Inventing “French Feminism:” A Critical History

by

Katherine A. Costello

Department of Literature
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Robyn Wiegman, Supervisor

___________________________
Rey Chow

___________________________
Anne F. Garréta

___________________________
Ranjana Khanna

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
Literature in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2016
ABSTRACT

Inventing “French Feminism:” A Critical History

by

Katherine A. Costello, Department of Literature
Duke University

Date: ______________________

Approved:

_________________________

Robyn Wiegman, Supervisor

_________________________

Rey Chow

_________________________

Anne F. Garréta

_________________________

Ranjana Khanna

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

French Feminism has little to do with feminism in France. While in the U.S. this now canonical body of work designates almost exclusively the work of three theorists—Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva—in France, these same thinkers are actually associated with the rejection of feminism. If some scholars have on this basis passionately denounced French Feminism as an American invention, there exists to date no comprehensive analysis of that invention or of its effects. Why did theorists who were at best marginal to feminist thought and political practice in France galvanize feminist scholars working in the United States? Why does French Feminism provoke such an intense affective response in France to this date? Drawing on the fields of feminist and queer studies, literary studies, and history, “Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” offers a transnational account of the emergence and impact of one of U.S. academic feminism’s most influential bodies of work. The first half of the dissertation argues that, although French Feminism has now been dismissed for being biologically essentialist and falsely universal, feminists working in the U.S. academy of the 1980s, particularly feminist literary critics and postcolonial feminist critics, deployed the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva to displace what they perceived as U.S. feminist literary criticism’s essentialist reliance on the biological sex of the author and to challenge U.S. academic feminism’s inattention to racial differences between women. French Feminism thus found traction among feminist scholars to the extent that it was perceived as
addressing some of U.S. feminism’s most pressing political issues. The second half of the dissertation traces French feminist scholars’ vehement rejection of French Feminism to an affectively charged split in the French women’s liberation movement of the 1970s and shows that this split has resulted in an entrenched opposition between sexual difference and materialist feminism, an opposition that continues to structure French feminist debates to this day. “Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” ends by arguing that in so far as the U.S. invention of French Feminism has contributed to the emergence of U.S. queer theory, it has also impeded its uptake in France. Taken as a whole, this dissertation thus implicitly argues that the transnational circulation of ideas is simultaneously generative and disabling.
## Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. vii

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................................... x

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... xi

Introduction: Theoretical Crossings ..................................................................................................... 1
  French Feminism in a Transnational Frame ......................................................................................... 4
  Feminist Theory vs. Queer Theory: The Politics of Genealogy ........................................................ 12
  Chapter Outline .................................................................................................................................... 18

1. French Feminism and The Problem of Essentialism ........................................................................ 23
  1.1 Constructing French Feminism ..................................................................................................... 28
  1.2 French Feminism vs. Gynocriticism ............................................................................................. 35
  1.3 (Re)figuring the body .................................................................................................................. 45
  1.4 What Is A Woman? ....................................................................................................................... 52

2. French Feminism and the Problem of Universalism ........................................................................ 59
  2.1 The Race for French Feminism .................................................................................................... 64
  2.2 The “inscription and de-scription of a non-unitary female subject of color:” Ecriture Féminine’s Different Theory of Difference ........................................................................................................ 70
  2.3 “Learn[ing] to learn from them:” Heterogeneity Beyond the Same/Other Boundary .............. 78

3. French Feminism and the French Women’s Liberation Movement ............................................... 89
  3.1 “Un système d’oppositions dichotomiques” ................................................................................ 92
  3.2 “Là-bas, on appelle ça French feminism” .................................................................................... 98
  3.3 Women’s Liberation MovementTM ............................................................................................ 106
  3.4 Writing the History of the Women’s Liberation Movement ...................................................... 117

4. “Vous avez dit queer?:” Queer Theory after French Feminism ..................................................... 130
  4.1 “Trouble dans la réception” ...................................................................................................... 135
4.2 Lesbian Desire vs. the Regime of Heterosexuality .......................................................... 146

