Texts and contexts: contemporary feminist negotiations of class, race and gender

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Texts And Contexts: Contemporary Feminist Negotiations
Of Class, Race And Gender.

by

Angie Sandhu

A Doctoral Thesis

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for the award of

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Introduction

Rethinking 'Women': Contemporary Feminist Discourses on Race, Class and Gender

The original aim of this thesis was to investigate the relationship between feminist writing and the publishing industry. I was particularly interested in exploring the differences between 'successful' feminist writing and feminist writing which has either remained unpublished or has experienced difficulty in obtaining publication. I intended to foreground considerations of race, class and differences of sexual orientation between women and to explore the extent to which these factors were informing the publication of contemporary feminist writing. In order to understand the contexts from which feminist presses emerged, in Britain and America in the 1970s, I began by studying the history of the publishing industry. The contemporary publishing industry is no longer an intimate, homogeneous institution, as it was in the early twentieth century, but rather a number of bodies with varying amounts of resources and widely differing political and marketing aims. The flourishing of feminist presses in Britain and America was very much the result of women's understanding that they were being denied a voice by the patriarchal publishing houses.

However, it is precisely the feminist presses that have aroused the most angry condemnations from feminist writers, who point to their reluctance to publish the writing of lesbian women, poor women, black women and women of color. There is quite clearly a far deeper level of disillusionment with the feminist and smaller presses than with the mainstream presses. Barbara Smith, writing in 1977, argued that it would be a grave oversight to assume that hierarchical publishing practices could be eradicated simply by abandoning mainstream publishing houses:
I think of the thousands and thousands of books, magazines and articles which have been devoted, by this time, to the subject of women's writing and I am filled with rage at the fraction of those pages that mention Black and other Third world women. Clearly, a study of the publishing industry could not be undertaken with the assumption that feminist presses have solved the problem of an underrepresentation of feminist writers. However, the frustration expressed by feminist writers with all sections of the publishing industry focused this thesis on a more fundamental question.

My initial assumption, that I would find crucial evidence of the ways in which certain women have been marginalised by both the mainstream and the feminist presses, became explicable only in an enquiry that focused on a much larger context. I hoped that comparing mainstream publishing houses with smaller feminist presses would shed light upon the ways in which contemporary feminist publishing is engaged with the knowledge systems of mainstream publishing houses. Thus, the discrimination that operates in feminist presses could be tackled by examining the ways in which mainstream feminism is situating itself in terms of less privileged feminist narratives and the dominant culture. However, studying the publishing industry for crucial evidence of the ways in which a marginalisation of narratives is achieved, meant also analysing why and how certain narratives are credited with a greater relevance than others. It was this question that led to the need for a broader context for this research.

An examination of the publishing industry needed an exploration of what is meant and understood by feminist writing, as well as an analysis of what is meant by women when they choose to employ, or not to employ, the term 'feminist'. In examining this I wanted to look at crucial areas in which feminism has been defined and negotiated by women who would identify
themselves as feminists; for a reading of contemporary feminist theory conveys the extent to which 'feminism' is being perceived of as in need of re-examination. This is particularly true of western feminist texts, precisely in response to the criticisms that have been levelled at white, western, middle-class, heterosexual feminists as perpetrating the exclusion of 'Other' women from 'the' feminist arena. It is this debate between feminists that I would locate as providing the most useful ground for a discussion of marginality. Moreover, I would argue that the present preoccupation with the question of gender identity needs to be traced back to the arguments of black women, and women of color, rather than treated as a new area of discussion.

Recent critical feminist work has responded to the ruptures, such as Barbara Smith commented upon in 1977, by searching for ways in which to eradicate the link between the category of 'woman' and white, heterosexual, middle-class identity and experience. The present preoccupation with the category of 'woman' and identity politics in feminist theory is a clear response to those who have criticised its exclusionary practices and theoretical frameworks. Audre Lorde in her book, A Burst of Light, records her dismay when she attended the 'First International Feminist Bookfair' in London. The fact that there were no local black women there, which for Lorde was her main interest in attending, conveys the deeply divided history of the feminist movement. Lorde's personal condemnation and dissociation from the fair empowered black women to recognise and resist the obvious racism of white feminists. It is this problematic history that contemporary feminist discussions of gender, race and sexuality are grounded in. Elizabeth Spelman in her book, Inessential Women, took this as her subject:
in feminist theory it is the refusal to take differences among women seriously that lies at the heart of feminism’s implicit politics of domination. 

The task then becomes one which sets out to show how not only is the feminist 'we' often oppressive but it is also manifestly difficult to agree upon.

For Spelman, the recognition that women differ poses the problem of what do 'we' do about those differences; how do 'we' talk about them? Spelman argues that what feminism needs is to find new ways of enabling different women to speak without prioritising certain narratives. Spelman takes up Audre Lorde’s directive that it is not the differences between women that is the problem but how we treat our differences:

We have all been programmed to respond to human differences between us with fear and loathing... But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.

This recognition of the importance of difference has been discussed in Judith Butler’s, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity,* and Diana Fuss’s, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference.* Butler and Fuss approach the problem of exclusion within feminism by arguing that western, white, heterosexual, middle-class female identity is itself based upon an erroneous assumption of stability and cohesion.

For Butler and Fuss, the problem of privilege that Spelman grapples with is best eradicated by challenging the efficacy of gender identity itself. What is needed, they argue, is a feminist narrative that questions existing definitions of what constitutes 'woman'. Butler and Fuss argue that gender is not a stable identity for any woman, since it is always in the process of being constructed and deconstructed by its subjects.
Gender, then, should be viewed as a fluid category rather than as something that really does explain a concrete truth about women and men. Butler comments that it is in this sense that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed". [9]

Thus, Butler and Fuss challenge the authority of the link between 'woman' and white, heterosexual middle-class women, by dismantling the structural stability of any account of gender. Butler concludes by asserting that feminist theory needs to question:

the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate. The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that already exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible. [10]

This confidence in the ability of a thorough reassessment of the value of identity politics for feminism to solve the exclusionary practices and theories of feminism, is shared by Jane Gallop. Gallop suggests that:

We might want to consider this perpetration of exclusion not so much as an ethical failing but rather as the effect of a certain structure, the recurrent tendency in the establishment of a subfield to generate exclusionary definitions. [11]

Definition, then, is the authoritative tool that has closed feminism off from an alignment with women in general.

Hélène Cixous takes this argument further, opening up the ground between theory and practice whereupon theory becomes the authoritative stifling force that confines what would otherwise be an energised feminine practice:

At the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded which does not mean it does not exist. [12]

I would suggest that Cixous' analysis reveals a recurrent problem with
feminist criticism that places the emphasis upon theory. The suggestion that if a theory were to recognise the oppression of theory then the 'real' energy of feminine practice could be unleashed, grants feminine practice a curious ahistorical agency.

For in this scenario, whatever the limit and errors of the theory, this actually bears no relation upon feminine practice which is always outside the restricting seal of feminist theory. Thus, for Cixous, despite her conception of a historical tradition that has imprisoned feminism she, nevertheless, suggests that feminine practice is already liberated. The question then becomes what exactly is the relation of theory to practice. Cixous sidesteps this point by assigning the sporadic appearance of creative geniuses with the ability to transcend his or her historical context and reproduce this essentially ahistorical practice. This is, I would argue, to return full circle to the point that it is precisely this ability to disregard history and materialism that constitutes the privilege of white, middle-class, western feminism. This is not to suggest that white, middle-class, western feminism really does have a less fundamental connection with materialism or history, but rather that it is this very ability to deny its presence that characterises its power.

Butler and Fuss, in their discussion of gender identity are careful to point out that whatever theoretical conclusions they might arrive at are not accompanied by a failure to recognise the importance of active political struggle. Thus, for them, recognising the invalidity of the feminist 'we' does not necessarily mean that it is not useful, if not essential, for feminism. Fuss comments that though we should challenge any notion that there really is an essential womanness, we should nevertheless hold on the logico-linguistic idea of a class of women in order to be
politically effective. Certainly, it is significant that the need for feminism to contribute to the economic and material emancipation of women preoccupies the texts of black and third world women.

The notion that feminist theoreticians now have a difficult and challenging task ahead, if they wish to contribute towards feminist debate, can too easily fail to recognise that it is precisely the question of who is doing the debating that is at issue. Moreover, I would argue that it is vital for contemporary discussions of marginality and identity to recognise that these issues have always preoccupied the fields of black and third world studies. Contemporary black and third world writers voice a widespread unease that this is not being sufficiently acknowledged within the more prestigious arena of 'Cultural Studies':

it can be disheartening when new programs focusing on similar issues receive a prestige and acclaim denied black studies. Cultural studies programs are definitely in this category. They are almost always administered by white men and are quickly gaining a legitimacy long denied African-American and Third World studies. 

I would add that not acknowledging this long standing concern with identity and marginality can enable feminist theoreticians to carry on not recognising the relevance of race and class.

Avtar Brah in her essay, 'Re-framing Europe: en-gendered racisms, ethnicities and nationalisms in contemporary western Europe', uses Butler's discussions of gender to support her discussion whilst noting that, "Butler's account is silent on issues of racism or class." Brah does not criticise Butler's omission but goes on to reformulate Butler's discussion of gender:

"But her question: 'To what extent does the body come in to being in and through the mark(s) of gender?' may be reformulated as 'To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender, 'Race', or 'class?' There is then an implosion of boundaries between the physical and social body. "
Butler's exploration of gender is clearly useful for considerations of race and class, but I would argue that her 'silence' is deeply problematic as it maintains a gesture of privilege that has characterised too many white feminist-authored texts. bell hooks, as far back as 1982, noted that:

'The force that allows white feminist authors to make no reference to racial identity in their books about 'women' that are in actuality about white women is the same one that would compel any author writing exclusively on black women to refer explicitly to their racial identity. That force is racism.' [19]

That this silence takes place in the very arena which is setting out to challenge the efficacy of essentialist notions of gender identity is a cause for concern.

The inability of black women to isolate gender has been characterised as a salient feature of black women's lives and writing. Patricia Hill Collins in, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, [19] points out that African-American women have always been engaged with the effects of racial, class and gender differentiation and inequality:

African-American women find themselves in a web of cross-cutting relationships, each presenting varying combinations of controlling images and Black women's self-definitions. [20]

Whilst I would in no way disagree with this, I would suggest that it is equally important that 'whiteness' is not construed as a uniform identity for white women. Class and sexuality clearly influence perceptions of whiteness in as complex a way as they do perceptions of blackness. Moreover, a setting up of a binary opposition between black and white women leaves women of color totally excluded. [21]

The problems facing women who are not 'black' or 'white' are exacerbated by feminist discussions which insist upon the need for 'them' to 'choose' their racial identity. Thus, Lauretta Ngcobo in her
introduction to the anthology, *Let It Be Told: Black Women Writers In Britain*, refers to the 'unenviable' plight of those who possess mixed racial parentage:

'Those of mixed parentage are in an even more unenviable position for, while they could identify with either community, racism militates against them. They may want to outgrow the image of the 'tragic mulatto' yet have to deal with white rejection and the prevailing attitudes towards Blackness. Instead of being drawn to identifying with either half of themselves, they are often pushed one way or another or else repelled both ways. The choice to be Black and accepted as such by other Black people has to be an emphatic one. They have to live demonstrably Black lives and make a conscious decision to renounce their white heritage.'

Ngcobo's argument perpetuates racist ideas about racial identity; 'black' and 'white' in this reading are both identifiable as eternally separate, regardless of the existence of those who challenge this very assumption. Mixed racial parentage, far from challenging the racist notion of biological and innate racial difference, it seems produces people who can be clinically defined as oddities who are 'half' one race and 'half' another. In other words, their racial identity is construed as invalid. Validation, it seems, can only be achieved by renouncing one half of their identity. I would argue that this reading is intensely racist in that it denies the legitimate identity of those who 'lack' a proper racial identity. The notion that 'they' can be neatly split into two separate racial identities is, needless to say, far harder for the objects of this reading to accept.

Having expressed her belief that 'these' people lack a proper racial identity, which I would argue is the key argument that does indeed position those of 'us' who are of 'mixed racial parentage' in an 'unenviable position', Ngcobo proceeds to direct 'them' to choose 'Black' lives. The problematic questions, concerning what it is that constitutes 'blackness' and 'whiteness', are thus solved by directing those of 'us' who could be
either to demonstrate which is the correct choice. I would argue that it is precisely Ngcobo's dismissal of the validity of 'mixed racial parentage' that perpetuates essentialist and qualitative readings of racial difference. I would argue that the whole question of racial identity needs to be explored rather than be assumed to possess unalterable truths.

The recent interest in 'whiteness' as a construct is, I would argue, one of the most compelling directions of contemporary feminist theory. Such work is in fact vital for the dismantling of racism as it makes race relations explicit and thus produces a more effective context for white-authored discussions of race. Examining whiteness is essential for the eradication of the authority of the white feminist voice as by definition racially neutral. Clearly how whiteness is discussed is a far more complex matter.

The potential pitfalls involved in making 'blackness' or 'ethnicity' the subject is clearly the prolonged construction of people of color and black people as an object of enquiry. In their introduction to, 'Feminist Review: Thinking Through Ethnicities', the editors point out that:

rarely has the term 'ethnic' in the mass of literature on the subject been used to refer to white identities or to imagined communities that have emerged in the West. Colonialism and imperialism have resulted in the ethnocentric idea that the white majority are not 'ethnic' - only Others are.

A discussion of racism or black culture that does not refer to whiteness is critically incomplete, as it ignores how integral perceptions of whiteness are to the construction of the racially 'different' Other. bell hooks discusses this in her essay, 'Culture to culture: ethnography and cultural studies as critical intervention'. She voices her unease at the current academic interest in questions of race and post-colonial discourse. While hooks welcomes the need for cultural studies to concern itself with such
questions, she points to the disturbing reluctance of scholars to investigate *how* they came to be interested in these issues. Taking race as the subject, hooks notes:

how often contemporary white scholars writing about black people assume positions of familiarity, as though their work were not coming into being in a cultural context of white supremacy, as though it were in no way shaped and informed by that context. And therefore as though no need exists for them to overtly articulate a response to this political reality as part of their critical enterprise. White scholars can write about black culture or black people without fully interrogating their work to see if it employs white western intellectual traditions to re-inscribe white supremacy, to perpetuate racist domination."

This dissatisfaction with the ease with which white academics engage with discussions of race and colonialism has been addressed by feminists particularly in discussions of anthropology and early socialization.

Ruth Frankenberg in her essay, 'Growing up white: feminism, racism and the social geography of childhood', introduces her discussion of the lives of five white US women in precisely this context:

"there is no place for us to stand 'outside' racism, any more than we can stand 'outside' sexism. We cannot...simply 'give up' race privilege. I suggest that as white feminists we need to take cognizance both of the embeddedness of racism in all aspects of society and the ways this has shaped our own lives, theories and actions. Concretely, this means work in at least three linked areas: work on re-examining personal history and changing consciousness; thorough-going theoretical transformation within feminism; and participation in practical political work towards structural change."

The radical content of Frankenberg's work lies in her focus upon whiteness as instrumental in the struggle against racism. This contrasts with the more problematic proposals in Vron Ware's study of, *White Women, Racism and History*. In this text the emphasis falls upon the health and viability of 'feminism' which is perceived to be endangered by racial, class and sexual divisions. Ware acknowledges the need for understanding that there are differences between women but worries about the possible harm that this may cause to 'feminism':
there is a danger that such philosophical uncertainty will make it even harder to find a basis of political unity among women. I argue that blackness and whiteness are both gendered categories whose meanings are historically derived, always in relation to each other but rarely in a simple binary pattern of opposites. It is partly through disassembling these meanings that important political connections between women are able to emerge. These connections may indeed be 'politically dangerous' but they will help to ensure that feminism has a future as a radical movement that can unite women across existing divisions of class, race and culture.

What concerns me about Ware's methodology is the way in which feminism becomes defined solely in terms of a unified movement. The notion that feminism must be homogeneous in order to be politically effective places an enormous amount of pressure upon her thesis to undermine and overlook dissent between women. It is this assumption that undermines Ware's historical detection of a fundamental unity between women. Ware's search for points of connection between women in America during and after slavery is presented alongside a more muted commentary which acknowledges the somewhat problematic racism of many of the leading white abolitionists. This presents an interesting comparison to Angela Davis' discussions of white and black women's relations during slavery. Davis stresses that it is significant that the history of white working-class women's support has been overwritten by a concentration on the more problematic contribution of white middle class abolitionists.

I would argue that Ware's focus upon leading female abolitionists makes her examination of white-black relations critically incomplete. Ware's decision to pursue historical lines of connection between women could more accurately be described as lines of connection between wealthy white women such as Elizabeth Pease, and leading black women, notably Ida B. Wells. This is not to criticise the importance of this research but rather to question whether this is a sufficient context for Ware's overall aim. Ware directs her investigation towards her conviction that however
difficult it may be to connect race with gender, it is nevertheless essential for the future of feminism that 'we' do. This leads to the consistently problematic location of class in her account:

Trying to talk about race and gender, without forgetting class, is constantly a struggle against the urge to over-simplify and generalize without over-stressing particularity; against the urge to speak for others without ignoring them entirely; against the urge to run away from complicated and contradictory desires and feelings, without losing sight of the way identities are interconnected. Feminism and the politics of black liberation share the goal of redefining language and of ridding the ways in which we speak and understand each other of negative and oppressive meaning.

Earlier, Ware comments that she will leave aside class for the sake of 'clarity'. But it is precisely this perception of class, as endangering coherence, that constitutes the most problematic aspect of Ware's discourse.

Ware's unwillingness to incorporate class into her analysis, as opposed to her strenuous efforts to incorporate race and gender, denies class its complex interrelation with racial and gender oppression. As Carolyn Steedman points out in her autobiography, Landscape For A Good Woman: A Story Of Two Lives:

This refusal of a complicated psychology to those living in conditions of material distress is a central theme of this book. Working-class people have come to be seen within the field of cultural criticism, as bearing the elemental simplicity of class consciousness and little more.

The notion that class can be temporarily put aside in order for the point to be made more clearly fails to acknowledge that this is to maintain the power of the middle-class voice as fundamentally neutral. In other words, for Ware, the presence of white working-class women for this particular study risks the confusion that could so easily prevent 'us' from envisioning a common struggle. The feminist 'we', in short, cannot, in this instance, accommodate class differences.
Ware's concern that feminism should have a viable future is, of course, a personal one. Ware, like Spelman, reiterates throughout her text that the purpose of her discussion is to find a way for feminism to continue as a radical movement. Given this, Ware's historical perception of feminism is as important as it is problematic. Post-war feminism, she explains, developed:

as a political and cultural movement during a period of continuous reconstruction of colonial memory.  

In Ware's account, 'feminism' did not sufficiently engage with this process. I would suggest that this very much depends on what is being understood by 'feminism'. Certainly, mainstream feminism has not until recently engaged with this process, but this is hardly an accurate conclusion about feminist work done by black women and women of color on the subject.  

It is significant that despite having stated the need for white feminists to investigate their own history, Ware proceeds to locate the origins of discourses upon the 'fracturing' of woman with postmodernism. This is, of course, one of its histories, but the more striking relevance of the history of black women's, third world women's, and women of color's work on the subject is overlooked. The inevitable preoccupation with colonialism in the work of black and women of color is buried again as Ware explains:

One of the problems that arises from insufficiently exploring this recent history of Empire is the lack of critical, feminist reaction to the way that the memory of colonialism is constantly being recycled and reconstructed.  

Moreover, Ware assumes that it is possible, indeed that it has to be possible to find sufficient points of connection between women, before and after colonialism, to enable 'feminism' to continue its radical function.
'Feminism' becomes the predefined category of unity between women.

There is very much the sense in Ware's text that to not find unity would be to signal the end of 'feminism'. It is precisely this conclusion that I would like to challenge. I would argue that contemporary discussions of gender identity too frequently fail to recognise that what it is that constitutes 'feminism' is also a site of contention between 'feminists'. There is a danger that 'feminism', like 'the Women's Movement', will continue to be under the historical ownership of white, western, middle-class, heterosexual 'feminists'.

The problem is then that, despite Ware's desire to find a language that will both express difference and discover unity, feminism remains located primarily within the realm of white, western, middle-class experience. Thus, Ware and Spelman attempt to simultaneously focus upon the need to recognise and overcome the differences between women. Spelman is less resolute about the certainty of finding unity, commenting that:

it is one thing to urge women to look beyond their own cases; it is quite another to assume that if one does one will find a common condition or a common hope shared by all women.  

However, Spelman throughout her text is confident that if 'we' always take account of our differences then this will in itself enable 'us' to: "come to an understanding of what we have in common." I would suggest that there is a certain anomaly in white, middle-class discussions of feminism, which begin by asserting the need to attend to the problems of exclusion within feminism, and end by asserting that the only way out of this is to find a way in which to unite women. I would suggest that perhaps what is needed is an attention to difference alongside an attention to the dangers of stating what it is that 'feminism' needs 'us' to make of this.

The problem of what 'we' do with our differences is addressed in,
Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History. In this text the contributors discuss the implications for work done by women about women. Their conclusions, I would argue, are particularly useful for contemporary discussions of identity politics and feminism. The editors record how their initial assumption that, "gender united women more powerfully than race and class divided them", was challenged by the complexity of the relations of race, class and gender. Judith Stacey, in her essay, 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?', points out that the assumption that power relations can be transcended between women, serves to consolidate the unequal relations between women, who are the object of identification, and women who discuss and research their difference:

Feminism's keen sensitivity to structural inequalities in research and to the irreconcilability of Otherness applies primarily, I believe, to its critique of research by men, particularly to research by men, but about women. The majority of feminist claims about feminist ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research, however, presume that such research occurs almost exclusively woman-to-woman. Thus, feminist researchers are apt to suffer the delusion of alliance more than the delusion of separateness...Recall the claims about empathy and identification between feminist researchers and the women they study, and the calls by feminist scholars for an egalitarian research process...It strikes me that a fruitful dialogue between feminism and critical ethnography might address their complementary sensitivities and naïvetés about the inherent inequalities and the possibilities for relationships in the definition, study, and representation of the Other. 

This critical appraisal of how identification between women is to take place is, I would argue, crucial for its identification of power relationships between women. Stacey's reservations about the kind of relationships that can develop between different women marks precisely her ability to relinquish the authority of white, western feminism. Stacey is not suggesting that first world feminists should not engage with third world and black feminists but questions the ethical implications of assuming that identification is wholly possible.
There can and should be feminist research that is rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other. I believe the potential benefits of 'partially' feminist ethnography seem worth the serious moral costs involved.

It is this conception of the limitations of a purely gendered definition of feminism that signals what is lacking in feminist demands for the excavation of 'the' common ground between women.

As Sondra Hale points out in her essay, 'Feminist method, process and self-criticism: interviewing Sudanese women', her expectation that she would find common ground in her interviews proved to be inaccurate. Hale's assumption that she would be received as a 'sister feminist', because of her feminism and commitment to the Sudanese Party, was undermined by the wariness of her interviewees. Hale comments that her disappointment at the guarded exchange between herself and Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim arose from her own mistaken perception of herself as an 'Insider'. Although Hale's belief in a particular feminist process was challenged, she produces, from this, a crucial point about relations between feminists:

'To put it in the Sudanese context, when there are class differences and/or racial differences, or when the interviewer represents the colonizer and the narrator the colonized, it is not appropriate for the interviewer/biographer to want 'equal time', or expect to be equally affirmed. Is it logical for me, a white, Western feminist interviewing a Sudanese to expect to be addressed as I see myself, when I may represent so many other categories to her.

The need for a definition of feminism which involves a sustained analysis of the intersection of race, class and sexuality with gender is, I would argue, essential for a discussion of marginality. It is for this reason that I have chosen to extend my analysis beyond the sites of the publishing industry to feminist discourses themselves.

Marginality, in feminist writing, is constructed by discourses that present middle-class, white, western, heterosexual viewpoints as
quintessentially neutral. In chapter one, 'Textual contexts: feminist writing and the publishing industry', I begin my discussion by focusing on the relationship between feminist discourses and the publishing industry. The importance of this, I would argue, lies in recognising the need for an appraisal of the material context in which discourses are produced and marketed. Certainly, it is a cause for concern when theoretical debates become increasingly sophisticated and ambitious, while references to the material constraints, that prevent the publication of a diverse number of voices, remains largely unacknowledged and unexplored. As Susanne Kappeler points out in, *The Pornography of Representation*:

> We do not subject works to an analysis of labour and production within the economy; we learn to talk only of values: moral values, aesthetic values, imaginative values, complex values, technical values, innovative values, textual values. We are not taught what we thereby validate...Even though we are taught to cite the publishers of books in our references and footnotes, we are to see these publishers as in the service of literature, rather than see literature as in the service of their business. We think they publish books out of the goodness of their hearts, out of their recognition of the values, out of their genuine enthusiasm for literary culture. We give little attention to the way in which our literary values mesh with their market values. "[46]" 

It is precisely this relation that I want to focus upon in my examination of the publishing industry.

Moreover, as a small number of feminist writers enter the mainstream, it is, I would argue, crucial for feminist criticism to examine what kinds of feminist narratives are receiving attention, and from where. I start chapter one by tracing and analysing the history of the publishing industry in Britain in order to provide a context for my subsequent discussion of feminist publishing. I then compare the different aims and structures of feminist publishing houses in Britain and America, particularly in terms of their engagement with and departure from mainstream publishing practices.

I outline my concern with the extent to which successful feminist
publishing houses have replicated the manipulation of old colonialist networks into the third world by multinational publishing companies. This concern is, as I demonstrate, one that has been voiced by third world and black commentators. However, it is significant that this disquiet is not present in prominent western feminist discussions of feminist publishing. I discuss this in some depth examining, in particular, Nicci Gerrard's *Into The Mainstream: Feminist Writing And The Publishing Industry*, which was the first feminist text to take this as its principal subject. My analysis focuses upon the tension between writers, such as Gerrard, who view the success of some feminist writing as a positive step for feminism, as opposed to those writers who point to the continued marginalisation of black women, poor women, lesbian women, working-class women and third world women in feminist publishing.

I conclude the chapter by arguing that for feminist publishing to perform a radical function, it needs to repudiate the economic and theoretical structures that inform the expansionist model of mainstream publishing. I hope to demonstrate that a focus on 'women' in western feminist publishing has led to the exclusion of women who are not white, western, middle-class and heterosexual. Thus, the need for an inclusion of race and class in notions of gender is indispensable for the eradication of marginal publishing by feminist publishing houses.

In chapter two, 'Bestselling feminism: problems of exclusion in the writings of Margaret Atwood', I focus upon a feminist writer who has been successfully published by a feminist press, in order to analyse the textual content of a dominant feminist narrative. I would argue that Margaret Atwood strives to express the 'extraordinary' humanity of her white, middle-class and heterosexual central characters through a portrayal of
those with different identities as correspondingly less empathic. I
selected Atwood because she is one of the most well known and successful
'feminist' writers. She has now become firmly positioned on school and
university reading lists,\textsuperscript{48} and her novel, \textit{The Handmaid's Tale},\textsuperscript{49} was
translated into film.\textsuperscript{50} This is not to suggest that Atwood has reached
the audience that writers with mainstream publishing houses might hope to
attain. Indeed, the publishing and culture industry's endorsement of Atwood
as a particularly gifted 'feminist' writer is one that reaffirms the idea
that there is usually a contradiction at work when the two identites of
'feminist' and 'great' writer co-exist together.

I contend that it is Atwood's belief in the existence of rare and
great artistic talent, combined with her reluctance to admit the presence
of ideology in artistic production, that has enabled her to be upheld as a
major feminist voice by mainstream cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{51} What
interests me about 'Atwood' is the tension that exists between critical
conceptions of her and her own personal unwillingness to position herself
as a feminist. In examining both her critical and fictional writing I hope
to challenge those readings that position her as a feminist writer.

It is Atwood's allegiance with liberal-humanist notions of innate
artistic genius\textsuperscript{52} that most problematises definitions of her writing as
feminist. I trace this first of all in her critical work and then show how
it relates to her fictional representations. In accordance with my overall
aim to explore race, class and gender in this thesis I have concentrated on
Atwood's negotiation of these configurations. In Atwood's writing, race and
class are present as points of conflict symbolised by their embodiment in
her minor characters, who are presented with far less sympathy than her
central ones.\textsuperscript{53} In Atwood's texts 'Others' are very clearly not white,
not lesbian or gay, and not working-class. Those of 'us' who are not white, working-class or heterosexual are constantly objectified by her narrative voice. Thus, Atwood's narratives are controlled by white, middle-class and heterosexual perspectives which guide her readers through her representations of 'the' world.

I intend to show how Atwood's denunciation of ideology and politics is repudiated by her specific ideological viewpoint. Thus, I would stress that Atwood's criticisms of politically motivated writing\textsuperscript{42} is the result of her perception of her own viewpoint as bearing no trace of political motivation. In my reading of her texts I demonstrate that there are very clear political motivations at work and they are precisely those that wish to maintain the mystique of artistic production. That this mystique is founded upon hierarchical notions of who is able to produce valuable creative writing is one that, I would suggest, presents profound problems for an equation of Atwood's writing with feminism.

My discussion of Atwood includes an assessment of some prominent feminist criticisms of her work, which I argue are reading her texts as feminist because of her subject matter and because she is published by a feminist press. I take issue with the notion that this in itself renders her writing 'feminist'. It is by investigating both Atwood and critical readings of Atwood that I hope to show how mainstream feminism can exclude and undermine black women, working-class women, lesbian women and women of color. In this sense I am reading Atwood in order to locate prominent, exclusionary assumptions that are characteristic of 'successful' feminist writing.

In chapter three, 'Narrative selection: genre and minority voices', I continue my examination of the discourses and practices that represent
'Other' lives as marginal. In this chapter, I explore this through an examination of the literary convention of genre. I propose that genre be viewed as a hierarchical means of excluding certain narratives through the imposition of western interpretations of narrative structure and content. I begin by tracing the historical function of generic categories for literary criticism. I draw upon the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, who have argued that genre classification should be traced back to the liberal bourgeois attempt to create a refined and 'private' arena for the literary gentleman.

In the same way as Stallybrass and White, I would contend that contemporary attempts to view genre as a useful and subversive convention fail to recognise their fundamental role as conventions which police the literary borders, rendering certain narratives less literary than others. Thus, I argue that radical reappropriations of 'major' genres, as containing previously unexplored discourses of subversion, fail to challenge the authority of the hierarchies upon which 'the' literary is constituted. I demonstrate this by exploring autobiography, examining both autobiographical texts and critical discussions of what it is that constitutes autobiographical narratives.

I am particularly concerned to stress that the existence of different interpretations of autobiographical narratives explicates the dangers of suggesting that particular autobiographies are more properly autobiographical than 'others'. Thus, I compare feminist interpretations and definitions of autobiography. This comparison demonstrates how the factors of class and race produce divergent readings of prominent autobiographical narrative features. The point that I wish to stress is that this difference becomes translated into a hierarchical literary system.
if one particular autobiographical narrative is proclaimed to most represent autobiography as a particular and identifiable genre.

It is the extent to which genre definitions facilitate exclusion of narratives that, I would argue, has been overlooked in prominent feminist discussions of genre. I am concerned to demonstrate that feminist attempts to 'reappropriate' literary conventions that have been employed to exclude women fail to prevent their continued exclusion of certain women writers. I extend this argument in chapter four, 'Challenging the identification of 'major' and 'minor' voices in 'feminist' literary traditions', where I move from feminist discussions of genre to feminist discussions of literary traditions. Literary traditions are the product of genre definitions, whereby the characteristics of particular texts are used to propose an identifiable literary tradition.

I begin chapter four by examining the work of Elaine Showalter and Dale Spender and the implications of their proposed 'canons' of women writers. I argue that literary traditions, in the same way as generic definitions, exclude narratives on the basis of their apparent failure to adhere to their selected narrative model. As in chapter three, I am particularly concerned to locate which narratives are excluded by feminist reappropriations of traditional literary conventions. I demonstrate this by discussing, in particular, black feminist criticisms of the predominantly 'white' female literary traditions that were unearthed by Spender and Showalter as the most representative of 'great' women's writing. However, as I demonstrate, prominent black feminist attempts to locate a black women's tradition share problematic assumptions with those that underlie Showalter's work.

Thus, I argue that Alice Walker's attempt to locate a black women's
tradition relies upon notions of 'great' individual talent and 'genius'. I would suggest that the black feminist discussion of Zora Neale Hurston mirrors the white feminist debate over Virginia Woolf. Both debates share a narrow focus upon 'the' unique individual, which prevents more productive discussions that could focus upon the differences that exist between women who are supposed to share 'a' genre or 'a' tradition. In order to dismantle the authority of traditions, I discuss in some detail past and contemporary feminist interpretations of 'great' writing and 'genius'. For, it is the continued feminist employment of notions of 'genius' and 'great' individual talent that, I argue, problematises feminist literary critical efforts to relate their work to the masses of women.

I conclude the chapter by arguing that the 'feminism' of feminist 'literary' theory is dependent upon a concerted challenge to existing hierarchical literary values and assumptions. Thus, I cite Audre Lorde's essay, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', in which Lorde stresses the continued exclusion of poor women, black women, older women and lesbian women from contemporary feminist debate.

Lorde's directive to feminists to work with their differences and attempt to overthrow existing systems of oppression is the subject of my final chapter.

Thus in chapter five, 'Overcoming 'our' differences: feminist discourses on women in the 'first' and 'third' world', I discuss the ways in which western and third world feminist debate has negotiated their difference. I demonstrate my contention that 'difference' should also be extended to the divisions within western feminist debate and third world feminist debate. I also examine the ways in which western feminism and third world feminism can be erroneously presented as unified discourses.
I begin by analysing prominent western feminist attempts to construct global definitions of women's oppression. I look in particular at the work of Maria Mies and French feminist notions of 'women's writing' (écriture féminine). I am interested in examining these debates in terms of their similarities rather than in the context of their more widely discussed difference as psychoanalytic and materialist western feminist discourses. I argue that Mies, Cixous and Irigaray propose notions of 'women's' sameness by failing to attend to racial, national and class differences between women. I support this contention by drawing on the work of third world feminist theorists.

I discuss in particular the anthology, Third World Women And The Politics Of Feminism,50 which arose from the 1983 conference held in Illinois, 'Common differences: third world women and feminist perspectives'. I focus on the ways in which third world difference is articulated by western feminist commentators, and how this has been challenged by third world feminists. I also examine tensions within third world feminist debates, particularly over the issue of whether it should be more concerned with sexuality or with questions of race and nationalism.

I conclude my discussion by arguing that dominant western feminist debate needs to relinquish its attempt to determine the location and significance of 'difference' for feminism, and recognise that this characterises the oppressive power of dominant western feminist theory. Thus, I conclude that the final issue is power and that feminist theoreticians, particularly in the west, need to take note of their own power, specifically by relinquishing their assumption that they know what it is that unites and divides women. I argue that the question of difference, and of identification between women, should be regarded as an
open question rather than as a problem that western feminists can solve.

Thus, the thesis as a whole aims to analyse how the marginalisation of working-class women, black women, lesbian women and third world women is produced. I am particularly concerned to investigate feminist discourses in terms of their ability to challenge the marginalisation of the masses of women. This involves a parallel challenge to those feminist discourses which, I argue, fail to address their own powerful identifications with mainstream hierarchical practices and discourses.
Notes


3. Ibid. Audre Lorde's dissociation from the fair united black women against its racist organisation. Detailed in pp. 63-4.


5. Ibid., p. 11.


10. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


20. Ibid., pp. 95-6.

21. I am drawing on Cherrie Moraga's and Gloria Anzaldúa's definitions of the term, 'women of color', in their introduction to the anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women Of Color*, Kitchen Table, New York: 1981. They use the term to encompass the widely different women of color living in and outside of the United States, and express through it their desire to forge connections with each other. 'Women of color' expresses a fluid conception of racial identity emphasising the importance of 'bridges' and connections, rather than racial membership. pp. i-viii.


23. I am referring to work such as Ruth Frankenberg's essay, 'Growing up white: feminism, racism and the social geography of childhood', which I discuss later in this section.


25. hooks b, 'Culture to culture: ethnography and cultural studies as critical intervention', in hooks b, *Yearning: Race, Gender, And Cultural Politics*, pp.123-135.

26. Ibid., p. 124.


28. Ibid., p. 78.


30. Ibid., p. xvii.


34. Ware V, *Beyond The Pale*, p. 227.


38. Ibid., p. 113.


40. Ibid., p. 2.


42. Ibid., pp. 116-7.

43. Ibid., p. 117.


45. Ibid., p. 133.


48. Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been positioned at all levels of required reading for English examinations in Britain.


51. Atwood is generously reviewed by all sections of the media which is a fundamental requirement for reaching a wide and profitable audience.

52. Atwood's belief in the existence of rare artistic individuals is detailed throughout her critical work *Second Words, Critical Writings*, Anansi Press, Toronto: 1983. In chapter two I demonstrate that this is a key assumption in her fictional writing.

53. As I demonstrate, in chapter two, all of Atwood's major protagonists express their dislike, distrust and fear of working-class people, gay people and black people; though it should be noted that black people are particularly absent in Atwood's fiction.

54. Detailed in *Second Words*.

56. I am referring, in particular, to working-class writers, and black and third world writers, who I would argue are the least likely to fulfil the narrative requirements of prestigious genre classifications.

57. I argue that Alice Walker and Elizabeth Fox Genovese rely on a notion that a few 'great' women can represent 'black' women.

58. See my discussion of Jane Gallop, Toril Moi and Alice Walker in chapter four.


Chapter One

First Contexts: Feminist Writing And The Publishing Industry

An examination of the publishing industry is, I would argue, crucial for an understanding of how 'marginality' is produced. Publication is, after all, the only means by which a text can reach a wide number of readers. Moreover, the different ways in which books are marketed and published is a key factor in determining how large that audience is likely to be. The effects of this relation between books and publishers is, as Dale Spender comments in, The Writing Or The Sex Or Why You Don't Have To Read Women's Writing To Know it's No Good, conspicuous for its absence from literary studies:

The means by which the written word gets accepted for publication, and for promotion, review, validation, and inclusion in the literary curriculum to become part of the cultural heritage, would have to be one of the least-taught areas of intellectual endeavour. And this cannot be because the process is unimportant: The production of the printed word in our society - and the role that the gatekeepers play in it -is centrally significant and should be open to investigation. Certainly, it is significant that the lack of interest in publishing is not shared by those who are most affected by their lack of representation, or their equally damaging mis-representation by the publishing industry.

June Jordan, in her essay 'Notes towards a black balancing of love and hatred', explains how the high profile given to black, male authors of the protest novel was paralleled by a resounding lack of interest in the work of authors such as Zora Neale Hurston. As Jordan points out, while Richard White's portrayal of white hatred in Native Song earned him well earned fame, Hurston's portrayal of a black community left her critically neglected, and penniless. The reluctance of American publishing houses to publish narratives that were concerned with the black community reflects
the unwillingness of those publishers to accept the experience of black people outside of a central and white reference point. In this sense, publishing reflects and reinforces the world view of the dominant culture, as Jordan argues in her essay:

Since white America lies outside the Hurston universe, in fact as well as in her fiction, you do not run upon the man/enemy; protest, narrowly conceived is therefore beside the point; rhythm or tones of outrage or desperate flight would be wholly inappropriate in her text. Instead you slip into a total Black reality where Black people do not represent issues; they represent their own, particular selves in a Family/Community setting that permits relaxation from hunted/warrior postures, and that fosters the natural, person postures of courting, jealousy, ambition, dream, sex, work, partying, sorrow, bitterness, celebration, and fellowship. 

It is this connection between publishing and representation that, I would argue, makes it of particular concern to those who are judged to be uttering narratives that fall outside of the mainstream of western culture. It is for this reason that I intend to examine the publishing industry and its implications for feminist writing. I will start by analysing the changes that have taken place in the publishing industry since the post war period and will then explore the implications of those changes for feminist writing and publishing.

1. The Changing Publishing Industry

Studies of the publishing industry locate 1947 as a critical point for publishing. Maria Mies in, Patriarchy And Accumulation On A World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour, locates the period immediately after the Second World War as the time when western countries sought to develop their markets in the so-called 'underdeveloped' countries:

Since the rise of Europe and later the USA as the dominant centres of the capitalist world economy, a process of polarization and division has been
taking place by which one pole - the Western industrialized world - is getting richer and ever more powerful, and the other pole - the colonized countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America - are getting poorer and less powerful. 

The significance of this desire for economic expansion, on the part of Europe and the United States, was the extent to which 'economic' and 'cultural' spheres became conflated. Books, and other cultural mediums, became industrialised and shaped into products that could be sold abroad in exchange for the raw materials and cheap labour that enabled the capitalist economies to sustain their growth. As Armand Mattelart points out in *Transnationals And The Third World: The Struggle For Culture,* the emergent transnational empires, that own the rights to the mass media in the forms of publishing, television and radio should be viewed as the logical result of the capitalist growth model:

The transnational firms are a part of an overall system in which they have admittedly the role of central units in a capital expansion model. As the basic organizational form of a world scale production process, they are in this sense the foundation of a cultural, political and economic system. Their network of natural connections does not come from a conspiratorial strategy but from a logic of development and the reproduction of the conditions of this development. 

The extent to which books formed a part of this desire for economic and cultural expansion became particularly clear in the 1980s. Throughout that time the larger publishing houses, in both Europe and the United States, began to purchase their smaller and often independent counterparts.

As Nicci Gerrard explains, in *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism has Changed Women's Writing,* between 1982-1987 there were over forty publishing houses involved in more than one hundred major purchases. The momentum that is generated by such purchasing is clearly reflected in The Bookseller's review of the transactions taking place within the publishing industry in the late 1980s:
Associated Book Publishers buys A: H: & A.W.Reed, Routledge & Kegan Paul (including Pandora) and Croom Helm; ABP is bought by Thomsons, it sells to other conglomerates both Methuen General and Pandora, Bertelsmann buys Doubleday. Chatto, Bodley Head & Cape buys Virago; Random House buys them; Virago buys out. Century buys Hutchinson, Macmillan buys Sidgwick & Jackson. Octopus - out-tenting almost everybody else - buys Brimax books, the Heinemann group, Hamlyn Publishing, a third of Pan, and Mitchell Beazley; Octopus is then bought by Reed International. It was in this climate that most smaller publishing houses either went bankrupt or were absorbed into the new publishing giants. Moreover, the large publishing houses that emerged from these transactions were themselves soon being sought by huge conglomerates such as Paramount which owns the American publishing house Simon & Schuster.

ii. Unease within the Publishing Industry

The increasing ties of the book industry with the multinationals has brought with it an increased sense of books as commercial products that are ultimately answerable to the marketplace, rather than to the discerning judgement of a few cultural experts. The erasure of the long standing connection between publishing and creative judgement and literary skills is one that, not surprisingly, many publishers are reluctant to embrace. Peter Owen's self-published anthology of essays on the current state of the publishing industry, Publishing the Future, discusses the consequences of this for publishing. The contributors reflect the sense of unease within the publishing industry at their increasing dependence upon the state of major multinationals. Owen himself draws attention to the instability within publishing houses:

Editors who have been involved with authors, and who care about these authors and their books are becoming increasingly disillusioned. They find it hard to adjust to the cynicism of some managements, where the authors are treated as a commodity. A number of editors have left their former
employers hoping to start their own imprints. However, the fate of smaller imprints in the current climate is particularly fragile, as books become increasingly available outside of their traditional home in bookshops. The decline of the small, specialist bookshop is a further consequence of the increased alliance between books and other commodities. Thomas Whiteside, in The Blockbuster Complex: Conglomerates, Show Business and Book Publishing, argues that this decrease in independent bookshops has been paralleled by the emergence of closer informal ties between publishers and chainstore bookshops:

I have heard it said that some major hardcover publishers just will not go ahead with the publication of a certain book until they have obtained what they consider to be an encouraging response from the big bookstore chains about its chances for selling well.

Small bookshops now have to compete with the easy access to books offered by supermarkets, newsagents and the rapidly expanding mainstream bookstores such as Dillons and Waterstones. Moreover, the ability of the large bookstore chains to seize the market by lowering the price of books, as Dillons did in 1992, has contributed to the difficulties experienced by smaller bookshops such as the British, radical feminist 'Sisterwrite' which closed down in 1993. 'Sisterwrite's' steady loss of profit was a direct result of the ability of larger bookstores to incorporate mainstream and specialist interests, often at a cheaper price.

Moreover, books may well now be more accessible but as the authors of Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors, point out, increased accessibility has not meant that a wider range of books is published. Rather, the involvement of the multinationals has caused the major publishing houses to all be frantically competing with each other to find and market the next bestseller. The prominence of the bestseller as a
genre reflects the increased significance attached to books as a source of profit.

In *The Myth of Superwoman: Women's Bestsellers in France and the United States*, Resa L. Dudovitz stresses that the international prominence of the bestseller is very much the result of an increasingly industrialised book industry. Dudovitz draws her readers' attention to the extent to which 'bestsellers' are a predicted result for certain books that the major publishing houses decide to invest in:

"Today, the massive industrialization of the book industry has turned the bestseller into a book whose success, despite disclaimers by publishers, is manipulated and engineered in advance of its release... (The bestseller is) Above all...a book which appears on the list most commonly known as the bestseller list which represents the numbers game played by the publishing industry to create interest in a new book." 

Bestsellers, then, are the books that publishers select as the ones most likely to sell. In fact, many books which are marketed as 'bestsellers' fail to actually reach bestselling status. Robert Escarpit, a French sociologist of literature, has provided a useful definition of bestsellers which he argues should be identified by their sales pattern as well as the number of copies sold. Escarpit locates the bestseller as a text that is both a 'fastseller', in that it quickly sells enough copies to pay for itself before drifting into oblivion, and a 'steady seller' which starts off slowly but sells over a long period of time. It is, in other words, a rare phenomenon representing only two or three percent of all books sold.

