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The above reflects only a few of the interesting points of difference in this discussion, i.e., those that *I* identify as points of difference and also as interesting. The authors, themselves, offer other perspectives. I invite you, therefore, to turn your attention to the following essays and responses to form your own assessment "on what this volume is about."

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Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance

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I. The Feminist Alliance With Postmodernism

A decade ago a question haunted feminist theorists who had participated in the experiences of the New Left and who had come to feminism after an initial engagement with varieties of twentieth-century Marxist theory: whether Marxism and feminism were reconcilable, or whether their alliance could end only in an "unhappy marriage"?¹ Today with Marxist theory world-wide on the retreat, feminists are no longer preoccupied with saving their unhappy union. Instead it is a new alliance, or misalliance—depending on one's perspective—that has proved more seductive.

Viewed from within the intellectual and academic culture of western capitalist democracies, feminism and postmodernism have emerged as two leading currents of our time. They have discovered their affinities in the struggle against the grand narratives of Western Enlightenment and modernity. Feminism and postmodernism are thus often mentioned as if their current union was a foregone conclusion; yet certain characterizations of postmodernism should make us rather ask "feminism *or* postmodernism?" At issue, of course, are not merely terminological quibbles. Both feminism and postmodernism are not merely descriptive categories: they are constitutive and evaluative terms, informing and helping define the very practices which they attempt to describe. As categories of the present, they project

modes of thinking about the future and evaluating the past. Let us begin then by considering one of the recent more comprehensive characterizations of the "postmodern moment" provided by a feminist theorist.

In her recent book, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Jane Flax characterizes the postmodern position as subscription to the theses of the death of Man, of History and of Metaphysics.²

— The Death of Man. "Postmodernists wish to destroy," she writes, "all essentialist conceptions of human being or nature. . . . In fact Man is a social, historical, or linguistic artifact, not a noumenal or transcendental Being. . . . Man is forever caught in the web of fictive meaning, in chains of signification, in which the subject is merely another position in language."³

— The Death of History. "The idea that History exists for or is his Being is more than just another precondition and justification for the fiction of Man. This idea also supports and underlies the concept of Progress, which is itself such an important part of Man's story. . . . Such an idea of Man and History privileges and presupposes the value of unity, homogeneity, totality, closure, and identity."⁴

— The Death of Metaphysics. According to postmodernists, "Western metaphysics has been under the spell of the 'metaphysics of presence' at least since Plato. . . . For postmodernists this quest for the Real conceals most Western philosophers' desire, which is to master the world once and for all by enclosing it within an illusory but absolute system they believe represents or corresponds to a unitary Being beyond history, particularity and change. . . . Just as the Real is the ground of Truth, so too philosophy as the privileged representative of the Real and interrogator of truth claims must play a 'foundational' role in all 'positive knowledge'.⁵

This clear and cogent characterization of the postmodernist position enables us to see why feminists find in this critique of the ideals of Western rationalism and the Enlightenment more than a congenial ally. Feminist versions of the three theses concerning the Death of Man, History, and Metaphysics can be articulated.

— The feminist counterpoint to the postmodernist theme of "the Death of Man" can be named the "Demystification of the Male Subject of Reason." Whereas postmodernists situate "Man," or the sovereign subject of the theoretical and practical reason of the tradition, in contingent, historically changing, and culturally variable social,

linguistic, and discursive practices, feminists claim that "gender," and the various practices contributing to its constitution, is one of the most crucial contexts in which to situate the purportedly neutral and universal subject of reason.⁶ The western philosophical tradition articulates the deep structures of the experiences and consciousness of a self which it claims to be representative for humans as such. But in its deepest categories western philosophy obliterates differences of gender as these shape and structure the experience and subjectivity of the self. Western reason posits itself as the discourse of the one self-identical subject, thereby blinding us to and in fact delegitimizing the presence of otherness and difference which do not fit into its categories. From Plato over Descartes to Kant and Hegel western philosophy thematizes the story of the male subject of reason.

