

Lessons in Difference in the American Feminist Criticism of the 1980s

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Difference in the Wilderness

According to the leading American feminist critic Jane Gallop, it was “around 1981” that “feminist criticism attain[ed] some sort of centrality” in the literary scholarship of the country (222). However, this does not mean that feminist literary criticism had positively been peripheral there before the decade. Even though feminist literary traditions had yet to find their “home” in the “wilderness of theory,” as Elaine Showalter put it in 1981 (180), several notable studies had appeared in the 1970s following Kate Millett’s forceful disclosure of textual subjugation of women by male authors in her *Sexual Politics* (Columbia UP, 1970), including *A Literature of Their Own* by Showalter (Princeton UP, 1977), *Woman’s Fiction* by Nina Baym (Cornell UP, 1978), and *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Yale UP, 1979). If this is the case, what then characterized the core debate among the American literary feminists around that time?

Gallop herself identifies the publication of the special issues on feminism in *Critical Inquiry* and *Yale French Studies* by the end of 1981 as a symbolic event authenticating her observation. Her comment is justified insofar as she takes the motivation of these prestigious journals to compile feminist criticisms to be proof of these criticisms’ diversification of subject matter, interests, and perspectives. In other words, when critics started to question the validity of the feminist critical canon itself and to focus accordingly on “The Difference Within” (Gallop 1), their

discourse made inroads into the mainstream where heterogeneous views and experiences would collide and create an arena that would render transcultural decentralization of “woman’s desire” (i.e., the psychological locus of feminist thinking latent in patriarchy).

The problem, however, is that it is quite difficult for us today to follow the sense of breakthrough that feminist debates on difference created in the 1980s. Since Judith Butler drastically reformulated the theory of the mechanism of gender in 1990, veering attention away from *difference* to *construction* and *performativity*, difference has become all the more hackneyed, commonplace, and essentialist. Now, how did this concept actually play out in feminist arguments back then? The purpose of this essay is to answer this question by revisiting some of the important debates taking place at the time. I will begin by analyzing the deployments of difference in Euro-American feminist literary criticism, and then investigate a case related to maternalism, that is, discourse on the socio-cultural and textual function of the maternal as well as a strain of thinking that essentializes maternity in women’s subject formation, as a notable site of controversy in which the problem of difference characteristically arises.

The mother and mothering became the primary interest of feminism in the 1980s because in a sense they conjointly condensed the symptoms of the patriarchal society. Yet, on the other hand, since the social order determined by such attributes as race and class would differentiate the performativity of patriarchy group by group, maternalism emerged as a site of dynamic contestation. For instance, while Nancy J. Chodorow’s theory of the “reproduction of mothering” critically explains the reason why the modern society has relegated child rearing to women, black feminists vigorously inquire into “a distinctly Afrocentric ideology of motherhood” as a vital antithesis to the white middle-class domestic ideology (Collins 3). They have, at the same time, meant to oppose white feminists’ critique of patriarchy, for, according to Hortense Spillers, emulation of white middle-class gender roles provided African Americans with the means to overcome “the dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing project” that had originated in the Middle Passage (72). In a similar light, bell hooks contends, “Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as a women” (133).

The array of positions as represented by these critics soon came to be politicized as the embodiment of “the interlocking nature of identity—the way that gender is always inflected by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and nationality” (Henry 1718). A major force came from the black feminist, as Astrid Henry traces the thrust of the argument “back to the writings of first-wave African American

feminists”—a group that launched their political activity in the 1890s calling for recognition of black women’s human rights and female respectabilities. By the late 1970s, the time when they furthered feminist criticism, they redefined their political stand as one not necessarily restricted within their African-Americanness.