Dudovitz compares French and American publishers and their attitudes to this increasing commercialisation of the book industry. According to Dudovitz, French publishers and editors were especially keen to insist that bestsellers were the only means by which they could hope to publish more literary enterprises. Dudovitz cites both Olivier Orban and Robert Laffont as heads of publishing houses:
which publish a substantial number of bestsellers, [and] justify their publishing of bestsellers as an economic necessity, and deny the harmful effect of the overproduction of such a type of literature. "[21]"

This defence of bestsellers is not one that is shared by many researchers into the effects of multinational involvement in the publishing industry. Thomas Whiteside, in his investigation into the effects of the mass media's involvement with book production, cites Oscar Dystal's, of Bantam Books, observation that:

"Everybody in the industry knows that what the publishers call the middle novel is suffering." [22]"

The fate of the middle ranking author is very much the same as the traditional publisher and it is significant that it is those authors whom publishers most frequently point to as marking the decline of any serious interest in literature. The rationale behind the promotion of bestsellers is clearly threatening to an industry that has built itself up upon notions of good taste, neutrality and cultural expertise. The bestseller may be the most coveted manuscript of the major publishing houses but it is also the most dispensable. A key aspect of the bestseller is that it is superfluous and shortlived; satisfying an immediate need which once read needs to be replaced by another bestseller.

Thus books, at the very time when they are being targeted at as wide an audience as possible, are at their most removed from any connection with literary excellence. A striking example of the co-existence of publisher's contempt for manuscripts and their willingness to invest in them occurred in the case of Jacqueline Susann's Valley of the Dolls [23]. Thomas Whiteside relates how Susann's publisher dismissed her manuscript as "literary trash" before proceeding to promote it with an unprecedented amount of print advertising. However, as Whiteside points out, the main
promotional effort consisted of getting the author on to as many radio and TV shows as possible. The result was that the book sold 350,000 hardcover copies and remained on the bestseller lists for a year and a half. The success of the novel goes some way to explaining the president of Simon & Schuster's comment that 'In a certain sense we are the software of the television and movie media'.

The involvement of the mass media with book production has direct consequences both for the kinds of books that will be promoted and the kinds of author who will be solicited. Publishers are attracted to television, not only for its access to far wider audiences than that generated by print advertising, but also because it costs them very little. As Whiteside comments, television, as well as giving publishers guaranteed sales, also predisposes them to "those authors who seem capable of becoming public 'personalities'". Moreover, this decision, according to Whiteside, is one that seems to be taken at an early stage of the negotiations between authors and publishers.

The weight that leading publishers attach to television for promotional purposes is evident in the 'Memo on media exposure' that McGraw Hill Trade book company issue to their authors. The article stresses the importance of authors cooperating with the chat show format insisting that they:

Do not underestimate the value of a minor show...Resolve to be at your best on every show, regardless of your opinion of its format or host...Do not feel incensed if the host has obviously not read your book...You have temporarily assumed the obligations of a show-business personality...You must radiate self-confidence, charm, charisma..."

Resa L. Dudovitz also stresses the impact that television talk shows have had on book sales. Dudovitz points to the huge influence of Bernard Pivot's show *Apostrophes*, a weekly literary discussion which regularly attracts an
estimated five million French viewers, and is now commissioned for cable television in America. As Dudovitz comments, this effectively makes Pivot, who is also the editor of the literary magazine Lire, "the current arbiter of literary tastes in France".

Hosts such as Bernard Pivot and publicity guidelines issued to authors, such as that by McGraw Hill, all work towards creating a new kind of literary standard for authors. As Whiteside comments, there are certain narratives that do not fit in with the structure of the literary chat show. Fiction is problematic, since it means that the interviewer would need to have read the text in order to discuss it. This is however an obstacle that has been overcome by publishers wishing to launch their selected 'bestsellers'. Whiteside explains how:

Publishers try to get round the anti-fiction obstacle by offering the producers fiction writers who can discuss the factual situations underlying their subject matter.

Thus, Jacqueline Susann, when she appeared on television, was engaged in lengthy discussions which revealed her knowledge of the private lives of the rich and famous. Authors are solicited in terms of their ability to perform on television and are encouraged to write manuscripts that are concerned with what Whiteside terms "subjects natural to the talk show". Subjects that are, in other words, concerned primarily with marriage, divorce and mental and physical self-improvement.

Dudovitz, in her research into bestsellers, discovered a parallel trend in France, with writers producing books that would appeal to Bernard Pivot. Moreover, the success of Pivot's show and subsequent expansion into the United States has resulted in a considerable dilution of its original format:

Pivot's success stems from the personality he has created. Whereas in the early years of his program Pivot attacked and provoked his guests,
producing lively and often controversial discussions, today, seated in an informal living-room type setting, he plays the role of the well-informed reader.

Pivot, like the writers that he interviews, is involved in the successful projection of himself as a television 'personality' which, in turn determines the kinds of books and authors that will gain access to a wide audience. The extent to which writers are producing prearranged scripts is already a general feature of publishing, as Anthony Blond points out in The Book Book:

"A great many authors are recommended by publishers...more than one third of Jonathan Cape's annual non-fiction list consists of books which the publishers have paid for in advance and have asked specifically to be written for them."

The prominence of the bestseller in contemporary publishing is, I would argue, the logical result of a capitalist society; founded as it is on the notion of fierce competition between products that will, in time, all be supplanted by 'newer' variations. The authors of Rolling Our Own voice a commonly cited observation that:

"books of quality became unavailable in preference for rapidly replaced books which could be freshly raved over and quickly forgotten."

Books, in other words, are now a part of the survival mechanism of capitalist markets which are dependent on a notion of their products as all needing to be continually replaced by fresh versions of a dispensable original.

Clearly, this economic and ideological rationale is more significant for books than it is for washing powder; and as Michael Poutney points out in The Publishing/Bookselling Balance, is reflected in the decline of reprints. Poutney's comparison between the figures for reprints as opposed to the figures for new writing reveals the extent to which the changing structure of the publishing industry has affected book production. As
Poutney details; between 1950-78 the number of new titles soared from 11,738 to 29,530, whereas reprints hardly doubled: 5,334 compared to 9,236 in 1978.

In order to be successful, books need to sell well and quickly, for, as Poutney explains, the disproportionate investment of publishers and bookstores in new and potentially bestselling fiction means that there are fewer available resources and shelf space for books that are not members of this genre, or are deemed to be unlikely to achieve a wide readership. Thomas Whiteside also cites the ever increasing number of paperbacks as contributing to the intense competition for shelf space in bookshops. Poutney points out that the massive increase of new titles, particularly since the mid seventies, provides what is an "impossible tide" for booksellers with the result that "many books get next to no showing in bookshops".

iii. 'Publishers' versus 'Managers'

The investment in bestsellers, as well as taking up what is increasingly valuable shelf space, also contributes to an overall shift in the cultural significance that is attached to books by the dominant culture.

The dissatisfaction that is being expressed within the publishing industry reflects, I would suggest, the power struggle that is taking place between the traditional owners of the industry and their new managers. The cultural significance of art for contemporary society is, according to researchers and established publishers, at stake. The question that this raises for feminists concerns the extent to which the vision that publishers, such as Peter Owen and the contributors to his anthology,
present is an accurate and, perhaps more importantly, desirable context for book production.

As the authors of *Rolling Our Own* point out, there is a basic contradiction operating at the heart of the contemporary publishing industry:

"it is the discrepancy between the image that publishers still have of themselves as the 'Gentleman's Profession' and the change in the market which makes it impossible to be any such thing."  

The impact of multinational involvement has certainly produced far reaching structural changes in the publishing industry. As Peter Owen explains, there has been a profound disruption to the traditional close knit publishing company, to the extent that publishing itself has become a less prestigious and autonomous part of book production. Publishers have become subordinate to managers who often rely on editors and agents rather than the opinion of a publisher. As Owen comments, commissioning editors are becoming increasingly active in seeking out and commissioning new manuscripts, which is the traditional work of the publisher. The effect of this, according to Owens, is that:

This means they are mini-publishers within the publishing house and are only responsible to management."

Owen contrasts this present scenario with his own vision of how a publishing company should be governed:

"The publisher should be aware of everything that is going on. He or she is the captain of a team. Every publisher should have a specific policy. My firm has always concentrated on quality, and specialised in the translation of distinguished foreign authors. If I think a book is outstanding I publish it, even if only a small sale can be expected."

It is this general sense of insecurity within the industry that has prompted some publishers to invoke the past as a golden period in which publishing was regarded as a craft rather than as a business venture.
Michael Lane in his study, *Books and Publishers*, depicts the image of this once archetypal publisher:

"We picture him as someone who is ultimately connected by ties of friendship, or even kinship with the most distinguished members of our society's literary and intellectual élite; as someone who spends the greater part of his time in the company of men of letters. He is a writer himself or aspires to be one. He has a private income which he uses either directly to subsidise his business or indirectly so that he himself need not be governed in his decisions by such crude considerations as making a living or profit and loss...His only real interest is in the world of books."

Lane's romantic description of publishing is one that is considerably less appealing to feminists and those that 'the most distinguished' members of society have neglected to publish. Indeed, Lane's portrayal of the once intimate connection between authors and publishers is precisely what feminist literary historians have pointed to as the reason for women's absence from the world of letters. However, Lane's description of publishing, as once belonging to a sphere that was uncontaminated by material matters, is one that is frequently invoked by contemporary publishers.

Thus, when Marion Boyars discusses the future of publishing, she invokes the past as something worth regaining. Boyars, like Peter Owen, distinguishes between an interest in books and an interest in profit and expresses her hope that there will come a time when a few highly motivated and courageous individuals will regenerate the industry:

"Our real hope is that the maverick publishers comparable to the innovators of yore, those legendary, infuriating and exceptionally creative eccentrics who could either function as employees or as owners, will emerge - since every society throws up such people from time to time; and through their inventiveness will create conditions where this can really come into being."

This sense that publishing can only be revitalised by investing 'our' hopes in a few highly creative individuals is one that, I would argue, poses
particular problems for any conception of publishing as reflecting a chorus of voices. Certainly, the present cynicism and disillusionment within the publishing industry rarely extends to any doubts about the ability of a select number of individuals making choices that affect the reading population as a whole.

In *Publishing the Future*, Peter Owen, like Michael Lane, criticises the contemporary publishing industry for its failure to view book production as being about something more precious than economics. He contrasts the small independent publishing houses with the sterile and purely economic motives of the larger corporations. Much of his criticism of the contemporary publishing industry is prompted by his own confidence in his role as a cultural expert:

'To be a successful publisher, flair and an instinctive feeling for books are essential. These qualities are intrinsic and cannot be acquired.'

It is this belief in the ability of talented publishers to determine what it is that constitutes good literature that, I would argue, has problematised any efforts by outsiders to comment upon their choices. One of the major obstacles that the *Women in Publishing* group encountered in their study was the lack of available data on the publishing industry. *Women in Publishing* discovered that there were no available statistics on the number of women and men who had written books. Furthermore, this does not bode well for any attempt to investigate publishing in terms of race and class. The lack of statistical information obviously creates a highly unaccountable publishing industry but, perhaps more importantly, maintains its distance from the reading public.

The notion that writing and publication are spheres that are best left to the good taste of literary experts, or indeed to the managers of
multinational corporations, is one that obstructs the publication and reception of a diverse community of writers and readers. As Susanne Kappeler comments in *The Pornography Of Representation*:

The literary guild depends upon there being Authors, Writers, artists as well as the attendant crew of critics, editors and reviewers, otherwise there would just be people writing which might mean all people write, and then there would be a real task in evaluating who writes 'best' (if best needs to be established) and what are the criteria for evaluation. There would be debate. "

Moreover, a publishing and culture industry that accommodated 'people writing' would also remove the supremacy of the published word that is achieved by its very inaccessibility. Writing could finally be about communication rather than operating as a symbol of specialised talent. The extent to which publishing has been a neglected subject in literary studies has been commented upon by feminist writers. However, Nicci Gerrard's *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing*, published in 1989, is the first feminist book to take it as its main subject. It is for this reason that I want to examine Gerrard's findings in some detail.

**iv. A Contemporary Feminist analysis of the Publishing Industry**

Nicci Gerrard's *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing*, is the first text to take the relationship between feminist writing and publishing as its main subject. The book promises to investigate the way in which feminism has changed women's writing and to look at how the book industry has affected feminist writing. The reviews on the back cover of the book emphasise the author's numerous interviews with contemporary women writers, and in-depth research into the connections between the culture industry and feminist writing. Unfortunately, the most
striking aspect of the text lies in its consistent disregard for its own advertised concerns.

*Into the Mainstream* sweeps blithely through decades and genres producing a 'Spirit of the Age' analysis of the historical contexts and current conditions that govern writing. Gerrard keeps her literary critical narrative entirely separate from her sections on books within the marketplace. This, I would argue, reinforces the notion that literary expertise is marked by its dissociation from any concern with how texts are marketed and produced. It is significant that Gerrard does not actually connect any of her findings about the publishing industry to the books that she discusses. As Susanne Kappeler points out in *The Pornography of Representation*:

> We are taught to see literature in terms of mental constructs, expressions of the creative spirit; we are not encouraged to expend much energy on the study of production of the economic entities in the world. Even though we are taught to cite the publishers of books in our references and our footnotes, we are able to see these publishers as in the service of literature, rather than see literature as in the service of their business. [43]

I would suggest that this desire to maintain a clear distinction between artistic production and economic analysis is very much in evidence in *Into the Mainstream*. Gerrard permits a cursory glance at books as economic entities before slipping into the familiar literary narrative with its extensive use of value ridden judgements, which readers are encouraged to accept as being derived from the special discernment and taste of the literary expert.

In order to discuss Gerrard's analysis of feminist writing and the publishing industry, it would perhaps be useful to begin by focusing on her use of the terms 'Ideology' and 'Imagination'. For it is through a juxtaposition of these two categories that Gerrard produces her definition
of 'good' writing. Gerrard does not discuss her definitions of ideology and imagination, choosing instead to present them as self-evident. As Gerrard makes clear to her readers, ideology is to be understood as a negative phenomenon; something that polices and obstructs the creative imagination of the writer. Thus, her analysis of the relation between feminist writing and publishing leads her to the startling conclusion that it is ideology that is to blame for the scarcity of 'good' feminist writing:

'It [feminist self-awareness] is a form that can hobble the imagination. Of course, it is still true that women writers, especially if they are black or lesbian, and especially if they explicitly call themselves feminist, stumble against numerous obstacles not put in the way of men. But the internal barriers are more disturbing than these external, visible ones. Camouflaged, often unperceived, they can prevent women writers from speaking in their own voices. It is a crushing irony that feminism has always encouraged women to speak out and to write, but that feminist ideology can simultaneously curb female speech or confine it in artificial dogmatism. [463]

Gerrard's perception of an inalienable division between ideology and imagination leads her to depict the feminist writer as one who necessarily experiences this distinction as a problem. There is no sense that ideology and imagination ever merge or condition each other. Instead, Gerrard expects her readers to accept that there is a clear point at which the two cease to bear any relation to each other.

In Gerrard's text, ideology is linked with 'party' politics, encouraging the feminist writer to shape her text into the 'right' message. Gerrard's proposition is further removed from any discursive scene by her comment that the feminist writer herself is likely to be unaware that her 'own' voice is being betrayed by the presence of ideological barriers. What is missing from her definition of ideology is any sense of it as informing those knowledge systems that are themselves based on a rejection of any connection between 'art' and 'politics'. This proposition is perhaps most
evident in liberal humanism, which has insisted on the autonomy and purity of art. The impact of this on cultural studies is clearly still in evidence when a 'feminist' appraisal of women writers finds that the best writers are those that have 'escaped' ideology.

This consigning of ideology to particular writers whilst claiming it to be absent in the work of others is, I would suggest, to overlook the extent to which all subjects are involved with ideology. The scenario that Gerrard offers regarding the relations between subjects and ideology is one of a brave defeat of ideology by the truly imaginative artist. Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood are both writers that Gerrard constantly cites as courageous enough to banish the inhibiting spectre of ideology and so produce writing that is more all-encompassing than the drab and dreary novels that are infused with ideological correctness. The writing that Atwood and Carter produce is, Gerrard informs her readers:

'alchemised in the crucible of imagination and disciplined by painstaking craft, it can imply a freedom from the tyranny of a monolithic inheritance, a liberation from parochial concerns, it can conjure kaleidoscopic new possibilities.'

Gerrard's scenario of a few intrepid feminist writers struggling with the demon ideology becomes particularly unconvincing when she produces examples of this. It is no surprise to find that the writers that Gerrard selects as representing the pinnacle of feminist writing talent, share her belief that good writing operates outside of and against any ideological framework.

A reading of Margaret Atwood does not promote a vision of her regrettfully turning her back on the 'beloved Angel of Correctness'. For Atwood, like Gerrard, human communication is about far more than ideology, which she assumes herself to be unaffected by. It is this reasoning that prompts both women to stress that they themselves do not communicate an
ideological position. I would argue that Gerrard is mapping out a very clear ideological framework: one that invests her own criteria for 'good' art with the power of neutrality and universality. Gerrard dismisses the restrictive presence of ideology from her critical framework only to offer one that is beyond any point of discussion. Thus, Atwood and Carter are good because they write about all of 'us'.

Gerrard's assumption that she can understand 'us' emerges as perhaps the most obvious consequence of power existing, despite the efforts of those who possess it to deny its existence. Gerrard does criticise the inadequacy of the wages that middle-stream writers receive, and produces examples of the specific difficulty of combining writing with motherhood. However, these problems are presented as ones that potentially affect all women, leaving the question of the significance of racial, class and gender differences between women writers unexplored. Gerrard at no point addresses the issue of power in literary selections. For, it is worth noting that although Gerrard depicts 'good' feminist writers as being those that have successfully warded off the diminishing impact of ideological correctness, these writers are those that are doing particularly well.

Gerrard offers no comments on the power structures at work in feminist and mainstream publishing. This can only be to the disadvantage of the many people whose writing is obstructed and suppressed by the dominant culture; therefore it is not surprising that Gerrard's book offers little to those who are not listened to or published. The fact that only certain kinds of imagination are awarded with literary acclaim by the dominant culture is left unaddressed in the enquiry. Instead, Gerrard proceeds to present her personal list of favourite writers. Into the Mainstream claims to be investigating the plight of feminist writing in the mainstream publishing
industry, but it is worth noting that despite Gerrard's perfunctory remarks about the difficulties that some women face, she finds that good women writers are selling well.

Moreover, having dismissed ideology from the cultural arena that apparently represents the best of feminist writing, Gerrard proceeds to reintroduce 'politics' into her critical framework. Thus, Sara Maitland, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood are in the mainstream because they are:

- more political because they are in motion; more inventive because they are not confined by static, predetermined theories...
- more feminist because less policed by a repressive feminist ideology; more illuminating because the novel's spotlight casts a wider arc. And they are more mainstream because quite simply they are more enjoyable. 

Political writing is then to be recognised by its creativity; it is more intangible than ideology and ultimately, according to Gerrard, is at its most apparent when it is operating outside of existing power structures and knowledge systems. The problem with this is that Gerrard is proposing that 'we' view a select number of writers as producing discourses that are particularly unaffected by the material world and by existing discourses about that world. I would suggest that this is an impossible position for anyone to be in, and that the 'wider arc' that Gerrard refers to reflects her confidence in her ability to determine what the common experiences and interests of humanity are. What is missing is any reference to the fact that very few people are given the chance to decide which texts are the most expressive of 'human' experience.

Furthermore, exactly who it is that decides which books are enjoyable is clearly not a part of Gerrard's investigation. Instead, 'Enjoyment' becomes the determining factor between a good and a bad book. A glance at the representation, in terms of published books, of lesbians, women of color, working-class women, and women, period, can only lead to the
conclusion that women do not write enjoyable books. This assumption has been rigorously challenged by prominent feminist historical work. I would suggest that a contemporary enquiry into the relations between feminist writing and the publishing industries should also challenge why it is that so little feminist writing is judged to be 'enjoyable'.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Gerrard's critical vocabulary is the way in which she attempts to empty her own criteria from having any specific connection with her own concerns and interests. Gerrard wants her readers to view her readings as ones that are based on a solid understanding of 'our' fundamental interests as readers. Thus, ideology and politics, because they explicitly address the existence of debate, conflict and dissolution in their narratives, are unwelcome discourses in Gerrard's altogether more cohesive narrative. It is through her use of 'complexity' that Gerrard is able finally to place her chosen texts firmly outside of any personal or ideological concern. In doing this, Gerrard replicates the traditional equation, that patriarchal publishing houses and literary critics have made, between imagination (as opposed to ideology) and complexity.

Ideology becomes something that is instantly comprehensible and legible, whereas imagination is something intangible and beyond absolute comprehension. As Gerrard explains:

If all fiction is rooted in its own culture, then all fiction is, in a wide and vague sense 'political'. But there is a gulf between the novel whose ideological line is so undigested that it makes its fiction into a hasty scaffolding and its reader into an unparticipating pupil, and the work that seeks to understand and alchemise the political and cultural complexities of its world... Novels which survive their time seed their imagined worlds in the consciousness of their readers. 

There are a number of problems with Gerrard's sketch of the differences
between ideological and imaginative fiction. Firstly, it is not at all clear how exactly ideology becomes 'digested' into a more complex and rewarding novel. Gerrard's sweeping reference to 'the' reader assumes that all readers are reading a book in the same way and that these readers all accept a 'pupil' relation to texts, which Gerrard is by contrast able to comment upon.

Gerrard fails to notice that it is predominantly white and middle-class writers who are able to see themselves as operating in a neutral sphere that is all the more human and complex for its dissociation from any merely ideological concern. It is in this sense that 'neutrality' and 'complexity' come to denote the specific power of those who are in a position to deny such terms to the masses of people who are not middle-class and white. In short, what is complexity for one person may well be oppression for another. It is this convenient refusal to take women's different identities and social and political positions seriously that underlies Gerrard's notion of good writing as the kind that is able to 'alchemise' the political complexity of its world. Given that Gerrard is unwilling to concede that there will be different opinions on what it is that constitutes narrative complexity, it follows that she will only recognise certain kinds of narrative alchemy.

Moreover, the consequences of dismissing ideology from having any connection with imagination is that it forces critical discussions of texts to also deny any connection with ideology or politics. The most useful skill becomes, instead, the esoteric ability to recognise 'good' writing. It is interesting to look at the ideological systems at work in the texts of those writers who are the most keen to renounce the presence of anything so mundane as politics or ideology in artistic production. I would argue
that this is a position that is particularly held by male writers of acutely misogynistic texts.

It is in this sense that D.M. Thomas prefers to view the success of his novels, which I would read as all sharing a relentless objectification and degredation of women. However, it is no surprise to find that Thomas views his success as a tribute to his extraordinary imagination rather than as a standard and marketable blend of a literary and a pornographic voice. For Thomas, the subject matter of his novels is 'art' and therefore the only possible context for it is 'inspiration'. Thus, in Ararat, Thomas presents the subject of the novel as an authoritative 'it' that exists outside of any intelligible context:

The subject chosen for their improvisation slept serenely through the night. It did not dream. It did not fight. It did not talk. It stood. It let the storm clouds improvise around it.

The fact that the subject is engaged in an exhaustive commentary upon the 'nature' of woman is presumably to simplify the text which is, Thomas assures his readers, the product of mystery. I would argue that Thomas' extensive employment of imagination, complexity and mystery reflects a crucial and dangerous consequence of investing writing with a reality that is removed from any site of production other than the author's imagination.

Thomas' conviction, that he is presenting an innovative challenge to repressive sexual norms, fails to recognise that his pronouncements upon female sexuality are neither innovative or challenging. I would contend that it is precisely his failure to criticise oppressive patriarchal notions, such as the assumption that women desire male force and power, that has assured him a largely warm reception in the mainstream press and parts of the left wing press. The 'literary' recognition of writers such as Thomas, is expressed in terms of their 'unique' imaginative talent,
which prevents their material from being 'merely' pornographic. I would argue that this celebration of 'imagination', both by Thomas and by the dominant literary culture, should alert feminist critics, in particular, to its association with critical attempts to avoid the political ramifications of texts by selecting the best ones on the basis of their ideological 'neutrality' and 'powerful' imagination.

This 'literary' distinction between ideology and imagination is very much in evidence in Gerrard's text, Into the Mainstream. Gerrard's limited discussions of critical feminist work in itself reflects her belief that 'imaginative' fiction is the area in which the best feminist writing is being produced. Her discussion of Andrea Dworkin's work, in particular Intercourse, reveals her belief that criticism, unlike fiction, is unable to actually challenge existing thoughts and institutions. Thus, Gerrard writes dismissively of Dworkin's "venomous obsessive attacks upon our pornographic world." Dworkin is to be admonished for failing to recognise that to write about something is to encourage its further production:

"How far can a feminist go in revealing the wrongs of a constructed society before she succumbs to it? Obscenities are simultaneously exposed and reproduced."

Criticism is then always in danger of being seduced by its chosen subject. If we are to take this assertion seriously, then it would certainly be a good argument for ending any critical feminist work rather than witness the spectacle of feminist critics becoming transformed into patriarchs dazzled by their critical subject. Gerrard here is reproducing a critique that operates to prevent women from engaging critically in the debates concerning the widespread pornographic representation of women.

Gerrard's prediction that a study of pornography would result in 'the'
feminist 'succumbing' to it makes the disturbing conclusion that pornography is, in fact, inherently pleasurable for men and women. Ultimately, Gerrard gives credence to pornography by questioning the aims of the critic rather than that of the pornographer. Her dismissal of critical feminist work in an area that is expanding throughout Europe and America and being exported to the third world, is, I would argue, to entirely miss one of the most worrying aspects of an increasingly industrialised and international publishing industry.

v. The Increasingly Unhappy alliance of Feminism and the Mainstream

Gerrard's privileging of imagination as a neutral literary term involves a parallel lack of interest in examining why certain texts qualify as imaginative work while others are 'merely' ideological productions. Into the Mainstream fails to offer any comments upon the connections between the knowledge systems of those who are able to select the texts that apparently constitute human experience and the texts themselves.

Gerrard's belief in the ability of 'good' feminist writing to survive, and even thrive, in an increasingly competitive marketplace is one that has been endorsed by other commentators. Joanna Briscoe's article entitled 'Feminist presses: who needs them ?', published in 1990, begins with the announcement that, "In a word feminist publishing has succeeded". This 'success' constitutes the 'progression' of feminist publishing from its "rebel-rousing days" to its present integration within mainstream publishing. Briscoe cites Ros de Lanerolle, the former managing director of 'The Women's Press', who describes her own change in perspective:

When I started, the concerns were much more about so-called 'women's issues'. Now I would say they are as general as anything can be - women
have a view and can express it on any subject. [603] This notion, that somehow 'women's issues' are to be viewed as ones that are entirely different from 'general' issues, is one that Briscoe clearly accepts. Briscoe, like Gerrard, distinguishes between writing that is only concerned with 'women's issues' (read ideological, strident and boring) as opposed to genuinely gifted writing (read not ideological and imaginative). Accordingly, she produces a summary of Virago, the women's publishing house, who began by publishing fiction that was often characterised by "dreariness and indignant poetry" to their increasing publication of "outstanding fiction".

Briscoe arrives at the same conclusion as Gerrard, namely that feminist writing is successfully entering the mainstream precisely because it has lost its ideological commitment. Ideological commitment then becomes the proposed obstacle that feminist writers and publishers should seek to overcome:

Authors can more or less stop worrying about being ideologically sound and write what they really think'. [61, my emphasis] This overview of feminist writing and publishing grants ideology an interesting historical agency. Ideology becomes the hallmark of a new movement which for 'feminism' occurs in the 'rebel rousing' seventies when feminist writing interrupted literary production. The overt politicism of early feminist writing becomes, in Briscoe's and Gerrard's account, a mark of origin for feminist writing and publishing and is inevitably something that feminist writing and publishing has progressed away from. In this reading, ideology becomes firmly attached to a certain period of 'feminist' history.

Gerrard and Briscoe present a historical narrative that explains the
success of certain feminist narratives and publishing ventures in terms of their sophisticated ability to move away from the early stranglehold of feminist ideology. Ideology and politics are thus reduced by a reading that aligns them with an infant stage of feminist consciousness which 'we' can now look back on with a measure of indulgence. I would suggest that such readings make the mistake of assuming that the past is by definition entirely comprehensible to contemporary readers.

I would suggest that the purpose of readings, such as Gerrard's, is to establish a dominant feminist narrative. For this narrative is one that is entirely uninterested in the absence of ideological commitment in some areas of feminism in the seventies, and similarly uninterested in examples of current ideological commitment. Thus, politics and ideological commitment become both safely removed to a past point in time and also cease to have any significant presence in contemporary feminism.

It is significant that such overt celebrations of feminist publishing and writing have become increasingly muted by the failure of feminist publishing houses to thrive in the early 1990s. The Women's Press nearly collapsed in 1991 along with the Scottish feminist press Stramullion. Meanwhile, radical feminist presses such as Sheba and Onlywomen are under pressure and radical feminist bookshops such as Sisterwrite are closing down. However, before examining contemporary feminist publishing, I would like to discuss some of the criticisms and fears that were being expressed, even in the so-called heyday of feminist publishing in the mid-1970's.
The confidence that writers, such as Nicci Gerrard, have in the ability of 'good' feminist writing to transcend the material constraints of the dominant culture, is one that has been particularly challenged by women of color, and black and lesbian feminists. In her introduction to the anthology of black women writers, *Let It Be Told: Black Women Writers In Britain*, published in 1988, Lauretta Ngcobo stresses that the hostility of the publishing industry towards writing by black women has undermined any useful distinction between those who have been published and those who have not:

Those writers who feature here have not been chosen on merit alone, as against those whose work does not appear or who have not been published: a book of this nature can encompass only so many and it was not possible to invite as many contributions as I would have liked. Not all of the contributors can yet claim publications of their own; but as Black women writers we share a feeling of oneness whether we are published or not, for the publication of anyone's work is fortuitous and we have all felt disillusionment with the British publishing establishment. Among us, unpublished writers can enjoy as much recognition as those published."

Moreover, this disillusionment with the publishing industry includes both black and feminist publishing houses.

Maud Sulter's contribution to Lauretta Ngcobo's anthology outlines the difficulties that black women face within feminist publishing. Significantly, while commentators such as Joanna Briscoe, Dale Spender and Nicci Gerrard are comfortably assigning major feminist publishing achievements to the mid 1970s, Sulter records how it was not until 1984, at the first International Feminist Bookfair, that black women assembled to address their exclusion from feminist publishing. As Sulter comments, the problem of racism in the feminist publishing industry was about more than the lack of black women being published by feminist publishing houses:

"
Racism in books takes many forms. Books like Union Street by Pat Barker (Virago, 1982) reveal obvious direct racism; whereas Sex and Love, edited by Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (The Women’s Press, 1983), show their racism by exclusion. Come Come by Jo Jones (Sheba, 1993), and books like it show racism by misinterpretation.

Sulter points out that the five main feminist publishing houses that emerged in Britain in the 1970s all employed predominantly white middle-class workers. Moreover, a review of their backlists reveal both a specifically racist content by white women writers, and that the only black women to be published with any consistency were Afro-American. Sulter goes on to criticise the apparent inclusion of black women writers by these presses, which took place mainly by the use of anthologies:

In publishing, anthologies are cheap to produce. First, the publisher makes a one-off payment to the authors and invariably undercuts the royalties percentage within the budget. Secondly, little support by way of advances or re-writing is necessary. Thirdly, suddenly the House has published several blackwomen.

Added to this the anthologies produced by the major feminist presses were still predominantly white.

Contributors to the anthology, Let it Be Told, echo Sulter’s assertion that black women writers all experience problems with the publishing and marketing of their books. As she comments, black women writers have to continually struggle to assert their own ideas about black representation and usually have to submit to stereotypical images of black women. Sulter’s own experience, both in publishing and as a black feminist researcher, were deemed insufficient when it came to selecting the covers for her first published collection of poetry with the black Akira Press:

As seems to be the case across the board for black women endeavouring to have their work published, I ran into problems. My suggestion for cover artists, drawn from three years research into black and Asian women’s creativity in Britain and direct experience in publishing were dismissed and the book was published by stereotyped images of ‘Blackwomanhood’ drawn by a man. I sought solace in the fact that Alice Walker still has problems with her covers after twenty years of being published.
The commitment of feminist presses, particularly Pandora and Virago, to publishing women's historical texts was, as Barbara Christian comments, of little benefit to black women who were also searching for expressions of historical female experience. In her essay, 'But what do we think we're doing anyway: the state of black feminist criticism(s) or my version of a little bit of history', Christian provides an account of her own attempts to discover the work of black women writers. This included xeroxing a copy of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, which as Christian comments, left her feeling "more like a detective than a literary critic".

This sense of existing outside of the concerns of feminist publishing is one that is shared by lesbian commentaries on the subject. Bonnie Zimmerman, in her essay 'What has never been: an overview of lesbian feminist criticism', points out that in the early 1970s the only lesbian novels in print were Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah*. Zimmerman goes on to comment that it is still difficult to trace texts that were written before 1970. The demise of Diana Press and the reduced output of Daughters, which represented the two most active lesbian publishing houses, leaves many major works unavailable. Since Zimmerman's article, the London feminist bookshop, Silvermoon has successfully published and marketed mainly lesbian erotic fiction, but this still leaves lesbian criticism a largely neglected area within feminist publishing. As Zimmerman points out, the "perpetual screen of heterosexism in most acclaimed works of feminist literary criticism" continues to marginalise critical lesbian writing.

Unfortunately, the obstacles that confront lesbian criticism are also
present for lesbian fiction. In her essay, 'The truth that never hurts: black lesbians in fiction in the 1980s', Barbara Smith focuses on the difficulties that Audre Lorde, a black lesbian writer, faced when she had completed her autobiographical novel, *Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name*. In comparing the publishing history of *Zami* with that of Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple*, and Gloria Naylor's, *The Women Of Brewster Place*, Smith contends that:

'It is not coincidental that of the three works considered here, *Zami* has the most to tell the reader about the texture of Black lesbian experience, and that it was written by an out Black lesbian.'

As Smith records, not only was *Zami* rejected by twelve trade publishers but, more worryingly, was refused by one that specialised in gay titles:

'The white male editor of that supposedly sympathetic house returned the manuscript saying, 'if only you were just one, Black or lesbian'.'

The repercussions of arguments such as this are clearly that black and lesbian women writers and readers can be safely assumed to be existing at the absolute periphery of mainstream and alternative society. The assumption by 'alternative' publishing houses that they are, by definition, opposed to the knowledge systems that govern mainstream publishing, is one that black and lesbian women pinpoint as a major obstacle in their struggle for expression. Pratibha Parmar in her article, 'Other kinds of dreams', cites an article that she co-authored entitled, 'Racism and the Women's Movement', which she sent to *Spare Rib*. As Parmar comments, *Spare Rib*'s decision not to publish it was taken with the presumption that the Women's Movement was by definition white, with black women functioning as one of their concerns, rather than as equal participants:

'We received a three-page letter from a member of the collective who attempted to answer our critique. 'The problem is that while our movement [my emphasis] is undoubtedly failing to reach large numbers of black women we have not in fact made the precise mistakes your paper describes'. Throughout she addressed us as if we were speaking from outside of the...
movement and used 'we' to denote white women as being representative of the women's movement. [78]

It is this perpetual struggle to find a space for expression that dominates the work of black women, lesbians and women of color, who are constantly excluded by 'feminist' publishing houses.

It is the oppressive function of these representations that Barbara Christian attacks when she speculates on how different the configurations of race and gender would be, if favoured representations were displaced by ones with black people appearing on the centre stage:

'We might wonder, given that Afro-American women's writing is so clearly at the vortex of sex, race and class factors that mitigate the notion of democracy at the core of 'traditional' American literatures, whether one might want to predict the day when other literatures will reflect the currents of the black American women's writing community. [78]

I would like to take Barbara Christian's speculation further and conclude this chapter by examining the ways in which western representations have been imposed upon the third world. For, I would argue that it is crucial for feminist and radical publishing houses to address the current implications of a highly developed media industry in the so-called developed world and its implications for the existing cultural identities of less industrialised countries. It is in this context that I wish to return to the question of the success of feminist publishing and analyse what this can mean in a global context.

Feminist Publishing And The Third World

Dale Spender, in The Writing Or The Sex Or Why You Don't Have To Read Women's Writing To know Its No Good, isolates publishing as the only area in which women have been able to operate entirely separately from men:
In the publishing business, as in the colleges and universities, women's success story is inextricably linked with a pattern of male resistance and the present atmosphere contains many elements of tension. This is partly because this is one - if not the only - area where women have been able to set up an alternative, autonomous, and viable industry.\[77\]

Here, Spender offers the conventional feminist narrative which celebrates the early days of feminist publishing as representing an innovative step forward for 'the Women's Movement'. Three years later, researchers such as Nicci Gerrard were able to add that women had also been successfully negotiating the commercialism of the mainstream. Certainly, there is no doubt that, despite its predominantly white, middle-class and heterosexual bias, feminist publishing has brought women into print.

However, I would suggest that the more important questions are firstly, which women have been granted what Spender calls a "fair hearing", and secondly, whether it is true that feminist publishers can operate as an autonomous industry. Finally, I would question whether it is productive to view publishing as a purely gendered power struggle. I would argue that it is the inevitable involvement of western feminist publishing with the cultures of the so-called third world, in particular, that raises the most urgent questions for feminist publishing.

Spender's discussion of feminist publishing is critically undermined by her depiction of the diverse array of feminist publishing houses as operating as a mutually supportive and almost familial unit. Thus, Virago is presented as leading the way for smaller, radical presses such as Sheba, Onlywomen and The Women's Press. This is to overlook the differences between the publishing houses that, I would suggest, raise crucial questions for feminist publishing. It is significant that the most successful of the feminist presses has been Virago, who also have an organisational structure and marketing aims, that more closely resemble a
mainstream publishing company than a small radical feminist press, such as Sheba Feminist Publishers.

The history of Virago demonstrates how difficult it is for a small press to exist independently from larger publishing corporations. The press was launched by Carmen Callil in 1973 and issued its first book two years later, in association with Quartet Books. In 1982, Carmen Callil was approached by Chatto, Bodley & Cape and agreed to join the group. Virago clearly hoped to be able to make use of the publishing services offered by Chatto, Bodley & Cape and were assured independence in editing and crucial marketing areas. However, Virago found that they were unable to meet the overheads that they, as a fourth member of the Company, had to share. Consequently, although sales for Virago rose considerably, they found themselves facing financial ruin. As Ursula Owen, a founder and director of the press, comments:

'the group situation was grave and was affecting Virago's financial situation; the end of year accounts registered our first loss.'

Meanwhile, books were becoming increasingly sought out by multinationals, which persuaded Virago of the need to regain fully independent status. The directors of Virago predicted that multinational involvement would also create a space for smaller presses in which there were specific publishing aims and closer contact with authors.

The Women's Press was the only other British feminist press to have substantial involvement with larger publishing companies. The press, which was founded in 1977, began publishing in 1978 with financial backing from the Namara Group of companies. The Women's Press insisted that despite this they did maintain complete autonomy in their publishing decisions. Quartet Books also helped them with selling and production work in Britain.
However, despite their insistence that they could publish independently, the press was in fact owned by Naim Attallah, an entrepreneur who caused the press some embarrassment when he publicly referred to them as 'his girls'. Moreover, Atallah's interference in both editorial and staffing policies produced their voluntary closure in 1991. Ros de Lanerolle, the former managing director of the press, concluded that independence could only be guaranteed by an entirely female organisation:

'It now seems clear that the only way to safeguard the considerable achievements of feminist publishing over the past decade and a half, is to set up a new company owned and controlled by women who work in it, and by others sympathetic to their aims. [3013]

Lanerolle, in other words, has come to agree with the smaller feminist presses who always viewed independence as essential for publishing feminist writing.

The crucial problem that faces independent presses is their lack of resources to produce and market books that will reach a wide readership. Sheba feminist publishers, which was formed in 1980, and Onlywomen Press, which was established in 1971, have achieved very little presence in mainstream bookstores and have insufficient funds to produce books in any quantity. As Onlywomen point out, the idea that publishing houses should expand and 'grow' is incompatible with a press that is fully independent from mainstream publishing:

'We will publish the books we feel are necessary and important for the Women's Movement. We do not see ourselves tied to a linear concept of expansion where one makes 'targets' of so many books per year...we exist as a press as a form of commitment to women's liberation, and thus operate to put out the books we need - a varying number. [3023]

This acceptance that radical publishing should be committed to aims that fall outside of a capitalist notion of expansion contrasts markedly with the clearly defined aims of Virago. Ursula Owen explains:
The question was, and is, not just what to publish but how to publish, because Virago had marketing as well as literary and political aims - attempting to reach not just feminists but people who were not necessarily feminist sympathisers, who might fear and dislike feminist ideas...we were determined to get into the high street as well as the radical bookshops. [59]

Given that this was the principal aim, it would seem that Virago have indeed been successful, as Owen concludes: "We have achieved visibility beyond our wildest dreams."[64]

Ursula Owen, like Dale Spender, is inclined to view the increasing visibility of women in publishing as a success for feminism. For Spender this occurrence should be seen as constituting a revolution:

The achievement of women in publishing is not matched in any other medium...there is no industry in which women are setting their own standards and determining their own terms - and this publishing venture must stand as a spectacular success in a male-dominated society! It seems sometimes to me that what women need in the other media...is much the same revolution that has occurred with women's books. It may be a revolution which has too often been overlooked, one which has not even been fully acclaimed or analysed within feminism, but it has been a revolution none the less. [70]

If we are to understand by feminism that the advancement of women in previously male dominated spheres in itself fulfills its aims, then certainly Spender's claims could be accepted without question. Catherine Bennett, in her article 'The house that Carmen built',[88] discusses the twenty year history of Virago press, and comes to precisely this conclusion. Bennett points out that Virago have altered radically from their early days, when they offered an overtly political statement of intent as the frontispiece of every text, to their present style which is as bland as any other publication. For Bennett, this is to be recognised as an inevitable consequence of the success of women in publishing:

This is understandable. The world is not what it was in 1973. Then women in publishing were few and mostly subordinate...Today women reign over Random House, the enormous publishing conglomerate. Women editors thrive elsewhere, bidding great sums for feminist books and frightening men with
their formidable group, Women in Publishing. [67]

The battle has, in other words, been won, and it is now time to move on and ensure that 'feminism' can be safeguarded within its new arena of the multinationals. Virago, and the incorporation of women in the publishing industry as a whole, is to be looked at as a successful balancing act between 'feminism' and 'shrewd commercial' expertise.

Bennett does discuss the problematic organisational structure of Virago, whose hierarchical management system has always undermined its theoretical socialist basis. As Bennett comments:

In its management structures Virago was, and is, as conventionally patriarchal as any other publishing company, with Callil, feminism's answer to Sir John Harvey Jones, at the very top, a band of loyal, share-holding directors in the middle, and low paid editors at the bottom. Over a third of the shares are now owned by a venture capital company. [67]

Capitalism can, in other words, in keeping with the inexorable industrialisation of the publishing industry, be allied with feminism. Thus, Bennett cites the case of a previous employee who was forced to leave the press because she could not afford to live on her salary, even though she was living in a housing co-op, without ever addressing the question of whether this in itself problematised the definition of Virago as a feminist press. This it seems is not at stake, for:

'Virago has always been as shrewedly commercial as it is intently feminist.' [67]

I would suggest that it is the willingness of numerous western feminist writers to perceive the increased visibility and progression of women in central cultural and political arenas, as constituting an unarguable advancement for 'women', that paradoxically represents the most disturbing development in western feminist thought.

Time and time again, the fact that certain women have made gains in
the developing international book trade is presented as a cause for celebration. What such a conclusion handily omits to acknowledge is that, in the course of such achievements, 'women' have also been exploited, particularly in those countries that western publishers target as 'their' markets. This is not to suggest that women in the so-called 'first' world are not exploited either, but to assert that dealing with mainstream culture ultimately involves women in a system of privilege that, by definition, controls essential means of communication both within their countries of origin and abroad.

I would argue that it is a cause for concern when 'feminism' is being recruited as a justification for practices that exploit both women and men, rather than as a term that denotes opposition to practices and institutions that exploit women in particular. It is working within this framework that enabled Virago to justify their decision to export their typesetting to a company that was based half in Hong Kong and half in Scotland. Virago explained why they chose to do this:

The reason for this is because British setting is now so expensive that we had to choose between making our books available at prices people could afford or not publishing the books. We feel very strongly that our books should be priced as reasonably as possible and look as good as our competitors.

Feminist books, in other words, ultimately depend upon an involvement with the exploitative labour practices of capitalist markets. I would suggest that the consequences of this alliance should be studied more carefully and in broader terms. 'Feminist' books are caught up in the process of industrialisation that has affected the book industry and it is imperative that feminist studies considers the implications of such an involvement. I would argue that there is a need for feminists to examine the implications of reaching ever wider audiences more closely.
Certainly, there is a need to distinguish between reaching a wide audience in the west as opposed to expanding into the third world 'audience'. For if feminist publishers see their primary aim as one that is to reach as wide an audience as possible, then they are embracing a cultural network that has been established by western publishing houses specifically to dominate the media of the so-called 'developing' countries. Clearly, if, as Virago claim, feminist texts need to compete with their competitors, then those texts are operating alongside their competitors to consolidate the exportation of western culture.

In *Publishing The Future*, Peter Owen refers to the increasing 'internationalism' of the publishing industry and adds that feminist writing in particular is "currently thriving". 'Internationalism' suggests a scenario in which, in this case, books are involved in a mutual system of exchange. It conveys the sense that now books are travelling outside of their countries of origin, thus facilitating greater access to other cultures and experiences. However, this is to completely overlook the fact that this new 'internationalism' is being achieved through the employment of old established networks of imperial and colonial domination. It therefore comes as no surprise that Owen proceeds to write enthusiastically about the "unique advantage of the English language". This advantage is, in short, the result of American and European imperialism:

British publishers insist that they have an exclusive market in the original British Commonwealth, which includes South Africa, India, Pakistan and other countries which have seceded. Canada is usually granted to the first English language publisher, English or American, although sometimes it is arranged that both editions can be sold there. American publishers usually have exclusivity in the Philippines. The rest of the world is an open market for both editions.

The question for feminist publishers is, surely, to what extent the interests of women can be served by an industry that has no interest in
recognising the validity of the cultures that already exist in the third world.

For Owen, the fact that competition is taking place between western countries, and then being exported to the third world, is clearly not a problem. Rather, Owen depicts the 'open' market as an empty space which can be filled by western cultural products. However, I would argue that it is essential for feminist publishers to accept that these markets are opened by dominant capitalist countries in order to ensure their continuing expansion and growth. The 'open' market is, after all, also a reference to countries which already possess different histories and cultures.