— The feminist counterpoint to the "Death of History" would be the "Engendering of Historical Narrative." If the subject of the western intellectual tradition has usually been the white, propertied, Christian, male head of household, then History as hitherto recorded and narrated has been "his story." Furthermore, the various philosophies of history which have dominated since the Enlightenment have forced historical narrative into unity, homogeneity, and linearity, with the consequence that fragmentation, heterogeneity, and above all the varying pace of different temporalities as experienced by different groups have been obliterated.⁷ We need only remember Hegel's quip that Africa has no history.⁸ Until very recently neither did women have their own history, their own narrative with different categories of periodization and with different structural regularities.

— The feminist counterpoint to the "Death of Metaphysics" would be "Feminist Skepticism toward the Claims of Transcendent Reason." If the subject of reason is not a supra-historical and context-transcendent being, but the theoretical and practical creations and activities of this subject bear in every instance the marks of the context out of which they emerge, then the subject of philosophy is inevitably embroiled with knowledge-governing interests which mark and direct its activities. For feminist theory, the most important "knowledge-guiding interest" in Habermas's terms, or disciplinary matrix of truth and power in Foucault's terms, is gender relations and the social, economic, political and symbolic constitution of gender differences among human beings.⁹

Despite this "elective affinity" between feminism and postmodernism, however, each of the three theses

interpreted to permit if not contradictory then at least radically divergent theoretical strategies. And for feminists, which set of theoretical claims they adopt as their own cannot be a matter of indifference. As Linda Alcoff has recently observed, feminist theory is undergoing a profound identity crisis at the moment.¹⁰ The postmodernist position(s) thought through to their conclusions may eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women's movements altogether.

II. Feminist Skepticism Toward Postmodernism

Let us begin by considering the thesis of the "Death of Man" for a closer understanding of the conceptual option(s) allowed by the postmodernist position(s). The weak version of this thesis would situate the subject in the context of various social, linguistic, and discursive practices. This view, however, would by no means question the desirability and theoretical necessity of articulating a more adequate, less deluded, and less mystified vision of subjectivity. The traditional attributes of the philosophical subject of the West, like self-reflexivity, the capacity for acting on principles, rational accountability for one's actions and the ability to project a life-plan into the future, in short some form of autonomy and rationality, could then be reformulated by taking account of the radical situatedness of the subject.

The strong version of the thesis of the "Death of the Man" is perhaps best captured in Flax's own phrase that "Man is forever caught in the web of fictive meaning, in chains of signification, *in which the subject is merely another position in language.*" The subject thus dissolves into the chain of significations of which it was supposed to be the initiator. Along with this dissolution of the subject into yet "another position in language" disappear of course concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity, and autonomy. The subject that is but another position in language can no longer master and create that distance between itself and the chain of significations in which it is immersed such that it can reflect upon them and creatively alter them.

The strong version of the "Death of the Subject" thesis is not compatible with the goals of feminism.¹¹ Surely, a subjectivity that would not be structured by language, by narrative and by the symbolic structures of narrative available in a culture is unthinkable. We tell of who we are, of the "I" that we are by means of a narrative. "I was

born on such and such a date, as the daughter of such and such . . ." etc. These narratives are deeply colored and structured by the codes of expectable and understandable biographies and identities in our cultures. We can concede all that, but nevertheless we must still argue that we are not merely extensions of our histories, that vis-à-vis our own stories we are in the position of author and character at once. The situated and gendered subject is heteronomously determined but still strives toward autonomy. I want to ask how in fact the very project of female emancipation would even be thinkable without such a regulative principle on agency, autonomy, and selfhood?

Feminist appropriations of Nietzsche on this question, therefore, can only lead to self-incoherence. Judith Butler, for example, wants to extend the limits of reflexivity in thinking about the self beyond the dichotomy of "sex" and "gender." "Gender," she writes "is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or a "natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which culture acts.*"¹² For Butler, we might say, the myth of the already sexed body is the epistemological equivalent of the myth of the given: just as the given can be identified only within a discursive framework, so too it is the culturally available codes of gender that "sexualize" a body and that construct the directionality of that body's desire.