The Combahee River Collective, one of the earliest organizations of black feminists and lesbians inaugurated by writer-critic Barbara Smith, declares, “The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex and class are simultaneous factors in oppression” (272-73). This “inclusiveness” is, furthermore, according to Toni Cade Bambara, an integral part of the collective, not a device for a spectacular plurality “to protest, complain or explain to white feminist would-be allies” (vi). In a legendary anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, published exactly in 1981, Bambara accuses the “spectacular plurality” approach of being a gesture “delaying our true coming of age as committed, competent, principled combatants” (vi). While representing her co-authors, namely “radical women of color,” she contends, “it takes more than the self-disclosure and the bold glimpse of each others’ life documents to make the grand resolve to fearlessly work toward potent meshings” (vii).

Theory vis-à-vis the Real World

Bambara’s definition of feminism of color implicitly criticizes the simplistic or almost clichéd understanding of the goal of black/Third-World feminism as nothing other than self-expression—breaking silence—through their embodied, historicized, and geopolitically demonstrated difference. As a matter of fact, feminists in the 1980s widely scorned this kind of quasi-achievement as tokenism. The term “meshings” signifies that the “radical women of color” tactically interlock their differences so as to dismantle either the physical or metaphysical categories determining their underrepresentation or minority status. To mesh, intertwine, or combine people and ideologies in a non-conventional way, in other words, necessarily entails reorganization of the order of a given political discourse or agenda. Thus, quite descriptively, Bambara, an acclaimed African American woman novelist, explicates the nature of her work by obfuscating the scope of her profession: writing. By reaffirming “a call to unite,” “wrath,” “vision,” and “powers” of women of color which she has portrayed in her novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980), she responds to an interviewer asking her, “Do you think that fiction is the most effective way to do this?” in this condensed statement: “No. The most effective way to do it, is *to do*

it!” (viii).

Bambara’s obviously intentional tautology seems to suggest the primary she places on the action of writing over the act of textual representation. The significance of difference Bambara reveals here is, therefore, emphatically attached to her displacement of the category of fiction—hence literature; it is not deployed simply as a set of racially inspired identitarian components. Indeed, such an act of mocking the foundation of literary analysis on a meta-level is presumably a rebellious act for those who expect to see theoretical sophistication in feminist criticism. As Showalter’s metaphor “wilderness” relatedly—if not negatively—implies, feminist criticism was said to be “dismissed” for being “not properly ‘theoretical’” even after its incorporation into the institution of literary theory (Gallop 6). Precisely in the article she contributed to the 1981 feminist issue of *Critical Inquiry*, Showalter mentions a generalized notion of conflict between “pluralism” and theoretical consensus: “An early obstacle to constructing a theoretical framework for feminist criticism was the unwillingness of many women to limit or bound an expressive and dynamic enterprise” (180-81).

Black feminists’ disturbance of the boundary between literary theory and feminist praxis may certainly look as if they would inescapably reduce textual occurrences to instances of political subjectivity—either the reader’s or the writer’s. Either the priority of the Combahee River Collective to fight “oppression” or Bambara’s reiteration “to do it” may gesture toward this reduction. However, as quotations from her text show, Bambara’s black feminist intervention bases itself in the principle that the difference between action and fiction emerges as a differential moment vis-à-vis her awareness of actual political needs. In this regard, even though her argument has apparently nothing to do with literary theory, it invites readers to unpack the theoretical basis underlying her practice of literary creation. In other words, black feminists have argued from their differential vantage point for the legitimacy of such an allocation of the theoretical in the feminist discourse.

The issue posed by Bambara’s self-positioning, furthermore, not coincidentally intersects with the thesis Barbara Johnson advances in *A World of Difference* (1987). At the beginning of her introduction to the book, Johnson foregrounds Audre Lorde’s contention on the minority’s “survival” as the matter is never enabled by “an academic skill.” In so doing, she echoes Lorde’s challenge to the widespread conviction in the mutual alienation between critical theory (in particular psychoanalysis and semiotics) and politics grounded in identity or autobiographical facts: “The essays in this book . . . all attempt . . . to transfer the analysis of difference . . . out of the realm of linguistic universality or deconstructive allegory and into contexts in which difference is very much at issue in the ‘real world’” (Johnson 2).

