

*Tessera*

¿*Essentialism(e)*?

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## Imagine Her Surprise ...

*Susan Knutson*

Thanks to *Tessera*, Teresa de Lauretis's discussion of feminist essentialism and Italian feminist theory sought me out in my *petit coin d'Acadie* to remind me of the electric relay of neural light that feminist theory sometimes is. Thank you, *Tessera*, thank you Teresa, and thank you, women of the Milan Women's Bookstore, for responding to "the necessity to give meaning, exalt, and represent in words and images the relationship of one woman to another." (*Non credere*; cited in de Lauretis, 14) In naming relationships between women as "the substance" of their politics, and in going further to theorize this political practise (putting it into words), the Milan Women's Bookstore has disturbed a certain sedimentation in my understanding of feminism.

*Non credere* boldly asserts that it will bring to light the "actual meaning, and therefore [the actual] name" of events and ideas which "commonly go under the name of feminism." "That name is 'genealogy.' What we have seen taking shape ... is a genealogy of women, that is, a coming into being of women legitimated by the reference to their female origin." (*Non credere* 9; cited in de Lauretis, 14) I believe this corresponds to what in Quebec was named "l'urgence d'une culture au féminin." My hope is renewed that we, too, will see our efforts "taking shape ... [as] a genealogy of women" and I think I understand the Milanese feminists when they write:

We are not certain that the history reconstructed by this book will actually produce what we have sought, which is our inscription in a female generation. We do not exclude the possibility that, put to the test, our experience may turn out to be just one of the many historical vicissitudes of the fragile concept of woman. (*Non credere* 9; cited in de Lauretis, 14)

Doesn't Nicole Brossard express something of the same hope in the closing lines of *L'Amèr*? "*Je veux en effet voir s'organiser la forme des femmes dans la trajectoire de l'espèce*" (99).

This is one of several correspondences which appear to me to link Canadian feminism with that of Milan; notwithstanding the real differences, and therefore the freshness of the Italian experience, for us. Women's friendships are addressed theoretically and are seen as central to feminist practise; Italian theory runs ahead of ours here. The Italian concept of relations of "entrustment" is a revelation permitting a more just evaluation of certain relationships between women. The interpretation of the much maligned practise of separatism as "the practise of sexual difference," the concept of a system of symbolic authorization in the feminine, elaborated as "female genealogy," "the engendering of female freedom," "responsibility to women," and the name of "the symbolic mother," strike me as important theoretical acquisitions.

Italian feminism is undetermined by the "essentialist/constructionist binarism" which has tended to structure feminist theory, particularly in the United States (Fuss, 1). The Italians might simply be condemned as "essentialist," since, as de Lauretis explains, a "notion of essential and originary difference represents a point of consensus and a starting point for the Italian theory of sexual difference" (32). However, she argues that "this is not a biological or metaphysical essentialism, but a consciously political formulation of the specific difference of women in a particular sociohistorical location" (31). As Adriana Cavarero put it, "For women, being engendered in difference is something not negotiable; for each one who is born female, it is always already so and not otherwise, rooted in her being not as something superfluous or something more, but as that which she necessarily is: female" (cited in de Lauretis 31).

De Lauretis argues that such an assumption "is basic ... to feminism as historically constituted" and without it, "the still necessary articulation of all other differences between and within women must remain framed in male dominant and heterosexist ideologies of liberal pluralism, conservative humanism, or, goddess forbid, religious fundamentalism" (32). By definition, feminism is hopeful that "inscribed within the shared horizon of sexual difference, the words of all women could find affirmation, including the affirmation of their differences, without fear of self-destruction" (25). The TELLING IT conference, held in Vancouver in November, 1988, offers an important example of a practise – or better, *praxis* – correlative to this theory. The women who took the risk of "affirming their differences" there came,

in fact, perilously close to self-destruction. However, happily, they did survive and the conference proceedings are published in an important book: *Telling it: Women and Language Across Cultures*, edited by the Telling It Book Collective. I would like to explore what I understand of the Italian feminists' theory taking as a paradigm, what I understand of the TELLING IT experience. I don't think I am simply developing an analogy; it seems that certain aspects of our practise translate over the cultural divide, and the work of the Milan Women's Bookstore collective can help us to theorize, i.e., put into words, the experience here.

One of the critical concepts developed in *Non credere* is that of the symbolic mother, a kind of transcendental signifier *au féminin*. A figure of symbolic mediation between women and the world, the symbolic mother legitimates female subjects in "a female-gendered frame of reference:" (24)

As a theoretical concept, the symbolic mother is the structure that sustains or recognizes the gendered and embodied nature of women's thought, knowledge, experience, subjectivity and desire – their "originary difference" – and guarantees women's claim to self-affirmative existence as subjects in the social, and existence as subjects in the social, and existence as subjects not altogether separate from male society, yet autonomous from male definition and dominance. (25)

The symbolic mother is a figure of a "female social contract" (29) which underwrites women's full social agency and accountability to other women. Among other things, the symbolic mother is the symbolic authorization for the phenomenon of debate and struggle between women which goes on in the name of, or in the frame of reference provided by, the women's movement.

I suggest that the fact that the TELLING IT conference was organized by the Ruth Wynnwood Chair of Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University is already an indication that it took symbolic authorization from what the Italian feminists would identify as the symbolic mother. Daphne Marlatt used her tenureship of the Ruth Wynnwood Chair to organize it, and she conceived it in explicit recognition of difference and disparity among women, which she names "rift-lines that have become apparent in the women's movement."

[It was] “designed as a non-academic ... communities – (in the plural) – focused conference ... aspiring to showcase the writing and thought of women who are marginalized in different ways, it drew on the three largest groups of marginalized women in British Columbia ... Native Indian, Asian-Canadian and lesbian communities.... It was designed to be a celebration of the work by these writers – work which i felt to be ground-breaking in different ways ... It was meant to provoke discussion that seemed long overdue about difference on several crucial rift-lines, not the least of which are the rifts of race and sexual orientation .... Bringing women together in the same room implied a hope that our differences were not completely unbridgeable, that women with dissimilar, even unequal experiences of oppression, might be able to speak openly and hear each other openly, might even (and this was a wilder hope) find some sense of shared ground to enable us to help each other in our struggle against the forces of a society that continues to marginalize us.”(12-13)

Clearly, Marlatt hoped that the horizon of common difference – perhaps what we used to call solidarity of women – would permit women to voice differences in a safe environment and thus begin to address the problems of racist privilege and homophobia which divide us. It was a risky affair, and it only partially succeeded. Both racism and homophobia were frighteningly in evidence. Racism is too intricately woven into western culture to be dispelled by simple good will. In the proceedings, Lee Maracle goes to the trouble of explicating one thread of that racist fabric, so that those of us who are blinded by white privilege perhaps can learn to see. She explains how one woman’s well-intentioned comments, “we’re all women, we’re all equal, so what if you’re a different colour,” were “very patriarchal and very racist,” denying and attempting to erase the experience of women of colour, refusing them voice, saying “so what?” instead of listening with basic respect. Another woman challenged the presence of lesbians, the notion of lesbian culture. For her, the experience of being a woman writer, and even a feminist woman writer, was not reason enough to solidarize with lesbian writers. In the words of Sky Lee, she questioned “why white lesbians would want to connect their word and their names to Native and Asian women” (188). Betsy Warland concludes, “after the experience of the conference, I also believe

that the feminist communities have not honestly confronted their homophobia" (199).

