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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

## French Feminism in an International Frame

A young Sudanese woman in the Faculty of Sociology at a Saudi Arabian University said to me, surprisingly: “I have written a structural functionalist dissertation on female circumcision in the Sudan.” I was ready to forgive the sexist term “female circumcision.” We have learned to say “clitoridectomy” because others more acute than we have pointed out our mistake.

But Structural Functionalism? Where “integration” is “social control [which] defines and enforces . . . a degree of *solidarity*”? Where “interaction, seen from the side of the economy,” is defined as “consist[ing] of the supply of income and wealth applied to purposes strengthening the persistence of cultural patterns?”<sup>1</sup> Structural functionalism takes a “disinterested” stance on society as functioning structure. Its implicit interest is to applaud a system—in this case sexual—because it functions. A description such as the one below makes it difficult to credit that this young Sudanese woman had taken such an approach to clitoridectomy:

In Egypt it is only the clitoris which is amputated, and usually not completely. But in the Sudan, the operation consists in the complete removal of all the external genital organs. They cut off the clitoris, the two major outer lips (*labia majora*) and the two minor inner lips (*labia minora*). Then the wound is repaired. The outer opening of the vagina is the only portion left intact, not however without having ensured that, during the process of repairing, some narrowing of the opening is carried out with a few extra stitches. The result is that on the marriage night it is necessary to widen the external opening by slitting one or both ends with a sharp scalpel or razor so that the male organ can be introduced.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bert F. Hoselitz, “Development and the Theory of Social Systems,” in M. Stanley, ed., *Social Development* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), pp. 45, 45. I am grateful to Professor Michael Ryan for drawing my attention to this article.

<sup>2</sup>Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Press, 1980), p. 5.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

In my Sudanese colleague's research I found an allegory of my own ideological victimage:

The "choice" of English Honors by an upper-class young woman in the Calcutta of the fifties was itself highly overdetermined. Becoming a professor of English in the U.S. fitted in with the "brain drain." In due course, a commitment to feminism was the best of a collection of accessible scenarios. The morphology of a feminist theoretical practice came clear through Jacques Derrida's critique of phallogentrism and Luce Irigaray's reading of Freud. (The stumbling "choice" of French avant-garde criticism by an undistinguished Ivy League Ph.D. working in the Midwest is itself not without ideology-critical interest.) Predictably, I began by identifying the "female academic" and feminism as such. Gradually I found that there was indeed an area of feminist scholarship in the U.S. that was called "International Feminism:" the arena usually defined as feminism in England, France, West Germany, Italy, and that part of the Third World most easily accessible to American interests: Latin America. When one attempted to think of so-called Third World women in a broader scope, one found oneself caught, as my Sudanese colleague was caught and held by Structural Functionalism, in a web of information retrieval inspired at best by: "what can I do *for* them?"

I sensed obscurely that this articulation was part of the problem. I re-articulated the question: What is the constituency of an international feminism? The following fragmentary and anecdotal pages approach the question. The complicity of a few French texts in that attempt could be part both of the problem—the "West" out to "know" the "East" determining a "westernized Easterner's" symptomatic attempt to "know her own world"; or of something like a solution,—reversing and displacing (if only by juxtaposing "some French texts" and a "certain Calcutta") the ironclad opposition of West and East. As soon as I write this, it seems a hopelessly idealistic restatement of the problem. I am not in a position of choice in this dilemma.

To begin with, an obstinate childhood memory.

I am walking alone in my grandfather's estate on the Bihar-Bengal border one winter afternoon in 1949. Two ancient washerwomen are washing clothes in the river, beating the clothes on the stones. One

accuses the other of poaching on her part of the river. I can still hear the cracked derisive voice of the one accused: “You fool! Is this your river? The river belongs to the Company!”—the East India Company, from whom India passed to England by the Act for the Better Government of India (1858); England had transferred its charge to an Indian Governor-General in 1947. India would become an independent republic in 1950. For these withered women, the land as soil and water to be used rather than a map to be learned still belonged, as it did one hundred and nineteen years before that date, to the East India Company.

I was precocious enough to know that the remark was incorrect. It has taken me thirty-one years and the experience of confronting a nearly inarticulate question to apprehend that their facts were wrong but the fact was right. The Company does still own the land.

I should not consequently patronize and romanticize these women, nor yet entertain a nostalgia for being as they are. The academic feminist must learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened compassion. Is our insistence upon the especial beauty of the old necessarily to be preferred to a careless acknowledgment of the mutability of sexuality? What of the fact that my distance from those two was, however micrologically you defined class, class-determined and determining?

How, then, can one learn from and speak to the millions of illiterate rural and urban Indian women who live “in the pores of” capitalism, inaccessible to the capitalist dynamics that allow us our shared channels of communication, the definition of common enemies? The pioneering books that bring First World feminists news from the Third World are written by privileged informants and can only be deciphered by a trained readership. The distance between “the informant’s world,” her “own sense of the world she writes about,” and that of the non-specialist feminist is so great that, paradoxically, *pace* the subtleties of reader-response theories, here the distinctions might easily be missed.

This is not the tired nationalist claim that only a native can know the scene. The point that I am trying to make is that, in order to learn

enough about Third World women and to develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated, and the First World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged *as a woman*.

These concerns were well articulated in my approach to feminism when I came across Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*.<sup>3</sup> Here again I found a link with my own ideological victimage, "naturalization" transformed into privilege.

French theorists such as Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and the like, have at one time or another been interested in reaching out to all that is not the West, because they have, in one way or another, questioned the millennially cherished excellences of Western metaphysics: the sovereignty of the subject's intention, the power of predication and so on. There is a more or less vaguely articulated conviction that these characteristics had something like a relationship with the morphology of capital. The French feminist theory that makes its way to us comes to a readership more or less familiar with this enclave.

During the 1970's, the prestigious journal *Tel Quel*—Kristeva is on the editorial committee—pursued an assiduous if somewhat eclectic interest in the matter of China.<sup>4</sup> Before I consider that interest as it is deployed in *About Chinese Women*, let us look briefly at the solution Kristeva offers Frenchwomen in the first part of her book:

We cannot gain access to the temporal scene, i.e. to political affairs, except by identifying with the values considered to be masculine (dominance, superego, *the endorsed communicative word* that institutes stable social exchange) . . . [We must] achieve this identification in order to escape a smug polymorphism where it is so easy and comfortable for a woman here to remain; and by this identification [we must] gain entry to social experience. [We must] be wary from the first of the premium on narcissism that such an integration may carry with it: to reject the validity of homologous woman, finally virile: and to act, on the socio-politico-historical stage, as her negative: that is, to act first with all those who "swim against the tide," all those who refuse . . . But neither to take the role of revolutionary (male or female): to refuse all roles . . . to summon this timeless "truth"—formless, neither true nor false, echo of our pleasure, of our

<sup>3</sup>Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, tr. Anita Barrows (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>As is indicated by Philippe Sollers, "On n'a encore rien vu," *Tel Quel* 85, Autumn 1980, this interest has now been superseded.

madness, of our pregnancies—*into the order of speech and social symbolism*. But how? By listening; by recognizing the unspoken in speech, even revolutionary speech; by calling attention at all times to whatever remains unsatisfied, repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible, disturbing to the *status quo* (p. 38; italics mine).

