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Looking Back and Looking Forwards: Issues in Western Feminist Theory and Cultural Analysis from the 1970s to the Present

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Abstract: More than 40 years on since the start of the Second-wave, how can we understand and learn from the history of feminism since 1968? This essay looks at the cultural politics and analysis that emerged in second wave feminism. It outlines the critiques of universalism and ethnocentrism made by Black, 'Third World' and other postcolonial feminist critics. It outlines how, from the mid 1970s onwards, feminist literary and cultural critics began to engage with new theoretical and critical modes with a view to developing different ways of conceptualising, understanding and analysing patriarchy that complexified understandings of female difference and women's experience. The essay further considers the emergence of forms of 'third wave' feminism and their relationship to 'postfeminism'. The essay concludes by re-emphasising the importance of understanding the complexity of feminism since the 1960s and argues that ways forward require knowledge of and respect for different positions, combined with supportive on-going debate.

Keywords: Feminism, cultural politics, patriarchy, second wave, difference, third wave, postfeminism

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Looking Back and Looking Forwards: Issues in Western Feminist Theory and Cultural Analysis from the 1970s to the Present

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For some time now the assertion that we live in a 'postfeminist' world has been commonplace in the Western media and for more than ten years – from the early to mid-nineties onwards – young undergraduate students have been eager to assure me that while they could understand why my generation espoused feminism, it was no longer relevant or needed in the present. In many ways this position could be termed 'postfeminist', signifying a moving beyond feminism while benefiting from changes it made possible. If, as Deborah Siegel argued in 1997, postfeminism 'suggests that the gains forged by previous generations of women have so completely pervaded all tiers of our social existence that those still "harping" about women's victim status are embarrassingly out of touch',¹ then postfeminism is very much a located subject position, a specific way of seeing social relations, that reflects relative class, racial and ethnic privilege rather than established social facts about gender relations in Western societies. Postfeminism can be understood as serving the interests of those who wish to marginalise or de-radicalise feminist politics. It is a useful term to describe particular discursive strategies, widespread in the media that ultimately seek to deny the need for a critical activist feminism today. While it is the case that many gains have been made and feminist objectives have become part of the political mainstream to varying degrees, for many women in Western societies, gender remains an important factor influencing life chances and aspects of everyday life in negative ways. While many women (lesbian and heterosexual), some men (gay and straight), transgendered people and transsexuals in higher education often draw on feminist, queer and gender theory in their academic work, political feminism is often viewed as something separate from the academy. Yet it is hard to think of a second wave feminist demand that has been realised for all women (and men) who want it.

¹Deborah Siegel, 'The Legacy of the Personal: Generating Theory in Feminism's Third Wave,' *Hypatia*, 12. 4 (1997), 46-75 (p. 75). See also Siegel, *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to Girls Gone Wild* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

The perception referenced by Siegel that to argue for feminist objectives implies the assumption of 'victim status' was of course never accurate. Second wave feminism formulated its aims in terms of rights, and agency has always been central to feminist analysis and politics. Moreover, if many younger women in the West see themselves as postfeminist, just as many women from older generations never embraced a feminist identity or the political agenda of the Women's Liberation Movement or recognised a need for them. Certain cultural political images and practices from early second wave feminism have achieved a largely negative mythical status, which is often used as grounds to reject feminism in the present. Examples of this would include the myth of bra burning at the demonstration against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1969 or the radical feminist and lesbian feminist rejection of mainstream modes of femininity, or the use of separatism as a political strategy, in both consciousness-raising and campaigns. Outside the ambit of the mainstream media, feminism has, of course never disappeared. It has taken new forms and made inroads into mainstream politics, popular culture and the cultures of everyday life. Changes for which women in the 1970s had campaigned gradually became taken-for-granted by younger generations of women. The increasing attention paid to masculinity from the 1980s onwards, in both popular culture and academia, and the development of Queer perspectives also helped transform and diversify understandings of gender relations and prepared the way for the eventual widespread shift from Women's Studies to Gender Studies. This move was often seen by second wave feminists as likely to be depoliticising in its effects. While it is the case that neither Gender Studies nor Queer Studies necessarily entail a feminist political commitment, they do provide important and potentially supportive sites for feminist engagement.

Recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in feminism both among younger women involved in activism and those coming to feminist ideas within the context of higher education. Like other forms of activism, recent feminism has benefited from the Internet which serves as a site for debate and for the organisation of political campaigns. In universities, many younger women may not identify with feminist subject positions, yet are none the less interested in the issues that feminism raises. Others explicitly define themselves as 'third wave' feminists in opposition both to second wave and postfeminisms.

As Stacey Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford argue, 'third wave feminists have been keen to distance themselves from postfeminism, which is identified by some as referring to the conservative or power feminism of Rene Denfield, Camilla Paglia, Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf'.² At the same time academic publishing has turned its attention to how we might understand the history of (Western) feminism since 1968 and to debates on 'third wave' and 'post' feminisms. As with much early second wave feminist debate, this discussion has been most prolific in the United States and has been largely Eurocentric in its perspectives. It has tended to assume a mainly middle class, often white, Western subject, who is not confronted by the issues facing women in the non-Western world, nor those faced by women in the West who are part of socially excluded groups or minority communities. The types of narratives that attempt to account for second wave feminism, and its difference from the 'third wave', have been largely generational in approach. The 'waves' metaphor has some strengths, but it also has major limitations since, especially when implicitly or explicitly attached to generation, it tends to render invisible the issues, theoretical and analytical approaches and forms of political organisation and activism that cut across 'waves'. To categorise the history of feminism in terms of waves tends to lead to a greater reduction of the diversity and complexity of the past than history writing necessarily requires. While accounts of the past often serve to delineate and legitimate a present that seeks an identity as different, it is politically important to hold onto the complexity and specificity of the past in order to draw on what is useful for the challenges of the present.

Second wave feminism is usually seen to date from the late 1960s and to include the activism, theory, research and scholarship of the 1970s and early 1980s. It is important to recognise that the history of feminism varies from country to country and that the details of second wave feminism are not the same in different locations. Notwithstanding this, second wave feminism in its early years and in a range of Western contexts did share a grounding in the politics of the personal, women's experience and activism, together with a tendency to attempt to develop general theories of patriarchy, be they radical, Marxist, liberal or psychoanalytic. In the British context the national Women's Liberation Movement voiced a number of key demands, some of which had been on the political agenda since the 1700s.

² Stacey Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford, eds, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. xxvi.

These issues themselves became key focuses of both political debate and academic scholarship alongside the exclusion of women's experience, history and cultural production from the work of existing academic disciplines. They included the rights to work, to equal pay, equal access to education, the provision of twenty-four hour nursery care, free access to contraception and abortion, the right to define one's own sexuality and full lesbian rights, an end to domestic violence and sexual violence against women, including the legal recognition of rape in marriage, and an end to the exploitation of women in the sex industry. The theoretical questions that underpinned much of this activism were related to the status of women's experience as knowledge, female subjectivity, the sexual division of labour, women's difference from men, the global structures of patriarchy, global sisterhood as a form of resistance, and separatism. Largely absent at first were questions of race, sexuality, Eurocentrism and colonial modes of representation. Class tended to figure in some areas of work, for example on the labour market, and to be absent from others. It was addressed much more centrally in socialist and Marxist feminist analyses. In its attempts to theorise patriarchy as a set of power relations and social institutions and structures, second wave feminism focused attention on the exploitation of women's bodies and the question of women's complicity with capitalist patriarchy. Women's bodies – their labour power and their reproductive capacity – were important in second wave liberal and socialist feminisms, as well as in radical and lesbian writing and activism. Yet it was radical feminism that directed most attention to the body as the site of women's difference and oppression and placed it most firmly at the centre of the political agenda. While aspects of this radicalism were quickly taken up by many liberal, Marxist and socialist feminists, radical feminists went beyond liberal and socialist objectives by seeking to give new, positive meanings to female difference. They argued that women's difference was fundamental to their position in the cultural sphere and affected how women read, wrote and represented themselves in cultural texts.