4.3 The Trouble with Gender Trouble ................................................................................... 155

Epilogue .................................................................................................................................. 166

Biography ............................................................................................................................... 198

List of Figures

Figure 1: Trademark registration, now expired. Source: INPI. .................................................... 126

Figure 2: Women from Psychépo try to take the lead of the march while holding the letters "M," "L," "F," at the October 6th 1979 demonstration to preserve the Loi Veil. Photograph: Catherine Deudon ........................................................................................................ 127

Figure 3: Demonstration at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26th 1970. Carrying the wreath: Christine Delphy. Carrying the banner to the right: Monique Wittig. Photographer unknown ......................................................................................................................... 128

Figure 4: Police stops the demonstration at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26th 1970. To the left of the police officer: Monique Wittig. Photograph: Catherine Deudon .............. 129
Acknowledgements

I wrote this dissertation with generous financial support from the Literature Program at Duke University, the Graduate School at Duke University, and, in the last few months, Edward Costello and Mary Ann Piwowarczyk. My parents also gave me the gift of bilingualism, biculturalism, and binationalism without which this project simply could not have been. In September and October 2013 I conducted interviews in Paris that decisively shaped the direction of my work. I would like to thank all those who so generously shared their time, experiences, and intellect with me: Sylvina Boissonnas, Oristelle Bonis, Marie-Jo Bonnet, Hélène Cixous, Christine Delphy, Catherine Deudon, Geneviève Fraisse, Michèle Idels, Luce Irigaray, Brigitte Lhomond, Claire Michard, Françoise Picq, Nadja Ringart, and Suzette Robichon. Suzette also guided me through a wealth of resources in Paris, helping me identify archives of particular relevance and putting me in touch with many of the women I interviewed. At Duke, Leah Allen became a generative interlocutor; she gave me valuable comments and advice on several parts of the dissertation and I benefited from her previous experience in the program. I’m also grateful to Annabel Kim for her thoughtful engagement with and generous feedback on this project, especially its last two chapters, and for the common language. Sarah-Neel Smith probably read more drafts of this dissertation than anyone. Her ruthless editing and precious friendship sustained me, and helped bring clarity and eloquence to my work. In the last year, Marca Cassity redefined the meaning of support, enabling me to dedicate myself to writing in new and fuller ways—and to find joy in the process of doing so.
Throughout, I benefited from a committee of extraordinary scholars and pedagogues. Rey Chow was an incisive reader and, through her keen sense of humor, often identified before I could some of the central questions running through these chapters. Ranji Khanna brought an invaluable depth of knowledge and thoughtful support to the project, pointing out important lacunae along the way. The ones that remain are, of course, my responsibility alone. Anne Garréta and Robyn Wiegman were the twin forces behind this work. Often wanting very different things from my various chapters, they respectively came to represent for me the French and U.S. intellectual communities whose incommensurabilities are the very subject of this dissertation. Internalizing both of their voices helped me adopt the double vision at the heart of this project. Like all true mentorship, Anne’s extended beyond the confines of academia. Anne has taught me everything from how to up my pool game to how to sharpen my critical thinking by honing my prose. The shape of this dissertation also owes everything to her since it was in working with her that I began reading French materialist feminism. Robyn’s frequent and copious feedback guided this dissertation through every single step, from its earliest formulations to its final instantiation. Her metacritical thinking was a continuous source of inspiration; this dissertation owes its most capacious insights and far-reaching implications to her. Finally, my unexpected grief in transitioning from “I’m working with Robyn” to “I worked with Robyn” has highlighted the extent to which my intellectual relationship with her has also been an affective one. It was Robyn who first suggested I write on French Feminism, before I was even admitted to the Literature Program. Although I came to and wrote this dissertation on my own terms, I did in fact also write it
for her. If it had more closely approximated everything I wanted from it, I would have dedicated it to her.
Introduction: Theoretical Crossings