Lee Maracle, in her afterword, writes powerfully of the fact that, although the rifts of racism and homophobia were painfully in evidence, the participants risked building connections:

We ... dug deep inside ourselves for the words, special words, that would finally begin to build the ramparts to the bridge which would allow us to meet as equals. Those ramparts are still hanging in the air in that room, dusty and unused.

... TELLING IT was difficult because we are still telling it, not moving with it. I dream of the day when remarks such as "so what if you are a woman of colour?" and "is Lesbian a culture?" will stop all the proceedings, and everyone will say, "Let's thrash this out, let's settle it, let's keep going until we come to a common agreement – consensus – because we aren't going anywhere if we don't." We all struggled to build bridges at the TELLING IT conference. Too bad they weren't located in the same spot directly across from each other. (171)

It is important to honor the risks that were taken, and to understand why these bridges are not easily built. Perhaps the ramparts can still be used.

One way of naming this effort at bridge building, these lessons painfully learned and told and aching still between the pages of the proceedings, would be to refer to the conference as an important but difficult acquisition of "female genealogy." The construction of a genealogy – and the word's roots link it with gender, generation, and "birth as a social event" – has to do with the symbolic placement of individual women, that is, where we place ourselves, and in relation to what other realities. In patriarchal cultures, women have been invisible, silently placed in relation to father or husband. "Among the things that had no name [prior to feminist discourse] there was, there is, the pain of coming into the world this way, without symbolic placement" (*Non credere* 10; cited in de Lauretis, 15). This reminds me of a feminist t-shirt I used to see at meetings and rallies: "I am a woman giving birth to myself." To inscribe a female genealogy is to construct a relationship of "belonging" which permits self-definition. For example, Sky Lee writes of her belonging in a women of colour context, and how that supported her through the TELLING IT



experience, which Joanne Arnott humourously renames “Yelling It: Women and Anger Across Cultures” (185). From one relationship of belonging, Sky Lee is able to illuminate others, and so constructs, or in fact *writes* her genealogy. Development of relations of belonging and construction of female genealogies is, as I understand it, a way of mediating women’s access to a full humanity. To once again quote Lee Maracle,

... we have a great distance to travel. We have taken the first steps towards a new humanity. We look a little odd – most of us are well over thirty and ought not to be still toddling and faltering – but through the organization of such gatherings as the TELLING IT symposium, we are on our feet and on our way. (173)

The participants of TELLING IT – at any rate those who edited the proceedings – are clear that the problems which arose at the conference were manifestations of the same racism, the same homophobia, that generates rifts between women in the first place. It is also remembered that class is another very divisive factor, a major silencer of voices, which is not dealt with in any depth by the conference proceedings. Evidently, those who do not have access to the gatherings and the discourse will not be represented. Nonetheless, in spite of omissions and failures, this meeting which I am suggesting, took place in the name of the symbolic mother, made progress. What could be more important?

In attempting to read Canadian women’s experience in terms of the theorization of the practise of the women of Milan – a practise of sexual difference – I may be accused of falling squarely into the trap of essentialism without even bothering to address myself to the debate. However, my strategy is intended to bring into play another aspect of de Lauretis’s text – one that comes out of her framing of the Italian debate over *Non credere* within the Anglo-American debate on feminist essentialism. This is the critical importance of feminism challenging directly the “social-symbolic institution of heterosexuality” (32).

*Non credere* and its sister publications prompted a debate of remarkable magnitude within the progressive elements of Italian society. One writer raised the objection that “if the symbolic mother is the figure of a female social contract (as it indeed is), ... then the whole theory is founded on a ‘radically separatist practice’ and on refusing

the male-female dialect" (Grazia Zuffa; cited in de Lauretis, 29). This she names "homosexual fundamentalism," and condemns. "In other words," de Lauretis comments, "when the meaning of separatism shifts from the 'traditional,' socially innocuous, women's support group, in which women could let down their hair and commiserate with one another on personal matters, to a new social formation of women with no loyalty to men and intent on changing the world on their own, this is going too far" (29). It is impossible to trace all of de Lauretis's argument here, but, to summarize, she concludes that homophobia and a lesbian feminism that 'dare not speak its name' are in conflict in Italy, and this conflict is raising the stakes significantly in the debate following the publication of *Non credere*. In this debate concerning the "practice of sexual difference" it is not the difference which is questioned, but the question of women's sexuality. Turning back to the Anglo- American debate through the *optique* provided by her reading of the Italian feminists, she makes the following observations:

I would now suggest that what motivates the suspicion ... of a phantom feminist essentialism, may be less the risk of essentialism itself than the further risk which that entails: the risk of challenging directly the social- symbolic institution of heterosexuality. Which, at least in Italy, appears to be no easier said for lesbians than for heterosexual women. Here, however, the challenge has been posed, and most articulately by precisely those feminists who are then accused of separatism in their political stance and of essentialism with regard to their epistemological claims. I do not think it is a coincidence. (32)

In other words, de Lauretis suggests that there is a kind of phantom presence in the debate over essentialism, and that is the presence of homophobia. And this perhaps, after considerable thought, might explain why, when meeting with white women in the name of feminism, women of colour sometimes, and perhaps to their surprise, find themselves face to face with white lesbians. It is because of the location of the heterosexual institution in blocking the progress of women's full humanity, in thwarting any social mediation in the feminine, or we might say, in the name of the symbolic mother. To put it the other way, feminists operating in the frame work of the symbolic mother, and thus engendering "a social formation of women with no

loyalty to men and intent on changing the world on their own," – these feminists sometimes discover, perhaps to their surprise, that they are lesbians, and that the heterosexual institution is intent on silencing them, should they dare to speak their name.

To conclude, if hunting for essentialisms masks homophobic fears, if women of colour are not part of the debate, nor working-class women, then surely the framework is wrong. Teresa de Lauretis – and Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking* – are right to try to shift the terms of the debate. I say, in this époque, we cannot know if women are women because of nature, or culture. There is, however, critical advantage in taking the *point de repère* the notion that women are women now. Taking my hat off to Monique Wittig, I must say in spite of her that, for the same reason, we must consider lesbians to be women, too. All of which is not to refuse to problematize the concept of woman, but let us start, as Nicole Brossard suggests, from the paradox of women's identity in this patriarchal time (1985; 94). Because, in this patriarchal time, feminist practise, and theory which permits us to understand and to continue – is urgently needed.

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## Writing The Risk In, Risking the Writing

Kathy Mezei

We may as well begin with Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, for here we come up against a writer encountering, like a number of us, the "risk of essentialism."<sup>1</sup> Let's see how Woolf negotiates this encounter, for the process like the concept itself, has snared so many into immobility, anger, and acrimonious debate.<sup>2</sup>

Midway through *Room*, Woolf writes:

The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men (Woolf, 78).

Then, abruptly, close to the end of the book:

It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex (Woolf, 102).