This is a set of directives for class- and race-privileged literary women who can ignore the seductive effects of identifying with the values of the other side while rejecting their validity;<sup>5</sup> and, by identifying the political with the temporal and linguistic, ignore as well the micrology of political economy. To act with individualistic rather than systematic subverters in order to summon timeless “truths” resembles the task of the literary critic who explicates the secrets of the avant-garde artist of western Europe; the program of “symptomatic and semiotic reading”—here called “listening”—adds more detail to that literary-critical task.<sup>6</sup> The end of this chapter reveals another line of thought active in the group I mention above: to bring together Marx and Freud: “An analyst conscious of history and politics? A politician tuned into the unconscious? A woman perhaps . . .” (p. 38).

Kristeva is certainly aware that such a solution cannot be offered to the nameless women of the Third World. Here is her opening description of some women in Huxian Square: “An enormous crowd is sitting in the sun: they wait for us wordlessly, perfectly still. Calm eyes, not even curious, but slightly amused or anxious: in any case, piercing, and certain of belonging to a community with which we will never have anything to do” (p. 11). Her question, in the face of those silent women, is about her *own* identity rather than theirs: “Who is speaking, then, before the stare of the peasants at Huxian?” (p. 15). This too might be a characteristic of the group of thinkers to whom I have, most generally attached her. In spite of their occasional interest in touching the *other* of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered: if we are not what

<sup>5</sup>For an astute summary and analysis of this problem in terms of electoral Communism and Social Democracy, see Adam Przeworski, “Social Democracy as a Historical Phenomenon,” *New Left Review* 122, July–August, 1980.

<sup>6</sup>For Kristeva’s argument that the literary intellectual is the fulcrum of dissent see “Un nouveau type d’intellectuel: le dissident,” *Tel Quel* 74, Winter 1977.

official history and philosophy say we are, who then are we (not), how are we (not)?

It is therefore not surprising that, even as she leaves the incredibly detailed terrain of the problem of knowing who she herself is exactly—the speaking, reading, listening “I” at this particular *moment*—she begins to compute the reality of who “they” are in terms of *millennia*: “One thing is certain: a revolution in the rules of kinship took place in China, and can be traced to sometime around B.C. 1000” (p. 46).

The sweeping historiographical scope is not internally consistent. Speaking of modern China, Kristeva asserts drastic socio-sexual structural changes through legislation in a brisk reportorial tone that does not allow for irony (p. 118; p. 128). Yet, speaking of ancient China, she finds traces of an older matrilineal and matrilocal society (evidence for which is gleaned from two books by Marcel Granet, dating from the twenties and thirties, and based on “folk dance and legend” [p. 47]—and Lévi-Strauss’s general book on elementary structures of kinship) lingering through the fierce Confucian tradition to this very day because, at first, it seems to be speculatively the more elegant argument (p. 68). In ten pages this speculative assumption has taken on psychological causality (p. 78).

In another seventy-odd pages, and always with no encroachment of archival evidence, speculation has become historical fact: “The influence of the powerful system of matrilinear descent, and the Confucianism that is so strongly affected by it, can hardly be discounted” (p. 151). Should such a vigorous conclusion not call into question the authority of the following remark, used, it seems, because at that point the author needs a way of valorizing the women of the countryside today over the women of the cities: “An intense life-experience has thrust them from *a patriarchal world which hadn’t moved for millennia* into a modern universe where they are called upon to command” (p. 193; italic mine)? Where then are those matrilocal vestiges that kept up women’s strength all through those centuries?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Joseph Needham’s attitudes toward the curious fact of feminine symbolism in Taoism, as expressed in *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969) is altogether tentative.

It is this wishful use of history that brings Kristeva close to the eighteenth-century Sinophiles whom she criticizes because “they deformed those systems in order to assimilate them into their own” (p. 53). In the very next page, “the essential problem” of the interpretation of Chinese thought, defined (under cover of the self-deprecatory question) as a species of differential semiotics: “The heterogeneity of this Li [form and content at once] defies symbolism, and is actualized only by derivation, through a combination of opposing signs (+ and –, earth and sky, etc.), all of which are of equal value. In other words, there is no single isolatable symbolic principle to oppose itself and assert itself as transcendent law.” Even as the Western-trained Third World feminist deplores the absence of the usual kind of textual analysis and demonstration, she is treated to the most stupendous generalizations about Chinese writing, a topos of that very eighteenth century that Kristeva scorns: “Not only has Chinese writing maintained the memory of matrilinear pre-history (collective and individual) in its architectonic of image, gesture, and sound; it has been able as well to integrate it into a logico-symbolic code capable of ensuring the most direct, ‘reasonable,’ legislating—even the most bureaucratic—communication: all the qualities that the West believes itself unique in honouring and that it attributes to the Father” (p. 57). Kristeva’s text seems to authorize, here and elsewhere, the definition of the essentially feminine and the essentially masculine as non-logical and logical. At any rate, this particular movement ends with the conclusion that “the Chinese give us a ‘structuralist’ or ‘warring’ (contradictory) portrait” (p. 57).

Kristeva prefers this misty past to the present. Most of her account of the latter is dates, legislations, important people, important places. There is no transition between the two accounts. Reflecting a broader Western cultural practice, the “classical” East is studied with primitivistic reverence, even as the “contemporary” East is treated with realpolitikal contempt.

On the basis of evidence gleaned from lives of great women included in translated anthologies and theses of the *troisième cycle* (take it that is what “third form thesis” [p. 91] indicates) and no primary research; and an unquestioning acceptance of Freud’s conclusions about the



“pre-oedipal” stage, and no *analytic* experience of Chinese women, Kristeva makes this prediction: “If the question [of finding a channel for sexual energy in a socialist society through various forms of sublimation outside the family] should be asked one day, and if the analysis of Chinese tradition that the *Pi Lin Pi Kong* [against Lin and Kong] Campaign seems to have undertaken is not interrupted, it’s not altogether impossible that China may approach it with much less prudishness and fetishistic neurosis than the Christian West has managed while clamouring for ‘sexual freedom’” (p. 90). Whether or not the “Christian West” as a whole has been clamoring for sexual freedom, the prediction about China is of course a benevolent one; my point is that its provenance is symptomatic of a colonialist benevolence.

The most troubling feature of *About Chinese Women* is that, in the context of China, Kristeva seems to blunt the fine edge of her approach to literature. She draws many conclusions about “the mother at the centre” in ancient China from “all the manuals of the ‘Art of the Bedchamber’—which date back to the first century A.D.” and “a novel of the Qing Dynasty . . . *The Dream of the Red Pavilion*” (p. 61, 79). Let us forget that there is no attempt at textual analysis, not even in translation. We must still ask, are these manuals representative or marginal, “normal” or “perverse,” have they a class fix? Further, is the relationship between “literature and life” so unproblematic as to permit *The Dream* to be described as “an accurate portrait of noble families” because it “is currently studied in China as evidence of the insoluble link between class struggle and intra/inter-familial attitudes?” (pp. 78–79). How may it differ when a Chinese person with a “Chinese experience” studies it in Chinese, apparently in this way? Is it only the West that can afford its protracted debate over the representationality of realism? Similar questions haunt the reader as Kristeva launches into a running summary of the female literati of China since 150 A.D., in terms of dominant themes. She offers this impressionistic comment on a poet who, we are told, is “among the greatest, not only in China, but in the literature of the entire world” (p. 50): “Li Qingzhao breathes into these universal traits of Chinese poetry a musicality rarely attained by other poets: the brilliantly intertwined rhythms and alliterations, the shape of the

characters themselves, create a language where the least aural or visual element becomes the bearer of this symbiosis between body, world, and sense, a language that one cannot label ‘music’ or ‘meaning’ because it is both at once.” The poem is then “quoted” twice—first in English transcription and literal translation, and next in “a translation (from a French version by Philippe Sollers).” What would happen to Louise Labé in such a quick Chinese treatment for a Chinese audience with a vestigial sense of European culture as a whole? What is one to make of the gap between the last lines of the two translations: “This time / how a single word / sadness is enough” and “this time one / word death won’t be enough?” What would happen to “Absent thee from felicity awhile” in a correspondingly “free” Chinese version?

