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women's studies, but little of it is new and not enough is specific. In fact, this third section of the anthology is unquestionably the weakest. The writing simply doesn't measure up to the rest. "But Is It Feminist Art?" by Daphne Read makes some quite good points about the artist's economic and social situation but is disappointing in its attempt to define the relation between politics and art. (Perhaps any such definition is doomed to cause discontent.) Finally, Amy Gottlieb's "Mothers, Sisters, Lovers, Listen," a lesbian-feminist critique of the women's movement, is the least impressive article of the lot. Many will not trouble to read past Gottlieb's patronizing remark that "Heterosexual women do not have to justify or legitimize their existence, which is given by virtue of their connection to a man" (p. 238).

Let me reiterate, despite these minor reservations about section three, that *Still Ain't Satisfied* is a superbly edited and useful book that should have a place in any feminist's library. Ten years of the women's movement in Canada has resulted in countless changes, and the most significant of these are dealt with in this book. In an important way it prepares us for the work ahead.

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## FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

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Elizabeth Abel ed., *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

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### Writing and "What's the difference?"<sup>1</sup>

#### **Sexual difference is too directly political a problem now to admit of an imaginary abstraction.<sup>2</sup>**

This collection of thirteen essays and four critical responses, originally published in *Critical Inquiry*, is more about literature than writing, feminism in academia, than sexual difference. The title, a play on Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* doesn't deliver what it promises, that is, an extended critique of his deconstructive writings. The question remains whether the universalist presuppositions of a masculinist critical tradition are unexamined in Derrida's category "woman". Although the title may be misleading, a volume of feminist

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literary criticism is especially significant at this moment in literary history. Critics have developed a fondness for feminism that has emerged in some of the latest post-structuralist writing in the form of a no-name feminist critic cited in a footnote or paragraph. Or, as in a lecture by Geoffrey Hartman, feminism is reduced to a single strategy where the feminist critic's attempt to "reverse patriarchy (and) search for the mother tongue, a true vernacular"<sup>3</sup> is seen simply as part of a broader critical move to decanonize literary studies. In the case of Jonathan Culler's recent discussion of "reading as a woman",<sup>4</sup> politics disappear when feminism is reduced to simply mean female. His feminist critic offers a "critique of male chauvinism" bereft of any transformative strategy.

Elizabeth Abel introduces *Writing and Sexual Difference* with a thumbnail sketch of feminist literary criticism, which initially adopted the oppositional "women are just as good" strategy in examining images of women in male texts. The second wave of feminist critics recuperated the lost and underrated women writers of the past, maximizing the difference between male and female writing. Finally, the contemporary American feminist literary critic, as represented in this collection, develops a more complex perspective where gendered literature is marked by

interrelationship as well as opposition, difference *between* as well as difference *from* . . . Aware that women writers inevitably engage a literary history and system of conventions shaped primarily by men, feminist critics now often strive to elucidate the acts of revision, appropriation and subversion that constitute a female text (pp. 1-2).

This new critical perspective corresponds to the deconstructive project itself. Psychoanalytic critic, Barbara Johnson, whose work provides the epigraph to this collection, has written of deconstruction's challenge to the simple binary oppositions, including the male/female oppositions of structuralism:

Far from eliminating binary oppositions from the critical vocabulary, one can only show that binary difference does not function as one thinks it does and that certain subversions that seem to befall it in the critical narrative are logically prior to it.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between the feminist critic and her writing is paradoxical. Jane Gallop's "critical response" describes how the feminist critic "in her inheritance from both feminism and criticism lives the at once enabling and disabling tension of a difference within" (p. 290). Abel addresses this tension between the traditions of feminist politics and mainstream academia in her discussion of the new "sophisticated readings" she includes in her collection. She anticipates accusations "that the concern with textuality augurs a return to formalism: that feminist critics have betrayed political commitments in pursuit of academic credibility" (p. 2). However, sophisticated theoretical writing is nothing for

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feminist to become defensive about. During the past ten years, a necessarily complex and fruitful feminist theory has been developing in all disciplines to help us understand and act on a whole series of political issues. But, when Abel insists that her volume is not unified by a "single ideology" other accusations can be made. Abel notes "the celebrated pluralism of feminist criticism" (p. 2), and the reader should take note of the politics embodied in this apparent heterogeneity. While the textual methodologies in this collection may be multiple and include "psychoanalytic, deconstructive, historical, formalist, generic and biographical studies", the text is finally dominated by a liberal feminist academic discourse, which substitutes a canonical structure of female writings for the old masculine one. This new canon is "just as authoritarian and hierarchical".<sup>6</sup> While several essays discuss the importance of non-traditional female forms of writing such as journals and letters, none of these is treated in detail. Nor is there an attempt to investigate more popular forms of writing by and/or for women. Aside from four essays on male writers, the majority treat the now familiar favorite feminist English and American women writers. (Margaret Atwood appears on this list.)