Now why does Woolf do that to us? After spending a hundred pages discussing the (difficult) conditions under which women write or cannot write, after explicating how Austen, the Brontës, and Shakespeare's less fortunate "sister" negotiated their writing lives, she seems to cast off her carefully constructed position. How we are taken aback, for all along we have been nodding in agreement. Why must one be, as Woolf elaborates over several pages, "woman-manly or man-womanly ... before the art of creation can be accomplished"? (102-103) Why suddenly bring up Coleridge and claim that the great mind is androgynous?<sup>3</sup>

As we well know, Elaine Showalter condemns Woolf's "flight into androgyny": "The androgynous vision ... is a response to the dilemma of a woman writer embarrassed and alarmed by feelings too hot to handle without risking real rejection by her family, her audience, and her class (*A Literature of Their Own*, 286). On the contrary, I find the Woolf "risks a great deal. She risked breaking the sentence, the sequence (*Room*, 81). Toril Moi seems to understand this:

We can read Woolf's playful shifts and changes of perspective ... as something rather more than a wilful desire to irritate the serious-minded feminist critic. Through her conscious exploitation of the sportive, sensual nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology. (Moi, 9)

Still Showalter is right to query Woolf's flight into androgyny and the reason why we, the reader are perturbed by it, remain unanswered.

Did Woolf resort to androgyny to escape from what she already in 1928 perceived to be an "essentialist trap"? Emphasizing fatal, she wrote: "It is fatal for a woman ... to speak consciously as a woman" (*Room*, 102-3). How could she have contradicted her earlier words? Surely the only explanation is that Woolf was suddenly appalled by the implications of what we now term biological essentialism, by the limitations it can impose upon women who write, by the prison bars it can erect in order to trap women ... "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (*Room*, 25-26). Her only escape from an originary (and stifling) female androgyny. She does, however, inadvertently offer another way out, more of which is a moment.

Woolf's entanglement foreshadows our discussion in *Tessera* – essentialism? – the positions we find ourselves taking. There are those among us who will admit that as feminists we too risked essentialism as we learned at first to understand, then theorize our always intuited "difference" from men. Only later did we re-vision this essential difference more precisely as socially constructed. <sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir said it best in 1949:

It must be repeated once more that woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilization .... Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself. (*The Second Sex*, 682)

As feminists, teachers, writers many of us have had not only to learn to represent our experience, our selves (think of Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood), but also to theorize them. When we began to understand ourselves as subjects constructed

through language, discourse, society, we investigated whether the nature of discourse could be radically altered, seeking ways to manifest our specific subjectivity. Our differences from men interested us less. Moving beyond representation, some of us tried to reconstruct ourselves through subverting language and syntax and ideology (Nicole Brossard, Gail Scott, Daphne Marlatt, Louky Bersianik)<sup>5</sup>.

While, for some, to write out of the experience of their bodies has been an act of liberation, for others it has seemed prescriptive, a sinister variation of the biological traps set by the patriarchy. (Not to speak of those of us feeling both simultaneously). Taking an admirable firm stand, Chris Weedon, for example, urges us to see how:

feminist poststructuralist approaches deny the central humanist assumption that women or men have essential natures. They insist on the social construction of gender in discourse ... [and refuse] to fall back on general theories of the feminine psyche or biologically based definitions of femininity which locates its essence in processes such as motherhood or female sexuality. (Weedon, 167)

None of us wishes to locate our essence only in "processes such as motherhood or female sexuality." But is it not a question of who defines these processes? For to deny myself as mother in a line of mothers would be to split myself beyond repair. How to wear my (mother) hood is fraught with consequences. "We live," Kristeva reminds us, "civilization where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood (*Stabat Mater*, 161). It is to that subject that my writing often turns of its own volition. I feel the need to talk about those limitations ... real, perceived, other-defined ... that our reproductive functions *do* impose on us. Although we may insist on legitimizing writing ourselves through our bodies, on valuing our differences from men, the definition of "our bodies" should be elastic – "differences *within* essentialism" or *essentialisms* as Diana Fuss put it (*Essentially Speaking*, xii). Some of us bear children, others do not; we bear them differently, vaginally, by caesarian, we abort them, we mourn them. Each of us has a different menstruation story and tells a different menopause story, and our sexual pleasures, socially constructed or not, reflect different desires. As I write these words I think the only risk of essentialism is to deny it, to deny how we waver between positions. Writing essentially need not mean

writing from a fixed, frozen position – it may mean writing out of a sense of one’s essence, however troubled, variable it is, particularly because it is troubled, variable. Are we getting closer to Woolf’s meaning, not a flight into androgyny, but a negotiation between positions?

Perhaps it comes down to where we locate *difference*. I like how Teresa de Lauretis does just this in her article “The Essence of the Triangle, or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S. and Britain,” where she presents the theory and practice of the Milan Women’s Bookstore as published in co-authored text, *Non Credere*. (See Susan’s thoughtful response in “Imagine Her Surprise”). De Lauretis locates difference in a dialogic relationship with its past, its representation. [excuse the necessarily long quotation, but the idea takes awhile to unwind].

... the conception of sexual difference as “originary human difference” proposed by *Non credere* and *Diotima* is less an essentialist – biological or metaphysical – view of woman’s difference (from man) than a historical materialist analysis of “the state of emergency” in which we live as feminists ... this is not the sexual difference of symbolization, a different production of reference and meaning out of a particular embodied knowledge, emergent in the present time but reaching back to recognize an “image of the past which unexpectedly appears to [those who are] singled out by history at a moment of danger” (255) (quoting Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* New York, 1969, 27)

This may be one way out of Woolf’s androgynous dilemma – to “recast” difference not through (sexual) essence, but through a dialogic relationship with the changing symbolization of gender.

When H  l  ne Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” comes up against the trap of definition (essence), she argues that “it is impossible to [define] a feminine practise of writing ... this practise can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (*New French Feminisms*, 253); and so Kristeva: “In ‘woman’ I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies” (*New French Feminisms*, 137). Beyond the exaltation of Difference lies the Horror of the Same. Like Woolf, Cixous turns her anxiety over sexual difference as essentialist and its problematic expression through writing towards what she calls “the other bisexuality”:

It will usually be said, thus disposing of sexual difference: either that all writing ... is feminine, or inversely ... that the act of writing is bisexual, hence neuter, which again does away with differentiation ... In saying "bisexual, hence neuter," I am referring to the classic conception of bisexuality, which, squashed under the emblem of castration fear ... would do away with the difference experienced as an operation incurring loss ... to this self-effacing, merger type bisexuality ... I oppose the *other bisexuality* on which every subject not enclosed in the false theater of phallogocentric representationalism has founded his/her erotic universe ... each one's location in self ... of the presence-variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female – of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex ... (253-254)

Such vague bisexuality or androgyny did not seem to help Woolf or Cixous escape from the dangers they perceived within essentialism, and it worries those of us who fear it signifies merely another form in which the dominant subsumes the other. For, instead of transcending sexual difference, the concept of androgyny seems to emphasize it, falling unintentionally deeper into binary oppositions. Interestingly, Kristeva, who in 1974 echoed Woolf and Cixous, "all speaking subjects have within themselves a certain bisexuality which, even if it existed, would only ... be the aspiration towards that totality of one of the sexes and thus an effacing of difference" ("Women's Time," 209).