Feminist publishers should be particularly aware of the implications of the current competition taking place between Europe and America for the 'open' markets of the third world. Moreover, it is precisely this conception of a passive audience in the third world that facilitates the continued perception of that 'audience' as a less developed and 'primitive' version of western ones. As Armand Mattelart warns his readers, in Transnationals And The Third World: The Struggle For Culture, it is crucial that the relationship between 'developed' and 'developing' countries is not perceived as simply a passive encounter:

in the analysis of the impact of transnationals on developing countries, it is urgent to reestablish...an analysis that considers the local bourgeoisies as social subjects and no longer as mere passive receptacles, mechanically reproducing the norms, values and signs of transnational power. Even if they are entirely subordinated to this transnational project, they can at least reformulate in accordance with the historical heritage and particular conditions the reception they give to these models, all of which profoundly influences the effect that the transnational cultural product is likely to have in each national territory. The process of transnationalization can only be understood in a complex correlation of national and international or even local and regional forces, crisscrossed by the existence of resistance, adaptation, recuperation, offensives, and mimicry.

Certainly, in the present political and economic climate, feminist books
that do succeed in the mainstream, and larger feminist presses, are facing an 'audience' of a hitherto unprecedented size. For, as Mattelart explains, the various forms of western media can be identified as the 'new' venture that can hopefully ensure the continuation of western capitalist expansion.

As Mattelart points out, the new conceptual title for culture is 'information society' which reflects principally the fact that by 1970 nearly half of the American workforce was classified as 'information workers'. What this means, in effect, is an increasing concentration of western media which can then saturate the markets of the third world:

The concept information industry extends from basic information (all types of data-bank, financial, commercial, scientific, and technical information) to so-called cultural information (films, books, newspapers, magazines, telegrams, etc.) or again to the entire know-how, that is patents, expertise, advice, management, and so forth. The ambitions of this concept know no boundaries as it is no longer only a question of circumscribing one aspect of individual activity or marking off the frontiers of a scientific discipline but paving the way for a new society, the information society which is succeeding the industrial society.

However, there is more than the continued financial control of third world countries by western governments at stake. The integration of the western media exercises what is, arguably, a more insidious form of power over the subjects of those apparently 'open' markets. Intervention now takes place in the cultural identities of people who are surrounded by western media that constantly undermine and problematise any connections that might exist with beliefs and values that are not a part of western culture. The all encompassing presence of western culture further ensures the fracturing of relations amongst its colonised 'audience'. Mattelart comments upon his own recognition of this isolation when he worked with Ariel Dorfman on the relationship between the media and Latin Americans:

We Latin Americans are separated from each other by the vision we have acquired of each other via the comics and other mass media.
It is this tension between the cultures of the third world and the presence of western media that Fatima El Mernissi explores in her theological and historical enquiry, *Women And Islam.*

Mernissi too asserts that western influence in the third world is now more powerful because it has extended into the consciousness of its subjects. In Mernissi's opinion, it is this that informs the increasingly strict adherence to Islam which is to some extent perceived, quite correctly, as being under threat. As Mernissi points out, 'audiences' in the third world are now being subdued in part by an unavoidable digestion of western culture:

The post-industrial Western society obliges all other cultures to fall into line with its rhythm. Through its time-rhythm, which standardises behavior whatever the place or culture, the West manifests its domination of our era...the control of space, which is the basis and essence of the political and economic power of a nation, is today replaced by that of time. Today it is the control of time that is the basis of this power. It is not the oil that lies beneath your soil that makes you rich, but control of the marketing operations necessary for positioning it on the world market...The new imperialism that dominates us, the non-Westerners, no longer appears as a physical occupation. The new imperialism is not even economic; it is more insidious - it is a way of reckoning, of calculating, of evaluation...The enemy is ingrained in our little calculator. He is in our head, he is our way of calculating, of consuming, of buying. The multinational corporation forces us to make diagnoses, prognostications, and programs according to its models. The vocabulary that we use for our national budget is its language; investment, amortization, debt...The West, 'drugged with growth,' projects its present into the future and forces us to realize that, in order to take up its challenge, we must fight on the grounds that it has chosen: the present.

Certainly, despite the rhetoric of 'open markets' there is, at present a 'struggle for culture' taking place between the western and third world. As Mattelart points out, such struggles are necessary for the survival of countries which will otherwise have to exist as poor and unequal relations.

For Mattelart, the increasing concentration of the western media has served to consolidate the power of the west. Mattelart endorses Jacqueline Grapin's observation that investments between developed countries have a
"gravitational effect" which further reinforces western economic superiority. It is precisely this economic and political power that countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Colombia are attempting to reduce. In 1980, Brazil introduced broadcasting legislation requiring that a percentage of television programmes be devoted to national topics. This was followed by proposals that aimed at effecting the future nationalisation of the publishing industry. The increasing interest, in Latin American countries in particular, in exploring ways in which they can increase their self-sufficiency has also had a 'gravitational effect' with Venezuela, for example, adopting similar requirements to that of Brazil.

I would argue that it is crucial for western feminist publishers and writers to recognise that there is a larger struggle taking place, in which books play an integral part. It is in this context that notions of texts, audiences and readers should be explored. The question is finally about whether feminism, in the west, is prepared to measure its success by its ability to navigate the commercial networks of the third world. Western growth is, after all, ultimately dependent on the ability of the west to marginalise and reduce the existence of third world 'difference'.

I would agree with the founders of the American Women of Color Press, Kitchen Table, that what is needed is an entirely different context for feminist publishing. For Kitchen Table, the crucial task for feminist publishing is to publish those narratives that do not assume a dominant central position. As a member of the press explains:

One thing that you see, just even from the early seventies in the publications from the White women's presses, is that the point of view is American and this includes a certain class of women; and most of us don't think of the US as being the centre, especially Latin women. We think in terms of continents, of worlds and ages, and I think it is so for other 'Third World' women. What kind of world view is that, if you're just talking about one group who don't look any further than themselves when
they talk about publishing.\cite{1013}

In other words, feminist publishing should be challenging the validity of marketing texts as a series of combatants all aiming to jostle each other off the 'world' stage. As Kitchen Table make clear, feminist publishers should instead question the ideological framework of mainstream western publishing which is dependent on the pretence that a few solitary texts can express a 'world' view. The ideological commitment of Kitchen Table is reflected in their comparative lack of 'visibility', compared to that of Virago Press. However, it is precisely presses such as Kitchen Table that, I would argue, offer the most compelling direction for 'feminist' publishing.
Notes


2. Ibid., p. 16.


4. Ibid., pp. 47-8.

5. Ibid., p. 48.


8. Ibid., p. 39.


10. Ibid., p. 8.


12. Ibid., pp. 17-8.


16. Ibid., p. 46.


19. Ibid., p. 25.

20. Ibid., p. 30.

23. Ibid., pp. 35-7.
24. Ibid., p. 65.
25. Ibid., p. 37.
29. Ibid.
34. Ibid., pp. 42-4.
37. Ibid., p. 27.
47. I am drawing on notions of art as expressed by theorists such as I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, in which imagination is held to be a unique individual talent and the basis of the 'best' literary works. 'Human' expression is thus assigned to only a few talented individuals, while humanity itself is characterised by its lack of such fine artistic sensibilities. See Eliot S. T., 'Tradition and the individual talent', in Lodge D., ed, 20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader, Longman, London: 1972. pp.71-7, and Richards I.A., 'Communication and the artist', pp.106-111.


54. I am referring here to texts such as Maurice Charney's Sexual Fiction, Methuen, London: 1981, and Angela Carter's The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise In Cultural History, Virago, London: 1979. Both texts celebrate the Marquis de Sade as offering liberating and radical perspectives upon sexuality. The emphasis is firmly upon the 'daring' of both this particular kind of criticism and of the pornographic texts themselves. I would argue that such readings overlook the fact that Sade's idea of sexual 'freedom' depended upon coercion and force; detailed in Andrea Dworkin, Pornography: Men Possessing Women, Women's Press, London: 1984. pp. 90-100 and further references. I discuss the notion of re-appropriation and radical subversion fully in chapter three.


57. Ibid.

58. See for example Maria Mies (1986) and Andrea Dworkin (1981)


60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.


64. Sulter M, 'Notes of a native daughter', in Let It Be Told, p. 63.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., p. 56.


68. Ibid., p. 62.


70. Ibid., p. 217.


72. Ibid., p. 122.

73. Ibid., p. 123.


75. Ibid., p. 56.

76. Christian B, 'But what do we think we're doing anyway', in Wall A. C., ed., Changing Our Own Words, p. 70.

77. Spender D, The Writing Or The Sex, p. 47.

78. Detailed in Rolling Our Own, pp. 30-3.


80. Detailed in Rolling Our Own, p. 35.


82. Policy statement cited in Rolling Our Own, p. 35.

84. Ibid., pp. 90-1.


87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Cited in *Rolling Our Own*, p. 31.


92. Ibid., p. 30.


94. Ibid., p. 11.

95. Ibid., p. 74.


97. Ibid., pp. 17-8.


100. 'Interview with Kitchen Table Press', in *Outwrite: Women's Newspaper*, issue 3, June 1982. p. 5.

101. Ibid.
Margaret Atwood is a striking example of a woman writer who has succeeded. Her writing has received commendation from both feminists and those within the mainstream cultural industries. Her fiction has been published by Virago Press who introduce her as "Canada's most eminent novelist, poet and critic." Atwood has won the Governor-General's Award twice, as well as being twice shortlisted for the Booker prize. The adaptation of her novel, The Handmaid's Tale, into a film has secured her an even larger audience. Atwood is perceived as a feminist writer because of her longstanding publishing history with Virago Press. It is significant that Atwood has avoided any such definition of her writing, and demonstrates how critical a publishing label is to readers' conceptions of authors. Nicci Gerrard, in her examination of feminist writing and contemporary publishing, cites Margaret Atwood as one of the few genuinely gifted feminist writers.

That Atwood has been successful in creating a plausible 'world' picture that rules out the need for people to understand and resist material oppression is unquestionable. Reviews constantly focus on Atwood's understanding of 'life':

- 'This book is about life for all of us.'
- 'It is superb, complete.'
- 'A subtle and penetrating observer of relationships between men and women.'
- 'An acute and poetic observer of the eternal, universal, rum relations between women and men.'

In the current anti-feminist backlash, it is easy to see why Atwood has been heralded by both left and right-wing commentators as one of the few
gifted writers that feminism has to offer. In chapter one, I outlined my own contention that concentrating on a small number of writers obstructs the recording of cultural diversity, and maintains an oppressive silencing of different voices. The success of Margaret Atwood as a 'feminist' writer completes the diversion of feminism from mainstream publishing to so-called feminist publishing.

In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate how Atwood's critical and fictional writing attempts to reinforce established notions of writing as belonging to a few gifted individuals. For Atwood, a key attribute of this gift is precisely the ability to transcend the mundane concerns of the material world and thereby enable other people to experience this creative flight through reading. Atwood's ironic reflections upon relations between men and women appear to have seduced both the mainstream and parts of the feminist press. I would argue that the world picture that Atwood offers her readers is one that distrusts the ability of either men or women to have productive relations with themselves or each other.

The fact that Atwood has written about women and therefore inevitably explored issues pertinent to women, such as reproduction and sexual relations, coupled with the fact that she is published by Virago Press, appears to have been enough to secure her position as one of the great contemporary feminist writers. What has remained relatively unexplored is what Atwood actually says about such issues. I will begin by discussing Atwood's critical work before discussing in greater depth her fictional texts.
A useful insight into Margaret Atwood's concerns as a writer can be gained by a reading of one of her reviews. In 1977, she wrote approvingly of Audrey Thomas' writing skills:

"Thomas is a writer's writer, which shouldn't prevent her from being a readers' writer as well. She has enormous verbal skills: a passion for words - words as games, words as magic or refrain, words as puzzle or multi-leveled pun - a wonderful ear for dialogue and dialect, a flexible style. Her fascination with language for its own sake accounts for much of the sheer panache of her writing, though it occasionally leads her into unsuccessful excesses. She is at her best when her stylistic gifts and her obsession with language are reflected by her material. Her finest stories not only demonstrate language, they are about language: the impossibility and the necessity of using it for true communication."

Atwood warms to Thomas' 'natural' talents; her intuitive understanding of the complexity of words. Thomas, like all good writers, is not in control of her text because it is inspired by an appreciation of the impossibility of any writer being able to control meaning. For Atwood, Thomas is passionate enough and skilled enough to articulate the 'real' subject of writing: the writing itself. Thus, it is not surprising that she interprets Thomas' best stories as being those that 'are about language'.

Atwood's belief that all writers are compelled to write because they are 'in love' with language is very much a personal statement. In her introduction to her collection of critical writings she explains:

"When you begin to write you're in love with the language, with the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing - if you follow it - will take you places you never intended to go, and show you things you would otherwise never have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me."  

Atwood presents her writing as developing from, at first, satisfying her love of language, and then beckoning her into unknown and external territories; however, there is very little sense of importance attached to
the world at large and the writer's relation to it. Where the writer is
transported to, and what he or she makes of it is left uncommented upon.
For Atwood, the relevant sites in the writing practice are that of the
writer and language, and the writer's task is to represent the intimate
struggle that takes place between herself and her material. It comes as no
surprise to find that 'good' writing is by no means common:

'Deep down inside, most people think that writing is something that anyone
can do, really, because after all it's only expressing yourself. Well, it's
probably true that anyone can write...but doing it well is another
thing.' [10]

It is significant that Atwood does not provide her readers with any clues
as to how they are to recognise those writers that write 'well'.

Atwood's refusal to credit her belief in the existence of innate and
rare artistic talent with any ideological significance enables her to
present her values as being rooted in universal truths. Any writer who is
fortunate enough to possess a 'natural' skill with language and is willing
to succumb to, what is in her view, the universal direction of language,
becomes a reliable transmitter of reality. Clearly, Atwood assumes that
there will be widespread agreement upon the function and nature of the
writing practice.

Throughout her critical work, Atwood comfortably refers to a coherent
group of 'writers' and 'readers' with attendant and equally concordant
arrays of 'critics' and 'publishers'.

ii. The Task of Criticism

In a 1981 address to Amnesty International, Atwood tackles the issue of the
writer's responsibility. It is clear from her speech that 'the' writer's
responsibility is a matter for the writer rather than the reader or critic. Certainly, there is little sense that Atwood would welcome any kind of open discussion, much less censure, upon a writer's motives. Atwood's characteristically tentative portrayal of the writer in her, or his, material context, contrasts with her delineation of the reading public. Thus, critics, writers and audience are lumped together as though they each form a coherent and indistinguishable whole.

For Atwood, the writer is a creative individual and, as she states in an essay on Northrop Frye, the critic is someone who should provide a helpful commentary for readers of his or her work:

The critic's job is not to tell poets what to do, but to tell readers what they have done. The writer's job is to write. This was an arrangement that seemed appropriate to me, and still does. 

Atwood's assertion manages to obscure the question of whether or not a critic can tell a reader what a writer has done. Her distinction between 'criticism' and 'writing' is clearly based upon the assumption that criticism is in the service of literature. Noticeably, Atwood does not impose any such restrictions on her own reviews of authors, and this is, I would argue, due to the inherently critical and imaginative character of any form of writing. Atwood perhaps feels able to occupy the space of creative and critical writing because she has produced the more elusive of the two.

In her introduction to her collection of critical writings, Atwood explains her preference for 'writing' which is like "looking out of a window" as opposed to 'criticism' which she likens to "homework". It is presumably for this reason that Atwood emphasises her choice of the title 'Second Words' for her critical works. She explains:

This book is called Second Words for two reasons. The first is that I am not primarily a critic but a poet and novelist, and therefore my critical
activities...necessarily come second to me. The other reason is based on precedence: that is, a writer has to write something before a critic can criticise it. This is in no way to imply that words spoken first are necessarily better than the critical fabrics raised upon them. It is only to state what seems to be the obvious; that is, you can't have a thought about a stone without first seeing a stone."

There is arguably more than an 'implication' of the superior worth of poetry and fiction here; particularly as 'criticism' fails to qualify as having any independent and creative insight to bear upon the text. In this scenario, it is difficult to see any valid way in which a critic could criticise a text, since the writer and the writing (in this case the stone) are mutually exclusive. A critic who questioned the validity of the stone would presumably be demonstrating a lamentable lack of imagination.

In an article entitled, 'An end to audience?', Atwood again details the proper way in which critics should enhance the writing that they discuss. The only condition attached to this is that they be intelligent enough to understand the writing in front of them.

'The critic is that curious creature, a reader-writer, and he reflects trends even more accurately than Toronto Life. In his popular form he's supposed to function as a kind of stand-in for the average, intelligent reader...he's supposed to keep us informed about what's going on in writing, what writers are producing, and what effect these productions had on him as a reasonably experienced reader.'

The possibility of conflict between the reader and the writer are striking for their resounding silence in any of Atwood's discussions.

iii. The Problem of Audience

Atwood's expectations of 'audience' are equally stringent. In her 1977 address to Amnesty International, she warns those present that 'the' audience is fast degenerating into a mass of people looking for escapism:

'We live in a society in which the main consensus seems to be that the artist's duty is to entertain and divert, nothing more. Occasionally our
critics get a little heavy and start talking about the human condition, but on the whole the audience seems to prefer art not to be a mirror held up to life but a Disneyland of the soul, containing Romanceland, Spyland, Pornoland and all the other Escapeland which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth. [18]

Atwood does not define 'we', so it is not at all clear in what capacity she is speaking, or in what capacity she is perceiving the audience. Her apparent commitment to the 'complex' truth does not include an interested analysis of audience or reader; much less a recognition that both terms obscure class, race and gender differences in society, as well as their concomitant cohesion in particular audiences and readers.

For Atwood, audience and reader operate as intrinsic parts of 'the' writing process, but where the serious writer is always represented as the easily misunderstood individual, the reader and audience are presented as a faceless mass, characterised by a lack of imagination and responsibility. The speech is full of sweeping assumptions about what it is that the audience wants: yet, Atwood at no point refers to the fact that most of the audience, if we take this to mean society at large, are denied any measure of choice in what they decide to read.

Atwood does refer elsewhere to the necessity of government intervention, for the survival of serious writing, in a book industry that prefers to invest in texts which are likely to sell quickly. However, when she discusses the audience in any other context, there is no reference to the fact that books are selected by a particular group of readers who decide whether they will be available for general consumption. Instead, Atwood slips into her habitual portrayal of the crass demands that are placed on the writer:

"When we take an author seriously, we prefer to believe that her vision derives from her individual and subjective and neurotic soul - we like artists to have tortured souls - not from the world she is looking at. Sometimes our artists believe this version too, and the ego takes over. I,
me and mine are our favourite pronouns; we, us and ours are low on the list.\textsuperscript{[142]}

This contention, that writers are not different to any other members of society, contradicts Atwood's frequent allusions to the artist as someone who is in possession of a unique insight into the way that 'life' really is.

Moreover, Atwood's suggestion that writers can avoid self-indulgence simply by making more use of collective pronouns conjures up an image of society as a passive mass that can be effortlessly summoned up by a grammatical gesture. Having explained why it is that so few people are endowed with the ability to write, she proceeds to ignore the possibility that people other than those that she deems to be good writers might prefer to speak for, and about, themselves. However, Atwood does not consider whether or not the writer is equipped to assume a collective voice, much less whether this is a desirable scenario.

\textbf{iv. Writing for 'Us'}

In 'An end to audience ?', Atwood develops this notion of the writer as a specialised transmitter of reality. The writer describes the world by surrendering herself or himself to 'language':

\dots art happens. It happens when you have the craft and the vocation and are waiting for something else, something extra, or maybe not waiting; in any case it happens. It's the extra rabbit coming out of the hat, the one you didn't put in there..It is the bringing the dead to life and giving voices to those who lack them so that they may speak for themselves. It is not 'expressing yourself'. It is opening yourself, discarding your self, so that the language and the world may be evoked through you..Maybe the writer expresses; but evocation, calling up, is what writing does for the reader. Writing is also a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling. It is a naming of the world..The writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer bears witness. Bearing witness is not the same as
self-expression.\footnote{17} 

Atwood blithely assumes that when a writer speaks for those that 'lack' a voice, she, or he, is enabling them to 'speak for themselves'. If this was what she really saw as the point of writing, then it would follow that those who lack a voice may as well speak for themselves.

However, this possibility is not on Atwood's literary agenda since, as she enumerates, the writer does more than simply bring the 'dead' to life. The author is the only means by which the full complexity of 'the' reader's world and 'the' writer's world can be perceived. Far from being an oppressive assumption about the ability of a few individuals to really comprehend human existence, this is apparently an act of selflessness. Atwood endorses the liberal humanist assumption that a few gifted artists are able to speak for and about the whole of humankind.\footnote{18} Those readers who do not respond favourably to the texts that the dominant culture selects as the most worthwhile commentaries on human existence, are presumably misunderstanding their role.

Having established that writers are somehow mysteriously equipped to speak for all sections of society, Atwood goes on to claim that 'we' are not much interested in politics:

We are good at measuring an author's production in terms of his craft. We are not good at analysing it in terms of his politics, and by and large we do not do so. \footnote{19}

Atwood adds that by this she does not mean how an author votes but:

'I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what. Such material enters a writer's work...because a writer is an observer, a witness, and such observations are the air he breathes. They are the air all of us breathe; the only difference is that the author looks, and then writes down what he sees. \footnote{20}

It is striking that the possibility of such issues entering the writer's
life from direct experience is not, at any point, entertained by Atwood. Writers are firmly located in the realm of observation, rendering visible what may be all too easily overlooked by the rest of humankind.

Atwood devotes much space throughout both her critical and fictional work to emphasising the 'real' place of politics for the writer. Throughout her critical ruminations, it is the mysterious workings of the writer's mind, and the equally inexplicable but decidedly discriminatory operations of 'language', that are the truly important agents. Her support for improved working conditions for writers, and her insistence that it be treated as a profession (and at its best an 'honourable' one) exists alongside a reiterated statement that writers are not in any sense politicians. It is, presumably, this conviction that informs Atwood's somewhat surprising conclusion to her article, 'On being a "woman writer": paradoxes and dilemmas':

But in relationship to the writing itself, this is a false arena. The real one is in her head, her real struggle is the daily battle with words, the language itself. The false arena becomes valid for writing itself only insofar as it becomes part of her material and is, transformed into one of the verbal and imaginative structures she is constantly engaged in making. Writers, as writers, are not propagandists or examples of social trends or preachers or politicians. They are makers of books, and unless they can make books well they will be bad writers, no matter what the social validity of their views.

Having dismissed gender from having any useful part in discussions about writing, Atwood then proceeds to make a far reaching claim for the political validity of fiction.

In 'An end to audience ?', Atwood states that poetry in particular is:

"...the heart of language, the activity through which language is renewed and kept alive. I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community." 

Atwood's erasing of gender, race and class from the writing arena is evident in her depiction of 'language' as a universal phenomenon which
everyone relates to in the same way. Atwood assumes that there is only one 'moral' and 'ethical' sense, which fiction is able to preserve. She exhibits little interest in the factors that determine both who is going to read and write, and how particular readers and writers are going to be classified. It thus remains unclear as to how Atwood can expect an entire community to recognise 'a' moral and ethical consciousness. The fact that a white, middle-class, heterosexual man stands a better chance of being published than a working-class, lesbian, woman of color apparently need not concern 'us'.

Atwood's apparent interest in 'humanity' and 'the world' is, I would argue, founded on a refusal to acknowledge the possibility that people have conflicting interests and different perspectives on the world, a possibility that also extends to writers. Her suggestion, that 'we' can only hope to analyse society through fiction, could perhaps more accurately be defined as a suggestion that gives white middle-class experience a universal importance:

"...fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see other, and judge them and ourselves." [24]

Atwood's rejection of the significance of class, race and gender in her discussions of 'language' is accompanied by her assertion that writers, in general, should not be too concerned with such issues. Writers are, she maintains, a specific group and are all equal before their various publishing contracts. [25]

As I demonstrated in chapter one, the idea that writers all receive the same conditions and treatment is clearly erroneous. Atwood links publishing with the writer's need for solitude and fair reviews. These
conditions, Atwood assures her readers, have nothing to do with factors such as the gender of the writer:

There is nothing 'male' or 'female' about these conditions; they are just attributes of the activity known as writing.  

For Atwood, writers operate in a distinct sphere removed from any necessary contact with categories such as gender. This explains, Atwood suggests in 'On being a 'woman writer': paradoxes and dilemmas', the lack of involvement of significant numbers of women writers in 'the' feminist movement; they have no real need for it:

If you are a writer, prejudice against women will affect you as a writer not directly but indirectly. You won't suffer from wage discrimination, because you aren't paid any wages; you won't be hired last and fired first, because you aren't hired or fired anyway. You have relatively little to complain of, and absorbed in your own work as you are likely to be, you will find it quite easy to shut your eyes to what goes on at the spool factory, or even at the University'.

According to Atwood then, 'writers' for the most part escape relatively unscathed from the 'false arena' of such concerns as race and class. Instead, she or he concentrates on the more critical struggle with 'language'. Atwood presents 'the' writer, at his or her best, as an essentially autonomous figure, servicing humanity and propelled by motives that are beyond even their own comprehension.

It is, Atwood insists, a sense of vocation, as opposed to a wish to 'make messages' that inspires a writer to put pen to paper:

Writing is a craft...But writing is also a vocation. By vocation I mean a lifetime pursuit to which you feel called."  

Moreover, Atwood stresses that this 'calling' is not something that everyone can expect to be summoned by. In a review of Jay MacPherson, Atwood congratulates her for reminding 'us' that poetry:

is not a career but a vocation, something to which one is called, or not, as the case may be."
Atwood's description of writing as a vocational act gives writing a spiritual essence. Her readers are encouraged to feel awed by such an event and process rather than to be engaged with it. The reader's attention should be focused upon the words before her, rather than involved in challenging knowledge systems that employ notions of rare genius to explain the small numbers of writers in, and out of, print.

v. Writing against Politics

Atwood's reluctance to find any connection between artistic creativity and politics is particularly striking in her reviews of explicitly political writers. In her 1973 review of Adrienne Rich, Atwood refers, in passing, to those adverse occasions when Rich is tempted to 'sloganize'. Luckily, Atwood asserts, this is more than compensated for by her extraordinary poetic skills. Natural ability is posited alongside the synthetic and apparently easier option of political commitment. Atwood adds weight to her preference by asserting that when Rich does not attempt to bombard the reader with a message she is writing more as herself:

It is not enough to state the truth; it must be imagined, and when Rich does this she is irresistible. When she does this she is also most characteristically herself.  

In a review, written three years later, Atwood introduces Rich as "one of America's best poets". This glowing definition is swiftly followed by the assurance that:

This is not to deny the feminist content of her poems, or their sometimes overtly polemical intent.  

Atwood's assumption, that political consciousness is a potential threat to artistic integrity, results in her frequent apologies for the radical
writers that she reviews. Marge Piercy, like Adrienne Rich, falls into the category of writers who are radical and feminist but produce poetry:

'She's [Marge Piercy] a feminist and a radical, but her poetry fleshes out these concepts in complex and sometimes startling ways, and she's no simpleminded sloganeer.'

Atwood's juxtaposition of radical politics with art, particularly poetry, which she regards as being at the pinnacle of written forms, derives from her conviction that politics can stifle artistic creativity. It is this suspicion that prompts her to voice her 'reluctance' in approaching the subject of women writers. Atwood begins her discussion of writing and women in her article, 'On being a 'woman writer': paradoxes and dilemmas', with an opening cautionary note:

'Some of my reservations have to do with the questionable value of writers, male or female, becoming directly involved in political movements of any sort: their involvement may be good for the movement, but it has yet to be demonstrated that it is good for the writer.'

This conception of politics, as presenting a threat to the authentic movement of the writer's imagination, is one that Atwood is pleased to discover in the writing of Marie-Claire Blais. Blais, a successful writer in Quebec, returned to Quebec after a long exile to find a dramatically different social and political order. Blais shares Atwood's misgivings in the face of any signs of active political consciousness:

'The new Quebec, she thinks is a far different place: vibrant, alive, with a new confidence and freedom. But although she is enthusiastic about the changes, she is less certain about the intense political activity and awareness that brought at least some of them into being. Writers, she feels, should observe and record; they cross the line into political involvement at their own peril: a writer is a témoign, a witness...Dogmatism closes a writer off.'

Atwood responds positively to Blais' doubts concerning the political involvement of writers. Clearly, such doubts can only be entertained alongside a belief that writers are able to transcend the confines of a
political doctrine and produce a more complete picture of material reality. It is not surprising that Blais' pleasure in finding a freer Quebec is tempered by a fear of the presence of active politics. Blais' conception of the writer, as possessing a unique and unhampered vision, involves a parallel vision of the material world as being essentially passive and inert, brought to life only by the writer's pen and imagination.

Atwood often alludes to the stiff and unrelenting character of political consciousness, contrasting it with the organic and boundless realm of the imagination. It is this, Atwood informs her readers, that is perhaps the 'real' reason for the infrequent political involvement of writers:

'no good writer wants to be merely a transmitter of someone else's ideology, no matter how fine that ideology may be. The aim of propaganda is to convince, and to spur people to action; the aim of writing is to create a plausible and moving world, and to create it from words...the aim of a political movement is to improve the quality of people's lives...Writing however, tends to concentrate more on life, not as it ought to be, but as it is, as the writer feels it, experiences it. Writers are eye-witnesses, I-witnesses. 

The writer, in short, by virtue of a fortuitous calling and a personal sense of vocation, occupies a potentially inimitable vantage point from which to record human existence. Given this, it is not surprising that Atwood is anxious for writers to resist the imprisoning clutch of ideologies. Fortunately for Atwood, this concern is diminished by her stubborn confidence in the autonomous urge of writers to write:

no one can tell writers what to write, and they won't listen if you do tell them. They will just continue writing, as they always do, and critics will continue to comment. 

Given Atwood's critical dissociation from political intent in her writing, it is something of an irony that this is precisely what is referred to in critical discussions of her work. This is particularly true of her
successful novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*,\(^{27}\) which has been heralded as a feminist dystopia. I hope to show, by a close reading of the novel, that there is very little ground for asserting that this is a feminist text. I will then go on to discuss Atwood's other fiction and the ways in which it expresses her critical beliefs.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is probably Margaret Atwood's most well known novel and it has, together with her subsequent work, received widespread commendation from feminist commentators. Carla Freccero, in her article, 'Notes of a post-sex wars theorizer',\(^{28}\) views *The Handmaid's Tale* as a fictional representation of her own concerns about the implications of some contemporary feminist strategies, most notably those involved in the anti-abortion movement in North America. Freccero puts forward a criticism of the anti-pornography movement in America as presenting disturbing consequences for female liberation. In particular, she argues that organizing around pornography imposes an inaccurate and damaging cohesion upon the recipients of its abuse:

> When the state oppresses a number of people by virtue of a certain commonality, it is on the basis of that commonality that people organize to become visible in their opposition to the state. But that does not necessarily mean that an all-encompassing 'identity' exists among those people, though the legal identity produced may and often does...become reified as it becomes totalizing.\(^{29}\)

Freccero goes on to argue that focusing on pornography as the key to women's liberation means that valuable space is filled which would more effectively be spent by focusing on the need for a revolutionary dispersal of power. For the purposes of my discussion, the significant point raised by Freccero's argument lies in her reading of Atwood's novel as a radical intervention in the pornography debate.

Freccero defines *The Handmaid's Tale* as a "masterful novel about a
feminist dystopia"; and one that examines the possible consequences of an appeal to state protection:

"Women under the old order were jeopardised by rape, pornography, and ideological degradation; in Gilead they are protected from abuse by a strictly patriarchal state that claims total ownership of their bodies. They have become, literally, state property... [Atwood] not only criticizes the tactics of a branch of the North American women's movement, but also suggests a relation between tactical choices and philosophical positions."

I would argue that the distrust in identity politics that Freccero locates in *The Handmaid's Tale* is derived from Atwood's belief in a universal human condition that certain people, namely writers, are able to present to their readers. For Atwood, oppression can best be overcome by fictional representations that demonstrate the intrinsic humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressors:

"Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings."

Atwood is primarily concerned to represent the power of imagination in its combat with the earthly problem of mass inequality. Thus, it is not surprising that Atwood approaches the subject of patriarchy by stressing the need for positive identification with men.

In her 1982 article, "Writing the male character", Atwood outlines what she sees as the agenda for contemporary writing on sexual relations:

"I believe we have now reached, as a culture, the point at which we need a little positive reinforcement for men."

Atwood goes on to outline her own plans concerning this new stage in 'our' culture:

I've written more pages from a female character's point of view than from a male's. But male characters are more of a challenge, and now that I'm middle-aged and less lazy I'll undoubtedly try a few more of them. If writing novels - and reading them - have any redeeming social value it's probably that they force you to imagine what it's like to be somebody else."
This results in a continual suspension of the significance of power relations in her fiction as Atwood doggedly emphasises the value of all humanity. Atwood's underlying conviction that there is a potentially discernible 'humanity' in everyone makes her concerns, as a writer, more closely linked with an affirmation of this than with a disinterested observation that she perceives to be the writer's special social contribution. This is, I would argue, the crucial point expressed in The Handmaid's Tale. The novel is set in the future where women have lost any independent status from the state machinery. Atwood represents this future society through the narrative voice of Offred who is a birth machine for the Gileadan Republic.

It is through Offred's changing narrative that Atwood demonstrates the indestructible nature of humanity. At first, Offred rejects her body as a mere extension of the political system:

'I avoid looking down at my body...I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.'

It is Offred's 'failure' to remain detached from the Commander, to whom she is assigned as a breeding machine, that actually reinforces the inability of any political system, even one as nightmarish as this, to overcome human sensibility.

Both Offred and the Commander defeat the gendered structure of the Gileadan Republic by achieving a relationship that becomes increasingly distinct from its state imposed definition. It is in Atwood's depiction of the relationship between them that the liberal humanist impulse of the text is revealed. The Commander's demand for a kiss only momentarily displays "who holds the real power" before his human frailty has undercut it and produced a less stark power relation:
'It's this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It's like a small crack in the wall before, now impenetrable.'

It is the Commander's desire for Offred that transforms her from a single 'body' into a feeling human being again. She moves from exploited female object to ambiguous, responsive subject:

I don't love the Commander or anything like it, but he's of interest to me, he occupies a space, he is more than a shadow. And I for him. To him I'm not merely empty.

The mutuality that underlies the most seemingly oppressive of human relations is a recurrent revelation in Atwood's fiction.

Cat's Eye, like The Handmaid's Tale, deals with a traumatic loss of self that is eventually resolved by a recognition of the limited power of, what is at first sight, a clear-cut case of oppression. The main review on the back of the book is by The Listener, which applauds it for capturing, "so forcefully the relationship between school bully and victim". The novel is narrated, almost entirely, by Elaine: the 'victim' who in the first part of the book records her childhood torment at the hands of Cordelia and her associates Grace and Carol. Elaine remembers painful childhood experiences, such as Cordelia's gruesome re-enactment of Mary, Queen of Scots' execution:

I'm wearing a black dress and a cloak, from the dress-up cupboard. I'm supposed to be Mary, Queen of Scots, headless already. They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight disappears, and there's the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful...I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror.'

Atwood dislocates the original relationship between Elaine and Cordelia by reversing their roles later on in the novel. Elaine refuses to do what Cordelia demands her to and bullies Cordelia with her newly found razor sharp tongue:
I have such a mean mouth that I become known for it. I don't use it unless provoked, but then I open my mean mouth and short, devastating comments come out of it. The person I use my mean mouth on the most is Cordelia. She doesn't even have to provoke me, I use her as target practice.

It is in this entirely different power structure that Atwood destabilises the clarity of Elaine and Cordelia's childhood relationship. Cordelia asks Elaine whether she remembers all the holes in her garden and tells her how she used to dig them to escape from her father:

'I guess I wanted some place that was all mine, where nobody could bug me. When I was little, I used to sit on a chair in the front hall. I used to think that if I kept very still and out of the way and didn't say anything, I would be safe...when I was really little, I guess I used to get into trouble a lot with Daddy. When he would lose his temper. You never knew when he was going to do it. 'Wipe that smirk off your face,' he would say.'

Cordelia not only presents a different perspective on the garden hole of Elaine's mock execution, but also reveals who she was imitating when she bullied her. Cordelia's father's demand that she 'wipe the smirk off her face' echoes Cordelia's own instructions to Elaine when she was a child. Her description of her tyrannical father forces Elaine to review Cordelia's 'power' over her:

'Cordelia's face dissolves, re-forms: I can see her nine-year old face taking shape beneath it...It's as if I've been standing outside in the dark and a shade has snapped up, over a lighted window, revealing the life that's been going on inside in all its clarity and detail. There is that glimpse, during which I can see. And then not.'

Elaine, like Offred, experiences flashes of insight into the complexity of human relationships. And like Offred, Elaine ultimately dispenses with the relevance of a easily identifiable power relation. This rejection of the ultimate ability of humans to dominate each other is made all the more emphatic by both Offred and Elaine's efforts to resist such a conclusion. Elaine's initial indifference to Cordelia, in the face of the mounting evidence of the pain inflicted on her by her father, shocks her, but it is
Atwood's key characters constantly oscillate between a desire to ignore the sufferings of others and an instinctive inability to reject the needs of others; particularly those who are in what becomes a merely superficial position of power. Later on in the novel, when Elaine discovers her father's life story, she voices her understanding of this inevitable facet of human existence:

"..knowing too much about other people puts you in their power, they have a claim on you, you are forced to understand their reasons for doing things and then you are weakened." [533]

Given Atwood's view of the task of fiction, it is perhaps not wholly surprising that she is so keen to demonstrate the power of human empathy in the narratives of Offred and Elaine.

For Atwood, it is the power of the mind that can both create and overthrow repressive power structures:

"The most significant and lethal weapon is the human mind..But it is the human mind also that can summon up the power to resist, that can imagine a better world." [543]

However, I would suggest that Atwood's depiction of 'the' human mind as a dispassionate force is contradicted by its specifically gendered presence in her writing. Atwood, throughout her fictional work, displays an unshakeable faith in the ability of women to realize the essential vulnerability of men. This is not something that occurs so easily between women.

vi. The Limits of Sisterhood: Female Relationships in Atwood's Fiction.

The little communication between women that there is in Atwood's fiction is striking for its resounding failure to achieve the imaginative
identification that she insists is the writer's task to represent. In The Handmaid's Tale, the rare conversations that Offred has with other women serve to emphasise her difference from them. Offred's mother and her friend Moira are present in the text to symbolise the danger of a feminism that does not take men into account. Their 'rigidly' anti-patriarchal stance, while occasionally providing a useful exposure of the 'objective' reality of the text— as for example, when Moira comments on the Commander's "crummy power trip" with Offred—is present as a meaningful contrast to Offred's sensitivity.

Offred's consistent and valuable unwillingness to make an objective appraisal of reality is quickly suspended in her relations with her mother and Moira—here she is permitted to find a definite context for her present existence:

Mother, I think where ever you may be...you wanted a woman's culture. Well now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.  

Atwood's portrayal of mother-child relationships throughout her work are marked by a fundamental distrust. In Cat's Eye, Elaine's mother responds to her daughter's distress by advising her not to be "spineless" and thus seals her isolation:

I can't afford the distraction of comfort. If I give into what little backbone I have left I will crumble away to nothing. I pull away from her.

The barriers that are occasionally broken down between men and women are immovable between mothers and daughters.

The concluding passage in Atwood's short story, 'Significant moments in the life of my mother', like the end of Cat's Eye, depicts the inevitable gulf that results between mothers and their children when they
become adults. Atwood recalls how her own mother's enthusiasm for telling stories diminished as she grew up:

My mother has few stories to tell about these times. What I remember from them is the odd look I would sometimes catch in her eyes. It struck me for the first time in my life, that my mother might be afraid of me...I had become a visitor from outer space.

Atwood's autobiographical account of her relationship with her mother becomes another universal 'truth' about mothers and daughters in her fiction.

It is through her depiction of female relationships that Atwood most clearly expresses her notion of the unique individual. Relations between women, and girls, are characterised by their complete lack of any sense of shared concerns or experiences. Even these relationships are not, Atwood suggests, at all easy to form, as her central female characters express their unease at the company of their own sex. In Cat's Eye, Elaine's desire for girl friends, prompted by her nomadic life with her family, becomes yet another reminder of her difference when her wish is made real:

So I am left to the girls, real girls at last in the flesh. But I'm not used to girls or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them. I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder.

Elaine's sense of separation from any shared female experiences is reinforced throughout the novel. As a teenager she is unsurprised to receive the most Valentine cards, "I hug my knowledge, which is new but doesn't surprise me: boys are my secret allies." Elaine's isolation and individuality is emphasised by her sense of alienation amongst women and her inevitably partial inclusion with male company. However, it is with the latter that she experiences a kind of acceptance that is always lacking in her relations with women. It is this that informs her allegiance:
My loyalty to Mr Smeath is similar to my loyalty to my brother: both are on the side of ox eyeballs, toe-jam under the microscope, the outrageous, the subversive. Outrageous to whom, subversive of what? Of Grace and Mrs Smeath, of tidy paper ladies pasted into scrapbooks.  

Elaine's rare sense of human contact is strikingly abstract.

Atwood's resistance to the idea of people gaining any reward from human relations is reflected by the scarce appearance of groups in her novels. Atwood always chooses a single narrative voice which probes into the context of the particular story that is related. This voice is recognisable in all her fiction as being fundamentally alone. Human contact is fleeting and confined to taking place, very occasionally, between women and men. In *Life Before Man*, Lesje shares Offred's inability to 'sacrifice' her self to the demands of other women. This contrasts with her inability to reject the needs of Nate:

Something in the way he asked her made it impossible for her to say no...The anger and desperation of others have always been her weak point.  

I would suggest that the needs of 'others' might more accurately be read as the needs of certain *male* characters present in Atwood's fiction.

Lesje is swept along by Nate, but she is always acutely conscious of her difference; Atwood employs Lesje's 'social inadequacy' in order to stress her personal integrity. This juxtaposition necessitates the lumping together of the sporadic groups of women that appear in her novels as dogmatic and insensitive. Atwood's key women characters are often employed to represent the vulnerability of the self that is threatened by the 'demands' that other women place on her. The text extracts sympathy for the paralysed individual, in this case Lesje, whilst it simultaneously caricatures the inflexible and monolithic framework for any shared ideas. Lesje's roommate at College ("...a social historian with tinted granny
emotionally blackmails Lesje into attending a 'Women's Group', where Atwood's readers, once again, witness her hostility to any notion of people attempting to work and think together:

Already they were looking at her with calculation: her murmurs of assent had not been enough. Soon they would confront her. Panic-stricken she searched her past for suitable offerings, but the only thing she could think of was so minor, so trivial, that she knew it would never be accepted. It was this: on the gold dome of the Museum's lobby, up at the top, it said: THAT ALL MEN MAY KNOW HIS WORK. It was only a quotation from the Bible...but it might keep them busy; they were very big on the piggishness of God. On the other hand they might reject it completely. Come on Lesje, something personal. [Emphasis in the original]

The warning against the implications of radical feminism issued in The Handmaid's Tale is present as a less central issue throughout Atwood's work. In Cat's Eye, Elaine is a successful painter, and the present tense of the novel is concerned with her feelings about an exhibition of her work. The women who have arranged the exhibition provoke Elaine's perpetual sense of alienation:

'I should be grateful, these women are on my side, they planned the whole thing for me, they're doing me an honour, they like what I do. But still I feel outnumbered, as if they are a species of which I am not a member.' [Emphasis]

Elaine's subsequent interview with one of these women emphasises Atwood's perception of the intrinsic suspicion that underpins women's relationships with each other. Atwood does make occasional, casual references to collections of women where they are depicted as a tight-knit and formidable unit, but she does not actually explore these units. Consequently, their cohesion is only ever an intimidating obstacle for Atwood's heroines, who remain conspicuously outside of their realm.

Atwood's central female characters are quick to challenge any notion of sisterhood. Elaine rejects any questions that refer to her gender and counters them by 'rebelliously' insisting on emphasising the support of her husband in her career, and the primary influence of her male art tutor, who
taught her how to paint naked women. Elaine concludes the interview by remarking that she is pleased if women like her work, whilst at the same time, abruptly dismissing the relevance of feminism:

'I hate party lines, I hate ghettos. Anyway I'm too old to have invented it and you're too young to understand it, so what's the point of discussing it at all?'

Clearly, this is not a case in which feminism can prompt women to attempt to forge links and understand each others' experiences. Exaggerated though Elaine's reaction may be, it does, nonetheless, contain a striking resemblance to Atwood's more direct criticism of feminism in her essay, 'On being a 'woman writer': paradoxes and dilemmas'. In the article, she voices her fear of a "one-dimensional feminist criticism", whilst at the same time disassociating herself from feminist debate. Atwood explains that for her, and a lot of other women writers, they were growing up and writing before 'the' Women's Movement and so do not feel a part of it - "Being adopted is not the same as being born". It is significant that Atwood sees this as a logical consequence, and perhaps relates more to her view of thought being valid only if it is experienced personally as an 'original' insight.

It is in The Handmaid's Tale that Atwood most fully depicts her fears of the possible consequences of a 'one-dimensional feminism'. The patrolling Aunts of Gilead are the logical extension of a politically organised female solidarity. The feminists in the novel, namely Moira and Offred's mother, are guilty of a narrow minded perception of the world. The theoretical ideal of a woman-orientated culture - the only feminism represented in the book - is posited as the major danger for contemporary society. Offred criticises Moira's feminism and lesbianism for its delusion and lack of relation to 'humanity':

I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create utopia by shutting herself up in 105
a woman-only enclave she was sadly mistaken.\

The nightmare world of Gilead is set against Offred's memories, where the political constructs of the family and heterosexuality are granted a haunting and nostalgic place in the text. Atwood ultimately invests contemporary sexual and familial relations with a value that she urges her readers not to demolish.

