of recovery.

9. As Gilbert and I learned when revising *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* for its second edition, even in the ten years that separated this publication from its first appearance in 1985, a host of discoveries—writers like Mary Wroth, Eliza Haywood, Helen Maria Williams, and Anne Spencer—dramatized the difference the period of recovery has made in the Anglo-American literature classroom and in our mapping of the various periods of literary production.

10. I am taking issue with Toril Moi's view that Anglo-American empiricism stood in opposition to the rhetorical French feminism because I see both camps involved in comparable endeavors; see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York, 1985). In her frequently reprinted "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous began by using Derrida's notion of hierarchized binary oppositions to censure Western culture's identification of masculinity with activity, rationality, culture, and logos and of femininity with passivity,

5. Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Showalter (New York, 1985), p. 129.

6. See *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York, 1970); *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York, 1971); *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women*, ed. Mary Helen Washington (Garden City, N.Y., 1975); Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington, Ind., 1978); and Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York, 1978).

7. Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," p. 129.

By the eighties, changes were taking place that laid the groundwork for the third phase of feminist criticism, which I will call the engendering of differences. Among people occupied in critique, more attention began to be paid to images not only of femininity but also of masculinity, not only of heterosexuality but also of homosexuality in historically specified sites in the past and in popular media of the present, including the electronic forms that saturate contemporary culture. Among people absorbed by recovery, the evolution of a series of distinctive subtraditions generated research and classes on Native American, Chicana, Asian American, and, especially, African American literary legacies. I use the verb *engendering* for the third stage because it engaged feminists in the activity of bringing gender to bear upon other differences: sexual and racial differences primarily, but also economic, religious, and regional distinctions. Antithetically, it also included thinkers bringing sexual and racial identifications (as well as economic, religious, and regional affiliations) to bear upon gender, thereby accentuating dissimilarities among women, divergences among men.

Notable in the emergence of scholarship on lesbian and gay topics, critics like Teresa de Lauretis and Terry Castle, Diana Fuss and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explored such subjects as the social construction of heterosexuality, psychoanalytic models of lesbian desire, and the representational repercussions of homophobia. Prominent in the rise of ethnic studies, African American feminists like Nellie McKay and Hortense Spillers, Deborah McDowell and Akasha (Gloria) Hull analyzed such issues as the links between racial and sexual stereotyping, the distinct inflections of African American women's literary history, the impact of a racist past on depictions of maternity or the relationship between the sexes. Under the influence of thriving postcolonial research, the historically unprecedented number of self-defined lesbian and black intellectuals publishing from within higher education investigated the interaction between heterosexual and homosexual, white and black cultural phenomena in manifold national arenas.

sensitivity, nature, and pathos. Then she attempted to excavate an *écriture féminine* composed of "mother's milk . . . white ink," in a "language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death" (Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 [Summer 1976]: 889). Similarly, in her influential *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), Luce Irigaray castigated the specular logic of the same in philosophical traditions established from Plato to Hegel and Freud that situate woman outside representation. For Irigaray, *parler-femme*, described in "This Sex Which Is Not One," constitutes a recoverable and infinitely fluid style that is "always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them" (Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke [Ithaca, N.Y., 1985], p. 29). On British input into feminist criticism in this period, see Todd's *Feminist Literary History* (New York, 1988), as well as the special issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12 (Fall 1993) on Anglo-American criticism.

In the face of this vigorous growth, why do I even consider the dire possibility that feminist critics suffered a series of debilitating bouts of dis-ease? One answer is encapsulated in Barbara Johnson's witty point, "Nothing fails like success."¹¹ Maybe critique and recovery have become so much a part of the interpretive way we behave in the literature classroom that their ubiquity leads us to take both approaches for granted. Just as important, while many scholars still pursue work in all three phases, the methodological moves they make might now seem somewhat predictable.¹² Another reason, as powerful as that of ennui, relates to a sense of vulnerability experienced by some early practitioners of feminist criticism in higher education, produced by the intense attacks they received from their successors or by the perceived fragility of their enterprise.¹³ While critique, recovery, and the engendering of differences

11. This is the title of Johnson's essay on the institutionalization of deconstruction. See Barbara Johnson, "Nothing Fails Like Success," *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 11-16.

12. This is especially the case vis-à-vis the first two stages. As the procedure of critique is usually practiced, after all, one expects the interpreter to find the text either feminist or misogynist in its sexual ideologies. With recovery, often the woman writer being excavated is claimed to be central because of the highly charged (again, feminist or misogynist) sexual ideologies of her productions, or the standards of evaluation by which she had been judged are said to be skewed by generic and gendered criteria inappropriate to her accomplishment.

13. See Gilligan's description of her dismay at seeing herself disparaged by feminists as an advocate of the "Victorian 'angel in the house'" and "pious maternalism" (Carol Gilligan, "Getting Civilized," in *Who's Afraid of Feminism? Seeing through the Backlash*, ed. Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell [New York, 1997], p. 26). Gayle Greene writes about how feminists in the eighties established credentials by "demonstrating how feminism fits in with or around Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard, or how we're superior to our benighted compatriots (Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar are the favorite targets)" (Gayle Greene, "Looking at History," in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Greene and Coppélia Kahn [New York, 1993], p. 17). Describing a 1987 conference at which she witnessed "the raw hostility" of attendees, Susan Bordo admits feeling "dismayed at the anger that (white, middle-class) feminists have exhibited toward the work of Gilligan and Chodorow" (Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* [Berkeley, 1993], p. 233; hereafter abbreviated *U*).