As we come to the literatures of modern China, all the careful apologies of the opening of the book seem forgotten: “Let us examine the findings of a few researchers on family psychology or its representation in modern fiction, as a means of understanding the forms these feudal/Confucian mores take in Chinese culture today” (p. 95). As far as I can tell, the author’s source of literary information—a few simple statistics—is a single article by Ai-Li S. Chin, “Family Relations in Modern Chinese Fiction,” in M. Freedman, ed., *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*.<sup>8</sup> It seems startling, then, that it can be said with apparent ease: “Are these [mother-daughter] problems intensified by those passionate and archaic rivalries between women which, in the West, produce our Electras, who usurp their mothers’ roles by murdering them in the names of their fathers? *Chinese literature is not explicit here*” (p. 146; italics mine).

This brings us to a certain principled “anti-feminism” in Kristeva’s book which may be related to what has been called “the New Philosophy” in France.<sup>9</sup> “The Electras—deprived forever of their hymens—militants in the cause of their fathers, frigid with exaltation—are dramatic figures where the social consensus corners any woman who

<sup>8</sup>Stanford Univ. Press, 1970. See *Chinese Women*, p. 98n, p. 145n.

<sup>9</sup>For a somewhat dated and dogmatic view of this movement, see Michael Ryan and Spivak, “Anarchism Revisited: A New Philosophy?,” *Diacritics* 8, no. 2, Summer, 1978.

wants to escape her condition: nuns, ‘revolutionaries,’ ‘feminists’” (p. 32). I think such a sentiment rests upon certain unexamined questions: What is the relationship between myth (the story of Electra), the socio-literary formulation of myths (Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, written for a civic competition with choruses, owned by rich citizens, playing with freelance troupes) and “the immutable structures” of human behavior? What hidden agenda does Freud’s use of Greek myth to fix the father-daughter relationship—specially at the end of “Analysis Terminable and Interminable”—contain? Although Kristeva sometimes speaks in a tone reminiscent of *Anti-Oedipus*, she does not broach these questions, which are the basis of that book.<sup>10</sup>

This principled “anti-feminism,” which puts its trust in the individualistic critical avant-garde rather than anything that might call itself a revolutionary collectivity is part of a general intellectual backlash—represented, for instance, by *Tel Quel*’s espousal of the Chinese past after the disappointment with the Communist Party of France during the events of May 1968 and the movement toward a Left Coalition through the early 1970’s.

The question of how to speak *to* the “faceless” women of China cannot be asked within such a partisan conflict. The question, even, of who speaks in front of the mute and uncomprehending women in Huxian Square must now be articulated in sweeping macrological terms. The real differences between “our Indo-European, monotheistic world . . . still obviously in the lead” (p. 195) and the Chinese situation must be presented as the fact that the “Chinese women whose ancestresses knew the secrets of the bedchamber better than anyone . . . are similar to the men” (p. 198). Thus when Chinese Communism attacks the tendencies—“pragmatic, materialistic, psychological”—that “are considered ‘feminine’ by patriarchal society,” it does not really do so; because in China the pre-patriarchal society has always lingered on, giving women access to real rather than representative power. I have indicated above my reasons for thinking that the evidence for this lingering maternal power, at least as offered in

<sup>10</sup>*The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964, vol. 23; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 1, tr. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

this book, is extremely dubious. Yet that is, indeed, Kristeva's "reason" for suggesting that in China the Party's suppression of the feminine is not really a suppression of the "feminine": "By addressing itself thus to women, [the Party] appeals to their capacity to assume the symbolic function (the structural constraint, the law of the society): a capacity which itself has a basis in tradition, since it includes the *world prior to and behind the scenes of Confucianism*" (p. 199; italics mine).

My final question about this macrological nostalgia for the pre-history of the East is plaintive and predictable: what about us? The "Indo-European" world whose "monotheism" supports the argument of the difference between China and the West is not altogether monotheistic. The splendid, decadent, multiple, oppressive, and more than millennial polytheistic tradition of India has to be written out of the *Indo-European* picture in order that this difference may stand.

The fact that Kristeva thus speaks for a generalized West is the "naturalization transformed into privilege" that I compared to my own ideological victimage. As she investigates the pre-Confucian text of the modern Chinese woman, her own pre-history in Bulgaria is not even a shadow under the harsh light of the Parisian voice. I hold on to a solitary passage:

For me—having been educated in a "popular democracy," having benefited from its advantages and been subjected to its censorship, having left it inasmuch as it is possible to leave the world of one's childhood, and probably not without bearing its "birthmarks"—for me what seems to be "missing" in the system is, indeed, the stubborn refusal to admit anything is missing (p. 156).

Who is speaking here? An effort to answer that question might have revealed more about the mute women of Huxian Square, looking with qualified envy at "the incursion of the West."

I am suggesting, then, that a *deliberate* application of the doctrines of French High "Feminism" to a different situation of political specificity might misfire. If, however, International Feminism is defined within a Western European context, the heterogeneity becomes manageable. In our own situation as academic feminists, we can begin

thinking of planning a class. What one does not know can be worked up. There are experts in the field. We can work by the practical assumption that there is no serious communication barrier between them and us. No anguish over uncharted continents, no superstitious dread of making false starts, no questions to which answers may not at least be entertained.

Within such a context, after initial weeks attempting to define and name an “American” and an “English” feminism, one would get down to the question of what is specific about French feminism. We shall consider the fact that the most accessible strand of French feminism is governed by a philosophy that argues the impossibility of answering such a question.

We now have the indispensable textbook for this segment of the course: *New French Feminism: An Anthology*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron.<sup>11</sup> In the United States, French feminism or, more specifically, French feminist theory, has so far been of interest to a “radical” fringe in French and Comparative Literature departments rather than to the feminists in the field. A book such as this has an interdisciplinary accessibility. This is somewhat unlike the case in England, where Marxist feminism has used mainstream (or masculist) French “theory”—at least Althusser and Lacan—to explain the constitution of the subject (of ideology or sexuality)—to produce a more specifically “feminist” critique of Marx’s theories of ideology and reproduction.<sup>12</sup>

Because of a predominantly “literary” interest, the question in French feminist texts that seems most relevant and urgent is that of a specifically feminine discourse. At the crossroads of sexuality and ideology, woman stands constituted (if that is the word) as object. As subject, woman must learn to “speak ‘otherwise,’” or “*make audible* [what] . . . suffers silently in *the holes of discourse*” (Xavière Gauthier, p. 163).

The relationship between this project of “speaking” (writing) and

<sup>11</sup>Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980. In this part of my essay, I have quoted liberally from *New French Feminisms*, giving the name of the author of the particular piece and the page number.

<sup>12</sup>I hope to present a discussion of such an appropriation in a forthcoming book on Deconstruction, Feminism, and Marxism.