In developing theories and approaches to culture and society, radical feminists rejected the theoretical frameworks and political practice of both liberalism and Marxism. They argued against liberalism, that women's liberation cannot be achieved by a theory and practice which make provisions for the rights of abstract individuals, irrespective of social class, race and gender relations. In the case of Marxism they argued that women's

oppression cannot be reduced to class oppression and made an epiphenomenon of the economic and social structures of the capitalist mode of production. From a radical feminist perspective women's oppression is the primary and fundamental form of oppression and gender is an elaborate system of male domination of women's minds and bodies, which is at the basis of all social organisation. The feminist project is one of decolonising women's minds and bodies and discovering the reserves of woman-identified female power that women have within them.³ For each individual woman, this power of decolonisation requires a separate, female centred environment and the support of other women. The term used to signify this universal system of oppression is patriarchy which radical lesbian feminist, Adrienne Rich defined as:

the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor—determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.⁴

Rich argued that while patriarchy does 'not necessarily imply that no woman has power, or that all women in a given culture may not have certain powers',⁵ it does mean that men ultimately control women's access to power.

In early radical feminist analysis, as in psychoanalysis, patriarchy structures the symbolic order via a system of power relations that pervade all aspects of culture and social life and which are to be found in all cultures and at all moments of history. These power relations permeate every aspect of women's lives. Writing of heterosexual male sexuality, for example, Rich argued that it is forced on women by institutions and practices as different as sexual violence, literature and psychoanalysis. Heterosexuality is enforced by means of:

rape (including marital rape) and wife beating; father-daughter, brother-sister incest; the socialization of women to feel that the male sexual "drive" amounts to a right; idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising, and so forth; child marriage; arranged marriage; prostitution; the harem; psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm; pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation (a subliminal message

³ See Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (London: Women's Press, 1979).

⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 57.

⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 57.

being that sadistic heterosexuality is more 'normal' than sensuality between women.⁶

Rich's far reaching analysis is articulated as part of her critique of what she termed the 'compulsory heterosexuality' that is maintained by the institution of heterosexuality. Her examples span different cultures and historical moments and are placed within a narrative of patriarchy in which culture everywhere colonises women. It is thus global in its remit and can only be contested and transformed by global strategies of sisterhood and resistance.

In second wave feminism the question of resistance and struggle led directly to that of complicity, namely why women tolerate patriarchal relations. The answer to this was most often seen to lie in the cultural colonisation of women's minds alongside their bodies, and feminists developed techniques of consciousness-raising to enable women to recognise their own interests and fight for them. This reflected a founding belief that the sexual division of labour and existing gender differences are not natural but socially imposed, and that life for women could be very different. Second wave feminisms – radical, liberal, Marxist and socialist – set out to identify and contest patriarchy in all its forms. In this struggle, culture was an important terrain for denaturalising and challenging existing social relations including the sexual division of labour, heterosexuality and the family as patriarchal institutions, patriarchal law, religion and the patriarchal construction of women's bodies and sexuality.⁷ It was also a means of advancing feminist objectives such as revealing the importance of women's experience as a source of knowledge and power. The role of the literary and cultural critic was to analyse how cultural texts and practices both reinforced and challenged the patriarchal meanings and values that naturalised relations of inequality between women and men. This project rapidly became central to feminist cultural and literary criticism from early works like Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) to substantial historical research in a wide range of cultural forms and practices, which has recovered both mainstream and oppositional discourses defining women and the female body.⁸ Second wave feminism set out to analyse and contest patriarchal images of women, recover lost cultural traditions, create new woman-

⁶ Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* eds Anne Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (London: Virago, 1984), pp. 212-41 (p. 218).

⁷ For a comprehensive introduction to the main forms of second wave feminism see Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983).

⁸ For a full history see *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* eds Gill Plain and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

identified forms of culture and make them accessible and visible. This agenda involved a broad spectrum of cultural political work ranging from the analysis of patriarchal meanings and values in existing literary and other cultural texts and practices to the creation of new modes of representation. It also involved the struggle to transform the language and the institutions governing culture and education.