When Dale Bauer confesses, "most feminist professors I know have to fight on a daily basis the temptation to give up. The level of frustration can be overwhelming," she stresses the difficulties of keeping the discipline "vital precisely at the time society, the economy, and conventional politics are making it increasingly difficult for us to thrive" (Dale M. Bauer, "Personal Criticism and the Academic Personality," in *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, ed. Roof and Robyn Wiegman [Urbana, Ill., 1995], p. 65). On this same issue, I remain saddened when I think about the cohorts hired in the period after I arrived at Indiana University in 1973, for many of the women were unable to stay in the profession. Some did not get tenure; some suffered untimely deaths or debilitating illnesses; some could not sustain relationships with partners working elsewhere. There is no casualty rate comparable among the men hired in those years or in any other period of the department's history. Even a relatively welcoming profession like English still remains more difficult for women than for men.

In relation to the vulnerability of African American women within the humanities,

continue to play significant pedagogical roles, I believe all three became eclipsed by interventions performed within areas of scholarship ratified as theoretical.

Perhaps inevitably, since the engendering of differences foregrounded disparities among women, it set the stage for a questioning of the categories that the concept of gender itself proposed. Self-reflexive theorizing about criticism undermined the term *women* upon which feminist literary practice previously depended.¹⁴ Because I am distressed about the debilitating effects of this fourth phase of metacritical dissension, I will examine its dismantling of the category *women* in two arenas populated by scholars not always allied. On the one hand, feminist criticism was disparaged by African American and postcolonial thinkers as universalizing a privileged, white womanhood; on the other, it was maligned by poststructuralists as naively essentialist about the identity of women. Needless to say, the powerfully subtle methodologies provided by African American, postcolonial, and poststructuralist studies have greatly enhanced the ways in which we think about culture and society, race and gender. Needless to say, too, one cannot conflate African American with postcolonial studies because they have had quite different histories, just as one should not consolidate the poststructuralism generated by one philosophical approach with that produced by another. Taking these widely accepted points for granted, my analysis deals with one bewildering consequence that qualifies the linguistic practices these approaches have occasionally sponsored. Although feminists of racial identity politics and of poststructuralism did not always agree with one another, together their words combined to make *women* an invalid word.

What Do You Mean "We," White Woman?

In 1981, the landmark volume *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* signalled the start of a barrage of diatribes directed against white feminists throughout the decade. Attentive to what the editors term "a class and color war that is still escalating in the feminist

Ann duCille writes about "the startling number of brilliant black women scholars who have produced only one book or no book" in part because they have been "used up as role models" who couldn't "just say 'no'" to student demands (Ann duCille, *Skin Trade* [Cambridge, Mass., 1996], p. 97).

14. Tania Modleski's *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York, 1991) and my own essay, "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One,'" in *Feminism beside Itself*, ed. Diane Elam and Wiegman (New York, 1995), address related points about the hazards of attempting to establish a political movement for women without the category *women* or with that category saturated by a misogynist intellectual history.

movement,"¹⁵ the collection includes Doris Davenport's comments on the aversion of "black wimmin" not only to the bigotry and naivety of "white wimmin" but also to their very being:

Aesthetically (& physically) we frequently find white wimmin repulsive. That is, their skin colors are unaesthetic (ugly, to some people). Their hair, stringy and straight, is unattractive. Their bodies: rather like misshapen lumps of whitish clay or dough, that somebody forgot to mold in-certain-areas. Furthermore, they have a strange body odor.¹⁶

Given a slave past that had set in place black women's subjection to white women and given the unconscious racism permeating the women's movement from its inception in the nineteenth century, Davenport's acrimony is founded on comprehensible grounds. Yet though such a passage may be attempting to redirect racist formulae against those who historically have done the stereotyping, the writings in *This Bridge Called My Back* about racism in the movement—originally meant "to make a connection with white women"—actually function "more like a separation," as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa conclude in their editorial speculation.¹⁷

15. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, preface to "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You: Racism in the Women's Movement," part 3 of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Moraga and Anzaldúa (New York, 1981), p. 61.

16. Doris Davenport, "The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, p. 87. Of course Davenport's analysis never attains the sophistication of the subsequent African American and postcolonial thinkers I consider; however, the volume in which she appears played an important role in the intellectual history I am tracing.

17. Moraga and Anzaldúa, preface to "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You," p. 61. To be sure, the rancor of early black feminists has to be understood in terms of the unraveling of the Black Power movement and the perception that white feminists were co-opting the language of civil rights. For another example of it, see Lorraine Bethel's poem "What Chou Mean We, White Girl?" *Conditions: Five: The Black Women's Issue* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1979), pp. 86–92, which is equally angry in its dedication "TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL WOMEN ARE NOT EQUAL; I.E. IDENTICAL/LY OPPRESSED":

So this is an open letter to movement white girls:
Dear Ms Ann Glad Cosmic Womoon,
We're not doing that kind of work anymore
educating white women. [Pp. 86, 88]

In particular, Bethel rages against white feminist lesbians "who would be scorned as racist dogs if they were heterosexual white men / instead of white lesbians hiding behind the liberal veneer of / equal bedroom opportunity" (p. 90). Unlike this indignant work, Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis's *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (New York, 1986) insists on "the importance of Black women and White women connecting their specific understandings of oppression to an understanding of the political totality that thrives on these oppressions" (p. 14).

If black women had served as a bridge upon which black men (in the civil rights movement) and white women (in the feminist movement) walked, a refusal to fulfill this role meant standing up to be made visible, a laudable step in establishing the rights and perspectives of women of color most powerfully urged by Audre Lorde.¹⁸ But when bell hooks published *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (also in 1981), she couched its excellent point about the propensity of feminists to use the word *women* to mean "white women" in a curiously condemnatory vocabulary directed against all other efforts of black and white feminists to expand the word *women* to encompass women of different colors. Held culpable, for instance, were black separatist activists like the members of the Combahee River Collective, whom hooks dubbed "reactionary" in their endorsement of the racism they supposedly attacked.¹⁹ And Michele Wallace, hooks's most famous contemporary in the African American feminist scene, was dismissed as the author of a book judged to be "neither an important feminist work nor an important work about black women" (*AI*, p. 11).²⁰ Censorious about white thinkers engaged in purportedly antiracist and feminist meditations—Catharine Stimpson, for example, and Rich—hooks argued that "white women were not sincerely committed to bonding with black women and other groups of women to fight sexism," for they remained unwilling to admit that "the women's movement was consciously and deliberately structured to exclude black and other non-white women" (*AI*, pp. 142, 147). Harmful and hurtful as white exclusions have been, hooks universalized them as intentionally so.

