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NOMADIC SUBJECTS: FEMINIST POSTMODERNISM AS ANTIRELATIVISM

*Most people in the world
are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female
Non-Christian
and do not speak English.
By the year 2000
the 20 largest cities in the world
will have one thing in common
none of them will be in Europe
none in the United States.*

Audre Lorde!

In this paper, I will defend a feminist poststructuralist position as a nonrelativist standpoint. This position rests on the assumption, which I shall outline presently, of the historical decline of the classical view of the human subject. By way of introduction, let me say that I see it as one of the historical tasks of feminism to elaborate an epistemological and ethical position that is suitable to postmodernity in a gendered perspective. I would also want to suggest that this position conveys a posthumanist vision of subjectivity as a de-essentialized and historicized entity—a multilayered (not a fixed) phenomenon, more akin to a process than a substantial unity, more like an event than an essence. This is what I have called, echoing Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze, nomadic subjectivity.

Before I get into the heart of the matter, however, let me confront the set of critiques coming from within feminism that tend to construe the poststructuralist critique of classical essentialistic notions of subjectivity as a relativist position. The charge of relativism has usually been made against

*Yn: Bondkeoe, Ron and Marietta Stepanic
(eds) Justice and Democracy. Cross -
Cultural Perspectives, Honolulu,
University of Hawaii Press, 1997.*

feminists by die-hard champions of European rationality, such as Ernst Gellner² and other militant masculinists. What is striking, however, is the extent to which this charge is now being made from within the feminist horizon. For instance, Sabine Lovibond³ criticizes poststructuralist feminist theory because its radical reappraisal of epistemological and political values allegedly provokes a real "crisis" of rationality. Lovibond prefers the moderate readings justments proposed to the existing system of values by more "reformist-minded" feminists and concludes with a dismissal of poststructuralist feminist politics as both contradictory and pretentious in its relativistic understanding of human subjectivity⁴.

For her part, Martha Nussbaum,⁵ in keeping with the central premises of her work, claims an explicitly universalistic and neo-Aristotelian essentialist position. Nussbaum argues that this stance provides the only possible grounds from which to make judgments and defend fundamental moral values such as compassion and respect. Unwilling to take into serious consideration the more sophisticated case for difference, which has been made by poststructuralists and feminists,⁶ Nussbaum shares Catharine MacKinnon's conviction that difference is a pernicious notion in that it carries pejorative connotations. Thus she chooses to concentrate instead on capabilities and functions that are central to all and common in human life.

In an important reversal of what had become the standard objection to postmodern feminism as "essentialistic,"⁷ Nussbaum declares that all "difference-minded" feminists are antiessentialists. This strikes me as a major step forward toward a better understanding of the poststructuralist position after years of misunderstanding. The disadvantage of this reading, however, is that the antiessentialist feminists are represented as necessarily and inevitably relativistic in that they seek "norms defined relatively to a local context and locally held belief."⁸ In other words, Nussbaum attempts to establish a context-independent sense of human nature and of human moral values, which leads her to formulate a sort of short list of essential points by which human subjectivity can be defined for all places and times.

In Nussbaum's rather simplistic reading, the deconstruction of essentialism, which is the cornerstone of poststructuralist philosophy, results in a collapse into subjectivism, which in turn is defined as a retreat into extreme relativism. This sequence of argumentative steps reveals beyond any possible doubt Nussbaum's attachment to liberal bourgeois notions of the individual and of the dualistic opposition self/other that it entails. In this view, the individual can only be conceived either as part of a global entity—family, state, nation, humanity, the cosmos—or, contrarily, as splintered off and atomized. This simplistic reading positions language as an instrument of communication and banks on human affectivity—especially the qualities of identification and empathy—as the only possible moral bridges between the various atomized particles.

This philosophical tradition is obviously at the antipodes of poststructuralist philosophy: Nussbaum's liberal individualism has little in common with the materialist theories of subjectivity proposed by those philosophers whom she dismisses as relativists. For them, the critique of liberal individualism is yesterday's battle, and their main priority is to disentangle their own brand of materialism from the confining structure of Marxist theory. In this respect, the psychoanalytic theory of language plays a crucial role, in that it historicizes, and therefore politicizes, the process of subject-formation. According to poststructuralist psychoanalysis, language is what one is made of: it is an ontological site that defies rational, let alone individual, control. Thus to suggest that it is a "tool" is a humanist form of arrogance that does not help either the moral plan of bringing humanity together or the task of the social theorist who is supposed to account for processes of signification. Psychoanalysis also smashes any illusion of atomized individuality by embedding the subject in the thick materiality of a symbolic system of which language is the most available source. This allows for subtler analyses of the interaction between self and society and among different selves than does liberal ego-based psychology. Thus to say that Nussbaum utterly misconstrues the poststructuralist case would be an understatement.