In the second wave, the emphasis on the body, procreation and sexuality helped to make radical feminist theory and politics one of the most powerful forces shaping feminist cultural activism since it placed the question of gender difference in sharper focus than previously. Working within the binary oppositions between female and male and woman and man, many radical feminists sought to transform and revalue the meaning of the terms 'female' and 'woman', celebrating the female body as a site of strength, endurance, creativity and power. In her powerful and poetic text *Woman and Nature: the Roaring Inside Her* (1984, original 1978), Susan Griffin, for example, exposes how man has used science and religion over the centuries to colonise both woman and nature and to shape them in his own interests. Man, she argues, has sought to gain ascendancy over woman and nature by separating himself off from them and cultivating forms of rationality, denied to women.⁹ Taking marginalised figures such as witches, mystics, goddesses, Amazons, wise women and healers as role models, radical feminists created a discourse of strong and resistant women throughout history. These are women who refused to submit to the power relations of an all-pervasive patriarchy. These inspirational figures, which elude patriarchal control, are seen to embody strength, wildness and self-determination, together with traits more usually ascribed to women, such as intuition, emotion and fertility. In much radical feminist discourse, traditional female traits and values are given a new and positive status, which challenges the supremacy of traditionally male traits such as reason and objectivity. The devalued qualities, which are central to traditional ideas of femininity, are seen as necessary to the wholeness of both women and men. To reinstate their importance is a first step towards radically transforming patriarchal understandings of reason and emotion.

Radical feminism not only reclaimed positive, traditionally female qualities, but also

⁹ The themes of Griffin's work have subsequently become central to a broad-based eco-feminist movement, which takes issue with many of the assumptions and practices of modern science. See Griffin, *Woman and Nature: the Roaring Inside Her* [1978] (London: Women's Press, 1984).

patriarchal language, transforming terms of abuse such as 'hags', 'crones', 'harpies', 'furies' and 'spinsters' into positive terms. Here I quote from Mary Daly on spinsters:

The functioning of the word spinster to contort women's minds into double-think is clear. It has been a powerful weapon of intimidation and deception, driving women into the 'respectable' alternative of marriage, forcing them to believe, against all evidence to the contrary, that wedlock will be the salvation from a fate worse than death, that it will inevitably mean fulfilment. The alternatives, traditionally, have been the roles of prostitute, nun or mistress. In more recent times, another alternative is the lifestyle of 'swinging single', euphemistically called 'bachelor girl'. The process of reclaiming the meaning of spinster does not follow the route of affirming the 'freedom' of the 'swinging' bachelor girl, which is simply a variation on the theme of prostitute/mistress/wife. Instead it begins with reversing the reversal, seeing the basic unfreedom in all these feminine roles.¹⁰

For Mary Daly, spinsters become a metaphor for women involved in creating new meanings and a new culture beyond patriarchy. Although often inspirational, the effect of radical feminist celebrations of long established but traditionally devalued ideas of female difference is two-fold. It revalues the female and the feminine, while implicitly tending to locate them within long established binary oppositions. Like their patriarchally defined sisters, who were confined to the domestic sphere, the strong women of the radical feminist tradition tended to remain outside of mainstream society and politics in a separatist sphere. Despite this, radical second wave feminism had an agenda that was in many ways empowering and often utopian, proclaiming a sisterhood and a struggle against patriarchy that was, at least at the level of rhetoric, fired by global aspirations for the freedom of women everywhere. Yet in practice it was also profoundly limited by its assumptions about woman and its lack of attention to difference, as well as the Eurocentric assumptions underpinning its understanding of patriarchy which were also shared by much Marxist and liberal feminist analysis. The failure of much early second wave feminism to attend to difference was powerfully critiqued by Audre Lorde in essays that were published in *Sister Outsider* (1981). Lorde points both to the failure of much white feminism to take account of those difference of race, class and sexual orientation that complexify how patriarchy works, and to the ways in which this weakens feminism as a movement for change. An example of this in the sphere of literary and cultural

¹⁰ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, pp. 393-4.