In 2012, the critical theoretical journal *Paragraph* published a special issue on “Queer Theory’s Return to France.” The only scholarly work to date to substantially engage with the status of queer theory in France, the issue takes as its premise the “late” arrival of queer theory in France and problematizes this “belatedness” in light of queer theory’s indebtedness to French thought.¹ The near-simultaneous publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* in the year 1990 is widely invoked as the birth date of queer theory in the U.S. This intellectual strain of thought only emerged in France some years later, around 1997, and as a distinctly U.S. body of work, when Didier Eribon, a philosopher and sociologist, organized a conference somewhat paradoxically entitled “les études gay et lesbiennes” (gay and lesbian studies).² The conference, which took place at the Centre Pompidou—a dynamic cultural center as well as Paris’ main modern and contemporary art museum—brought together eminent French scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu with key figures of U.S. queer theory, such as Leo Bersani and Eve Sedgwick, and more complexly situated

¹ Davis and Kollias, “Editor’s Introduction,” 139. The special issue was edited by Oliver Davis of the University of Warwick and Hector Kollias of King’s College London who also headed a three-year investigation on the subject of “Queer Theory in France,” from October 2012 to September 2015. For more information, see: [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/french/news/queertheory.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/french/news/queertheory.aspx)

theorists such as Monique Wittig. Despite this landmark event, Butler’s Gender Trouble was not translated into French until 2005 and Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet not until 2008. Since then, queer theory has remained marginal to French intellectual production at large. As of 2015, for example, only fifteen dissertations on the subject have been registered in France compared to some six hundred in the United States.

All of this is remarkable, the special issue of Paragraph asserts, given that U.S. queer theory draws heavily on continental philosophy and, more specifically, on what has come to be known in the U.S. as “French Theory.” Gender Trouble and Epistemology of the Closet, Claire Boyle argues, develop their anti-identitarian arguments through a critical deployment of the work of French poststructuralist thinkers Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida into theories of gender and sexuality. If the first wave of queer theory worked through these thinkers, more recent scholarship also draws on the thought of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Jean Baudrillard. The question that organizes the special issue of Paragraph is thus two-fold: if U.S. queer theory is so

3 By 1997, Wittig had been living and working in the U.S. for over two decades. While she was considered an important French scholar in the U.S., in France, her work was much less well known. Thus for example, her collection of essays The Straight Mind and Other Essays, which was published in the U.S. in 1992, did not appear in France until 2001 (La Pensée Straight).

4 The data about queer theory dissertations is mine and is based on a search for “queer” in the title of theses in the French thesis database thèses.fr and in the U.S. thesis database Proquest Dissertation and Thesis Global.

5 Boyle, “Post-Queer (Un)Made in France?,” especially 265-266.

6 Ibid.
deeply influenced by French poststructuralist thought, why is it that U.S. queer theory has not traveled sooner and with more ease to France? And why is it that these thinkers have not given rise to anything resembling queer theory in their country of origin? As a whole, “Queer Theory’s Return to France” shows that the very different histories of queer theory in France and the U.S. are linked not just to questions of linguistic translation but, more crucially, to issues of institutional, disciplinary, political, ideological, and intellectual translation. These include the different institutional status of interdisciplinarity in France and the U.S., the hegemony of republican universalism in France, and the mutations undergone by French Theory as it was deployed in U.S. queer theory.

“Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” argues that a transnational history of French Feminism’s emergence and impact is also necessary to understanding the contemporary status of queer theory in France. Animated, like the special issue of Paragraph, by an interest in the discrepant status of queer theory in France and the U.S., this dissertation adds a crucial new element to the preexisting study of institutions, social and political contexts, and transatlantic mutations of French Theory: the U.S. invention of French Feminism. Feminist scholars in France have displayed a particularly strong resistance to queer theory. Asking why this is the case, I argue that their rejection of queer theory is best understood in light of their reaction to the U.S. invention of French Feminism and the latter’s influence on queer theory. I chart the travel of a set of theoretical ideas from France to the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s, their influential transformation in the U.S. into what has come to be known as French Feminism, and the ensuing controversy over French Feminism in France. I argue for French Feminism’s
formative role in generating and shaping queer theory and demonstrate that the importation of U.S. queer theory to France is widely perceived as the controversial “return” of French Feminism to France as queer theory.