I do not intend, however, to intervene at length in the debate on relativism, which has been so admirably dealt with by Barbara Herrnstein-Smith.⁹ My aim in this paper is rather to try to decode the political and theoretical stakes of this debate within feminist theory today and to argue for poststructuralism as a nonrelativistic position. I want to stress that the reason why relativism is a problem for feminists is that it erodes the possibilities for political coalitions among women, thereby weakening feminist politics. I wish to suggest that a feminist postmodernist perspective manages to combine respect for differences with shifting yet productive foundations for political agency in a manner suitable to the complexity of our era.

In a paper that I consider to be of the greatest relevance, though it deals with cultural rather than cognitive or moral relativism, Clifford Geertz addresses this point.¹⁰ He stresses the polemical and political use to which the "antirelativism" campaign is put (in this case, in the field of anthropology). In an argument that is analogous to the case feminists have made for strategic essentialism,¹¹ Geertz argues that a double negative does *not* amount to an affirmative. Thus to be opposed to antirelativism, does not make one a relativist. What this critical position makes possible is rather the possibility of deconstructing authoritarian modes of thinking that attempt to pass themselves off as universalistic. Geertz states that the fear of relativism is unfounded, because

the moral and intellectual consequences that are commonly supposed to flow from relativism—subjectivism, nihilism, incoherence, Machiavellianism,

ethical idioy, esthetic blindness, and so on—do not in fact do so and the promised rewards of escaping its clutches, mostly having to do with pasteurized knowledge, are illusory. Whatever cultural relativism may be or originally have been . . . it serves these days largely as a spectre to scare us away from certain ways of thinking and towards others. And, as the ways of thinking away from which we are being driven seem to me to be more cogent than those toward which we are being propelled . . . I would like to do something about this.¹²

Accordingly, my reaction to the antirelativism charge is to go ahead and explore the ways of thinking from which the antirelativists are trying to scare us away. I will do so not in the spirit of polemic, but because I am convinced that these ways of thinking are far more cogent and useful than their critics suggest. Furthermore, and beyond the polemic, my position implies the historical need for the redefinition of our understanding of human subjectivity. It also assumes that feminist experiences have been elaborated in such a way as to be able to produce ideas that have a more general range of application than ever before. Contemporary feminist theory has a universalistic reach, if not a universalistic aspiration. As such it is not only a form of anti-antirelativism, but downright nonrelativistic.

FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNITY

Contrary to fashionable usages of the term, I take "postmodernism" to refer to a specific moment of the historical position of what can also be called late capitalism or postindustrialism. Not only is it the case that poststructuralist thought provides an adequate description of our historicity, but it also constitutes a constructive reaction to the sets of paradoxes that are engendered by this specific historical location. Thus postmodernity refers to an intellectual and ethical standpoint rather than a specific date—in that historians and philosophers alike do not seem to agree on its chronology. German critical theorists, especially Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, argue against this notion, because they think that modernity is still to come, that it is a horizon toward which we are moving, like some kind of utopia. French critical philosophers, on the other hand, especially Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Luce Irigaray, argue that modernity is a philosophical and political project inspired by the Enlightenment, which has by now exhausted its historical function.

I find myself much closer to the French way of assessing the question of modernity. I believe that the central notions that animated the Enlightenment project, especially the belief in the fundamental reasonableness of the human being, the universal usefulness of reason, and the liberating powers of rationality and science—all these notions have been rudely shaken and

contradicted by the events of modern history. More specifically, I am thinking of such phenomena as colonialism and European fascism, which are marked by episodes of genocide and industrial-scale exploitation and the elimination of people who were considered inferior and therefore disposable.

Moreover, my work on philosophical nomadism has made me aware of a sort of structural aporia in theoretical discourse and especially in philosophy. Discourse, understood in the poststructuralist sense as a process of the production of ideas, knowledge, texts, and representations, is an ongoing process upon which high theory rests, in order to capture and codify its diversity into an acceptable scientific norm. The normativity of high theory, however, also marks its limitation, because discourse, being a complex network of interrelated truth-effects, exceeds theory's power of codification. Thus philosophy has to "run after" all sorts of new discourses (those relating to, and produced by, for example, women, postcolonial subjects, youth, the audiovisual media, and other new technologies) in order to incorporate and codify them. As Donna Haraway¹³ reminds us, high theory is a cannibalistic machine aiming at the assimilation of all new and even of alien and monstrous bodies. Fortunately, the conceptual nomads can run faster and endure longer trips than most.