I said earlier that Woolf inadvertently offered another way out, one which Cixous and Kristeva, and de Lauretis in "The Essence of the Triangle" also offer in differing forms. Remember Woolf suggesting that "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers" (*Room*, 96). Cixous writes, "The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was "born" to her," (252). Kristeva in "*Stabat Mater*" postulates a herethics of continuity, reproduction, and undeath emanating from the "mother." Is it just possible that we have something closer to our desire as women and as writers than androgyny? Can we imagine a different "bisexuality"? That of mother to daughter, sister to sister, that of the nurturing symbolic Mother and of the mentoring relationship described in *Non Credere*, where "the notion of the symbolic



mother permits the exchange between women across generations and the sharing of knowledge and desire across differences" (de Lauretis, 25). It all begins – the seduction and the resistance, the dialogic interplay essential for the locatinf of the self. Not flight, but honing in. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, mother and artist, hand each other a gift across the divide of death, across the barrier of a different sexuality, a gift that becomes for Lily a generating vision, a creative act but also an act of defiance: mothers, sisters, mentors in love and in resistance. For we must remember Nicole Brossard's explosive, necessary "J'ai tué le ventre" (*L'amèr*, 11).

In the end what matters is the writing itself, the fictions, the inventions, the stories, and it is to these we must turn. The writer will find her way to tell us what matters to her. Woolf's theoretical entanglement and Cixous' theoretical sleight of hand fade before the actual process of writing it out and writing us in. Look at Kristeva's personal style, her fragmented page, her typographical play in *Stabat Mater* as she takes Woolf's "playful shifts" in *Room* one step further. How can she (the writer) not risk essentialism? Writing the risk in, risking the writing.

Taking this risk becomes the subtext, the narrative grid of women's texts. Playful shifting language and narrative mirror the writer's shifting postions. It creates a dialogism between past and present, between a speaking subject and a repressed other as the self seeks to locate or define her sexual difference, her essence. In this tension lies the subject matter of so many women's texts. Jostling for position. Through the writing.

Think back to an early mother, Margaret Laurence, and the double discourse of Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers*. Above, the constructed voice of mother and wife – the utterance; below, the inner voice preceded by a dash, speaking antithetically, authentically to the utterance. Stacey greets her husband after work:

Mm. Everything's fine. You?

....

– The automatic kiss bit. Does he actually not see me when he kisses me like that, or is it really the opposite – out of the corner of his day-beleaguered eyes he sees his life's partner, slacks and scruffy blouse, ... (p. 55)

There is no essential self, just the dialogue between selves, wavering, working it out somehow by speaking.

Or think how Elaine Risely in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* surrealizes the conventional suburban monster mother (Mrs. Smeath) in her paintings; it is her way to symbolize and distance the constructed mother. Elaine's dialogic meditation between her past, troubled girlhood and her present vacuity represents her desire to negotiate an authentic self. Only through remembering, can she do so. That she fails to resolve her separation from self may reflect the narrator's own inability to "reach back to recognize 'an image of the past,'" (de Lauretis, 27) or Atwood's failure of vision, or her realistic assessment of the condition of women in the 1980s.

Daphne Marlatt's dialogic process in *Anahistoric* is a more radical enactment through language and narrative of the desire to locate the "symbolic mother" in discourse. Risking her self by uncovering her selves in the past – the personal past of her mother, Ina, and the historical past of Anna Richards, the narrator, Annie gives birth to herself (and the reader) through writing it out. Here in de Lauretis' words "is a difference of symbolization, a different production of reference and meaning out of a particular embodied knowledge, emergent in the present time but reaching back to recognize an 'image of the past ...'" (27).

The writer will take her own risks in the writing. Let us look at Woolf's flight into androgyny and Cixous' other bisexuality as a way of writing the risk in, expressing ambivalence, succumbing to the seduction of a distinct female essence, the symbolic mother, of restrictions and definitions with their implications for the death of creativity. A writer writing her difference(s) in can frustrate a reader, as I was frustrated by Woolf's apparent abdication of her recognition of woman's difference and her recourse to androgyny. But the dialogic play and playful shifts she engages in mirrors her own and our own struggles. Both and or. We can recognize ourselves in Woolf's "the book has somehow to be adapted to the body" and "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex."

We are back to where we started, but we wrote it all out or in along the way.

## Notes

1. The editorial collective as they began composing their responses to this issue had a look at Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking* which makes the "claim that there is no essence to essentialism, that ... we can only speak of *essentialisms*."(xii)
2. Thanks to Michèle Valiquette for the dialogue that opened up this essay's essence. And I owe much of the origins of the following discussion to my graduate class who watched me skeptically while I tried to explain in sheer defiance of the printed page that Virginia Woolf could not possibly be promoting androgyny.
3. In *The Subject of Semiotics* Kaja Silverman recounts Aristophane's story in Plato's *Symposium* (referred to by Lacan) how Zeus bisected beings into two, male and female, leaving each half with a desperate yearning for the other. "The human subject derives from an original whole which was divided in half, and ... the division of the subject was sexual in nature –then when it was 'sliced' in half, it lost the sexual androgyny in once had and was reduced to the biological dimension either of a man or a woman" (151-152).
4. See Julia Kristeva's two stages of (European) feminism; the first, women's attempt to insert themselves into history; the second, their "radical *refusal* of the subjective limitations imposed by history's time". (i.e. psychoanalysis) ("Women's Time", 195).
5. This is a whole other topic – the role of essentialism in feminist literary criticism of Canadian women writers. How have feminist critics approached women's texts. For example Pat Smart's recent study of Quebec women's writers, *Writers in the Father's House* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) reads the literature "from a perspective which emphasizes sexual difference."

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## Essentialism? A Problem in Discourse

Barbara Godard

"Woman was not born but made," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949, framing the issues of feminist inquiry around the *construction* of femininity. The "eternal feminine," she suggested, was not an ahistoric universal, but produced by specific social practices. In *The Second Sex*, she extended a theoretical frame for the pronouncements of Mary Wollstonecraft who had argued woman was produced as a creature of nature, as one whose sole aim was to please, by educational practices that stimulated the senses rather than training the reason to become a "moral being," and for those of Virginia Woolf claiming that the feminine condition could be altered only by an improvement in women's material situation to support such changes to the educational system. Developing the existentialist critique of metaphysics, de Beauvoir argued that "existence precedes essence." There are no *a priori* essences, no originary Platonic idea or Being, but rather the construction of identity through a dialectic: negativity is worked through in an *Aufhebung* or movement to transcendence, Being attained through a process of encountering nothingness, the self confronting the other, sameness in dialectical opposition to difference. This engaged a movement from the *en-soi*, the individual who is acted upon and, avoiding choice, lives an inauthentic existence, to the *pour-soi*, the type of existence in which one acts by initiating choices and responsibly assuming the consequences of actions to attain the dignity of a being *created* in, by, and for itself.