This dissertation’s history of French Feminism contributes to two major scholarly conversations. First, it intervenes in the history of Franco-American intellectual exchange by distinguishing the American invention of French Feminism from the equally American invention of French Theory and by considering how U.S. transformations of French thought affect not only U.S. academic developments but, in another transatlantic turn, French intellectual history as well. Second, by placing French Feminism in the purview of U.S. queer theory, it joins recent work on the genealogical relation between feminist and queer theory. Rather than understanding these two bodies of work as antithetical, or framing queer theory as the supersession of feminist precedents, “Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” shows how deeply queer theory has been shaped by French Feminism and how this has, in turn, impeded queer theory’s ability to travel “back” to France.

**French Feminism in a Transnational Frame**

One of the most influential bodies of work in U.S. feminist theory to date, French Feminism emerged out of U.S. academic feminism of the early 1980s. Represented in its canonical formation by the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, French Feminism has come to signify an academic feminism deeply engaged with
poststructuralist thought, most notably Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian
psychoanalysis, and primarily concerned with sexual difference, language, and the
unconscious. In France, however, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva are associated with the
rejection of feminism, and feminist thought of the 1970s is characterized by the
theorizing that came out of the women’s liberation movement. There is, in other words, a
significant discrepancy between what is known in the U.S. as French Feminism and what
feminists in France understand 1970s feminism to be. On this basis, several scholars,
most notably Christine Delphy and Claire Moses, have passionately denounced French
Feminism as an American invention.7 Other scholars have pointed out this category’s
homogenizing effect and illuminated the significant differences between the work of
Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva; or drawn attention to these authors’ rejection of the term
“feminism,” unpacked the issues at stake in such a rejection, and contented with the
implications of nonetheless thinking of them as feminists in the U.S. While many
scholars gesture to the problematic construction of French Feminism, there exists no
comprehensive analysis of French Feminism’s invention. My dissertation, “Inventing
‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History,” thus fills a crucial gap in the history of the
intellectual relation between France and the U.S., as well as in the history of U.S.
academic feminism.

7 Delphy, “The Invention of ‘French Feminism’” and Moses “Made in America.” Both
articles were also published in French: Delphy, “L’Invention du ‘French Feminism’” and
Moses, “La Construction du ‘French Feminism.’”
As the first book-length project to build on Delphy and Moses’ analyses of French Feminism’s invention, this dissertation departs from them on two significant counts. Delphy and Moses’ studies are underwritten by a realist understanding of history and sustained by the assumption that bodies of work can travel transparently between two countries, in this case between France and the United States. Against this realist understanding of history and transnational circulation, I take it as axiomatic that bodies of work are reinvented to meet the needs of their new environment as they travel from one context to another. Rather than offering a critique of French Feminism as an inaccurate portrayal of feminism in France, I historicize the impact that French Feminism has had in intellectual circles on both sides of the Atlantic.

