

Interview

Feminism by Any Other Name

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The interview here pertains centrally to the theoretical and political implications of formulating feminist theory in Europe, and to debates emerging from the paradigms of sexual difference and gender. At the time of this transcription Rosi Braidotti and I have never met in person, but we appear

to be part of a post-topical feminist community. She has described our interview as taking place in “cyberspace”: we sent queries and responses back and forth across the Atlantic at odd hours with the aid of various fax machines. The following is a result of our efforts:

JB: How would you describe the difference, both institutionally and theoretically, between gender and women’s studies in Europe right now?

RB: Don’t forget that you are talking to a nomadic subject. I was born on that northeastern corner of Italy that changed hands several times before becoming Italian after World War I. My family emigrated to Melbourne, Australia, alongside millions of our country(wo)men. I grew up in the polycultural metropolises of down-under, just as the “white Australia” policy was coming to an end, to be replaced by the antipodean version of multiculturalism. The great common denominator for all European migrants was a negative identity; i.e. our *not* being British. This is the context in which I discovered that I was, after all, European—which was far from a single, let alone a steady, identity.

Insofar as “European” could be taken as “continental”—as opposed to British—it was an act of resistance to the dominant colonial mode. Calling myself European was a way of claiming an identity they taught me to despise. But I knew enough about Europe not to believe that it was *one*. The sheer evidence of the innumerable migrant ghettos would testify to its diverse and divisive nature. Thus, discovering my “European-ness” was an external and oppositional move, which far from giving me the assurance of a sovereign identity, cured me once and for all of any belief in sovereignty. Reading and recognizing Foucault’s critique of sovereignty became later on the mere icing on a cake whose ingredients had already been carefully selected, mixed and pre-baked.

The Europe I feel attached to is that site of possible forms of resistance that I’ve just described. My support for the highly risky business of European integration into a “common house” (the European Community, also referred to as “The European Union” in what follows) rests on the hope, formulated by Delors and Mitterand—that this “new” Europe can be constructed as a collective project. The Europe of the European Union is *virtual* reality: it’s a project that requires hard work and commitment. I am perfectly aware of the fact that, so far, the results are not splendid, if you consider the debacle in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the increasing waves of xenophobia and racism that are sweeping across this region.

Nonetheless I believe that without the project of the European Union, this wave is here to stay. The resurgence of xenophobia and racism is the negative side of the process of globalization that we are going through at the moment. I share the hope that we shall grow out of it and confront the new, wider European space without paranoia or hatred for the other. I am deeply and sincerely convinced that European integration is the only way for this continent to avoid the hopeless repetition of the darker sides of our dark past. The anti-Europeans in Europe today are: the conservative and the extreme right, as well as the extreme fringe of the nostalgic left, including the many “green parties” and other well-meaning but often ineffectual intellectuals. Shall we ever get over the Weimar syndrome?

With these qualifications in mind, I’d like to point out two initiatives in which I am involved, which in my opinion have the potential to influence the international debate. Firstly, the making of the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*. Secondly, the growing number of ERASMUS (intra-European) networks for women’s studies, of which the Utrecht-run one, significantly called NOIOSE, is the best example. A great many of my observations about gender and its institutional perspectives come from my experience in NOIOSE.¹

Having said this, would you really be surprised if I told you that it is impossible to speak of “European” women’s studies in any systematic or coherent manner? Each region has its own political and cultural traditions of feminism, which need to be compared carefully. As a matter of fact, there is already quite a rich bibliography of comparative studies on the question of how to institutionalize women’s studies in Europe today.² Based on the experience of the initiatives listed above, I would raise the following points:

1. Only northern European universities enjoy some degree of visibility for positions that can be identified as women’s studies and feminist studies. The term “women’s studies” is preferred as it stresses the link with the social and political women’s movements. Only research institutions or centers that are not tied to teaching programmes at the undergraduate level can afford the denominator “feminist.” Generally, however, “feminist” is perceived as too threatening by the established disciplines, especially by sympathetic, non-feminist women within them—so it tends to be avoided.
2. Many women’s studies courses are integrated. An alarming proportion of them are “integrated” into departments of American

Literature or American Studies, especially in southern and eastern European countries. The reason for this is obvious: as feminism is strong in the U.S.A., its presence in an American Studies curriculum requires no additional legitimation. The paradox here is that these courses never reflect local feminist work, initiatives, or practices.

3. We have very little teaching material in women's studies that is conceptualized and produced in Europe. The U.K. is active, but they still tend to look at their privileged North Atlantic connections more favorably than they do their European partners. On the continent, there's not even one publisher that has the capacity to attract and monitor the feminist intellectual production in a truly trans-European manner. The quasi-monopoly exercised on the feminist market by the Routledge giant is in this respect very problematic for us continental feminists because it concentrates the agenda-setting in the hands of that one company.

All of this makes us *dependent* upon the commercial, financial and discursive power of American feminists. This dependency is a problem when it comes to setting the feminist agenda. It also means that there's no effective feedback between local feminist political cultures and local university programs in women's studies. A sort of schizophrenia is written into this, as in all colonial situations. I think Europe is a bit of a colony in the realm of women's studies.

Special mention must be made, in this respect, of the work of the feminist historians who are among the few groups that have managed to bridge the gap between university programs and local feminist practices and traditions. See, for example, the multi-lingual and polyvocal collection of volumes on Women's History, edited by Michelle Perrot and Georges Duby and translated into every major European language. In both Italy and the Netherlands the historians have gotten themselves organized in strong national associations that produce enlightening publications. I also have the impression that the historians have more systematic professional exchanges with their American colleagues than any of the other disciplines—judging by the fact that Gianna Pomata and Luisa Passerini, for instance, were well received in the United States.

JB: As you no doubt know, there has emerged an important and thoroughgoing critique of Eurocentrism within feminism and within cultural studies more generally right now. But I wonder whether this has culminated in an intellectual impasse such that a critical understanding of Europe, of the volatility of the very category, and of the notions of nation and citizenship in crisis there, have become difficult to address.

In that context, (a) How has the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism—and the reappropriation of the “European” within that critique—registered with feminist domains? (b) Has your network of feminist institutions in Europe addressed the question of the current parameters of Europe as a feminist question? Do you know some of the feminist philosophers in Belgrade or the lesbian group, Arkadia? They seem to be drawing some important critical linkages between nation-building, heterosexual reproduction, the violent subordination of women, and homophobia.

RB: I think that the impact of the critiques of Eurocentrism upon women’s studies has been fundamental. I am thinking not only of work done in cultural studies such as that of Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, bell hooks, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and many others, but also of critiques that take place within more traditional disciplines, such as those of Julia Kristeva (psychoanalyst), Edgar Morin (historian of the philosophy of science), Bernard Henry-Levy (philosopher), Massimo Cacciari (philosopher), and others. All of these share a deep distrust of any essentialist definition of Europe, although for quite different reasons.

I would not describe this situation as an impasse, but rather as a clear-cut political divide between, on the one hand, those on the right who uphold a nostalgic, romanticized ideal of a quintessential Europe as the bastion of civilization and human rights and, on the other hand, the progressive left for whom Europe is a project yet to be constructed by overcoming the hegemonic nationalist and exclusionary tendencies that have marked our history. In between these two great camps are the individualist libertarians who fear and oppose the power of the Brussels bureaucracy in the name of “freedom”: a great many in the ecological or “green” parties are in this position. The right as well as this last group oppose the Maastricht Treaty which includes provisions for a social charter of workers’ rights, a common currency, and an enhanced federalism; the left see federalism as a necessary, however painful, process.