The construction of identity through the play of difference is the legacy of Hegelian theories of the subject positioned within the relations of master/slave, self/other constructed differentially with respect to power. Examining the discourses on woman (implicitly critiquing existentialism) Simone de Beauvoir found that while other power relations, such as those of colonizer/colonized, capitalist/worker, could be inflected as reciprocal interrelationships, those

of masculine/feminine differences were locked into hierarchical relations with respect to power. Woman was defined always in subordination to man: there was no subject-position offered for the feminine. Indeed, as de Beauvoir noted, in the structuralist theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss, woman is a sign or token of exchange between men, the occluded ground of the social contract which, with the taboo of incest in the Oedipal family romance, maintained endogamy through the exchange of women. The social contract fixes the relations of men and women with respect to value. Under these particular social relations, women are constituted in/as exchange value, as commodities or goods, as Luce Irigaray has pointed out, reified or fetishized objects for exchange in a "hom(m)osexual" economy through which their sex is produced as difference. While one direction of feminist inquiry has explored the practices through which such values have been fixed, another has questioned the grounds of the discourse establishing such binary oppositions of signs that would seek to fix meanings and gendered bodies always in relations of hierarchy on the lines established by an occluded ground or referent – feminine lack – the origin and vanishing point of the system of meaning. Identity as a provisional construct within contradictory fields of relations of power seemed to be an important contribution of feminist theory to post-structuralist theories of the sign and subjectivity.

*Seemed*, I write, because forty years after the publication of *The Second Sex* the debate over essentialism versus constructivism is still raging, especially in American feminist circles. What to make of the ubiquity of the term "essentialism" in contemporary feminist publications? *Essentially Speaking*, is how Diane Fuss opens up the issues at stake in considering a feminine specificity and the politics of "experience" around the categories "Feminism, nature and difference." The question is framed as "The Essential Difference," as the irreducible, in the first volume of the journal of feminist cultural studies, *Differences*. These texts focus a debate throughout the decade diffusely articulated in a number of essays on feminist literary theory that have attempted to outline the implications of various theories for feminism evaluating them on the grounds of historicity and anti-biologism.

Typical of these is Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," where a variety of feminist approaches are assessed for their essentialism: feminist critique of male critical theory for its unexamined universalist assumptions has been important but is limited

“because it has continued to feed on the discourse of the masters” (Showalter 1981, 184). Gynocritics, or the elaboration of “a literature of their own” by and for women focuses on *the* difference of women’s writing, what constitutes the specificity or distinctiveness of women as a literary group. Difference is elaborated according to four different models: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. Obsessions with “the corporeal ground of our intelligence” become prescriptive, and fail to account for the linguistic and social mediation of the textual body. Linguistic and textual theories of difference – the dream of a common language, or mother-tongue – are also reductive, confining women in “a prison-house of language” (193) rather than expanding the verbal territories for women. Psychoanalytic theories of difference also, Showalter suggests, advance a negative identity for women through the Oedipal triangulation where they are characterized by an identification with lack. Showalter locates “a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women’s writing” in a theory of women’s culture which takes into account its dual positioning within a dominant masculine and a muted feminine subculture. It sees the way women conceptualize their bodies and the female psyche “as a product or construction of cultural forces” among which are the mediating social determinants of language (197). Strategies of “thick description” will elaborate the social ground and import of “structures of signification” (205) allowing one to read the social construction of gender differences from a position both inside and outside the male tradition in literature. While Showalter suggests such a cultural theory acknowledges differences of race, class, nationality among women, nonetheless, she advances that “women’s culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers” over time and space (197). In a later text, Showalter argues against such a singular female aesthetic that elides differences among women, pointing out that many feminist critics have “opposed both the concept of an essential female identity that expressed itself though only one literary style, and the privileging of lesbian creative identity” (Showalter 1985, 7). What Showalter has enacted here is the feminist shuffle, one step forward, two steps back, a double bind in feminist theory: arguments of feminine specificity are accused of essentialism, those failing to raise the issue of sexual difference are tainted with masculinism.

Crucial here is what is perceived as a danger for feminism, the

establishment of a feminine specificity in a totalizing feminine "nature," grounded in the body, the psyche, or language. Theoretical positions are policed for their avoidance of claims that would universalize or naturalize the feminine, determinist theories of identity that would preclude any movement to effect social change. To be called "essentialist" is tantamount to being labelled anti-feminist. A slogan with the force of a billy-stick in maintaining "political correctness" among feminists in the academy, essentialism is an empty signifier, mobilized by different groups of feminist theorists to legitimate the truth claims of their respective positions, to assert their right to construct the "real." The very mobility of the term and the contradictory valences within which it is articulated – discursive purity is an impossibility – point to its imbrication within discursive struggles. Rather than historicizing it or relating it to the history of philosophical essentialisms, feminists have invoked the term to distance and disallow certain kinds of discourse. The question of essences becomes the question of regulative political concepts. Within feminism, essentialism is, to paraphrase Irigaray, the old blind spot of symmetry, the question that refuses to go away. Invoked as critique by anti-essentialists, "essentialism" is, nonetheless, the unarticulated ground of their discourse against the claims of nature and biology. This is the case in its so-called "strategic" deployment in taking up "the risk of essentialism."<sup>1</sup> The problems with that utterance, Spivak subsequently acknowledges are the grounds they open up for a "politics of overdetermination," (Spivak 1989, 140) an anti-essentialist multiplicity, that serves as a justification for the personalism of liberal pluralism with its homogenization of difference.

A veritable critical carnival! Elaine Showalter critiques literary theories of sexual difference for being essentialist and theories grounded in linguistics and psychoanalysis for being ahistorical and reductive. All are associated with "writing the body," as the French term "*l'écriture féminine*" has been rendered into English. These are, as Ann Rosalind Jones writes, "problematic as well as powerful concepts. They have been criticized as idealist and essentialist, bound up in the very system they claim to undermine; they have been attacked as theoretically fuzzy and as fatal to constructive political action" (Jones 1985, 367). As formulated by Showalter, the problematic of a feminism of difference appears to be an argument for a universal femininity which has resulted from reversals of the masculine/feminine



dichotomy, so that everything that is devalorized by the phallogocentric now becomes valorised as universal feminine: nature, body, private, passive, emotional, sexuality, madness, etc. However, in its unstated assumptions about literature and reality and its position between feminist politics and literary evaluation, in its efforts to construct a separate canon of women's writing of female texts that express "authentic female experience," without theorizing the construction of gender or subjectivity, or indeed the reading and writing processes, Showalter's own criticism reproduces the commitment to a theory of the transparency of language and the fixity of subjectivity of the malestream literary criticism it would challenge. Both take over the very metaphysical categories set up by phallogocentrism to keep women in their places. Toril Moi has criticized Showalterian "gynocritics for its focus on female experience – on biology rather than on the cultural construction of femininity – for its failure to see texts as signifying processes," and reading and writing as "textual production," in short for being humanist empiricism, or essentialist (Moi 78-79). Moi, in turn has been critiqued for her complicity in this essentialist "reversal syndrome" in the confusion produced by "misunderstanding or essentialist extensions of the psychoanalytically based arguments of Kristeva and Irigaray which would celebrate a 'feminine' language" (Threadgold 1990, 9). Liberal feminist theoreticians of equality, attack radical feminisms of difference and post-structuralist feminisms of *différance* are, in turn, challenged on their own essentialism by materialist feminists and semioticians who also challenge each other, offering mutual accusations of essentialism.