The Handmaid's Tale is Atwood's only novel in which the essential mutuality of male and female relations is asserted; it is, perhaps, significant that it is also her only novel that is set in a future that feminism is largely responsible for. In her other works Atwood draws upon the friction in sexual relations in order to emphasise the isolation of the self. It is only when she projects humanity into the future that contemporary sexual relations receive a preciously empathic quality. Atwood constantly links the past (contemporary society) to the Gileadean present. Offred's concern for her splintered family evokes a consistent nostalgia for traditional familial and sexual relations. Offred recalls a conversation with her husband about buying a house with a garden and starting a family - "such freedom now seems almost weightless" - and...
noticing with relief a man washing a car: "This at least hasn't changed, the way men caress good cars."[70]

In Atwood's novels, 'normality' is present as something valuable that is under threat. Racial, sexual and class based conflict, (and contact), are all rendered invisible and insignificant under the weight of 'normal' life. Contemporary western readers recognise these representations of everyday living and Atwood provides them as a form of reassurance. This reassurance is made more substantial because it is delivered by Offred, who no longer has these 'freedoms' in the Gileadean present. It is not, Atwood stresses, that feminists are entirely wrong, but just that, unlike Offred, they make the fatal mistake of believing themselves to be entirely right. Atwood emphasises this in her presentation of the Aunt's use of a pornographic film and a feminist protest to validate the Gileadean order. The Aunt's employment of a feminist film emphasises the correlation between the Gileadean future and contemporary feminism:

'Mind you some of their ideas were sound enough...We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today.'[71]

Atwood's representations of female relationships, and feminism, are characterised by a combination of fear and alienation. The female protagonists in her fiction are perpetually estranged from their physical existence: either by a repressive state machinery or by their own sense of horror at the female form. In Cat's Eye, Elaine recalls her first experience of a life class and her reluctance to draw the model:

'No, no,' he, [the tutor], says to a young man. 'This is a body'...This is not an automobile. You must think of the fingers, touching this flesh, or the running of the hand over. This must be tactile.' I try to think the way he wants me to, but I recoil. I have no wish to run my fingers over this woman's goose-pimply flesh.[72]

Atwood's delineation of the distasteful spectacle of women's bodies is

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directed at women who are middle aged. Cordelia and Elaine, as teenagers, stress their commitment to not looking like the vast majority of women that they see around them. Their preference for women who do not fit in to the mass of middle aged and old women is, Atwood suggests, an understandable preference for denying the material existence of their bodies:

'Their lipstick mouths are too big around their mouths, their rouge blotchy, their eyes drawn screw-jiggy around their real eyes. These are the ones most likely to talk to themselves. This is the kind we like best. They have a certain gaiety to them, a power of invention, they don't care what people think. They have escaped though what it is they've escaped from isn't clear to us. We think that their bizarre costumes, their verbal tics, are chosen, and that when the time comes we also will be free to choose.'

Presumably, women like these are not significant enough for Atwood to rescue from this kind of 'one-dimensional' appraisal. Instead, they perform their familiar disappearing act as the narrative voice picks its way through the 'world' picture of the novel. I would argue that it is Atwood's representation of 'others', through her central white, middle-class and heterosexual narrative voices, that reveals her particular notions of 'life' and 'humanity'.

Throughout her fiction, Atwood performs abrupt changes of narrative voice. This is particularly evident in Life Before Man, in which the four main characters all take their turn to narrate the story. It is through such juxtapositioning of her characters that she is able to draw her readers into the complex detail of their lives. However, it is precisely Atwood's focus on sexuality and gender as timeless, ahistorical, innate and complex entities that casts the material world of her novels into such shadow. In Life Before Man, Atwood provides a commentary upon heterosexual relations by alternating between the complaints of her central women characters to the justifications offered by her male characters.
Consequently, her readers are engaged in challenging any single narrative voice. However, it is noticeable that although her readers are encouraged to continually reassess the motives of the main characters, no such engagement is required from her readers in assessing Atwood's depictions of material social and political reality.

The *Handmaid's Tale* is a novel in which a discussion of material social and political reality would seem to be particularly relevant. Instead, the text is narrated by the one character who is compelled to emphasise her lack of interest in such matters throughout her narration. This, combined with Atwood's refusal to allow any comment upon Offred's narration by other characters in the novel, leaves her readers with only glimpses of Gileadean society. Politics and ideology are, it seems, to be recognised by their inability to shed any useful light upon humanity.

It is significant that Offred 'chooses' to inject 'humanity' into an oppressive representative of the Gileadean Republic, rather than become involved with the underground resistance movement. Early on in the novel, Offred voices her properly mixed feelings about the Commander:

'I ought to feel hatred for this man. I know I ought to feel it, but that isn't what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don't know what to call it. It isn't love.'

The underground movement, on the other hand, remains a shadowy presence in the novel; it, like the repressive state machinery of the Gileadean Republic, is subsumed under the individual experiences and perceptions of Offred:

'I feel like cotton candy: sugar and air, squeeze me and I turn into a small sticky damp pad of weeping pinky-red.'

The material world is always the most elusive of constructs in Atwood's fiction. Offred's narration is finally 'concluded' at the end of the novel,
whereupon Atwood details the historical context of the tale. The text, it appears, had never been 'real', as it had been compiled and edited by a group of professors, who describe the extensive "guesswork" that was involved in translating their discovery of thirty obsolete tapes into a text.

In a story that purports to take place at a time when women have become state property, it is significant that Atwood creates a heroine who is able to recognise the inadequacy of political resistance. Her belief in the ability of writing to transcend the boundaries of personal experience, ("it is the bringing the dead to life and giving voices to those that lack them so that they may speak for themselves") omits any consideration of exactly whose voices the writer is compelled to conjure up. There are, in fact, very few 'voices' that Atwood attempts to instill life into. In The Handmaid's Tale, lesbianism is one of the dangerous extremes that is responsible for the Gileadean Republic, and the relentless homophobia of Peter and Ainsley, in The Edible Woman, is at no point qualified by the other characters. Apart from these representations, the vast majority of people who are denied literary existence will not find themselves being spoken for in Atwood's novels. Poor people and racially oppressed people are conspicuously absent from this project.

Instead, Atwood busies herself with revealing the inadequacy of material structures of power: thus, male vulnerability and patriarchy are both simultaneously evoked. Her refusal to project any comparative measure of sympathy towards women is situated at the heart of her representations of relations between women. Nowhere is this more at work than in The Edible Woman, in which female bodies are described with fear and loathing by a female character. Marion, the main character, is trapped in a predominantly
female office party; such proximity with the women around her causes her to panic:

She looked around the room at all the women there, at the mouths opening and shutting, to talk or to eat. She examined the women's bodies with interest, critically, as though she had never seen them before. She could see the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs. Gundridge's back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases round the neck, the large porous cheeks; the blotch of varicose veins glimpsed at the back of one plump crossed leg, the way her jowls jellied when she chewed...and the others too. For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. At some time she would be—no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity. She drew a deep breath, clenching her body and her mind back into her self like some tactile sea-creature withdrawing its tentacles; she wanted something solid, clear: a man...

Marion's sense of being dragged into the imprisoning fecundity of femaleness gives a material context to her intellectual disassociation from the other women in the novel. Her recognition, that only a man can 'save' her from the inevitable despair at being female, is shared by Atwood's other central female protagonists.

vii. Men in Atwood's Fiction

Throughout her fiction, Atwood contrasts the stifling demands that her secondary women characters make of her heroines with the liberation offered to them by certain male characters. Atwood certainly does not suggest that such relationships are commonplace. Men who are not committed to assaulting the personal integrity of those around them are, like women, notable exceptions. Nevertheless, they do exist in Atwood's texts, and demonstrate the possibility for preciously fleeting human contact.
It is significant that Atwood frequently portrays male fallibility as a 'human' vulnerability. Men can always attain a level of frailty in her fiction, whereas women are always in danger of losing their humanity; turning into monsters like Atwood's creation of the tyrannical Auntie Muriel in *Life Before Man*. This contrasts with her female characters, whose selfishness is presented as just that; as in the case of Auntie Muriel and the humiliations, particularly the financial ones, that Elizabeth imposes on her husband Nate, in *Life Before Man*.

Atwood assigns to maleness an integral simplicity and guileless goodwill. Nate, in *Life Before Man*, embodies this idea. It is his inability to understand why and how he hurts the women that he meets that becomes the site for the representation of 'human' susceptibility rather than the suffering that he inflicts (despite himself) on the women in the novel, in particular Martha and Lesje. Thus, Atwood depicts the miserably absurd screech of Martha, as Nate once again lets her down:

'Lunch?' A retreating wail. He peddles his bicycle through the rain, aiming deliberately for the puddles, soaking his legs, Fool. There's something missing in him that other people have...He takes a dime from his pocket, holds it. His token, his talisman, his one hope of salvation. At the other end of the line a thin woman waits, her pale face framed by dark hair, her hand lifted, fingers upraised in blessing.

Martha, as a secondary female character, occupies a characteristically absurd position in the text. She is present as a tragi-comic figure voicing the conventional fury of women at the shortcomings of men. Atwood depicts Nate's rejection of her for Lesje as an inevitable consequence of his idealisation of women. Nate is unable to cope with Martha once she has lost her original enticing autonomy. Nate recalls what it was about her that first attracted him to her: "vagueness, lack of focus, an absence of edges that gave her a nebulous shimmer." It is significant that Nate is only
able to value women who appear to be in some way unattainable. Martha, like his wife, becomes positive only as a memory. Moreover, his visionary summoning of Lesje, as a strikingly unearthly personal saviour, does little to suggest that much has changed.

For Atwood, Nate's confused attempts to form sexual relations is something that she prompts her readers to sympathise with. Her female protagonists lead the way, by being drawn to male vulnerability. The complete lack of support between women in her fiction is suspended in her portrayals of heterosexual relations. Elaine, in Cat's Eye, echoes the sentiments of Atwood's other central women characters when she discovers that men are much easier to forgive than women. Elaine's provides women's conventional support for male frailty when she meets up with her ex-husband:

'He's lost something, some illusion I used to think was necessary to him. He's come to realize he too is human. Maybe men shouldn't have been told about their own humanity. It's only made them uncomfortable. It's only made them trickier, slyer, more evasive, harder to read. 'if you hadn't been so crazy', I say, 'it could have worked out. With us, I mean.' That perks him up. 'Who was crazy?' he says, grinning again. 'Forgiving men is so much easier than forgiving women.'

Elaine's sudden maternal tone provides a rare glimpse of one of Atwood's characters caring about another person in terms that are not merely abstractions.

In The Handmaid's Tale, the difference between textual and material power structures results in the familiar obliteration of rape in the novel. Offred may be a birth machine for the Gilead Republic but she, like today's prostitute, can never be simply a raped consequence of political and economic structures:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist...below it the commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because that is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor
does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. \[e^{22}\]

Offred's implausible ability to produce an 'objective' reading of her function in the Gileadean State is replicated by Atwood's other female protagonists, who, no matter how selfish they are in other matters, never perceive of themselves as victims of male abuse. Atwood's representations of rape and sexual harrassment are clearly intended to demonstrate the paucity of such an interpretation.

In Life Before Man, Atwood depicts Elizabeth's perceptions of sexual relations through a stereotypical male objectification of female desire. Elizabeth's problem, of not being able to want anything from life, is eased momentarily when a man attempts to solicit her while she's waiting for a bus. The man, by posing as a possible threat, almost manages to bring some life back into her. It is the man who fails, who is belittled - he can do nothing to really reach her:

Elizabeth stands up, 'There's my bus,' she says lightly. His hand tented in black nylon, clothed like a puppet in some empty woman's groin, is absurdly and at last, at last, exciting to her. For an instant only. The man fades almost at once, flattens, greys. 'Thank you for the conversation', she says, feeling she should thank him for something. He withdraws his hand, looks up at her sadly, 'Do you think I'd do this,' he says, 'if I didn't have to?' \[e^{22}\]

Here Atwood infuses an oppressive patriarchal stereotype with a renewed sense of 'humanity'. 'Simply' to read male power into this scene is to miss the 'fuller' point that Atwood is making. The man, like William and Nate, even if he rapes her (which he does later on) cannot 'touch' her, he is always a sad failure that she is somehow implicated in.

Women, in Atwood's fiction, constantly have to perceive of themselves as objects in order to express textual subjectivity. This, in practice, comes to work against Atwood's dictum of the completeness of the self.
Throughout *Life Before Man*, Lesje, like Offred, is empowered with a significance that far out-reaches anything to do with her character. Lesje is the frail individual remembering past injuries or waiting for new ones. Nonetheless, as the story of liberal humanism goes, she is at the same time 'our' hope; her human frailty is the only thing we can depend on. It is the vulnerable figure of Lesje that renders useless any possibility for human action or change. Ultimately, Lesje is objectified; forced into the inertia that every liberal humanist text imposes on its female subjects. She constantly slips between the Lesje who is fascinated by dinosaurs and the Lesje, who, being a woman, cannot struggle against the lure of male idealisation and distortion. By the end of the novel, she has been raped and lost interest in her job; she has, in fact, followed the natural course of a female saviour.

Atwood's female protagonists 'defy' readers who would read some measure of oppression into their lives. Their defence is, of course, profoundly simple; namely they do not see themselves as oppressed. Moreover, they are uniquely equipped to understand the humanity that exists in the most unlikely people. Again, Atwood demonstrates her belief that finding value in unlikely places in itself constitutes an impressive demonstration of imaginative talent. Thus, it is Offred's refusal to use such terms as exploitation that makes her 'our' best chance for the future. As soon as Offred concentrates on anyone in the novel, they become complicated and therefore beyond the categories of exploiter and exploited.

Offred, in short, represents far more than a woman living under a nightmarish regime. She is the embodiment of the dormant utopianism of the text. She dates back to Shakespeare's model of redemptive femininity, as she reminds us that: 

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Forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, perhaps the greatest... Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death... Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it.

Offred goes on to demonstrate her powers of forgiveness, as she recalls watching a Nazi being interviewed on television, and her surprise that a Nazi could have such recognisable 'humanness':

She was very ordinary under that beauty. She believed in decency. She was nice to the Jewish maid, or nice enough, nicer than she needed to be.

Offred's reaction confirms Atwood's juxtaposition of the supposed paucity of political analysis with the fuller 'human' act of empathy. The chapter ends with the information that the woman committed suicide shortly after the interview, and Offred's haunting last thought: "Nobody asked her whether or not she had loved him."

Atwood's texts reflect the familiar consequences of an affirmation of female powers of forgiveness: 'woman' becomes somehow identified with guilt. In the first stages of the Gileadean takeover, women were dismissed from any kind of employment; Offred recalls their reaction:

It's outrageous, one woman said, but without belief. What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?

This is a question that predictably Atwood prefers to leave unexamined in her text; rather it emerges as another discovery concerning humanity. Atwood is concerned with excavating 'truths' about humanity and this is, I would argue, set against any prolonged interest in material social and political reality. I will conclude this chapter by discussing how Atwood articulates this as an opposition in her writing.
In her article, 'On being a 'woman writer'; paradoxes and dilemmas', Atwood asserts that, for the writer, material power structures represent a "false arena" since real engagement constitutes the writer's personal struggle with language. This belief is strongly evident throughout her fictional work.

In all of her novels, the main characters come to realise that the 'real' struggle is an internal one that takes place inside their heads with language. Ultimately, 'language' becomes the omnipresent determining force in the 'world'. Inevitably, there are 'languages' which Atwood's novels do not and could not express. Moreover, there are 'languages' that Atwood takes great care to demonstrate are not significant enough to earn a place in her texts. For example, the languages that articulate the presence of poverty and repression are not, apparently, sufficiently concerned with 'truth' to be welcome in Atwood's textual 'world' pictures.

Throughout The Handmaid’s Tale, she constantly draws attention to the impossibility of representing this world in its entirety. The text, even as it depicts a nightmare, erases it as Atwood reminds her readers of the inadequacy of the narrator's perception; an inadequacy that Offred comes to recognise herself:

It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, cross currents; too many gestures, which could never mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue.

In contemporary narratives, a fascination with the seeming limits of writing to capture and represent 'reality', in effect, produces a paradoxical privileging of the writing act. Readers are not left wishing
the reality that she or he did not see in the text had been there, but instead are nudged into an appreciation of the honesty of the writing itself.

For Offred, like Atwood, a forensic attentiveness to 'language' necessitates the rejection of 'simple' political explanations. Her increasingly intimate relationship with the Gileadean State, via the Commander, reawakens both her body and narrative. Atwood stresses the importance of human relationships, not for the purposes of communication, but for the production of self-knowledge. Offred's triumph lies in her successful relocation of herself as central to the social and political reality she is (dis)engaged with. She articulates an increasingly depoliticised and unanalytical perception of her political function. Thus, Offred 'responds' to the 'Particution Ceremony', the Gileadean system of public execution, capturing the horror of it by free association:

'Death makes me hungry. I want to go to bed, make love right now. I think of the word relish. I could eat a horse.'

Offred symbolises the indefatigable strength of the individual. This is marked by her ability to view life as always capable of offering self-awareness and knowledge.

Atwood's injection of 'humanity' into the most repressive and exploitative power systems constitutes the main achievement of her protagonists in her fiction. This makes the actual details of events untranslatable into political terms. When Elaine's brother, in Cat's Eye, is killed on a plane, she describes the hostage scene purely in terms of her brother's feelings. Why he was killed remains an inevitable mystery:

'Die for what? There's probably a religious motive, though in the foreground something more immediate: money, the release of others jailed in the same sinkhole for doing more or less the same thing these men are doing. Blowing something up or threatening to. Or shooting someone.'
Atwood's constant evocation of the tragic nobility of the individual is emphasised by the parallel sense, in her fiction, of a permanent breakdown of communication between people. The individual is etched against a context of fractured relationships and present or potential loss. The world is, according to Atwood, in chaos, and the only way to make sense of it is to grasp at details and moments. Atwood is well able to capture the absurdity of human efforts to comprehend the world. Serious political commitment must be shown to be at best absurd and at worst dangerous; symbolised by the patrolling Aunts of Gilead. In Life Before Man, Nate's mother's political commitment to world peace and the protection of the environment is represented more sympathetically. It is no surprise to discover that her political commitments are based upon reassuringly 'human' motives. Her politics are not derived from any sense of hope for humanity, but are there as the only stop-gap against her suicide after her husband's death in the war.

It is this sense of chaos that Atwood strives to represent. Chaos in the sense of complexity and mystery is Atwood's social context and it is from this that her key characters provide her readers with fleeting insights. For what Atwood seems, ultimately, to be interested in is the traditional discovery and unveiling of a Truth about humanity and the world. And a reading of Atwood suggests that this Truth is one that is almost beyond expression, which should certainly not be assumed and is infrequently and fleetingly in the possession of a gifted imagination.

Thus, her chapters frequently 'end' with a sense of open-endedness. Atwood stresses that her readers cannot expect to find 'easy' answers to her portrayals of 'life'. This perpetual circling around action results in
the sense that Atwood's fiction is always exceptionally close to a fundamental, yet elusive, Truth:

It's all exactly the same. Nothing is the same...She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. [93]

Atwood's main women characters attain this level of perception by transcending what are, in her texts, the restrictions of gender, race or class consciousness. At the end of Life Before Man, Atwood describes Elizabeth's final ability to perceive the world, in a way that Atwood has defined, in her critical writing, as a 'writer':

She has no difficulty seeing the visible world as a transparent veil or whirlwind. The miracle is to make it solid. [94]

That this miracle is dependent upon a view of the masses of women and men as wholly lacking in imagination is, I would argue, of crucial importance for contemporary definitions of feminist writing.

The success of Margaret Atwood as a feminist writer signals that feminism need not be concerned with oppression and exploitation; that power can be left unexamined and unchallenged. It suggests that feminist writers can declare themselves to not much like women and to prefer discussing the vulnerability of men. Atwood's growing interest in the male psyche suggests that feminist writing need not even retain any commitment to women in order to qualify as feminist writing. As I have made clear, in my reading of Atwood, I have found no evidence of any kind of feminism in either her critical or fictional work. Rather, I would contend that the success of Margaret Atwood as a 'feminist' writer completes the evasion of feminism from mainstream publishing to so-called feminist publishing.
Notes


13. Ibid.


18. See note 47. p. 77.


20. Ibid.


24. Ibid.


26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.


31. Ibid.


40. Ibid., pp. 306-7.


42. Atwood M, 'Writing the male character', in Second Words, p. 413.

43. Ibid., p. 430.


45. Ibid., p. 146.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., p. 172.


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49. Ibid., p. 107.
50. Ibid., p. 234.
51. Ibid., p. 252.
52. Ibid., p. 252-3.
53. Ibid., p. 217.
58. Ibid., p. 29.
59. Atwood M, Cat's Eye p. 47.
60. Ibid., p. 163.
61. Ibid., p. 126.
63. Ibid., p. 63.
64. Ibid.
65. Atwood M, Cat's Eyes, p. 87.
66. Ibid., p. 90.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., p. 27.
71. Ibid., pp. 128-9.
72. Atwood M, Cat's Eyes, p. 272.
73. Ibid., p. 5.
75. Ibid., p. 148.
76. Ibid., pp. 314 and 322.
79. Atwood M, Life Before Man, p. 35.
80. Ibid., p. 34.
83. Atwood M, Life Before Man, p. 103.
84. I am referring to heroines such as Cordelia in King Lear and Hermione in The Winter's Tale. Both women demonstrate an ideal version of all-forgiving womanhood.
86. Ibid., p. 156.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid., p. 186.
89. Atwood M, 'On being a 'woman writer', in Second Words, p. 203.
91. Ibid., p. 293.
93. Atwood M, Bodily Harm, pp. 300-1.
Chapter Three

Narrative Selection: Genre and 'Minority' Voices

The presentation of white, western, heterosexual and middle-class experiences as universally relevant clearly depends upon more than the partiality of publishing houses. As much as it is necessary to account for economic and material conditions and institutions it is also, I would argue, essential that this is allied to an unravelling of key literary discourses and conventions. For it is they that assist in the continued literary sanction of those who are white, male, western, heterosexual and middle-class. I would cite the public organisation of texts in bookshops as a reflection of largely unacknowledged generic assumptions. The 'special' sections in bookshops that contain working-class, black, third world and gay and women's writing alongside the 'general' fiction of largely male, white, western, middle-class writers needs to be questioned. This necessitates tracing back the history of literary classifications and dismantling their hierarchical theoretical framework.

In chapters three and four I want to concentrate upon feminist interpretations of hierarchical literary conventions. In this chapter, I will focus upon where and how narratives are sifted and assessed in order to discuss the less visible mechanisms of literary selection. For, I would contend that the most effective power of the dominant culture resides in precisely those arenas which appear to be the most neutral and the least ideologically charged. I will start by tracing the history of genre as a term before looking at the ways in which feminist criticism has interpreted it, and where it has been situated in feminist criticism.
This discussion raises what I see as important questions concerning historical and contemporary perceptions of 'audience' which I will discuss in some detail. I will then explore autobiographical writing in order to assess in which ways notions of genre inform both the writing of autobiography and its reception. In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which feminist approaches to genre have failed to adequately challenge racist, classist, and heterosexist approaches to 'different' narratives.

The classification of texts according to narrative content has informed literary criticism from its inception. I would argue that genre can only be understood in conjunction with notions of literary traditions and literary canons. The arrangement of texts into traditions has preoccupied feminist studies precisely because these traditions have been characterised by their failure to recognise women's writing as suitable for inclusion. Feminists have quite correctly located the construction of traditions as a powerful method of choosing a version of history that prioritises the narratives of white, western, heterosexual, and predominantly middle-class men. Challenging this monolithic presentation of 'history' and reclaiming 'Other' histories has been a major venture for feminists.

Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, illustrates the level of attention that feminists have given to the question of literary traditions and their role in the marginalisation of women. However, I would argue that the extent to which genre has been instrumental in facilitating the construction of literary traditions has been insufficiently acknowledged. Humm defines genre as, "a term for a literary type or class". She then goes on to summarise feminist contributions to
studies of genre, noting in particular the work of Ellen Moers who, like other critics, has:

examined feminine traditions in women's writing and discovered that women favour particular genres over others, for example the Gothic and domestic fiction. Later critics have gone on to argue that women writers use particular genres, for example the romance, regarded in the literary tradition as inherently minor, in order to subvert that tradition. 

This notion, that by choosing to write in minor genres women have provided a subversive attack upon the canon, is one that is shared by Sarah Lefanu. In her study of science fiction, In The Chinks of The World Machine, Feminism and Science Fiction, Lefanu explores the ways in which feminist writers have been able to exploit what remains a 'minor' genre and use it to articulate female experience. Lefanu's study follows on from Moers' depiction of Mary Shelley's Gothic novel, Frankenstein, which, Moers argues, enabled Shelley to translate her experience of miscarriage into accessible and appropriate monster imagery.

For Humm and Moers then, the crucial issue is that women have employed, (or 'favoured'), the 'minor' genres in order to express themselves; debarred from inclusion into the prestigious 'classic' narrative, women have, nevertheless, found ways of challenging the obstacles put in their way to prevent them from writing. I do not intend to undermine the work of women writing in 'minor' genres but I would argue that in viewing women's writing in 'minor' genres as actually particularly appropriate for female experience runs the very real risk of consolidating the hierarchy of 'minor' and 'major' genres into something that has some value for women's writing. In other words, the emphasis falls upon what women have achieved within the parameters of a hierarchical system rather than challenging the literary system that constrains the terms in which women can write.
I would like to argue for a theoretical approach to genre that will stretch beyond the 'subversive' action of using existing hierarchical forms and instead attempt to dismantle the hierarchical framework that subversive activity is engaged in. For, in the last analysis, 'minor' genres are effectively denied the audience potential of a wide readership while 'general' fiction continues to be consumed by the widest readership of all.\(^\text{c}2\) The 'Women in Publishing' group point out, in their survey of book publishing in 1984,\(^\text{c}7\) that the publishing industry at every stage favours the fictional work of white, male, heterosexual middle class men.

I would suggest that there is a point at which feminist criticism needs to challenge the efficacy of a select group of people determining and defining narratives in terms of author, audience and literary value. For it is this relationship that genre negotiates and, I would suggest, that notions of readers and texts remain a problematic and divided issue within feminist debate.

1. **Authors, Audiences and The Role of Genre**

The notion of distinct literary narratives is inextricably linked to the establishment of literary criticism as a laudable professional activity in the eighteenth century. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out in their text, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*,\(^\text{c}9\) the literary classification of texts was, from the outset, allied to the economic repression of the masses in Britain. Thus, the concept of the 'Classic' author was originally derived from ancient taxation categories. They detail how Aulus Gellius used tax-bands, which were the social division of citizens according to property qualifications, as a way of designating the
prestige and rank of writers. It was from this reckoning that citizens of the first taxation category came to be known as the *classici* as opposed to the masses who were defined as the *proletarius*. As Stallybrass and White comment, the significance of this has not been addressed in contemporary discussions of literary hierarchies:

This development in the generic terminology of antiquity...subsequently had an enduring influence on the European system of hierarchizing authors and works. It separated out a distinct élite set (the *classici*) from the commonality (the *proletariat*) and used this as a model for literary discriminations...In recent times we have been inclined to forget this ancient and enduring link between social rank and the organising of authors and works, including literary genres.

Stallybrass and White point out that the establishment of 'literary criticism' as a specialised and worthy occupation was enacted in the coffee houses that were set up by the emergent middle classes in Britain in the eighteenth century.

Throughout their text, Stallybrass and White excavate the relation between the old, new and conflicting cultural arenas into which literary criticism and the liberal bourgeoisie formulated its identity. Their historical analysis is, I would contend, crucial for politicising and historicising the establishment of liberal consciousness. This is particularly necessary given that liberalism has expended considerable energy in claiming to be outside of any ideological or political arena. In order to dismantle liberal bourgeois claims to speak for 'humanity' it is clearly necessary to examine the ways in which 'humanity' is being perceived in liberal accounts.

As Stallybrass and White point out, literary criticism was indispensable for the liberal bourgeois expression of its own specialised knowledge about human affairs which has informed and shaped literary conventions since its inception. It is, I would argue, crucial to recognise
the extent to which liberal notions of taste and judgement are based on a repudiation of the 'humanity' of black, third world, gay and working-class women and men. It is in this sense that I would suggest that the liberal roots of literary critical conventions need to be explored in terms of how they overcame and defined previous cultural arenas.

Stallybrass and White's historical work on this subject emphasises the extent to which bourgeois identity was based on a perception of the masses as vulgar and insensitive, as, in short, unfit for professions such as literary criticism. It was this perception of the crowd, and audience, that sanctioned the rigorous attempts of the bourgeois to rid the theatre of its longstanding engagement with authors and instead to receive 'texts' passively in accordance with their comparative 'ignorance':

'Seen historically, the modern concept of literary criticism is closely tied to the rise of the liberal bourgeois, public sphere in the early eighteenth century. Literature served the emancipation movement of the middle class as an instrument to gain self-esteem and to articulate its human demands against the absolutist state and the hierarchical society. Concomitant with the establishing of the 'refined' public sphere and its distinct notion of professional authorship was a widespread attempt to regulate body and crowd behaviour so as to create conditions favourable to the operation of the sphere.'

The liberal project of establishing a cleansed and refined public space for authors and audience was thus inextricably bound up with notions of boundaries and 'difference'. It was precisely the class 'Otherness' of both the working and upper classes that served to define the class identity of the bourgeois.

Moreover, it was the failure to adhere to these lines of demarcation that characterised perceptions of revolt and subversion. As early as 1595 Philip Sidney attacked:

'mongrell Tragi-comedie' which mingled kings and clowns and allowed the clown to play a part in majestical matters.
The failure of an author to adhere to the hierarchy of genres related directly to political subversion. And it was from this privileging of first 'tragedy' and later 'the' novel that 'other' narratives were judged to fall outside of a proper understanding of humanity. I would argue that the task is not so much to ascertain which particular genres were employed or utilized by women, but to dismantle the link between the 'major' genres and their authoritative stance towards understanding and representing humanity.

In other words, 'major' genres need to be explored in terms of their particular audiences and writers. Their antipathy towards 'Others' has to be made clear in order to expose the extent to which they are an inevitable partial representation of 'the' world. It is precisely the disparity between their partial world view and their actual power that renders them 'major'. In this sense I would stress that it is important to assign 'major' to material and cultural power rather than to a broader understanding of humanity in textual representation. For, it is noticeable that humanity en masse are not characterised by favourable representations. It is a conception of the masses as possessing a comparative lack of humanity that generic hierarchies are founded upon.

Stallybrass and White relate William Wordsworth's panic when he was caught up in the bustle of Bartholomew Fair. As they comment, it is to literary hierarchies that Wordsworth looks in order to restore social order and counteract this unpleasant vision of 'other' lives:

he turns not to the imagination, nor to nature, but to the classical 'Muse' to 'implore' help. In invoking the Muse, Wordsworth also invokes the linguistic and generic hierarchies of a classical aesthetic which can separate into discrete hierarchies all that has been 'jumbled up together'. It is as if the fair's threat to authorship and identity alike could only be contained by returning to the poetics, and also the politics, of the old classical dispensation. \[143\]

This reflects one of the prevailing ironies of liberal bourgeois
perceptions of art, whereby an emphasis upon the greatness of imaginative portrayals of a universal human 'condition' exists alongside a pandemic contempt for the masses. I would argue that this is clearly in evidence in certain feminist debates upon the relative merits of 'feminist' genre writing. I want to continue my analysis of genre and its relation to notions of audience and focus upon Nicci Gerrard's contemporary analysis of feminist genre writing.

ii. Genre and the Reading Public

In her text, Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing, Nicci Gerrard devotes one of the seven sections of the book to a discussion of feminist genres. Gerrard observes that there has been a striking proliferation in feminist genre writing over the last two decades. As she comments, the sudden appearance of feminist science fiction, detective, romance and horror narratives has more to do with "obsessive labelling" than with an increase in feminist literary output. Gerrard locates the flourishing of genres as a major contemporary marketing strategy:

The boom in 'books for young adults', for example, relies upon defining a group of readers who previously have been ignored and targeting them. It does not necessarily mean publishing new books, or books written specifically for a younger market. I would agree that this increase is more an effect of feminist publishers wanting to create and identify 'markets' than it has with women writers suddenly exhibiting diverse genre preferences.

Moreover, I would add that genre does not exist in an equal relation between the author's wishes and the publisher's interpretation. Margaret Elphinstone, who was published with the Women's Press, relates how she had
not even considered her novel, *The Incomer*, to be science-fiction, which is how her publishers decided to publish it. Interestingly, Elphinstone's sequel to this novel was not considered to be science-fiction by her 'Scottish' publishers.

Gerrard, having identified the market as encouraging the present proliferation of feminist genre writing, proceeds to launch into an entirely separate 'literary critical' evaluation of the subject. This entails a selection of successful and non-successful examples of science-fiction, romance and crime narratives. Furthermore, the criterion is the familiar and elusive favourite of western patriarchal culture: imagination. Jill Tweedie's attempt to write a feminist blockbuster fails, Gerrard informs her readers, because Tweedie is:

searching up a cul-de-sac of feminism for that elusive vehicle, a radical novel that holds mass appeal.

Zoe Fairbairns by contrast, is able to be both popular and radical. Whilst I would not argue with Gerrard's estimation of Fairbairns, I would query her explanation:

Zoe Fairbairns successfully injects a popular form with a radical message, she has won an appreciative readership. Because she did not take up the genre as a ideological campaign.

I would suggest that Gerrard's employment of 'ideology' here is characteristically problematic. According to Gerrard, Tweedie fails to produce a radical, popular novel for two reasons; firstly, she deliberately sets out to do this and, secondly, such a novel is a rare and unfathomable event. Fairbairns however has apparently achieved this through her very lack of overt intention. Gerrard here presents two wholly contradictory images of the reading public. On the one hand, they are for the most part unwilling to read 'radical' texts and on the other, 'appreciate' those same
texts, so long as the author has not explicitly addressed them as readers.

'The' audience in Gerrard's text is a pliable construct that exists to sanction her own ideological viewpoint. Thus 'the' very same audience that is apparently unable to easily tolerate 'radical' writing can 'appreciate' a writer that Gerrard values. I would argue that the underlying assumption about the 'general' reader, (and writer), here is not particularly favourable.

For Gerrard, the problem with the current proliferation of feminist genre writing is that it encourages the publication of too many books. Her discussion, far from providing any critical discussion of the hierarchical function of genre, concludes that it is genre itself which is at risk from the diminishing effect of too many 'average' books. For Gerrard, there is an inevitable contradiction between good books and large numbers of books. Thus, she argues that the shortcomings of genre classification lies in its habitual pattern of discovering a new and exciting area of literary production, such as Virago's classic series, only to then saturate the new genre with mediocre books:

But while the strategy can set standards, it also runs the danger of sinking literature into the porridge of standardisation, carrying the homogenising process of the writing programmes one stage further. Gerrard's overriding concern is that an innovative literary form will be diminished and emptied of its "cutting edge" by sheer numbers. Gerrard poses this scenario as a possibility but her descriptions of mass popular culture ("porridge", "bland", "confined by intrinsically conservative rules") reflect her belief that 'good' books are an exceptional product of rare individual talents.

Gerrard concludes her evaluation of feminist writing by speculating that the most exciting development in feminist genres lies in those texts
that cross the boundaries of genre.\textsuperscript{253} It is precisely this contention that, I would suggest, reveals the extent to which genre operates as something that has to be transgressed in order to produce a literary hierarchy. Thus, 'truly great' literature is not that which most ably expresses a 'high' generic literary category, but precisely that which does not. Traditional literary theory, whilst labouring to define and evaluate texts in accordance with their particular genre, reserves a mystical arena for a few texts which are able to somehow elude the boundaries of genre.\textsuperscript{263}

'Great literature', is that which can apparently reach 'us' all, has no boundaries and transcends both material and theoretical categories. Thus, an autobiography such as Eva Hoffman's, \textit{Lost in Translation},\textsuperscript{273} is marketed with a cover that displays a quotation from the \textit{New York Times} proclaiming: "It is about us all..A Marvellously thoughtful book". Hoffman joins those other great literary giants who have apparently transcended the limits set by their form; most notably Shakespeare. Unfortunately, what exactly is meant by 'us' is left unclear.

Critical commentaries, like Gerrard's, employ the notion of a dull, conservative mass of people, at the same time as proposing that the criteria for evaluating literary texts should be a judgement on how far they can relate to and move 'us'. This simultaneous and contradictory construction of the reading public raises the question of how can fine, imaginative works possibly relate to the same public who are only prepared to swallow 'porridge'. Clearly, the 'us' is not as all-encompassing as it seems, and refers more to an unspoken evocation of difference between the 'us' who can read and the 'they' who consume.
iii. Subverting the Canon?

A striking consequence of this adherence to genre combined with a belief in the ability of exceptional writing to transcend it, is the extent to which this has constrained the terms of critical debate on the subject. I would read contemporary alternative readings of literary traditions in this way. Adrienne Munich, in her essay, 'Notorious signs, feminist criticism and literary tradition', suggests that:

Ideally, a feminist critique would question not only the inadequate representation of other voices in the western literary canon but the inadequate explication of received tradition. The blindness of patriarchal criticism to female-authored works does not mean that its acuity to subjects it has called its own is thereby sharpened. To privilege certain forms as great, certain themes as important and certain genres as major has required traditional criticism to disregard or elide those very aspects in the 'great' texts that are incongruent with patriarchal gender definitions. Feminist critics can question received interpretation, refusing to see the text as an icon, isolated from the world in which it was produced, refusing to accept texts as unaffected by women. We can read signs of real female power, untapped because unexplained. Rather than invent female language, we can appropriate what is at least half ours anyway.

I have quoted Munich at some length because I wish to discuss her proposals in some detail. Munich, here, is drawing upon contemporary critical debates which have attempted to demonstrate how the patriarchal canon is more open to interpretation than the dominant culture has presumed it to be.

In this scenario, the literary 'giants' are shown to have been hijacked by the dominant culture which has had to struggle against those aspects in the texts which undermine their inclusion into the canon. Any vestige of radical meaning has had to be avoided by traditional commentaries. For Munich, the text becomes something which needs to be rescued from its imprisoning and inevitably partial representation within traditional criticism. The text becomes, in this reading, something worth arguing about. Contemporary criticism thus reactivates 'the' text by
questioning the ability of any one viewpoint to comprehend its meaning.

Whilst I would not disagree that 'great' texts have been inadequately discussed by the dominant culture, I would suggest that there are critical pitfalls involved in investing those 'great' texts with a particularly valuable importance for contemporary feminism. Munich's suggestion that 'we' are in those texts anyway, whilst appearing to be a defiant repudiation of the wishes of traditional criticism, in crucial ways, I would argue, is precisely what has enabled those 'great' texts and authors to retain their cultural prominence. For, it is worth noting that this desire to 're-read' the 'classics' in order to excavate more contestable narratives has taken place at the very time when feminist, third world and black studies are emerging in Britain and America. Given this, it is perhaps worth speculating upon what indeed would happen if 'we' were to accept 'our' non-existence in the patriarchal canon and look for it in other places.

'Radical' commentaries that insist upon proclaiming that, in re-reading 'the' tradition 'we' are discovering 'ourselves', fail to account for the fact that 'we' is also a historical category. In other words, whilst some women may be able to locate 'themselves', others will not, particularly working-class, lesbian, colonised and first and second generation immigrants. I would conclude that, the question raised by Munich's proposals is more how can 'we' both criticise the exclusion of 'Others' from the canon and discover that 'we' were represented there anyway. The first task would inevitably decentre the identity of any one text as 'great', which is precisely the notion that encourages participation in the latter.

I would contend that a radical reading would not assume there to
necessarily be a discernible and equivalent 'we' in any text. Reading texts with this as an open question is, moreover, essential for readings that wish to engage with considerations of race, class and sexuality. I would locate the desire to find 'ourselves' in texts as an intensely problematic requirement. Certainly, it is incompatible with critical accounts that wish to extend the literary arena beyond a focus upon middle-class, heterosexual, western, and white-authored texts. I would argue that extending the boundaries of the literary depends upon the recognition that 'we' do not need to be represented in every text.

For, it is worth noting that critical accounts which insist upon the need for authors to represent 'life' and 'humanity' are often expressed when white, western, middle-class characters appear to be absent from a text. Barbara Smith in her essay, 'Toward a black feminist criticism', cites Sara Blackburn's review of Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*:

Morrison is far too talented to remain only a recorder of the black side of provincial American life... she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification 'black woman writer' and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working. [302]

It is, of course, highly unlikely that these 'most serious' writers have expended any energy upon 'serious' representations of black women.

The extent to which the practice of 're-reading' the canon, in order to subvert its hierarchical significance, can involve the further oppression of those people that radical criticism locates as their concern, is particularly clear in Terry Eagleton's work on Samuel Richardson.[31] In his interpretation of Richardson, Eagleton sets out to replace him within his 'real' context of radical subversion. Unfortunately, his reappraisal of Clarissa,[32] involves the replication of Richardson's voyeuristic use of the female body. Moreover, Eagleton expresses the additional absurdity of
locating a 'true' account of female oppression in the text of a male bourgeois writer:

'There is nothing 'novel' about Clarissa, this is no trashy escapism, no idle 'imaginative' creation but the true history of women's oppression at the hands of eighteenth-century patriarchy.'

Eagleton's sweeping overview of 'popular' writing is presented alongside a reading which invests Richardson's text with the authority of historical 'truth'. This demonstrates the way in which contemporary reinterpretations of such classics as Chaucer, Shakespeare and Richardson involve an unacknowledged manipulation of history inherent in its claim to be unearthing 'a' historical truth.

In this scenario, the 'major' genre that is being invoked is not literature but 'history'. However, the repercussions of this are clearly equally significant for literature which becomes classified in terms that are not based on imagination. The overt rebellion that is promised by Eagleton's work ultimately proposes another hierarchical system, the difference being one merely of criteria. A notion of historical truth in itself necessitates ignoring the dominant culture's active production of historical authenticity, and re-enacts their absorption and removal of conflicting narratives. Francis Barker discusses this in relation to Shakespeare:

In particular, the sign of the literary greatness of Shakespeare has played a major part in remaking the late feudal world in the image of the bourgeois settlement that grew up inside it, and eventually brought it down - the timelessness of great art has had to be mobilized in order to secure in an alien history a value and a point of reference by which the other can be identified as the same.

I would contend that contemporary re-readings effectively preserve the hierarchical function of genre by re-equipping them with apparently 'radical' significance.
It is ironically appropriate that critics of Eagleton's persuasion devote their time to reinserting the works of authors, such as Richardson, into the radical canon, since Richardson himself strived to suppress material and political inequality within a construct of linguistic equality. Eagleton's 're-reading' of Pamela replicates Richardson's submersion of Pamela's economic and sexual subordination within her linguistic strength. Effort is duly spent on deciphering the unsolvable problem of textual power within the novel.

Eagleton displaces the representation of Pamela, the servant, with that of Pamela, the efficaciously unified living and writing subject. She becomes, in his text:

'a triumphant victory over the 'alienations' of writing, which are ceaselessly recuperated in that seamless unity of Subject and Object which is the identity between Pamela as writing subject and the 'I' of whom she writes.'

In Eagleton's reading, 'the' text becomes so important a historical document that authorship can for the most part appear to be secondary. It is, however, precisely this apparently progressive repudiation of 'authorship' as being in itself unimportant that obscures the fact that 'the' text is operating here as a source of authority over 'other' readings. I would, for example, read Pamela as Richardson's exploitative employment of a 'female' voice for the endorsement of patriarchal attitudes.

Eagleton's reading, I would argue, re-empowers the radical critic with the power to locate where the 'real' lives of 'others' are to be found. His assertion that Pamela is a "genuinely popular novel: a novel of the 'People'" finally reclaims the patriarchal canon as the most radical literary site of all. Genre and
the canon remain firmly in place armed with new and seemingly more relevant reasons for their prominence. Criticism which seeks to state in which ways a major genre, such as 'the' classics, are particularly important inevitably addresses itself to those dominant critical discourses which have claimed supremacy in terms of how 'we' should read texts.

Radical interventions into the patriarchal canon may disrupt traditional ways of reading texts but I would argue that they also preserve the notion that texts can be evaluated by 'scholars' who can then determine what it is that makes it invaluable for 'us' all. Given that most people are not literary critics, this is clearly an intensely problematic issue. However, it is precisely the ease with which 'we' can be invoked by critics such as Eagleton that betrays their lack of engagement with the difficulties involved in assuming that there is a historically constant and identifiable 'we'.

I intend to challenge the notion that 'we' must reappropriate the traditional canon and, instead, approach genre definitions as a literary convention that has been employed to police the literary borders. For, I would contend that 'we' are often being denied a voice precisely by literary conventions such as genres. I want to discuss this in relation to autobiography. In my analysis of 'autobiography' and autobiographies, I intend to demonstrate how the use of the notion of genre facilitates the obscuring of racist, classist and heterosexist approaches to 'different' narratives. I will argue that such employment of generic categories ultimately produces the 'difference' that is necessary to preserve certain kinds of narratives as universally relevant, and classify others as expressing a more limited vision.
iv. Autobiography: Gender Differences

I will begin my discussion of 'autobiography' and 'autobiographies' by analysing historical definitions of their narrative content. I am particularly interested in examining the ways in which feminist critics have negotiated mainstream definitions of autobiography. In her essay, 'Women's autobiographical selves: theory and practice', Susan Stanford Friedman outlines why it is that traditional definitions of autobiography do not apply to those written by women.

Citing the most common starting point for definitions of autobiography, Friedman refers to Georges Gusdorf's 'seminal' essay: 'Conditions and limits of autobiography'. In his essay, Gusdorf claimed that autobiography could only exist in a culture that recognised the concept of individuals. Thus, Gusdorf wrote that:

'...autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist.'

Friedman argues that this model is inadequate for an understanding of the selves of women and minorities:

the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities...the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity.

Gusdorf's belief in the existence of 'the' self as a finite societal unit is, as Friedman points out, shared by the equally influential theorist, James Olney, who, in his text, *Metaphors Of Self: The Meaning Of Autobiography*, describes the autobiographer as:

surrounded and isolated by his own consciousness, an awareness grown out of a unique heredity and unique experience...Separate selfhood is the very motive of creation.