Annette Kolodny, who here and in earlier essays has championed the notion of pluralism, outlines the liberal feminist position. By "asking additional questions", feminist criticism is supplementary, not radically transformational; reformist, not revolutionary. In reading the eighteenth-century American narrative *The Panther Captivity*, she proposes a two-fold feminist strategy which examines woman as person and analyzes the symbolic significance of gender. She reads the representation of gender in *The Panther Captivity* as an allegory of oppositions "not so much between the civilized European association and the Indianized wilderness as between different ways of being in and relating to the vast American landscape." (p. 173). What she uncovers in her reading is the repression of a female narrative where the female cultivator is juxtaposed to the male hunter. Kolodny describes her critical method in modest finishing school terms where she seeks to "sharpen", "refine", and "correct" sex blind critical readings. However, her practical criticism is radically engaging precisely because she points to a startling blindness in the leading male Americanist interpretation of this literature — a blindness that develops from their understanding of their perspective as not so much "male", as "non-gendered". There is, as Maria Black and Rosalind Coward have pointed out, an imperative revelation for the male critic to experience. They write:

Men are sustained at the centre of the stage precisely because they can be "people" and do not have to represent their masculinity to themselves. They need never see themselves or their maleness as a problem. Our understanding of the effects of discursive practices leads us to suggest that men can never be displaced from the centre until they can be forced to recognize themselves as men and to take responsibility for this.<sup>7</sup>

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Less apologetic to the male literary tradition than Kolodny, Susan Gubar is more unabashedly essentialist in her analysis of women's writing. Tracing the "pen penis writing on the virgin page" (p. 77) model of creativity from Ovid through Derrida, she proposes an alternative female creativity "which substitutes for the artistic object an act or a process." (p. 93). Unfortunately, by her own admission, she "persistently and perversely ignores history" (p. 92) and valorizes a reductive reproductive female creativity where "no woman is a blank page: every woman is author of the page and author of the page's author" (p. 90). What is welcome in Gubar's writing is a transition from a theory of woman as victim to a theory of woman's resistance and subversion.

Judith Kegan Gardiner's feminism is once again a "collaborative" enterprise. Basing her work on the American sociological theories of Nancy Chodorow, Gardiner turns difference into a universal female identity which she describes as "process" rather than lack. Her undifferentiated identity theory defeats itself in Gardiner's depoliticized reading of *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Creole novelist Jean Rhys. Gardiner imagines the reader "enraged at the patriarchy" in the novel. Ignored is how Rhys' writing is overdetermined by another sphere of difference and domination. It is not only "patriarchy" but colonialism that accounts for the particularity of women's oppression in Rhys.

Mary Jacobus, in one of two essays included on George Eliot, suggests that since gender in writing, as in other means of representation, marginalizes as well as differentiates, critical attention to women's writing is by definition engaged. The questions remain: Engaged? How? In her symptomatic reading of a chapter of *The Mill on the Floss*, Jacobus uncovers a multi-dimensional focus of feminist criticism, moving in the direction of a "necessary utopianism" she finds in both Eliot and French feminist Luce Irigaray's gesture towards what cannot be said. A countermove, in feminist criticism, writes Jacobus, returns to the materiality of women's writing where the conditions of its "reproduction are the economic and educational disadvantages, the sexual and material organizations of society which, rather than biology, form the crucial determinants" (p. 39).

A number of the following essays discuss another series of differences in women's writing. Susan Gilbert considers female "identity", not as an autonomous whole, but in its differential relation to male writers. Two essays on lesbian writers foreground the difference between gender and sexuality. And Gayatri Spivak provides a lesson for the first world feminist critic who would universalize what is particular.

The literary representation of gender becomes ideology (my term) "dressed up" in Sandra M. Gilbert's "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature". She studies male and female modernist writers' attitudes to transvestism, observing that male writers, "nostalgic for the old days of uniforms", tend to view false costumes as "unsexed or wrongly sexed" (p. 195). Women like Virginia Woolf, however, with a more ironic view of costume, link female dress to women's oppression. Gilbert traces the transvestite scenario in three male writers. In Joyce's *Ulysses* she reads Bloom's behaviour in the Nighttown episode as his response to "the terrifying ascendancy of women". (p. 200). In *The Fox*, Lawrence replaces the transvestite "disorder" of the lesbian

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couple with the "hierarchical principle of order based upon male dominance/female submission" (p. 201). And Eliot's *The Waste Land* becomes "the fever dream of the hermaphrodite, the nightmare of gender disorder" (p. 205). Juxtaposed to this "ritual transvestism of the male modernists", Gilbert points out the "utopian ceremonial androgyny of the woman writer" (p. 214) where characters like Woolf's Orlando cross-dress as a sign of resistance.

If sexual difference is hierarchical in a male dominated society, the difference of lesbian sexuality in a heterosexist culture demands careful study. Two essays in this collection look not simply at gender difference, but at the lesbian in literature. Carolyn Burke writes a biographical study of Gertrude Stein's friendships with the Cone sisters and her love affair with Alice B. Toklas "in order to better understand how [Stein's] portraits participate in the reflexive interplay between self-discovery and writing" (p. 223). Burke suggests that these writings provided Stein with a therapeutic solution to "the painful puzzle of female relationships" (p. 223). Burke is less reductive in her use of biography, which becomes a counter text to Stein's writing. She advises the feminist critic to rethink the place of biography, often dismissed by critics as causally related to writing.