These divisions are also present within the women's movements in Europe. The clearest evidence of this is the huge numbers of women who participated in the anti-Maastricht referenda recently held in the community. Take the case of Denmark: in the first referendum, it was definitely the women who defeated the Treaty; their arguments were based in a critique of Eurocentrism, but in the libertarian mode I mentioned above. They feared both the centralization of decision-making in Brussels and the loss of social welfare privileges that the Maastricht Treaty would entail for them. Because the Treaty is an attempt to find a compromise among all the member states, some of the social provisions in the Treaty which may appear progressive from a Greek or Italian perspective tend to look rather disappointing from a Scandinavian one. For instance, the Danish women stressed that the European Union takes the family as the basic social unit. They thought, quite rightly, that European legislation would have negative consequences for single women and lesbians.

Other examples of feminist critiques of Eurocentrism can be found in the work done by black and migrant women commissioned by Brussels. These women include prominent academics such as Helma Lutz, Philomena Essed, and Nira Yural-Davis, who wrote books and official reports denouncing the "Fortress Europe," sponsored by Brussels.

I think there is a consensus that racism and xenophobia are the largest problems in the European Community at the moment. What I want to emphasize is that these problems can be solved only at an intra-European level and cannot be left to single nation-states which are generally far more conservative and nationalistic than the European commission in Brussels.

JB: I take it that for you the European Union constitutes a hyper-federalism that thwarts the nationalist tendencies at work in various European nation-states?

RB: Yes, but I want to add that this is a *hope* and a political choice. I take it that by "hyper-federalism" you do not mean something abstract: the European project is powerfully real in its economic and material realities.

Let me give you concrete examples: no sooner had the first issue of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* come out last week than the United Kingdom Women's Studies Association accused it of being Eurocentric. They obviously had not read the editorial, which states quite clearly our political determination to undo the hegemonic and imperialist view of

Europe by stressing the discrepancies and differences internal to women's studies. How often and how clearly must we say that we need to deconstruct the essentialist and dominant view of Europe by starting a social and intellectual process of federalism, i.e. anti-nationalism?

JB: I take it that federalism can be an instrument of nationalism, though, and that it may not be enough for a women's studies journal to declare, however clearly, its anti-Eurocentrism if the substance of its articles tend to underscore an opposing intellectual disposition. I haven't seen the journal in question, so I can't make a judgement. But I would suggest that an anti-Eurocentric stance probably has to do more than mark differences, that is, those markings have to become a point of departure for a critique of nationalism in both its federalist and anti-federalist forms. But as I understand it, your point is that right now to center a progressive politics on Europe is not the same as Eurocentrism, and that Eurocentrism is not the same as nationalism. I take it that part of what will make good this last claim is for the boundaries of what is accepted as "Europe" sure to contest rather than reinscribe the map of colonial territorialities.

RB: Yes, but that can only be achieved through political action. Let me give you a different example of what I mean. This year the Europride week took place in Amsterdam and gay people and various associations gathered to talk and celebrate. Some complained that a Europride week was too Eurocentric. They either did not know or chose to ignore the points of view expressed by Italian, Spanish, Greek and other European gay rights activists who clearly stated that European legislation on gay rights is far more advanced than legislation existing at national levels. As a consequence, we need to appeal to Europe in order to oppose national governments; the Irish feminists worked this tactic in the case of abortion legislation. Many lesbian organizations have also pointed out that, with the exception of Holland and Denmark, there are no lesbian rights at all in the nations comprising the European Community today. Take the case of the Italian lesbian couple who recently gave birth to a child through donor insemination. The Vatican *excommunicated* them. Whereas at some level I find it quite hilarious to be officially condemned to eternal damnation, it is also important to remember how enormous is the social ostracism of these women.

In such a context, opposing European federalism in the name of anti-Eurocentrism ends up confirming the hegemonic and fascistic view of

Europe which we are all fighting against. It is quite analogous to opposing special actions for women in the name of anti-essentialism. I think we need to approach these questions strategically.

JB: So how is it that the kind of feminist scholarship and activism in which you are involved calls into question the given parameters of “Europe”?

RB: The ERASMUS NOISE Network has placed the critical evaluation of European multiculturalism at the center of our interests. The joint curriculum that we have been developing focuses entirely on cultural diversity, European multiculturalism, and anti-racism. Significantly, we (Christine Rammrath and all the participating partners) spent about three years in preliminary research for this new curriculum. The bibliographic search confirmed the points I made before about the domination of American sources on the theme of multiculturalism.

It seems quite obvious that we Europeans have been slower to face these issues, partly because intra-European cultural and ethnic divisions are so huge that they seem threatening. The first time we opened a discussion on the theme of racism in Europe, many of the southern European participants in our network felt very strongly that they have been the oppressed in the Community today, that they have suffered from racism in the course of the mass migrations (to northern and western Europe) from countries such as Greece, Spain, and Italy. They also acknowledged how difficult it is for countries or peoples who are accustomed to economic and social marginality, such as southern European emigrants, to realize that, at this point in history in the European Community they are actually discriminating against peoples from even further south or from Eastern Europe: the Turks, the Moroccans, the peoples from the former Yugoslavia, the African migrants who enter the Community legally or not. I think that the process by which this realization is made is both painful and necessary.

If you look at how these concerns are reflected in the university curricula in women’s studies, you will be struck by omissions and silences. In her background preliminary study on this theme, Marischka Verbeek argues that whereas U.S.-style black feminism is well represented in most European courses, issues closer to local realities are more often omitted. I think that there is a tendency to defer confrontation with the more immediate “Other.”

JB: What I found recently in Germany was a revival of interest in Jewish culture, and a strong show against anti-semitism in public discourse,

but that form of anti-racism did not appear to translate into a more systematic and wide-ranging public examination of racism against the Turks and other domestic minorities. It was as if the work of culturally rehabilitating Jewish culture within Germany—an important and necessary project in its own right—works in part to displace public attention away from of the most vehement forms of contemporary racism.

RB: I think that the concern about anti-semitism is perfectly justified, but anti-racism needs to cover a broader spectrum. In the context I am referring to above, this deferral takes a spatial and temporal dimension. You will find women's studies courses in history throughout Europe that deal with issues of colonialism and imperialism in the last century, including American slavery as well as anti-semitism and the holocaust in Nazi Europe. It is much more difficult, however, to find material related to recent events, such as the growing persecution of immigrant workers, the killing of gypsies and other nomads, the resurgence of Nazi-skinheads, anti-semitism, and the growth of the "Fortress Europe" mentality. This difficulty is the result of the inherent conservatism of European universities which are still monopolized by rigid disciplinary boundaries and of the delayed relation of theory to practice. As you know, thinking the present is always the most difficult task. In our European network, we have taken this task as our focus. We plan to start producing research and a book series in the next few years.

JB: Can you say more about feminist critiques of nationalism in the contemporary context?

RB: I think that the former Yugoslavia is the nightmare case that illustrates everything the European Union is trying to fight against. Paradoxically, it has also demonstrated the inefficiency and powerlessness of the European Community which simply has no military way of enforcing its policies and has shown pathetic diplomatic skills.

You asked before about the work of the Yugoslav philosophers. I think you mean Dasa Duhacek and Zarana Papic whose work is well-known and very well received at the moment. I think that the analyses Papic proposes of nationalism, patriarchy, and war are important, courageous, and necessary. I am especially impressed by her reading of the current war as a "tribalist patriarchalism" which seeks to erase sexual difference through the rule of war-oriented nationalist masculinism. One cannot be a woman in the

former Yugoslavia: one must be a Serbian, a Croatian, or a Bosnian woman. Sexual difference is killed by nationalism.

In this respect, Papic's work is not unique. There are several interesting analyses of the intersection between nationalism, war, and masculinity in Europe. There is the work of Maria Antoinetta Macciocchi, former Communist and now Euro-parliamentarian. Already in her study of Italian fascism, *La Donna Nera* published in the seventies, she broke the taboo against linking nationalist masculinity with the subordination of women. Her later work, published in French, *Les femmes et leurs maîtres*, is also of great interest. I think also of Gisela Bock's research on women in Nazi Germany and the literature by migrant and postcolonial women who are either citizens or residents in the European Community, from Buchi Emecheta to the Algerian-Jewish Hélène Cixous. Interesting also is the work of Italian women who were caught in the armed rebellion of the 70s against the nation-state (the so-called "terrorists").