Butler also maintains that to think beyond the univocity and dualisms of gender categories, we must bid farewell to the "doer beyond the deed," to the self as the subject of a life-narrative. "In an application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or condoned, we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."¹³ If this view of the self is adopted, is there any possibility of changing those "expressions" which constitute us? If we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform, is there ever any chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and let it rise only if one can have a say in the production of the play itself? Isn't this what the struggle over gender is all about? Surely we can criticize the supremacy of presuppositions of identity politics and challenge the supremacy of heterosexist and dualist positions in the women's movement. Yet is such a challenge only thinkable via a complete debunking of any concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy? What follows from this Nietzschean position is a vision of the

self as a masquerading performer, except of course we are now asked to believe that there is no self behind the mask. Given how fragile and tenuous women's sense of selfhood is in many cases, how much of a hit and miss affair their struggles for autonomy are, this reduction of female agency to a "doing without the doer" at best appears to me to be making a virtue out of necessity.¹⁴

Consider now the thesis of "the Death of History." Of all positions normally associated with postmodernism, this particular one appears to me to be the least problematical. Disillusionment with the ideals of progress, awareness of the atrocities committed in this century in the name technological and economic progress, the political and moral bankruptcy of the natural sciences which put themselves in the service of the forces of human and planetary destruction—these are the shared sentiments of our century. Intellectuals and philosophers in the twentieth century are to be distinguished from one another less as being friends and opponents of the belief in progress but more in terms of the following: whether the farewell from the "metanarratives of the Enlightenment" can be exercised in terms of a continuing belief in the power of rational reflection or whether this farewell is itself seen as but a prelude to a departure from such reflection.

Interpreted as a weak thesis, the Death of History could mean two things: theoretically, this could be understood as a call to end the practice of "grand narratives" which are essentialist and monocausal. Politically the end of such grand narratives would mean rejecting the hegemonial claims of any group or organization to "represent" the forces of history, to be moving with such forces, or to be acting in their name. The critique of the various totalitarian and totalizing movements of our century from national socialism and fascism to orthodox Marxism and other forms of nationalisms is certainly one of the most formative political experiences of postmodernist intellectuals like Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida.¹⁵ This is also what makes the death of history thesis interpreted as the end of "grand narratives" so attractive to feminist theorists. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson write, for example: "... the practice of feminist politics in the 1980s has generated a new set of pressures which have worked against meta-narratives. In recent years, poor and working-class women, women of color, and lesbians have finally won a wider hearing for their objections to feminist theories which fail to illuminate their lives and address their problems. They have exposed the earlier quasi-metanarratives, with their assumptions of universal female dependence and

confinement to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women who dominated the beginnings of the second wave . . . Thus, as the class, sexual, racial, and ethnic awareness of the movement has altered, so has the preferred conception of theory. It has become clear that quasi-metanarratives hamper rather than promote sisterhood, since they elide differences among women and among the forms of sexism to which different women are differentially subject."¹⁶

The strong version of the thesis of the "Death of History" would imply, however, a *prima facie* rejection of any historical narrative that concerns itself with the *longue durée* and that focuses on macro-rather than on micro-social practices. Nicholson and Fraser also warn against this "nominalist" tendency in Lyotard's work.¹⁷ I agree with them that it would be a mistake to interpret the death of "grand narratives" as sanctioning in the future local stories as opposed to global history. The more difficult question suggested by the strong thesis of the "death of history" appears to me to be different: even while we dispense with grand narratives, how can we rethink the relationship between politics and historical memory? Is it possible for struggling groups not to interpret history in light of a moral-political imperative, namely, the imperative of the future interest in emancipation? Think for a moment of the way in which feminist historians in the last two decades have not only discovered women and their hitherto invisible lives and work, but of the manner in which they have also revalorized and taught us to see with different eyes such traditionally female and previously denigrated activities like gossip, quilt-making, and even forms of typically female sickness like headaches, hysteria, and taking to bed during menstruation.¹⁸ In this process of the "feminist transvaluation of values" our present interest in women's strategies of survival and historical resistance has led us to imbue these activities, which were wholly uninteresting from the standpoint of the traditional historian, with new meaning and significance.