Politically, the nomadic style expresses my doubts about the capacity of high theory to accommodate the very questions that I see as central: the critique of phallogocentrism and ethnocentrism and the affirmation of the positivity of difference. Philosophy, as a discipline of thought, is highly antinomadic. It holds a privileged bond to domination, power, and violence. It consequently requires mechanisms of exclusion as part of its standard practices. Philosophy creates itself through what it excludes as much as through what it asserts. High theory posits its values through the exclusion of many—nonmen, nonwhites, nonlearned, etc. The structural necessity of these pejorative figurings of otherness within a structure of thought that insists on claiming universal validity, makes me doubt the theoretical capacity, let alone the moral and political willingness, of theoretical discourse to act in a non-hegemonic, nonexclusionary and nonethnocentric manner.

Even closer to us, confronted by episodes of planned and thoroughly thought out violence, such as was displayed in Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Gulag Archipelago, Vietnam, and by the Pol Pot regime, not to speak of the persistent pernicious effects of racism and xenophobia and the systematic destruction of the tropical rain forests and the events in Bosnia-Herzegovina—and this list is unfortunately open, of course—I think it would be irresponsible in the most sentimentally vacuous manner to go on believing in the reasonableness of the human being or in the coincidence of subjectivity with rational consciousness. Similarly, since the Manhattan project and the advent of the nuclear age, with its capacity to "overkill," science

and technology—far from holding the key to our future progress and growth—have become the source of persistent anxieties about our present. As Fredric Jameson put it,

The postmodern is an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. . . . Postmodernism may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own conditions of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications.¹⁴

This may well be the case, but given that cartographies are politically informed maps of the present, the sort of enumeration of changes that they are likely to offer tend to give rise to all sorts of contestations and dissonant readings. The first rule of the poststructuralist approach, therefore, is to compare notes on our respective cartographies, so as to engage in politically informed discussions on how to account for the present.

The enumeration of the changes and modifications engendered by the postmodern sociosymbolic space must begin with changes in the system of economic production, which are also altering traditional social and symbolic structures. In the West, the shift away from manufacturing toward a service and information-based economic structure entails a global redistribution of labor, with the rest of the world and especially the developing countries providing most of the offshore production through underpaid female and child labor.

The postmodern condition rests therefore on the paradox of the simultaneous occurrence of contradictory trends. On the one hand, we see the *globalization* of economic and cultural processes, which engenders increasing conformism in consumption and consumerism habits, and through them in general lifestyle. On the other hand, however, we also see the *fragmentation* of these processes: the resurgence of regional, local, ethnic, cultural and other differences not only between the geopolitical blocks, but also within them.

Following Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and others, I believe that the single most important effect of this paradoxical historical situation is the ethnic mix that is coming upon the West through world migration. This is a huge movement of population from periphery to center, which has already affected and will continue to alter the alleged cultural homogeneity of European nation-states.¹⁵ This new context demands that we shift the terms of the political debate from the issue of differences *between* cultures (East and West, Christian and Islamic, etc.) to differences *within* the same culture.

Gayatri Spivak puts it with customary wit: "The face of global feminism is turned outward and must be welcomed and respected as such, rather than fetishized as the figure of the Other."¹⁶ The postmodern condition is about the becoming-Third-World of the First World, even as it continues the exploitation of developing countries. It is about the decline of "legal" economies

and the rise of structural illegality as a factor in the world economy. It is about capital as cocaine. It is about the globalization of pornography and the prostitution of women and children; it is about the ruthless trade in human life. The postmodern predicament is about the feminization of poverty; it is also about the rising rates of female illiteracy and the structural unemployment of large sectors of the population, especially the youth.

It is also about the difficulties encountered by the law and traditional jurisprudence in trying to cope with such phenomena as the new reproductive rights, copyright laws as they relate to the use of photocopiers and video-recorders, the control of surrogate motherhood and artificial procreation, environmental control, and the problem of authorship on the Internet. These difficulties are what Foucault analyzed in terms of the decline of classical legal thinking and the rise of a system of diffuse and all-pervading surveillance and overregulation.

Postmodern culture is thus closely and powerfully linked to technology, which freezes time and displaces subjects, allowing for prosthetic extensions of our bodily functions and intellectual capacities: computers and answering machines augment our powers of memory; global telecommunications bring splinters of the globe into our living rooms, while electronic networks—telephones, faxes, and the Internet—make real-time communication a daily event.