JB: What are the intellectual reasons for preferring the term Feminist Studies over Gender or Women's Studies?

RB: This question has been at the center of a hot debate in *The Dutch Journal of Women's Studies* and I think it will continue in the pages of the new *European Journal of Women's Studies*.

Let me start with this formulation: I think that the notion of "gender" is at a crisis-point in feminist theory and practice, that it is undergoing intense criticism from all sides both for its theoretical inadequacy and for its politically amorphous and unfocused nature. Italian feminist Liana Borghi calls gender "a cookie cutter," which can take just about any shape you want.³ The areas from which the most pertinent criticism of "gender" has emerged are: the European sexual difference theorists, the postcolonial and black feminist theorists (my colleague Gloria Wekker explains that in our practice here in Europe we use the term "black feminist theory" as a political category, and we refer to black and migrant women. In the U.S., on the other hand, you seem to use the term "black" as synonymous with "African-American" and you refer to "women of color" to cover other ethnic denominators); the feminist epistemologists working in the natural sciences, postmodernist cyborg feminism and the lesbian thinkers. I think your work has been very influential in arousing healthy suspicion about the notion of gender, too.

A second remark: the crisis of gender as a useful category in feminist analysis is simultaneous with a re-shuffling of theoretical positions which had become fixed and stalemated in feminist theory, most notably the opposition between, on the one hand, “gender theorists” in the Anglo-American tradition and on the other, “sexual difference theorists” in the French and continental tradition.⁴ The debate between Anglo-American “gender” theory and Continental sexual difference theorists became stuck in the 80s in a fairly sterile polemic between opposing cultural and theoretical frameworks which rest on different assumptions about political practice.⁵ This polarized climate was re-shuffled partly because of the increasing awareness of the culturally specific forms assumed by feminist theory and this has resulted in a new and more productive approach to differences in feminist positions.

A third related phenomenon in this respect is the recent emergence of the international debate of Italian, Australian, and Dutch feminist thought, as well as others; these alternatives have helped to displace the too comfortable binary opposition between French Continental and Anglo-American positions.⁶ These publications have helped not only to put another, however “minor,” European feminist culture on the map, but also to stress the extent to which the notion of “gender” is a vicissitude of the *English language*, one which bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages.⁷ This is why gender has found no successful echo in the French, Spanish or Italian feminist movements. When you consider that in French “le genre” can be used to refer to humanity as a whole (“le genre humain”) you can get a sense of the culturally specific nature of the term and, consequently, of its untranslatability as well.

JB: But what do you make of the German Movement? How is it that the term which has no theoretical tradition in that language nevertheless can take hold there, precisely as a disruption of that tradition?

RB: My impression from working with groups in Berlin, Kassel, Bielefeld and Frankfurt is that the process of institutionalizing feminism has been slow and not very successful. Even Habermas has not appointed a single feminist philosopher in his department! The feminist wave of the 70s did not survive the long march through the institutions. “Gender” is coming in as a later, compromise solution in the place of the more radical options that have emerged from local traditions and practices.

The imported nature of the notion of gender also means that the sex/gender distinction, which is one of the pillars on which English-speaking feminist theory is built, makes neither epistemological nor political sense in many non-English, western European contexts, where the notions of “sexuality” and “sexual difference” are currently used instead. Although much ink has been spilled over the question of whether to praise or attack theories of sexual difference, little effort has been made to try and situate these debates in their cultural contexts.

I think that one of the reasons for the huge impact of your *Gender Trouble* in the German context is that it brings in with a vengeance a long overdue discussion. What is special about the German context, and potentially very explosive, is that their debate on feminist gender theory is simultaneous with a radical deconstruction of that notion. Many rather conventional German feminists are very worried about it.

More generally, though, the focus on gender rather than sexual difference presumes that men and women are constituted in symmetrical ways. But this misses the feminist point about masculine dominance. In such a system, the masculine and the feminine are in a structurally dissymmetrical position: men, as the empirical referent of the masculine, cannot be said to have a gender; rather, they are expected to carry the Phallus—which is something different. They are expected to exemplify abstract virility, which is hardly an easy task.⁸ Simone de Beauvoir observed fifty years ago that the price men pay for representing the universal is a loss of embodiment; the price women pay, on the other hand, is at once a loss of subjectivity and a confinement to the body. Men become disembodied and, through this process, gain entitlement to transcendence and subjectivity; women become over-embodied and thereby consigned to immanence. This results in two dissymmetrical positions and to opposing kinds of problems.

JB: Your point that gender studies presumes and institutionalizes a false “symmetry” between men and women is very provocative. It seems to me, though, that the turn to “gender” has also marked an effort to counter a perhaps too rigid notion of gender asymmetry. How do you respond to the following kind of critique of “sexual difference”: when sexual difference is understood as a linguistic and conceptual presupposition or, for that matter, an inevitable condition of all writing, it falsely universalizes a social asymmetry, thereby reifying social relations of gender asymmetry in a linguistic or symbolic realm, maintained problematically at a distance from socio-historical practice?

As a second question, is there a way to affirm the political concerns implicit in this critique at the same time to insist on the continuing value of the “sexual difference” framework?

RB: I don't see sexual difference as a monolithic or ahistorical theory. Quite to the contrary. In *Nomadic Subjects* I have tried to work out a three-level scheme for understanding sexual difference. On the first level, the focus is on the differences between men and women. Here the aim is descriptive and diagnostic. The approach to sexual difference involves both the description and denunciation of the false universalism of the male symbolic, in which one finds the notion of the subject as a self-regulating masculine agency and the notion of the “Other” as a site of devaluation. What comes into focus in the second level is that the relation between Subject and Other is not one of reversibility. As Irigaray points out, women's “otherness” remains unrepresentable within this scene of representation. The two poles of opposition exist in an asymmetrical relationship. Under the heading of “the double syntax” Irigaray defends this irreducible and irreversible difference not only of Woman from man, but also of real-life women from the reified image of Woman-as-Other. This is proposed as the foundation for a new phase of feminist politics.

JB: But what does it mean to establish that asymmetry as irreducible and irreversible, and then to claim that it ought to serve as a foundation for feminist politics? Doesn't that simply reify a social asymmetry as an eternal necessity, thus installing the pathos of exclusion as the “ground” of feminism?

RB: You must not confuse the diagnostic function of sexual difference with its strategic or programmatic aims. The emphasis, for me, is on the implications of the recognition of the asymmetrical position between the sexes, namely that reversibility is *not* an option, either conceptually or politically. The point is to overcome the dialectics of domination, not to turn the previous slaves into new masters. Emancipationism tries to push women in that direction, thereby introducing homology into a male-dominated system. Just slotting women *in*, without changing the rules of the game, would indeed be mere reification of existing social conditions of inequality. Sexual difference feminists are opposed to that and want to criticize the political bankruptcy of that move. We should bank instead on the margin of eccentricity from the phallic system that women “enjoy” as part of the patriarchal socio-symbolic deal. It's *that margin of non-belonging* that serves as

foundation for feminist politics. Whereas Derrida-style feminists are happy to let this margin float in a disseminating vortex, sexual difference feminists are determined to anchor it in women's lived experience.

The central issue at stake in this project is how to create, legitimate, and represent a multiplicity of alternative forms of feminist subjectivity without falling into either a new essentialism or a new relativism. The starting point for the project of sexual difference is the political will to assert the specificity of the lived, female bodily experience. This involves the refusal to disembodify sexual difference through the valorization of a new allegedly "postmodern" and "anti-essentialist" subject; in other words, the project of sexual difference engages a will to reconnect the whole debate on difference to the bodily existence and experience of women.