While it is no longer possible or desirable to produce "grand narratives of history, the "death of history" thesis occludes the epistemological interest in history and in historical narrative which accompany the aspirations of all struggling historical actors. Once this "interest" in recovering the lives and struggles of those "losers" and "victims" of history is lost, can we produce engaged feminist theory? I remain skeptical that the call to a "postmodern-feminist theory" that would be pragmatic and fallibilistic, that "would take its method

and categories to the specific task at hand, using multiple categories when appropriate and foreswearing the metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method or feminist epistemology¹⁹ would also be a call toward an emancipatory appropriation of past narratives. What would distinguish this type of fallibilistic pragmatics of feminist theory from the usual self-understanding of empirical and value-free social science? Can feminist theory be postmodernist and still retain an interest in emancipation?²⁰

Finally, let me articulate strong and weak versions of the “death of metaphysics” thesis. In considering this point it would be important to note right at the outset that much of the postmodernist critique of western metaphysics itself proceeds under the spell of a metanarrative, namely, the narrative first articulated by Heidegger and then developed by Derrida that “Western metaphysics has been under the spell of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ at least since Plato . . .” This characterization of the philosophical tradition allows postmodernists the rhetorical advantage of presenting what they are arguing against in its most simple-minded and least defensive versions. Listen again to Flax’s words: “For postmodernists this quest for the Real conceals the philosophers’ desire, which is to master the world” or “Just as the Real is the ground of Truth, so too philosophy as the privilege representative of the Real . . .” etc. But is the philosophical tradition so monolithic and so essentialist as postmodernists would like to claim? Would not even Hobbes shudder at the suggestion that the “Real is the ground of Truth”? What would Kant say when confronted with the claim that “philosophy is the privileged representation of the Real”? Would not Hegel consider the view that concepts and language are one sphere and the “Real” yet another merely a version of a naive correspondence theory of truth which the chapter on “Sense Certainty” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* eloquently dispensed with? In its strong version the “death of metaphysics” thesis not only subscribes to a grandiose metanarrative, but more significantly, this grandiose metanarrative flattens out the history of modern philosophy and the competing conceptual schemes it contains to the point of unrecognizability. Once this history is rendered unrecognizable, then the conceptual and philosophical problems involved in this proclamation of the “death of metaphysics” can be neglected.

The version of the “death of metaphysics” thesis which is today more influential than the Heidegger-Derrida tall tale about the

“metaphysics of presence” is Richard Rorty’s account. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty has shown in a subtle and convincing manner that empiricist as well as rationalist projects in the modern period presupposed that philosophy, in contradistinction from the developing natural sciences in this period, could articulate the basis of validity of right knowledge and correct action. Rorty names this the project of “epistemology”;²¹ this is the view that philosophy is a meta-discourse of legitimation, articulating the criteria of validity presupposed by all other discourses. Once it ceases to be a discourse of justification, philosophy loses its *raison d’être*. This is indeed the crux of the matter. Once we have detranscendentalized, contextualized, historicized, genderized the subject of knowledge, the context of inquiry, and even the methods of justification, what remains of philosophy?²² Does not philosophy become a form of genealogical critique of regimes of discourse and power as they succeed each other in their endless historical monotony? Or maybe philosophy becomes a form of thick cultural narration of the sort that hitherto only poets had provided us with? Or maybe all that remains of philosophy is a form of sociology of knowledge, which instead of investigating the conditions of the validity of knowledge and action, investigates the empirical conditions under which communities of interpretation generate such validity claims?