Kristeva's project of "listening" (reading) is clear. Such a writing is generally though not invariably attempted in feminist fiction or familiar-essay-cum-prose-poem such as Cixous's *Préparatifs de nocés au delà de l'abîme* or Monique Wittig's *Lesbian Body*.<sup>13</sup> As such it has strong ties to the "evocative magic" of the prose poem endorsed by Baudelaire—the power of indeterminate suggestion rather than determinate reference that could overwhelm and sabotage the signifying conventions. Baudelaire is not often invoked by the French theorists of feminist or revolutionary discourse. Is it because his practice remains caught within the gestures of an embarrassingly masculinist decadence (linked to "high capitalism" by Walter Benjamin, *A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*)?<sup>14</sup>

The important figures for these theorists remain Mallarmé and Joyce. Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, the two feminist discourse-theorists who are most heard in the U.S., do not disavow this. Kristeva seems to suggest that if women can accede to the avant-garde in general, they will fulfill the possibilities of their discourse (p. 166). Cixous privileges poetry (for "the novelists [are] allies of representation" [p. 250]) and suggests that a Kleist or a Rimbaud can speak as women do. Older feminist writers like Duras ("the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in the organism, in the body" [p. 238]—rather than the mind, the place of the subject) or Sarraute are therefore related to the mainstream avant-garde phenomenon of the *nouveau roman*.

In a certain sense the definitive characteristic of the French feminist project of founding a woman's discourse reflects a coalition with the continuing tradition of the French avant-garde. It can be referred to the debate about the political potential of the avant-garde, between Expressionism and Realism.<sup>15</sup>

It is also an activity that is more politically significant for the

<sup>13</sup>Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977); Cixous, *Préparatifs de nocés au delà de l'abîme* (Paris: des femmes, 1978); Wittig, *Lesbian Body*, tr. David Le Vay (New York: William Morrow, 1975).

<sup>14</sup>(London: New Left Books, 1973).

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Ernst Bloch, *Aesthetics and Politics*, tr. Ronald Taylor (London: New Left Books, 1977).

producer/writer than the consumer/reader. It is for the writer rather than the reader that Herbert Marcuse's words may have some validity: "There is the inner link between dialectical thought and the effort of avant-garde literature: the effort to break the power of facts over the word, and to speak a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce and benefit from the facts."<sup>16</sup> As even a quick glance at the longest entries for the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the PMLA bibliographies will testify, the "political" energy of avant-garde production, contained within the present academic system, leads to little more than the stockpiling of exegeses, restoring those texts back to propositional discourse. In fact, given this situation, the power of a *Les Guérillères* or a *Tell Me a Riddle* (to mention a non-French text)—distinguishing them from the "liberated texts" supposedly subverting "the traditional components of discourse," but in fact sharing "all the components of the most classic pornographic literature" (Benoîte Groult, p. 72)—is what they talk *about*, their *substantive* revision of, rather than their apparent *formal* allegiance to, the European avant-garde. This differential will stubbornly remain in the most "deconstructive" of readings.

The search for a discourse of woman is related not merely to a literary but also the philosophical avant-garde which I mentioned with reference to *About Chinese Women*. The itinerary of this group is set out in Jacques Derrida's "The Ends of Man."<sup>17</sup> Louis Althusser launched a challenge against Sartre's theory of humanistic practice and his anthropologic reading of Marx with his own "Feuerbach's 'Philosophical Manifesto'" in 1960.<sup>18</sup> Althusser's position was *scientific* anti-humanism. The challenge in French philosophy described by Derrida in his essay (which makes a point of being written in 1968), again largely in terms of Sartre and his anthropologic reading of Heidegger, can be called an *anti-scientific* anti-humanism. (Sartre does not remain the butt of the attack for long. An echo of the importance of Sartre as the chief philosopher of French humanism, however,

<sup>16</sup>*Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. x.

<sup>17</sup>Tr. Edouard Morot-Sir et al., *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30, no. 1, September, 1969.

<sup>18</sup>In *For Marx*, tr. Ben Brewster (New York: Vintage, 1970).

is heard in Michèle Le Doeuff's "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism," presented on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of *The Second Sex* in New York.<sup>19</sup> Le Doeuff's essay reminds us that, just as the current anti-humanism move in French philosophy was "post-Sartrean" as well as "post-structuralist," so also the discourse-theorists in French feminism marked a rupture, precisely, from Simone de Beauvoir.)

In "Ends of Man," Derrida is describing a trend in contemporary French philosophy rather than specifically his own thoughts, though he does hint how his own approach is distinct from the others'. "Man" in this piece is neither distinguished from woman nor specifically inclusive of her. "Man" is simply the hero of philosophy:

There is [in existentialism] no interruption in a metaphysical familiarity which so naturally relates the *we* of the philosopher to "we-men," the total horizon of humanity. Although the theme of history is eminently present . . . the history of the concept of man is never questioned. Everything takes place as though the sign "man" had no origin, no historical, cultural, linguistic limit (p. 35).

Any extended consideration of Derrida's description would locate the landmark texts. Here suffice it to point at Jean-François Lyotard's *Economie libidinale*, since it establishes an affinity with the French feminist use of Marx.<sup>20</sup>

For Lyotard, the Freudian pluralization of "the grounds of man" is still no more than a "political economy," plotted as it is in terms of investments (German *Besetzung*, English "cathexis," French *investissement*—providing a convenient analogy) of the libido. In terms of a "libidinal" economy as such, when the "libidinal Marx" is taken within this "libidinal cartography" (p. 117) what emerges is a powerful "literary-critical" exegesis under the governing allegory of the libido, cross-hatched with analogies between "a philosophy of alienation and a psychoanalysis of the signifier" (p. 158), or "capitalist society" and "prostitution" (p. 169) which has, admittedly, very little to do with the micrological and shifting specificities of the class-struggle and its complicity with the economic text of the world-market.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Tr. Colin Gordon, *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2, Summer, 1980.

<sup>20</sup>(Paris: Minuit), 1974, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup>For a discussion of the lack of specificity in the privileged metaphors of politi-



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I have already spoken of the “New Philosophical” reaction to the possibility of a Left Coalition in 1978. Within this capsule summary such a reaction can be called anti-humanist (against the privileged subject), anti-scientific (against psychoanalysis and Marxism as specific or “regional” practices) and anti-revolutionary (against collectivities).

It is within this context of the deconstruction of the general sign of “man” as it exists within the “metaphysical” tradition (a deconstruction that can “produce”—Derrida commenting on Blanchot—“‘female element,’ which does not signify female person”)<sup>22</sup> that the following statements by Kristeva about the specific sign “woman” should be read:

On a deeper level [than advertisements or slogans for our demands], however, a woman cannot “be”; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists. . . . In “woman” I see something that cannot be represented, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. . . . Certain feminist demands revive a kind of naïve romanticism, a belief in identity (the reverse of phallogentrism), if we compare them to the experience of both poles of sexual difference as is found in the economy of Joycean or Artaudian prose. . . . I pay close attention to the particular aspect of the work of the avant-garde which dissolves identity, even sexual identities; and in my theoretical formulations I try to go against metaphysical theories that censure what I just labeled a “woman”—that is what, I think, makes my research that of a woman (pp. 137–38).

I have already expressed my dissatisfaction with the presupposition of the *necessarily* revolutionary potential of the avant-garde, literary or philosophical. There is something even faintly comical about Joyce rising above sexual identities and bequeathing the proper mind-set to the women’s movement. The point might be to remark how, even if one knows how to undo identities, one does not necessarily escape the historical determinations of sexism.<sup>23</sup> Yet it must

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cal economy, especially in some texts of Derrida, see Spivak, “Il faut s’y prendre en s’en prenant à elles,” in *Les fins de l’homme* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

<sup>22</sup>“The Law of Genre,” *Glyph* 7, 1980, p. 225.