Lorde, sometimes considered as a militant black lesbian poet and intellectual, summarizes her feminism as an enterprise of “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” (112). This testifies that she represents the type of feminist thinker who strategically remains in the Showalteresque “wilderness” in order to complicate theory. At the same time, Johnson’s hinting at her perfect comprehension of the significance of Lorde’s ideas concomitantly points to her own contribution to the feminist debate in the U.S. in the 1980s over difference.

The thematizing of difference as a problematic in the “real world” logically resonates with the argument of those critics who observe that it is not biology, let alone self-identity, but rather the material, institutional, and historical conditions that determine each woman’s destiny. Nonetheless, as Johnson notes in a tone of concession, it is clear that this feature of feminism of color has not yet been thoroughly recognized: “There is, of course, no guarantee that to speak of the gender or race of an author (including one’s own) is to situate the literary-theoretical activity in the ‘real world’” (3). On the contrary, one of the most notable moments of feminist criticism in the 1980s was non-European theorists’ robust critique of the academic feminists’ lack of knowledge and of imagination about the world outside Europe. Their insight into difference in the “wilderness of theory” promoted a theoretical practice that had disclosed the high-theorists’ fallacy of believing that “‘theory’ is a turning away from the world” (Johnson 3).

Maternalist Orientalism

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and later Rey Chow are among the most widely known U.S.-based non-Western critics who have taken issue with such fallacy. One example of their critical stance is their postcolonial evaluation of Julia Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women*. Written in 1974 after the author’s brief trip to China, Kristeva’s book fabricates China as an oppositional site from which she advances critiques of the Western patriarchal society. However, for critics of the author—a leading figure in so-called French feminism who was then assumed to produce “the most prestigious, the ‘highest’ discourse in American literary studies” (Gallop 47)—any theoretical impulse can hardly evade its owner’s worldly positioning. Scholars such as Spivak (*In Other Worlds* 132), Toril Moi (6), and Lisa Lowe (150) have all pointed out that Kristeva’s editorship at *Tel Quel* (1960-82) has particularly informed her motivation to establish “China” as her formulation of radical subject matter satisfying the journal’s avowed political interest. Writing China as

an “object of desire,” in Lowe’s terms, thus eventually enters the realm of personal narrative and even self-fashioning. If the 1980s saw a particular fertilization of feminist theory, this was partly thanks to the realization that it was always the “real world” experience that motivated theory.

In “French Feminism in the International Frame,” originally published in the above-mentioned feminist issue of *Yale French Studies*, Spivak takes up Kristeva’s delineation of China and inquires into the possibility of delivering an “International Feminism” within “a Western European context” that makes “the heterogeneity . . . manageable” (*In Other Worlds* 141). Spivak argues that the China as fantasized in Kristeva’s book in accordance with her political interest has little to do with Chinese social realities: “This is a set of directives for class- and race-privileged literary women who can ignore the seductive effects of identifying with the values of the other side while rejecting their validity” (*In Other Worlds* 136). This is a point Rey Chow affirms as well in her argument against Kristeva’s orientalism: “Kristeva’s book about Chinese women shows us how the alluring tactic of ‘feminizing’ another culture in the attempt to criticize Western discourse actually repeats the mechanisms of the discourse and hence cannot be an alternative to it” (32). In other words, in Kristeva’s framework, China is useful merely for her discussion of women’s subject position, that is, her theory of the feminization of women based on the Lacanian psycholinguistic formula of personal development. In the book, Kristeva tries to envision the qualities that she feels are missing in Western philosophical and cultural practices.