In tracking the Atlantic crossings of French Feminism, the dissertation also departs from existing work on French Theory in two important ways. It conceptualizes the transnational movement of ideas between France and the U.S. as a feedback loop rather than as a unidirectional flow of influence, and it separates out French Feminism from French Theory, establishing it as a distinct body of work with a distinct intellectual history. The three main intellectual histories of French Theory, *Traveling Theory: France and the United States*, *French Theory in America*, and *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* focus on why the texts and authors known as French Theory became of such interest to U.S. scholars in the 1970s and 1980s and on how their reception in a drastically different
context generated new intellectual possibilities. The essays collected in Traveling Theory: France and the United States, for example, examine “the various ways in which American academics have appropriated, modified, or enhanced the French cultural heritage.” French Theory in America builds upon this work by explicitly defining French Theory as an American invention that produces a false unity of post-1968 French thought, and focuses on how French Theory transformed U.S. academia. In what is perhaps the most authoritative intellectual history of French Theory to date, François Cusset adds an in-depth analysis of the conditions of possibility for the U.S. invention of French Theory. He also details the ways in which it was used and transformed in the U.S. context by tracking the creative mutations of French thought as it crossed the Atlantic. These existing works on the transatlantic travel of post-1968 French thought to the U.S. all nod to French Feminism by either citing Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva in the list of theorists imported from France or by offering a brief gloss of French Theory’s impact on U.S. academic feminism. The connection between French Theory and French Feminism is everywhere assumed but nowhere studied, and the gap between U.S. and French understandings of 1970s feminism in France remains unaddressed.

All of these intellectual histories are, more or less explicitly, methodologically underwritten by Edward Said’s landmark essay “Traveling Theory.” In his comparative analysis of Luckasian Marxism in post-WWI Hungary, 1960s France, and 1970s


England, Said develops a historicizing methodology for studying theory’s travel. Defining theory as “a response to a specific social and historical situation of which an intellectual occasion is a part,” he focuses on the effects specific historical circumstances have on theory as it travels from one nation to another and from one time period to another.\(^{10}\) Said outlines four stages to a theory’s travel: a theory comes into being in an initial set of circumstances, travels a certain amount of distance, is confronted by a new set of conditions, and, finally, is transformed through its new uses and its new position in space and time. This model generates two main questions for Said: Does a theory gain or lose strength in its travels? And does it become altogether different in a new spatial and temporal context? By producing a historicizing approach to theory’s travel, Said’s work provides an instrumental counterpoint to any belief in the possibility of a transparent transplantation of theory from one context to another. It also opens up questions about the circumstances to which a theory is responding as it is read in a new location. In these respects, Said’s model of traveling theory remains foundational to my transnational history of French Feminism, particularly in its historicization of the U.S. interest in French Feminism. However, Said’s model does not problematize the notion of a theory’s origin and, hence, is not particularly helpful in understanding French Feminism as an

\(^{10}\) Said, “Traveling Theory,” 237.
invention. More significantly, it maps a unidirectional travel of theory and thus cannot account for how French Feminism has, in turn, impacted intellectual history in France.

French Feminism exemplifies the late twentieth and twenty-first century destabilization of the concept of theoretical origin. In the contemporary situation, theory, as James Clifford puts it, “is always written from some ‘where’, and that ‘where’ is less a place than itineraries: different, concrete histories of dwelling, immigration, exile, migration.” As a U.S. invention, French Feminism is not written from France but, rather, from institutional and personal networks of travel between France and the U.S. Furthermore, the national origin of the very writers who have come to represent it—Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva—puts additional pressure on French Feminism’s supposed Frenchness. Although all three work and live in Paris, none of them hail from metropolitan France. Hélène Cixous was born in French Algeria of a German mother and Algerian father. Luce Irigaray moved to France from Belgium and Julia Kristeva emigrated from Bulgaria. In her seminal essay “French Feminism in an International Frame,” Gayatri Spivak draws on this to critique French Feminism’s pretensions to universality and argue that French Feminist theories cannot and should not be transposed onto Third world women. In her analysis of Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women*, she suggests that Kristeva could remember her experience as an emigrant to ask not only

---

11 Said gestures towards a critical understanding of origin in his phrase “a point of origin, or what seems like one,” but does not develop this insight. Said, “Traveling Theory,” 226.

12 Clifford, “Notes on Travel and Theory.”
“who am I?” but “who is the other woman?” as she writes about her encounters with women in China. Rethinking French Feminism’s Frenchness opens the way to considering how its formation has impacted the French intellectual landscape.