Friedman demonstrates how this link between the self and autobiography has
led to psychoanalytical definitions of autobiography which, although departing from Olney's conception of a teleological self, have nevertheless shared his view of the self as distinct from other selves.48

Friedman comments that psychoanalytical models rely on a perception of the healthy ego as one that is able to separate itself from others. Thus, Lacan, like Freud, formulates a conception of the ego which is:

based on the assumption that the ego results from a process that moves away from fusion and toward separation. These theories of ego formation often lead psychoanalytic critics of autobiography to decode the narrative as the ego's movement away from early fusion with the mother and toward the establishment of sharp boundaries between the self and others.49

Friedman demonstrates how this perception of the self as a finite unit is in evidence even in the work of those theorists who reject the possibility of this self being represented by an author. She cites Jeffrey Mehlman, who in his essay, 'A structural study of autobiography', asserted that the impossible task of autobiography was the articulation of a 'real self'. In this sense, the inevitable 'false' self that is represented by the autobiographer reveals autobiography as a fictional form. As Friedman comments, in this scenario 'the' self itself remains intact:

This focus on the autobiographical self's nonreferentiality nonetheless presumes that this false entity created in the text is distinct, separate from all others.50

Friedman refutes this definition of autobiography in order to argue that it is precisely by reversing Gusdorf's and Olney's definition that women-authored autobiographies can be understood.

Friedman draws on the work of Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow to argue that it is a sense of identification, interdependence and community which are the key elements in the development of women's identity.51 The link between community and 'woman' is, in other words, absolute. Friedman cites Rowbotham's assertion that a woman cannot experience herself as a
unique entity because she is always aware of how she is defined as a woman. She goes on to connect this to black identity in her citation of Lynn Sukenick's comparison between women and slaves:

'If we express the historic relation between the sexes crudely in terms of master and slave, it is part of the master's privileges not to have to think continuously of the fact that he is the master, while the position of the slave carries with it the constant reminder of his being a slave. It cannot be overlooked that a woman forgets far less often the fact of being a woman than the man of being a man.'

However, this historical subjugation of women in the same way as blacks should, Friedman argues, be seen as a possible source of strength and transformation, opening up new possibilities for a 'new consciousness' of self. Friedman, quoting W.E.B. Du Bois, relates her discussion of sexual difference to that of racial difference, suggesting that this 'unique' way of viewing the world, through 'other's' representations, results in a distinctive insight that is both collective and personal.

Thus, for Friedman, women's autobiography should be distinguished from male authored ones by this inevitable and gender specific view of the world. Autobiography, for Friedman, is a negotiation of selfhood through society. Women's autobiographies, then, share a quest for self-definition based on an experience of selfhood that does not allow them to perceive of themselves as isolated. Male authored autobiography reflects a perception of self that is able to disregard social context, whereas women as recipients of patriarchal power share the 'colonized' history of blacks. Friedman concludes that:

'Women's autobiography comes alive as a literary tradition of self-creation when we approach the texts from a psycho-political perspective based in the lives of women. Historically, women as a group have never been the 'gatherer of men, of lands of power, maker of kingdoms or empires,' to echo Gusdorf once again. Instead, they have been the gathered, the colonized, the ruled.'

I would argue that Friedman's perception of 'women's' autobiography as
comprehensible in terms of sexual difference and racial sameness is problematic.

Friedman's sweeping historical connection between 'women' and slavery erases the significance of women's different histories and relegates racial experience to that of a primarily supporting role for contemporary discussions of 'women'. The extent to which women are, and have always been, enmeshed with different as well as connected experiences of oppression and privilege is lost in Friedman's account. Slavery as a historical event is evoked rather than the continuous reworking of racism that secures the present oppression of black people and people of color. Moreover, the contemporary relevance of slavery itself is lost in Friedman's depiction of it as a completed historical event. As Michelle Wallace points out in, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop To Theory*:

'We may suggest that slavery's most lasting abuse of power was its tendency to annihilate the slave's potential for historical and political consciousness...the psychic lot of the slave describes the current existential predicament of far too many black people.'

Furthermore, the repercussions of slavery for black men problematises Friedman's analysis and undermines her equally questionable attempt to assign a monolithic cultural and ideological history to men. Black women themselves are noticeably less able to view slavery as a primarily gendered oppression.

Friedman's choice of slavery as a useful way of relating 'women's' plight to that of black people's also raises the question of how black women are to be related to 'women'. I would suggest that 'woman' in this scenario is being conceived of as implicitly white. However, this is not to propose that Friedman's representation of 'white' women is any less problematic. I would argue that the only white woman who could view
autobiographical narratives as marked primarily by sexual difference are those who have not experienced the repercussions of capitalism for working-class men.

As Maureen Lawrence recalls in her autobiography, *A Telling And A Keeping: A Writer's Autobiography*, her perception of her father involved a complicated mixture of fear and compassion. Moreover, the two were, as she explains, inextricably bound up with each other. Lawrence relates how she first became aware that she was afraid of her father when she discovered him crying:

'I think my fear of him took its first definite shape that morning. His desolation was a dreadful pit opening in front of my eyes. I would always remember and be afraid that some minimal gesture on my part might produce an unaccountable recoil. And so I discovered that I felt at fault in his eyes. And as I grew, I came unwittingly to seek his approval, not because I valued his esteem, but because I was afraid of his demons.'

Lawrence's father is not a figure of power or authority, or at least, whatever power he may represent and exert coexists with his own lack of control over his poverty and his redundancy after the war.

The simultaneous existence of patriarchal authority and working-class oppression that informs the dominant theories and institutions of western capitalism inevitably reduces the scope of sexual 'difference' for working-class women autobiographers. Thus, Lawrence documents her shock at encountering her father outside of the house and in the factory. Lawrence recollects her grief at finding her father worn down by his work, and feeling as though her childhood had ended:

'It was a paradox that he, the dragon guarding my life, should be a prisoner in that industrial wilderness...I felt then the dreadful urgency of his expectation, his desire to raise me out of his imminent reality.'

The importance of class and racial difference to women undermines Friedman's attempt to coalesce 'women' into a unified category. Her
confidence in the capacity of a literary tradition to incorporate 'women's lives' expunges the significance of the different lives that women have and the relation of that difference to literary traditions.

Carolyn Steedman, in her autobiography, *Landscape For A Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, prefaces her text by emphasising that one of her main motivations for writing an autobiography was to disrupt this notion that women share a similar perception of historical oppression. Steedman comments upon her fundamental sense of difference from middle-class feminists:

'I read a woman's book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman now like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago I'd have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't.'

I would argue that studying definitions of a genre is particularly useful for revealing the extent to which literary definitions are constructed upon contested ground. Moreover, it is the conflict that exists between different definitions of genres, in this case autobiography, which as I hope to demonstrate, locate genre definitions as sites of power.

Friedman's analysis of James Olney and Georges Gusdorf attempts to reverse their definition in order to elaborate a theory of women's autobiography. However, I would suggest that Friedman fails to account for the specifically class orientated direction of their definition. Olney and Gusdorf's delineation of the essential separation of self for artistic production is not, I would contend, simply a prioritising of masculine history and culture. The emphasis on individualism can also be related to the desire of the literary élite to maintain a difference between the cultured few and the indiscriminate masses.

In this sense, Gusdorf and Olney's theory of autobiography can be related to the ongoing attempt by the dominant culture to mystify artistic
production. Analysing their work purely in terms of its relation to 'the' different historical and cultural histories of men and women overlooks the extent to which their view of the self is based upon an equally stringent view of 'other' people, and 'other' cultures, as clearly lacking this civilised mark of bourgeois western society. Their emphasis upon the gifted and isolated self constructs society as something different to this; as something less desirable, less discriminating; as the backdrop for the self. As Stallybrass and White point out:

'There is no more easily recognizable scene of bourgeois pathos than the lonely crowd in which the individual identity is achieved over against all the others, through the sad realization of not-belonging. That moment, in which the subject is made the outsider to the crowd, an onlooker, compensating for exclusion through the deployment of the discriminating gaze, is at the very root of bourgeois sensibility. Who would not exchange vulgar participation in the jostle of the crowd for the gift of discriminating judgement?'

I would argue that a critique of traditional theories of autobiography requires more than a distinction between men and women. Furthermore, Friedman's conjuring up of a historic class of women marks her definition of autobiography with racial and class privilege.

v. Autobiography and 'A Rhetoric of Truth'

In *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen,* the editors, Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby and Helen Wilcox locate the construction of bourgeois individualism with the origins of autobiography. In their discussion of the specific narrative character of seventeenth century English women's autobiographies they point to the central role of religion and conversion narratives. The conversion
narrative in particular, is, they argue, crucial to an understanding of the autobiographies that succeeded them. The pertinent qualities of conversion narratives included:

'A specific pattern of doubt, false security, renewed (often agonizing) doubt, and eventual true assurance. A drive to suicide also frequently occurs in such stories, as does a stubborn refusal to listen to words of comfort.'

For the editors, religious and conversion narratives infused autobiography with a particularly urgent sense of the author's need for an important truth about herself to be known. Autobiographies then should be seen in their context of active disruption to received ideas of womanhood. Linda Anderson, in her discussion of women's autobiography in 'At the threshold of the self: women and autobiography', also identifies this desire for the publication of a truth as a key tenet of women's autobiographical writing:

'It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the nature of the activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about her since by seeking to publicise herself, she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden. She is resisting or changing what is known about her.'

For the editors of Her Own Life this radical disruption of 'the' public can be traced back to the published pamphlets of radical sectaries which they locate as an important source for women's autobiographies:

'Acting from what they believed was direct contact with God, many were led to engage in public preaching and disruption of church services: activities that frequently resulted in their arrest and imprisonment.'

It is from this history that the editors locate autobiography as a genre that most dynamically articulates the complexity surrounding notions of 'truth' and 'self':

'it raises questions about 'self', 'writing', 'experience' and literary convention with particular intensity.'

For the editors of Her Own Life, it is this fundamental connection with the
desire for truth to be made public that connects them to contemporary autobiographies. Thus, they comment that:

There is clearly a rhetoric of truthfulness which is fundamental to autobiographical writings. However, it is this attempt to assign what is, I would argue, a specific feature of some autobiographies to 'autobiography' as a definite genre that immediately raises problems.

For, it is precisely the subversion of truth that black feminist commentators have pointed to as marking the autobiographies of black women. In her essay, 'My statue, my self: autobiographical writings of Afro-American women', Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in her discussion of an 'Afro-American female literary tradition', outlines the unique and oppositional sense of self that characterises black women's autobiographies and lives. For Fox-Genovese, the crucial point is that for black women 'the' self is not something that progresses towards a point of clear identity, but rather something that articulates its specific condition of oppression. Thus, the self is always unclear, subversive and inherently unreliable as a representation, because black women have been denied a legitimate place in American society. Fox-Genovese explains:

'more often than not the autobiographies of Afro-American women have been written within the cage. The self develops in opposition to, rather than as an articulation of, a condition. Yet the condition remains as that against which the self is forged. And the condition as much as the representations of self, constitutes an inescapable aspect of the Afro-American female literary tradition, especially of Afro-American women's autobiographies.'

Fox-Genovese draws on Zora Neale Hurston's deliberately 'inaccurate' autobiography, Dust Tracks On A Road, to expand on this point.

This autobiography, Fox-Genovese suggests, demonstrates how black American women did not, and could not, engage with a 'rhetoric of
truthfulness'. Black American women were writing for a predominantly white audience which explains the common subversion of "promised candour" toward their readers. It is in this context, Fox-Genovese argues, that Hurston, who called story-telling lying, went on to offer her own thoroughly 'dishonest' autobiography. Fox-Genovese comments that, "In most respects Dust Tracks constitutes a marvel of self-concealment. Hurston, like the story-tellers on the porch whom she celebrated in Mules and Men, delighted in 'lying'... There is nothing in Dust Tracks to suggest that Hurston trusted her readers."

It is precisely Hurston's partly antagonistic relationship to her predominantly white American audience that clearly differentiates her autobiographical narrative from that of a white-authored one. This wariness and desire to maintain some distance from her audience occurs in another more contemporary autobiography by a 'third' world autobiographer.

In her essay, 'A third world woman's text: between the politics of criticism and cultural politics', Claudia Salazar discusses Rigoberta Menchu's autobiography, entitled: I Rigoberta Menchu. Salazar, like Fox-Genovese, emphasises the importance of community to Menchu's autobiography. This foregrounding of community for an understanding of self, as Salazar points out, in itself challenges conventional definitions of autobiography, which limit their discussions to the ways in which such texts articulate self-hood:

'I Rigoberta Menchu can be broadly characterised as the testimony of a Guatemalan Indian organiser fighting for her people's civil rights. Defying the literary conventions of this genre, Rigoberta's testimony is not...the recounting of the personal itinerary of an illiterate woman living in a particular historical context. 

However, Rigoberta Menchu's 'autobiography' does not neatly connect with that of Hurston's. Menchu's autobiography contradicts the articulation of self that occurs in Dust Tracks even as it shares Hurston's cautious stance
towards her audience. Moreover, Salazar argues, Menchu's autobiography should not be read as intending to speak 'for her' community but rather as an expression of her inextricable relation with it.

Salazar cites Doris Summer, who has stressed that Menchu's autobiography should not be read in terms of western literary convention:

"...it would be a mistake to see Rigoberta's 'I' as a metaphor for a plural subject. Rather, Rigoberta's first voice expresses 'a metonymic relationship of shared experience and consciousness'...This effacement of Rigoberta's self, together with her denial that her experiences are somehow unique or extraordinary, remains throughout the text, her strongest political statement."  

The centrality of notions of 'uniqueness' and 'extraordinariness' to western literary theory is particularly visible, as a contestable claim, when it is assigned to texts which do not themselves accept it as a crucial sign of artistic production. It is this desire to privilege certain texts by assigning uniqueness to them that, I would argue, prompts western editors to emphasise the 'extraordinary' life of the person they are editing. Craig McKenzie's introduction to his compilation of Bessie Head's writing offers his readers this explanation:

"The significance of each piece (and the justification for its inclusion in the present volume) is that it reveals something about the extraordinary life of the author Bessie Head."  

McKenzie's claim manages to entirely misunderstand Head's own desire to represent the 'ordinary' precisely because, for Head, 'ordinary' did not signify inferior, or weaker but was valuable and existed outside of a frame of reference that prioritises the 'extraordinary' by degrading the 'ordinary'. Moreover, Head in her essay, 'Notes from a quiet backwater 1', which is the first article in McKenzie's anthology, compares her own life to that of her mother's and concludes that:

"In contrast to all this I fear any biographer would be bored to tears by my own life story. There are truly no skeletons in my cupboard or dark secrets swept under the carpet; no real sensation or scandal has ever
touched my life, and I look back on myself as a personality, plain and ordinary, without any glamour or mystery. McKenzie, in his capacity as a literary expert, rewrites Head's own text for inclusion into the parameters of bourgeois western literary convention.

In order to understand the particular concerns of third world autobiographies, Claudia Salazar also draws upon Georges Gusdorf's essay, 'Conditions and limits of autobiography'. Salazar comments that Gusdorf's conviction, that one of the 'metaphysical preconditions' of autobiographies is "consciousness of self (one's agency) in shaping the historical field", is particularly relevant to the autobiographies of struggle that are being written in the third world. In this scenario, Gusdorf's prioritising of the self becomes re-worked as the necessary empowering condition for autobiographies that engage with struggles for civil liberties and independence.

Gusdorf is thus recruited by Salazar for the understanding of the texts of third world autobiographers, while Friedman devotes her essay to dismantling the relevance of his definition of autobiography for 'women'. Certainly, Gusdorf himself would be horrified to imagine that his extrapolation of the need for a consciousness of one's 'own' historical agency could occur outside of western Europe. For Gusdorf was convinced that this could only occur in the 'civilised' countries of western Europe. Thus, he asserted that in 'different' cultures autobiography could only exist as a cultural 'transplant' from western societies. In fact, the idea that a consciousness of one's historical agency could coexist with an imported and superior model for articulating that discovery is something of a contradiction. I would contend that the differences that occur in the articulation of selfhood reflects precisely the different cultural and
ideological histories that determine perceptions of self and society.

The suggestion that 'other' autobiographies are merely 'transplanted' versions of western ones is, I would argue, to make a quite different point; namely that western 'history' and 'culture' is intrinsically better than others. Gusdorf's assertion that non-western autobiographies are 'transplants' reflects his willingness to impose the knowledge systems that inform western culture to all cultures. As Salazar points out, Rigoberta Menchu's autobiography cannot be understood in western literary terms:

'It is important to stress that Rigoberta is not simply doing away with the private/public opposition... she is recoding it in such a way that the private becomes public and vice versa. What is public for Rigoberta is her private life - thus she tells about her story. What is private... are the ways of her community, which she keeps hidden from us.'

Menchu, in the same way as Hurston, "offers truths punctuated by silences." And Menchu, like Hurston, responds to the problems of a predominantly hostile and oppositional reading public that confronts those for whom 'marginality' comes to exist as a consequence of their involvement in 'the' writing process.

Menchu and Hurston, as members of communities that are for the most part denied access to the public arena of written debate, are particularly not interested in autobiography as a means of public self-articulation. Their autobiographies share a concern with not yielding up their community for 'public' consumption. As Salazar comments:

'Rigoberta, in ways similar to those of others occupying the margins, counterposes the secrets of the Indians to the quest for truth of the ethnographer. Thus, in the beginning of her testimony, she politely forewarns us that 'Indians have been very careful not to disclose any details of their communities, and the community does not allow them to talk about Indian things. I too must abide by this.'

The uneasiness that is expressed by third world, and black women autobiographers, at the disparity between their 'audience' and their
'community', parallels the sense of alienation that inscribes working-class women's autobiographies.

vi. Autobiography and Class 'Difference'

Julia Swindells' study Victorian Writing and Working Women, analyses the significance of class in working-class women's autobiographies. As Swindells points out, in order to discuss working-class women's autobiographies, it has to be clear that the 'difference' of class begins with a 'different' relation to 'the' literary:

'The play of comparison between different kinds of novelists, different kinds of literary professions, as with the central idea of comparing nineteenth century novelist with working woman autobiographer, comments on the whole business of writing, of the literary production process of the writer. It is my belief that this is the area - writing, the writer - where professional ideologies and practices are most formally encoded as norms of taste, morality and subjectivity; and that all texts, and perhaps most of all the canonical text, are involved and implicated in this process of encoding."

The extent to which writing, and being 'a writer', is conceived of as a mark of class 'otherness' is, as Swindells documents, evident in working-class women's autobiographies.

This concern is also central to more contemporary autobiographies. Maureen Lawrence, in her choice of title for her autobiography: A Telling And A Keeping: A Writer's Autobiography, draws attention to this simultaneous conception of the writing process as both a public and a private representation. Lawrence emphasises how her overwhelming desire to express herself involved her need to make her public 'marginality' explicit as an inevitable consequence of the power of the dominant culture.

Writing becomes the paradoxical vehicle that is utilized, whilst being
recognised as a form of power that maintains working-class existence as marginal to the lives of middle-class people. Lawrence describes her childhood in the North of England in the 1940s and 1950s and, like Carolyn Steedman, stresses throughout her text that her desire to be a writer was inextricably bound up with perceptions of herself and the working-class community that she had grown up in:

'...My sense of urgency, my need to find reciprocity and to express myself, were heightened by the bitter knowledge that within the lower classes there was a potential energy that would never be released, and which could -if only it were ever harnessed -become the motive power for great change. But this would never be allowed to happen by these others. On the contrary, I knew that in each generation a few of us had been singled out by pure chance for special treatment by a system of selection that was actually no system, that was only a pretence of justice; and I knew that those that had been excluded were in essence exactly the same as myself. Yet whatever my private affiliations, I had been admitted to the middle ranks. I no longer belonged in the street. I felt myself to be a member of nothing.'

It is precisely this heightened sense of 'otherness', of existing on the periphery of 'the' literary even while engaging in 'the' writing process, that Steedman identifies in working-class autobiographies:

the processes of working-class autobiography, of people's history and of the working-class novel cannot show a proper and valid culture existing in its own right underneath the official forms, waiting for revelation. Accounts of working-class life are told by tension and ambiguity, out on the borderlands. The story - my mother's story, a hundred thousand others - cannot be absorbed into the central one: it is both its disruption and its essential counterpoint: this is the drama of class.

In this account, 'marginality' becomes explicit as an effect of the bourgeois construction of 'the' literary as a quintessentially middle-class arena. As Steedman points out, working-class life cannot be assimilated into this framework because it is already present within it as the antithesis of desirable and legitimate literary values.

Class, in the same way as race, problematises feminist discussions of genre which focus solely on sexual difference. Carolyn Steedman in her autobiography, *Landscape For A Good Woman: A Story Of Two Lives*, expresses
her familiar sense of exclusion from autobiographical anthologies which fail to include the experiences of working-class women. Steedman refers specifically to Ursula Owen's anthology, *Fathers: Reflections By Daughters*, and Ann Oakley's *Taking It Like A Woman*. Steedman objects particularly to their unproblematic connection of 'women's' experience with middle-class experience. Steedman argues that such foregrounding of 'women's' oppression, whilst retaining a structure of oppression over 'women' who are not white and middle-class, is a consequence of the inability of white, middle-class feminists to accept the possibility of their own power:

What they cannot bear, I think, is that there exists a poverty and marginality of experience to which they have no access, structures of feeling that they have not lived (and would not want to live within: for these are structures of deprivation). They are caught then in a terrible exclusion, an exclusion from the experience of others that measures out their own central relationship to the culture.

Steedman's rejection of the ability of patriarchy alone to decipher working-class women's oppression is, I would argue, strengthened by the fact that Ursula Owen's anthology is published by the 'feminist' press Virago. Thus, western 'feminism's' primary identification with middle-class experience is sanctioned by a prominent feminist publishing house.

In *Victorian Writing and Working Women*, Swindells demonstrates how the construction of working-class women's autobiographies and lives as 'other' cannot simply be attributed to men. The construction of working-class narratives and lives as 'marginal' relies upon notions of professionalism and expertise which extend far beyond the parameters of sexual difference. Moreover, it is precisely this literary evocation of expertise and professionalism for predominantly middle-class narratives that informs the subsequent exclusion of working-class narratives. As Swindells comments:
I would hazard the theory that an important reason for this neglect [of working women's autobiographies] is precisely that the experience of working women, our lives, our writing, remains categorized in culture as amateur to professional, as relative, as dependent. This perception of working-class narratives as trespassing upon ground that most properly relates to the more 'professional' ones of the middle-classes is very much in evidence in the way that working-class texts are 'presented' to the public by literary editors and publishers.

Swindells concludes her examination of working women's autobiographies by discussing the ways in which the dominant culture has infused them with its interpretations of them. Swindells cites Edward Hall's discovery of Ellen Weeton's writing in a Wigan bookshop, and his subsequent editorial influence over them. Thus, Hall introduces Weeton as a unique and graceful presence in an otherwise bleak landscape of "dead blue-stockings" and "silly mothers". As Swindells comments, Hall's attachment is that of the professional historian whose assumptions are about individuals, about rescuing the lone voice, through a woman from a sick class and gender history.

Swindells goes on to cite Elizabeth Ham's editor, Eric Gillett, who, in his capacity as editor, informs his readers that:

he has omitted fifty thousand words of what he takes to be 'almost maudlin self-pity and inconsequential gossip.' Moreover, this management of working-class texts is a practice that has involved 'professional' writers of both sexes. As Swindells points out, Virginia Woolf, whilst seeing no need for prefaces did, nevertheless, assert the need for some kind of introduction to books by working women:

'Women's autobiography here, it appears, does not constitute literature, a book would not need a preface. These writings do need a preface, because without the intervention of a professional writer, they do not add up to a book.' This assumption of a particular need for editorial explanations and
involvement relates directly to contemporary assumptions that inform the publication of texts by black and third world women.


Claudia Salazar, in her discussion of I. Rigoberta Menchu, emphasises the "interventionist practices carried out by editors of testimonies". Salazar draws her reader's attention to the introduction to Menchu's autobiography in which Elizabeth Burgos-Debray explains how she organised a thematic card index and fitted Menchu's words into it. The consequences of this for the text, as Salazar points out, was that parts of it have been deleted as superfluous. Thus, Burgos-Debray explains how these 'repetitions' are "simply Rigoberta's way of talking". Menchu's way of talking, it seems, requires modification in order to justify its appearance in a written text. As Salazar argues:

'Such textual violence becomes apparent when a close reading of the structure of address in Rigoberta's testimony reveal her insistent and continuous subversions of the Western notion of a coherent self. Hence, through multiple layers of editorial orchestrations, a second, and even a third, voice is brought to bear upon Rigoberta's muted speech. Rigoberta's story is insured a place in bookstore shelves for the 'facile consumption of cultural otherness'.

This manipulation of 'difference' in Menchu's autobiography is practised with the assumption that her text must conform to western notions of what it is that constitutes autobiography.

And it is worth pointing out that locating what exactly it is that the dominant western culture has decided characterises autobiography is not an easy task. Furthermore, it becomes little clearer within feminist debate. Feminist work on autobiography frequently alludes to the difficulty of
defining it while proposing that such a venture is ultimately possible. In terms of feminist publishing there exists the familiar reluctance to assign a purely literary generic definition to the 'lives' of black women, women of color, lesbian women and working-class women.

Thus, when Ellen Kuzwayo writes about her life in South Africa, in her 'autobiography', *Call Me Woman*, her publishers, the Women's Press, inform 'us' that this is 'Autobiography/Politics'. The Women's Press justify and market this particular 'life' with the implication that it has political interest; it is about somewhere 'else'. The reluctance to equate a literary definition with someone 'else' extends to the preface, in which Nadine Gordimer pronounces upon the difference between a 'writer' and 'Ellen Kuzwayo', who is:

> 'history in the person of one woman. Fortunately, although she is not a writer, she has the memory and the gift of unconscious expression that enable her to tell her story as no-one else could.'

Kuzwayo, although she is denied the title of 'writer', is awarded with a superhuman ability to narrate 'history'. Gordimer objectifies Kuzwayo, subsuming her into a historical narrative. Her reference to her 'unconscious expression' upholds the racist tradition of assigning a childlike simplicity and fervency to black women and women of color.

The assigning of 'politics' to Ellen Kuzwayo is, I would argue, more a reflection of the Women's Press's assumption that 'some' lives can be 'unpolitical'. I am not questioning the accuracy of including 'politics' in a description of Kuzwayo's text, but rather the implicit assertion that it need not necessarily be there in other texts. The negotiation of 'culture' and 'politics' by feminist publishers is, I would argue, crucial for an understanding of how the literary is being perceived of within feminist debate.
It is significant that Virago elect to classify Carolyn Steedman's autobiography, *Landscape For A Good Woman*, as 'cultural studies'. Steedman's aim, which is to demonstrate how mainstream theories and narratives, particularly psychoanalysis, obscure working-class childhoods is interpreted as a 'cultural' rather than a 'political' one. Virago's classification of it as autobiography and cultural studies is further endorsed by the illustration on the front of the book, which is a reproduction of a Lawrence Daws' painting; 'Figure on the Terrace'. Virago's choice of a painting for the cover signals that readers can expect to find evidence of 'elevated' thought here. The term 'cultural' studies thus makes its connection with notions of impersonality and intellectual abstraction.

By contrast, Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography features a photograph of the author on the cover of the book. This, I would suggest, serves to reinforce the link between politics and immediacy; both in terms of content and comprehension. The combination of the photograph and the classification locates Kuzwayo's narrative as descriptive and informative but not necessarily conceptual.

Of course, the racially based differential use of the terms 'politics' and 'culture' affects the meaning of both terms. 'Politics' becomes associated with action, oppression, direct experience and allegiance; whereas 'culture' incorporates notions of reflection, neutrality and literary interest. The engagement of both authors with mainstream attempts to marginalise 'other' people's lives is repudiated by the feminist presses that publish them in precisely those terms. Needless to say, this linguistic attempt to segregate literary, cultural and political arenas in itself constitutes a political strategy.
There is, however, a classification that transcends even autobiography; namely 'Literature'. Thus, autobiographies that have been written by women who have previously produced fiction can be incorporated into the literary arena. A life becomes most significantly a 'literary' one. Thus, despite the fact that Maureen Lawrence writes a autobiography that shares the same concerns as those raised by Carolyn Steedman, it is her established success as a writer that The Women's Press choose to emphasise. A Telling And A Keeping: A Writer's Autobiography is, accordingly, classified as Autobiography/Literature. There is, I would argue, little evidence of what is meant by 'literature' being addressed by either feminist or mainstream western literary experts. However, I would suggest that it is 'Literature' that exists as the final site of 'indefinable' narrative excellence for which generic definitions are in themselves insufficient. It is precisely this apparent lack of generic implications for 'Literature' that marks it as the crucial and unaccountable category that informs all other generic definitions.

I have explored these different interpretations of autobiography in order to support my conviction that white, western, middle-class definitions of autobiography that are proposed by men and women exercise a wider power over what become, in this scenario, 'other' autobiographies. I will conclude this chapter by outlining my belief that a re-working of the notion of genre, as a crucial way of understanding texts, is incompatible with feminist criticism.
As I have demonstrated, producing 'a' definition of autobiography inevitably marginalises the narratives of 'other' autobiographies. The question for feminist criticism then, is, whether to attempt to formulate 'a' definition or instead to challenge the practice of genre classification itself. Joanna Russ, in *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, argues that genre classification should be recognised as a practice that is about far more than clarifying narrative content:

'The assignment of genre can also function as a false categorization, especially when work appears to fall between established genres and can thereby be assigned to either (and then called an imperfect example of it) or chided for belonging to neither... I would argue that this function of genre has been largely overlooked in both feminist and mainstream criticism. Thus, Anne Cranny-Francis, in *Feminist Fiction*, cites Frederic Jameson's suggestion that genres be viewed as:

'essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular social artifact...'

Francis then proposes that:

For feminists to intervene in these social contracts, to de/re/construct them, revealing their ideological significance, means a fundamental intervention in the relationship between reader and text, a disruption of the reader's conventionalised understanding of the contract, the literary institution of the particular genre...

Cranny-Francis' proposal implies that 'the' relationship between 'reader' and 'text' can be easily understood and recognised. Feminists can thus embark on a narrative quest that will radically alter 'the' established expectations that previously existed between 'reader' and 'text'. I would argue that this is to overlook the complexity of 'these' relationships and
also to critically undermine the extent to which their dissolution is suppressed by the dominant culture.

In Cranny-Francis' account, the conflicts that simmer beneath the apparently cohesive surface of generic definitions is erased twice; firstly as existing in the past and secondly as a future possibility after feminists have subverted a particular genre. In this apparently radical use of genre then, 'the' relationship between 'reader' and 'text' remains one in which the reader is a passive recipient of narrative intention. Genre and the literary can be summoned up, either as sites of repression or as sites of subversion, with the same disregard for the existence of legitimate differences between authors, readers and texts. Ultimately, the power that is exerted through literary conventions is displaced, recoded as a potential site for radical feminist fiction and criticism.

It is, I would argue, crucial to recognise that generic definitions have always been used to differentiate between texts and readers - not all readers are able to appreciate particular genres. What is missing in attempts to reformulate certain genres as radical is the delineation of texts themselves, whatever their generic status, as sites of power. Thus, Cranny-Francis asserts that texts can be divided into those which restate the dominant cultural messages and those which question them. Arguments that present certain genres as conservative and certain others as radical propose that texts themselves can be understood solely in terms of narrative content. Cranny-Francis contends:

'Feminist generic fiction, like Socialist generic fiction, is a radical revision of conservative generic texts, which critically evaluate the ideological significance of textual conventions and of fiction as a discursive practice.'

'Ideological significance' can, in this scenario, be discussed without any
reference to the relation of 'the' literary arena with other sites of material and cultural power.

I would suggest that it is 'significant' that authors themselves are often less able to appreciate the radical status of performing in more popular and less prestigious genres. For genre classification determines both the financial livelihood of the author and locates his or her audience; it is the public sign of the literary's relation to both 'the' audience and the economic marketplace. Joanna Russ cites the effects of the distinction between 'serious' and 'not serious art' upon Scott Joplin:

A recent television biography of Scott Joplin emphasized his bitterness at never being accepted as a 'serious' or publicly honoured composer - in contrast with the equally popular (but white) John Phillip Sousa. The (also white) George Gershwin was honoured during his own short life-time for bridging the gap between 'jazz' and 'classical' music; it took Joplin more than fifty years after his death to gain public recognition. One cannot escape the impression that in Joplin's case the category 'not serious' hid another category (which only one character in the television play speaks aloud): 'coon music'.

I would argue that feminist criticism needs to locate genre definitions as sites of power that are enmeshed within the unacknowledged relation between literary hierarchies and the authority of the dominant culture. Challenging the efficacy of literary conventions, such as genre, is thus essential if 'we' are to dismantle the authority of white, western, middle-class texts. Accepting finally that 'we' do not necessarily know how to classify a text is, I would suggest, to relinquish 'our' position as literary experts.
Notes


3. Ibid., pp. 86-7.


7. Ibid., p. 89-92 and further references.


10. Ibid.


13. Ibid., p. 115.


17. Ibid., pp. 116-7.


22. Ibid., p. 117.
23. Ibid., pp. 118-20.

24. Ibid., p. 119.

25. Ibid., p. 148.

26. I am referring to the practice of praising fiction by asserting that it is beyond the limits of genre. This is a particular characteristic of the reviews that publishers select for marketing texts. See note 31.


33. Ibid., p. 17.

34. I am referring to the New Accents Series, under the general editorialship of Terence Hawkes. The series attempts to re-examine texts and films in order to argue for their subversive meaning. Studies focus on established authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare.


36. I am referring to critical work written under the New Accents Series. In this thesis I have drawn in particular on the work of Tery Eagleton in this chapter and Maurice Charney's re-reading of the Marquis de Sade in chapter two.


38. Ibid., p. 56.

39. Ibid.


42. Cited in Friedman S. S, 'Women's autobiographical selves', in The Private Self: Theory And Practice Of Autobiography p. 34.

43. Ibid., pp.34-5.

44. Ibid., p.36.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., p. 37.

47. Ibid.


49. Ibid.

50. Ibid. p. 39.

51. Ibid. p. 40.

52. Ibid., p. 55.


56. Ibid., p. 68.


60. Ibid. pp. 3-4.


62. Her Own Life p. 2.

63. Ibid. p. 21.
64. Ibid., pp. 24-5.


66. Ibid., p. 64.


69. Ibid.,


72. Salazar C, 'A third world women's text': between the politics of criticism and cultural politics'. p. 94.

73. Ibid.


75. Head B, A Woman Alone, p. 31 and further references.

76. Ibid., p. 5.

77. Salazar C, 'A third world women's text', p. 96.

78. Cited in Friedman


80. Ibid., p. 101.

81. Ibid.


83. Ibid. see especially 'Working women and initial experience of class' pp. 125-137. Swindells details the clandestine and subversive nature of writing for working-class women. As Swindells documents, for working-class women writing "functioned more as class otherness than social aspiration". p. 128.


89. Swindells J, *Victorian Writing And Working Women*, p. 204.

90. Ibid., p. 188.

91. Ibid., pp. 188-9.

92. Ibid., p. 189.

93. Ibid., p. 191.

94. Salazar C, 'A third world women's text', p. 98.

95. Ibid., p. 99.

96. Ibid., pp. 99-100.

97. See *Her Own Life*, in which the contributors attempt to map out a definition of women's autobiography. They draw attention to the difficulties that this involves but do offer suggestions concerning the expression of the relationship between the self and truth, which I discuss in this chapter.


99. Ibid., p. xi.


102. Ibid.

103. Ibid pp. 9-10.

Chapter Four

Challenging The Identification Of 'Major' And 'Minor' Voices In Feminist Literary Traditions.

In this chapter I extend my analysis of feminist discussions of genre by focusing on feminist theoretical work on literary traditions. Literary traditions are, in many ways, the product of genre definitions; an emphasis upon the generic content and quality of a particular text is articulated on the assumption that this can be related to other texts and other genres. Thus, Virginia Woolf justified her interest in autobiography as a genre on the grounds that it provided a useful context in which to read 'great' works of art. In her essay written in 1925, 'The lives of the obscure', Woolf asserted that her intention was not to undermine autobiography, but rather to stress how vital writing of "invincible mediocrity" is to the cultural landscape. Jane Marcus, in her essay, 'Invincible mediocrity: The private selves of public women', cites Woolf in her title and employs Woolf's early discussion of autobiography in order to explain her own interest in memoirs.

For Marcus, Woolf's evaluation of the role of autobiography should be recognised for its positive contribution towards work which focuses on 'minor' genres. Marcus emphasises that Woolf has been misunderstood to be denigrating 'smaller' works of art, and that 'invincible mediocrity' should be read as a positive statement that urges readers to recognise that "these smaller books" (namely autobiography and memoirs) were read by literary historians and that "great books" were dependent on them. They are, in short, the crucial grounding for an appreciation of such works as Hamlet. Thus Marcus, citing Woolf, stresses the significance of minor
genres precisely because they are essential to an understanding of 'great' works:

'Autobiography is important because it stretches the reader's mind. The reader remains at the centre of Woolf's discourse... Woolf can read Hamlet creatively and receptively because she has read Elizabethan memoirs. But the Greeks remain abstract because she has never read the life stories of ordinary people in that age. Contemporary criticism would say that autobiography is no closer to life than other genres. But common sense tells us that Woolf is right. [CS]

In this account, both 'reader' and 'great' authors are located outside of the lives of 'ordinary' people. 'Ordinary' lives are perceived as providing the necessary contexts for 'great' writing. Thus, reading and writing are presented as specialised activities, so that Woolf's focus on 'the' reader in her discourse produces her exceptional acuity in reading texts. Marcus' differentiation between 'the' reader and Woolf as a reader means that Woolf's ability to read "creatively" and "receptively" is presented as a skill that would be difficult to envision as a common pursuit. This is because 'ordinary' lives, in this reading, are construed as the passive backdrop for a landscape which is defined by a few 'great' figures.

The Greeks, in Marcus' text, exist alongside 'ordinary people' as an apparent contrast. The reader and the author are thus conceived against a backdrop of essential but essentially inert masses. There is no sense that a reading of these ordinary lives could possibly collide with the texts of those 'great' authors, or that a reading of such lives could perhaps undermine their designated roles as raw material for the understanding of loftier thoughts. There is, in short, no sense that reading 'ordinary' lives would challenge this predetermined definition.

I would argue that Marcus' reworking of Woolf's essay raises a crucial problem that permeates studies of traditions and genres. For, it
is worth noting that Marcus herself does not consider her own text to be endorsing any notion of literary hierarchies. Thus, Marcus produces an extensive criticism of theories of autobiography issued by Georges Gusdorf, James Olney and Roland Barthes. For Marcus, their common and most problematic contention resides precisely in their adherence to notions of genius and literary excellence. Thus, Marcus admonishes such theorists for their persistence in "maintaining the idea of individual genius." However, I would suggest that Marcus' criticism is severely undermined by her own constant references to women writers of genius.

This assumption is made the more problematic because it is raised in an essay that is addressing the need for a reading of memoirs. There is the sense that Marcus herself feels that extensive justification is required before she can reveal the actual purpose of her discussion which is, "to explore the memoirs of women of genius in their own right." Moreover, I would argue that this explanation is misleading, since 'their own right' implies that memoirs are important enough to be studied as an independent genre. However, it is precisely Marcus' detailed positioning of memoirs in their proper context of essential, but subordinate, to the lives and works of 'great' women, that reintroduces memoirs and literary hierarchies unchanged, as secondary reading material for feminist debate.

Furthermore, although Marcus produces an extensive discussion concerning possible definitions of autobiography, memoirs themselves are left relatively unaddressed. It is something of a surprise to find that Marcus does not feel the need to read the autobiographies, or 'ordinary life stories', in order to understand the texts of women geniuses. Instead, it seems that their own memoirs are a sufficient context for understanding their literary texts. A minor genre is thus resurrected in
order to deepen a focus on a literary tradition of predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual, western women writers.

It is precisely this tendency for feminist discussions of literary traditions to ground their discussions in apparently non-hierarchical principles that, I would argue, produces the most problematic theoretical repercussions in feminist work on genre and literary traditions. In this chapter, I will address current feminist work on literary traditions in order to explore the extent to which they have challenged and replicated liberal humanist ideas of a great canon of literature; such as in the work of F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot.\textsuperscript{103}

For feminist critics who have attempted to formulate traditions of women's writing, the crucial point has been that the traditions suggested by such writers as F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot have celebrated male writers and male experience. For contemporary feminism these traditions have erased women's writing and have made tracing past women writers an essential preliminary task for feminist criticism. However, feminist theorists such as Dale Spender and Elaine Showalter have also asserted that including women's historical writings will produce a 'better' literary canon.\textsuperscript{113}

In this chapter, I intend to explore the implications of this process of reconstruction, and focus in particular on the ways in which feminist canon-building negotiates and articulates its relation to a practice that was designed to police the conditions of entry into literary production. I will examine the ways in which feminist canon-building recuperates key traditional literary conventions in order to pursue historical research. The question that must be directed at feminist attempts to re-trace a female heritage is whether the valuable process of
publishing writing that has been suppressed by the dominant culture has not itself sustained hierarchical notions of literary production.

I would argue that any literary canon will inevitably fall short of representing a collective voice, because canons, by definition, require only a limited number of individuals, whose inclusion then has to be justified by their 'extraordinary' talent. Furthermore, the proposed canon then has to be vindicated on the grounds that it represents a collective and usually national experience. In *Criticism And Ideology*, Terry Eagleton has demonstrated how attempts by theorists, such as T.S. Eliot, to formulate 'a' tradition have inevitably suppressed narratives that do not support the ideological parameters that inform 'the' tradition in question. This contradiction, between the intentions of an individual critic and the multiplicity of narratives that are produced in a society, is equally evident in 'feminist' canon building, where the concern with female oppression and experience is set within the parameters of a series of unique individual texts.

I will start by looking at the implications of prominent white, western feminist discussions of canonicity, particularly the work of Elaine Showalter, and will compare this to current Afro-American attempts to recover the work of Afro-American women writers. I want to examine Elaine Showalter's work because her theory of gynocriticism has been extensively debated and criticised by contemporary feminist theorists. I would argue that feminist discussions of Showalter, while questioning aspects of her work, have also revealed crucial areas which have been neglected by feminist theory.

In particular, while her gynocritical model has been criticised for its failure to produce an authentic female literary history, her
accompanying notions of genius and literary excellence have undergone far
less criticism. It is notions of genius and excellence that I would
locate as the most problematic assumptions present in influential black
and white feminist attempts to construct female literary traditions.

1. Elaine Showalter’s Gynocritical Feminism

Clearly, feminism is particularly concerned with the causes and effects of
patriarchal oppression and it is this fundamental concern that unites
feminists. Contemporary feminist theorists who grapple with the numerous
difficulties involved in defining and understanding the relationship
between ‘women’ and ‘feminism’ are, nevertheless, reluctant to lose
‘something’ that will unite women as a political category. I would
argue that the present concern with questions of ‘gender’ and ‘race’ is
not derived from any sense that women should not be conceived of as a
united group, but rather, how ‘we’ are to do this without reproducing
traditional discourses of domination.

Thus, Diana Fuss in her recent exploration of gender in, Essentially
Speaking: Feminism, Nature And Difference, whilst producing an extensive
investigation and criticism of feminist accounts that attempt to disregard
the differences between women, pauses to concur briefly with Robert
Scholes:

Scholes believes that feminism needs to hold onto the logico-linguistic
idea of a class of women in order to be effective. I would not disagree. I
would however, wish to point out that nominal essences are often treated
by post-Lockeans as if they were real essences. In Fuss’ account, the need for a class of women is as pertinent as it ever
was, but it is precisely the difficulties involved in establishing what it is that unites women that she attends to in her text.

This caution contrasts markedly with the confident explorations of 'women's' writing that characterised western feminist criticism in the 1970s. The contemporary influence of Elaine Showalter, both in terms of the publication of previously unpublished women writers and in terms of contemporary feminist debate, has been reflected in feminist discussions of feminist literary theory. Thus, Toril Moi in her study, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, cites Showalter's rightful acknowledgement as, "one of the most important feminist critics in America". Moi's subsequent discussion does, however, locate crucial limitations in Showalter's ideas about texts and feminist criticism. Moi's reservations have been widely shared. Sydney Janet Kaplan's essay, 'Varieties of feminist criticism', also acknowledges the extent of Showalter's contribution to the task of rediscovery before moving on to criticise her theoretical framework. Before examining these contemporary discussions of Showalter, I will outline my own reading of gynocriticism.

It would be difficult to imagine any feminist approach that would fault Showalter's emphasis upon the need for women to have access to women's texts. However, Showalter's particular ideas about 'women', 'texts' and feminist criticism have received widely different degrees of assent. In her essay, 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness', written in 1981, she described her notion of gynocriticism as one that involved directing feminist critical work towards the study of women's writing. Such attention would, according to Showalter, illuminate the ways in which women's writing differed from men's. For Showalter, gender difference is the inevitable product of women's different position within patriarchal
society. Moreover, women's social and economic subordination has resulted in the existence of clear gender difference in all other areas of life. Thus, women's biological difference informs their psychological and historical difference.

Showalter frequently alludes to the radical character of this enterprise in terms of its historical specificity. Thus, gynocriticism should be seen in the context of a linear progression of feminist criticism. Gynocriticism is the 'new', the 'second wave' approach that marks feminist criticism as an ever evolving and improving organism:

Feminist criticism has gradually shifted its center from revisionary readings to a sustained investigation of literature by women. The second mode of feminist criticism engendered by this process is the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women. No English term exists for such a specialised critical discourse, and so I have invented the term 'gynocritics'.

I would argue that this account of gynocriticism is both descriptive and prescriptive. Indeed, throughout Showalter's critical work, gynocriticism exists both as an inevitable historical stage of feminist criticism and as a theoretical approach that requires evidence of why it is the appropriate theory for contemporary feminism. Because gynocriticism is the 'second stage', it therefore follows that it is necessary and that other theories have to be abandoned. Thus, in 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness', Showalter responds to Annette Kolodny's reflections on the merits of 'playful pluralism' with the following warning:

'If we see our critical job as interpretation and reinterpretation, we must be content with pluralism as our critical stance. But if we wish to ask questions about the process and the contexts of writing, if we genuinely wish to define ourselves to the uninitiated, we cannot rule out the prospect of theoretical consensus at this early stage.'

Feminists should, in other words, recognise that it is only through a gynocritical criticism that we will 'uncover' the true historical
experience of women and from this 'unique vantage point' raise pertinent questions about women's writing. 'We' will, finally, become visible in our own right alongside other theories.