research would be the tendency to construct new female cultural canons that excluded work by non-white, lesbian or working class women. By the mid-1980s many of the assumptions of second wave liberal, radical and socialist feminists had been questioned by women who felt that these positions did not represent their interests. In the West, the 1980s also saw a proliferation of new forms of feminism, often based on specific articulations of identity politics related to issues of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and third world location. Many of these critiques came from within Western societies, from working-class, lesbian, Black and other minority women. Others came from women located outside the West and from Indigenous women in white settler societies. In the fields of cultural history and analysis, this gave rise to work to recover and construct specific traditions in art, literature and other cultural forms and practices, for example: lesbian literary traditions or Black literary traditions. It also gave rise to work on the question of specific aesthetics and critiques of hegemonic modes of representation in literary and cultural texts.

Lessons From the Second Wave

The insistence on the importance of difference for feminist analysis and politics, as well as for more enabling conceptions of sisterhood, came from a number of sources, for example those Black, lesbian and working class women who had been struggling to make their voices heard since the inception of second wave feminism. It is in part the lack of success of these women in achieving mainstream visibility that has led to insufficiently differentiated accounts of the second wave. While it is possible to identify dominant yet contested feature of 1970s feminism, it is not helpful to reduce second wave thinking either to essentialism and universalism or to the struggle for rights. This does not do justice either to those forms of second wave feminism that demonstrated these tendencies or to work that took account of and even privileged other categories such as race and class. As Kimberly Springer argues in an article with the title 'Third Wave Black feminism?' in *Signs* (2002), seeing feminism in terms of distinct waves threatens to render invisible the history of black feminism, which has always had a focus on gender and race.¹¹ Among other lessons learned from critiques of early second wave feminism were the importance of located history, the dangers of

¹¹ Kimberly Springer, 'Third Wave Black feminism?', *Signs* 27: 4 (2002), 1059-83.

Eurocentrism, the importance of developing a more complex understanding of masculinity, and the importance of questioning all the binaries structuring heterosexist discourses of gender, and all binaries. They further included the importance of theory and the need for a located theory and politics. While much of the universalism that came out of radical feminism aspired to theorise and contest the global structures of patriarchy, its problems resided to a large extent in the level of generality of its arguments which remained, none the less, in many ways both inspirational and compelling,

The critiques of the universalising tendencies within Western second wave theory and the often pronounced tendency of a largely white and middle class movement not to pay due attention to class, race, ethnicity and sexuality might be described as facilitating what would come to be known as “third wave” feminism. This emerged as a category and identity in the United States in the 1980s. If, to date, this history has mostly been told from a North American perspective where forms of radical feminism were more pronounced than in many other countries, it was the strong, on-going, political critiques of much emerging theory, politics and scholarship by those women who felt excluded by them that led to the proliferation of different forms of organisation, activism, theory and scholarship in the 1980s. As Audre Lorde concisely argued:

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean that it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.¹²

The failure of many white middle class feminists to hear and take seriously these early critiques arguably fuelled the development of identity politics, which was always a much stronger phenomenon in the United States than elsewhere. It also gave rise to what has subsequently become known, particularly in the US, as ‘intersectionality’,¹³ an approach that insists on looking at the different power relations in play in any specific analysis. The struggle for the widespread recognition of the political and moral imperative for all feminists to address questions of class, race, sexuality, location within and outside of the West, Eurocentric and colonialist modes of representation was hard fought for and continues.

¹² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 70.

¹³ See Crenshaw 1995 and Collins 1990.