In addition to problematizing the notion of a theory’s origin, Clifford offers a critique of the linearity of Said’s four stages of theory’s travel. He argues that the itinerary outlined by Said is one of assimilation that cannot account for the complexities of travel in a postcolonial context. Although Said was himself also a postcolonial theorist, his model of traveling theory was developed from an exclusively European case study:

Said’s essay is an indispensable starting place for an analysis of theory in terms of its locations and displacements, its travels. But the essay needs modification when extended to a postcolonial context. The Budapest, Paris, London itinerary is linear, and confined to Europe. Said’s delineation of four ‘stages’ of travel […] read like an all-too-familiar story of immigration and acculturation. Such a linear path cannot do justice to the feedback loops, the ambivalent appropriations and resistances that characterize the travels of theories, and theorists, between places in the “First” and “Third” worlds. (I'm thinking about the journey of Gramscian Marxism to India through the work of the Subaltern Studies group, and its return as an altered, newly valuable commodity to places like Durham, North Carolina or Santa Cruz, California in the writings of Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakravorty, etc. When I began these notes Guha was a visiting professor at Santa Cruz.)

In response to Said, Clifford proposes a circular mapping of theory’s transnational travel in terms of feedback loops. To map the transnational travel of theory as a feedback loop is to do more than move from a unidirectional to a bidirectional understanding of theory’s

13 Spivak, “French Feminism,” 179. I take up Spivak’s reading of Kristeva in further detail in Chapter 2.

14 Clifford, “Notes on Travel and Theory.”
travel and more than inquire into what is happening “back” in the country “from” which a
theory has traveled. In his essay “The Franco-American Dialogue: A Late-Twentieth-
Century Reassessment,” Said asks “what of traffic going in the other direction, from the
United States to France?” and, in his influential book, Cusset studies the fate of the
French thinkers Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Deleuze and Guattari in France.15 Neither,
however, considers the impact that the transformation of French thought in the U.S.
might have had on the French intellectual landscape. To map transnational intellectual
exchange as a feedback loop is to chart a circular chain of cause and effect.

While Clifford conceptualizes theory’s travel as a feedback loop in order to
trouble the notion that theory somehow belongs to the West, this dissertation wagers that
the rethinking of transnational theoretical travel is relevant not just to the study of
theory’s travel between “First” and “Third” world nations, but to understanding the
intellectual relations between “First” world nations as well. Clifford’s insight that if the
Lukacsian Marxism of Said’s essay “seems to travel by immigrant boat; theory nowadays
takes the plane, sometimes with round-trip tickets” applies to all contemporary theoretical
travel.16 Drawing on Clifford, this dissertation asks: what are the effects of theory’s
travel, its “displacements, revisions, and challenges,” on the place from which it travels,
not just the place to which it travels?17 What has the effect of the U.S. invention of

16 Clifford, “Notes on Travel and Theory.”
17 Ibid.
French Feminism been on France, not just the U.S.? I demonstrate that because it has influenced U.S. queer theory and because it has elicited negative reactions from feminists in France who do not consider French Feminism to be, precisely, “feminist,” the U.S. invention of French Feminism has hindered queer theory’s ability to travel to France. I thus conceptualize transnational intellectual history to include not only what theoretical travel has been enabled but also what theoretical travel has been disabled.

**Feminist Theory vs. Queer Theory: The Politics of Genealogy**

In considering both the French and U.S. effects of French Feminism, my work rejoins Anne-Emmanuelle Berger’s notion of “double vision,” which is significant for transnational histories of intellectual exchange because it offers a means of comparison without evaluation. In her 2013 book *The Queer Turn in Feminism: Identities, Sexualities, and the Theater of Gender* (Le Grand Théâtre Du Genre: Identités, Sexualités et Féminisme En “Amérique;” U.S. translation 2014), Berger situates queer theory in the U.S. as now taking place in a logic of “afterness,” or being “over,” and queer theory in France as being very much understood in a framework of “nowness.” She thus frames queer theory in the U.S. and France as unfolding in two different but coeval temporalities, thereby moving away from the problematic logic of belatedness that defines the special issue of *Paragraph*’s characterization of queer theory in France. The