I think it is a factor of our historical condition that feminists identify feminism as a political site of experimentation and that they are reconsidering the notion of Woman (the patriarchal representation of women, as cultural imago) at the exact period in history when this notion is deconstructed and challenged in social as well as discursive practice. Modernity makes available to feminists the essence of femininity as an historical construct that needs to be worked upon. The real-life women who undertake the feminist subject-position as a part of the social and symbolic reconstruction of what I call female subjectivity are a multiplicity in themselves: split, fractured, and constituted across intersecting levels of experience.

This third level, which I call "the differences within," is approached through an analytic of subjectivity. It highlights the complexity of the embodied structure of the subject: the body refers to a layer of corporeal materiality, a substratum of living matter endowed with memory. The Deleuzian view of the corporeal subject that I work with implies that the body cannot be fully apprehended or represented: it exceeds representation. I stress this because far too often in feminist theory the level of "identity" gets merrily confused with issues of political subjectivity. Identity bears a privileged bond to unconscious processes—which are imbricated with the corporeal—whereas political subjectivity is a conscious and willful position. Unconscious desire and willful choice are of different registers. My emphasis falls on the positivity of desire, on its productive force. I would like to understand feminism not only in terms of willful commitment to a set of values or political beliefs, but also in terms of the ethical passions and the desire that sustain it.

What feminism liberates in women is their desire for freedom, lightness, justness and self-accomplishment. These values are not only ra-

tional political beliefs, but also objects of intense desire. This merry spirit was quite manifest in the earlier days of the women's movement, when it was clear that joy and laughter were profound political emotions and statements. Not much of this joyful beat survives in these days of postmodernist gloom, and yet we would do well to remember the subversive force of Dionysian laughter. A healthy dose of hermeneutics of suspicion towards one's political beliefs is no form of cynicism, or nihilism, but rather a way of returning politics to the fullness, the embodiedness, and consequently the partiality of lived experience. I wish feminism would shed its saddening, dogmatic mode to rediscover the joy of a movement that aims to change the form of life.

JB: I wonder whether the notion of the bodily specificity of women is compatible with the notion of difference that you also want to applaud, for the claim to specificity may well be disrupted by difference. It seems important not to reduce the one term to the other. I think part of the suspicion toward the "sexual difference" framework is precisely that it tends to make sexual difference more hallowed, more fundamental, as a constituting difference of social life more important than other kinds of differences. In your view, is the symbolic division of labor between the sexes more fundamental than racial or national divisions, and would you argue for the priority of sexual difference over other kinds of differences? If so, doesn't this presume that feminism is somehow more fundamental and has greater explanatory power and political salience than other kinds of critical intellectual movements?

RB: Your question tends to re-essentialize the issue of female subjectivity, whereas everything I am saying rests on a de-essentialized, complex, and multi-layered understanding of the female subject. Woman is a complex entity which, as Kristeva puts it, pertains *both* to the longer, linear time of history and to a deeper, more discontinuous sense of time: this is the time of cyclical transformation, of counter-genealogies, of becoming and resistance. Although I am aware of how irritated a postcolonial thinker such as Spivak is with Kristeva's "sacralization" of sexual difference, I prefer to approach Kristeva's analysis as a description—and, for me, a very adequate one—of how western culture has historically organized a very effective dichotomy between, on the one hand, the teleological time of historical agency—colonized by men—and, on the other, the time of cyclical becoming, of unconscious processes, of repetitions, and internal contradictions to which women have not only access but also a privileged relationship. To under-

stand the latter, I proposed that we interpret the notion of “situated” knowledge, or the “politics of location,” not only in spatial terms (class, ethnicity, etc.), but also as a temporal notion. It has to do with counter-memory, the emergence of alternative patterns of identification, of remembrance: memory and the sense of time are closely linked to sexual difference.

My position is that we need to fight on all levels, but to assert that the starting point is the recognition of a common symbolic position does not imply that women are in any way the same. I won't deny the real tensions that exist between the critique of the priority traditionally granted to the variable “sexuality” in Western discourses of subjectivity and my stated intention of redefining feminist subjects as embodied genealogies and counter-memories. The question is how to resituate subjectivity in a network of inter-related variables of which sexuality is only one, set alongside powerful axes of subjectification such as race, culture, nationality, class, life-choices, and sexual orientation. No wonder that this project has led some to reject the entire idea of sexual difference and to dispose with the signifier “woman” altogether.

These tensions form an historical contradiction: that the signifier “woman” be both the concept around which feminists have gathered in a political movement where the politics of identity are central, and that it be also the very concept that needs to be analyzed critically. I think that the feminist emphasis on sexual difference challenges the centrality granted to phallogentric sexuality in Western culture, even though by naming it as one of the pillars of this system, it appears to be endorsing it. As I said earlier, the real-life women who undertake the process of social and symbolic reconstruction of female subjectivity are not a new version of Cartesian consciousness, but rather a deconstructed, multiple entity in themselves: split, fractured, and constituted over intersecting levels of experience. This multiple identity is relational, in that it requires a bond to the “Other”; it is retrospective, in that it rests on a set of imaginary identifications, that is to say unconscious internalized images which escape rational control. This fundamental *non-coincidence* of identity with the conventional Cartesian idea of consciousness is the crucial starting point. Because of it, one's imaginary relations to one's real-life conditions, including one's history, social conditions, and gender relations, become available as material for political and other types of analysis.

Now, we all know—with Foucault—that western culture has given high priority to sexuality as a matrix of subjectivity. By taking up issues with the institution of sexuality, sexual difference feminists point out that the

normative effects of the web of power that takes the sexed body as target are not equally distributed between the sexes, but rather implement the lack of symmetry between them, which is the trademark of patriarchy. Hence, feminists go beyond Foucault and in so doing challenge the whole institution of sexuality. For one thing, Irigaray and others challenge it by redefining the body in a form of corporeal materialism that goes beyond the sacralized conception upheld in the west; the mimetic repetition is a strategy to engender the new, as you well know.

As a consequence, the best strategy for moving out of this contradiction is radical embodiment and strategic mimesis, that is, the working through of the contradictions: *working backwards through*, like Benjamin's angel of history, a strategy of deconstruction that also allows for temporary redefinitions, combining the fluidity and dangers of a process of change with a minimum of stability or anchoring. This is why I relate strongly to your "Contingent Foundations" piece. The process is forward-looking, not nostalgic. It does not aim at recovering a lost origin, but rather at bringing about modes of representation that take into account the sort of women whom *we have already become*. In this respect, I suppose you are right in stating that I grant to feminism a greater explanatory power than other critical theories.

JB: It seems we are in an odd position, since for you the turn to "gender" depoliticizes feminism, but for some, the turn to gender is a way of insisting that feminism expand its political concerns beyond gender asymmetry, to underscore the cultural specificity of its constitution as well as its interrelations with other politically invested categories, such as nation and race. Is this political aim in the turn to gender legible to you?

RB: The opposition to gender is based on the realization of its politically disastrous institutional consequences. For instance, in their contribution to the first issue of the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson review the ongoing controversy concerning the naming of feminist programs in the institutions. They signal especially the take-over of the feminist agenda by studies on masculinity, which results in transferring funding from feminist faculty positions to other kinds of positions. There have been cases here in the Netherlands, too, of positions advertised as "gender studies" being given away to the "bright boys." Some of the competitive take-over has to do with gay studies. Of special significance in this discussion is the role of the mainstream publisher Routledge who, in our opinion, is responsible for promoting gender as a way of de-

radicalizing the feminist agenda, re-marketing masculinity and gay male identity instead.

On the other hand, I remember conversations with people in eastern European countries who argued that gender allowed them to bring to visibility very basic problems linked to the status of women after the paralysis of the Communist regime. Still, there are many feminists, especially in Asia, who refuse our own definition of gender equality because they see it as an imitation of masculine norms and forms of behavior.