As Chow notes, Kristeva’s critique is complicated by the fact that the Chinese woman is peculiarly “sexualized,” and the ethical pole in her figuration of China virtually represents the reverse of the French and British orientalism, which Edward Said has famously shed light on. Said’s account of the orientalist archival practice of the nineteenth-century French and British imperialists in the Middle East illuminates the formulation of male sexual fantasy as the imaginational basis of their discourse; that is, orientalism is “the male conception of the world in which the East is defined as a sexually feminine space” (Said 208). The imperialist projection of a Western modernity confronting the ageless pre-modernity of the East similarly works as the underlying assumption in Kristeva’s discourse. In contrast, however, in Kristeva’s classification, China is not quite feminized or subordinated to the superior masculine foothold of the West. Feminized China is rather elevated above the West due to its preservation of an ancient matrilinear psychic stratum. While maintaining that “ancient China was . . . the best known and most highly developed matrilinear society,” Kristeva finds evidence of this in modern Chinese writing, which, she claims, has “maintained the memory of matrilinear

pre-history (collective and individual) in its architectonic of image, gesture, and sound" (*About* 57). In this passage—where Spivak finds one of “the most stupendous generalizations about Chinese writing” (*In Other Worlds* 138)—Kristeva decides that the life of the speaking and writing individuals in China embodies the “pre-Oedipal phase,” distinguished by “dependency on the maternal,” its “absence of clear-cut divisions between the order of things and the order of symbols,” and its “predominance of the unconscious impulses” (*About* 56).

This description immediately reminds us of a seminal Kristevan concept: semiotic chora. Here she is obviously describing China in light of the concept as “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases” (*Revolution* 25). Critics like Chow have noted the theorist’s fetishization of the gendered conceptual basis of chora, which was originally articulated by Plato in *Themaieus*: “unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted” (*Desire* 133). In other words, as Chow points out, “Kristeva’s idealization of the ‘maternal’ order in China in terms of an ‘empty and peaceful center’” virtually reduces it to a pre-subjective realm lacking any meaningful signification and dominated by libidinous drive (Chow 8). Needless to say, this move on Kristeva’s part embodies nothing other than the “‘negative’ or ‘repressed’ side of Western discourse” (Chow 7).

Furthermore, insofar as chora is not the model with which to “deconstruct the origin, but rather to *recuperate*, archeologically and formulaically, what she locates as the potential originary space before the sign,” as Spivak points out (*In Other Worlds* 146), Kristeva’s attribution of Chinese people’s communicational mode to the semiotic phase means to arguably essentialize an infantile representation of the country. Kristeva’s “Chinese woman,” consequently, bears no resemblance to modern Chinese women and, in fact, erases the actual situations of women in contemporary China. Her theory relegates the maternal space, Chinese culture, and the Chinese language to a pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal realm of rhythm, music, and play that is mistaken in its understanding of the discursive behavior of people including mothers. They are, to be sure, organized agents within language who conduct daily practices of speech and action without dissolving into choric pun, nonsense, or silence.

Comparison Dismissed

Indeed, Kristeva’s Chinese women are associated with pre-linguistic pulses and

rhythms that render them inarticulate or incoherent in the symbolic order of everyday speech and writing. This also suggests her preoccupation with adding a practical validity to her theory of semiosis; this is why Spivak warns that “Kristeva seems to blunt the fine edge of her approach to literature” (*In Other Worlds* 138). Spivak’s emphasis on Kristeva’s performing “no primary research” and “no *analytic* experience of Chinese woman” is significant not just in terms of how she pinpoints the period-specific orientalism manifest in Kristeva’s work (*In Other Worlds* 138). From the present vantage point, we can see how clearly Spivak’s attention to orientalist thinking in seemingly progressive thinkers anticipates her recent contemplation on the reformation of comparative literature. She has been vocal about replacing this discipline’s Eurocentric principle of globalization with “planetarity,” a concept enabled by “deep language learning”: “I continue to believe that the politics of the production of knowledge in area studies (and also anthropology and the other human sciences’) can be touched by a new Comparative Literature, whose hallmark remains a care for language and idiom” (*Death* 4-5; “Rethinking” 613).

To look back at Spivak’s call for a “French feminism in an international frame” as the germ of her dense theory of comparativism may suggest a possible reason why the Kristevan maternal/patriarchal morphology of Chinese culture and society sounds so unreliable as a scheme of deciphering difference. What Spivak radically proposes in her recent studies is the necessity to approach other languages with the guidance of “the assumption of equivalence” (“Rethinking” 613). This is the assumption that potentially leads a scholar to seriously learn languages different from her/his native tongue and become qualified to scrutinize texts in those languages.