I would argue that the most crucial problem with Showalter's proposals lies, not with her particular view of texts, or even her notion of women's 'experience', but with her failure to recognise 'feminism' itself as a contestable site. For her 'feminist' criticism can only be accomplished through gynocriticism. Thus, it is gynocriticism that will release feminism from the improper contexts of theories such as marxism and structuralism which are inapplicable to women since 'they' cannot explain women's lives. In her essay, 'Toward a feminist poetics', Showalter explains:

''Both Marxism and Structuralism see themselves as privileged critical discourse, particularly by a claim to 'science'. The experience of women can easily disappear, become mute, invalid and invisible, lost in the diagrams of the structuralist or the class conflict of the Marxists.''

Unfortunately, Showalter's dismissal of these privileged critical discourses is not allied to any sense that feminist criticism can challenge the idea of 'an' authoritative theory. Showalter may well theorise about the secondary status of theory to 'creative' texts, but such doubts remain conspicuously absent from her own critical project. Instead, Showalter is determined to place 'feminist' criticism on the critical map. Feminism's specificity will, she assumes, be apparent by its very difference and independence from all other theories. As she argues in, 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness':

''It is time for feminist criticism to decide whether between religion and revision we can claim any firm theoretical ground of our own.'

The task is an extensive one, for Showalter intends to define and practice
a criticism that will incorporate women's differences, described by her as racial, national and class based, whilst at the same time finding the things that 'bind' women together over 'time' and 'space'. Her assumption that this enterprise will produce evidence of women's connected experience locates gynocriticism, not as an investigation, but rather as a practice whose efficacy has already been established.

The gynocritical task to 'find' those 'things' that 'bind' women together is entirely dependent on the validity of Showalter's assumption that women will agree that their primary identification is with each other. Showalter herself is convinced that feminist criticism as an identifiable and distinct critical form is gaining visibility. This process, she affirms, can be referred back to the publication of Patricia Meyer Spacks', *The Female Imagination*, a text which, according to Showalter, recognises for the first time that 'we' have a literature of our own and enabled "the continuities in women's writing [to] become clear for the first time."

Showalter proceeds to cite the four studies that have enabled 'us' to read a conclusive literary history of female experience: after Spacks' *The Female Imagination*, there followed Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, her own, *A Literature Of Their Own*, and finally Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "monumental study": *The Madwoman In The Attic*. Showalter's depiction of these books as constituting the groundwork for an authentic record of female writing received prompt criticism.


### Gynocritical Feminism and Black Women

Barbara Smith responded to Showalter in her 1977 essay, "Toward a black feminist criticism," and noted, in particular, the racism of Moers' text, *Literary Women: The Great Writers*. Smith pointed out that in the seventy page long bibliographical notes that accompany the text, there are four black, one Puertorriqueña and no third world women. Moreover, as Smith commented, this failure to recognise black women and women of color was a salient characteristic of this search for 'female' experience through textual representations.

As Smith argued, a notion of 'women' was posited alongside race as an apparent contradiction. Thus, Spacks, in *The Female Imagination*, compares black people with women, signalling her unwillingness to include black women in her search for a 'female' tradition. Smith concluded that:

> "Their ignorance seems suspiciously selective...particularly in the light of the dozens of truly obscure white women writers that they are able to unearth...Spacks was herself employed at Wellesley College at the same time that Alice Walker was there teaching in one of the first courses on Black women writers in the country."

Smith's anger was shared by other black American feminists. Deborah E. McDowell, writing three years later, also drew attention to the racism at the heart of white feminist criticism. McDowell singled out Spacks', *The Female Imagination*, as one of the most "flagrant examples of this chauvinism".

The pertinence of Smith and McDowell's criticisms are emphasised by their very inclusion in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays On Women, Literature And Theory*, an anthology which was published in 1986 and edited by Showalter. In her introduction, Showalter acknowledges the "vital
questions that Smith and McDowell raise, whilst proceeding to completely ignore their relevance for white feminism. Showalter, having noted that McDowell and Smith are quite understandably angered by their marginalisation both by male Afro-American critics and white feminists, proceeds to endorse a critical strategy that contradicts her prescriptions for white feminist criticism.

Thus, while white feminist criticism is now ready to move on from a study of male texts, black feminist criticism, she argues, needs to develop from a black context. Black women are, in other words, more black than women. Clearly, Showalter is, to some extent, drawing on McDowell's own proposals, but I would argue that there is a crucial difference in formulating this argument as a white feminist. Showalter, however, drawing on McDowell, directs black feminists to their proper context:

They [black women] must situate the study of black women's writing in the contexts of black history and culture and explore its thematic and stylistic correspondences with the literature of black men, as well as investigate its special uses of language and imagery.

In this account, black feminist criticism is assigned to an infant stage of 'feminist' critical history; a stage which 'white' feminism has apparently completed. Black feminism is thus related to 'feminism' (obviously 'white') as a less developed and essentially separate concern.

Furthermore, there is little sense that black feminist criticism will ever stand alongside 'feminist' criticism, because Showalter assumes that even without the inclusion of black feminist criticism, 'we' nearly possess 'the' female literary tradition. Thus, having directed black feminists to a 'black' context in order to construct 'their' tradition, she then proceeds to claim that 'we' now have a tradition that represents the historical consciousness of women:
We now have a coherent, if still incomplete, narrative of female literary history, which describes the evolutionary stages of women's writing during the last 250 years from imitation through protest to self-definition, and defines and traces the connections throughout history and across national boundaries of the recurring images, themes and plots that emerge from women's social, psychological, and aesthetic experience in male-dominated cultures.

Showalter's assumption that 'we' have unearthed points of connection between women across national boundaries is, I would argue, problematic precisely because it retains the primacy of gender for all women.

Moreover, Showalter herself has already directed black women to a black context which means that any points of connection that white feminists discover between themselves and black feminists will inevitably include the experience of black men. As Lillian Robinson points out in her essay, 'Treason our text: feminist challenges to the literary canon', such feminist accounts of 'the' female tradition:

delineate their subject in such a way as to exclude not only black and working-class authors but any notion that race and class might be relevant categories in the definition and apprehension of 'women's literature'.

I would contend that Showalter's differentiation between the appropriate contexts for white and black feminists relates directly to the inadequacy of gynocriticism as constituting 'the' most radical 'feminist' theory. For, her proposed female literary tradition, although motivated by a concern for the neglect of women's lives, has also illuminated the extent to which 'women' and their lives remain contentious issues amongst feminists.

iii. Gynocritical Perceptions of Women

The extent to which feminists disagree about ways of understanding women's lives extends to the very foundation of gynocriticism, which asserts that
women's lives can only be comprehended by focusing on 'women'. The reluctance of all women to view their historical oppression only in a context of male power emphasises that 'women' cannot be understood as a cohesive class that can all cite men as the explanation for their oppression.

The emphasis in gynocriticism upon 'female' lives and experiences fails to recognise that this makes the problematic assumption that women did not, and do not, ever view other women as exerting or possessing power over themselves. 'Women' as the only reference point becomes, finally, problematic, because it implies that women who are not able to conceptualise their experience as inherently and obviously 'female' are somehow caught up in the patriarchal mire. I would argue that this is to overlook the real difficulties that confront any woman who attempts to claim that her experience can be understood and extracted as exclusively male or female. Experience in terms of power and oppression can not, I would argue, be reduced entirely to a gender division.

Moreover, I would argue that this is to denote female experience as something that has always been 'common' amongst women. As Judith Butler points out, in Gender Trouble: Feminism And The Subversion Of Identity, disagreement about what it is that constitutes 'female' experience is as fundamental to feminism as is the concern with women's oppression:

The fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from 'women' whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics. 

However, throughout Showalter's critical work it is clear that, for her, the crucial opposition lies between feminism and male theory. Conflicts within feminism, such as those voiced by McDowell, Smith, and in Kolodny's 'playful pluralism', can all be clarified via the overall authority of her
gynocritical method. I would argue that gynocritical authority relates directly to Showalter's perception of the 'truth' of experience. Thus, in 'Toward a feminist poetics', she comments that:

While scientific criticism struggles to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism is willing to assert (in the title of a recent anthology) *The Authority of Experience*. Showalter explains this authority by way of an anecdotal account of her own "divided consciousness". Thus, she relates her own dilemma that arises from her divided identity as both a woman and a Professor. Professorship pulls her towards "impersonal" textual meditations, whereas her womanhood directs her towards the search for connections between "life and work". This dilemma swiftly becomes 'ours' and it is precisely this progression that signals Showalter's inability to include feminists who experience being female differently.

Moreover, Showalter's attempt to claim for this experience a universal authenticity, which as such is beyond science and ideology, means that her notion of what it is that constitutes female experience does not require justification. However, as Diana Fuss points out in her text, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*:

'Belief in the truth of Experience is as much an ideological production as a belief in the experience of Truth.'

I would argue that it is crucial to analyse Showalter's notion of female texts and experience precisely in terms of their ideological content and significance. In particular, I would argue that her differentiation between criticism and creative writing exerts a crucial limitation to the feminism of her criticism.
Showalter's directions for 'feminist' criticism contrast sharply with her recommendations for 'black' feminist criticism. In her essay, 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness', she argues that the most urgent task facing 'feminist' criticism lies in recognising the present redundancy of male theory for feminist concerns. Her conviction, that it is only through the study of women's texts that 'we' can understand women's lives, involves considerable energy being spent stressing why a study of patriarchy and male texts (which in Showalter's critique amount to the same thing) are futile feminist occupations. I would suggest that the ways in which Showalter attempts to expel patriarchy from feminist debate uncovers assumptions about 'the' reading and writing process that are equally relevant to her proposals for feminist criticism.

Men and patriarchy are, in Showalter's account, redundant as a subject for feminist work. Thus, in her essay, 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness', she argues that the early feminist concern with male texts was important in so far as it brought literary misogyny into the critical arena. However, it is more significant in her reading as a necessary stage of feminist critical history. Showalter argues that the inability of male texts to yield any critical light upon women's lives and experience led to the second stage, in which feminist criticism recognised the need for a study of women writers. In this reading, male texts, and the early feminist interest in them, are subordinated to the increasingly visible 'real' concern of feminist criticism, namely women's writing. Thus, in 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness' she argues that:

No theory, however suggestive, can be a substitute for the close and extensive knowledge of women's texts which constitutes our essential
However, I would argue that Showalter's insistence upon the primacy of women's texts for feminist criticism is undermined by her rather less decisive perception of the relation of male texts to feminist criticism. This indecisiveness is critical, since Showalter pins her prioritising of women's texts upon the apparent irrelevance of male-authored ones.

It is significant that Showalter's critical work articulates a changing perception of male texts, whereas her view of criticism as being essentially in the service of literature remains constant. It is this that I would locate as revealing Showalter's enterprise as more firmly linked to a concern for theoretical status than with feminism. Of course, she is concerned to position women alongside men as 'great' writers but, I would argue, the inevitable exclusion of women from this endeavour prevents gynocriticism possessing any inherent or universal relevance for feminism.

Thus, in her 1979 essay, 'Toward a feminist poetics', she discusses the dangers that a feminist focus upon male criticism involves. Showalter criticises feminist analysis of patriarchal structures and writing as ultimately "obsessive", "dependent" and "unproductive". For Showalter, the danger of this method is that it risks diverting and seducing the feminist reader away from female concerns:

In some fields of specialization, this may require a long apprenticeship to the male theoretician...and then an application of the theory. The temporal and intellectual investment one makes in such a process increases resistance to questioning it, and to seeing its historical and ideological boundaries. The critique also has a tendency to naturalise women's victimisation, by making it the inevitable and obsessive topic of discussion. Showalter asserts a questionable connection between analysis and legitimization; feminist readings of patriarchal authority become equated with an acceptance of it. Her emphasis upon the need for feminist critics
to study 'great' women writers reflects her belief in the 'authority of experience' that is to be found in such texts. Thus, for Showalter, the text is a particularly important icon, since the critic should attempt only to decipher its meaning. In this reading, criticism begins as an 'apprenticeship'. The feminist critic is, like any other, ultimately performing a service for the text that she is discussing.

What remains securely in place is the authority of 'the' text. In Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, Toril Moi points out that, despite their attack upon the authority of the male tradition, Anglo-American feminists have seldom questioned the notion of a canon:

Showalter's aim is to create a separate canon of women's writing, not to abolish all canons. But a new canon would not be intrinsically less oppressive than the old. The role of the feminist critic is still to sit quietly and listen to her mistress' voice as it expresses authentic female experience. The feminist reader is not granted leave to get up and challenge this female voice; the female text rules as despotically as the old male text.

The feminist intervention is, in other words, no more than a dispute about which texts 'we' are to accept as authoritative documents. Moreover, Showalter's assumption that texts can yield authentic 'experience' has been cited as the reason for her selective account of female literary history.

Moi, in particular, argues that Showalter's notion of female experience led her to favour realist writers. The accompanying absence of modernist writers from her literary 'history' is, Moi argues, a crucial omission. Moi cites Showalter's rejection of Virginia Woolf:

For Showalter, Woolf's writing continually escapes the critic's perspective, always refusing to be pinned down to one unifying angle of vision. This elusiveness is then interpreted as a denial of authentic feminist states of mind.

Moi's criticism, I would argue, is directed quite accurately at Showalter's
failure to admit the significance of her own interpretation of authentic female experience. Certainly, Showalter at no point addresses the issue of her own power as a feminist critic exerting considerable influence over the publication of texts which she claims 'we' should 'honour'. Showalter's assertion that gynocriticism represents a radical departure from the authoritarian context of established theories presents feminist criticism in a unique context:

'Feminist criticism differs from other contemporary schools of critical theory in not deriving its literary principles from a single authority or from a body of sacred texts.'

Whilst I would not disagree that feminist criticism has a different historical context than previous critical theories, I would question Showalter's depiction of it as ideologically neutral. Showalter's attempt to demonstrate that feminist criticism is not bound towards considerations of authority or power is particularly surprising given that she is attempting to formulate a canon of women's writing as the necessary task of feminist criticism. The future role of such texts will surely share features of the male canon of literature. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn in their essay, 'Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman', also point out the dangers of representing feminist aims as inherently neutral:

Showalter implies that gynocriticism is somehow less ideological, more value-free. Feminist criticism should avoid representing its own ideals as politically neutral, for, if a feminist approach has taught us anything, it is that all critical stances are ideological...'female subcultures' exist in complicated relation to the dominant culture, in collusion with as well as 'counter' to it.'

It is this convenient refusal to incorporate an analysis of her own speaking position that enables Showalter to propose a theoretical model whilst casting doubts upon the ultimate importance of criticism.
Moreover, her analysis of the difficulty feminist critics experience in 'criticising' male theory fails to account for her own ability to extricate herself from this intellectual lure. I would argue that she seeks to diminish the relevance of her own critical authority by casually defining it as the mundane literary 'housework' that 'we' all share:

Yet, if the Women's movement has taught us anything it is that we must all share the housework but must also get the chance to gaze at stars.·[593]

The crucial problem is, surely, that the literary housework, (defined by Showalter as "research, editing and reinterpretation")[593], is the most exclusive aspect of literary production. And it is precisely this continuation of a distinct and élite sphere of literary production that literary traditions encourage.

It is Showalter's perceptions of literary excellence and genius which are most in need of challenging. I will conclude my discussion of Showalter by demonstrating that such notions are still very much in evidence in contemporary critical discussions of gynocriticism.

v. 'Great' Women Writers and Feminist Criticism

I have already indicated how Toril Moi's principal criticism of gynocriticism lies in her challenge to Showalter's specific interpretation of authentic female experience. For Moi, the accompanying dismissal of Virginia Woolf exposes a crucial flaw in the gynocritical method. However, Showalter's rejection of Woolf is more than simply an unfortunate oversight, it is proof that gynocriticism does not fulfil its expressed purpose. Thus, in Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, Moi argues that:
'The major drawback of this approach is surely signalled in the fact that it proves incapable of appropriating for feminism the work of the greatest British woman writer of this century, despite the fact that Woolf was not only a novelist of considerable genius but a declared feminist and dedicated reader of other women's writings.

Showalter has failed, because she has proved unable to accommodate the 'best' woman writer. Moi's celebration of Woolf is present in the same text that has chastised Showalter for failing to recognise that a female canon is not intrinsically different to that of a male one.

The presence of notions of genius and excellence in Moi's own criticism lead, I would argue, to striking contradictions in her text. Thus, Moi argues that feminist criticism should strive to dismantle the traditional emphasis upon 'the' author as 'the' source of authority:

'For the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of authority, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author.'

According to Moi, Woolf is a great writer because she deconstructs stable meaning, offering her readers a multiplicity of perspectives and, as such, challenging textual authority within her own text. However, it is ironic that Moi's perception of Woolf as a particularly striking example of a feminist writer leads her to replicate Showalter's own progression from a personal interpretation to 'a' historical truth about who is the most feminist writer of 'us' all. Accordingly Moi directs 'us' to our proper origin:

'A feminist criticism that would do both justice and homage to its great mother and sister: this, surely, should be our goal.'

Virginia Woolf thus emerges from Moi's text as 'our' mother, whom 'we' should as daughters, to quote Showalter out of context, 'honor'. The death of the author, that Moi recommends, lapses into a portrayal of 'our' feminist literary family tree.
I would suggest that presenting the 'death of the author' as a progressive critical strategy overlooks the importance of accountability, by which I mean the significance of which authors are being reviewed, published and discussed by cultural critics. This is particularly important for radical critical theories, such as feminism, where authorial identity is an issue. Certainly, it is clearly easier for white, western, middle-class, heterosexual feminist critics to dismiss the relevance of authorship, since they dominate written 'feminist' debate. I would argue that retaining the significance of authorship is crucial if 'we' are to dismantle authorial attempts to present themselves as politically and textually neutral.

In 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness', Showalter depicts the female tradition as, once in place, acting independently as an autonomous organism:

'One of the great advantages of the women's cultural model is that it shows how the female tradition can be a positive source of strength and solidarity as well as a negative strength of powerlessness; it can generate its own experiences and symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition.'

However, what this account fails to acknowledge is that there is another effect of power present here, namely the power to determine what is not a part of 'the' female tradition. The solidarity and strength that Showalter refers to may well challenge 'the' male tradition by its very difference, but it is also derived from the exclusion of women's writing. The solidarity of any tradition is, in short, dependent on the assumption that 'we' know which writing to exclude. I would argue that this belief that 'the' best texts are instantly identifiable should be traced directly back to those critics who assume to know what best constitutes 'our' tradition and feminist writing.
Toril Moi and Elaine Showalter may disagree about what it is that best constitutes feminist writing, but they both assume that they are able to locate 'the' best feminist writers. Moi, like Dale Spender, proposes that 'we' read past feminist writing as daughters. Clearly, Woolf is less of a mother to working-class women, black women, and third world women, but this does not prevent Moi from employing the feminist 'we'. I would suggest that this unlikely convergence between Moi and Showalter occurs because both critics have failed to question the implications of notions of literary genius for feminist critical accounts that wish to retain the feminist 'we' as its principal subject. As Lillian Robinson points out in her essay, 'Treason our text: feminist challenges to the literary canon', feminist attempts to insert previously unacknowledged women writers into 'a' female tradition inevitably infuse feminist criticism with hierarchical assumptions about literary production:

Obviously, no challenge is presented to the particular notions of literary quality, timelessness, universality, and other qualities that constitute the rationale for canonicity. The underlying argument, rather, is that consistency, fidelity to those values, requires recognition of at least the few best and best-known women writers. Equally obviously, this approach does not call the notion of the canon itself into question. [69]

The extent to which the literary, as a site of power, is left unscathed by feminist accounts that wish to assert the neglect of women writers of genius is clear in the work of Dale Spender.

In The Writing Or The Sex Or Why You Don't Have To Read Women's Writing To Know It's No Good, published in 1989, Spender argues that the neglect of women writers begins with the unequal literary education of girls:

What if their 'English Education' has been to prepare them to be the handmaidens of literary men? Is it possible that women have been trained to excel in technical correctness so that they can all do the maintenance work on men's creative contributions...education paves the way for this theft of
women's intellectual and creative resources. \[60\]

It is upon this opening premise that Spender bases her subsequent discussion of the unequal treatment of women at the hands of reviewers and publishers and the literary establishment in general. While this produces compelling evidence of the patriarchal bias of literary institutions, I would argue that it is undermined by Spender's reading of this as exclusively a matter of gender.

Spender's account fails to recognise that the literary establishment's endorsement of Standard English, with its accompanying grammatical rules and conventions, disadvantages both men and women for whom this is not their first language or dialect. Her text depicts 'women' as a unified group of equally disadvantaged members of society. However, the racial and class differences amongst women undermines this as a tenable proposal. Women themselves are clearly not all equally disadvantaged; for many women even pursuing the 'maintenance work' is an unavailable option.

Spender's dissatisfaction with the patriarchal bias of the literary arena is, I would suggest, marked by a lack of critical attention to the wider hierarchies upon which 'the' literary is constituted. It is gender, not class or race, that concerns Spender and this is soon apparent in her text. Thus, she criticises the literary, whilst at the same time re-employing traditional literary notions of genius and excellence to argue for the recognition of 'women'. Spender, using 'women' as her focus, proceeds to map out a very specific group of women:

In educational institutions in the western world, it is girls who are routinely rated as better writers... if girls were getting a fair hearing and were \textit{legitimately being judged as superior}, then the poor representation of women as professional writers, critics, reviewers and the like is all the more significant. For this would mean that not only were women underrepresented in those areas which depend upon the writing skill - it would mean that the best writers were being excluded. \[61\]
In this account, if the existing western cultural apparatus finds women and girls to be better at writing, then this demonstrates that their subsequent treatment is not only unfair to themselves but also to the literary arena.

Ultimately, for Spender, incorporating women fairly into the literary arena would strengthen the apparent concern with literary excellence. Thus, the literary emerges as 'the' crucial and potentially ideologically neutral site. The literary arena can, in this reading, now accommodate women precisely because the literary conventions of hierarchical expert evaluations of narratives have not undergone any fundamental investigation. The ability of these conventions to justify the exclusion of large numbers of writers from 'the' literary arena is not addressed, rather, the crucial point is its failure to include women writers in this project. I would argue that it is precisely Spender's acceptance of the literary arena as an exclusive haven for a few uniquely gifted individuals that problematises her assertion that she is incorporating 'women' into it.

For Spender, 'women' and the literary emerge as the most obvious and just alliance of all because women, it seems, write 'better' texts than men. There is no recognition here that there might be dissent as to what it is that constitutes 'better' writing. Furthermore, her initial conception of western, educational institutions as sites of patriarchal power is, nevertheless, the very same site that she invokes as evidence of the superior writing ability of girls. The existence of the literary arena as one of rare, individual talent is not in itself a problem, or at least, it is only a problem if it fails to include 'good' women writers.

Thus, in Spender's account, the literary as an exclusive site is preserved, only this time it is women writers who can best demonstrate the credibility of the literary as a sphere of excellence and genius. The
incompatibility that lies at the crux of feminist attempts to both establish 'a' female tradition and argue that this should be seen as a radical feminist activity is addressed by Lillian Robinson. She points out that feminist critics who wish to establish a canon of women's writing have had to negotiate a literary value system that has been particularly suitable for excluding women writers, whilst arguing for a female canon on the same basis of rarified literary excellence:

"What is involved here is more like the agony of feminist criticism, for it is the champions of women's literature who are torn between defending the quality of their discoveries and radically redefining literary quality itself."^{33}

This 'agony' is very much the subject of Jane Gallop's, Around 1981 [Academic Feminist Literary Theory], published in 1992. Gallop, citing Robinson, suggests that this dilemma should be seen as extending beyond the concerns of feminist critics who wish to propose 'a' female tradition. Thus, she argues that:

When feminist literary criticism devotes itself to geniuses like Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, it contradicts feminism by preferring the woman who is different from and better than other women. But in that contradiction, feminist criticism participates in the general feminist embrace of great women. The contradiction between feminism and (academic) criticism can also be found as a contradiction within feminism. The feminist identifies with other women but also struggles to rise above the lot of women. Feminism both desires superior women and celebrates the common woman."^{33}

I would argue that Gallop's attempt to reformulate Robinson's analysis of gynocriticism into one that relates to 'feminism in general' is highly problematic. Gallop does not explain in what ways Dickinson and Woolf are 'different' from and 'better' than 'other' women. Instead, 'genius' is enlisted in order to state what is an extremely questionable assumption about women 'in general'.

Gallop, without ever actually explaining how she has acquired her
insights into 'feminism' and 'women', proceeds to assert what it is that most accurately characterises them. Thus, feminism is, apparently, preoccupied with 'great' women. It is due to this, Gallop suggests, that 'the' feminist can be recognised by her desire to distinguish herself from most 'other' women. Identification, then, is primarily a matter of discovering that women as a group, or class, are deficient in some crucial way. Finally, this particular feminist, that Gallop depicts, then comes to represent the aims of 'feminism'.

Gallop's reading should be regarded as representing an element of some feminist thought rather than as an all-purpose definition for 'feminism' itself. In fact, this particular analysis raises a crucial problem within mainstream feminist literary theory; namely, its assumption of the inferior identity of most women. In Gallop's account, 'the' common woman is recruited as the essential but inadequate context that 'great' women transcend and women in general attempt to rise above. I would query how the masses of women that apparently provide this deficient context can be viewed as sharing a conception of themselves as inferior to these few great women.

For, Gallop is not only suggesting that most women want to be 'better' than other women, but also that most of them fail in this endeavour, thus leaving 'the' feminist, and 'feminism', caught between the desire for great women and an unhappy identification with the majority of women who simply are not great. It is significant that she conceals her actual proposition by juxtaposing 'superior' women, not with 'inferior' women but with "the lot of women". The clearly delineated 'great' woman is thus set alongside a vague reference to a general condition.

Gallop's attempt to negotiate her notion of unequal women into a
radical feminist theoretical framework leads her back to Lillian Robinson's essay. Thus, she draws on Robinson's suggestion that:

"It is not role-models we need so much as a mass movement, not celebration of individual struggle...so much as a recognition that we are all heroes."

Significantly, Gallop does not criticise Robinson for employing a notion of 'heroes' as a productive way in which to envision 'the' masses. Instead, she attempts to restore 'common sense' to what is by now an extremely complicated impasse. Thus, Gallop counters Robinson, by noting that:

'Whether in some ideal superior version of feminism, 'serious' feminists would completely shun 'hero-worshipping', in the real, 'popular' form that feminism is usually found, we tend to celebrate exceptional individual women.'

In the end, Gallop asserts, no matter what lofty aims academic feminists entertain about their choice of subject matter, out there in the 'real' world, 'popular' feminism continues to celebrate individual talent.

What interests me about both Robinson's and Gallop's proposals is the way in which the gifted individual is retained as a particularly appropriate concept for 'popular' feminism. Feminism, if 'we' are talking about a 'mass' movement, becomes cast as the most demanding of all feminisms of 'great' individual women. Thus, Robinson, despite her commitment to 'women', registers her perception of this as an inadequate concern by proposing that 'we' attempt the impossible; namely, apply a notion that is only applicable to a limited number of individuals, to 'us' all. In Gallop's account, the hierarchical activity of hero worshipping is assigned to the popular arena, whilst the radical desire to not engage with notions of individual talent is defined as a 'superior' version of 'feminism'. Thus, the reasons for 'feminism's' concentration upon individual women is displaced from the critical arena into the popular one.
This tension between literary values and 'feminist' ones seems, in this account, unresolvable, since the only solution appears to lie in redefining 'mass' feminism as particularly engaged with hierarchical values. Gallop's attempt to assert that feminist literary criticism is feminist, because it responds to the elitist demands of 'popular' feminism, reflects a straightforward imbalance between her commitment to 'literature' as a site of rare female talent, and her commitment to women 'in general'. Indeed, Gallop's review of Linda Ray Pratt makes precisely this point:

The feminist literary academic speaks not only as a woman but also from a professional identity she has invested much time and effort to acquire. We should perhaps not be surprised to find that the feminist literary critic speaks out of a vested interest in literature, speaks 'from the standpoint of literary criticism'.

Literary criticism, in other words, even if prefixed by feminism, cannot undergo any fundamental change. I would argue that this underlying loyalty to 'literature' and 'literary criticism' is derived from the accommodation of liberal, white, western, middle class, heterosexual feminist writing into the literary arena. I would suggest that this particular feminist discourse has been accepted into the literary arena by the former 'gatekeepers' in the hope that they will respect dominant cultural literary values.

I would argue that the publication of women writers and the appearance of 'women's studies' in institutions is not simply the result of feminist protest, but is also a strategic attempt by those who benefit from capitalist patriarchal values and institutions to absorb and modify feminism as a radical ideology. Thus, while some aspects of feminist debate have flourished in the media, those aspects which most challenge dominant cultural values have been largely ignored. In this sense, I would argue that feminist debates concerning the relationship between the literary and
'feminism' offer crucial insights into how feminist politics are being conceived.

I want to continue my examination of the relationship between 'feminist' and 'literary' values by examining the ways in which black feminist thought has negotiated this tension.

vi. Black Feminist Critical Contexts

As Elaine Showalter pointed out, the impatience of white, western feminists at their exclusion from the literary arena resulted in extensive criticism of women's neglect and misrepresentation in mainstream literature and criticism. However, the exclusion of black women from this enterprise gave black feminist criticism an entirely different context. Thus, early black feminist critical work focused on the racism at the heart of white, western feminism.

Moreover, the racism that had prompted their neglect led to early fears that inclusion could prove to be equally damaging. Thus, Barbara Smith, in her essay, 'Toward a black feminist criticism', expressed her fears for black and lesbian women if they did prove to be of interest to white, middle-class heterosexual feminists:

'There is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women's experience through studying our history, literature and culture. There is no political presence that demands a minimal level of consciousness and respect for those who write or talk about our lives...Showalter obviously thinks that the identities of being Black and female are mutually exclusive, as this statement illustrates: "Furthermore, there are other literary subcultures (black American novelists, for example) whose history offers a precedent for feminist scholarship to 'use'". The idea of critics like Showalter using Black literature is chilling, a case of barely disguised cultural imperialism. The final insult is that she footnotes the preceding remark by pointing...
readers to work on Black literature by white males.

For black feminist critics like Smith then, the problems of inclusion were as pressing as those of exclusion. Smith's sense of isolation contrasts with white, middle-class, heterosexual feminist criticism which was beginning to develop into a 'body' of work.

However, since the publication of Smith's essay in 1977, the literary and critical vacuum that she drew attention to has been increasingly challenged. In 1982, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was published, and in that same year the first anthology of black women's studies, *But Some Of Us Are Brave* appeared. Three years later, the anthology * Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* was published. Both anthologies illustrate the importance of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston to contemporary black feminist studies.

Walker introduced her 1984 text, *In Search Of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* by delineating the difference of black women's 'feminism', a term which she explicitly challenged through her employment of the term 'womanist'. Walker explained this as: "A black feminist or feminist of color", who could be identified by her commitment to human survival and by her preference for women and female culture. 'Womanist' also emphasised the importance of the mother-daughter relationship and reached for specifically black female experiences that were not offered by the term 'feminist'. Thus, Walker concluded her definition by asserting that: "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender".

Walker, in the same way as Barbara Smith, begins by stressing the difficulties involved in writing in a cultural vacuum. She cites Toni Morrison's comment that she wrote the kinds of books she wanted to be able to read, as applicable to the motivation behind her own writing. Hence, the
title of the first article in the collection, 'Saving the life that is your own', emphasises this connection between past and present existence. Walker alerts her readers to the sense of isolation that a writer/artist experiences when he or she is denied any sense of collective history:

'The absence of models, in literature as in life... is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect— even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence. 

Walker's subsequent attempt to outline a theoretical framework for a black female tradition offers crucial insights into the tensions that occur when black feminist writers attempt to unite the re-construction of a female literary tradition with black 'folk' culture.

It is this desire to relate literature to the black community that, I would argue, resides at the heart of Afro-American feminist discussions of a black female tradition. Thus, Walker identifies the absence of a black reading public as constituting, "our main problem". This concern to relate literary and critical work to the black community is a preoccupation that runs through contemporary black feminist studies. The importance of community to black feminism means that gender difference, as a primary mark of oppression, is constantly set alongside the significance of racial and class difference.

Walker rejects the notion that black men are not recipients of oppressive dominant cultural theories and practices, and also extends this perception to white men. Accordingly, she discusses the isolation and financial hardship of artists by referring to Vincent Van Gogh, a white, male painter. Throughout her text, Walker relates the experiences of being black and female alongside questions of racial and class oppression. As she explains:
'I am drawn to working-class characters as I am to working-class people in general. I have a basic antagonism toward the system of capitalism.'

Walker's concern with oppression, wherever it occurs, is one that prevents her from viewing black female experiences as something to assert over other experiences, particularly those of black men.

Walker, like bell hooks, throughout her work emphasises the need for black people to reject an antagonistic stance towards each other based on sexual difference. The restoration of a black female tradition, and the publishing of contemporary writing by black women, is not something that writers such as bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, or Walker want to see in terms of competition with black men. Thus, the recapture of a black female literary tradition intersects with the aim of, as Alexis Deveaux puts it, promoting 'race consciousness' through 'racial memory'.

However, black feminist criticism has also drawn attention to the imbalance between black men and black women in the literary arena. The hostility of some black male writers to the success of a small number of black women writers provoked Michelle Wallace to devote her first critical work to the sexism of black male writers. Thus, in 1978, Wallace wrote Black Macho And The Myth Of Superwoman, in which she explored the double burden of racism and sexism that black women labour under. Wallace's highlighting of black male sexism was received coolly by both black men and black women.

I would argue that the reluctance of prominent black female writers to support Wallace's study was prompted more by their awareness that this would be welcomed by a predominantly white, racist society than that Wallace had actually said anything that was overly contentious. Wallace herself writing fourteen years later in Invisibility Blues: From Pop To
Theory commented that the sales figures for her book had been exaggerated by the media, reinforcing its problematic popularity in an overwhelmingly white literary arena.

The desire of black feminist critics to unite with black men against racism is complicated by the hostility of leading black male writers to black women. Walker responded to Ishmael Reed's accusation that he only sold eight thousand copies of his last book, but would have sold more if he had been a black lesbian, by reminding him that, in a racist society, the survival of black people is at stake:

'Ve live in a society that is racist and white. That is one problem. Another is, we don't have a large black readership. That is our main problem... None of us will survive except in very distorted ways if we have to depend on white publishers and white readers. And white critics.'

Walker tackled Reed by emphasising the convenience to a racist society of divisions within the black community. Nevertheless, it is obviously black women that black feminist criticism focuses upon. The attempt to record black female experiences involves a fundamental distinction from white mainstream feminist criticism which occurs in their different perceptions of the literary arena.

For black feminist criticism, as for white working-class criticism, the literary is perceived in terms of its desire to remain inhabited only by white, western, middle-class, preferably male and heterosexual, authored texts. Thus, black feminist accounts often cite the prohibiting of black people from reading and writing under slavery. Walker and hooks document black women's creativity alongside their textual production. Walker draws attention to this in her title, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, in which she relates the importance of largely unrecognised creative pursuits such as gardening and quilt making to black female
As Walker points out, a history of black female experience has to recognise that most black women’s creativity was involved in areas outside of the prohibited literary arena.

Moreover, for Walker, contemporary black women need to recover the lives of their ‘foremothers’ in order to secure their own survival. Black women are in this sense all bound to each other:

‘I understand that each woman is capable of truly bringing another into the world. This we must all do for each other.’

Walker’s subsequent restoration of the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston involved this simultaneous sense of rescue both for an unrecognised writer and an entire collective heritage. Thus, Walker cited the importance of Hurston’s fundamental empathy for black women and men which underlay her expression of the connections and ruptures between them.

Walker shares Showalter’s concern for the literary neglect of women and her interest in their importance for an understanding of what is meant by the term ‘woman’. However, Walker’s interest in the community as a whole sets her apart from Showalter, who is concerned to document ‘female’ experience which she assumes can be achieved through a focus upon white women writers. For Walker, identification is not confined to a notion of gender or literature. Certainly however, her primary identification is with her literary foremothers, specifically Zora Neale Hurston. Women, not surprisingly, are the particular focus for black feminists like Walker:

‘So many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are our mother’s stories...through years of listening to my mothers’ stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded...Guided by my heritage of love and beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own.’

It is these mothers that Walker wants to define as essential to her self and to relocate as crucial to the black community as a whole. However,
Walker's definition of Hurston as a genius produces tensions similar to those that I have discussed in terms of gynocriticism. I will now analyse the tensions that, I would argue, are produced in black feminist attempts to link the importance of community with a notion of genius.

vii. Black 'Folk' and the Importance of Genius

In 'Zora Neale Hurston: a cautionary tale and a partisan view',\textsuperscript{390} Walker is keen to emphasise that the establishment of Hurston as a genius - Walker placed a stone near her unmarked grave proclaiming her a literary foremother and a 'Genius of the South'. Walker argues that Hurston's genius should be recognised in order to effect the restoration of black folk culture. In this reading, the tension between genius and folk is collapsed into a celebration of black people. The connection between the community that Hurston grew up in and her writing are presented as mutually exclusive:

'When I read \textit{Mules and Men} I was delighted. Here was the perfect book! The 'perfection' of which I immediately tested on my relatives, who are such typical black Americans they are useful for every sort of political, cultural, or economic survey...a kind of paradise was regained. For what Zora's book did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed...Zora grew up in a community of black people who had enormous respect for themselves...This community affirmed her right to exist, and loved her as an extension of itself.\textsuperscript{913}

Thus, for Walker, genius, far from being a category that promotes notions of individuality and exclusion, is the best term to apply to the expression of black folk culture.

Hurston's genius both demonstrates the limitations of many of her contemporaries and provides a crucial record of black history:
Her work, so vigorous among the rather pallid productions of many of her contemporaries, comes from the essence of black folk life.

Moreover, for Walker, Hurston also signals the crucial task facing contemporary black people:

"We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children."

Walker's autobiographical account of reading *Mules and Men* with her relatives emphasises how such work restores the connections that make contemporary black 'community' possible. In 'My statue, my self: autobiographical writings of Afro-American women', Elizabeth Fox-Genovese also depicts Hurston as possessing a unique ability to represent the collective historical experiences of black people. Fox-Genovese, like Walker, equates the authentication of Hurston's stature as inseparable from the authentication of the Afro-American female literary tradition as a whole.

There are, however, problematic consequences that such depictions of writers and their relation to their community produce. The risk is always that the activity of the individuals in that community become defined by a particular individual. Thus, the community becomes important as something that is under the principal ownership of the individual. It becomes, through 'their' representation, quite literally 'theirs'. I am not convinced that stressing that 'the' community has an equal part in this relationship, because it is the site from which such individuals spring, does much to return the individual back to the community on equal terms. Gillian Beer alludes to this in her essay, 'Representing women: representing the past':

"Representations rapidly become representatives - those empowered to speak on behalf of their constituency: the authentic voices of a group. That is where the trouble starts when the claim is representing women: speaking on
behalf of women - speaking on behalf of who. Are we offering and receiving formulations of an abiding group; offering accounts of a person, or a group of people, conceived as stable? Beer's questions, I would suggest, apply equally to those efforts which attempt to establish writers, such as Hurston, with the capacity to articulate the consciousness of black 'folk'.

Focusing on an individual, a fundamental operation of literary studies, involves a temporary suspension of the disparate strands of thoughts and beliefs of those individuals that constitute the individual's community. The process of clarifying and examining an individual involves a notion of difference from what becomes, temporarily, a cohesive group. This is not in itself a fundamental problem; however, I would suggest that, it becomes highly problematic if it causes the portrayal of 'the' community to remain cast as a cohesive backdrop for a specific individual.

Clearly, both Fox-Genovese and Walker are committed to restoring black experiences, as expressed by black female writers, to the contemporary arena. However, the question is whether this can be achieved through the texts of a selected number of writers. After all, a writer is unable to conveniently remove herself or himself from the text in order to permit the contemporary reader access to those experiences that she, or he, has not voiced. However, whilst the genius of certain black women writers may have escaped scrutiny as a productive notion for black feminist criticism, the complexity of the relationship between past and present has received considerable emphasis.
viii. Conceptions of the Past

The black feminist anthology, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction And Literary Tradition*, takes as its subject the intersection between black women and the black community. The different conclusions that the two editors, Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, make about this relation demonstrates how complex an issue it is. For Pryse, the anthology reflects the successful integration of black women's experiences with those of black folk:

'The 'ancient power' black women writers document in their fiction and express as the intersection of black, female, and folk vision serves as a predominant and unifying concern for the writers of many of the essays in this collection, as well as for the novelists themselves.'

However, the strength of this claim is undermined by Spillers' unease at whether black women academics can express the 'ancient power' of black folk culture within the academy. Thus, Spillers voices a warning in the 'Afterword' that the interests of the American Academy could work against those black women who want to reclaim the power of folk writing. This is, I would suggest, to overlook the equally critical question of whether black women, academic or otherwise, can in fact reclaim this 'ancient power'.

I would argue that feminist attempts to 'reclaim' a collective experience through past texts often assume a hierarchical relationship between the past and the present. Thus the past, and its writers, are assumed to have a less developed consciousness than that available to present writers. In *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory*, Jane Gallop focuses upon the depiction of Walker's relation to Hurston in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction And Literary Tradition*. Gallop wonders if the anthology does not in fact locate Walker as both a familial and a literary progression from Hurston:
The relationship is thus construed in two opposite ways: in one Hurston is a first draft for Walker; in the other, Walker is a secondary reflection of Hurston. These two versions of the relationship bespeak a tension, if not a paradox, absolutely central to the literary tradition Pryse would portray, a tradition which would honour the mother, but which also surpasses the mother precisely in its ability to 'go home to look for mother' [99].

Gallop offers this insight as evidence of the inbuilt dynamics of literary traditions in general when, citing Pryse, she agrees that:

"Literary traditions in general" are formed by looking backwards through specific and embodied eyes and often...in order to construe the past as forerunners and precursors leading up to a privileged work or author or movement in the present. And as in any search for roots, the past is seen as leading up to the present in as much as the present is in search of its own past. [99]

Gallop moves on to provide her own validation of this assumption about history that literary traditions produce:

"African-American women's fiction is progressively improving; the contemporary novels are the best that have ever been seen." [100]

It is significant that Gallop's illustration of the way in which Pryse's introductory tribute to "the powers of Hurston and Walker" is not a case of "simple ancestor worship" preserves a notion of the past as more simple than the present.

Gallop stresses to her readers that there is: "at once progress and movement backward". [102] The past can only be conceived of in terms of re-discovery; it is of interest to Gallop only in so far as it obstructs a definitive relation to the present. What is missing is a consideration of the past as, at times, falling beyond, or outside what Patricia Hill Collins calls "the knowledge claims" of the present. [103] Gillian Beer draws her readers' attention to the implications of such oversights:

The encounter with the otherness of earlier literature can allow us also to recognise and challenge our own assumptions, and those of the society in which we live. To do so we must take care not to fall into the trap of assuming the evolutionist model of literary development, so often taken for granted, in which texts are praised for their 'almost modern awareness' or for being 'ahead of their time'. This presentist mode of argument takes now
as the source of authority, the only real place.

Accepting then the ability of contemporary readers to define the characteristics of the past, Gallop proceeds to investigate the tensions that occur between these 'hardworking' foremothers and their 'brilliant' literary daughters.

Gallop picks up particularly on the problems of potential conflict for this relationship. The possibility of a lack of understanding between these foremothers and their daughters serves to deconstruct the familial connection that writers such as Pryse and Walker are keen to acknowledge. Gallop cites Toni Morrison's novel, *Tar Baby*, as an exploration of the possibility of viewing the relationship in degenerative terms. The heroine, Jadine, is successful, but has 'lost' her ability to empathise and nurture, and is in this sense estranged from her foremothers.

Gallop's reading of *Tar Baby* provides a useful example of her own willingness to accept the idea that contemporary readers are able to accurately construct 'a' historical identity. Gallop, by focusing on the tensions between black 'mothers' and 'daughters', exhibits her belief that 'the' foremothers are accessible and identifiable for present concerns. However, as Gillian Beer in 'Representing women: re-presenting the past', suggests:

The task of the literary historian is to receive the same fullness of resource from past texts as from present: to respect their difference, to revive those shifty significations which do not pay court to our concerns but are full of the meaning of that past present... We are not at work on a supine or docile text which we can colonise with our meaning or meanings. Instead we have difficult inter-action.

Beer's discussion of the consequences of selecting 'the' applicable connections between the past and present, and then treating them as an authentic account of history is, I would argue, of crucial importance for
historical work. This is not to suggest that reading the past is not important, but rather to inject a reading of historical texts, or oral stories, with the same complexity that we afford to contemporary writing. As Beer points out, if the past is read solely as a means of providing a relevant connection to the present, then that past becomes represented as something more comprehensible and simple than the present:

'The problem with the concept of relevance is that it assumes an autonomous and coherent subject... Relevance assumes fixity - it is not self-questioning and does not incorporate change... The inquisitorial reading of past literature for correctness and error cast us as the inquisitors: we identify with authority and externality.

This simplification of the past is very much in evidence in Gallop's discussion where the foremothers exist as inert embodiments of nurture and spiritual wisdom.

Throughout her text, Gallop replicates the qualities of these foremothers which prominent Afro-American feminists have ascribed to them. 'Foremothers' are 'fixed' and straightforward in her text, as opposed to the complexity which is afforded to contemporary black female writers. Gallop identifies the daughter's possible "awe" at her "hardworking foremother" as the only site of tension between the mother-daughter relationship. This is not to suggest that there were not black women who experienced a close communion with nature, family and spiritual life, but rather to object to the imposition of a coherent identity on past existence.

Gillian Beer draws her reader's attention to the importance of recognising that a desire to recover the past intersects with motivations that are very much the concern of the present. In this sense, the identification of a black female tradition as possessing a motherly strength automatically undermines any sense that the past was as
contradictory a site of identity as is the present. Gloria Wade-Gayle addresses this issue in 'The truths of our mothers' lives':

'Those of us who search in Black women's fiction for mother-daughter relationships are often disappointed by the recurring image of the cold, distant and domineering mother. We want to see mothers embracing their daughters—loving them openly and unashamedly. We want to see mothers and daughters sharing laughter and bearing their souls to each other in moments of intimacy. And yet, we want the truth of our mothers' lives, even if those truths are sometimes 'cruel enough to stop the blood.' We must see them first as persons with dreams and needs no less important than ours, and then as mothers who sacrificed their dreams in order to put our hands on the pulse of freedom and self-hood. We dare today to search for sisterhood because our mothers, our 'sister warrior(s)' taught us the beauty of struggle.'