JB: Yes, I found in Prague that the Gender Studies group found it necessary to distance themselves from the term “feminism” since that latter term had been explicitly used by the communist state to persuade women that their interests were best served by the state.

RB: I can see their point and have absolutely no objection to it as a first step toward setting up a feminist project—as long as it does not stop there.

The other relevant use of gender occurs, of course, in development work and in the sort of work done by U.N. agencies. It is clear that in a context where physical survival, clean air and water, and basic necessities are at stake, you need to allow for a more global term than sexual difference. Also, as the emphasis on sexuality is so central to the western mind set, it may not apply widely outside it.

JB: But what do you think of this association of “gender” with equality in opposition to difference?

RB: All I can say is that I believe firmly that a feminist working in Europe today simply has to come to terms with the knot of contradictions surrounding the question of difference. I remember the first time I attempted such a conversation with an American colleague was when Donna Haraway came to Utrecht. Donna asked how it is I believe that difference is *the* question. I replied that it has to do with European history and with my being situated as a European feminist.

As I told you before, I think that the notion and the historical problems related to difference in general and “sexual difference” in particular are extremely relevant *politically* in the European Community today. The renewed emphasis on a common European identity, which accompanies the project of the unification of the old continent, is resulting in “difference” becoming more than ever a divisive and antagonistic notion. According to

the paradox of simultaneous globalization and fragmentation, which marks the socio-economic structure of these post-industrial times, what we are witnessing in Europe these days is a nationalistic and racist regression that goes hand in hand with the project of European federalism.

It is actually quite an explosion of vested interests that claim their respective differences in the sense of regionalisms, localisms, ethnic wars, and relativisms of all kinds. "Difference," in the age of the disintegration of the Eastern block, is a lethally relevant term, as several feminist Yugoslav philosophers put it. Fragmentation and the reappraisal of difference in a poststructuralist mode can only be perceived at best ironically and at worst tragically, by somebody living in Zagreb, not to speak of Dubrovnik or Sarajevo.

I think the notion of "difference" is a concept rooted in European fascism, having been colonized and taken over by hierarchical and exclusionary ways of thinking. Fascism, however, does not come from nothing. In the European history of philosophy, "difference" is central insofar as it has *always* functioned by dualistic oppositions, which create sub-categories of otherness, or "difference-from." Because in this history, "difference" has been predicated on relations of domination and exclusion, to be "different-from" came to mean "less than," to be *worth* less than. Historically, difference has consequently acquired essentialistic and lethal connotations, which in turn have made entire categories of beings disposable, that is to say: just as human, but slightly more mortal than those who are not marked off as "different."

What I was trying to say earlier is that, as a critical thinker, an intellectual raised in the baby-boom era of the new Europe, as a feminist committed to enacting empowering alternatives, I choose to make myself *accountable* for this aspect of my culture and my history. I consequently want to think through difference, through the knots of power and violence that have accompanied its rise to supremacy in the European mind. This notion is far too important and rich to be left to fascist and hegemonic interpretations.

What I hope to do, to achieve through accountability, is to reclaim and repossess this notion so that through a strategy of creative mimetic repetition it can be cleansed of its links with power, domination, and exclusion. Difference becomes a project, a process. Moreover, within Western feminist practice and the history of ideas, the notion of difference has enjoyed a long and eventful existence. I cannot think of a notion that has been more contradictory, polemical, and important. "Difference" within feminist thinking, is a site of intense conceptual tension. At the same time, my firm

defense of the project of sexual difference as an epistemological and political process also expresses my concern for the ways in which many “radical” feminists have rejected difference, dismissing it as a hopelessly “essentialistic” notion, relying instead on the notion of “gender,” with the implicit sex/gender divide.

The poststructuralist feminists in the mid-seventies challenged Beauvoir’s emphasis on the politics of egalitarian rationality and emphasized instead the politics of difference. As Marguerite Duras puts it, women who continue to measure themselves against the yardstick of masculine values, women who feel they have to correct male mistakes will certainly waste a lot of time and energy. In the same vein, in her polemical article called “Equal to whom?” Luce Irigaray recommends a shift of political emphasis away from reactive criticism onto the affirmation of positive counter-values.

In a revision of Beauvoir’s work, poststructuralist feminist theories such as your own work have reconsidered difference and asked whether its association with domination and hierarchy is as intrinsic as the existentialist generation would have it and therefore as historically inevitable. On the other hand, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx—the apocalyptic trinity of modernity—introduces another provocative innovation: the idea that subjectivity does not coincide with consciousness. The subject is ex-centric with his/her conscious self because of the importance of structures such as unconscious desire, the impact of historical circumstances, and social conditions of production. This represents a major point of disagreement with equality-minded gender theorists.

JB: Can you explain a bit more why it is that the sex/gender distinction makes no sense to those working within the sexual difference model? Is it that the sexual difference model accommodates the theoretical contribution of the sex/gender model, i.e. that it is not reducible to a biologism? Is it that English language users tend to biologize sexual difference?

RB: Sexual difference rests on a post-phenomenological notion of sexuality as reducible neither to biologism or sociologism. To really make sense of this, you would have to look more closely at the respective definitions of “the body” which each of these frameworks entails. The sex-gender distinction re-essentializes sex: that English speakers should tend to biologize sexual difference is a clear reflection of this mind-set. It is no wonder, then, that throughout the feminist 80s, a polemic divided the “difference-inspired” feminists, especially the spokeswomen of the “écriture femi-

nine” movement, from the “Anglo-American” “gender” opposition. This polemic fed into the debate on essentialism and resulted in a political and intellectual stalemate from which we are just beginning to emerge.

JB: Perhaps it isn’t so much that sexual difference appears biologicistic, but that even when it is affirmed as linguistic, in the sense that structuralist linguistics produced, it still appears fixed. Isn’t it also the case that some feminists who work within the framework of sexual difference maintain a strong distinction between linguistic and social relations of sex?

RB: I do not recognize this reading of sexual difference except as a caricature, and there have been many of those going around of late. The whole point of taking the trouble to define, analyze, and act on sexual difference as a project aiming at the symbolic empowerment of the feminine (defined as “the other of the other”) is to turn it into a platform of political action for and by women. The reading you suggest seems to me to be the classical anti-sexual difference line first formulated by Monique Plaza and then repeated by Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy, and the whole editorial board of *Questions féministes*. According to them, sexual difference is psychically essentialist, ahistorical and apolitical. I read it as exactly the opposite and I am so sick and tired of the Marxist hangover that prevents people from seeing the deep interrelation between the linguistic and the social.

I think that the sexual difference theorists⁹ transformed the feminist debate by drawing attention to the social relevance of the theoretical and linguistic structures of the differences between the sexes. They claimed that the social field is coextensive with relations of power and knowledge, that it is an intersecting web of symbolic and material structures.¹⁰ This school of feminist thought argues that an adequate analysis of women’s oppression must take into account both language and materialism¹¹ and not be reduced to either one. It is very critical of the notion of “gender” as being unduly focused on social and material factors to the detriment of the semiotic and symbolic aspects.