18. Lorde's strategic position as a black lesbian poet made her exceptionally influential in ways that most histories of this period have not yet fully documented. See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y., 1984) and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, Calif., 1982). As my reference to the civil rights movement that preceded feminism's second wave indicates, I am not arguing that feminist criticism produced African American studies because I am well aware of how much feminist criticism profited from it. Indeed, a figure like Lorde speaks to the interrelatedness of these two enterprises.

19. Bell hooks [Gloria Watkins], *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, 1981), p. 15; hereafter abbreviated *AI*.

20. Although Wallace judges hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* a "fine job of providing the historical overview of black feminist thought," she condemns hooks's later writing as "self-indulgent and undigested drivel that careens madly from outrageous self-pity, poetic and elliptical, to playful exhibitionism, to dogmatic righteous sermonizing" (Michele Wallace, "For Whom the Bell Tolls: Why America Can't Deal with Black Feminist Intellectuals," *Voice Literary Supplement*, no. 140 [Nov. 1995]: 21, 22). In another recent review, Wallace criticizes the absence of documentation in hooks's books: "The only person being empowered by her failure to use footnotes and bibliography is her. Footnotes and bibliographies take extra time to prepare and cost more money. Not only that, the reader might get a better idea of when hooks, herself, is 'eating the other'" (Wallace, "Art for Whose Sake?" *The Women's Review of Books*, Oct. 1995, p. 8). On competition and distrust between powerful black female intellectuals and artists, see hooks, "Third World Diva Girls: Politics of Feminist Solidarity," *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, 1990), pp. 89–102.

Two smart articles—one published by Hazel V. Carby in 1982 and the other by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in 1984 (and revised in 1991)—extended hooks's insight into the implicit whiteness of the word *women* by questioning reductive images of "the" Third World woman, but the way in which they did so explains why white feminists began to feel beleaguered by blatantly imperative efforts to right the wrong of black female instrumentality. Employing the approaches of African American and postcolonial studies, Carby and Mohanty set out to show that all generalizations about "women's experience" perpetuated the negation of black womanhood. Carby's "White Woman Listen!"—a title revising Richard Wright's *White Man, Listen!*—makes explicit through its subtitle ("Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood") this scholar's argument with mainstream feminists who are accused of providing racially prejudicial analytical frameworks. Yet, Carby's claim that white feminists stereotype Africa as, for example, barbaric in the practice of genital mutilation ignored numerous feminist attacks on the mutilations carried out by gynecologists on nineteenth- and twentieth-century white women in England and America. Carby was primed to overlook such critiques, she was impelled to disparage any feminist theory founded on equality, by her conviction that "white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women."²¹

Like Carby, Mohanty attempted to undo the homogeneity of standard conceptualizations of women of color, but in the process she contributes to the essentializing of white women. According to Mohanty, Western feminism works hand in hand with imperialism because of the "ethnocentric universalism" informing contemporary scholarship.²² Carby's hostility—as in her final query, "Of white feminists we must ask, what exactly do you mean when you say 'WE?'"²³—finds expression in Mohanty's argument that Western feminists "discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world" ("UW," p. 174). A "homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group" buttresses stereotypes about the "average third world woman" as ignorant and poor, the object of scrutiny, the First World woman as educated and modern, the subject of history ("UW," p. 176). Part of the problem, not the solution, the white feminists pictured by Mohanty pursue projects that "tie into" economic and ideological modes of exploitation ("UW," p. 192). Thus, Mohanty's title—"Under Western

21. Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, ed. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London, 1982), p. 214.

22. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London, 1996), p. 175; hereafter abbreviated "UW."

23. Carby, "White Woman Listen!" p. 233.

Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"—hints that the scopophilic gaze or imperial eyes of First World feminists scrutinize to wage war on Third World women.²⁴

If we consider the rhetorical impact of hooks's, Carby's, and Mohanty's arguments, we can see why, though they sought to serve the interests of women of color, they promoted consternation among white women. Any number of examples could drive home this point.²⁵ In her self-deprecating *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, one quintessentially guilt-ridden author confesses that even though she was born a privileged, middle-class, Western European sinner, she has witnessed the evil of her colonizing ways. "Writing is never innocent," Nicole Ward Jouve concedes, and "white writing is less innocent than any other." Then she goes on to cite the requisite antiauthoritarian authority: "As Gayatri Spivak has said, every First World woman's book is typed out on a word processor made cheap by the low-paid labour of a Third World woman."²⁶ In keeping with Jouve's stance, not only some faculty but many students these days make obeisance to the necessity of considering (without subordinating) race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation in litanies that often translate into depressingly knee-jerk essays rejecting out-of-hand the speculations of a given literary or theoretical work simply because it neglects to discuss *x* (fill in the blank—bisexual Anglo-Pakistani mothers;

24. A similar point is made by Barbara Smith in her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" when—after protesting the absence of black women writers in feminist criticism—she finds "the idea of critics like Showalter using Black literature . . . chilling, a case of barely disguised cultural imperialism" (Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Showalter [New York, 1985], p. 172).