The Impact of Developments in Cultural Theory

The shift in the 1980s into a widespread recognition and acceptance of critiques of simple ideas of sisterhood and shared oppression, found a theoretical underpinning in an increasing feminist engagement with poststructuralist and postcolonialist critiques of Western theoretical metanarratives. While early second wave feminism was rooted in a new and liberating validation of women's experience, in practice on the ground this experience was far from shared, except at a fairly high level of generality. It was inflected by other forms of power relation such as class, race, sexual orientation and ethnicity as well as the complexities of affect, which made the politics of separatism and political lesbianism difficult even for many self-identified (heterosexual) feminists. The turn in the 1970s to work by male French theorists such as Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, was both highly controversial and contested within broader feminist circles. For example, in Britain in the mid-to-late 1970s, the importance placed on women's experience as a source for feminist knowledge, combined with radical critiques of male authored and male identified scholarship, made the use of 'male' theory untenable in the eyes of many radical women. The turn to new theoretical sources, in particular poststructuralism, aimed to address an agenda that included the theorising of subjectivity and experience in ways that could move beyond models of the power of patriarchal ideology that explained it in terms of male/patriarchal colonisation and false consciousness. It sought to understand the complexities of experience and identities as often contradictory and disunified. In the postcolonial context, the turn to theory also involved critiques of the often implicit Eurocentrism of much Western feminist discourse, including the tendency to see non-Western women as the victims of static religions and traditions and to assume that Western feminist modes of analysis were best placed to understand non-Western societies.

From the mid 1970s onwards, feminists began to engage with new theoretical and critical modes. They asked how such theories might offer different ways of conceptualising, understanding and analysing patriarchy. Born in part of a critique of theories that celebrated female difference and women's experience without adequately theorising it, this work sought

to offer alternative ways of theorising women, femininity and experience from those offered by liberal, Marxist and radical feminisms. It drew on a number of important developments in cultural theory and analysis, in particular poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism and theories of race.¹⁴ Each in its different way challenged existing feminist theory posing new agendas for feminist critical practice that would become increasingly important and would profoundly influence the development of what has subsequently come to be termed the 'third wave'.

Poststructuralism was particularly important for the ways in which it complexifies understandings of language, experience, subjectivity, identity and power. It undermines commonsense assumptions about sovereign knowing subjects, innately unique individuals and true femininity and female nature. The embodied, gendered individual as a complex and often contradictory subject is constituted in language, understood as material discourses structured by relations of power. In this approach, the task of a feminist literary and cultural criticism is to analyse how these discursive power relations work in the cultural arena to constitute meanings, gendered subjects, bodies and resistance. From the mid 1970s onwards, psychoanalysis also became influential for its insistence on the importance of the unconscious and desire and the way in which, in psychoanalytic criticism, texts become sites for the recovery of repressed meanings. In feminist and postcolonial appropriations of psychoanalysis, the unconscious is often rewritten as a site of social rather than individual repressed meanings. Postcolonial feminism challenges Eurocentric narratives of emancipation that privilege Western understandings, meanings and values, while the emphasis on race and racism insists on seeing gender and race as integrally related. These theoretical and critical approaches not only put into question the assumptions of earlier Western second-wave feminisms – radical, Marxist and liberal – but also those feminisms that were grounded in identity politics.

Postcolonial critiques have been among the most powerful in shifting feminist literary and cultural critical agendas since the 1970s. They have not only helped expand Western cultural and theoretical horizons but have encouraged new ways of reading texts that have long belonged to national literary canons. It was the fundamental recognition that the history

¹⁴ For a full account of different types of feminism see Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

of the West is intimately bound up in the colonial project and that the West's sense of self has been defined against its colonial and enslaved others that shifted perspectives. Postcolonial feminists produced sharp critiques of colonial modes of representation and of the tendency to read non-Western cultures through Western eyes that implicitly assumed the superiority of Western feminist theory and political agendas.¹⁵ They use the insights of Marxism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis to understand colonial and postcolonial relationships as they are played out in the literary and cultural arenas.¹⁶

The 1980s and 1990s also produced debates about queering feminism that have become increasingly important to feminist critical practice. Taking up critiques of the category 'woman' and the radical feminist tendency to locate revalued gender difference in female bodies, Queer feminism refuses fixed ideas of what is normal or natural. It challenges the very ideas of normality which underpin social institutions and practices, arguing that nothing is natural, and that normality is a social convention and an effect of power. Indeed gender is a social and cultural construct and gender identities are acquired, at least in part, through performance.¹⁷ Much queer cultural politics is aimed at exposing the cultural nature of gender, stressing the arbitrariness and unnaturalness of traditional signifiers of gender difference. In theoretical terms queer theory is in many ways postmodern, since it renounces any fixed notions of difference, in particular, fixed distinctions between masculine and feminine, maleness and femaleness and heterosexual, gay and lesbian. Binary oppositions are replaced by a proliferation of differences, which queer theory and politics refuse to

¹⁵ See Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* eds Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: MacMillan, 1988), pp. 271-313; Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse', in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 51-80; M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁶ The most influential postcolonial critic to take up psychoanalysis is Homi Bhabha (see Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). For a sophisticated feminist appropriation see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁷ The work of Judith Butler has been particularly influential here. See Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

hierarchies, and gender ceases to express anything fundamental about women, men, transgender or transsexual people.