"The Lesbian Novel" by Catherine R. Stimpson is an overview of lesbian writers whom she defines with none of the breadth of Lillian Faderman's "female friendship", or Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum." To Stimpson "the lesbian — as writer, as character, as reader . . . represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast and bone" (p. 244). Her thematic approach identifies two narrative patterns in lesbian writing. "The dying fall, a narrative of damnation" and the more positive "enabling escape, a narration of the . . . lesbian's rebellion against social stigma and self-contempt" (p. 244). The essay contrasts Radcliffe Hall's "homosexuality is sickness" (p.248), to "the lesbian romanticism" of Woolf's *Orlando* "the lesbian realism" of Stein's *Autobiography* and the "fusion of romanticism and realism" in McCarthy's *The Group* (p. 253). She concludes with a call for more and more sophisticated lesbian feminist criticism, quoting lesbian author Bertha Harris, who writes that the "feminist and lesbian press still lacks an informed criticism to mediate between texts and a large audience" (p.258). Stimpson betrays a curiously patronizing concern for the lesbian reader who finds both community "and comfort in the ease of reading"(p.251) and may be alienated from the more experimental formal innovations of contemporary lesbian writers. The major task for the lesbian feminist critic, writes Stimpson, is in listening for "why people wish to stigmatize, to dominate, to outlaw and to erase a particular longing for passion and love"(p.259).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a feminist, Marxist deconstructivist, raises important issues about the international context of writing and sexual difference unmasking a totality where a multiplicity was intended. However, the only piece of work devoted to a non-white author is in the form, not of criticism, but in Spivak's introduction and translation to "Draupadi", a short story by Bengali writer Mahasveta Devi.

Spivak has defined textuality as "the inter-determination of differential representation", where "the economic, political and ideological can be

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practically related".<sup>8</sup> These three factors are primary in her deconstruction of the final moment in the story when, having endured a night of torture and rape, the defiant Draupadi refuses to clothe herself. She confronts the uncomprehending chief of police Senanayak, her body, a gaping wound, "and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (p. 282). Spivak identifies the complicity of Senanayak as "pluralist aesthete", and finds in him "the closest approximation to the first world scholar in search of the Third World." She continues, "In theory, Senanayak can identify with the enemy, but pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society" (p. 261).

Spivak's writing and translation uncovers the scarcity in this collection of a combined treatment of "the economic, political and ideological" factors at work in women's writing. Much feminist writing emerges from a feminist tradition which, while limited by claims of universality, has had both the privilege and the opportunity to problematize sexuality. Ellen Willis describes these contradictions:

That the mainstream of both reformist and radical feminist movements has been relatively privileged cuts two ways. White middle-class feminists have too often defined the movement's priorities in ways that ignore or reinforce class and racial divisions. Yet precisely because we do not have to cope with three forms of oppression at once, we are freer to confront the sexual questions and explore their most radical implications. In that sense, the bourgeois impulse at the core of feminism is revolutionary.<sup>9</sup>

While Willis's comments may explain a tendency in feminism, what she characterizes as "the bourgeois impulse" is too often assumed to represent feminism". What then would an alternative volume of "writing and sexual difference" include? The first term of the title might be read with more attention to Derrida's own category "writing", which Spivak reminds us

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.<sup>10</sup>

The suggestive discussion in June Howard's exploratory essay, "Toward a 'Marxist-Feminist Cultural Analysis'"<sup>11</sup> charts the movement from women's literary studies to a broader category "writing".

And the issue of sexual difference becomes complex and fruitful in "Freud and H.D. — bisexuality and a feminine discourse" where Claire Buck critiques the American feminist urge to establish a female identity and poetic that results in a female subject "outside the historical or symbolic dimension in which

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sexuality can be analysed as constructed."<sup>12</sup> For the moment, the feminist reader can take pleasure in the controversies and contradictions in this *Writing and Sexual Difference*.

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### Notes

1. My thanks to Darien Taylor, Jane Springer and Daphne Read for critical support and discussion.
2. Stephen Heath, "Barthes on Love," *Substance*, No. 37/38 (1983).
3. Geoffrey Hartman, "The Culture of Criticism," "University of Toronto, 6 October, 1983.
4. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1982.
5. Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1980, p. xi.
6. Toril Moi, "Sexual/Textual Politics," "Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, 1982.
7. Maria Black and Rosalind Coward, "Linguistic, Social and Sexual Relations: A Review of Dale Spender's *Man-Made Language*," *Screen Education*, No. 39, Summer 1981, p. 85.
8. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, "Desire, Power & Interest: Affirmative Deconstruction," Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture Conference, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, July 9, 1983.
9. Ellen Willis, *Beginning to See the Light: Pieces of a Decade*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.
10. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies*, No. 62, 1981, p. 175.
11. June Howard, "Toward a 'Marxist-Feminist Cultural Analysis'," *The Minnesota Review*, No. 20, Spring 1983.
12. Claire Buck, "Freud and H.D. — bisexuality and a feminine discourse," *m/f, a feminist journal*, no. 8, 1983, p. 59.