Last but not least, the postmodern predicament is about the shift of geopolitical power away from the North Atlantic in favor of the Pacific and especially the South Pacific area. Cornel West put it succinctly, from a North American perspective: "Postmodernism . . . is a set of responses due to the decentering of Europe—of living in a world that no longer rests upon European hegemony and domination in the political, economic, military and cultural dimensions which began in 1492."¹⁷ This shift in geopolitical power is both confirmed and theorized in poststructuralist philosophy in terms of the decline of European logocentrism. But philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Massimo Cacciari¹⁸ have pointed out an interesting fact about this shift in geopolitical power relations, which makes their discourse about the end of Western European hegemony radically different from the fascist and right-wing nostalgic discourse about the "decline of the West," which was popular at the end of the last century and which found expression in the work of, for example, Weininger and Spengler.

In a contemporary and more poststructuralist perspective, the more radical line of deconstruction of Eurocentrism runs as follows: what makes Western philosophical culture so perniciously effective is that it has been announcing its own death for over a hundred years. Since the apocalyptic trinity of modernity, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the West has been thinking through the historical inevitability and the logical possibility of its own decline—so much so that the state of "crisis" has become the *modus*

vivendi of Western philosophers. We thrive on it, we write endlessly about it; if the crisis did not exist, we would have to invent it, to justify our existence. Having written extensively about the metaphor of the crisis of philosophy in my first book,¹⁹ let me just say here that I think nobody, let alone critical thinkers, should take the notion of the "crisis" of the West naively or at face value. White man always speaks with a forked tongue, and this state of prolonged and self-agonizing crisis may simply be the form that Western postmodernity has chosen in order to perpetuate itself. After all, Plato tells us that Socrates pointed out a long time ago that philosophy always loves a good crisis! Again, Gayatri Spivak makes the point:

The agenda is to wrench these regulative political signifiers out of their represented field of reference. And the instrument of such a wrenching, such a reconstellating or dehegemonizing, cannot be ethnophilosophical or race-ideological pride. Given the international division of labor of the imperialist countries, it is quite appropriate that the best critique of the European ethico-politico-social universals, those regulative concepts, should come from the North Atlantic. But what is ironically appropriate in postcoloniality is that this critique finds its best staging outside of the North Atlantic in the undoing of imperialism.²⁰

Spivak then goes on to argue that there are forces at work in the North Atlantic region that aim at rewriting universalism as "solidarity," thus reasserting the historical advantage of the center of the empire, in spite of evident signs of economic and cultural decline.²¹ In Spivak's view, there is an implicit ethnocentric bias in this kind of universalism.

I think this insight highlights one of the central paradoxes of the postmodern historical condition, one that pitches center versus periphery in a manner so complex and so perverse as to require that we think the simultaneity of potentially contradictory social effects. This is the main consideration for rejecting antirelativism as an historically inadequate concept. The simultaneity of opposite factors, in fact, defies simplistic dual oppositions between wholeness and fragments and calls for subtler and more articulate modes of thought. As the artist Martha Rosler put it, "there cannot be fragments if there is no whole."²²

Postcolonial thinkers have also emphasized the extent to which white mainstream philosophers resist this sort of displacement and dispossession, or tend to deny it, under the cover of neo-universalistic tendencies. Let me add to this another consideration: that in so far as poststructuralist philosophy makes manifest the crisis of Western modes of representation, it also evokes—especially in its opponents—the fear of loss of control and mastery.²³ In this regard, the appeal to neo-universalism on the part of Western philosophers fulfills a twofold function: it allows them to reject any suspicion of loss of conceptual mastery, and it helps them reassert that specifically ethnocen-

tric Western concern that consists in passing itself off as the center of the universe. I want to argue that it is to the credit of poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, and others that, in their critique of a fixed subject position and the illusion of a coherent self coinciding with rational consciousness, they expose the web of violence and exclusion that lies at the heart of white heterosexual masculinist political economies. They also unveil the ethnocentric assumptions behind them.