25. Consider the thirty-five pages of response to Annette Kolodny's "Dancing through the Minefield" printed by *Feminist Studies* in 1982, attacking Kolodny's racism, heterosexism, classism (described by Nancy K. Miller in *Getting Personal*, p. 83). See Judith Kegan Gardiner et al., "An Interchange on Feminist Criticism: On 'Dancing through the Minefield,'" *Feminist Studies* 8 (Fall 1982): 628–75, and Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring 1980): 1–25. In a recent book, Susan Suleiman reprints a letter from Raquel Portillo Bauman, a Chicana mother, who complains that Suleiman's 1989 essay on "Maternal Splitting" excluded not only Bauman's experiences but also those of her Mexican and Mexican American grandmothers and her black mother-in-law. Suleiman notes in her response Bauman's assumption that her ethnicity somehow makes her more representative of "the 'real' experience of minority women" and thus more accurate about them than the supposedly "advantaged" scholar writing from a psychoanalytic perspective could ever be (Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Motherhood and Identity Politics: An Exchange," *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* [Cambridge, Mass., 1994], p. 61). "Are racial or ethnic allegiances more significant, and ultimately more important, than allegiances among women?" Suleiman then asks. "Does one have to choose between allegiances rather than try to combine them?" (*ibid.*, p. 62). In short, does identifying as a Hispanic or a black mean one cannot also identify as a woman with women from other traditions?

26. Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (New York, 1991), p. viii.

the heterosexual, working-class, Jews-for-Jesus community of Nashville, and so forth). Too often, each text becomes grist for a mill that proves the same intellectually vapid—though politically appalling—point that racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia reign supreme.

Albeit a crucial goal, the raising of feminism's racial consciousness has instilled an impossible, inhibiting dream of innocent rectitude in numerous white scholars keenly aware of America's and England's long intellectual history of prejudicial thinking about people of African origins. White feminists' fear of saying the wrong thing, of sounding racist, means that they often silence themselves on racial matters altogether, or—in thrall to a fantasy of finding the correct antiracist stance—they become ventriloquists, echoing the words of a handful of "specialists" whose color somehow certifies them as experts on race (as if whiteness itself were not a racial category). Yet, Sara Suleri quite reasonably wonders, how effective can it possibly be to require all critics to be matched to their subjects through a string of hyphenated adjectival qualifiers?

The claim to authenticity—only a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial subcontinental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture—points to the great difficulty posed by the "authenticity" of female racial voices in the great game that claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want.²⁷

To the extent that white critics deprived of their assumption of white privilege take refuge in critical abjection (the silence or ventriloquism of white deference and deferral), the politics of racial authenticity may be experienced as an attack on feminism's endorsement of all women's right to self-expression. As Janet Todd has observed, "since anti-racism commands more general assent than feminism ever did, it is often used in a curious way to discredit women and women's endeavors. Or, to be more specific, the language of accepted anti-racism is frequently used to denigrate the feminist enterprise."²⁸

27. Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 760; rpt. in *Identities*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago, 1995), pp. 133–46. Politically correct identity politics that troubled women's studies teachers in the classroom could not be easily addressed in public since the media had already attached the label PC to all feminists within the academy, absurdly linking the teaching of Alice Walker to the decline of cultural literacy and the destruction of Western civilization. See the satire *Masterpiece Theatre: An Academic Melodrama* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995), the first installment of which appeared in *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 693–714, that Gilbert and I wrote on this (and related) subjects.

28. Todd, "Anglo-American Difference," p. 243. Bordo's point seems pertinent in this regard: "It is striking to me that there is often a curious selectivity at work in contemporary feminist criticisms of gender-based theories of identity. The analytics of race and class—the two other giants of modernist social critique—do not seem to be undergoing quite the same deconstruction" (*U*, p. 229).

That Spivak became the most often cited authority on the matter of white feminists' racism may be related to the ways in which she combines an attention toward racial identity politics with the poststructuralist methodologies to which I am about to turn.²⁹ According to Spivak, the "disenfranchised" woman who cannot recognize herself as the subject of feminist theory teaches us "that the name of 'woman,' however political, is, like any other name, a catachresis," and therefore she asks that we "name (as) 'woman' that disenfranchised woman whom we strictly, historically, geopolitically *cannot imagine*, as literal referent."³⁰ Engaged in a project as ambitious as it is complex, Spivak valiantly seeks to make deconstruction and feminism answerable to the colonized; however, at times the process leads her to set herself up as a righteous representative of subordinated peoples (the honorable Third World spokesperson) who remains quite distinct from empowered and therefore degenerate readers (perverted First World citizens).³¹ For example, Spivak castigates

29. Pam Morris's rhetoric of self-blame which appears in *Literature and Feminism*—

My inevitably western-orientated critical discourse can itself be regarded as a colonizing and expansionist language, appropriating the writing of 'black' women for my own academic purposes. To construct black feminist writing as the object of my 'knowledge' would be to engage in one of the most typical forms of colonial linguistic oppression [Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1993), p. 175]

—leads directly to a quotation from Spivak on "the immense distance separating privileged 'first-world' feminists and the great majority of women in the 'third-world'" (p. 175). Perhaps a passage in Dymphna Callaghan's "The Vicar and Virago" can best stand for the common use of Spivak against white feminists:

Lacking the reassurance of absolute hegemonic subjective and social identities (which, by definition, can never be secure enough), significant feminist theoretical texts can be understood as playing out a white identity crisis that, despite all assertions to the contrary, reinstates white hegemony via a complicity with what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called 'the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow.' [Dymphna Callaghan, "The Vicar and Virago: Feminism and the Problem of Identity," *Who Can Speak?* p. 198]

Spivak herself rejects the standard demonization of white feminists—"There is nothing necessarily meretricious about the Western feminist gaze," she declares (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," *Outside in the Teaching Machine* [New York, 1993], p. 182)—and she has "found politically very troubling" the tendency of "more and more people" to find in her "a very convenient marginal, capital M" (Spivak, "The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic," *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym [New York, 1990], p. 156).

30. Spivak, "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations," *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, pp. 137, 139.