Why is this question concerning the identity and future and maybe the possibility of philosophy of interest to feminists? Can feminist theory not flourish without getting embroiled in the arcane debates about the end or transformation of philosophy? The inclination of the majority of feminist theorists at the present is to argue that we can side-step this question; even if we do not want to ignore it, we must not be committed to answer it one way or another. Fraser and Nicholson ask: “How can we conceive a version of criticism without philosophy which is robust enough to handle the tough job of analyzing sexism in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity?”²³ My answer is that we cannot, and it is this which makes me doubt that as feminists we can adopt postmodernism as a theoretical ally. Social criticism without philosophy is not possible, and without social criticism the project of a feminist theory, which is committed at once to knowledge and to the emancipatory interests of women is inconceivable. Sabina Lovibond has articulated the dilemma of postmodernists quite well:

I think we have reason to be wary, not only of the unqualified Nietzschean vision of an end of legitimation, but also of the suggestion that it would somehow be "better" if legitimation exercises were carried out in a self-consciously parochial spirit. For if feminism aspires to be something more than a reformist movement, then it is bound sooner or later to find itself calling the parish boundaries into question.

So postmodernism seems to face a dilemma: either it can concede the necessity, in terms of the aims of feminism, of "turning the world upside down" in the way just outlined—thereby opening a door once again to the Enlightenment idea of a total reconstruction of society on rational lines; or it can dogmatically reaffirm the arguments already marshalled against that idea—thereby licensing the cynical thought that, here as elsewhere, "who will do what to whom under the new pluralism is depressingly predictable."²⁴

Faced with this objection, the answer of postmodernists committed both to the project of social criticism and to the thesis of the death of philosophy as a metanarrative of legitimation will be that the "local narratives," *les petits récits*, which constitute our everyday social practices or language-games, are themselves reflexive and self-critical enough to pass judgments on themselves. The Enlightenment fiction of philosophical reflection, of *episteme* juxtaposed to the noncritical practice of everyday *doxa*, is precisely that, a fiction of legitimation which ignores that everyday practices and traditions also have their own criteria of legitimation and criticism. The question then would be, if among the criteria made available to us by various practices, language games, and cultural traditions we could not find some which would serve feminists in their task of social criticism and radical political transformation.²⁵ Following Michael Walzer, such postmodernists might wish to maintain that the view of the social critic is never "the view from nowhere," but always the view of the one situated somewhere, in some culture, society and tradition.²⁶

I should now like to consider this objection.

III. Feminism as Situated Criticism

The obvious answer to any defender of the view of "situated criticism" is that cultures, societies and traditions are not monolithic; univocal and homogenous fields of meaning. However one wishes to

ple as "the Anglo-American liberal tradition of thought," "the tradition of progressive and interventionist jurisprudence," "the Judeo-Christian tradition," "the culture of the West," "the legacy of the Suffragettes," "the tradition of courtly love," "Old Testament views of justice," "the political culture of democratic welfare states," etc., all these characterizations are themselves "ideal types" in some Weberian sense. They are constructed out of the tapestry of meaning and interpretation which constitutes the horizon of our social lifeworld. The social critic does not find criteria of legitimation and self-criticism to be given in the culture as one might find, say, apples on a tree and goldfish in an aquarium; she no less than social actors is in the position of constantly interpreting, appropriating, reconstructing and constituting the norms, principles, and values which are an aspect of the lifeworld. There is never a single set of constitutive criteria to appeal to in characterizing complex social practices. Complex social practices, like constitutional traditions, ethical and political views, religious beliefs, scientific institutions are not like games of chess. The social critic cannot assume that when she turns to an immanent analysis and characterization of these practices, she will find a single set of criteria on which there is such universal consensus that one can simply assume that by juxtaposing these criteria to the actual carrying out of the practice one has accomplished the task of immanent social criticism. So the first defect of situated criticism is a kind of "hermeneutic monism of meaning," the assumption namely that the narratives of our culture are so univocal and uncontroversial that in appealing to them one could simply be exempt from the task of evaluative, ideal-typical reconstruction.²⁷ Social criticism needs philosophy precisely because the narratives of our cultures are so conflictual and irreconcilable that, even when one appeals to them, a certain ordering of one's normative priorities and a clarification of those principles in the name of which one speaks is unavoidable.