The undeniable convergence between the discourse of the "crisis" of the West within poststructuralism and the postcolonial deconstruction of imperial whiteness is not a sufficient—though it is a necessary condition—for a political alliance between them. At the very least, however, it lays the grounds for the possibility of such an alliance. As Judith Butler and Joan Scott put it, the question then becomes:

Where are the critical intersections between postcolonialism and post-structuralism that reveal the critique of Western logic as part of the critical decentring of colonial hegemony? What contradictions does Eurocentric theory face in trying to expose the constitutive logic of colonial oppression?²⁴

I believe that facing up to these contradictions is our historical responsibility, because I am committed to thinking alongside my world and not to pretending that it does not exist or to hoping that maybe it will go away. As late-twentieth-century North Atlantic people, we are historically condemned to feeling responsible for our history, because we are the ones who come after the historical decline of the promises of the Enlightenment. Whether you choose to call our predicament "postmodern," "posthumanist" or "neohumanist" makes little difference. What does matter, however, is our shared awareness that living as thinking beings at the end of this millennium in the North Atlantic means that we must make ourselves *accountable* for the history of our culture without burying our head in the sand, but also without giving in to relativism or the decadent feeling that: "Alright then, if that's how things are, anything goes." It isn't true that anything goes.

In the specific case of the critique of European ethnocentrism, a post-structuralist perspective allows us to discuss quite seriously the grounds on which we postulate European identity. Identity is not understood by postmodernists as a foundational issue, based on fixed, God-given essences—of the biological, psychic, or historical kind. On the contrary, identity is taken as being constructed in the very gesture that posits it as the anchoring point for certain kinds of social and discursive practices. Consequently, the question is no longer the essentialist one, "What is national or ethnic identity?" but rather the critical and genealogical one, "How is it constructed? by whom? under which conditions? and for which aims?"

The bottom line is the need for a new nonessentialist politics; thus the relevant question is, as Stuart Hall put it,²⁵ who is entitled to claim an ethnic or national identity? Who has the right to claim that legacy, to speak on its behalf and turn it into a policy-making platform? These are questions about entitlement, agency, and subjectivity. In other words, to paraphrase Foucault, we need to address the paradox of exclusion and affirmation, of power and truth, which lies at the heart of the quest for, and the construction of, identity.

I do think that, on this point, a serious case of dissonance has emerged within the North Atlantic, namely, between Europe and the United States, on the issue of the political utility of French poststructuralism and especially of French feminist theories. As Cornel West points out, in American academic circles these theories have been given an apolitical and ahistorical reception, which does not do justice to either the spirit or the content of these theoretical movements. West suggests that French theories, including French feminist thought, are rendered in American academic debates in a neo-ethnocentric manner. This mistranslation fits within a broader scheme of commodification of European thought by the American academy.

If one is talking about critiques of racism, critiques of patriarchy, critiques of homophobia, then simply call it that. Eurocentrism is not identical with racism. . . . Eurocentrism is not the same as male supremacists. . . . And the same is so with homophobia. *Demystify the categories in order to stay tuned to the complexity of the realities*²⁶ [my emphasis].

CRITICAL SPACES FOR FEMINIST RESISTANCE

One of the crucial points of intersection between poststructuralist philosophies and feminist theory is the desire to leave behind the linear mode of intellectual thinking, the teleologically ordained style of argumentation that most of us have been trained to respect and emulate. In my experience, the traditional mode results in encouraging repetition and dutifulness to a canonical tradition that enforces the sanctimonious sacredness of certain texts—the texts of the great Western philosophical humanistic tradition. I would like to oppose to them a passionate form of posthumanism, based on feminist nomadic epistemology. Nomadism is an invitation to dis-identify ourselves from the sedentary phallogocentric monologism of philosophical thinking and to start cultivating the art of disloyalty, or rather that form of healthy disrespect for both academic and intellectual conventions which in the West was inaugurated and propagated by the second feminist wave. The point for me is not loyalty to existing philosophies, but accountability for one's gender: a nomadic feminist is necessarily an undutiful daughter.

Let me therefore reiterate the main point: the shift of historical context entails in the West the decline of the traditional sociosymbolic system based on the state, the family, and masculine authority. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan point out,²⁷ postmodernity corresponds to a reorganization of capital accumulation in a mobile and transnational manner. Given this new historical context of "trans"-national mobility, it is imperative for cultural critics to rethink their situation and their practices within this scheme, without romanticizing it, but also without nostalgia for an allegedly more wholesome past.

If you set these statements in the context of a postindustrial climate where the only constant is change, it becomes apparent that today the challenge for feminism and philosophy alike is how to think about and account adequately for changes and changing conditions. We do not need the comfort of static truths, but rather the stimulation of having to think through living processes of transformation.

As the feminist movement put it, well before Deleuze, we need to learn to think differently about our historical condition; we need to reinvent ourselves. This transformative project begins with the relinquishing of the historically established, phallogocentric, eurocentric, hegemonic habits of thought which, until now, have provided the "standard" view of human subjectivity. We must relinquish all that in favor of a decentered and multilayered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity, situated in a shifting context.