<sup>23</sup>Percy Shelley’s treatment of Harriet and Mary is a case in point; a “life” is not necessarily “outside the text.” I have discussed the question in greater detail in “Finding Feminist Readings: Dante-Yeats” (forthcoming in *Social Text*) and “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman” (forthcoming in a collection of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee).

also be acknowledged that there is in Kristeva's text an implicit double program for women which we encounter in the best of French feminism: *against* sexism, where women unite as a biologically oppressed caste; and *for* feminism, where human beings train to prepare for a transformation of consciousness.

Within this group of male anti-humanist avant-garde philosophers, Derrida has most overtly investigated the possibilities of "the name of woman" as a corollary to the project of charging "the ends of man." In *Of Grammatology* he relates the privileging of the sovereign subject not only with phonocentrism (primacy of voice-consciousness) and logocentrism (primacy of the word as law), but also with phallogentrism (primacy of the phallus as arbiter of [legal] identity).<sup>24</sup> In texts such as "La double séance" (the figure of the hymen as both inside and outside), *Glas* (the project of philosophy as desire for the mother), *Eperons* (woman as affirmative deconstruction), "The Law of Genre" (the female element as double affirmation) and "Living On: Border Lines" (double invagination as textual effect) a certain textuality of woman is established.

Hélène Cixous is most directly aware of this line of thought in Derrida. She mentions Derrida's work with approval in her influential "Laugh of the Medusa" (p. 258) and "Sorties" (p. 91). Especially in the latter, she uses the Derridian methodology of reversing and displacing hierarchized binary oppositions. The text begins with a series of these oppositions and Cixous says of women: "she does not enter into the oppositions, she is not coupled with the father (who is coupled with the son)." Later, Cixous deploys the Derridian notion of *restance* (remains) or minimal idealization, giving to woman a dispersed and differential identity: "She does not exist, she may be nonexistent; but there must be something of her" (p. 92).<sup>26</sup> She relates man to his particular "torment, his desire to be (at) the origin" (p. 92). She uses

<sup>24</sup>Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976).

<sup>25</sup>"La double séance," *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972); *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1976); "The Law of Genre" (op. cit.); "Living On: Border Lines," in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction & Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

<sup>26</sup>For a discussion of the importance of *restance* or minimal idealization in Derrida, see Spivak, "Revolutions that as Yet Have No Model: Derrida's *Limited Inc.*," forthcoming in *Diacritics*.

the theme of socio-political and ideological “textuality” with a sureness of touch that places her within the Derridian-Foucauldian problematic: “men and women are caught in a network of millennial cultural determinations of a complexity that is practically unanalyzable: we can no more talk about ‘woman’ than about ‘man’ without being caught within an ideological theater where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications constantly transforms, deforms, alters each person’s imaginary order and in advance, renders all conceptualization null and void” (p. 96).<sup>27</sup> “We can no more talk about ‘woman’ than about ‘man.’” This sentiment is matched by the passage from Kristeva I quote above—to make my point that the decision *not* to search for a woman’s identity but to speculate about a woman’s discourse by way of the negative is related to the deconstruction-of man’s insistence upon his own identity as betrayed by existing models of discourse-launched by mainstream French and anti-humanism.

Cixous relates the idea of this over-determined ideological theater to the impossible heterogeneity of “each person’s imaginary order.” She is referring here to the Lacanian notion of the “irremediably deceptive” Imaginary, a “basically narcissistic relation of the subject to his [sic] ego”; a relationship to other subjects as my “counterparts”; a relationship to the world by way of ideological reflexes; a relationship to meaning in terms of resemblance and unity.<sup>28</sup> To change the stock of Imaginary counterparts which provides the material for sublation into the symbolic dimension is an important part of the project for a woman’s discourse: “Assuming the *real* subjective position that corresponds to this discourse is another matter. One would cut through all the heavy layers of ideology that have borne

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Clément, “La Coupable,” in *La jeune née* (Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1975), p. 15. This network-web-tissu-text is the untotizable yet always grasped “subject” of “textuality.” In Barthes it is the “writable,” where we are written into this fuller text. Derrida speaks of it most compellingly in “Ja, ou le faux-bond,” *Digraphes* 11, March, 1977. It is in these terms that Foucault’s notion of the micro physics of power should be understood. It is a mistake to think of such a thematic of textuality as a mere reduction of history to language.

<sup>28</sup>J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 210. The gap between this distilled definition and its use in the feminist context reminds us yet once again that the use of a dictionary has its own attendant dangers.

down since the beginnings of the family and private property: that can be done only in the imagination. And that is precisely what feminist action is all about: to change the imaginary in order to be able to act on the real, to change the very forms of language which by its structure and history has been subject to a law that is patrilinear, therefore masculine” (Catherine Clément, pp. 130–31).<sup>29</sup> In the following remark by Antoinette Fouque, the space between the “ideological” and the “symbolic” is marked by the Imaginary order: “Women cannot allow themselves to deal with political problems while at the same time blotting out the unconscious. If they do, they become, at best, feminists capable of attacking patriarchy on the ideological level but not on a symbolic level” (p. 117).

Now Cixous, as the most Derridian of the French “anti-feminist” feminists, knows that the re-inscription of the Imaginary cannot be a project launched by a sovereign subject; just as she knows that “it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain” (p. 253). Therefore, in Cixous the Imaginary remains subjected to persistent alteration and the concept’s grasp upon it remains always deferred. This is a classic argument within the French anti-humanist deconstruction of the sovereignty of the subject. It takes off from Freud’s suggestion that the I (ego) constitutes itself in obligatory pursuit of the it (id): “I am” must be read as an anaseme of “where it was there shall I become” [*wo es war soll ich werden*]. Most obviously, of course, it relates to Lacan’s admonition that the Symbolic order’s grasp upon the stuff of the Imaginary is random and pointillist: like buttons in upholstery [*points de capiton*]. Yet, as Cixous begins the peroration of “The Laugh of the Medusa” she does take on Lacan. She questions the practice of deciphering every code as referring to the Name-of-the-Father or its alias, the mother-who-has-the-phallus: “And what about the libido? Haven’t I read [Lacan’s] the ‘Signification of the Phallus.’ . . .<sup>30</sup> If the New Women, arriving now, dare to create outside the theoretical,

<sup>29</sup>Clément’s use of “imaginary” and “symbolic” here inclines towards the colloquial, perhaps because of situational reasons. Clément is addressing irate feminists who are disaffected from what they see as Marxist-feminist theoreticism.

<sup>30</sup>Lacan, *Écrits*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

they're called in by the cops of the Signifier, fingerprinted, remonstrated, and brought into the line of order that they are supposed to know; assigned by force of trickery to a precise place in the chain that's always formed for the benefit of a privileged 'signifier.' We are re-membered to the string that leads back, if not to the Name-of-the-Father, then, for a new twist, to the place of the phallic mother" (pp. 262–63).<sup>31</sup> As she exposes the phallus to be the "privileged signifier," she takes her place with Derrida's critique of the Lacanian phallus as the "transcendental signifier" in "The Purveyor of Truth," and with his articulation of the phallic mother as the limit of man's enterprise in *Glas*.<sup>32</sup> I believe she is not speaking only of orthodox or neo-Freudian psychoanalysis when she writes: "Don't remain within the psychoanalytic enclosure" (p. 263). Indeed, the choice of the Medusa as her logo is a derisive takeoff on the notion that woman as object of knowledge or desire does not relate to the *subject*-object but to the *eye*-object dialectic. When she writes: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her" (p. 255), I believe she is rewriting the arrogance of "you only have to go and look at the Bernini statue in Rome to understand immediately she [St. Teresa] is coming."<sup>33</sup> For the passage is followed by an invocation of the male member in splendid isolation: "It's the jitters that give them a hard-on! for themselves! They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes."