I think we are confronted with opposing claims which rest on different conceptual frameworks: the emphasis on empowering a female feminist subject, which is reiterated by sexual difference theorists, clashes with the claim of gender theorists, that the feminine is a morass of metaphysical nonsense and that one is better off rejecting it altogether. From a sexual difference perspective, the sex/gender distinction perpetuates a nature/culture, mind/body divide which constitutes the worst aspect of the

Cartesian legacy of Simone de Beauvoir. We have an odd set of opposing critiques here—which almost mirror each other in a strange way. What I do find interesting for the purpose of our discussion, however, is that these opposing claims constitute a divide which is not one between heterosexuality and lesbian theory—i.e., a sexual difference bound by heterosexuality and gender displaced onto lesbian theory—but rather a disagreement *within* theories and practices of female homosexuality.¹² Sexual difference theorists like Cixous and Irigaray posit lesbian desire in a continuum with female sexuality, especially the attachment to the mother. They also refer back to the anti-Freudian tradition within psychoanalysis to defend both the specificity of women’s libido and the continuity between lesbian desire and love for the mother.¹³

Of course, the consequences of their analyses differ: whereas Cixous then argues for a female homosexual aesthetics and ethics capable of universal appeal, Irigaray pleads for a radical version of heterosexuality based on the mutual recognition of each sex by the other, i.e. a new feminist humanity. They both reject the notion of lesbianism not only as a separate identity, but as a political subjectivity. In a very different vein, Wittig argues for the specificity of lesbian desire but disengages that desire from the accounts of female sexuality, infantile homosexuality, and the attachment to the mother.

As you rightly point out, the two positions—Cixous and Irigaray on the one hand, Wittig on the other—situate language and, especially, literary language quite differently. That is why it is important to analyze the conceptual frameworks within which they operate. I think Wittig has a non-poststructuralist understanding of language and, consequently, of identity. Although her actual creative work suggests the opposite. One would need to compare her theory with the effect of her fiction to see how contradictory her position appears.

Nowadays, the anti-sexual difference feminist line has evolved into an argument for a “beyond gender” or a “post-gender” kind of subjectivity. This line of thought argues for the overcoming of sexual dualism and gender polarities in favor of a new sexually undifferentiated subjectivity. Thinkers such as Wittig go so far as to dismiss the emphasis on sexual difference as leading to a revival of the metaphysics of the “eternal feminine.”

As opposed to what I see as the hasty dismissal of sexual difference, in the name of a polemical form of “anti-essentialism,” or of a utopian longing for a position “beyond gender,” I want to valorize sexual difference as aiming at the symbolic empowerment of the feminine understood as “the other of the other”: as a political project.

JB: Wasn't part of Wittig's important theoretical point precisely that the version of sexual difference circulating within *écriture féminine* at the time, and derived largely from Levi-Strauss's notion of exchange, was the institutionalization of heterosexuality? In affirming sexual difference as a function of language and signification, there was an affirmation of heterosexuality as the basis of linguistic intelligibility! Her point was that language was not as fixed as that, and certainly not as tied to a binding heterosexual presumption. I take it that lesbian authorship in her view enacted linguistically a challenge to that theoretical presumption. What I find interesting there is that she did not mobilize literature as a "Trojan horse" to establish a lesbian subjectivity, but to inaugurate a more expansive conception of universality. Indeed, the lesbian for her, with its tenuous relation to gender, becomes a figure for this universality. I take this to be, quite literally, a form of *poststructuralism* to the extent that Wittig, more than any other inheritor of that theory, calls into question the heterosexual presumption.

I also think that it would be a mistake to locate the discourse on lesbian desire within the available conception of female sexuality or femininity in the psychoanalytically established sense. It seems clear to me that there are important cross-identifications with masculine norms and figures within lesbian desire for which an emphasis on feminine specificity cannot suffice. I also think that those very terms, masculine and feminine, are destabilized in part through their very reappropriation in lesbian sexuality. I take it that this is one reason why sexual difference theorists resist queer theory.

Although it may be true that the turn to gender obfuscates or denies the asymmetrical relation of sexual difference, it seems equally true that the exclusive or primary focus on sexual difference obfuscates or denies the asymmetry of the hetero/homo divide. And that dynamic has, of course, the power to work in reverse, whereby the exclusive emphasis on the hetero/homo divide works to obfuscate the asymmetry of sexual difference. These are, of course, not the only matrices of power in which these displacements occur. In fact, they are bound to occur, in my view *wherever* one matrix becomes distilled from the others and asserted as primary.

RB: I will agree on one thing: you do remain very much under Wittig's influence. Let me focus on a few points: your suggestion that sexual difference theorists "resist" queer theory. I think the verb "resist" suggests a more active and purposeful denial of this theory than is actually the case. What is true is that queer theory has had little impact on European feminism

so far, but that is mostly due to the fact that a great deal of uncertainty still surrounds the term. Most of us have read the issue of *differences* on “Queer Theory” (3.2 [1991]), but the positions expressed there and elsewhere seem to be quite diverse. For instance, you seem to claim a “queer” identity as a practice of resignification and resistance, rather than as a lesbian counter-identity. In this respect, there is an interesting dialogue to be had between you and Teresa de Lauretis, who is more concerned with issues of lesbian epistemology, desire, and subjectivity.

Moreover, in countries like Holland, where gay and lesbian studies are institutionalized and the social and legal position of gays and lesbians is comparatively quite advanced, the emphasis at the moment does not seem to be so much on claiming an identity they taught us to despise, as on a sort of epistemological anarchy, a psychic and social guerilla warfare against the kingdom of identity per se. The term “queer” sounds strangely old-fashioned in this context. I think that to really understand why sexual difference theorists do not care for queer theory you need to address the very real conceptual differences between the two schools of thought.

And here let me move on to another point you make, concerning Wittig’s practice of lesbian authorship. If the issue is the analysis of the limitations of the social/sexual contract such as Levi-Strauss proposes, let me say that Wittig was neither the first nor the only one to raise questions about it. In her early 70s essay called “Des marchandises entr’elles,” Irigaray opens fire on the whole theory of exogamy and diagnoses the heterosexual contract as confining women to a reified position in the realm of desire, as well as in the socio-economic spheres. As I said earlier, however, she then goes on to propose another line of attack, quite different from Wittig’s, but equally aware of the hold that heterosexual desire has on women.

I guess part of my cross-questioning has to do with the fact that I do not recognize Wittig in the reading you are proposing of her. I think there’s more of you in it than Wittig herself, though I am sure you would say the same of my readings of Irigaray—with which I would have to agree. Let me focus on only one point, however: I do not see how the kind of lesbian subjectivity Wittig defends can be taken as a more universal conception of subjectivity. All I see is the affirmation of a lesbian identity which rests on the *dissolution* of the signifier “woman” and the dismissal of all that which, historically and psychically—following the multi-layered scheme I suggested earlier—we have learned to recognize as “female desire.” I object to that because I see it as a contradictory claim which aims to hold together simultaneously a notion of a specific, object-oriented practice of lesbian desire *and*

a concept of sexually undifferentiated, “post-gender” subjectivity. I just do not see how that would work. You know from my first book how critical I am of any attempt to “dissolve” women into “post-something” categories; I think it is one of the most pernicious aspects of both postmodern and other theories.

I also have a conceptual objection: Wittig speaks as if we could dispose of “woman,” shedding her like an old skin, ascending onto a third subject position. This strikes me as a voluntaristic attempt to tear women away from the crucial paradox of our identity. Paradoxes need to be handled with more care than that. As I said earlier, the paradox of female identity for feminists is that it needs to be both claimed and deconstructed. Such a paradox is therefore the site of a powerful set of historical contradictions, which must be worked through fully and collectively before they can be overcome. It is not by willful self-naming that we shall find the exit from the prison-house of phallogocentric language.

Wittig may appear to have a more optimistic approach to language, believing in the plasticity and changeability of the linguistic chain. Without giving into some of the linguistic euphoria which marks the more exalted moments of *écriture féminine*, especially in Cixous, I do think nonetheless that changes in the deep structures of identity require socio-symbolic interventions that go beyond willful self-naming and that these call for concerted action by men and women. The famous statement that the unconscious processes are trans-historical and consequently require *time* to be changed was not supposed to mean that we can step outside or beside the unconscious by making a counter-move towards “historical or social reality.” It rather means that to make effective political choices we must come to terms with the specific temporality of the unconscious. Hence the points I made earlier about women and time. It seems to me that Wittig wants none of this. Insofar as her theoretical work—as opposed to her fictional work—rests on the assumption of a nature/culture, sex/gender divide which springs from Beauvoir’s Cartesian legacy, she’s vehemently opposed to the practice of the unconscious, be it in the literary texts or through psychoanalysis. If the optimistic side of this is that she believes that we can change the world by renaming it, the negative one is that she neglects the issue of the split nature of the subject, the loss and pain that mark her/his entry into the signifying order. Wittig makes no allowance for this specific pain and prefers simply to declare that the phallicity of language is not at issue.