Nostalgia is one of the most pernicious traits of the reaction against the postmodern condition. As a feminist, I am firmly opposed to it. There is no need to mourn the decline of the West, the state, the nation, rationality, men, religion, and all the other pillars on which received ideas of "civilization" were built. Instead, we need to expose the deeply seated masculinism, misogyny, and racism of these ideals and, taking advantage of their historical decline, work toward replacing them with new and more adequate notions.

If we take, for instance, the idea of "national identity," a poststructuralist critical perspective, inspired by Homi Bhaba or Edward Said, can make us aware of the fact that common ideas of "the nation" are to a large extent narrative structures or imaginary tales, which project a reassuring but nonetheless illusory sense of unity over the disjointed, fragmented, and often incoherent range of internal regional and cultural differences that make up a nation-state. Moreover, any feminist knows to what extent the legitimating tales of nationhood in the West has been constructed over the body of women, as well as on the crucible of imperial and colonial masculinity.

The fact that these allegedly universal or all-encompassing ideas of "nation" or "national identity" are in fact flawed and internally incoherent does not make them any less effective, nor does it prevent them from exercising hegemonic power. But the awareness of the lack of coherence, consistency, and inner rationality of what Jean-François Lyotard named the "master-narratives" of the Western world, does open new spaces for

critical opposition. As Jenny Lloyd pointed out in her critique of the role of rationality in the history of Western philosophy, it is not because masculinism, nationalism, and racism have superior inner rationality or logic that they have become hegemonic. Quite the contrary, it is because they were dominant that they have appropriated exclusive claims to rationality and logic.

Thus the postmodernist awareness of the profoundly unstable structure of the categories of political and philosophical analysis (the "nctanarratives" mentioned above), far from giving way to a suspension of belief in the permanence of power—as the critics of postmodernism suggest—results in the acknowledgment of the historical decline of categories of political analysis both in the liberal and the Marxist tradition. This translates, however, into a renewed commitment to elaborating forms of political resistance that are adequate, that is to say, suited to the specific paradoxes of our historical condition. More specifically, a postmodernist political priority consists in dispelling the belief in the natural foundations and consequently the fixed nature of *any* system of values, meanings, or belief. In this respect, the deconstruction of essentialized identities of all kinds, including the political one, lies at the heart of this project.

The historical contradiction a feminist postmodernist is specifically caught in is that the very conditions that are perceived by dominant subjects as factors of a "crisis" of values are for women, as for other historically oppressed subjects, rather the opening up of new possibilities. The same historical conditions can be perceived as positive or negative, depending on one's historical and geopolitical location. Clearly, the postmodernist predicament cannot fail to affect our understanding of sexual difference, that is to say, the definition of woman as the "other" or the "second" sex, which is a typical feature of European cultures. In these cultures, masculinity has also become identified with the normal and is thus synonymous with subjectivity; hence the standard feminist joke at Descartes' expense: "I think, therefore *He* is!" Because "difference" has been predicated on relations of domination and exclusion, to be "different from" came to mean to be "less than," to be *worth* less than. In other words, in the West, difference has been colonized by power relations that reduce it to inferiority. Further, it has resulted in passing off differences as "natural," which transformed entire categories of beings into devalued "others" and therefore disposable others. To be disposable means that you are just as human, but slightly more mortal than the first-class subjects.

A feminist postmodernist therefore approaches the political analyses of difference in terms of power and discursive formations. Discourse is about the political currency that is attributed to certain meanings, or systems of meaning, in such a way as to invest them with scientific legitimacy. In the work of Michel Foucault, discourse analysis becomes a pragmatic form of ma-

terialism. Foucault's genealogical method consists in reading the scientific process in terms of mechanisms that discipline some truth-values and, consequently, also disqualify some others.

Let me provide an example. The belief in the inferiority of women—be it mental, intellectual, spiritual, or moral—has no serious scientific foundation; the same goes for racist beliefs. This does *not* prevent them from having great currency in political practice and the organization of society. The woman and the black as "others"—that is to say, as both empirical referents and symbolic signs of pejoration—function discursively as shapers of meanings, as organizers of differences in a hierarchical scale that divides man from woman, but also man from the animal, or nonhuman and the divine. The mark of differences fulfills the crucially important function of dividing the subjects along a set of axes of varying degrees of "difference." To divide, so as to conquer in a normative order the subversive or dangerous charge that is potentially contained in these "others"—this is how phallogocentric order is maintained.