31. How else to compute Spivak's recognition of the advantages accruing to her from her traveling and teaching (when she speaks of her own "*carte d'identité* in Western Europe and Britain" [Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," *The Postcolonial Critic*, p. 16] or "*carte d'entrée* into the elite theoretical *ateliers* in France" [Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988),

"highly privileged women [who] see their face in the mirror and define 'Woman'—capital *w*—in terms of the reflection that they see there: sometimes they look at their face, sometimes they look at their genitals, and in terms of that, they adjudicate about woman as such. I have very little patience with that."³² Yet about herself she claims, "the word 'woman' is not after all something for which one can find a literal referent without looking into the looking glass. And . . . what I see in the looking glass is not particularly the constituency of feminism."³³

In other words, unlike narcissistic, affluent feminists who gaze at themselves in the mirror and then project their image onto others, Spivak looks simply because she seeks a referent, all the while understanding not only the disparity between her self-image and the constituencies of feminism but also the necessity of postponing indefinitely an identification that effaces subalterns, proletariats, and peasants. The aggression Jacques Lacan locates at the mirror stage in the rivalry between which image is deemed "self" and which "other" surfaces in Spivak's competing for perceptual supremacy over First World feminist critics. What undermines these deliberations—like those of hooks, Carby, and Mohanty—is a posture of critical election, the counterpart of critical abjection. An assumption of moral superiority on the part of scholars convinced of their ability to speak for those despised and rejected by everybody else, critical election holds sway, I suspect, to conceal the uncomfortable contradiction between claims to a radical politics genuinely opposed to hierarchical

p. 221]) with her meditation on the transcendental purity of Third World critics who "live in a First World country, but have kept ourselves clean from citizenship so that we can have a voice that we can suggest you cannot hear" (Spivak, "A Response to 'The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory,'" in *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker [Amsterdam, 1989], p. 216)? Spivak's attention to the disenfranchised and her identity as a Third World critic sponsor her mockery of deluded First World scholars who perform "the 'poor little rich girl speaking *personal* pain as victim of the *greatest* oppression-act that multiculturalist capitalism—with its emphasis on individuation and competition—would thrust upon us" (Spivak, "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again," p. 139). This rhetoric occurs again in an interview with Ellen Rooney when Spivak says, "I think the kind of antiessentialism that I like these days is in the work of Kalpana Bardhan. If you read her, you probably wouldn't see what I was talking about" (Ellen Rooney, "In a Word: *Interview*," interview with Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 17).

In my approach to Spivak, I am indebted to Shirley Geok-lin Lim's discussion of "the kind of bad faith and reasoning inherent in Third World intellectualization within the hegemony of the First World" (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Hegemony and 'Anglo-American Feminism': Living in the Funny House," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12 [Fall 1993]: 283). Also of use is Robert Young's insight that "the paradox of Spivak's own work remains: it seems as if the heterogeneity of the Third World woman can only be achieved through a certain homogenization of the First" (Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* [New York, 1990], p. 167).

32. Spivak, "The *Intervention* Interview," *The Post-Colonial Critic*, p. 119.

33. Spivak, "The Post-Colonial Critic," *The Post-Colonial Critic*, p. 70.

power structures and venues of writing inevitably configured by such structures (as, for example, they brace career advancement in the academy or the intellectual scaffolding of First World philosophizing). What else can explain why—while defining the colonized woman we should “name (as) ‘woman’” as one “whom we strictly, historically, geopolitically *cannot imagine*”—Spivak inserts the remark, “I know the kind of woman I am thinking about. And I also know that this person is not imaginable by most friends reading these words”?³⁴

What Do You Mean, Woman?

To certify the Derridean assumptions upon which thinkers like Spivak draw, many poststructuralists sought to use the race-based interrogation of the term *women* undertaken by African American and postcolonial scholars, even though a number of prominent black intellectuals criticized the elitism of what Christian called “the race for theory” undertaken by the followers of white, male philosophers.³⁵ For if early feminists exposed *humanism* as a euphemism for masculinism, if some African American and postcolonial critics went on to exhibit *feminism* as a code word for a privileged white women’s movement, then poststructuralists could delegitimize *any* generalizing, abstract appeal to “women” as propagating a phallogocentric metaphysics of presence. However, just as the language of critical election and abjection contaminates feminist prose with self-righteousness, obscurantism undermines the writing of feminist poststructuralists who rely on counterintuitive maxims recycled as fiat, a logic at odds with normative syntactic procedures, and utopian ontological paradigms.

When in 1985 Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* pitted Anglo-American empiricists against French theorists (to illustrate the purported naivety of the former and the supposed sophistication of the latter), Julia Kristeva emerged as an exemplary figure whose antiessentialist pronouncements challenged any stable definition of selfhood. “To believe that one ‘is a woman’ is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that one ‘is a man,’” Kristeva proclaimed, and, even more famously, “*woman as such does not exist.*”³⁶ In her attempt to denaturalize gender, Kristeva can rep-

resent many poststructuralists in the nineties who mapped the ways in which the subject (no longer a self or a subjectivity) was constructed through a range of linguistic as well as psychological, social as well as political discourses. To the extent that feminism depends upon a stable notion of sexual identity, it degenerates into a form of romanticism, according to Kristeva.

For those thinkers employing deconstruction in the service of feminism, therefore, the term *women* transmutes infinitely by virtue of the discursive relations within which it is located.³⁷ One of the most prominent poststructuralist thinkers in the nineties, Judith Butler analyzes gender as a performance producing the delusion of an abiding self that is always already constructed through discourse and thus neither an originating given nor a volitional agent. Butler set out to demonstrate that sex—just as culturally constructed as gender—is made to seem natural or real or fixed through regulatory practices that set in place the “heterosexualization of desire.”³⁸

If gender is drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait

37. This is why, as Diane Elam puts it, “feminism must be willing to understand the necessity of indeterminacy” (Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme* [New York, 1994], p. 31). Elam’s view that feminist analysis should be “a deconstruction of representation that keeps the category of women incessantly in question, as a permanently contested site of meaning,” underscores the efforts of poststructuralist thinkers to reject the universalisms at work in feminist analysis (*ibid.*, p. 41). In this regard, one might think of some of the work produced by Catherine Belsey, Mary Jacobus, Peggy Kamuf, Alice Jardine, and Mary Poovey.

38. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), p. 17; hereafter abbreviated *GT*. Emboldened by Monique Wittig’s argument that “lesbian is the only concept . . . which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically,” Butler argues that the categories of woman, man, and sex itself had to be debiologized (Monique Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman,” *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* [Boston, 1992], p. 20); however, she distinguishes herself from Wittig by claiming that the latter “subscribes to that metaphysics of substance that is responsible for the production and naturalization of the category of sex itself” (*GT*, p. 20).

That any reliance on the “metaphysics of substance” was demonized by poststructuralists appears evident in the pollution metaphors used by Caroline Ramazanoğlu:

The possibility of biological nature, or material bodies, playing some part in explanation of gender difference runs under the fields of feminism like a camouflaged sewer into which the unwary may trip and so be contaminated without fully realizing their danger. . . . Many feminists . . . have found the odour of biological essentialism clinging to them. [Caroline Ramazanoğlu, introduction to *Up against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Ramazanoğlu (New York, 1993), p. 7]

34. Spivak, “Feminism and Deconstruction, Again,” p. 137.

35. Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (Spring 1988): 67. See also Deborah E. McDowell’s list of the ways in which the program of black feminist critics diverged from that of poststructuralists; for example, when black feminists asserted the significance of black women’s experience, poststructuralists dismantled the authority of experience, in Deborah E. McDowell, “Recycling: Race, Gender, and the Practice of History,” *Studies in Historical Change*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Charlottesville, Va., 1992), pp. 246–63.

36. Quoted in Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, pp. 163, 165.

(that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth.³⁹

Possibly because of its difficult task of dislodging commonly held assumptions, possibly because of the influence of Foucault and Derrida, recondite abstractions characterize postmodernist feminist theory in general and Butler's books in particular.⁴⁰ The consequence for criticism of a linguistic model deriving from philosophy has been to divorce feminist speculations from literary texts or to subordinate those texts to the epistemological, ideological, economic, and political issues that supplanted literary history and aesthetic evaluation as the topics of writing about women. Given poststructuralist assumptions about the undecidability of meaning, the death of the author, the nonreferentiality of language contaminated by hegemonic power structures, and the contingency of evaluative judgments, it is not surprising that the aesthetic got marginalized and the first three stages of feminist criticism sidelined.⁴¹

One especially revealing feature of Butler's style is the preponderance of subject-verb disagreements. I want to speculate that this penchant, by reflecting the difficulty of sustaining a Foucauldian critique of the singular self and the biological body, reveals the tensions continually at play in efforts to combine poststructuralism with feminism. Since my argument depends on a pattern of mistakes in agreement, I will cite four examples here from *Gender Trouble*, its sequel *Bodies That Matter*, and an essay entitled "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," placing the location of eighteen others in a footnote:

The *totality* and *closure* of language is both presumed and contested within structuralism. [GT, p. 40]

The division and exchange between this "being" and "having" the Phallus is established by the Symbolic, the paternal law. [GT, p. 45]

Importantly, the erotic redeployment of prohibitions and the production of new cultural forms for sexuality is not a transient affair

39. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York, 1991), p. 28; hereafter abbreviated "I."

40. See Linda Charnes on how Butler's "jargon-clotted and, at times, numbingly redundant prose" echoes Foucault's "heavily Latinate, juridical, phallogocentric, often plodding, and by now, institutionally 'authoritative' prose" in her insightful discussion of how Butler's "critical style matters" (Linda Charnes, "Styles That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Ideology Critique," *Shakespeare Studies* 24 [1996]: 138, 139).

41. In this regard, to be sure, Butler represents a series of sophisticated thinkers—Barthes, Bakhtin, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Žižek, Levinas—whose treatises have profoundly influenced the writing of literary criticism. Pedagogically, what will their effect be on those dissertators—not a negligible group—who decide to model their prose on Butler's or Lacan's, even though their knowledge of, say, Wittig and Freud derives only from Butler's or Lacan's take on those precursors?

within an imaginary domain that will inevitably evaporate under the prohibitive force of the symbolic.⁴²

For psychoanalytic theorists Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Ruth Leys, however, identification, and, in particular, identificatory mimetism, precedes identity and constitutes identity as that which is fundamentally "other to itself." ["I," p. 26]

Note how prone Butler's prose is to a compound subject with a singular form of verbs that eschew action and instead denote a condition or stipulate a mode of existence.⁴³ Her dual subjects often involve not persons but abstractions, which are treated as if they have combined in her mind into a single force that therefore requires the singular verb. (This tendency to make conceptual processes the subject of sentences explains the prevalence of *ity* words in current theory: irresolvability, performativity, postcoloniality, generativity, locationality, historicity, citationality, etcetericity.) In a curious way, the reliance on intangible subjects and (often) the verb *to be* replicates Butler's Foucauldian rejection of humanism, her conviction that discursive "regimes of power" speak through individuals whose very conceptions of their identity are thereby constituted and regulated (GT, p. 18). That the result is so often a grammatical lapse, however, hints at a conflict between what Butler seeks to argue and the terms available to her.

When the subject gets multiplied into two, and when these two speak together, alas!—they end up sounding just like one. The singular verb keeps giving the lie to grammatical subjects that assert their doubleness, bearing witness paradoxically to Butler's own confession at the end of *Bodies That Matter* that "the temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error" (B, p. 230). Telling in this regard, too, is a passage in which she explains, "I use the grammar of an 'I' or a 'we' as if these subjects precede and activate their various identifications, but this

42. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), p. 110; hereafter abbreviated B. For other examples of subject-verb disagreements (not all following the pattern of dual nouns with singular verbs), see GT, pp. 91, 126; B, pp. 48, 55, 87, 125, 126, 127, 207, 224, 236; "I," pp. 23, 27; "Against Proper Objects," introduction to *Differences* 6 (Summer-Fall 1994): 2, 8, 16; and "Feminism by Any Other Name," *Differences* 6 (Summer-Fall 1994): 31, 33.