Thus, I find her deeply antithetical to the basic assumptions of poststructuralism, especially the idea of the non-coincidence of identity with consciousness. Contrary to you, I think we need more than ever to work

through the psychoanalytic scheme of desire, because it offers a set of multiple points of entry into the complexity of subjectivity. Besides, historically, psychoanalysis has evolved into the most thorough account of the construction of desire in the West, and you know how I feel about historical accountability!

JB: To me it is less interesting to establish Wittig's poststructuralist credentials than to consider the way in which she rewrites the imaginary and originary drama of the splitting of the subject. The subject comes into "sex" from a unitary being, split on the occasion of its sexing. You are quite right that she underestimates the usefulness of psychoanalysis for her project, but she does give us a quite trenchant critique of the sexual contract as it is presupposed and reinstated through structuralism. I also think that she understands the pain and agony involved in the process of remaking oneself: *The Lesbian Body* is precisely a painful, collective, and erotic effort to substitute (metaphorize) an older body with a newer one, and the struggle involved is quite graphically difficult and in no simple sense voluntaristic. I think as well that there is no way to read what Wittig has to say about Proust, about the "Trojan horse" of literature, without realizing that what she seeks is a medium of universality that does not dissimulate sexual difference. I think, at her best, she recasts writing as a complex action of materialism.

RB: I do think there are discrepancies between her theoretical positions and her fictional work; I do prefer the latter by far. One last point—about the asymmetrical relation between hetero/homo and the issues related to the power of each position. If at the level of diagnosis sexual difference theory clearly identifies heterosexuality as the location of power and domination, at the programmatic level, it challenges the idea of heterosexuality as the center and lesbianism as the periphery. Resting on psychoanalysis and on political determination alike, a sexual difference approach posits the center in terms of women's own homosexual desire for each other, whereas heterosexuality is seen as a further horizon towards which one could move, if one felt so inclined. It happens that Irigaray feels very much that way inclined and Cixous not a tiny bit—but the frame of reference is similar. And this is the reason why sexual difference theorists do *not* believe in radical lesbian claims. Not believing in them is quite another position than denying them.

I am quite struck by your final remark about clashes which occur between opposing claims as to which matrix of power really matters: is it man/

woman, hetero/homo, white/black, etc.? I think this approach is inadequate because if feminism and poststructuralism—each in its specific way—have taught us anything it is the need to recognize complexity; i.e., the simultaneous yet discontinuous presence of potentially contradictory aspects of diverse axes of subjectivity. In other words, I take it as a fundamental point to resist belief in the almighty potency of *one* power location; one is never fully contained by any one matrix of power, except in conditions of totalitarianism, which is the ultimate denial of complexity in that it reduces one to the most basic and most ruthlessly available matrix. For instance, as we said earlier, women in the former Yugoslavia are stuck with an ethnic identity which becomes the sole definer of who they are. The fact of being women, or lesbians, only exposes them to more brutal carnal violation than the same ethnic entities who happen *not* to be women. You can say the same for conditions of slavery—but these are extreme, and extremely revealing, cases. Everyday oppression tends to work through a network of constant checks and systems of surveillance, so that one cannot make a priority as to which matrix matters at all times. The temporal scale is very important. What matters especially to me is that we feminists find a way of accounting for the different matrices which we inhabit at different points in time—that we compare notes about them, identify points of resistance to them. There's no denying that sexual difference theorists and radical lesbian theorists will identify different points of resistance and different strategies to activate them. But why would that be a problem? Do we have to have only one point of exit from the kingdom of the phallus? I think, on the contrary: the more, the merrier. Let us turn our differences into objects of discursive exchange among us.

JB: I think a further problem with the notion of sexual difference has been its assumption of the separability of the symbolic organization of sexual difference—i.e. the Subject and (erased) Other—the Phallus and Lack, from any given social organization. It may be a Marxist hangover—I don't know—but it seems to me a yet unanswered question whether sexual difference, considered as symbolic, isn't a reification of a social formation, one which in making a claim to a status beyond the social offers the social one of its most insidious legitimating ruses. At worst, it reifies a given organization of compulsory heterosexuality as the symbolic, vacating (yet rarifying) the domain of the social and the political project of social transformation.

RB: I disagree with this account of sexual difference and I find this to be one of the most fruitful points of divergence between us. Working with

the multi-layered project of sexual difference, I distinguish between its descriptive and programmatic aspects. I would thus say that the separation of the symbolic from the material, as well as the separability—i.e. the thinkability—of the separation, are an effect of the patriarchal system of domination. By providing a description of this symbolic as an historically sedimented system, sexual difference theory highlights *the violence of the separation* between the linguistic and the social.

This description, however, must not be taken as an endorsement of this symbolic. Following the strategy of mimetic repetition, the perspective of sexual difference simultaneously exposes and offers a critique of the phallogocentric reification of social inequalities into an allegedly distinct and discursively superior symbolic structure. For instance, Irigaray states time and again that the phallogocentric regime cannot be separated from a material process of the male colonization of social space, starting from the woman's body and then spreading across the basic "symbolic" functions in the West (according to the scheme proposed by Dumézil): the educational, the religious, the military, and the political. The separability of the symbolic from the material presupposes a patriarchal power that enforces the conditions under which such a separation is produced. In this sense, the symbolic is a slab of frozen history.

But if you read Irigaray closely, you will see that her aim is to recombine that which patriarchal power has separated. Irigaray calls for the melt-down of the male symbolic in order to provide for the radical re-enfleshing of both men and women. She has always been explicit on the point that the production of new subjects of desire requires a massive social reorganization and transformation of the material conditions of life. This is no Marxist hangover, just radical materialism in the poststructuralist mode.

JB: To claim that the social and the symbolic must both be taken into account is still to assume their separability. How do you, then, distinguish between social and material, on the one hand, and semiotic and symbolic, on the other?

RB: Let us not confuse the thinkability of an issue with its reaffirmation. To think is a way of exposing and offering a critique, not necessarily an endorsing of certain conditions.

Thus, your question comes from a very uncomfortable place, which I want to challenge. I would like to historicize your question and not let it hang in a conceptual void. Let me turn it right around and ask you how

you hope to keep up a distinction between the socio-material and the linguistic or symbolic? I think we are living through a major transition: the sort of world that is being constructed for us is one where “bio-power” as thought by Foucault has been replaced by the informatics of domination and the hypnosis of techno-babble. As Deleuze rightly puts it in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and as many black and postcolonial feminists have noted: in the new age of transnational capital flow and world migration and, I would add, of the internet and computer pornography, of off-shore production plants and narco-dollars, the material and symbolic conditions are totally intertwined. I think we need new theories that encompass the simultaneity of semiotic and material effects, not those that perpetuate their disconnection.

JB: I agree, though. You mention here the intertwining of the symbolic and the material, but I am not sure where terms like the social and the historical fit into this scheme. I meant only to point out that those who separate the symbolic from the social tend to include under the rubric of the “symbolic” a highly idealized version of the social, a “structure” stripped of its sociality and, hence, an idealization of a social organization of sex under the rubric of the symbolic. Your reference to “the patriarchal system of domination” impresses me in a way. I think that the phrase has become permanently disabled in the course of recent critiques of (a) the systematic or putative universality of patriarchy, (b) the use of patriarchy to describe the power relations relating to male dominance in their culturally variable forms, and (c) the use of domination as the central way in which feminists approach the question of power.