As a corollary of the above, the pejorative use of the feminine, or of blackness, is structurally necessary to the phallogocentric system of meaning. By being structurally embedded, these differences of gender or race become paradoxically both abstract and invisible, except that the real-life, empirical subjects that are associated with them—women and blacks—experience in their embodied existence the effects of the disqualification (of the feminine and of blackness) that is effected at the symbolic level.

A poststructuralist approach to the analysis of power and discourse highlights the links that exist between scientific truth and discursive currency. Scientific discourse in particular is the master-narrative that has formalized the structural necessity for devalued difference in Western thought. Foucault's genealogical method emphasizes the need to historicize the analysis of the formation of scientific concepts as normative formations. Thus it allows us to take on the historicity of the very concepts that we are investigating. In a feminist poststructuralist frame, this emphasis on historicity means primarily two things. First, the rejection of dualistic schemes of thought. A discursive approach, for instance, makes us aware of the appalling simplicity of the dualism of Western science, but it also reveals the disconcerting fact that the banal simplicity of dualism is also the source of its success. Second, it implies that the scholar needs some humility before the eternal repetitions of history. We need to learn that there is no escape from the multilayered structure of language.

As a critical thinker, as an intellectual raised in the babyboom era of the new Europe, and as a feminist committed to enacting empowering alternatives, I choose to make myself accountable for this aspect of my culture and my history. Because of my own historicity and my specific location as a North Atlantic intellectual, I simply cannot leave the notion of "difference" alone,

nor do I wish to delegate it to its traditionally hegemonic and pejorative meaning. I rather choose to, and desire to, *think through* difference, through the knots of power and violence that have accompanied its rise to supremacy in the European mind. This notion is far too important to be reduced to a problem of the relativity of values. What I will want to argue instead, is that difference can become the basis for the elaboration of *alternative* positive values in an historically embedded and politically accountable perspective.

IN PRAISE OF DIFFERENCES

Given my definitions of feminism and modernity, I see it as a priority to radicalize our understanding of human subjectivity, so as to achieve a double aim: on the one hand, to end the complicity between subjectivity and masculinity, and on the other hand, to incorporate difference as a positive value, instead of projecting it outward as a sign of inferiority. As end-of-millennium feminists, we need to radicalize the universal altogether, not merely get rid of it, or replace one dominant formation with yet another.

The postmodern feminist antirelativist question is indeed: *who do we want to become?* We need to hold onto identity (sexual, social, national) and onto the material foundations of identity in terms of graspable reference points that help us define it (this is what Stuart Hall has called, quoting Derrida, "a constitutive outside"), but we do not need beliefs in the natural, fixed, or universalistic structure of such identities. We need anchoring points, but we could certainly do without essences or universalistic principles, especially as we embark on the painful but historically necessary task of redefining human subjectivity in the light of respect for diversity.

Postmodernist antirelativist feminists who are committed to the project of redefining subjectivity raise the issue of sexual difference in the sense of analyzing the historicity and the power relations that are centered on the figure of the feminine. Let me explain this, briefly, as follows: one of the more interesting consequences of the crisis of the Western subject is not only the crisis of masculinity that it inevitably entails. Of equal interest is the decline of classical femininity as a side effect of the postmodern predicament. This assumes that "woman as the other of man" had partaken in the historical construction of hegemonic and exclusionary practices of subjectivity. The "woman as other," the privileged "other" that Simone de Beauvoir analyzed brilliantly in terms of the "second" sex, is challenged, deconstructed, and thrown into question. This is only poetic and political justice: if white man is at a crisis point, so is white woman!

What I am saying is that the postmodern predicament, by opening up the conditions of possibility for the critical analysis of how certain forms of oppression have been structurally necessary (thus constituting "difference" nec-

essarily as a mark of pejoration), also makes it urgent and necessary to deconstruct "woman." To deconstruct means that a notion is analyzed historically and politically, so as to make manifest the web of discursive and other power formations that constitute its identity and thus allow it to function as a signifier. This way of thinking calls for that flair for contradictions and paradoxes that I mentioned earlier—in this case, the paradox of woman as simultaneously powerless and powerful. The traditional Western notion of "woman" as "other" is certainly a pejorative, oppressed notion, but this does not mean that it is entirely powerless. On the contrary, that same notion is shot through with power relations—relations of class, race, ethnicity, etc.—that qualify and situate it historically and geopolitically and make it function in an internally contradictory manner.