The problem of rethinking the categories for conceptualizing the feminine from within the frames of phallogocentric discourse is locked in this double bind wherein the antagonistic relation between two social groups is frozen into a mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive division. To frame this impasse as antagonism instead of pluralism is to insist on the political stakes in this discursive struggle. It is also to point to possible resistances in subjectivity and self-representation where a self-reflexive subject produced in contradiction is situated both inside and outside the process of meaning-making. For instead of binary oppositions equality/difference (or masculine/feminine) as the valences of feminist theory, its field of relations may be conceptualized in terms of contradictions or paradoxes. As Catherine Belsey has pointed out, women as a group in our society are

produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses, in “the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality” and simultaneously “in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition” (Belsey 50). Such a fractured subject undermines idealist theories of a singular pre-existent identity (essence) to be recovered. Identity instead becomes an ever delayed possibility to be patched together within the clash of discourses producing a subject.

Michel Pécheux’s concept of the “discursive process” wherein meaning is produced agonistically from positions in struggle within a discursive field displaces humanist theories of pluralism with political theories of discursive clash. No practice or discourse exists in itself: on whatever side, it is shaped and preceded by what it is opposing and so can never dictate its own terms. “[W]ords ... change their meaning according to the ‘positions’ from which they are used within the ‘discursive process’” (Pecheux 112). What is thought within one discourse is related to what is unthought there but thought elsewhere in another way. “Feminine” is thought differently from the site of masculinity and that of femininity. So too, “essentialism” is conceptualized agonistically from the sites of liberal, radical, materialist feminisms or by Native women, for instance. Institutional and social constraints act through the ordering of words and expression within discourses. What is at stake in discursive struggles is this ordering and combining of words. In a given instance, under specific historical conditions, discursive formations are asymmetrically related to one another. They are however, sites of reconfiguration which may be, variously, a work of “recuperation-reproduction” (Pecheux 118) or a politically “productive” work (Pecheux 155), supporting the reigning discourse or working for redistribution in the discursive field.

Such a structural model of uneven development for the contradictory movements of and between discursive sites (texts, genres, practices) is similar to that of Bakhtin who also formulates the conflictual dimension of the social determination of the weight and value of discursive elements. In this, he sets out a materialist theory of discourse in which ideological creation – the production of meaning and values – is realized in the material social reality surrounding man [sic], an aspect of the materialized ideological horizon” (Bakhtin/Medvedev 8). Discourse is always addressed to the word of an other on the same theme, “at the other’s statement about the same object. The other’s

words are treated antagonistically, and this antagonism, no less than the very topic being discussed, is what determines the author's discourse" (Bakhtin 1984, 195). "Essentialism" as an example of "hidden polemic" or "polemical blow" struck at an other's discourse on feminism. Feminist groups each have their different predicates to complete the sentence "essentialism is —". To consider essentialism within the clash of networks of signifiers is, however, to consider feminisms as "signifying process or practice," to shift the frames of analysis from a reflective theory of language to a semiotic theory.

Representation or the making something appear to stand for something else, is a process of signification, of semiosis, of meaning-making, for representations are in fact signs that can be "taken" as referring to something else, something "real," outside signification, something which was not made but is. There is no single "truth," only different representations, different constructions, some of which are read as "fact," some as "fiction," depending on the way they are functionally contextualized, by whom and in whose interests. "Truth" or the "real" are fixed in discursive clashes by representations or apparatuses that solicit subjects. As Nicole Brossard writes: "La réalité des femmes n'est pas la réalité des hommes" (Brossard 1985, 143). Fictions of men such as the monetary system are taken for reality, the "realities" of some women such as rape or incest are taken as "fiction." "Interceptor le réel" becomes then a feminist project to interrogate and realign the discursive borders that establish these categories, a discursive combat waged through fictions or representations that work upon reality to defamiliarize it and expose the ideologies at work in its construction.

Gender itself is an effect of representation, functioning as an apparatus to produce sexual difference or, as Teresa de Lauretis phrases it, a "technology of gender." Modalities of address, protocols, dispositions to act, beliefs, are signifying practices, the "habitus" or ultimate interpretant which, according to Peirce, is the sign or relationship that interprets the representamen (or sign) that stands for an object in semiosis (Peirce 5. 473-492). Habit is posited not in individual agency but in a complex nexus of reciprocally constitutive effects between a subject and a social text. Rewording "habitus" as "experience," Teresa de Lauretis elaborates on the ways in which it is a semiotic production, both "the result and the condition of the social production of meaning" (de Lauretis 1987, 41-42). Gender as a technology is the

group of signifying practices constitutive of subjectivity whereby women, "as historical beings, subjects of 'real relations,'" are caught up in representation as "Woman ... the object and the very condition of representation." "That women continue to become Woman, continue to be caught in gender as Althusser's subject in ideology, and that we persist in that imaginary relation even as we know, as feminists, that we are not *that* but we are historical subjects governed by social relations, which centrally include gender – such is the contradiction that feminist theory must be built on, and its very condition of possibility" (de Lauretis 1987, 10). Women are both within and without representation, gender, for gender is the "representation of a relation," the "sex-gender system," both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus: the representation of gender is its construction. That is, "the construction of gender is both the product and process of its representation" (de Lauretis 1987, 4-5).

From the interstices, within the discursive struggle, between the representation of gender and what that representation makes unrepresentable in a specific discourse, emerges a space of contradiction, of heteronomy, a within/without position for "a-woman," women masquerading as Woman, or the position for the subject of feminism, subject in process.

What de Lauretis is arguing here, is that "female subjectivity and experience are necessarily couched in a specific relation to sexuality" (1987, 18). While gender is discursively constructed, it also engages the question of the historical and socially specific construction of sexuality and biology and their effects on consciousness. Biology and history in turn are understood as culturally inflected. The body is understood as a hinge or threshold between nature and culture. For the meaning the body has, the significance of the body as lived, varies with ideas about the body in a given culture. This significance is learned and developed in a milieu of social meaning and value. What is in question here is the "imaginary body" produced in the formation of the subject (Threadgold 1990, 31). Pain, for instance, is a semiotic process that produces a belief or disposition to act that is a habitus or culturally inflected response. Whether one screams, grits one's teeth, grabs for the aspirin bottle, calls for mother, depends on what are the culturally accepted protocols in response to the signals of pain which are produced as representations by the brain. Such responses are the interpretants or habitus of semiosis.

On a more complex level of semiotic practices, feminist biologists such as Ruth Hubbard have been demonstrating the ways in which we construct reality according to representations of sexual difference. Indeed, this has been the major focus of feminist epistemology (Harding). To the question, who is bigger, men or women, most people would reply "men." The answer might more appropriately be, "some men are taller than all women." For the range and variety of body sizes of males and females in different parts of the globe means that there are many areas of overlap in body sizes of men and women. But if we go into the street in Toronto and look at men and women walking in pairs, we note that the men are taller than the women – most of the time. If they aren't, we catch ourselves looking at shoes, to see if the woman is wearing flats or if the man has lifts on his heels. Anxious teenagers not sure of their ultimate body configurations know well the work that goes to produce these differences between men and women, differences in height that work to reproduce the same gender distinctions in height among male and female offspring of tall men and shorter women. Where is nature, where culture in this work of representation? The body, natural ground according to essentialism, is the site of complex discursive, semiotic and representational practices. In such a frame, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, becomes a problematic move. Sex itself is a gendered category. Gender is not merely the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex. Rather it designates the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established as difference. Gender is the discursive/cultural means by which "a natural sex" is produced and established as "pre-discursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. In these narratives, the body is not predicated upon mind/body, sex/gender distinctions in which one is prior to or ruled by the other binary, rather the body is a process with no "truth" without contextualization, where social discourse, thought and body are imbricated and mutually constitutive.