I also think that to call for the simultaneity of the social and the symbolic or to claim that they are interrelated is still to claim the separability of those domains. Just before this last remark, you called that “separation” a violent one, thus marking an insuperability to the distinction. I understand that you take the symbolic to be historically sedimented, but you then go on to distinguish the symbolic from both the social and the material. These two terms remain unclear to me: are they the same? When does history become “the historically sedimented” and are all things historically sedimented the same as “the symbolic”? If the symbolic is also dynamic, as you argue in relation to Deleuze, what does this do to the definition?

RB: I do not see sexual difference as postulating a symbolic beyond the social—quite the contrary. You know, I am beginning to think that where we differ the most is on how we understand the theoretical speaking

stance and the activity of thinking. I do not think that to emphasize the simultaneity of the social and the symbolic is the same as endorsing the separability of these domains. The conditions of the thinkability of a notion need to be analyzed in a more complex manner. Let me put it this way: there is more to an utterance than its propositional content. One also needs to take into account the pre-conceptual component, i.e. affectivity, forces, the flows of intensity that underlay each utterance. With respect to “the separability of the social from the symbolic,” I would distinguish among different possible topologies:

1. a cartographic urge: the description and the assessment of the effects of a patriarchal symbolic;
2. a utopian drive: the feminist political project to overthrow the aforementioned system and set up an alternative one;
3. a polemical touch: the desire to set everybody talking about it.

Where I do agree with Deleuze is in approaching the theoretical process as a dynamic, forward-looking, nomadic activity. The process of making sense, therefore, rests on non-conceptual material and on more fluid transitions than you seem to allow for. The point remains, however: we need to construct new desiring subjects on the ruins of the phallogocentrically enforced gender dualism. New subjects also require new social and symbolic structures that allow for changes in identity and structures of desire to be enacted socially and registered collectively. To achieve this, we need a quiet, molecular, viral, and therefore unstoppable revolution within the self, multiplied over a multitude of different selves acting as historical agents of change.

Of course, history is the process of multi-layered sedimentations of events, activities, discourses, on the model of the archive which both Foucault and Deleuze propose, though in different modes (the latter more radically than the former). The symbolic system is linked to this historical sedimentation, though not always positively: I mean, it would be really too naive to think that the symbolic would automatically register the kind of social changes and in depth transformations brought about by movements such as feminism. I think the process of symbolic change is more like a dual feedback mechanism, which requires the sort of diversified and complex intervention that Kristeva talks about. I also think you need to make a distinction between Lacan’s ideas on the symbolic and its link to historical

processes, and Irigaray's and Deleuze's ideas on the matter: they are quite different. I prefer Deleuze's definition of the symbolic as a programmatic model because he sees it as the dynamic process of production of signifying practices in a manner which interlocks the linguistic and social conditions of this production. The problem is, however, that Deleuze denies—or rather, hesitates about—the specificity of sexual difference. Irigaray is clearer about the latter, on the other hand, but she still remains attached to the Lacanian scheme of the symbolic/imaginary link-up, which opens up a whole set of other problems, not the least of which is the issue of the female death drive. This results in a less dynamic scheme of operation.

JB: But here, Rosi, it seems that you pick and choose those definitions of the symbolic that appear to suit your purposes, and if Deleuze is more dynamic, then Deleuze wins the contest. I wonder whether the symbolic is meant to operate in that way, that is, as a set of regulating structures and dynamics which might be elected over others. My sense is that symbolic is taken to mean a set of structures and dynamics which set the limit to what can and cannot be elected. Who, for instance, is the author who decides these questions, and how is it that authorship itself is decided in advance by precisely this symbolic functioning? I think that the symbolic designates the ideality of regulatory power, and that that power must finally be situated and criticized within an enhanced conception of the social. This is clearly a difference between us. In what directions do you intend to go?

RB: Surely, by the mid 90s, we can say that there are *theories of the symbolic* which feminists need to analyze and assess comparatively and yes, I definitely believe that, at this point in time, feminists must choose among them. You seem to have a more static idea of how the symbolic works than I do; thus, my preference for Deleuze is not merely instrumental. I just think that his definition of the symbolic is more useful for feminist politics because it breaks from Lacan's psychic essentialism. I am also surprised that you seem to attribute all the regulatory power to the symbolic function alone. I see that function only as *a term in a relation*—for Lacan, the symbolic/imaginary/real relation, for Irigaray, the symbolic/imaginary/political relation, and for Foucault, the process of subjectification through truth, knowledge, and discursive practice. I am much more interested in the process, the relation, than any of its terms—hence my emphasis on nomadic shifts.

At the moment, I'm working on this tension between Deleuze's *explicit* hesitation on sexual difference, as opposed to what I see as Irigaray's

implicit inability to really move beyond it. I tell you, there are days when I am attracted to Haraway's "cyborg" theory, just because it postulates the demise of the vision of the subject as split and resting on the unconscious. But, of course, I cannot follow that road. So I pursue my nomadic journey in between different processes, terms of relation, and theories, hoping to be able to resist the two greatest temptations facing feminists; firstly, losing sight of the practical, political implications of both this journey and the theories that sustain it; secondly, believing that any one theory can ever bring salvation.

In this respect, the theoretical overload that marks our exchange may have at least one positive effect on the readers. By reaction, it may make them want to practice a merrier brand of idiosyncratic and hybrid thinking, something that is neither conceptually pure nor politically correct: a joyful kind of feminist "dirty-minded" thinking.

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Notes

- 1 NOIOSE (Network Of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies in Europe) takes place within the ERASMUS exchange scheme of the European Union. It's an intra-university students and teachers exchange program fully sponsored by the commissions of the European Union. We have partners from ten European countries and we have around 40 students every academic year.
The central theme of our NOIOSE network is the development of European women's studies from a multicultural perspective. Christine Rammrath and I have years of work behind us, to construct a joint European curriculum in women's studies. And I can tell you that the curriculum looks amazing. It is being tested in Bologna this summer, Denmark next summer and then it gets rolling in 1996.
- 2 a) GRACE, European Women's Studies Databank, Power, Empowerment and Politics, Feminist Research, Women and Work, Inequalities and Opportunities.
b) Steering group for women's studies, coordinated by Jalna Hanmer: Women's Studies and European Integration with Reference to Current and Future Action Programmes for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men.
c) Margo Brouns, "The development of women's studies: A report from the Netherlands."
d) ENWS, Establishing gender studies in Central and Eastern European countries.
- 3 In the seminars of the research group "Gender and Genre" held in Utrecht in 1992 and 1993.
- 4 See Duchén.
- 5 For an attempt to bypass the polemics and highlight the theoretical differences, allow me to refer you to my study *Patterns of Dissonance*.
- 6 See *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Political Practice*, by the Milan Women's Bookshop. See also the volumes edited by Bono and Kemp, and by Hermsen and van Lemming.
- 7 This point is made strongly by de Lauretis. See also "Savoir et différence des sexes," a special issue of

- Les cahiers du Grif* (45 [1980]) devoted to women's studies, where a similar point is raised in a French context.
- 8 One of the classics here is Rubin. See also Hartsock.
- 9 See Irigaray, *Speculum, Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, and *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*. See also Cixous, "Le rire de la Meduse," *La jeune née, Entre l'écriture*, and *Le livre de Promethea*.
- 10 As Foucault argued in his *L'Ordre du Discours*.
- 11 See Coward and Ellis.
- 12 To appreciate the difference, one has only to compare the vision of female homosexuality in Cixous's *Le livre de Promethea* with Wittig's in *Le corps lesbien*.
- 13 See the debate within the psychoanalytic society which, from the very start, opposed the male-centered theories of Freud on female sexuality to the woman-centered ones defended by Ernst Jones and Melanie Klein. Irigaray gives a full overview of this debate in *Ce Sexe*.

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