To own up to the *complexity* and *multiplicity* of the power relations involved in the making of "woman" under patriarchy is not to deny her oppressed status. Quite the contrary, it is an attempt to radically redefine the political potential of a feminist position that is committed to accounting for and resisting the *simultaneity of potentially contradictory axes of oppression*. Postmodernist feminism is committed to thinking through this simultaneity, accounting for multiplicity and complexity only in order to find more adequate forms of resistance to them. What is at stake in this is the political but also the epistemological operation of moving "woman" out of the slot of devalued otherness to which she has historically been confined as the structurally necessary—and necessarily disqualified—"other." It is my way of reappropriating difference by tearing it apart from its hegemonic and exclusionary historical roots.

Quite clearly, this project raises issues that transcend the immediate perspective of "special interest groups." Some of these questions, as Butler and Scott suggest, are: How should we move politically in a world where the classical gender dichotomies no longer hold, because power is understood as the occurrence of simultaneous, complex, and multiple events? How should we act politically in a world where hybridization and cultural mix have come to occupy the place of the previous white male supremacist culture? What is the position of women in the new postcolonial world order and in non-Western patriarchal systems?

I have argued throughout this paper that a poststructuralist perspective is more relevant and constructive than its opponents claim, and that it offers more cogent ways of coming to terms with the challenges of today's world, than liberal or neo-universalistic approaches. I also think that the ways of thinking that poststructuralism offers are precisely what the "antirelativists" are trying to scare us away from. Thus while stressing as a conclusion the importance of maintaining an anti-antirelativist stance, I also want to emphasize simultaneously the theoretical irrelevance of this polemic. What is at stake in it is a set of deeper and more far-reaching concerns than the vicissitudes of

the notion of relativism *per se*. To repeat the point made earlier by Cornel West, we are better off demystifying the categories in order to stay tuned to the complexity of the realities.

In response to these concerns, I maintain that we need to radicalize our vision of universal values, avoiding the double pitfall of relativism (i.e., dismissing the universal as redundant) and of essentialism (the nostalgic reassertion of essentialized identities). This is the challenge confronting the postmodernist antirelativist feminist and other critical intellectuals. I do believe that it will take more than the assault of nostalgia or the paranoia of those who fear "enemies within" to deter the feminists, the postcolonial and black subjects, the youth, and many others, from constructing viable alternatives to the decayed and nonetheless still operational ethno- and phallo-logocentric system, which, like an extinguished star, is still shining, though it is by now living on borrowed time.

NOTES

1. Unpublished poem, quoted in Audre Lorde's commencement address to Oberlin College, May 29, 1989. Cited in Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 1.
2. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992).
3. Sabine Lovibond in *New Left Review* (September/October 1994).
4. Contradictory because, in attempting to avoid relativism, poststructuralist feminists are drawn into complicity with the very rationalist tradition and the modernist kinds of value judgment that they criticize. Pretentious, because they do not live up to their own claims and fail to produce a radical alternative to dominant values.
5. Martha Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals," paper delivered at the Seventh East-West Philosophers' Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, January 8-22, 1995. See also, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," *Political Theory* (vol. 20, no. 2, May 92), pp. 202-46.
6. See, for instance, Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Engaging with Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
7. For an excellent survey of this polemic, see the special issue of the journal *Differences* (vol. 1, no. 2, 1989).
8. Paper delivered at the Seventh East-West Philosophers' Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, January 1995.
9. Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
10. Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist* (vol. 86, no. 2, June 1984), pp. 263-78.
11. For a study of this notion, see my *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
12. Geertz, *idem*, p. 263.
13. Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others" in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992).
14. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. ix.
15. In *What It Means To Be an American* (New York: Marsilio, 1992), Michael Walzer notes that European nation-states, being based on ancient and territorially based communities, find it harder to accommodate immigrant populations, especially from different religious backgrounds. Walzer opposes European intolerance to the greater flexibility of the United States, which is based on multiculturalism and pluralism. For a lucid comparison of the European and American brands of ethnocentrism, see Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1994).
16. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 54.
17. Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*, p. 125.
18. Massimo Cacciari, *Geo-filosofia dell'Europa* (Milano: Adelphi, 1994).
19. Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
20. *Idem*, p. 57.
21. This remark is explicitly aimed at Richard Rorty's notion of "solidarity," with reference to his article "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
22. Martha Rosler, quoted at the "Decade Show" at the New Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1990.
23. Poststructuralism is also known in Italian as *pensiero debole*, i.e., "weak thought."
24. Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. xi.
25. Stuart Hall, "'Race', Ethnicity, Nation: the Fateful/Fatal Triangle," W.E.B. du Bois Lectures, Harvard University, April 25-27, 1994.
26. Cornell West, *idem*, p. 20.
27. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).