If, in the consideration of representation, the body is caught up in semiosis in such a way as to destabilize the body as fixed category in essentialist charges and countercharges, what then of the category of history so frequently invoked as touchstone of anti-essentialist discursive claims. Here too, in recent years, concern with representation has destabilized the truth claims of history to present the facts, only the facts. "What is fact? (f)act. the f stop of act. a still photo in the

ongoing cinerama," as Daphne Marlatt points out (Marlatt 31). Facts are actions or events which, as historian such as Hayden White and Dominick La Capra have shown, are fragments made perceptible and intelligible in/as narrative. What they have done is to raise questions about the way of framing the historical project, of reconstructing the past, which has been conceived in terms of a documentary model, that is, in terms of "factual or referential propositions that may be derived from them to provide information about specific times and places" (LaCapra 18). Instead, they suggest more attention be paid to historical work as a process of hypothesis-formation, testing and explanation. This would open the way for more work in historiography that would draw attention to the way "'documents' are themselves texts that 'process' or rework 'reality' and require a critical reading" (LaCapra 20). This would foreground both the historian's use of texts as documents in the "inferential construction of 'reality'" (La Capra 21) and his or her writing of the historical work as a "verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and process in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*" (White 2). Such a project of exposing the occluded contradictions by which history has constructed its protocols and modes of address as a discipline, this investigation into its ordering process by which it constitutes knowledge with claims to truth, circles around the question of representation, around the historians' manipulation of signs, around reading and writing – history as signifying practice.

Gender is a work here too as an effect of these representations, woman having been constructed as a non actor in history by the narratives that have privileged the vantage point of men, as Joan Gadol Kelly has pointed out. *Ana Historic*, as Daphne Marlatt so eloquently phrases it, "the a-historic hasn't a speaking part. what's imagination next to the weight of the (f)actual? well, you could say you've imagined your way into what she really wants ... if i'm telling a story i'm untelling it. untelling the real" (Marlatt 139-140, 141). An a-historic is elided from the narrative lines of established historiography, recoverable only with effort by the imagination to construct a fiction that would represent Ana/Ina/Annie (Innana), fully readable ...

From within a semiotic theory, "reality" and its representations are mutually constitutive, engaged in a constant process of meaning-making. The distinctions between "body" and "history" as nature

and culture, immutable, universal versus changeable, specific is a constantly shifting one when both are caught up in the process of representation, moving points within a field of possible relations each combination of which produces certain political effects. Essentialism?

If discursive clashes occur in historically specific instances, how is the essentialism debate positioned in Canadian feminist discourse? What are we to make of its significant absence in the texts submitted for this issue? Discussions of the problems of the metaphoricity of discourse in French feminist theory, problems of the theories of the sign, we have (Binhammer), along with discussions of the construction of the feminine in Romantic theory (Christakos), of British materialist attacks on the liberal humanist presuppositions of American feminism, themselves critiqued as essentialist in light of Kenneth Burke's proto-structuralist analysis of the grammar of motives (Jackman). Nothing, however, on essentialism as it has been used in Canadian feminist debates.

A problem in translation, there certainly is. The absence of theoretical texts in French formulating the debate in these pages, the proliferation of creative texts that take for granted a preoccupation with a *textual* corpus is evidence of this lacunae. Louise Cotnoir who writes poems instead of an introduction. From within a theoretical frame that presupposes a theory of the sign, every utterance as representation, as mediation, the question of essentialism cannot be formulated. It can only be played out in the process of signification where the slippage of signifier and signified displaces the unary subject, the fixing of the feminine as presence. Then too, the concept of gender which, in English, distinguishes the construction of masculinity and femininity as socially produced from sex, or biological difference, has no cognate in French. While it might be said that in French the feminine is confounded with female, culture overdetermined by biology, the overlapping could be thought of inversely as the incapacity of conceptualizing biology outside of representation. Sex itself is a gendered category, a representation. Gender is the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" is produced.

The question of essentialism may be a non question in French feminist discourse concerned with semiosis, and consequently in Quebec feminism. Why though have the contributions in English that take up the question located the debate outside Canada? Is this shift in focus a failure of the politics of reading to address the ground of one's

textual engagement, a failure in what Derrida calls a responsibility to the trace of the other in the instance of the enunciation? This is to assume a transparency and unity of audience, to take up a representative position and to speak for someone, for in this case, a presumed universal feminist audience. The speaker may articulate her positionality, but fails to deconstruct the binary opposition of investigator and audience, fails to address the exclusions that fragment one's audience. This pluralism or corporatism when one takes the representative position assumes that the "future is simply a future present" not a building for difference (Spivak 1989, 152). Essentialism creeping in the back door when identity is not brought to a crisis. The "I" speaking/writing to "you" do not necessarily form "we." Is this reluctance to locate the debate close to home a strategy to maintain the illusion of unity among a relatively small feminist literary community?

How does essentialism resonate in Canadian feminist discourse? The term does appear in the Canadian context. Not where one might have expected it in the debates over racism at the Women's Press, when there was a challenge to the use made of the voice of marginalized cultures by those who were not members of these oppressed groups. This led to the establishment of acceptable textual practices that involved, among other things, not using the word "black" in a negative connotation and not using the culture of an oppressed group, an other. Framed as a problem of appropriation, this assumed an already fixed identity to be stolen rather than something to be made (and unmade) in certain institutionally validated representations. The debate took place between two groups of women each claiming discursive purity for policies that could be thought of as non-racist and anti-racist.<sup>2</sup> Writers of colour countered there was no policy of affirmative action to publish the works of women of colour (Nourbese Philip). In neither case was the discursive clash over who had the right to speak for (represent) the other positioned within a history of the discursive formation of Canadian literature and its construction of the racism through representational norms. Indeed, nowhere was there an acknowledgement that literature is a *signifying* practice. The claim that only women of colour can write in the voice of women of colour is, however to engage in an analogy confusing ontology and epistemology which, according to Gayatri Spivak, is to exercise a self-marginalized purism that maintains the dominant discourse in simple inversion rather than challenges the grounds on



which its norms have been established (Spivak 1988, 253). Race like sex, is an apparatus of production whereby racial difference is established as a semiotic category positioning people in relation to power according to distinctions in skin colour. Questions of representation are crucial in producing racial difference. In Canadian society, whites exert power to shape discourse through their control of institutional practices that regulate acceptable modes of address, protocols and textual strategies. These norms make (a) difference!