Wade-Gayle's juxtaposition of a positive historical narrative of black women's relationships with their mothers, with one that serves to refute this, exposes how the presentation of an essential historical 'truth' marginalises some black women from a tradition that purports to represent them all.

In terms of constructing 'a' female literary tradition then, critics will select those narratives that most accurately fit a pattern that has been, to some extent, defined by the present. Hurston's interest in black people is evident. However, what is not so definite, I would argue, is whether this can provide a starting point from which to build an authentic history of black female experience. Arguably, it is precisely the inability of the past to operate as a coherent entity for the present that plagues literary traditions: there is always room for disagreement about which narratives have been selected, and always a sense that too much has been left out.

As Hortense Spillers points out, the black feminist desire to record and sustain an expression of black people, both in the past and the present, is articulated through the 'elite institution of the American
academy. The predominantly white Academy as the major debating site for black feminism is, not surprisingly, viewed with some concern by black feminists. I will conclude this chapter by discussing contemporary black and white feminist perceptions of their relationship with the literary arena and their perceptions of its role for feminist literary traditions.

ix. Contemporary Feminist 'Literary' Theory

In Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction And Literary Tradition, Spillers alludes to the incorporation of black feminist work in the American Academy:

"The American academy, despite itself, is one of the enabling postulates of black women's literary community simply because it is not only a source of income for certain individual writers, but also a point of dissemination and inquiry for their work." ¹¹⁰

Spiller's hopes that this tension can produce "fruitful contradictions".¹¹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, in 'The politics of black feminist thought' also expresses a belief in the possibility of the academy not standing in the way of an academic black feminist concern with, and respect for 'ordinary knowledge':

"A similar process of deconstruction must be applied to the concept of intellectual. Just as theories, epistemologies, and facts produced by any group of individuals represent the standpoints and interests of their creators, the very definition of who is legitimated to do intellectual work is also politically contested... Reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition involves much more than developing Black feminist analyses using standard epistemological criteria. It also involves challenging the very definitions of intellectual discourse." ¹¹²

Thus, Collins, unlike Gallop, suggests that it is the literary arena that is most in need of re-evaluation.

However, the problematic implications of a black 'folk' vision being expressed through the academy permeates contemporary black feminist
thought. For ultimately, as Gallop points out, the central problem that black women are embroiled in when they reconstruct a literary tradition based on a folk vision is what the literary academy will do with that vision. Where is the vision going? Who else besides academics and graduates are going to read these 'ordinary' experiences? A small number of black female writers have undoubtedly been supported by the higher echelons of literary production, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in particular, but most experience difficulty in being published and marketed by high profile presses and so are denied the possibility of a wide readership.

A striking and predictable consequence of the black feminist literary tradition, which arguably most especially wants to produce a 'folk' vision, is that it very easily becomes the focal point for wider feminist discussions of the relation between 'ordinary' experiences and literary representations. Thus, Jane Gallop, in *Around 1981* (*Academic Feminist Literary Theory*), selects black feminism as the context for discussing the tensions between the academy and 'ordinary' people. Showalter, in the same book, is discussed in terms of how far her model of gynocriticism produces restrictions and limits on other feminist theories. References to the significance of the absence of 'ordinary' women in Showalter's critical vocabulary are conspicuously absent in Gallop's discussion.

This association of white academic feminism with 'theory' and black academic feminism with 'ancient power' is, Gallop informs her readers, a peculiarly white academic fantasy:

I want the conjure woman; I want some ancient power that stands beyond the reaches of white male culture. I want black women as the idealised and exoticised alternative to European high culture. I want some pure outside...I consider this illusion central to our reading of black women. We must confront our wish to find this ancient power, this pure outside of academic culture, before we deconstruct or correct our illusion.
Unfortunately, this reminder, directed as it is at 'us', goes some way towards reinforcing the assumed identity of the reader of academic texts as a white feminist. In the next page, Gallop refers to Barbara Christian's reading of Paule Marshall's novel, *The Chosen Place, Timeless People*, which depicts the protagonist, Merle, as being both inside and outside of 'her' people. Gallop agrees, and adds:

Her power is not the ancient power of black women but some new admixture of 'black' and 'Western'. The pure is attractive, not just for black nationalists but for white academics dreaming of an outside of Western culture. The pure is attractive, but we must try to affirm worldly impurity, inevitable mixity. 

Again, Gallop, even as she forwards a case for affirming a less dichotomous perception of black experience, manages to invest such readings with nostalgia and regret. The readers for whom such a binary opposition is impossible in the first place, become, in this scenario, textualised into an idealistic strategy for future feminist theory.

I would contend that Gallop's depiction of this lure of the 'black woman', who apparently represents the antitheses of 'our' perceptions of the literary, reveals the contemporary literary arena as problematic precisely because it facilitates a specifically white reading of black women as 'exotic' 'Others'. In this sense the 'feminism' of feminist literary theory is clearly dependent upon a complete re-evaluation of current literary values and assumptions. Moreover, I would argue that if feminism does not produce a radical shift in 'our' perceptions of the literary, then it risks becoming dispensible.

It is striking that Elaine Showalter's recent work has reflected a move away from her early gynocritical recommendations. Thus, Showalter in her capacity as editor to the volume, *Speaking Of Gender*, published in
1989, announces 'feminism's' departure from gynocriticism and newly found interest in:

reading male texts...as inscriptions of gender and renditions of sexual difference'.

'Feminism' is now concerned with gender. I would argue that this raises the same problem as her previous model of gynocriticism, namely her ability to define 'the' concern of feminism. Indeed, the marginalisation of 'other' feminisms that this entails extends to 'feminism' itself, which is now subordinate to 'gender studies'.

As Tania Modleski points out in her text, Feminism Without Women: Culture And Criticism In A 'Postfeminist' Age, Showalter's recent advocacy of 'gender' is accompanied by a disturbing lack of information as to precisely how this benefits feminism:

Showalter is no longer focused on the question...what's in these new developments for feminism and for women? Showalter writes, 'While men's studies, gay studies and feminist criticism have different priorities, together they are moving beyond 'male feminism' to raise challenging questions about masculinity in literary texts, questions that enable gender criticism to develop'. Feminism, in this formulation, is a conduit to the more comprehensive field of gender studies; no longer is the latter judged, as in my opinion it ought to be, according to the contributions it can make to the feminist project and the aid it can give us in illuminating the causes, effects, scope and limits of male dominance.

I would add that the notion that feminism can be compared with 'gender studies' overlooks feminism's inevitable, and historical, involvement with 'gender' concerns. In other words, 'feminism' is particularly vulnerable as a political viewpoint if it is denied historical agency and is, instead, defined within the parameters of the changing concerns of 'critical' debate.

I would conclude that feminist work on women's literary traditions illuminates the importance of recognising women's historical and current 'difference' in order to regard feminism as involved in a continual
reassessment both of 'its' history and 'its' present. This also locates the
disagreements (and agreement) amongst feminists as constituting feminism's
material and ideological historical significance. For, I would contend,
alongside Audre Lorde, recognising 'difference' is the only way to remove
it from a hierarchical conceptual framework. Thus, I will conclude by
citing Lorde's own conclusion to her essay, 'The master's tools will never
dismantle the master's house':

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of
acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of
difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who
are older, know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how
to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common
cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to
define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how
to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will
never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat
him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine
change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define
the master's house as their only source of support.'

Lorde's references to traditional 'masterful' discourses can usefully be
applied to feminist historical work that attempts to incorporate notions of
unique individual talent with a desire to record women's collective
experiences. Lorde's crucial point is that radical projects such as
recording, women's history and women's 'difference' needs an entirely
different theoretical and practical framework if it is to break away from
traditional discourses of domination.

In my final chapter I will discuss the ways in which the 'difference'
between the 'first' and 'third' world is articulated in contemporary
feminist debate. I will analyse these debates specifically in terms of
their ability to provide radical feminist methods with which we can begin
to discuss 'our' historical and current differences. Finally, I will
explore the question, raised by Audre Lorde, of what 'we' should do with our differences.
Notes


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., pp. 114-47.

4. Ibid., p. 118.

5. Ibid., pp. 118-9.

6. Ibid., p. 117.

7. Ibid., p. 117.

8. Ibid. pp. 121-3 and further references

9. Ibid.

10. See Franklin R. Leavis (1962), and Thomas S. Eliot (1919), (1923).


14. I discuss Moi and Gallop's criticisms of Showalter later in this chapter.


22. Ibid., p. 246.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 248.


27. Ibid., p. 260.


34. Ibid., p. 172.

35. Ibid.


38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., p. 6.


42. Showalter E, 'Toward a feminist poetics', p. 141.
44. Detailed in Showalter E, 'The feminist critical revolution', pp. 5-6.
45. Showalter E, 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness', p. 266.
46. Showalter E, 'Toward a feminist poetics', p. 130.
47. Ibid.
49. See for example, Toril Moi (1985), Sydney Janet Kaplan (1985).
50. Moi T, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 3.
53. Showalter E, 'The feminist critical revolution', p. 16.
54. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 63.
57. Ibid., p. 18.
61. Ibid., p. 93.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., pp. 138-9.
66. Ibid., p. 89.
67. I am drawing on Dale Spender and Lynne Spender’s employment of the term ‘gatekeeping’, by which they mean the ways in which the patriarchal dominant culture effectively denies women access to institutions, such as publishing and education. See Dale Spender (1981) and Lynne Spender (1983).

68. See Barbara Smith (1977), bell hooks (1981), and Angela Davis (1983).


74. Ibid., pp. xi-xii.

75. Ibid., p. 4.


78. Walker A, 'In conversation with Claudia Tate', p. 185.


81. Deveaux A, 'In conversation with Claudia Tate', in Black Women Writers At Work, p. 58.


83. Wallace refers to the critical reception of Black Macho throughout her text Invisibility Blues: From Pop To Theory, Verso, London: 1992. Wallace relates the criticisms of Alice Walker and June Jordan and comments that this may have been relevant but that the level of anger that her text caused in the black critical community also revealed how difficult it is to express criticism as a black woman.

84. Wallace M, Invisibility Blues: From Pop To Theory, p. 162.
85. Walker A, 'In conversation with Cludia Tate', p. 182.


87. Walker A, In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens, p. 241 and further references.


89. Ibid., p. 240.

90. Ibid., p. 115.

91. Ibid., pp. 84-5.

92. Ibid., p. 89.

93. Ibid., p. 92.


98. Ibid., p. 144.

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid., p. 148.

101. Ibid., p. 145.

102. Ibid., p. 144.


108. Ibid., pp. 67-8.


111. Ibid., pp 166-7.


Chapter Five

Overcoming 'Our' Differences: Feminist Discourses on Women in the 'First' and 'Third' World.

In Chapter four, I concluded that the most urgent task facing feminist theoreticians lies in challenging dominant literary assumptions of the value of individual talent. I would argue that feminist theories need to assume the value of what Toni Cade Bambara calls "a mixed chorus" if they are to extend the concerns of theoretical feminist debates beyond those of a few gifted women who represent 'us' all. For, the crucial question is, I would argue, whether there is any future for feminism as a valid term of struggle for women across the globe. Contemporary western feminist theory has become increasingly concerned with the question of how far feminism can be said to be about 'women' as a cohesive category. In this chapter I want to look at how the relationship between the 'first' and 'third' world is articulated in feminist debate. I will investigate the work of recent feminist theorists on the connections and ruptures that constitute feminism and its subject, women, in order to analyse where the term 'women' is retaining its identification with white, middle-class, western heterosexual women.

The centrality of this question in feminist theory reflects, I would suggest, the recognition that western and academic feminism need a concept of women, even if that constitutes a rethinking of essentialist notions of 'woman', if feminism is to have any political significance. As Ida Blom comments in her essay, 'Global women's history: organising principles and cross-cultural understandings':

'It is tempting to retain the basic notion of a common history for women world-wide...We constantly return to the question of whether there is a single theory in relation to gender analysis that will be applicable world-
wide, such as the theory of patriarchy, or whether each culture requires specific, more culturally limited theories to make sense of its gender arrangements. 

Maria Mies' text, *Patriarchy And Accumulation On A World Scale: Women In The International Division Of Labour*, attempts to retain precisely this notion of the efficacy of a single task and vision for feminists. Accordingly, women should be viewed as existing under the common oppression of patriarchal authority.

I will start by examining Maria Mies' attempt to provide a global definition and context for female oppression and liberation. I will then look at the work of prominent French feminist theorists, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who have attempted to formulate a psychoanalytic approach which, they argue, reveals the universal solidarity of women as a gender class. Finally, I will look at contemporary debates about women's 'difference' and will conclude by considering what possible futures such debate opens up for feminism. I will be doing this in order to support my contention that feminist theories need to find ways of eradicating hierarchical assumptions about women if they are to possess any crucial political significance.

1. Maria Mies' Model of Women's Global Oppression.

Maria Mies' 1986 study, *Patriarchy And Accumulation On A World Scale: Women In The International Division of Labour*, attempts to show how capitalist patriarchy has created an international sexual division of labour that exploits women regardless of the particular political system that they are living in. Mies draws her readers' attention to how the end of the economic
growth period for western capitalism has meant that it is women who have become the first targets of the recession in the west:

The new strategy of rationalization, computerization and automation of production processes and jobs in the service sector has the effect that women are the first to be pushed out of well-paid, qualified and secure jobs in the 'formal sector'. But they are not just being sent back to home and hearth. They are in fact pushed into a whole range of unqualified, low-paid, insecure jobs which they have to do on top of their housework, which more than ever, is considered to be their true vocation. And, contrary to the official conservative ideology on women and the family, the family is no longer a place where women can be sure to find their material existence secured. Man-the-breadwinner, though still the main ideological figure behind the new policies, is empirically disappearing from the stage. Not only does the rising unemployment of men, make their role of breadwinner a precarious one, but marriage for women is no longer an economic guarantee of their lifelong livelihood...The immediate effect of these new economic policies has been a rapid pauperization of women in the western economies. Women constitute the largest section among the 'new poor' in the USA, in France, in England and in West Germany.

For Mies, the economic repercussions of capitalist patriarchy are of a global sexual division of labour connecting the lives of women in the 'developing' world with those in the 'developed' world. Thus, it is the strenuous and unpaid labour of child care and housework that connects women in a global patriarchal system. Moreover, whilst women may have access to employment in times of relative prosperity, it is in a recession that their underlying subordination is exposed by the prioritising of male employment.

The subsequent contemporary pauperization of women has also been the subject of feminist work on eastern Europe after the collapse of state socialism. Irene Dölling, in her essay, 'Between hope and hopelessness: women in the GDR after the turning point', documents how, despite the availability of state subsidised childcare and healthcare facilities, women's secondary position in employment and government resulted in unequal job losses for women after unification. Dölling, writing in 1991, pointed out that:

At this point feminized job categories are especially threatened (women now make up more than 50 per cent of the unemployed and less than 25 per
Dölling, like Mies, is not suggesting that women in the former GDR can be simply set alongside women in western Europe but, rather, bases her discussion upon the premise that women do share a dependence upon ruling patriarchal knowledge systems and institutions. Thus, she contends that:

It may be that women in the GDR have - to a certain degree - overcome their dependence on their husbands through their paid labour. But they are caught at the same time in a dependence upon the 'Father State' of which they are in most cases just as unaware as they would be of their dependence on a husband, and to which they even consent.

Dölling grounds her discussion in a comparison between socialist and capitalist Europe, whereas, Mies' project is the more ambitious one of analysing women's global position with this as a basic premise. Mies does not suggest that the specific conditions determining women's lives are identical, but asserts that unless the conditions of individual women are related to the conditions of other women, there will be no possibility of challenging capitalist patriarchy which produces the oppressive division of labour in the first place:

it would be self-defeating to confine our struggles and analysis to the compartmentalizations capitalist patriarchy has created: if Western feminists would only try to understand women's problems in overdeveloped societies, and if Third World women would only try to restrict their analysis to problems in underdeveloped societies. Because capitalist patriarchy, by dividing and simultaneously linking these different parts of the world, has already created a worldwide context of accumulation within which the manipulation of women's labour and the sexual division of labour plays a crucial role.

Mies is particularly concerned to show how marxist accounts of capitalist exploitation fail to provide any means of securing female emancipation, because they retain a hierarchical distinction between wage-labour and non-wage-labour. Throughout her text Mies challenges patriarchal interpretations of work, such as child-care and relationship-work in general, as 'natural' and therefore independent from the visible
professional arena whose hierarchical status is reflected by the fact that it contains predominantly paid employment for men.\textsuperscript{203}

The connection between what patriarchal knowledge systems recognise as 'work' and women's subsequent economic dependence is crucial to Mies' formulation of a global gender-based oppression. This focus upon women's economic subordination has been challenged by feminists who have perceived materialist feminist accounts to be limiting the scope of feminist discussions of women's oppression.\textsuperscript{203} Thus, Juliet Mitchell in \textit{Women The Longest Revolution: Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis}, faults Engels' work on the family for defining female subordination only in terms of economics:

Engels effectively reduces the problem of women to her capacity to work. He therefore gives her physiological weakness as a primary cause of her oppression.\textsuperscript{203}

Mitchell's case for the incorporation of a psychoanalytic approach to feminism rests on her rejection of the notion that women can be solely defined by their work. In this scenario, 'work' retains a purely economic definition which is precisely what Mies attempts to dismantle.

Mitchell disputes Engels' claim that female equality is conditional upon entry into "socially productive work" and wants to consider factors 'outside' of this frame of reference, such as women's lesser capacity for violence, which she suggests has also been instrumental in women's subordination.\textsuperscript{213} Mitchell combines a rejection of a purely economic approach to women's subordination with an acceptance of the notion of women's relative physical weakness. This is, I would suggest, to overlook the ways in which material and economic factors inevitably intersect with cultural and ideological systems.

Mies' study, although it does not focus on the question of the
relative physical strength of the sexes, goes a long way toward challenging women's physiological weakness simply by documenting the amount of physical labour which women are involved in. Her discussions of tribal divisions of labour and her inclusion of research into contemporary patterns of female labour, in themselves draw attention to the schism that can occur between cultural definitions of womanhood and material conditions experienced by women:

In the Free Production Zones in South-East Asia, Africa and Latin America more than 70 per cent of the labour force is female. However, Mies is more concerned to retain the centrality of labour to an understanding of women's oppression whilst challenging patriarchal definitions of it, which, as she seeks to demonstrate, cuts across communist and capitalist societies; particularly the assumption of what it is that constitutes "socially productive labour".

Of course, the most striking implications of wage labour being allied to socially productive work is the extent to which housework and childcare, and all of what Mies terms 'relationship-work', is subsumed and rendered into an informal and invisible process. Moreover, as Mies demonstrates, women have never been able to gain entry into wage-labour, even in those countries which have attempted to implement a marxist model of government. Mies documents the position of women in the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam after their revolutions and shows how in all three cases the socialization of housework and childcare has been inadequately developed and ultimately dispensed with. Moreover, as in China, even when collectivization was introduced, it retained at its core a traditional conception of the sexual division of labour:

But much of this collectivization was done along the same sexual division of labour as before: men used to go into the more capital-intensive collectivized or state-owned sectors of industry and agriculture, whereas
women had to build up the so-called risk sector in collectivized services, in education and health and in small-scale production of basic consumer goods, in street factories and workshops... Thus, the sexual division of labour coincided with a sectoral division of the economy into the well-known structure of a formal and informal sector where women constituted the bulk of the labour force in the informal sector.

Similarly, in the Soviet Union erratic childcare provisions in the cities were accompanied by unreliable and non-existent ones in rural areas, forcing women to combine agricultural production with housework.

The repercussions of this workload is, as Mies points out, the continued neglect of any state concern with the emancipation of women, because women lack the time to attend the political activities which take place outside of 'working' hours. In all three countries, Mies stresses, the involvement of women in the political process has steadily dropped because of their dual work load. Ultimately, Mies argues, women in such post-revolutionary societies remain cast outside of the spheres targeted for radical change; their exclusion as non-wage labourers or housewives in capitalist patriarchy is replicated in post-revolutionary societies.

I would argue that Mies' attempt to demonstrate the similarity of women's subordination at times brings her dangerously close to undermining the significance of the different ways in which child-care and 'relationship-work' has been constructed within different cultures and political systems. Dölling contends that subsidised child-care from a patriarchal state constitutes a patronising 'gift'. However, whilst I would not disagree with Dölling, Mies' emphasis upon this overlooks the fact that subsidised child-care distinguishes women's lives from those of women living within capitalist-patriarchy where subsidised child-care and maternity leave is often close to non-existent. As Ida Blom points out: 'Western European and American researchers working with the post-war history of women from socialist countries have in some instances - probably correctly - stressed the double burden of work and family responsibility
for women in those countries. But they may have overlooked the importance of women's paid work for changing women's self-perception, for making them aware of their capabilities and providing them with a sense of self-reliance that has given them autonomy and respect in their public as in their private lives.”

Mies does not address this in her study, focusing instead on the lack of female employment that is available in the crippled economies of post revolutionary societies. Mies, like Dülling, points out that whatever differences there may be between women in different countries, they nevertheless share a marked disadvantage in terms of paid employment at times of national crises or upheaval. Thus, she cites the case of Zimbabwe, where the government decided to give the scarce, paid jobs in government or industry to men.

For Mies then, the fundamental connection between women is that their labour, and hence much of their existence, is not recognised either in socialist or capitalist economic models. Moreover, it is this relegation to an invisible and informal sphere that connects the plight of women with that of the colonised:

"It is my thesis that these two processes of colonization and housewifization are closely and causally interlinked. Without the ongoing exploitation of external colonies...the establishment of the 'internal colony', that is a nuclear family and a woman maintained by a male 'breadwinner' would not have been possible."

Mies' attempt to provide a model that necessitates a perception of a global economy that subordinates all women and people in the colonies involves an unusual approach to the 'problem' of privilege that resides within the category of women, a problem that dominates contemporary feminist thought.

Mies' contention that the apparent 'privileges' that constitute western middle-class women's lives are, in fact, better understood as thinly masking patriarchal oppression, contrasts with the work of western feminists such as Elizabeth Spelman. For Spelman, the crucial issue that
feminists must concern themselves with is the inequality that western privilege produces between women:

...in feminist theory it is a refusal to take differences among women seriously that lies at the heart of feminism's implicit politics of domination.

Spelman alerts her readers to the dangers of assuming that an essential female subject exists. For Spelman, such notions work against a concern with the plight of the individual women that form that category:

...posing an essential 'womanness' has the effect of making women inessential in a variety of ways...if there is an essential womanness that all women have and have always had, then we needn't know anything about any woman in particular. For the details of her situation and experience are irrelevant to her being a woman. Thus if we want to understand what 'being a woman' means, we needn't investigate her individual life or any other woman's individual life. All those particulars become inessential in the sense that she is not needed in order to produce the 'story of woman'. If all women have the same story 'as women' we don't need a chorus of voices to tell the story.

Thus, for Spelman, essentialist notions of women threaten the urgent task for feminism which is to involve an analysis and understanding of all women. The fact that all women do not have equal access to representing themselves is something that Spelman openly worries about in her text.

Spelman's project is straightforward: to demonstrate her willingness to attend to this problem. Spelman presents a historical study of the ways in which race and class have made the category 'woman' a more problematic one than mainstream, white, academic feminism has been prepared to admit. Spelman herself describes the book in terms of an experiment, a tentative step in the right direction:

'there has been a deep concern among some contemporary white middle-class feminists that we have handily forgotten about the race and class privileges that we have and that earlier feminists had. We often express this concern by insisting...that feminism be broader based, that it does not show the traces of race and class privilege in its terminology, its focus, its priorities. We've left something out, and it's high time, we say, to put it in. Our leaving it out is the reflection of our privilege. In many ways this book is about whether attempts to talk about 'difference'
simply preserve the privilege they were supposed to challenge. It has been about how deep such privilege goes. [203]

What interests me about Spelman's discussion is the extent to which the existence of 'difference' between women becomes represented as always bearing a clear relation of privilege and oppression. In other words, Spelman, although she seeks to dismantle the privilege of mainstream, white, academic feminism by drawing attention to the hierarchical inscriptions of race and gender in it, does not provide much explanation as to how and where she is perceiving privilege to exist. I would suggest that overcoming the problem of privilege is about more than simply including those women who have previously been omitted; how 'we' include them is a question that Spelman fails to address. Furthermore, I would question whether it is accurate to conceive of 'white', academic feminism as a unified and hence privileged category. Spelman's portrayal of white, academic feminism as privileged is undermined by her failure to discuss where and how she is locating it.

The main problem with Spelman's discussion is that the point of recognising difference is causally connected to a hope that in doing this a 'sameness' will emerge. Thus, although early on in the text Spelman challenges Simone de Beauvoir's complaint that women lack "a sense of the universal":

'it is one thing to urge women to look beyond their own cases; it is quite another to assume that if one does one will find a common condition or a common hope shared by all women." [213]

By the end of the fourth chapter she is voicing precisely this aspiration:

'if the meaning of what we apparently have in common (being women) depends in some ways on the meaning of what we don't have in common (for example, our different racial or class identities), then far from distracting us from issues of gender, attention to race and class in fact helps us to understand gender. In this sense it is only if we pay attention to how we differ that we come to an understanding of what we have in common." [223]
Spelman's assertion that attending to racial and class difference will alter 'our' conception of gender is problematic because there is no clue as to how attending to them will achieve a common understanding. Moreover, while gender identity is deconstructed and dismantled as an obvious 'truth' about women and men, race and class remain intact and are accordingly summoned to exert their monolithic pressure upon gender. In other words, Spelman's depiction of gender alongside 'race' and 'class' serves to emphasise the need for an equivalent dismantling of essentialist notions of race and class that are embedded within such portrayals of gender inequalities.

It is within Maria Mies' materialist project that readers are provided with an ongoing criticism of what it is that constitutes a more privileged, or 'developed' feminism. For Mies, the common ground between women is clear: a global system of patriarchal oppression that exploits women both in the formal and informal sector. Moreover, this economic exploitation is backed up by the existence and threat of male violence and force. Mies challenges the notion that western, middle-class women are the recipients of a problematic and enviable privilege:

The 'privileges' of middle-class women are not only that they are domesticated, isolated, dependent on a man, emotionally fettered and weakened, and tied down to an ideology that totally objectifies them. All this is combined with the fact that they, as housewives, have to spend the money their husbands earn. They have become - at least in the urban areas - the main agents of domestic consumption, who provide the necessary market for the commodities produced. [233]

I would question whether Mies' representation of 'middle-class women' is as applicable now as it was in the 1950s. Her assumption that middle-class women are all embroiled within a nuclear family does not take into account the increase of single women and changing patterns of employment. Moreover, I would argue that Mies' depiction of all middle-class women as subordinate
in their relationships is to ignore the relevance of the different kinds of relationships that exist, even under a capitalist patriarchal dominant culture.

However, Mies' conception of the 'first' world as 'overdeveloped' does disrupt the traditional equation made between the 'first' world and progress, symbolised by technological 'advancement' and wealth. As she points out, this is, in any case, to ignore the existence of wealth in the 'third' world and of poverty in the 'first' world.

Mies does not however underestimate the effect of first world economic policies on the 'developing' world. As she comments, it is third world women who work in the sweatshops and the sex industries and, in the process, provide the 'developed' world with cheap imports and the 'developing' world with cheap labour. For Mies, the crucial point of contact between women is that, although they may be positioned as producers and consumers in their relative economies, they are both subordinated to men because of the internationally established sexual division of labour. Women, because they are not recognised as workers, are therefore more vulnerable when there are changing economic demands on a particular government.

Moreover, Mies sees the inevitable process of capitalist expansion in the west as a precursor for an increased similarity between the masses of women. In this sense, the fate of women in the third world should, she argues, be seen as a projection of women's future in the west. As she comments, it has already happened for some women in the USA and Europe who now have:

to work 'invisibly' in the new informal sector, and to prostitute themselves in a variety of ways in order to make a living. \[243\]
Mies' attempt to link the lives of women in the 'first' world with those in the 'third' world contrasts with western feminist work that has sought to locate feminism solely in terms of western women. Thus in 1984, Juliet Mitchell proclaimed that:

"it is only in the highly developed societies of the West that an authentic liberation of women can be envisaged today." 

It is precisely this equation between progress and development that Mies takes to task in her work. As Mies demonstrates, to perceive of technological 'progress' as benefiting women is to accept, for example, the increased control over female reproduction and labour. Mies challenges both the idea that middle class women have nothing to learn from women living in the 'developing' world and emphasises this point with historical accounts of western society. Mies documents how the European witch-hunts were about more than a simple women-hating frenzy but were employed by men to remove women's control over their lives. Many 'witches' were healers and midwives and their persecution, Mies argues, established the sovereignty of medicine and the law; since the witch 'trials' replaced traditional judicial village methods with a new stringent legal method and gained wealth by confiscating the witch's property.

Mies' depiction of the historical existence of female control over reproduction challenges the notion of an inevitable historical progression, as voiced by Juliet Mitchell in her conception of a purely western feminist consciousness. Moreover, I would suggest that to conceive of progress as necessitating the development of industry and technology results in the familiar representation of the 'East' as a site of spiritualism, timelessness, as, in short, a place in which historical change is for the most part irrelevant.
It is Mies' belief in the existence of a common female experience, combined with her perception of an increasing similarity between the position of women in the 'first' and 'third' world, that informs her assertion that:

'I consider a feminist middle-class movement, both in the over - and in the under-developed countries, as an absolute historical necessity...it is also necessary that middle-class women themselves begin to destroy the myths, the images, the social values, which make them a false symbol of progress. If middle-class women in India, for instance, begin to question such patriarchal values as virginity, or the ideals of self-sacrificing womanhood propagated by mythology, like Sita or Savitri, or the modern housewife ideology, then they do not only contribute to their own liberation, but also to the liberation of working-class and peasant women.  

In this reading, middle-class women emerge as the essential and most potentially effective of all feminists. Thus, Mies' critical analysis of the human misery that is caused by capitalist patriarchy is nevertheless accompanied by an argument that selects the middle-classes as the most crucial revolutionary force. Her text is ultimately concerned to demonstrate why middle-class women must share her antipathy towards capitalist patriarchy, whilst poor women are depicted as subordinate, waiting for the global awakening of middle-class women.  

Mies' final list of recommendations for a future feminist movement reflects her privileging of middle-class women, as the emphasis is firmly upon those women resisting advertising and western consumerism. Significantly, there is no comment upon the role for women who are employed to produce these products. Poor women and working-class women are present in Mies' text as a symbol of capitalist patriarchy, but there is a striking silence concerning their function in any contemporary or future feminist movement. The need for the active identification of middle-class women with working-class and poor women is voiced through a depiction of the latter as
essentially passive recipients of this process.

I would argue that Mies' middle-class bias provides a useful reminder of why the issue of identification between women is so complex. The need for identification between women is clear; however, what is not so evident is how this is supposed to take place. Indeed, throughout her account, Mies avoids an analysis of how women are going to reach a global consciousness that will inspire them to identify with each other on the basis of a shared gender oppression. Her confident depiction of the common ground and struggle among women as primary recipients of an oppressive patriarchal (or socialist) system is accompanied by a marked uneasiness at the presence of conceptual analysis in her own study:

'I want to clarify why I use certain concepts in my analysis and not others. This does not mean that I propose fully to define these concepts, because the concepts which emerged in the feminist discourse were mostly struggle concepts, not based on theoretical definitions worked out by an ideological mastermind of the movement. Therefore, the concepts I am proposing are of a more open character than scientific definitions. They are defined from our struggle experience and the reflection on these experiences, and thus have a certain explanatory value. I do not think that it will help us very much to enter into a purely academic debate on the use of this or that concept. But, as we saw already in the discussion of the concepts 'gender' or 'sex', it is important to recognise that questions of conceptualization are questions of power, that is, they are political questions. In this sense, the clarification of conceptual positions is part of the political struggle of feminism.'

Mies attributes her reluctance to grant conceptual analysis with any far-reaching significance for feminist work to the fact that 'feminist' concepts possess an untheoretical history. Thus, while it may be useful to explain why a certain concept is being used, there is no need to examine its particular efficacy, because that is already proven by its description as a 'feminist' concept. Mies concludes that the question of conceptual analysis is relevant to feminism because it is about 'power', without recognising that feminist concepts are also questions of power between
feminists.

There is the sense in Mies' work that concepts can exist as autonomous and stable entities with a purely functional relation to each other. Thus, there are identifiable points within processes such as clarification where the only practice that is taking place is clarification. Mies proceeds to isolate the terms 'oppression', 'exploitation' and 'subordination' in order to demonstrate that 'exploitation' is the more useful concept for feminist struggle:

'Oppression or subordination, without reference to exploitation, becomes then a purely cultural or ideological matter, the basis of which cannot be made out, unless one has recourse to the notion of some inborn aggressive or sadistic tendencies in men. But exploitation is a historical - and not a biological or psychological - category which lies at the heart of the man-woman relation.' [33]

What Mies does not pay any attention to is that, equally, if exploitation is severed from having any connection with oppression or subordination, then it too loses any meaningful definition.

The repercussions of this extraction of concepts from their relational existence is that certain concepts become somehow able to function autonomously as the 'master discourse', which in Mies' text is 'history' as opposed to 'scientific' discourse. This acceptance of a clear, binary relationship between 'flexible', 'open' feminist discourse and closed definitive discourses is, as Michel Foucault points out, to ignore the extent to which discourses and concepts are fluid and interchangeable according to the purposes for which they are being employed:

'We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. There is not on one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy.' [30]
Evidence of this is clear in Mies' own juxtaposition of history with culture, ideology, psychology and biology. This manages to bestow 'history' with an overarching power and significance, whilst at the same time removing certain historical discourses and practices from something that can still be referred to as 'history'.

Mies' assertion that she is using 'exploitation' to express women's economic and 'human' exploitation is undermined by the fact that she has already dismissed the historical significance of culture, ideology and psychology, all of which, I would argue, are always employed to promote women's oppression. Moreover, the same concepts are also employed by feminists in different ways to challenge and resist power. As Foucault points out, positions of power carry with them possibilities of resistance:

'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it... This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead, there is a plurality of resistances... Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves... It is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.'

Foucault's depiction of the relational character of power and resistance points to the problem at stake in Mies' depiction of feminist concepts as 'struggle concepts'. Surely, the same could be said of patriarchal concepts, particularly in the light of her thesis which aims to show how men have had to struggle against women, in order to establish capitalist
Thus, Mies documents the European witch hunts and women's employment of herbs and plants to induce abortions and sterility as power battles between men and women over the control of female reproduction.\textsuperscript{323} The fact that men used force to establish patriarchy, Mies argues, proves that it was achieved through the overthrow of a previously matriarchal order. Mies' attempt to retain a specific connection between struggle concepts and feminism contradicts her historical account of patriarchy as the result of a successful struggle against an established matriarchy. This assertion is omitted in her contemporary depiction of feminism as particularly grounded in 'struggle concepts'. I would suggest that Mies is overlooking the extent to which all discourses are engaged with contradictory ones, both in the past and in the present. Moreover, her severance of the past from the present also undermines the extent to which the past informs present thought. This is particularly problematic, since Mies stresses the importance of history for contemporary feminist work.

Moreover, locating struggle only within feminist discourse is to overlook one of the ways in which capitalist patriarchy is maintained as a dominant system. A crucial aspect of maintaining power is surely the ability of dominant cultural concepts and practices to absorb aspects of oppositional discourses. I would read the predominantly heterosexist, white, western male orientated media's employment of the apparently 'new' and 'radical' man as a strategy, which makes male power more acceptable in a patriarchal society that also wants to ally itself with 'democratic' ideas of justice and equality.

Thus, the contemporary preoccupation with notions of male vulnerability and compassion is as indispensable to the maintenance of
capitalist patriarchy as a ruling ideology as it is a reflection of feminist struggle. Certainly, Mies' depiction of capitalist patriarchal authority as drawing its power from a series of historical events fails to account for its continued existence as a ruling practice.

I want to turn now to the implications of Mies' reluctance to ally feminism with conceptual analysis. If, as she suggests, feminism confines itself to admitting only a "certain explanatory value" in conceptual analysis, then it also denies the ongoing existence of feminist resistance to capitalist patriarchal authority even as it exercises power. Thus, Mies locates feminist resistance as occurring before the implementation of patriarchal authority and the possibility of power as existing only in the future. What is missing is any analysis of the present as involving a perpetual struggle against ruling discourses and practices. By neglecting to locate resistance in the present, Mies renders the possibility of change in the future seriously questionable. Thus, although towards the end of the book, Mies cites the example of women in the 'first' and 'third' worlds protesting about the international sex trade, there is no context for such action because of the limits that she has imposed upon feminist discourse.

Mies concludes the book by listing various strategies that western feminists could employ to dismantle patriarchy such as a "consumer liberation movement". However, the possibilities for any concerted struggle by women without recognising the centrality of conceptual analysis is surely limited. Material change cannot occur without a desire to redefine or replace meanings inherent in concepts that have been suppressed by those who have exercised power, precisely by having more control over both material practices and knowledge systems.
Mies attempts to sustain her distinction between discourses of power and discourses of resistance by presenting a juxtaposition between 'science' and 'feminist' discourse. Conceiving of certain concepts, like science, as in themselves possessing a definite meaning and purpose is, I would suggest, to overlook the existence of conflicting and dissenting ideas about what 'science' does and can mean. 'Science' becomes the enemy concept rather than a category that is 'open' to conjecture, dissent and perhaps even to feminists. Ultimately, by placing 'openness' and 'flexibility' within feminist discourse as opposed to 'science' and 'theory', Mies consolidates the construction of hierarchical discourses.

Certainly, Mies questions the existing status that is afforded to 'science' and later on to 'technology', but she does not address the fact that the material effects of concepts are largely determined by which person or group is able to decide what a concept means and put those beliefs into practice. For example, science and technology are presently being employed to implement femicide, particularly in India where, because of the dowry system, girls place an unwelcome economic and cultural pressure upon their families. However to attribute this to 'science' is to overlook the fact that in a culture that did not favour men and boys, science could mean something else entirely. Or, to put it another way, if western industrial capitalism had not needed to make a unique and hierarchical connection between scientific technology, progress and civilisation then science would still exist, but not in the power structures that are operational today.

Foucault, in his discussion of the lengthy debates concerning the question of whether marxism or psychoanalysis could be said to be sciences, points out that it is power that is the crucial issue, not science:
It is surely necessary to question ourselves about our aspiration to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany such a science. It is surely the following kinds of question that would need to be posed: What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: 'Is it a science'? Which speaking, discoursing subjects - which subjects of experience and knowledge - do you want to 'diminish' when you say: 'I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist'? Which theoretical political avant garde do you want to enthrone in order to isolate it from all the discontinuous forms of knowledge that circulate about it? When I see you straining to establish the scientificity of Marxism I do not really think that you are demonstrating once and for all that Marxism has a rational structure and that therefore its propositions are the outcome of verifiable procedures; for me you are doing something altogether different, you are investing Marxist discourses and those who uphold them with the effects of a power which the West since Medieval times has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in scientific discourse.

Mies' severance of scientific and theoretical approaches for feminist struggle leads her to dismiss conceptual analysis as being at its worst a 'purely academic debate'. This assertion occurs in a text that could very easily be described as precisely that. The book's back-cover review, by off our backs, proclaims it to be "feminist theory at its very best". The best theory becomes, paradoxically, theory that is the most suspicious of the validity of theory for feminism in the first place.

11. Materialist Feminism and Academic Feminism

Mies' assumption that feminist academic work is removed from 'real' materialist issues problematises both her own speaking position in an academic text and also fails to investigate the contradictory discourses that inform 'academic' debate itself. This reluctance to admit academic feminist debate to the arena of feminist struggle, whilst at the same time producing oppositional theory, is surely to contradict the real tension that exists within élite institutions. Ultimately, it is to ignore the evidence that suggests that institutions strengthen ruling ideology by
incorporating a safe minimal level of dissent within their arenas. This, in
turn, necessitates that a limited and controllable number of dissenting
voices are admitted into institutional arenas, in order to present the
illusion that they are operating in a fundamentally democratic way. Thus,
there are inevitably conflicting and disruptive interests at work inside,
as well as outside, institutions such as the academic ones.

Moreover, to deny that feminism proper is ever 'academic' runs the
risk of accepting that there is something special about academic debate, as
opposed to any other kind. Certainly, there are obvious ways in which
access to the 'academic' arena is controlled: the imposition of standard
English, hierarchical educational institutions and dominant discourses that
propagate notions of race, class and gender inequality. But, emphasising
the importance of the right of this or that person to be engaging with the
'academic' undermines the more productive question of what purposes and
interests the academy is serving. Simply dismissing the 'academy' as having
very little to do with feminist, or any other struggle, results in an
entirely inadequate criticism of what knowledge systems are governing
writing, literacy and education. Ultimately, it produces a manifestly
insufficient attention to thinking about education in other ways.

I am not suggesting that feminist academics should ignore the
existence of privilege that is afforded by entry into the academic arena,
but rather that focusing on whether or not useful feminist debate can occur
in the academy does very little to dismantle the élite belief systems of
the dominant academic discourses, which seek to justify their intentional
production of illiteracy and ignorance by referring to the inherent
complexity of academic discourse. In other words, academic discourses are
related to non-academic discourses in so far as together they enable a
hierarchical conception of discourses to function.

As I indicated earlier in my citation of *off our backs*, there is the sense there that feminist theory must prove that it is feminist by demonstrating that it is not really theoretical, but about material things. This is, I would suggest, to overlook the reasons behind the dominant culture's own endorsement of a fundamental difference between theory and practice and between thought and action. A more productive line of enquiry would perhaps consider the implications of thinking of theory and practice as interconnected sites rather than as oppositional categories. In this scenario, the reasons for the opposition become clearer; it is imperative that they be separate because concepts and theory provide the grounds for material practices. Furthermore, accepting that this is the case, then such a distinction should clearly be challenged by feminists who are particularly denigrated by dominant theories and, subsequently, oppressive practices.

It is interesting that Mies herself points out that in post-revolutionary Vietnam, the Communist Party, whilst recognizing female emancipation as one of its ten tasks still:

'followed the well-known strategy of denouncing feminist ideas about equality as 'bourgeois ideologies', and subordinating women's struggles for emancipation to the task of national liberation.'

As Mies comments, this dismissal of feminism as bourgeois at a crucial period of reconstruction should alert women to the necessity of considering whose interests are being served by such definitions. Mies' dismissal of theory as élitist risks suggesting that those of 'us' who write feminist theory know that it is inherently inapplicable to the masses of women who do not. Mies, in other words, assumes knowledge of 'other' women even as she insists that she is writing in the proper way about 'them'.

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Mies challenges the Vietnamese Communist Party's definition of feminism as an intrinsically bourgeois ideology precisely by prioritising the need for middle-class feminists to form a movement. However, her description of her own 'theory' as untheoretical, because it is not engaged with discourses of power, is not only inaccurate, but also removes any sense that she needs to account for her theory to other feminists. I would suggest that it is precisely this removal of her own theory from issues of accountability that reveals the evidence of power at work.

I would argue that a separation of theory and practice is a particularly middle-class discourse embodying its specific power to deny its subjective and conceptual basis. Thus, there is a need for a consideration of whose interests are being served by accepting a hierarchical separation of theory and practice. Certainly, if Karl Marx had expressed his desire for working-class power by focusing primarily on how few working-class people were able to spend large amounts of time in the British Library then, doubtless, he would not have written *Das Kapital*.

In *Invisibility Blues: From Pop To Theory*, Michelle Wallace also notes the extent to which the very people who have the most to gain from challenging mainstream theories, concepts and representations are the most likely to question the 'political' relevance of such work. Wallace relates how her own experience of teaching black students led her to recognise that:

"while I find their perspectives on literary issues engaging, they too find my obsession with cultural criticism a baffling one. From their point of view, the problems black people have are clear, and no manner of 'criticism' and 'interpretation' will solve them. The reflection of this attitude in the sphere of cultural production, however, is that people of color - perhaps especially black people - have very little input in decisions concerning the representation of their problems and their capacity for self-definition and self-direction. Not only are we barred from participation by racist exclusion, we have also barred ourselves from within Afro-American culture by minimising its importance. Yet it seems to
me that as the social level at which representation occurs (the omnipresence of global TV, the computer program and the national and international wire news services) becomes more and more all-encompassing and indistinguishable from the problems themselves, it is increasingly important for people of color to address issues of representation directly, to become actively engaged in criticising the politics of the production of culture.

Extolling the benefits of 'real' political feminist struggle as opposed to feminist conceptual analysis is to prevent women from confidently challenging the cultural and ideological systems that maintain material capitalist patriarchal power. It is to limit feminist discussion of the possibilities that exist beyond and outside the dominant discourses and practices. It is in this sense that I want to question the usefulness to feminism of labelling conceptual analysis as being a purely 'academic' pursuit. There is surely a need to, at some point, place a limit on capitalist patriarchy as the only 'real' world, since the discourses proffered by its material and cultural apparatuses are designed to make 'unreal' and 'invisible' the 'real' existence of those whom it oppresses, namely the colonised workers and housewives that Mies takes as her subject.

An example of feminist theory that has challenged a focus upon the 'real' world of capitalist patriarchy by speculating instead upon the difference that would occur if women were not silenced by patriarchal authority is the work of prominent French psychoanalytical feminists, such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Both Cixous and Irigaray have attempted to imagine a different 'feminist' world and have developed a theory about women's difference which, they assert, enables 'women' to be understood properly as a coherent group. Irigaray and Cixous attempt to produce a universal 'woman' by focusing upon 'the' body of woman and interpreting it as essentially common to women.

I would argue that Cixous, Irigaray and Mies, despite their difference
as 'psychoanalytical' and 'materialist' feminists, nevertheless share a problematic assumption that 'the' female body can be located as 'the' common ground for feminism. I will now examine Cixous and Irigaray's proposals in more detail in order to analyse the ways in which two apparently oppositional western feminist theories converge in their marginalisation of women, whilst attempting to formulate a universal definition of 'woman'.

iii. Psychoanalytical Feminism and The Re-Discovery of 'Woman' in the Work of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray

The emphasis that feminists like Mies place on the international sexual division of labour as the means by which all women have been exploited is not, of course, the only framework that feminist theory has cited for a common female experience. The work of French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, has been incorporated into western feminist theoretical debate. The obvious differences between their emphasis on the female 'Imaginary' rather than on state apparatus has produced a seemingly great divide between 'materialist' and 'psychoanalytical' feminism. I would prefer to look at these two approaches for similarities rather than differences and to examine at which points they intersect. For, I would argue that there are identifiable points at which western feminism, in the main, subscribes to notions of a specifically 'female' history that raise the same limitations for the depiction of a universal and global feminist struggle.