Since the 1990s a number of assumptions gained from these theories, combined with critiques of the second wave, have shaped feminist cultural and social analysis. These include the realisation that feminist cultural politics cannot just be about patriarchy. Power relations are multiple and must include class, race, location, age, sexuality and (dis)ability. From this perspective there is no essential femaleness or true womanhood and woman is never one thing. In the political arena and in everyday life specific identities matter, but political objectives involve coalitions, which can include a range of positions and identities. In understanding how patriarchal power relations are reproduced and contested, we need to understand the complex identities and positions occupied by women as well as men as the agents of patriarchy. We need to question assumptions that norms and values such as 'freedom' are by definition universal rather than historically and socially produced in specific contexts. Politics and power can raise them to hegemonic positions or give them the status of apparently universal aspirations. The study of literary and other cultural texts and practices, when adequately theorised, offers an important way into understanding diversity and those deemed radically 'Other' in mainstream Western discourse. This is an essential prerequisite for moves towards feminist alliances with transcultural, transnational or global aspirations.

Clearly a separate and distinct 'third wave' feminist identity became increasingly important to younger women from the 1990s onwards. Writing as an older feminist, I would argue that all feminist activism is necessarily historically located and a relevant feminist politics for today needs to address issues in ways that engage younger generations of women who, in the West at least, often continue to see second wave feminism as outmoded and no longer needed. What we need to avoid here, however, is a fixing of positions that caricatures and rigidifies. Neither theoretical position nor generation offer the most fertile ground for feminist alliances. As in the early years of second wave feminism, when women and also some men from a range of political positions and feminist and trade union organisations combined to fight for reproductive rights, an end to domestic violence, the right to define one's sexuality, freedom from sexual exploitation, equal pay, socialised childcare and a wide range of other issues, the point of organisation was these social and cultural issues, not identities or

identity politics. Identity politics were, however, very important in directing attention to marginalised issues, such as race and sexuality. Alliances functioned and achieved social and cultural change through engagement over shared political aims and objectives.

One of the most encouraging aspects of recent developments in feminism is the clear move by many younger women to redefine 'third wave' feminism as much more than a set of academic feminist debates about generational difference, insisting that it that includes activism. For activists, often influenced by the Riot Grrrl Movement of the early 1990s, which privileged the cultivation of women's autonomous cultural and artistic expression, it signals specific forms of political engagement outside of mainstream institutions that are informed by queered ideas of identities, boundaries, positions and genders and should ideally be cross-generational. Theoretically, recent feminism often shows an openness to poststructuralist understandings of gender and sexuality together with insights from queer, Black feminist and post-colonial theory as well as transnationalism and ecofeminism. Representation in its many senses remains a key issue for feminism in the twenty-first century. Both the constituencies seeking political representation and a change in hegemonic modes of representation have multiplied as minority communities in the West have become more assertive and struggle for a voice. More general shifts in broader economic, political and ideological climates have also placed new issues on both local and global agendas. These developments continue to raise old questions of universal and relative values, human rights and the conflicts between religion and gender equality as it is understood in the West. In the cultural sphere, questions of representation remain important. They encompassed how women are perceived and encouraged to be, who controls culture, whose interests cultural texts and practices represent, and where women do or do not have a voice. All these dimensions of representation are directly linked to broader relations of social and cultural power. Among the many issues currently on the feminist agenda are questions of affect, the politics of memory, gender and ageing, the trafficking of women and children, non-secular feminisms, science, the human and the animal. As can be seen from this brief list, it is political, social and cultural developments that make these issues so important. These range from factors as diverse as issues arising from the ageing of a generation of second wave feminists to the massive increase in the trafficking of women and children and global questions related to Islam.