Neither has the term essentialism emerged in another context where it might have been expected, to critique the liberal humanist assumptions about literature as a *reflection* of women's experience of many of the contributors to *Language in Her Eye* who failed to address the question of literature as a signifying practice or to foreground the representativity of their own speaking position in their contributions. In a recent review, Lola Tostevin criticized Margaret Atwood for her naive view of feminism based on an outdated understanding of its agenda unchanged since the 1960's and challenged an editor's failure to understand the theoretical presuppositions of the deconstructionism she was invoking. What the alternative position might be from which the challenge was launched, one that might foreground representation and discourse, was not elaborated. Nor was essentialism invoked as closure. The question was dis/placed into an argument *ad feminam*. There has not been a strong materialist tradition in Canadian literary feminism from which to launch an attack on the "essentialism" of monistic idealism. Indeed, within Canadian "academic" feminism, the strong position of socialist feminists has led to a quarrel between "materialists" and "culturalists." The work of "culturalists" – which includes all literary theorists working on questions of difference – has been understood by socialist or materialist feminists as essentialist (Théodorakis), concerned with idea or ideology (superstructure) not with their grounding in materialist modes of production. Literary analyses by socialist feminists espouse a reflective theory of language and focus on the content of fiction, especially attacking Margaret Atwood for writing dystopian rather than Utopian fiction in the future perfect and for proposing liberal, individualistic resolutions to her novels (Finn). The term 'essentialism' is not used in these debates, however.

The term has been used several times in feminist analysis in 1989. It was the emergence in print of a term on everybody's lips that

prompted this issue of *Tessera* on the essentialist controversy. Two of these instances allude to philosophical essentialism in light of the idealist insistence on unity and purity. The third refers to a fixity of the binaries in the alignment of feminine specificity. "Everywhere Marlatt seeks the *essential* self, unadulterated by the wrong structures of knowing. Her dream is Edenic. She dreams of return, imagines she will be restored," writes Dennis Cooley (78 emphasis added). "The text thus places, against the categorizing and collecting masculine, an *essential* feminine inside which the narrator can 'stand in my jeans and sandals unveiled, ... dance out names at the heart of where we are lost, hers first of all, wild mother dancing on the waves," writes Frank Davey (1989 45, emphasis added) who goes on to ponder the problems this observation raises with respect to the closure of Marlatt's text where the binary masculine/feminine is contradicted by the emphasis on textuality which inverts this particular opposition. *How Hug a Stone* will support readings that foreground the mother as textual site of undecidability and ambiguity, of the difference within, of the (*un*)heimlich (Moyes). Language-centred this writing may be, foregrounding its status as discourse, according to Lola Tostevin, but its strategies differ from those of *écriture féminine* which attempts through textual play and foregrounding the metaphoricity of all language to displace and exceed authority, truth and the illusionary essence of origins. While "[m]uch of Marlatt's use of etymology proliferates meaning but more and more her work relies on ordinary/original meaning" (Tostevin 1989, 35). Etymology is a genealogy that parallels the search for the lost mother.

What is at stake here, suggests Tostevin, quoting from Alice Jardine (1985), is "the attempt to posit a new form of catharsis – to purify (women's) writing of male topoi – [which] is a return to the worst extremes of our metaphysical tradition" (39). The search for discursive purity is equated here with the purported maintaining of sexual difference as *the* difference, writing women into the "blank" page of history, rather than exploring the differences "between women and women, but perhaps more importantly, within each woman" (39). How this decentred subjectivity might be textualized is not explicated. A similar argument is advanced by Anthony Purdy with respect to the critical reception of Jovette Marchessault's work placing it as object of a cult in a woman-centred sacred knowledge: "rhétorique du nouvel âge, d'un féminisme essentialiste et mystique

qui réduit le texte littéraire à des dimensions mythologique et religieuse" (Purdy 267). This produces a unified, coherent Truth of a work which he reads as polyphonic and heterogeneous (Purdy 271). Read within the discursive context of a critique of Atwood's "feminist poetics" for its reinscription of the traditional binary oppositions of masculine/feminine (Davey 1984) and the assessment of Canadian feminist theory as product of the anxiety of influence, "My Book is Bigger than Yours" (Kroetsch), this deployment of essentialism within Canadian critical discourse may be read as a strategic attempt at the containment of a feminist discourse that addresses female specificity. Instead, what is privileged is "gynesis" (Jardine 1985), the putting of the feminine into discourse, the project of figuring "woman" in philosophy from Nietzsche to Derrida in a way that refuses to substantialize woman, conceptualized as that which is forever heterogeneous, unthinkable. This constructs a place for men in feminism. "Femmeninism" (Jardine 1987).

Announced for a forthcoming issue of *Room of One's Own* on Canadian feminist theory is an article by a woman that denounces the essentialism of Nicole Brossard. This promises to reorient the debate in other directions. Taken in conjunction with the critique of Marlatt, this angle on Brossard might be seen as a critique of a lesbian focus on sexual difference as *the* difference in feminism to the exclusion of a concern with the fractured, heterogeneity of all subjects. However, it may also be a continuation of the tendency to read the body to the letter, to read language referentially rather than figuratively, as repetition or re-presentation. Though Brossard continually writes of the imaginary body, the textual body (le cortex), the body constructed in semiosis through the desiring transferential practice of reading that works on signifiers, on reading as the construction of text and meaning, her audiences read the metonyms analogically to attempt to position her always as/in body (Godard 1989). That the body is always staged representation, whose representational strategies are foregrounded in Brossard's texts which debate the problematic of the split between mind/body that refuses the thinking woman, the woman who, merging feeling and thinking, "makes sense," is elided in a reading that fixes the signifier "body" in a network of signifiers of biological processes rather than in a network of signifiers of semiotic processes. As Brossard's texts play out the slippage of signifiers, sex is a gendered category discursively produced. Significantly, her

Utopian “woman” can only be “re/cited” in the conditional anterior as a “possibility” of the fiction of the hologram. Woman emerges as an effect of reading, from a work upon signification that actualizes virtual codes in a particular configuration from her very different site of reading. Brossard problematizes the split between writer and reader in the slippage of translation – in the excessive play of signifiers – in *Le désert mauve*.

Effect of reading, of organizing the signs body, woman, women into networks, that align them variously with respect to being and becoming, “essentialism” in these discursive positions articulates the configurations differently in order to privilege different “grounds” for truth. The relative absence of Canadian/Quebec referents in the essentialist controversy is not the sign of discursive consensus around the issue of feminism(s) but rather of a struggle in the process of articulation. That the term essentialism has not always been used is not that the issue is irrelevant, but that the debate is being framed differently. Instead of deploying essentialism to critique the liberal humanist discourse of much of Canadian feminist literary criticism, those who would take up an oppositionary stance are reframing the terms of the debate to carry out an archeological project of discourse analysis, to bring the discourse to a crisis and attempt to articulate its points of contradiction, the moments where the traces of the ordering and organizing categories that are its occluded grounds may be read in the margins it produces, in its cuts and exclusions. The relevant questions then are on a different order, questions not of metaphysics but of ethics. Who is speaking? To whom? In what are the processes by which it does so? The focus is changed in the issues at stake from ontology to epistemology, from a discourse of truth to one of power/knowledge, site not of universal truth but of struggle over meaning. I write in the future perfect, however. This *Tessera* issue on the essentialist controversy in Canada/Quebec is inscribed in an ongoing process.

### Notes

1. This phrase was first used by Gayatri Spivak in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz, then developed by Teresa de Lauretis.
2. This is a radical simplification of a very complex debate. I have read the complete documentation of the struggle. It should be noted that the anti-racist “Front of the Bus” collective included several women of colour in what was nonetheless primarily a struggle among two groups of white women.

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