The attention that is afforded to the unconscious, female desire and
female sexuality in the work of Cixous and Irigaray, is derived from their belief in the need for feminism to look outside of both the existing material economy and the sexual economy in order to produce female liberation. For both Cixous and Irigaray, the dangers of a materialist feminist approach is that it threatens to merely render women equal to men. Economic change does not, they argue, challenge women's subordinate position, which is produced by the infusion of philosophy, literature and history with narratives and representations that combine to define women's difference as inferiority.

Thus, in 'Women's exile', Irigaray argues that feminism needs to challenge the representation of 'woman' as deficient in order to secure for her genuine change in the future. She asserts that women should challenge their economic exploitation, but must also dismantle debilitating conclusions that are made about her sexual difference:

"In concrete terms this means that women must continue to struggle for equal pay, for social rights, against discrimination, at work, in education, etc. But that is not enough: women who are simply 'equal' to men would be 'like them', and therefore not women. Once more, the sexual difference would be cancelled, misunderstood and glossed over, new forms of struggle, new challenges... the existing forms of political systems - belong to men's world not ours." [393]

This equation of a materialist analysis with the present patriarchal structures blocks a materialist analysis from having any real connection with female sexuality, which would thus still be construed primarily as being not male. In 'Sorties', Cixous signals her agreement with Irigaray concerning this fatal flaw in a materialist approach:

"All other ways of depicting the history of power, property, masculine domination, the constitution of the State, the ideological apparatus have their effectiveness. But the change taking place has nothing to do with the question of 'origin'. Phallocentrism is. History has never produced, recorded anything but that. Which does not mean that this form is natural or inevitable. Phallocentrism is the enemy. Of everyone. Men stand to lose by it, differently but as seriously as women. And it is time to transform.
To invent the other history. 

The most striking problem with this criticism of an economic approach is that assumes it to be motivated solely by a desire for equality. As I hope I have demonstrated, Maria Mies combines economic analysis with 'new' ways of structuring society that would differentiate a society organised around feminist principles from capitalist patriarchy.

Mies' own reluctance to devote too much time to conceptual analysis does not prevent the inevitable intersections of 'culture', 'psychoanalysis' and 'ideology' from appearing in her work. In the same way, I would suggest that Cixous and Irigaray's efforts to divorce economics from psychology is to ignore the inevitable relations between the two. Notions of womanhood as set out by writers like Cixous and Irigaray make it very difficult to imagine how women, even if they did gain only material equality with men, would then re-enact a patriarchal model. Ultimately, to argue that material and economic equality would lead women into being "like men" is surely to undermine the 'female imaginary' and its specific connection with women.

However, in Cixous and Irigaray's theories, women must be particularly suspicious of a materialist analysis because it is inextricably bound up with male practices and ideologies. Thus, economic and material improvements, whilst offering some alleviation for the condition of women, do not address the real needs of women which are not present in masculinist thought and knowledge systems. Instead, what is needed, they stress, is something that is not applicable in any way to the masculine economies. Thus the 'female imaginary' emerges as the site in which women can re-discover their needs, which are denied them in any existing ideological system. Like Elaine Showalter with her model of gynocriticism, Cixous
and Irigaray locate the 'female imaginary' as the ultimate challenge and resistance to patriarchy, precisely because it is not apparently bound by any of its precepts. In order to demonstrate that there is, and was, such a thing as a 'female imaginary', Cixous and Irigaray employ 'history' as the essential means for re-discovering this separate realm.

The need to look at society, before capitalist patriarchy repressed and displaced female existence and experience, parallels Maria Mies' interest in the pre-capitalist matriarchal societies that were hypothesised in texts such as Frederick Engels' *The Origin Of The Family, Private Property And The State*⁴²³. Thus, history, because it is 'the' discourse that has most suppressed the lives of women, is the site to which women must attend. The first step is to recognise that 'history' records and reflects the masculine imaginary and, from that, recreate the 'other' history that has been repressed within the limits of a dominant, masculine one. Thus, Irigaray, in 'This sex which is not one', foregrounds historical enquiry as the essential prerequisite for locating 'women's sexuality':

'one would have to dig very deep in order to find behind the traces of this civilisation, this history, the vestiges of a more archaic civilisation which could give some indication as to what women's sexuality is all about. This very ancient civilisation undoubtedly would not have the same language, the same alphabet - Woman's desire most likely does not speak the same language as man's desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks. '⁴³

The proposition is then that historical research can re-discover an authentic female sexuality that could become a material, rather than simply imaginary, force in the future.

The important point is not how this realisation of the female imaginary will occur. Indeed, there is a clear and intentional differentiation in Cixous and Irigaray's characterisation of the past as a monolithic record of the masculine imaginary and of the future as one that
will embody the female imaginary by its very complexity and anarchy. Cixous and Irigaray's confidence in the existence of a female imaginary extends into a confidence about the future; the female imaginary becomes recognisable as a historical principle, as Cixous makes clear when she depicts the present as a time of transition:

'At present we are living through a transitional period - where the classical structure appears as if it might crack. To predict what might happen to sexual difference - in another time..is impossible. But there should be no misunderstanding: men and women are caught up in a network of millenial cultural determinations of a complexity that is practically unanalyzable.' [44]

What interests me about this proposition is the way in which the past becomes, by implication, somehow more simple and more stable than the present. Thus, Cixous is able to state that 'History' has only ever recorded and produced phallocentrism, a connection that I would suggest immediately obliterates the existence of all those marginalised by the dominant recording of history. It is to confirm the notion that there is a clear and monolithic 'history' which can somehow be extracted as an autonomous category from the dominant record. I would suggest that Cixous and Irigaray's severance of economics and materialism from the female imaginary combined with their reluctance to admit it to contemporary feminist work constantly problematises their emphasis upon the 'historical' context that they insist informs their speculations.

There is, as Cixous demonstrates in the above quotation, an underlying conviction that the past reflects an inevitable progression towards the possibility of establishing the female imaginary. However, as Judith Butler points out, in Gender Trouble: Feminism And The Subversion Of Identity, the ease with which Irigaray views the future is not one that can necessarily be shared by her readers. For, as Butler comments, it is extremely
difficult to even locate the female imaginary in Irigaray's text, which in
turn makes it a distinctly unreliable category on which to base
contemporary feminist struggle:

'the characterization of female sexuality as radically distinct from a
phallic organization of sexuality remains problematic...it is often unclear
within Irigaray's text whether sexuality is culturally constructed, or
whether it is only culturally constructed within the terms of the phallus.
In other words, is specifically feminine pleasure 'outside' of culture as
its prehistory or as its utopian future? If so, of what use is such a
notion for negotiating the contemporary struggles of sexuality within the
terms of its construction...If sexuality is culturally constructed within
existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality
that is 'before', 'outside' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility
and a politically impracticable dream; one that postpones the concrete and
contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and
power within the terms of power itself. [456]

Moreover, this chaotic positioning of the female imaginary together with
the insistence that it is essential for contemporary feminist action, is
posited without any accompanying clue as to how the old order will cease to
exist.

The problems involved in imagining how the female imaginary could ever
be realised is, I would argue, a result of Cixous and Irigaray's insistence
that it is radically distinct from masculine economies. The female
imaginary, because it is 'not referable' to any aspect of capitalist,
patriarchal systems, becomes distinct from all previous critical frameworks
and practices. Finding a 'place' for the female imaginary in existing
critical discourses becomes a task that in many ways should not be
possible. Unlike the masculine imaginary, the female imaginary is something
new, not referable to anything other than its own multiple self. Thus, it
is characterised by its difference from 'masculinist' concerns of property,
power, authority and possession.

The female imaginary, as Irigaray explains, reflects female sexuality
which is multiple, complex, incomplete and omnipresent:
But woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere. Even without speaking of the hysterization of her entire body, one can say that the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined—in an imaginary centered a bit too much on one and the same.

Woman's sexuality is thus to be seen as without boundaries and, like the female imaginary, has always existed independently from the masculine imaginary, which has defined it as an inferior reflection of itself. The crucial point is not that the masculine imaginary has imposed a false sexual difference but that it has judged female sexuality to be inferior to its own. Women have thus been removed from sites of representation precisely because they disrupt the authority of masculine economies.

Disruption characterises the female imaginary where multiplicity, invention and complexity take place. The female imaginary, perhaps more importantly however, defies all notions of time and place. It is both present throughout history as an identifiable site of female experience and functions as the guiding principle for an entirely new society. The process of inventing and imagining 'history' facilitates the combination of concrete historical research with a discovery that has already been formulated outside of history. History becomes itself transplanted by the female imaginary which transcends all boundaries. The emphasis, in Cixous and Irigaray, for women to re-discover an essential woman, is surely to predict a markedly ahistorical discovery. In this historical account, 'woman' emerges as the same subject before and after capitalist patriarchy.

In order to establish that a materialist feminist approach is undermined by its connections with patriarchal systems, Cixous and Irigaray emphasise that the female imaginary, by contrast, is not in any way tied to existing systems and practices. Accordingly, the material existence of the
female imaginary cannot be imagined in any existing way. Cixous stresses that a feminist future that is based on the discovery of the female imaginary is, by definition, uninvolved with power or victory. 'Placing' the female imaginary is, most of all, not about defeating the masculine imaginary. Oppositions such as defeat and victory can indeed only take place within the symbolic system of patriarchy, as Cixous explains:

'Theory of culture, theory of society, the ensemble of symbolic systems - art, religion, family, language, - everything elaborates the same systems. And the movement by which each opposition is set up to produce meaning is the movement by which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time a war breaks out. Death is at work...And we perceive that the 'victory' always amounts to the same thing: it is hierarchised.

Moreover, this system of binary oppositions that is expressed in the symbolic system of patriarchy is, according to Irigaray, 'alien' to 'woman':

'Nearness...is not foreign to woman, a nearness so close that any identification of one or the other, and therefore any form of property, is impossible.

Irigaray concludes elsewhere that property is a "rather foreign" concept for women.

The critical question then becomes whether Cixous and Irigaray's depiction of the female imaginary, as something that is entirely outside of all existing knowledge systems, is convincing. Arguably, Cixous and Irigaray are able to expel the presence of power and authority from their critical arena precisely because the female imaginary is positioned 'beyond' such concerns. The female imaginary, in its very ability to transcend all existing knowledge systems, whilst it may signal a 'new' departure, does not, I would suggest, necessarily fall outside of any involvement with power and authority. Noticeably, the question of how power might function between women is not discussed in Cixous and Irigaray's
work. Moreover, positioning power and authority solely in patriarchal thought and practices avoids the problem of delineating how the female imaginary could ever conceivably challenge or replace existing social and political structures.

I would argue that power and authority are present in Cixous and Irigaray's critical discourse, specifically in their conception of the future as the site in which the female imaginary will be realised, in ways that fall beyond present comprehensibility. The notion that 'we' are, in any case, approaching a time in which the female imaginary can be realised, constructs the future as more complex and powerful than the past. Cixous and Irigaray's readings of the past are thus conspicuously authoritative:

"it's obviously not a simple task...a long history has placed all women in the same sexual, social and cultural situation."

The complexity that both Cixous and Irigaray attribute to the future involves a parallel conception of the past as 'a' comprehensible 'Other'.

This simplification of historical subjects to the dominant masculine imaginary risks surrendering past consciousness and resistance to capitalist patriarchy under the dictates of an all powerful masculine economy. Or more accurately, nearly submerging historical struggle and ruptures, for, as Cixous explains, there have been sporadic interruptions to the phallocentric economy:

"There have always been those uncertain poetic beings, who have not let themselves be reduced to the state of coded mannequins by the relentless repression of the homosexual component. Men or women, complex, mobile, open beings...we invent only on this condition: thinkers, artists, creators of new values, 'philosophers' of the mad Nietzschean sort, inventors and destroyers of concepts, of forms, the changers of life cannot but be agitated by singularities."

This notion of the rare and sporadic births of individual minds which refuse to live by the dominant system is, I would suggest, a highly
problematic one for a feminist theory that is taking 'all' women as its subject. The crucial requirements for the realisation of the female imaginary, namely research, invention and imagination are clearly based on a belief in the power of the talented individual who becomes the triumphant historical discovery. The masses, by implicated contrast, become inextricably linked with specifically 'patriarchal' materialism and economics.

Cixous' depiction of the 'cracks' in the masculine imaginary, whilst it presents an idealised vision of the rebel-artist, also produces their backdrop, which is of a stagnant and passive majority. Moreover, this conception of the past has significant bearings on the present, which becomes subjected to the same subordination of conscious radical struggle to the need for women to re-discover the female imaginary through writing. Again, without any need for considering issues such as poverty, illiteracy, oral cultures and active struggles, Cixous proceeds to invest a practice that is particularly not shared by women globally with a fundamental role for feminist struggle:

'To write. An act which will not only 'realise' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being...it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal.'

Writing reformulated and reinvented by Cixous can thus be extracted from any material or historical context. As Gayatri Spivak points out in her essay, 'French feminism in an international frame':

'...it is an activity that is more politically significant for the producer/writer than the consumer/reader.'

I would add that the emergence of the individual writer from Cixous and Irigaray's foray into history for the female imaginary presents serious problems when it becomes linked with an insistence that all women write.
The depiction of the past as producing a few dissenting voices who were able to embody the female imaginary has already produced a model of human society that is involved in hierarchical discourses, even as it proclaims itself to be 'the' discourse to end all discourses. For Cixous and Irigaray, it goes without saying that their model is devoid of the presence of masculinist power structures and beliefs because the female imaginary is by definition without authority.

The omnipotence of the future is invoked by Irigaray in 'Women's exile', where she argues that there have been no significant ruptures to patriarchy because all the struggles that women have been involved in, useful though they may be, have not broken out of 'the' masculine imaginary. Thus, the connections between 'politics' and women is something that can only exist in the future after the dissolution of the masculine imaginary:

'There is not, not yet, a 'politics for women', at least in the wider sense. And if it were to exist some day, it would be very different from the politics instituted by men. For the issues raised by the exploitation of women's bodies go beyond the issues, schemas and...the parties of the politics we know and which up to now have been practised...One must invent, amongst women, new forms of organization, new forms of struggle, new challenges.

The distinction that this introduces between the 'one' who is doing the inventing 'amongst' women is, I would suggest, just one example of the way in which the female imaginary poses a problem as a definitive means of articulating and locating a common female experience. The invention and imagination that are necessary for the transition outside of the masculine imaginary, are strikingly constrained by a theory that has already decided that sexual pleasure is 'the' common ground for women and should thus be 'the' crucial concern for all women.

This foregrounding of sexuality within western feminist debate has
been particularly challenged by black women and women of color. As bell hooks points out, the inadequacy of gender as 'the' crucial unifying force for women is something that has been increasingly challenged since the 1980s. Black and third world feminists have stressed the marked reluctance of many white, middle-class feminists to address the existence of dissent over what it is that is supposed to constitute female experience. The accompanying lack of attention that is afforded to who is assuming the ability to speak for all women has also been questioned.

Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, in their introduction to the anthology, Women's Words: The Feminist Practice Of Oral History, reflect on their initial assumptions, as oral researchers, that:

'Most striking, in retrospect, were the innocent assumptions that gender united women more powerfully than race and class divided them and that the mere study of women fulfilled commitment to do research 'about' women. Although we had questioned the value of traditional androcentric methodology, not all of us had yet learned to be sceptical of the claims for a single feminist methodology. Our assumptions had the effect of foregrounding gender while obscuring the possible centrality of other factors-race and class, in particular-in the identity of our narrators. To define feminist scholarship as work done by, about, and for women had seemed simple. Experience, however, demonstrated that these three little words positioned the scholar within a complex web of relationships, loyalties, and demands.

This engagement with the question of power involved in dialogues between women is strikingly absent in the work of Cixous and Irigaray. The tensions that are produced by women's different kinds of oppression, dependent as Irigaray herself comments, on "her country, her occupation, her class and her sexual estate", are manifestly overcome by a theory that takes as its focus 'the body' of woman. For, it is here that Irigaray and Cixous propose to collapse their theory with the interests of all women.

Irigaray's interest in the material inequalities that exist between women is governed entirely by her assumption that attending to such
inequalities will necessarily lead women to recognise their essential commonality. Thus, in the same way as Maria Mies' 'materialist' feminism, Cixous and Irigaray's 'psychoanalytical' feminism locates 'the' female body as constituting both the grounds of women's oppression and their potential liberation. It is 'the body' of women that ultimately legitimises and gives the individual writer the authority to locate a 'common female experience' as Cixous makes clear in 'The laugh of the Medusa':

"By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been confiscated from her... To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic process, in every political process." [63]

The notion that the female body can be understood as an authentic means of overcoming the inequalities and differences between women is one that Jane Gallop adheres to in *Around 1981* [Academic Feminist Literary Theory]:

'We associate écriture feminine with the body, but we do not often associate it with what Woolf calls 'the body of the people' with 'the body of women.' Yet the strategy of écriture feminine was in fact to claim high vanguard culture (postmodern écriture) for the ordinary woman, to associate it with what in woman was most 'common,' the body... 'French feminism' claimed that Everywoman already could produce the high culturally privileged writing." [63]

Gallop, like Cixous and Irigaray, assumes that 'the' female body can be extracted from its racial and class context as a neutral category for feminist purposes. This is, I would suggest, to ignore the very real differences that are involved in the material existences and cultural representations of the 'bodies' of women. I will conclude this chapter by demonstrating that feminist interpretations of 'the' body of woman reveal crucial differences which need to be recognised by white, western, middle-class feminists if global feminism is to be a possibility.
Feminist work on the history of slavery in the United States provides ample evidence of the ways in which the bodies of women have been inscribed with specific values that both support the dominant culture and produce hierarchical relations between women. Clearly, neither Cixous or Irigaray is suggesting that this has not taken place; however, I would argue that their assumption that attending to racial and class oppression is part of the journey towards the discovery of a common womanhood is to critically undermine the racial and class configurations of women's bodies. Race and class are surrendered to the more crucial realm of a common female experience.

As Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness And The Politics Of Empowerment*, this is not so tenable a critical option for black women who are subjected to far more debilitating systems of representations:

'Unlike white women's images attached to the cult of true womanhood, the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance if Black women are to have any positive self-images. '603

Collins' exploration of the production of specific meanings for the bodies of women of color and black women in pornographic representations is particularly relevant given the actual exploitation of, predominantly, third world women and girls in the international sex trade:

The process illustrated by the pornographic treatment of the bodies of enslaved African women....has developed into a full-scale industry encompassing all women objectified differently by racial/ethnic category. Contemporary portrayals of Black women in pornography represent the continuation of the historical treatment of their actual bodies. African-American women are usually depicted in a situation of bondage and slavery, typically in a submissive posture, and often with two white men....White women and women of color have different pornographic images applied to them. The image of Black women in pornography is almost consistently one
featuring them breaking from chains. The image of Asian women in pornography is almost consistently one of being tortured.

Clearly, the effects of these different constructions of female bodies is to determine very different material existences for women.

Cixous and Irigaray's contention that women can eventually return to a common point of origin, I would argue, overlooks the extent to which the present is inextricable from the past. The racial and class configurations of gender produced in the past become neutralised by the very fact that Cixous and Irigaray are able ultimately to distinguish race and class from gender. This is clearly an impossibility for women who had, and have, gender identities that are emphatically connected to racial and class identities. As bell hooks points out, in *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, historical surveys of the use of rape throughout slavery, such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*,[^2] fail to recognise the significance of this after slavery was abolished:

she fails to see that the significance of the rape of enslaved black women was not simply that it 'deliberately crushed' their sexual integrity for economic ends but that it led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of the black woman once slavery ended. One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society - the predominant image is that of the 'fallen' woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute.[^2]

The extent to which women's contemporary perceptions of gender identity are conditioned by the past is the point which feminist assertions of an obvious common female experience ignore.

Barbara Smith, in her analysis of the particularly problematic position of black lesbians in the black community, points out that this can be seen as the consequence of the debilitating effects of racial, gender and class oppression that black women face. In this sense, as Smith comments, "straightness is our last resort",[^43] heterosexuality is the
only way in which black women can be at all acceptable to the dominant culture. Cixous' contention that 'bi-sexuality' characterises the texts of those who have voiced the female imaginary, ignores the fact that bi-sexuality is not simply a matter of creative insight but also involves material choices. The female imaginary thus becomes a record of privilege, even as Cixous attempts to present its historical existence as one of liberation. Thus, Irigaray is able to extoll James Joyce and Jean Genet as producers of the female imaginary, while women who could not write, or women who did not write in a specific way, fail to provide any relevant historical purposes for contemporary feminist struggle.

Vron Ware's study of white women and racism, *Beyond The Pale,* explores the ways in which the specific construction of white femininity has been based on a hierarchical relation to non-white women. Such research implicitly challenges the notion that women can ultimately extract a shared gender oppression as 'the' unifying force between women. In Cixous and Irigaray's work, the fact that women have been constructed differently remains secondary, so that ultimately the subordination of women of color and black women in dominant systems of representations are in turn subordinated in their own critical agendas. As Ware points out, the construction of black women and women of color is not something that has only been taken up by men:

'British women have been instrumental in reinforcing the image of 'Oriental' or 'Eastern' women as passive, quiescent victims of male power, whose subordination was sometimes connected with, but always relative to, that of Western women.' However, I would question Ware's employment of the term 'British women', which I would argue reflects the dangers of focusing on a single characteristic, in this case race, without taking into account other
configurations, such as class.

Clearly, white working-class women were not a part of the cult of 'true womanhood', either in the United States or in Britain. Thus, white working-class women's historical involvement in capitalist production is marked by predominantly unskilled, low paid and dangerous employment. Moreover, as Julia Swindells points out in her study of Victorian working women, this history should be recognised as part of 'the' history of literary production. Swindells, citing Marx, explicates this:

Certain London firms where newspapers and books are printed have gained for themselves the honourable names of 'slaughter-houses'. Similar excesses occur in book-binding, where the victims are chiefly women, girls and children. Worse still were the conditions endured in the first stage of paper production, the process of sorting out the rags which were the raw material of paper. As late as 1866, a Public Health report examined the spread of small pox in the London rag trade and notes: One of the most shameful, dirtiest and worst paid jobs, a kind of labour in which women and young girls are by preference employed is the sorting of rags. They themselves are the first victims (of smallpox). The 'qualities' of refinement and noble sensibilities that formed part of the ideal of 'true' womanhood are clearly not extended to white women employed in dangerous and 'dirty' work. White women were not implicated in dominant cultural representations which depicted black women and women of color as sexually promiscuous and abnormal. However, they were excluded from notions of 'guiding femininity' which, as Ware demonstrates, were enlisted by the dominant colonial countries as essential to the 'civilisation' of the colonised. Thus, 'white' womanhood was not in itself a guarantee of more favourable depictions than that of 'black' womanhood, unless it was accompanied by a heterosexual and middle-class identity. I would argue that Ware's employment of 'white' women is problematic precisely because it fails to recognise that 'white' identity is also informed by racist and classist assumptions.
The hierarchical relation of western feminist discourses to discussions and representations of women in the third world is clearly a crucial issue for third world feminists. The anthology *Third World Women and The Politics Of Feminism* tackles the problems involved in definitions of third world women and feminism. The essays reflect the inevitable tensions that western feminism has produced, by claiming that the lives of women in the west can be applied wholesale to those in 'other' cultures and countries. The editors focus the anthology upon the questions that arose from the 1983 conference held in Illinois, 'Common differences: third world women and feminist perspectives'.

The essays reflect the inaccuracy of defining 'third' world feminism according to class or sexuality or race. Thus, Angela Gilliam, in her essay 'Women's equality and national liberation', argues that 'global class', not sexuality, should be central to feminism. For Gilliam, an emphasis on sexuality involves a parallel disinterest in the problems that confront impoverished women in particular:

...it concentrates on the individual and is narcissistic. Such a definition of women's true dimensions for struggle pulls away from the collective or shared concerns -except with one's own class. Sexualism becomes the new elitism, the new expression of class struggle within the movement, since most of the world's working women -including many poor women in the United States -identify survival issues to be food, housing, health care, and employment, not sexuality. Gilliam's argument reflects, I would suggest, precisely the consequences of established feminist claims 'for' sexuality. The response from women who are dealing with racial and class oppression is that feminism should be 'for' class. Class and sexuality thus become pitted against each other rather than taken up as equally relevant issues for feminism. Evelyne Accad, in her essay 'Sexuality and sexual politics: conflicts and contradictions for contemporary women in the Middle East', takes this
observation into the arena of third world feminist debate.

Accad challenges Gilliam's dismissal of sexuality as an elitist issue, stressing that there is a particular need to integrate sexuality in third world feminism because nationalist struggles could then be transformed into more viable revolutionary strategies. Accad argues that the neglect of sexuality and 'women's issues' prevents the erasure of war and limits the progressive content of liberation movements. Accad proceeds to argue that incorporating sexuality and women's issues into liberation struggles could transform nationalism into a progressive and beneficial ideology:

If the Lebanese people were to successfully unite and believe in their country; if they could strive not to possess a small part of it, but could develop a love for it outside material interests; if nationalism could unite all the various factions fighting each other under a common aim and belief, it could move toward a real solution. In this respect, nationalism (although often mixed with sexism) may appear to be the most urgent need. But I would argue that if nationalism remains at the sexist stage, and does not move beyond ownership and possession as final goals, the cycle of hell will repeat itself and violence will start all over again. In Lebanon then, both nationalism and feminism are necessary: nationalism in order to save Lebanon and feminism in order to change the values upon which social relationships are created and formed. Only with the two combined will salvation become more lasting. With a stronger nationhood based on real love, rather than domination.

I have quoted Accad at some length because I would argue that her proposals raise crucial questions concerning the relationship between 'first' and 'third' world feminism. Accad's impatience with western feminist assumptions that sexuality and women's lives and issues are somehow less relevant to feminists living in countries such as Lebanon, is echoed throughout the anthology. However, I would locate Accad's attempt to combine nationalist aims with feminist ones as intensely problematic.

In Accad's reading, feminism is perceived of as concerned with 'relationships' and 'love', whereas nationalism is allied to ideas of 'domination'. Nationalism will accordingly 'save' Lebanon and feminism will
ensure the human value of that salvation. There is, however, little clue as to how these two ideologies can join forces since they are depicted as oppositional, connected only by the fact that they must be combined in order to secure an effective peace. Accad is relying on nationalists and feminists accepting that their country and their selves have different but equally crucial needs. Thus, their survival as a people and as a country is dependent upon nationalists recognising that their ideas of dominance and ownership must at some point give way to a belief in relationships based on love and equality, while feminists must recognise that the survival of their country necessitates violence and accompanying notions of power and dominance.

In Accad's account, the points at which feminism and nationalism will recognise the more urgent validity of the other is problematised by the fact that Accad denotes both feminism and nationalism with dominance over the other. Thus, she claims that merging feminism with nationalism is worth considering because it has never been attempted before:

'a blending of feminism and nationalism has never in fact been tried out since sexuality has never been conceptualised as being at the centre of the problems in the Middle East'.

Here, sexuality is posited as central and Accad moves from this point to comment that wars and liberation struggles would be very different if sexuality was "dealt with from the beginning". However, Accad's subsequent proposal depicts nationalism as "the more urgent need", leaving the incorporation of feminism, which she has suggested should be implemented 'from the beginning', curiously ineffective. There is no sense in Accad's account that nationalism or feminism share any goals, their combination springs entirely from their different purposes; nationalism addressing the needs of the country and feminism the needs of women. As
Elleke Boehmer comments in her essay, 'Stories of women and mothers: gender and nationalism in the early fiction of Flora Nwapa', if nationalism does not see women as nationals, then a woman seeking to claim a place or identity in any field of national activity faces multiple perils of self-contradiction.

It is precisely this contradiction, that lies at the centre of Accad's proposals, which reinforces the opposition of women to 'people' and 'country' while arguing for a central position for 'feminism'.

I would argue that Accad's proposals avoid the implications of why nationalism and feminism are difficult to integrate. Boehmer points out that analysing the relation between nationalisms and feminism is a particularly vexed matter for third world women and women of color, for whom national liberation is an urgent goal. Boehmer documents third world women's accounts of their unease at the gender configurations embroiled within nationalist ideologies. As she comments:

Despite professed ideals, nationalisms do not address all individuals equally; significant distinctions and discriminations are made along gendered (and also class and racial) lines. Such distinctions are not mere decoration; on the contrary, nationalism relies heavily on gendered languages to imagine itself...The gender specifics of nationalism are clearly illustrated in the iconographies held dear by nations. In the literature, rhetoric and pageantry of nations, as in nationalist politics and political structures, it is a male figure who is cast as the author and subject of the nation...The 'female', in contrast, puts in an appearance chiefly in a metaphoric or symbolic role.

She is the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch, but it is a role which excludes her from public national life.

Moreover, it is precisely her role as a symbol of nationhood that leads to the rape and prostitution of women by a conquering nation. This was particularly symbolic in the 1945 Russian capture of Berlin in which liberation was expressed through the systematic rape of German women.

I would argue that this historical (and current) symbolic function of women's bodies, in wars and liberation struggles, is an aspect of women's
'sexuality'. Thus, I would suggest that Accad's proposal, that women's issues and female sexuality should be incorporated into Middle Eastern problems, is limited by her failure to add that this would also challenge key nationalist ideals and assumptions.

I am not suggesting that 'third' world discussions of female sexuality should confine their discussions to war and nationalism, but that any feminist discussion of 'women's' bodies and sexuality should recognise that women's bodies may well share a common physiology, but they are also attributed with different meanings by dominant cultures and are engaged in different struggles. I would argue that feminists who suggest that economics is a matter for 'third' world feminists and that sexuality is a bourgeois 'first' world feminist concern, preserve the notion that sexuality really is more applicable to western women and economics is somehow more relevant to 'third' world women.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty addresses this in her essay, 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', where she analyses the production of the 'third world woman' as "a singular monolithic subject" in recent western feminist texts. Mohanty concludes that the overriding image that western feminism has produced of third world women is one that corresponds to the distinction made by some marxists between the 'maintenance' function of the housewife and the real 'productive' role of wage labour, or the difference asserted by some developmentalists of the third world as being engaged in the lesser production of 'raw' material as opposed to the 'real' productive activity of the first world.

In this scenario, third world women emerge, in the words of Michelle Rosaldo, as "ourselves undressed". Mohanty stresses that what is needed to avoid this colonisation of third world women as a homogeneous entity is
"careful, historically specific generalisations responsive to complex realities". Mohanty's concern is that western feminism has, instead of attending to the differences between women in the first and third world, merely produced 'differences' that reduce women in the third world into paternalistic subjects for western feminism:

Legal, economic, religious and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards, it is here that ethnocentric universality comes into play. When the structures are defined as 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' and women are placed within them, an implicit image of the 'average third world woman' is produced...the 'oppressed third world woman' category has an additional attribute, the 'third world difference'. The 'third world difference' includes a paternalistic attitude toward women in the third world...as a group or category (they are automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read 'not progressive'), family-orientated (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights'), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward'), and sometimes revolutionary (read 'their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-must-fight'). This is how third world difference is produced.

Moreover, I would add that the production of a 'third' world and 'black' 'difference' also involves an equally fallacious representation of 'white' unity. Poor and lesbian white women are subsumed into a system of privilege that is better understood as an oppressive one. When Patricia Hill Collins extracts specific examples of 'Afrocentric' experience, she also produces connections between that experience and the experiences of white working-class women. Thus, Collins' discussion of the importance of education for black people in America produces an area of connected experience between black Americans and white working-class women. As Collins explains through her citation of Fanny Jackson Coppin:

Our idea of getting an education did not come out of wanting to imitate anyone whatever. It grew out of the uneasiness and restlessness of the desires we felt within us; the desire to know, not just a little, but a great deal.

Similarly, Julia Swindells, in Victorian Writing & Working Women, draws attention to the desire for knowledge as being more an expression of the
ostracism of white working-class women than an expression of a desire to imitate the dominant classes:

The passion for knowledge is part of a class perception of spiritual and intellectual self-advancement which departs from and may indeed be divorced from material self-advancement. Interest in reading is part of a life-long commitment, initiated in childhood but not confined to childhood, pursued frequently as clandestine, potentially subversive, functioning more as class otherness than social aspiration.

The connections between women that are produced by discussions that focus on gender alongside race and class are a powerful justification for the need to incorporate women's 'differences' into contemporary feminist debate. Lourdes Torres argues, in her discussion of four Latin American autobiographies, that:

all four authors find that it is not the differences between women that separate them, but the fear of recognising difference, naming it, and understanding that we have been programmed to respond to difference with fear and loathing.

I would add that a fear of difference also prevents any prospect of forging connections between women. Ultimately, I would argue, 'difference' should be recognised as not necessarily producing connections, but as producing both conflict and resolution in particular instances.

The need for feminist debates to relinquish a claim to a definite agreement and homogeneity between women has been the focus of two recent feminist texts. Judith Butler, in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity and Diana Fuss, in Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference, both explore the tensions that are produced by the need to envision women as involved in a shared oppression in order to organise feminist struggle, whilst also recognising that the racial, class, and sexual differences between women constantly problematise establishing gender as 'the' common ground between women. As Fuss comments, there has been little agreement concerning what constitutes 'shared experience',

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making it slippery ground on which to build notions of a class of women.

Butler and Fuss both conclude that the only viable way for feminism to deal with these, often conflicting, aims, is to accept the presence of contradictions, tensions and incompatibilities within feminist debate. Butler challenges the validity of attempts to establish a concrete shared experience between women:

"what sort of politics demands that kind of advance purchase on unity? Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact...The power relations that condition and limit dialogic possibilities need first to be interrogated. Otherwise, the model of dialogue risks relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking subjects occupy equal positions of power and speak with the same presuppositions about what constitutes 'agreement' and 'unity' and, indeed, that those are the goals to be sought."

For Butler, it is the very instability of the feminist 'we' that constitutes the proper ground on which to be basing feminist work. Rather than seeing women's differences as being a problematic block to feminist struggle, Butler suggests that it be viewed as the new departure for feminist thought. In this scenario, 'politics' itself can be opened up to new configurations. Fuss, too, ultimately relocates the 'problem' of identity and 'experience' into a productive and active subject for feminism. Thus, feminism should work with contradictions and tensions rather than attempt to discover and prescribe concrete points of unity. Fuss cites Jane Gallop's suggestion that - "Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question".

Whilst I would not disagree that feminist debate needs to find ways in which to talk about women's differences, I would add that 'difference' very easily becomes present in feminist debate as something that is instantly recognisable, which 'we' will as feminists accordingly incorporate into 'our' now multiple and flexible discourse. I would argue that this is to
miss a crucial aspect of difference and that is precisely its power to prevent the establishment of any single authoritative and universalising discourse. 'Difference', I would argue, can never be assumed to be something that is always comprehensible and resolvable, providing 'we' find the appropriate discourse.

In Butler's text, feminism is posited as 'the' discourse that will be able to articulate new ways of undermining the need for identity politics as the means of resistance to inequality and oppression. However, Butler's depiction of feminist discourse as uniquely able to escape from universalising, essentialising and hierarchical assumptions occurs even as she selects the contestable site of 'the' body as the passive vehicle upon which difference can be articulated. As Ed Cohen points out in his essay, 'Who are 'we'? gay 'identity' as political (e)motion':

while Butler assiduously abjures any recourse to an essentialising model of gender that is predicated on the ontological or metaphysical priority of the body, she does so precisely by invoking a parallel somatic idealization: the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated... By attempting to move gender out of the depths of bodies, Butler collapses bodies onto the 'surface' of discourse reiterating the classic Cartesian mapping of mind onto/over body that inscribes individuation as 'identity'. As a consequence, while her endeavour aspires to open up possibilities for exploring the complexity of how genders are embodied, it unfortunately forecloses this exploration by evacuating somatic practices, rendering 'the body' as a 'conceptual problem'...

Butler's particular conception of 'the' body does, as Cohen comments, undermine her attempt to work without rigid definitions. Butler is clearly vulnerable precisely because she has attempted to assert a theory that refutes any essentialising or universalising implications. However, it is precisely this endeavour that I would locate as problematic, because it combines an overt desire to articulate women's different experiences of their sexuality, class, and race whilst reflecting Butler's own focus upon
white identity. Thus, Butler discusses how 'the body' comes into being through configurations of 'gender' without alluding to the importance of race and class to 'the body'.

'The body' emerges again as the site upon which difference and dissent can be articulated and resolved. I would suggest that 'the' specific body that is present in Butler's account undermines her claim that she is able to formulate a discourse that is devoid of hierarchical implications. I would argue that what is needed is the recognition that the differences and connections that exist between women cannot be accommodated by a single discourse, even if its proponents claim that as its purpose.

In other words, the most urgent question raised by contemporary discussions of 'first' and 'third' world feminism concerns the efficacy of white, western, academic feminists formulating theories that predict and contain the resolution of 'difference' rather than work with those 'differences' that simultaneously reveal white, academic feminists as 'different'. The present interest in resolving 'third' world difference by 'a' feminist discourse that will incorporate and subdue all the contradictions and tensions that exist between women, is challenged by Daphne Patai. In 'U.S. academics and third world women: is ethical research possible', Patai argues that:

we must question the entire system that seems to allow for no other approach than manipulative distance, on the one hand, and spurious identification on the other. At the very least, this will keep us from mistakenly assuming that the discourse of feminism itself constitutes a solution to the fact of women's oppression.  

Patai's proposition that feminist discourse itself should be continually questioned is, I would argue, to address, finally, the existence of power in any discourse and to make that issue central to feminism. I would argue that feminist discourses should not be assumed to be applicable to 'women'

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or even inherently progressive. I would suggest that Gallop's suggestion that 'Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question' could be usefully applied to 'feminism'.

I would conclude that feminist attempts to produce politically effective theories need first to relinquish the assumption that they themselves can articulate and resolve mass female inequality and oppression. Feminist discourses could finally be about engaging with women rather than assuming the power of knowledge about 'them'.
Notes


3. Ibid., pp. 15-6.


5. Ibid., p. 5.

6. Ibid., p. 11.

7. Mies M, Patriarchy And Accumulation, p. 34.

8. I am refering to Mies’ notion of ‘housewifization’ which she argues reflects the capitalist-patriarchal state’s desire to employ men and to keep women at home without pay.

9. Materialist feminism has, as I demonstrate later, been criticised both by ‘first’ world and ‘third’ world feminists such as Irigaray L, Cixous H, and Accad E, for failing to account for women’s sexual difference.


11. Mitchell argues that woman’s biological function as a mother makes her a carer and that this ‘weakness’ has been exploited by the dominant patriarchal culture. In other words, Mitchell assumes that women’s biological difference does make them weaker. pp. 31-42.

12. Mies M, Patriarchy And Accumulation, p. 117.

13. Ibid., p. 183.

14. In Britain for example women are discriminated against by the lack of maternity rights and child care facilities. Britain has the lowest level of subsidised child care facilities in Europe.


17. Ibid., p. 110.

19. Ibid., p. 158.
20. Ibid., p. 164.
21. Ibid., p. 78.
22. Ibid., p. 113.
23. Mies M, Patriarchy And Accumulation, p. 207.
24. Ibid., p. 143.
26. Mies refers to the undocumented 'blood-money' accrued by the witch
hunts which was subsequently used to build the professions necessary for
the sovereignty of capitalist patriarchy. pp. 67-90.
27. Ibid., p. 206.
29. Ibid., p. 36.
30. Foucault M, The History Of Sexuality: An Introduction, Penguin,
31. Ibid., pp. 95-6.
32. Mies documents examples of women's use of herbs and plants to induce
sterility and abortions, such as the Ute Indians who used litho-spermium.
p. 54.
33. M, Patriarchy And Accumulation, p. 231.
34. Ibid., pp. 209-18.
35. See for example, Caplan P, Class And Gender In India: Women And Their
36. Foucault M, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews And Other Writings
37. Mies M, Patriarchal Accumulation On A World Scale, p. 188.
40. Cixous H, 'Sorties', in Marks E, Courtvieron I, eds., New French


43. Irigaray L, 'This sex which is not one', in New French Feminisms, p. 99.


46. Irigaray L, 'This sex which is not one', in New French Feminisms, p. 103.


48. Irigaray L, 'This sex which is not one', in New French Feminisms, pp. 104-5.

49. Ibid., p. 104.

50. Irigaray L, 'Women's exile', p. 86.


54. Irigaray L, 'Woman's exile', p. 86.


61. Ibid., p. 169.


66. Ibid., p. 163.


68. Ware V, Beyond The Pale, p. 162.


72. Ibid., p. 246.

73. Ibid., p. 238.

74. Ibid., p. 244

75. Ibid.


77. Ibid., p. 8.


80. Ibid.
81. Ibid., p. 56.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., p. 68.
84. Ibid., p. 72.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate that the marginalisation and exclusion of women in contemporary feminist debate cannot be solved by finding 'the' appropriate feminist discourse. I have argued that the notion that 'a' feminist theory can articulate women's global oppression fails to recognise that progress depends upon the acceptance of equally relevant and conflicting feminist discourses. I have focused upon the historical and present day contexts that I would locate as informing key assumptions about the role of feminist theory. Thus, I have drawn on the work of established feminist theoreticians, such as Elaine Showalter, and recent critics, such as Judith Butler, in order to show how western feminist theory may represent widely different aims, but it shares crucial assumptions concerning the ability of western feminist theory to find a theory that will speak for all women. I have demonstrated how such positions inevitably continue to represent some women more accurately than others.

In order to show the ways in which prominent western feminist theory has maintained hierarchical assumptions within different political frameworks, I have explored the histories that have informed notions of literary production. I have demonstrated that the historical construction of 'the' literary as a specialised and elite arena is clearly in evidence in current 'progressive' literary theory. Thus, I have argued that finding radical discourses depends, first of all, upon 'our' dismantling of the literary as really expressing a site of literary excellence. For, it is clearly not enough to simply attend to the historical neglect of women from the literary arena, as such an emphasis fails to attend to the contemporary
neglect and exclusion of women from contemporary feminist debate.

I have argued that unless notions of genius, literary excellence and individual talent are recognised as essential justifications for the exclusion of the masses of women and men from public 'informed' debate, then feminist theories will inevitably collude with the dominant culture's aim to restrict access to 'the' public, precisely by denying 'their' efficacy as speakers. It is those areas of collusion that I have located as signalling where prominent feminist discourses are making their primary connection with the dominant culture. Thus, I have demonstrated that 'feminist' publishing, if it is to perform any radical function, needs to abandon the idea that the publication of a few feminist writers constitutes progress. Instead I have argued that feminist publishing needs to investigate the colonial and imperial history of publishing and attend to the ways in which it facilitates the contemporary exploitation of 'third' world audiences.

I have argued that feminism as a radical and progressive ideology needs to foreground notions of equality and challenge those ideologies that exploit the masses of women and men both in the 'first' and 'third' world. I have been concerned to relate current mainstream western feminist theory to those areas in which it makes its connection with the dominant culture, rather than with discourses that articulate the need for the overthrow of repressive political theories and practices.

The contemporary radical interest in the problem of articulating women's difference could be productively set alongside the more critical 'problem' of power. I would contend that prominent western feminist theory needs to be particularly aware of its own power to perpetuate the fallacious idea that theory, articulated by a few, can address, much less
resolve, the oppression of poor women, black women, third world women, lesbian women and women of color.

I have demonstrated that the contexts of literary production need to be explored and questioned. This requires more than attending to the historical neglect of white, middle-class, western women, since such a focus fails to recognise the wider exclusions that are exercised by dominant literary assumptions and institutions. Failing to notice the wider hierarchies upon which the literary is constituted means that 'the' literary is only accountable in so far as it has excluded women. The idea that the recognition of a few women from the dominant culture can be attributed simply to feminism is, I would argue, to miss the crucial significance of feminism as an ongoing political movement that has, of yet, very little to celebrate if 'we' are talking about the masses of women.

Viewing the literary as, in fact, a particularly appropriate sphere for talented women writers means that it will continue to be held unaccountable for its successful exclusion of most women. It is this that I have located as a crucial issue for feminist theory. Thus, I have argued that re-examining the literary arena in terms of its attempt to silence most people should be of prime importance for feminist work that aims to dismantle hierarchies of race, class and gender 'difference'.

I have demonstrated that feminist theories that accept the idea of individual genius are immediately embroiled in hierarchical assumptions about the masses who can be summoned up either as an idealised, inherently progressive force or as an audience that wants only conservative, escapist texts. I was particularly concerned to explore the ways in which 'the' masses remain present as an audience, exhibiting different concerns and desires to 'writers'. I have contended that it is precisely the segregation
of society into audience, 'serious' reader, writer and critic that is most in need of questioning. Thus, I have argued that a crucial task for radical feminist theories is to transform 'the' audience into potential producers and to challenge those theories and practices that operate to perpetuate the hierarchical divisions that characterise capitalist patriarchy.

In my examination of notions of genre, I have demonstrated how 'the' masses, unless they are viewed as purposefully and forcefully excluded from dominant cultural arenas, such as the literary one, function as an object of investigation and speculation. Thus, the emphasis falls upon the question of whether 'they' enjoy escapist 'mass' bestselling fiction rather than upon why such texts are marketed to the exclusion of others and what assumptions are at work in those writers that produce the texts that are promoted by the dominant culture.

My discussion of 'first' and 'third' world feminist debates aimed to show that the disagreements and agreements amongst women is feminism's history and present and is not simply a new problem for western feminist theory to solve. I have demonstrated that recognising the different degrees of power between feminists is crucial if 'women's' difference is not to become simply a fleeting concern that western feminist theory can discuss before moving on to the next issue.

Attending to women's different histories reveals that 'our' differences were as complex and debatable as they are now and should not be left for a few of us to explain. I have argued that struggling against hierarchical literary assumptions is as critical as challenging repressive state apparatuses, since both prevent the transformation of 'the audience' into the speakers that 'we' need if our differences are to be realistically debated. I would conclude that the crucial 'difference' of power that
results from mainstream hierarchical assumptions concerning the ability of 'some' women to speak for 'others' remains feminism's most urgent concern.
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