Concluding Reflections

If as feminists we want to intervene effectively both locally and in cultural political struggles that extend beyond the local, we cannot rely on the sorts of Eurocentrist and universalist thinking for which much second wave feminism was criticised. Nor can we assume that 'third wave' forms of feminism have necessarily moved beyond them. In deciding where and how we want to intervene in both our critical and broader political practice, we need to take on board the lessons of Black, 'Third World' and postcolonial feminisms and to be open to the ways in which poststructuralist and Queer theories challenge naturalised categories. The insights that these developments have produced include the positive recognition that as women, men, transgendered people and transsexuals, our identities and experiences are both multiple and affected by class, race, ability, culture, religion, location and sexual orientation. We do not and cannot share a common location and although we may have global aspirations, we often do not agree on how to understand and challenge issues, but need to listen to the voices of those directly affected by them.

The formation of successful strategies for change often involves recognising that we need to find ways of enlisting women who, while generally supporting many feminist agendas, do not identify as feminists. Moreover, with the growth of multi-culturalism in Western societies, the effects of a continued failure to locate and delimit hegemonic assumptions about freedom and equality and the explanatory power of Western theories and modes of critical practice have become increasingly clear as issues concerning minority women in the West have entered mainstream agendas. Take the example of the hijab, the veil or headscarf with which many Muslim women cover their hair and more recently the niqab or face veil. As I have argued elsewhere, both are currently much debated, even banned, in parts of the state and public sphere in Europe. France instigated a ban in state schools from September 2004 and similar measures have been under discussion in some of the Federal German states. Turkey, an overwhelmingly Muslim country, which had secularism written into its constitution in 1937, and which is currently applying to join the European Union, has long had such a ban. In France, the mainstream media responded to debates on the hijab by posing the question

as to whether girls and women could cover their hair and still be 'truly French'. Muslim women who spoke out in the debate on the headscarf ban represented diverse competing and conflicting positions. In Britain there have been similar recent discussions of the niqab. Much of this debate has focused on the degree to which wearing the hijab or niqab is a matter of choice. While many secularists argue that it is imposed on girls and women by men, those in favour of allowing headscarves argue for the right to wear them as a woman's human right. Many in France argue that the headscarf ban would force French Muslim women into private Koranic schools. At the centre of the debate over the banning of the hijab in France is a law that seeks to erase difference, ostensibly in the interests of a secular state and both sides of the debate appeal to discourses of women's human rights. In the UK debate has recently focused on similar issues in terms of a binary opposition set up between respect for difference and social cohesion. This opposition, too, is ripe for deconstruction. Few positions do justice to the complex reason why women choose the veil or what this choice means. This requires a much more complex set of theories that also take due account of socio-cultural power relations, Islamophobia and racism in contemporary Europe.

In thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of feminist theory and cultural analysis since 1968, it is important to stress the usefulness of recognising breaks and shifts, and considering both the difficulties inherent in attempts to construct histories of feminism and the political effects of such attempts. For me, Black and postcolonial critiques of white Western feminisms offer some of the most important lessons for a feminist gender politics and critical practice in the twenty-first century, which is not to deny the specific role and legitimacy of other feminisms. A postcolonial perspective insists on recognition of the specificity of location and particular histories. It insists on displacing the centrality of Western feminism and placing it in a larger context. It stresses the interrelatedness of 'margins' and 'centres' and of colonisers and colonised in ways that are not exclusive to West European or US colonialism. It insists on hearing non-Western perspectives and on understanding the global context of economic and cultural relations of exploitation. It allows for both local and transnational modes of analysis. I want to end by insisting on the importance of respect for different positions alongside the importance of supportive on-going debate, which requires both the recognition of histories and locations as always problematic and potentially

exclusive. I want to urge a serious commitment to listening to others. It is my hope that this new on-line journal, *Assuming Gender*, will make a valuable contribution to on-going critical practice and debate, attracting contributions from diverse perspectives including those working on gender in non-Western contexts, something that an on-line journal is uniquely placed to do.

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