The distance between a Cixous, sympathetic to the deconstructive morphology in particular and therefore critical of Lacan's phallogocentrism and a Kristeva, sympathetic to French anti-humanism in general, may be measured, only half fancifully, by a juxtaposition like the following. Kristeva: "In 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented"; Cixous: "Men say there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex" (p. 255).

(In fact, Kristeva's association with Derridian thought dates back

<sup>31</sup>Cixous is referring to the two axes of the male subject: the Oedipal norm (discovering the Name-of-the-Father) and the fetishist deviation (fetishizing the Mother as possessing a fantasmatic phallus).

<sup>32</sup>"The Purveyor of Truth," tr. Willis Domingo et al., *Yale French Studies*, 52, 1975.

<sup>33</sup>Lacan, "Dieu et la jouissance de femme," in *Encore: 1972–73* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 70. Also cited in Stephen Heath's excellent essay "Difference," *Screen* 19, no. 8, Autumn, 1978.

to the sixties. Derrida was a regular contributor to the early *Tel Quel*. Her project, however, has been, not to *deconstruct* the origin, but rather to *recuperate*, archeologically and formulaically, what she locates as the potential originary space *before* the sign. Over the years, this space has acquired names and inhabitants related to specific ideological sets: geno-text, Mallarmean avant-garde, ancient Asiatic linguistics, the Platonic *chora*; and now the European High Art of Renaissance and Baroque, Christian theology through the ages, and personal experience, as they cope with the mystery of pregnancy-infancy.)<sup>34</sup>

Like Kristeva, Cixous also seems not to ask what it means to say some “men,” especially of the avant-garde, can be “women” in this special sense. In this respect, and in much of her argument for “bisexuality,” she is sometimes reminiscent of the Freud who silenced female psychoanalysts by calling them as good as men.<sup>35</sup> The question of the political or historical and indeed ideological differential that irreducibly separates the male from the female critic of phallogentrism is not asked.<sup>36</sup> And, occasionally the point of Derrida’s insistence that deconstruction is not a negative metaphysics and that one cannot practice free play is lost sight of: “To admit,” Cixous writes, “that to write is precisely to work (in) the between, questioning the process of the same *and* of the other without which nothing lives, undoing the work of death—is first to want the two [*le deux*] and both, the ensemble of the one and the other not congealed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death, but dynamized to infinity by an incessant process of exchange from one into the other different subject” (p. 254). Much of Derrida’s critique of humanism-phallogentrism is concerned with a reminder of the limits of deconstructive power *as well as* with the impossibility of remaining in the in-between. Unless one is aware that one cannot avoid taking a stand, unwitting

<sup>34</sup>“L’engendrement de la formule,” *Tel Quel* 37 & 38, Spring & Summer, 1969; *Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974); “Motherhood According to Bellini,” *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, tr. Thomas Gora et al. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980); “Hérétique de l’amour,” *Tel Quel* 74, Winter, 1977. And *passim*.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. *La jeune née*, p. 160. “Femininity,” *Standard Edition*, vol. 22, pp. 116–117.

<sup>36</sup>I attempt to discuss this question in detail in “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman” (see n. 29).

stands get taken. Further, “writing” in Derrida is not simply identical with the production of prose and verse. It is the name of a “structure” which operates and fractures knowing (epistemology), being (ontology), doing (practice), history, politics, economics, institutions as such. It is a “structure” whose “origin” and “end” are necessarily provisional and absent. “The essential predicates in a minimal determination of the classical concept of writing” are presented and contrasted to Derrida’s use of “writing” in “Signature Event Context.”<sup>37</sup> Because Cixous seems often to identify the Derridian mode of writing about writing with merely the production of prose and verse, a statement like “. . . women are body. More body, hence more writing” (p. 257) remains confusing.

In a course on International Feminism, the question of Cixous’s faithfulness to, or unquestioning acceptance of, Derrida, becomes quickly irrelevant. It suffices here to point out that the sort of anti-feminism that has its ties to anti-humanism understood as a critique of the name of man or of phallogentrism is to be distinguished from the other kinds of French anti-feminism, some of which the editors of *New French Feminism* mention on page 32. Of the many varieties, I would mention the party-line anti-feminism with which Communist Parties associate themselves: “The ‘new feminism’ is currently developing the thesis that no society, socialist or capitalist, is capable of favorably responding to the aspirations of women. . . . If we direct against men the action necessary for women’s progress, we condemn the great hopes of women to a dead end” (p. 128). Here the lesson of a double approach—against sexism and for feminism—is suppressed. I feel some sympathy with Christine Delphy’s remark, even as she calls for “a materialist analysis of the oppression of women,” that “the existence of this Marxist line had the practical consequence of being a brake on the [women’s] movement, and this fact is obviously not accidental.”<sup>38</sup>

Another variety of anti-“feminism” that should be yet further distinguished: “The social mode of being of men and women and of women is *in no way* linked with their nature as males and females nor

<sup>37</sup>Tr. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Glyph I*, 1977, p. 181.

<sup>38</sup>“The Main Enemy,” *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 1 (1980), pp. 24–25.

with the shape of their sex organs” (p. 215; italics mine). These are the “radical feminists” who are interested in shaping a feminist materialism and who are not programmatically or methodologically influenced by the critique of humanism. Unlike them, I certainly would not reject the search for a woman’s discourse out of hand. But I have, just as certainly, attended to the critique of such a search as expressed by the “radical feminists”:

The so-called explored language extolled by some women writers seems to be linked, if not in its content at least by its style, to a trend propagated by literary schools governed by its male masters. . . . To advocate a direct language of the body is . . . not subversive because it is equivalent to denying the reality and the strength of social mediations . . . that oppress us in our bodies (p. 219).

It would be a mistake (at least for those of us not directly embroiled in the French field) to ignore these astute warnings, although we should, of course, point out that the radical feminists’ credo—“I will be neither a woman nor a man in the present historical meaning: I shall be some Person in the body of a woman” (p. 226)—can, if the wonderful deconstructive potential of *Personne* in French (*someone* and, at the same time no *one*) is not attended to, lead to the sort of obsession with one’s proper identity as property that is both the self-duping and the oppressive power of humanism. This is particularly so because, neither in France nor in the U.S., apart from the curious example of Derrida, has mainstream academic anti-humanism had much to do with the practical critique of phallogentrism at all. In the U.S. the issue seems to be the indeterminacy of meaning and linguistic determination, in France the critique of identity and varieties of micrological and genealogical analyses of the structures of power.

We should also be vigilant, it seems to me, against the sort of gallic attitudinizing that has been a trend in Anglo-American literary criticism since the turn of the century. An American-style “French” feminist, eager to insert herself/himself into a Star Chamber, can at worst remind one of the tone of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* by Arthur Symons.<sup>39</sup> It can emphasize our own tendency to offer

<sup>39</sup>London: Heinemann, 1899.



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grandiose solutions with little political specificity, couched in the strategic form of rhetorical questions.<sup>40</sup>

I can do no better than quote here part of the final exchange between Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous in *La jeune née*, an exchange that is often forgotten:

H. The class struggle is this sort of enormous machine whose system is described by Marx and which therefore functions today. But its rhythm is not always the same, it is a rhythm that is sometimes most attenuated.