The second defect of "situated criticism" is to assume that the constitutive norms of a given culture, society, and tradition will be sufficient to enable one to exercise criticism in the name of a desirable future. There certainly may be times when one's own culture, society and tradition are so reified, dominated by such brutal forces, when debate and conversation are so dried up or simply made so impossible that the social critic becomes the social exile. Not only social critics in modernity, from Thoreau to the Frankfurt School, from Albert Camus to the dissidents of Eastern Europe, have exemplified this ges-

exile, chiliastic sects, mystical brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and prophets who have abandoned their cities. Certainly the social critic need not be the social exile; however, insofar as criticism presupposes a necessary distanciation of oneself from one's everyday certitudes, maybe eventually to return to them and to reaffirm them at a higher level of analysis and justification, to this extent the vocation of the social critic is more like the vocation of the social exile and the expatriate than the vocation of the one who never left home, who never had to challenge the certitude of her own way of life. And to leave home is not to end up nowhere; it is to occupy a space outside the walls of the city, in a host country, in a different social reality. Is this not in effect the quintessential postmodern condition in the twentieth century? Maybe the nostalgia for situated criticism is itself a nostalgia for home, for the certitudes of one's own culture and society in a world in which no tradition, no culture, and no society can exist any more without interaction and collaboration, confrontation and exchange. When cultures and societies clash, where do we stand as feminists, as social critics and political activists?

Are we then closer to resolving the question posed at the end of the previous section as to whether feminist social criticism without philosophy was possible? In considering the postmodernists' thesis of the "death of metaphysics," I suggested that the weak version of this thesis proceeded from a rhetorical construction of the history of philosophy as "a metaphysics of presence," while the strong version of the thesis would eliminate, I argued, not only metanarratives of legitimation but the practice of legitimation and criticism altogether. The postmodernist could then respond that this need not be the case, and that there were internal criteria of legitimation and criticism in our culture which the social critic could turn to such that social criticism without philosophy would be possible. I am now arguing that the practice of immanent social criticism or situated social criticism has two defects: first, the turn to immanent or internal criteria of legitimation appears to exempt one from the task of philosophical justification only because the postmodernists assume, *inter alia*, that there is one obvious set of such criteria to appeal to. But if cultures and traditions are more like competing sets of narratives and incoherent tapestries of meaning, then the social critic must herself construct out of these conflictual and incoherent accounts the set of criteria in the name of which she speaks. The "hermeneutic monism of meaning" brings no exemption from the

In the second place I have argued that the vocation of social criticism might require social exile, for there might be times when the immanent norms and values of a culture are so reified, dead, or petrified that one can no longer speak in their name. The social critic who is in exile does not adopt the "view from nowhere" but the "view from outside the walls of the city," wherever those walls and those boundaries might be. It may indeed be no coincidence that from Hypatia to Diotima to Olympe de Gouges and to Rosa Luxemburg, the vocation of the feminist thinker and critic has led her to leave home and the city walls.

IV. Feminism and the Postmodernist Retreat from Utopia

In the previous sections of this paper I have disagreed with the view of some feminist theorists that feminism and postmodernism are conceptual and political allies. A certain version of postmodernism is not only incompatible with but would undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women. This undermining occurs because in its strong version postmodernism is committed to three theses: the death of man, understood as the death of the autonomous, self-reflective subject, capable of acting on principle; the death of history, understood as the severance of the epistemic interest in history of struggling groups in constructing their past narratives; the death of metaphysics, understood as the impossibility of criticizing or legitimizing institutions, practices, and traditions other than through the immanent appeal to the self-legitimation of "small narratives." Interpreted thus, postmodernism undermines the feminist commitment to women's agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women's own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender "in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity."

I dare suggest in these concluding considerations that postmodernism has produced a "retreat from utopia" within feminism. By "utopia" I do not mean the modernist understanding of this term as the wholesale restructuring of our social and political universe according to some rationally worked-out plan. These utopias of the Enlightenment have not only ceased to convince but with the self-initiated exit of previously existing "socialist utopias" from their state of grace, one of the greatest rationalist utopias of mankind, the