Not by “comparison of historico-civilizational content” of the subject matter, but solely by envisioning the “equivalence among languages”—a hypothesis inspired by an imaginative-intellectual simulation of “the helplessness” of the speaking subjects at their acquisition of their first languages—one, for the first time, can embark on “the task of undoing historical injustice toward languages associated with peoples who were not successfully competitive within capitalism” (“Rethinking” 612-13). This is the paradigm shift in comparative literature intended by Spivak—from comparison to pursuit of translinguistic equivalence: “For the last few years, some of us have been trying to rethink comparativism by pondering how exactly Comparative Literature does not compare and how that not-comparing can shelter something affirmative” (“Rethinking” 611).

As Kristeva seems to wholeheartedly believe in her entitlement to affirm and celebrate Chinese women, the existing methodology of comparison is designed to revolve around a “nation-centered and culture-centered” intellectual framework

whose foundation is necessarily informed by its practitioners (Spivak, “Rethinking” 614). The very operation to overturn the centrality of one’s native language and to reach out to locations of difference is what Spivak calls “deep language learning across the spectrum of the subaltern languages of the world” (“Rethinking” 615). For her, this operation is integral to our attempt to cultivate the “ethical comparativist impulse” by which one can “undertake a serious and continuous undoing of nationalist or national language-based reading” (“Rethinking” 612-13).

At a glance, Kristeva’s approach is difficult to rebuke from the standpoint of liberal and maternalist feminism because it establishes its narrative on the genesis of the subject. Nonetheless, her psycholinguistic portrayal installs the orientalist morphology constituted by the Western masculine speech and the Eastern feminine extra-verbal signification as the very structure that allows the (Chinese female) subject to come into existence. Spivak disarticulates, by her theory of differential reading, the suture between psycholinguistic feminism and the pre-subjective model of the Chinese woman that serves as an agent in the Kristevan paradigm.

Even though in her argument Spivak presents no systematic counter-reading of Chinese texts, she brings to light a blind spot in Kristeva’s reliance on the maternal figure by displacing the connection between the reproduction of socio-political power and the pattern of signification at the uterine realm of the semiotic, whose engendering capacity has historically been maternalized ever since Plato. Insofar as actual women’s voices can evidently disturb—if not change—an existing male-centric institution, the subversive power of this reproductive function of giving birth to preverbal signs seems to suggest some sort of “linguistic life” of living mothers, a concept that Butler would later put forth as a source of one’s political agency (Butler 163). However, the process of Kristeva’s argument spares no room for any agency except her own as the storyteller. Spivak’s minutely wrought argument, thus, distinguishes her from the mainstream French feminist position “*against* sexism, where women unite as a biologically oppressed caste” (*In Other Worlds* 144). She is indeed avidly engaged in the debates over difference in relation to women, but her critique turns out to be something more drastic than a simple recognition of contextual difference surrounding female reproductive biology.

Feminist Genesis / Clitoral Exegesis

Spivak’s exceptional contribution to feminism in the 1980s instantiates the principle that activation of difference in theory does not mean implementing multiculturalism in critical practices. As her recent argument on comparativism requires a

shift from cultural comparison to language learning, critical appropriation of culturally, racially, or nationally diverse ways of mothering, for instance, cannot be the goal of the project. Even if such difference represents a certain physical aspect of the “real world,” which scholars can sample as useful evidence to validate their theory (as Kristeva did), Spivak’s worldliness is rather located outside of the logic of classifiable difference. Thus, the “international frame” she proposes, which is aimed to expose the imaginational limitation of psycholinguistic feminism, takes shape as a clitoral exegesis (so to speak) that undermines its feminine genesis that has been subordinated to the uterine reproductive model of woman: “Psychological investigation in this area cannot only confine itself to the effect of clitoridectomy on women. It would also ask why and show how, since an at least symbolic clitoridectomy has always been the ‘normal’ accession to womanhood and the unacknowledged name of motherhood, it might be necessary to plot out the entire geography of female sexuality in terms of the imagined possibility of the dismemberment of the phallus” (*In Other Worlds* 151).