One can sense the frustration in Clément's response, which could be directed equally well at a Lyotard or all of the "poetic revolutionaries":

C. It can *appear* attenuated, especially if one is bludgeoned into thinking so. But there is a considerable lag between the reality of the class struggle and the way in which it is lived mythically, especially by intellectuals for whom it is hard to measure the reality of struggles directly, because they are in a position where work on language and the imaginary has a primordial importance and can put blinkers on them (pp. 292, 294–95).

Cixous answers with a vague charge against the denial of poetry by advanced capitalism.

In the long run, the most useful thing that a training in French feminism can give us is politicized and critical examples of "Symptomatic reading" not always following the reversal-displacement technique of a deconstructive reading. The method that seemed recuperative when used to applaud the avant-garde is productively conflictual when used to expose the ruling discourse.

There are essays on Plato and Descartes in Irigaray's *Speculum de l'autre femme*, where the analysis brilliantly deploys the deconstructive *themes* of indeterminacy, critique of identity, and the absence of a totalizable analytic foothold, from a feminist point of view.<sup>41</sup> There are also the analyses of mainly eighteenth-century philosophical texts associated with work in progress at the feminist philosophy study group at the women's *École Normale* at Fontenay-aux-Roses. There is the long running commentary, especially on Greek mythemes—marked by an absence of questioning the history of the sign "myth,"

<sup>40</sup>As revealed in *Chinese Women*, pp. 200–01, or the juxtaposition of Cixous, *To Live the Orange* (Paris: Des femmes, 1979), pp. 32–34 and p. 94.

<sup>41</sup>*Speculum* (Paris: Minuit, 1974).

an absence, as I have argued in the case of *About Chinese Women*, which in its turn marks a historico-geographic boundary—to be found in *La jeune née*. The readings of Marx, generally incidental to other topics, suffer, as I have suggested above, from a lack of detailed awareness of the Marxian text. The best readings are of Freud. This is because Freud is at once the most powerful contemporary male philosopher of female sexuality, and the inaugurator, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of the technique of “symptomatic reading.” Irigaray’s “La Tache aveugle d’un vieux rêve de symétrie” (*Speculum*) has justifiably become a classic. More detailed, more scholarly, more sophisticated in its methodology, and perhaps more perceptive is Sarah Kofman’s *L’énigme de la femme: la femme dans les textes de Freud*.<sup>42</sup>

This book exposes, even if it does not theorize upon, the possibility of being a deconstructor of the metaphysics of identity, and yet remaining caught within a masculinist ideology; an awareness that I have found lacking in Kristeva and Cixous. Kofman comments on Freud’s ideological betrayal of his own sympathy for women’s mutism. She reveals the curious itinerary of Freud’s progress towards his final thoughts upon female sexuality: three moments of the discovery of woman as the stronger sex—three subsequent long movements to sublimate that strength into its unrecognizable contrary: the demonstration that woman is indeed the weaker sex. She deconstructs the “fact” of penis-envy through an analysis of the self-contradictory versions of the pre-oedipal stage. How is a sex possible that is despised by both sexes? This is the masculinist enigma to which Freud, like Oedipus, sought a solution. Like Oedipus’s mask of blindness, biology, reduced to penis-envy, is Freud’s screen-solution.

Using Freud’s own method of oneirocritique to show its ideological limits, isolating seemingly marginal moments to demonstrate the ethico-political agenda in Freud’s attempts at normalization, *L’énigme de la femme* is a fine example of French feminist critical practice of “symptomatic”—in this case deconstructive—reading. If we can move beyond the texts so far favored by the French feminists and relate the morphology of this critique with the “specificity” of other

<sup>42</sup>Paris: Galilée, 1980. A portion of this book has been published as “The Narcissistic Woman: Freud and Girard” in *Diacritics* 10.3, Fall, 1980.

discourses that spell out and establish the power of the patriarchy, we will indeed have gained an excellent strategy for undermining the masculist vanguard.<sup>43</sup> This is no doubt a benefit for female academics, women who, by comparison with the world's women at large, are already infinitely privileged. And yet, since today the discourse of the world's privileged societies dictates the configuration of the rest, this is not an inconsiderable gift, even in a classroom.

As soon as one steps out of the classroom, if indeed a "teacher" ever fully can, the dangers rather than the benefits of academic feminism, French or otherwise, become more insistent. Institutional changes against sexism here or in France may mean nothing or, indirectly, further harm for women in the Third World.<sup>44</sup> This discontinuity ought to be recognized and worked at. Otherwise, the focus remains defined by the investigator as subject. To bring us back to my initial concerns, let me insist that here, the difference between "French" and "Anglo-American" feminism is superficial. However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss? Indeed, it is the absence of such unfeasible but crucial questions that makes the "colonized woman" as "subject" see the investigators as sweet and sympathetic creatures from another planet who are free to come and go; or, depending on her own socialization in the colonizing cultures, see "feminism" as having a vanguardist class fix, the liberties it fights for as luxuries, finally identifiable with "free sex" of one kind or another. Wrong, of course. My point has been that there is something equally wrong in our most sophisticated research, our most benevolent impulses.

<sup>43</sup>I have attempted to develop the implications of such a strategy in "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" (see n. 23, 36). As the reader may have surmised, that piece is in many ways a companion to this one.

<sup>44</sup>To take the simplest possible American examples, even such innocent triumphs as the hiring of more tenured women or adding feminist sessions at a Convention might lead, since most U.S. universities have dubious investments, and most Convention hotels use Third World female labor in a most oppressive way, to the increasing proletarianization of the women of the less developed countries.

“One of the areas of greatest verbal concentration among French feminists is the description of women’s pleasure” (*New French Feminisms*, p. 37). Paradoxically enough, it is in this seemingly esoteric area of concern that I find a way of re-affirming the historically discontinuous yet common “object”-ification of the sexed subject as woman.

If it is indeed true that the best of French feminism encourages us to think of a double effort (*against* sexism and *for* feminism, with the lines forever shifting), that double vision is needed in the consideration of women’s reproductive freedom as well. For to see women’s liberation as identical with reproductive liberation is to make counter-sexism an end in itself, to see the establishment of women’s subject-status as an unquestioned good and indeed not to heed the best lessons of French anti-humanism, which discloses the historical dangers of a subjectivist normativity; and it is also to legitimate the view of culture as general exchange of women, constitutive of kinship structures where women’s object-status is clearly seen as identified with her reproductive function.<sup>45</sup>

The double vision that would affirm feminism as well as undo sexism suspects a pre-comprehended move *before* the reproductive coupling of man and woman, *before* the closing of the circle whose only productive excess is the child, and whose “outside” is the man’s “active” life in society. It recognizes that “nature had programmed female sexual pleasure independently from the needs of production” (Evelyne Sullerot, p. 155).

Male and female sexuality are asymmetrical. Male orgasmic pleasure “normally” entails the male reproductive act—semination. Female orgasmic pleasure (it is not, of course, the “same” pleasure, only called by the same name) does not entail any one component of the heterogeneous female reproductive scenario: ovulation, fertiliza-

<sup>45</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Structural Study of Myth,” in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeck (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1958), p. 103. The classic defense, to be found in *Structuralist Anthropology*, tr. Claire Jacobson Brooke Grundfest-Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 61–62, against the feminist realization that this was yet another elaboration of the objectification of women, seems curiously disingenuous. For if women had indeed been symbolized, on that level of generality, as *users* of signs rather than as signs, the binary opposition of exchanger and exchanged, founding structures of kinship, would collapse.

tion, conception, gestation, birthing. The clitoris escapes reproductive framing. In legally defining woman as object of exchange, passage, or possession in terms of reproduction, it is not only the womb that is literally “appropriated”; it is the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that is effaced. All historical and theoretical investigation into the definition of woman as legal *object*—in or out of marriage; or as politico-economic passageway for property and legitimacy would fall within the investigation of the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris.