tion, has come to an end. The end of these rationalistic visions of social engineering cannot dry up the sources of utopia in humanity. As for the longing for the "wholly other" (*das ganz Andere*), for that which is not yet, such utopian thinking is a practical-moral imperative. Without such a regulative principle of hope, not only morality but also radical transformation is unthinkable. What scares the opponents of utopia, like Lyotard for example, is that in the name of such future utopias the present in its multiple ambiguity, plurality, and contradiction will be reduced to a flat grand narrative. I share Lyotard's concerns insofar as utopian thinking becomes an excuse either for the crassest instrumentalism in the present—the end justifies the means—or to the extent that the coming utopia exempts the undemocratic and authoritarian practices of the present from critique. Yet we cannot deal with these political concerns by rejecting the ethical impulse of utopia but only by articulating the normative principles of democratic action and organization in the present. Will the postmodernists join us in this task or will they be content with singing the swan song of normative thinking in general?

The retreat from utopia within feminist theory in the last decade has taken the form of debunking as essentialist any attempt to formulate a feminist ethic, a feminist politics, a feminist concept of autonomy, and even a feminist aesthetic. The fact that the views of Gilligan or Chodorow or Sarah Ruddick (or for that matter Kristeva) articulate only the sensitivities of white, middle-class, affluent, first-world, heterosexual women may be true (although I even have empirical doubts about this). Yet what are we ready to offer in their place? As a project of an ethics which should guide us in the future are we able to offer a better vision than the synthesis of autonomous justice thinking and empathetic care? As a vision of the autonomous personality to aspire to in the future are we able to articulate a sense of self better than the model of autonomous individuality with fluid ego-boundaries and not threatened by otherness?²⁸ As a vision of feminist politics are we able to articulate a better model for the future than a radically democratic polity which also furthers the values of ecology, nonmilitarism, and solidarity of peoples? Postmodernism can teach us the theoretical and political traps of why utopias and foundational thinking can go wrong, but it should not lead to a retreat from utopia altogether. For we, as women, have much to lose by giving up

Notes

To republish an essay which was first written in 1990, and which has since appeared in various forms in other places, requires some justification. I am persuaded by the argument that to make this controversy available in its original form to a wider-reading public is significant. This exchange brought four of us who share profound ties of personal friendship into open public disagreement about our theoretical and political commitments. This process has not always been easy: public disagreements have strained personal loyalties and friendships. Nonetheless, serious intellectual exchanges are processes through which the life of the mind and the community of scholarship is enhanced. And as is to be expected from a deep controversy, no one has remained untouched by its consequences. For my own part, I am continuing to pursue the complex issues raised by this debate as they touch upon human subjectivity, agency, historiography, and politics in a new manuscript called *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore. Feminism and the Problem of the Subject*.

1. See Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
2. Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 32 ff.
3. *Ibid.*, 32.
4. *Ibid.*, 33.
5. *Ibid.*, 34.
6. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 133 ff.; Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason. Male and Female Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Sandra Harding and M. Hintikka, eds. *Discovering Reality. Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishers, 1983).
7. Joan Kelly Gadol, "The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," and "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in: *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1–19 and 19–51.