Clitoridectomy—together with the Indian sati—became an important site of critical practice where Western researchers of the decade analyzed what they believed to be a Third-World cultural essence on the one hand and, on the other, a problematic in investigations of gender justice. Spivak opens the essay “French Feminism in an International Frame” with an impressive episode about a young Sudanese woman scholar working on her dissertation on “Structural Functionism,” that is, the Sudanese version of clitoridectomy, and its evocation of “an allegory of” Spivak’s “own ideological victimage” (*In Other Worlds* 134). Even though the sense of this “victimage” is hard to tell precisely, her psychological experience may signify both her and the young scholar’s susceptibility to the ideological apparatus of European feminism as actors of its academic sector.

Spivak, who was to elaborate her thoughts on the “native informant” in her subsequent essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in 1988 (284), was coaxing here the very function of the institutional force from the Sudanese scholar’s socio-anthropological approach to clitoridectomy inattentive (ironically) to her virtual credit to its “function”: “Its implicit interest is to applaud a system—in this case sexual—because it functions” (*In Other Worlds* 134). By this episode of trans-contextual “structural function” of clitoridectomy, Spivak’s move seems to resonate with that of French feminism represented by Kristeva, who apparently believes in her capability to represent Chinese women and in her entitlement to use them to demonstrate the theoretical advantage of her idea of semiotic chora. Clitoridectomy alone will not automatically form a counterpoint of “an international feminism” enabling a critic to resist matricentric psycholinguistic feminism and delineate the

“geography of female sexuality.”

When Spivak criticizes “the inbuilt colonialism of First World feminism toward the Third,” she first and foremost contends that her critical excavation of “discontinuity, heterogeneity, and typology” as embedded in “such a sex-analysis” itself “will not necessarily escape” that colonialism (*In Other Worlds* 153). Unpacking of this statement clarifies her rejection of any comfortable anticipation of not only the liberating effect of the feminist discourse but also the decolonizing effect of the postcolonial discourse. Thanks to “Structural Functionism,” one may be able to recognize clitoridectomy as a culturally irrefragable practice. Yet even if this is the case, what kind of understanding of the world does this specific recognition make possible? How can difference be activated in its methodologically restricted field of function? While she is aware of her “ideological victimage,” Spivak tries to stay in her “highly overdetermined” vantage point as a Euro-American-based elite feminist of color—from which she asks herself, “what can I do for them?” (*In Other Worlds* 134).

At this point, we must once again recall the shift from comparison to equivalence, a shift vivified by the Spivakian “ethical comparativist impulse”; this impulse is intended for the analysis of conditions that may appear radically different but are approachable in light of equivalence. Accordingly, the performance of clitoral exegesis of the maternal feminist genesis “ties together the terrified child held down by her grandmother as the blood runs down her groin and the ‘liberated’ heterosexual woman who . . . in the ‘freest’ of ‘free’ activities . . . confronts, at worst, the ‘shame’ of admitting to the ‘abnormality’ of her orgasm” (*In Other Worlds* 153). The vision articulated here is—as I believe—one of the most compelling feminist critical discourses of the 1980s both affectwise and insightwise. The victims of sexualized pain here include not only the girl whose genital organ has to be mutilated by her grandmother, but also the adult woman whose inscription of heteronormativity makes her nothing but a beneficiary of male sexual impulse even after women’s “liberation.” Spivak’s interpolation of these scenes of subjection in the accounts of French feminist theory draws attention to the violence and vulnerability that very often inheres in the triumphant maternity. This exemplifies how lessens in difference have come to sophisticate a theory. The significance of this revisit is not simply about the problem of insufficient research; it is also about being able to identify a hegemonic mechanism in a well-received theory that claims to be explaining “the real world.”

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