Psychological investigation in this area cannot only confine itself to the effect of clitoridectomy on women. It would also ask why and show how, since an at least symbolic clitoridectomy has always been the “normal” accession to womanhood and the unacknowledged name of motherhood, it might be necessary to plot out the entire geography of female sexuality in terms of the imagined possibility of the dismemberment of the phallus. The arena of research here is not merely remote and primitive societies; the (sex) objectification of women by the elaborate attention to their skin and façade as represented by the immense complexity of the cosmetics, underwear, clothes, advertisement, women’s magazine, and pornography networks, the double standard in the criteria of men’s and women’s aging; the public versus private dimensions of menopause as opposed to impotence, are all questions within this circuit. The pre-comprehended suppression or effacement of the clitoris relates to every move to define woman as sex object, or as means or agent of reproduction—with no recourse to a subject-function except in terms of those definitions or as “imitators” of men.

The woman’s voice as Mother or Lover or Androgyne has sometimes been caught by great male writers. The theme of woman’s *norm* as clitorally ex-centric from the reproductive orbit is being developed at present in our esoteric French group and in the literature of the gay movement. There is a certain melancholy exhilaration in working out the patriarchal intricacy of Tiresias’s standing as a prophet—master of ceremonies at the Oedipal scene—in terms of the theme of the feminine norm as the suppression of the clitoris: “Being asked by Zeus and Hera to settle a dispute as to which sex had more pleasure

of love, he decided for the female; Hera was angry and blinded him, but Zeus recompensed him by giving him long life and power of prophecy” (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*).<sup>46</sup>

Although French feminism has not elaborated these possibilities, there is some sense of them in women as unlike as Irigaray and the *Questions féministes* group. Irigaray: “In order for woman to arrive at the point where she can enjoy her pleasure as a woman, a long detour by the analysis of the various systems of oppression which affect her is certainly necessary. By claiming to resort to pleasure alone as the solution to her problem, she runs the risk of missing the reconsideration of a social practice upon which *her* pleasure depends” (p. 105). *Questions féministes*: “What we must answer is—not the false problem . . . which consists in measuring the ‘role’ of biological factors and the ‘role’ of social factors in the behavior of sexed individuals—but rather the following questions: (1) in what way is the biological political? In other words, what is the political function of the biological?” (p. 227).

If an analysis of the suppression of the clitoris in general as the suppression of woman-in-excess is lifted from the limitations of the “French” context and pursued in all its “historical,” “political,” and “social” dimensions, then *Questions féministes* would not need to make a binary opposition such as the following: “It is legitimate to expose the oppression, the mutilation, the ‘functionalization’ and the ‘objectivation’ of the female body, but it is also dangerous to put the female body at the center of a search for female identity” (p. 218). It would be possible to suggest that, the typology of the subtraction or excision of the clitoris in order to determine a biologico-political female identity is opposed, in discontinuous and indefinitely context-determined ways, by both the points of view above. It would also not be necessary, in order to share a detailed and ecstatic analysis of motherhood as “ultimate guarantee of sociality,” to attack feminist collective commitments virulently: “A true feminine innovation . . . is not possible before maternity is clarified. . . . To bring that about,

<sup>46</sup>For further ironies of the prohibitions associated with Hera’s pleasure, see C. Kerényi, *Zeus and Hera: Archetypal Image of Father, Husband, and Wife*, tr. Christopher Holme (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 97, 113.

however, we must stop making feminism a new religion, an enterprise or a sect.”<sup>47</sup>

The double vision is not merely to work against sexism and for feminism. It is also to recognize that, even as we reclaim the excess of the clitoris, we cannot fully escape the symmetry of the reproductive definition. One cannot write off what may be called a uterine social organization (the arrangement of the world in terms of the reproduction of future generations, where the uterus is the chief agent and means of production) *in favor of* a clitoral. The uterine social organization should, rather, be “situated” through the understanding that it has so far been established by excluding a clitoral social organization. (The restoration of a continuous bond between mother and daughter even *after* the “facts” of gestation, birthing, and suckling is, indeed, of great importance as a persistent effort against the sexism of millennia, an effort of repairing psychological damage through questioning norms that are supposedly self-evident and descriptive. Yet, for the sake of an affirmative feminism, this too should be “situated”: to establish *historical* continuity by sublating a *natural* or *physiological* link as an end in itself is the idealistic subtext of the patriarchal project.) Investigation of the effacement of the clitoris—where clitoridectomy is a metonym for women’s definition as “legal object as subject of reproduction”—would persistently seek to de-normalize uterine social organization. At the moment, the fact that the entire complex network of advanced capitalist economy hinges on home-buying, and that the philosophy of home-ownership is intimately linked to the sanctity of the nuclear family, shows how encompassingly the uterine norm of womanhood supports the phallic norm of capitalism. At the other end of the spectrum, it is this ideologico-material repression of the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that operates the specific oppression of women, as the lowest level of the cheap labor that the multi-national corporations employ by remote control in the extraction of absolute surplus-value in the less developed countries. Whether the “social relations of patriarchy can be mapped into the social relations characteristic of a mode of production” or whether it is a “relatively autonomous structure written into family

<sup>47</sup>“Un nouveau type d’intellectuel: le dissident,” p. 71.

relations”; whether the family is a place of the production of socialization or the constitution of the subject of ideology; what such a heterogeneous sex-analysis would disclose is that the repression of the clitoris in the general or the narrow sense (the difference cannot be absolute) is presupposed by both patriarchy and family.<sup>48</sup>

I emphasize discontinuity, heterogeneity, and typology as I speak of such a sex-analysis, because this work cannot by itself obliterate the problems of race and class. It will not necessarily escape the inbuilt colonialism of First World feminism toward the Third. It might, one hopes, promote a sense of our common yet history-specific lot. It ties together the terrified child held down by her grandmother as the blood runs down her groin and the “liberated” heterosexual woman who, in spite of Mary Jane Sherfey and the famous page 53 of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, in bed with a casual lover—engaged, in other words, in the “freest” of “free” activities—confronts, at worst, the “shame” of admitting to the “abnormality” of her orgasm: at best, the acceptance of such a “special” need; and the radical feminist who, setting herself apart from the circle of reproduction, systematically discloses the beauty of the lesbian body; the dowried bride—a body for burning—and the female wage-slave—a body for maximum exploitation.<sup>49</sup> There can be other lists; and each one will straddle and undo the ideological-material opposition. For me it is the best gift of French feminism, that it cannot itself fully acknowledge, and that we must work at; here is a theme that can liberate my colleague from Sudan, and a theme the old washerwomen by the river would understand.

<sup>48</sup>*Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 49, 51. For an eloquent reverie on the ethic of penetration as it denies the clitoris see Irigaray, *New French Feminism*, p. 100. In “Displacement,” I suggest that such a gesture of penetrative appropriation is not absent from Derrida’s reach for the “name of women.”

<sup>49</sup>Sherfey, *The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1973); *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2nd edition, 1971).