- development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in the northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature . . .” in: *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree and Introd. by C. J. Friedrich (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 99.
9. For a provocative utilization of a Foucauldian framework for gender analysis, cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
 10. Linda Alcoff, “Poststructuralism and Cultural Feminism,” *Signs* Vol. 13, No. 3 (1988) 4-5-36 and Christine di Stefano, “Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism, in: *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 63-83.
 11. See Rosi Braidotti, “Patterns of Dissonance: Women and/in Philosophy,” in: *Feministische Philosophie*, ed. by Herta Nagl-Docekal (Vienna and Munich: R. Oldenburg, 1990), 108-23; Herta Nagl-Docekal, “Antigones Trauer und der Tod des Subjekts.” Lecture held at the “Philosophinnen-Ringvorlesung at the Institute of Philosophy,” Freie Universität Berlin, on May 25, 1990.
 12. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7.
 13. *Ibid.*, 25.
 14. Rosi Braidotti remarks very appropriately: “It seems to me that contemporary philosophical discussions on the death of the knowing subject, dispersion, multiplicity, etc. etc. have the immediate effect of concealing and undermining the attempts of women to find a theoretical voice of their own. Dismissing the notion of the subject at the very historical moment when women are beginning to have access to it, while at the same time advocating the “*devenir femme*” (as Guattari does, S.B.) of philosophical discourse itself, can at least be described as a paradox. . . . The truth of the matter is: one cannot de-sexualize a sexuality one has never had; in order to deconstruct the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one; before they can subvert the signs, women must learn to use them; in order to de-mystify meta-discourse one must first have access to a place of enunciation. “*Il faut, au moins, un sujet.*” in: “Patterns of Dissonance: Women and/in Philosophy,” in: *Feministische Philosophie*, Herta Nagl-Docekal, ed. 119-20.
 15. Cf. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
 16. Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, “Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in: *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda Nicholson, 33. Iris Young makes the same point in her “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” in the same volume, 300-1.
 17. *Ibid.*, 34.
 18. The pioneering anthology in different languages in this respect is: *Becoming Visible. Women in European History*, ed. by R. Bridenthal, C. Koonz, and S. Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987).
 19. *Ibid.*, 35.
 20. For an interesting, even if acrimonious, exchange on the question of agency in history and how different views might influence social and historical research, see Joan W. Scott’s Review of “Heroes of their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence” by Linda Gordon; Linda Gordon’s review of “Gender and the Politics of History” by Joan Scott and their Responses, in: *Signs*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Summer 1990), 848-60.
 21. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 131 ff.
 22. For trenchant accounts of the various problems and issues involved in this “sublation” and “transformation” of philosophy, see *After Philosophy. End or Transformation?*, ed. by Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).
 23. Fraser and Nicholson. “Social Criticism Without Philosophy,” 34.
 24. Sabina Lovibond, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” in: *New Left Review*, No. 178 (November-December 1989), 5-28; here 22.
 25. See Lyotard’s remark, “narratives . . . thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of the culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.” in: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 23. In his intervention in this debate, Rorty has sided with Lyotard and against Habermas, maintaining that the latter “scratches where it does not itch.” Cf. R. Rorty, “Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity,” *Praxis International*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (April 1984), 34. I have analyzed the difficulties of this turn to immanent social criticism in “Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-Francois Lyotard,” reprinted in: Nicholson, ed. *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 107-130.

26. See Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially 8–18.
27. See Georgia Warnke's discussion of Michael Walzer's position for an alternative account more sympathetic to the possibility of immanent, social criticism than my own, "Social Interpretation and Political Theory: Walzer and His Critics," in: *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. xxi, Nos. 1–2 (Fall–Winter 1989–90), 204 ff.
28. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968).
29. For a feminist position which seeks to retain this utopian element even while affirming postmodernist philosophy, see Drucilla Cornell, "Post-structuralism, the Ethical Relation, and the Law", *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 9, No. 6, 1587–1628 and "From the Lighthouse: The Promise of Redemption and the Possibility of Legal Interpretation," *Cardozo Law Review*, Volume 11, Nos. 5–6 (July–August 1990), pp. 1687–1714.

2

Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"

Judith Butler

The question of postmodernism is surely a question, for is there, after all, something called postmodernism? Is it an historical characterization, a certain kind of theoretical position, and what does it mean for a term that has described a certain aesthetic practice now to apply to social theory and to feminist social and political theory in particular? Who are these postmodernists? Is this a name that one takes on for oneself, or is it more often a name that one is called if and when one offers a critique of the subject, a discursive analysis, or questions the integrity or coherence of totalizing social descriptions?

I know the term from the way it is used, and it usually appears on my horizon embedded in the following critical formulations: "if discourse is all there is. . .," or "if everything is a text. . .," or "if the subject is dead. . .," or "if real bodies do not exist. . .." The sentence begins as a warning against an impending nihilism, for if the conjured content of these series of conditional clauses proves to be true, then, and there is always a then, some set of dangerous consequences will surely follow. So "postmodernism" appears to be articulated in the form of a fearful conditional or sometimes in the form of paternalistic disdain toward that which is youthful and irrational. Against this postmodernism, there is an effort to shore up the primary premises, to establish in advance that any theory of politics requires a subject, needs from the start to presume its subject, the referential-