43. My first thought on seeing what Butler would call the iterability of this usage was to wonder, Where was the copyeditor when her manuscripts arrived at the publisher's or journal's office? Have economic pressures on publishers caused them to withdraw this important safety net from writers? Or has the star system so dismantled the normative manner of refereeing that anything goes for an elite group of academicians? If so, should we count as one of the problems facing feminist criticism the effects of this star system on a depressed marketplace? For, at the institutional level, marked disparities (in workloads, professional status, and reward systems) between the few at the top and those laboring in what we tellingly call the trenches have contributed to a divisive atmosphere that affects all practitioners in the humanities at the present time.

is a grammatical fiction. . . . For there is no 'I' prior to its assumption of sex" (B, p. 99).⁴⁴ Like Butler's frequent use of lists of unanswered questions, her subject-verb disagreements hint that this professor of rhetoric remains haunted by the "necessary error[s]" and "grammatical fiction[s]" that shape "the unstable and continuing condition of the 'one' and the 'we'" which she studies quite brilliantly in the shifting allegiances of feminists, lesbians, and gay men (B, p. 242). Even for those to whom Butler's syntactic penchant appears a legitimate extension of the rule that a singular verb may be used when nouns form a compound word or convey a singular notion, the pattern bespeaks a quandary, for it demonstrates how often the most vigilantly antitotalizing theorist of poststructuralism relies on stubborn patterns of totalization (two treated as one). This, in turn, may lead some readers to hypothesize that the concept of the subject itself totalizes all subjectivities as passive products of discursive power-knowledge regimes (often assumed to be totally malign).⁴⁵

If nominalism teaches us that the self and women are illusory categories of nonexistent entities, perhaps only a newly imagined image of "our bodies, our selves" can help human beings out of the "necessary error[s]" and "grammatical fiction[s]" of "the temporary totalization performed by identity categories." As influential in the nineties as Butler, Donna Haraway provided such a figure in the cyborg. Founded on a thoroughgoing rejection of biologism joined with a skeptical foregrounding of the ways in which power pervades and thus implicates the conceptual apparatus used by critics, Haraway's cyborg stands out as the character best exemplifying the valorization of fragmentation, indeterminacy, marginalization. Haraway would repopulate feminism with cyborgs since "painful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention among women) along every possible fault line has made the concept of woman elusive, an excuse for

44. Pertinent to this discussion is Butler's admission that "it takes a certain suspicion toward grammar to reconceive the matter [of an "I" that performs gender] in a different light" (B, p. 7). Consider, too, this comment: "In my view, the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered (*grammar fails* us here, for the 'it' only becomes differentiated through that separation), a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some 'Other'" ("I," p. 27; emphasis mine). Yet if Butler purposefully generates ungrammatical structures, one would expect her to foreground that strategy.

45. The grammatical problem also proves the truth of Kate Soper's admonition that an "emphasis on the discursive formation of our corporeal existence . . . ceases to be productive if it is pressed at the expense of proper recognition of the impossibility of dispensing with any reference to a pre-discursive reality" (Kate Soper, "Productive Contradictions," in *Up against Foucault*, pp. 32-33). On the essentialism of always viewing essentialism as reactionary, see Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York, 1989), p. 21. On the limits of poststructuralist views of subjectivity, see George Levine, "Introduction: Constructivism and the Reemergent Self," in *Constructions of the Self*, ed. Levine (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992), pp. 1-13, and Irving Howe, "The Self in Literature," in *Constructions of the Self*, pp. 249-67.

the matrix of women's dominations of each other."⁴⁶ Breaching, confusing, and thereby confounding the boundaries between organism and machine, animal and human, male and female, cyborgian consciousness rejects the need for unity as the totalitarianism of totalizing, calling instead for partial identities, contradictory standpoints, and shifting affinities.

Because biology and, in particular, women's unique capacity to give birth served historically as powerful explanations or even influential justifications for debilitating gender roles, Butler and Haraway attempt to debiologize such roles. Yet, according to Rosi Braidotti, who understands that the cyborg "announces a world 'beyond gender,'" Haraway claims "that sexed identity is obsolete without showing the steps and the points of exit from the old, gender-polarized system."⁴⁷ In fact, the cyborg dwells in what Haraway herself terms "a postgender world," a domain not inhabited by contemporary women who, when they experience its features—the breaching of boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, or female bodies as mechanically engineered—know it in the form of interventions like breast implants, estrogen therapy, mood-altering or birth control or fertility drugs, and anticancer chemo- and radiation therapies whose positive effects have often been matched by equal or greater negative ones.⁴⁸ The disjunction between the nowhere of the cyborg's utopian fluidity and the everywhere of ordinary people's embodiment (with all its attendant ills) calls to mind Butler's "necessary error" of "temporary totalization" (which in turn might recall Spivak's "strategic choice of a genitalist essentialism in anti-sexist work today").⁴⁹

Taken together, poststructuralist publications suggest a fissure between deconstruction of the subject, on the one hand, and feminism's dependence on the collective word *women*, on the other. The terms of the impasse impel Butler and Spivak to resort to formulations that they themselves characterize as inadequate, while Haraway invents a nonce identity that no one will see when she looks in the mirror. Susan Stanford

46. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York, 1990), p. 197.

47. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York, 1994), p. 170. "Denial of the unity and stability of identity is one thing," Bordo remarks. "The epistemological fantasy of *becoming* multiplicity—the dream of limitless multiple embodiments, allowing one to dance from place to place and self to self—is another" (U, pp. 228-29). Judith K. Gardiner links antiessentialism with "a fear of mortality" that "springs less from the stable facts of human embodiment than from a current crisis precipitated by the fear of meaninglessness, which is related for the left, even more than for the right, to a crisis of values" (Gardiner, "Radical Optimism, Maternal Materialism, and Teaching Literature," *Changing Subjects*, p. 90).

48. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p. 192.

49. Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," p. 11.

Friedman, after endorsing the problematization of subjectivity undertaken by poststructuralists, deduces their logical perspective on feminist criticism: "more fluid and flexible critical practices are needed that do not regard sexual or gender differences as an *a priori*, fixed, primal, or primary assumption to be grasped in pristine isolation."⁵⁰ Even a "provisional privileging of gender" remains suspect for Friedman since "gender is only one among many axes of identity" ("BG," p. 32), and so feminist critics—accused now of "blindnesses" in their foregrounding of gender—should be terminated so that practitioners in the new field of "Identity Studies" can be hired ("BG," p. 14).

Diagnosis/Prognosis

This effort to trace the sources of the language crisis at which feminist criticism has arrived during its fourth and most quarrelsome phase obviously leaves me open to charges that, first, I have demonized debate, ignoring the ways in which new insights that challenge received wisdom may have to emerge (or seem to emerge) as a threat and, second, that the contention is contagious since I have myself engaged in antagonistic infighting. To the first objection, I can only respond with my view that critical election, abjection, and obscurantism perform a disservice to the libertarian politics and pedagogies endorsed by many of those whose astute ideas play a justly prominent part in feminist thinking. The brouhaha this essay immediately roused as a talk—causing me to be labelled an anti-intellectual racist, much to my shock and dismay—testifies to the ways in which critical election, abjection, and obscurantism have contributed to an atmosphere of censorship that silences or polices our feminist debates. About the second objection, I would add that although I have enlisted in the conflict, I do so in order to draw attention to a divisiveness that plays into the hands of conservative elements all too happy to see the women's movement self-destruct. Perhaps because stylistic foibles are easier to catch than originality or subtlety of conceptualization, much of the prose provoked by the reflections of hooks, Carby, Mohanty, and Spivak as well as Kristeva, Butler, and Haraway either mimes their critical election and obscurantism or acquiesces with critical abjection—without duplicating their remarkable discernment.

Undoubtedly, too, the economic forces that have worked to downsize the academy throughout the eighties and nineties escalated the pressure always exerted on humanities scholars to produce a reputation by engaging in arcane, agonistic maneuvers or by feverishly finding innovative

50. Susan Stanford Friedman, "'Beyond' Gynocriticism and Gynesis: The Geographics of Identity and the Future of Feminist Criticism," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15 (Spring 1996): 31; hereafter abbreviated "BG."

vocabularies. For this reason, too, the language available to critics in general and to feminist critics more specifically has become less limber than it needs to be. Churlish or cultish, its politically or theoretically correct jargon stifles rather than nurtures thoughtful interchange. Were I tempted to answer the query of my revised title—"What Ails Feminist Criticism?"—in one diagnostic phrase summing up the net effect of rhetorics of dissension, I could call the problem a bad case of critical anorexia, for racialized identity politics made the word *women* slim down to stand only for a very particularized kind of woman, whereas poststructuralists obliged the term to disappear altogether.⁵¹ How paradoxical that during the time of feminist criticism's successful institutionalization in many academic fields it seems to be suffering from a sickness that can end in suicide.

But what of my promise to use the disease metaphor as a means of imagining some hope for recovery? Thinking dialectically about stage four, I wonder whether several symptoms of rejuvenation mean that dissension has functioned as a purgative period in a much needed (though painful) process of growth. Metacritical contention has recently spurred first, second, and third stage feminists to produce hybrid forms of autobiographical criticism more supple in their attentiveness to various kinds of distinctively structured difference. Just as important, many practitioners within the third stage of feminist criticism—the engendering of differences—have managed to highlight dissimilarities among women without squelching conversations about them. African American and postcolonial scholars are currently making such a transformative mark in our field that one could argue they have paved the way for a virtual "racechange" in feminist literary criticism.⁵² In addition, the arguments of poststructuralists that uncovered the presumptive heterosexuality of previous theorizing have forged highways from feminist criticism to the now burgeoning fields of lesbian studies and queer theory. But perhaps these more cheering subjects should be the topic of another (or someone else's) paper.

51. I am agreeing with Greene, who senses "a self-defeating tendency" in feminist critics' "fierce self-scrutiny" and identifies it as "a kind of professional/pedagogical anorexia" (Greene, "Looking at History," pp. 16–17).

52. Feminist criticism has shifted away from the earlier default position of whiteness to generate a vast amount of scholarship on the literary history of women of color. A growing number of white women are now participating with women of color in African American and postcolonial feminist studies; however, optimism about this event needs to be qualified by several points made by duCille. Her "uneasy antagonism" toward certain senior scholars—untrained in African American studies but nevertheless publishing in the field—is related to her awareness that "black culture is more easily intellectualized (and canonized) when transferred from the danger of lived black experience to the safety of white metaphor" (duCille, *Skin Trade*, pp. 88, 91). She also points out that the influx into African American studies by white feminists is related to "white feminist restlessness with an already well-mined female literary tradition" (*ibid.*, p. 93).

In accord with Susan Bordo's "feminist chauvinism," her efforts "to help restore feminism's rightful parentage of the 'politics of the body'"⁵³ that she studies and of the bodies of literature that many others explore, I find myself echoing the words of Braidotti, who understands the word *women* as "a general umbrella term" and who exclaims, "I wish feminism would shed its saddening, dogmatic mode to rediscover the merrymaking of a movement that aims to change life."⁵⁴ By contesting the debilitating rhetorics of critical election, abjection, and obscurantism, I would like to think I'm supplying food for thought about how to find more mirthful scholarly lexicons. What should be tried are not only nutritious but also delicious linguistic practices so that we can heal feminist discourse of the infirmities that made us cranky with one another. For a robust feminist criticism needs to get into training to assume the vital roles we will undoubtedly want it to play in the twenty-first century.

53. Bordo, "Feminism, Foucault, and the Politics of the Body," *Up against Foucault*, p. 182.

54. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, pp. 162, 167.