---

18 Berger, *The Queer Turn in Feminism*, 2.
arrival of queer theory in France is only “late” from a U.S. perspective. The journal’s very premise thus positions the U.S. as the center of comparison, the point of reference for measuring all others. The notion of belatedness that subtends the special issue reinscribes a U.S. imperialist position through a space-time matrix: those that are more distant from the established “center” geographically are also more distant “historically” on a teleological scale of civilizational “progress.”\(^\text{19}\) France lags behind U.S. theoretical developments and is in need of catching up to the U.S. present. Berger’s double vision, on the other hand, decentralizes the U.S. Berger’s methodological innovation is to leave behind approaches that compare queer theory in France to queer theory in the U.S. and rather to move back and forth between seeing queer theory from the U.S. and from France. “Seeing double” thus offers what Nathalie Melas calls “a ground of comparison, but no given basis of equivalence,” which withdraws the discrimination that has historically attended comparison.\(^\text{20}\) In *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*, Melas proposes a spatial logic of comparison as an alternative to the inherent imperialism of the temporal logic of comparison. Such a spatial logic of comparison takes incommensurability as its corner stone, and suspends the relation between comparison and measure, hierarchy and discrimination.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{19}\) For more on this, see: Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

\(^{20}\) Melas, *All the Difference in the World*, xii.

\(^{21}\) In so far as Berger and Melas are proposing a model of difference that foregrounds incommensurability rather than a homologizing and evaluative model of comparison, their work has important affinities with Cixous and Irigaray’s rethinking of sexual difference. I discuss the latter point at length in Chapter 2.
'French Feminism:' A Critical History” deploys a double vision that foregrounds incommensurability by alternating between a French and U.S. point of view to historicize, rather than evaluate, the different impact French Feminism’s invention has had on either side of the Atlantic. In addition to working within Berger’s innovative framework of “seeing double,” my project joins Berger’s book in linking feminist and queer theory by developing a transnational intellectual genealogy of queer theory. Berger defines queer theory as having been formed along a Franco-American axis of intellectual exchange. In particular, she traces the mutations of the phrase “sexual difference” from Freud, to Cixous and Derrida, to Rubin and Butler, thereby charting what she calls a “becoming-queer” of sexual difference. She argues that, as an idiomatic expression, “sexual difference” has very specific meanings that do not translate from one language to another.

While my dissertation has important affinities with Berger’s work, it also differs on several major counts. Most obviously, Berger does not take up French Feminism as a distinct body of work and does not analyze the ways in which the influence of French thought on U.S. queer theory has in turn impacted the study of queer theory in France. Additionally, where Berger looks at how sexual difference comes to mean something

22 Berger, The Queer Turn in Feminism, 7.

23 She gestures to the impact when she mentions that “since American feminists and postfeminists are being translated in France in increasing numbers, the flow of discourse coming from the Anglophone world cannot help but provoke re-readings of the French corpus and consequent misalignments or realignments of the French theoretical scene in this realm,” but she does not take this up. Berger, The Queer Turn in Feminism, 110.
different in Butler than it does in Cixous and at how such mutations gave rise to gender theory in the early 1990s, I focus on the ways in which feminist critics drew on French Feminism to address some of the most pressing political concerns of 1980s U.S. feminism. Finally, but no less significantly, where Berger’s methodology is literary in its interest in the linguistic transformation of the meaning of “sexual difference” as it crosses the Atlantic, I take a historicizing approach to the U.S. invention of French Feminism.

Berger is not the only scholar to have recently taken a genealogical approach to studying the relationship between feminist and queer theory. Since the emergence of queer theory on the U.S. academic scene in the early 1990s, feminist and queer theorists alike have largely framed feminist and queer theory as theoretically incompatible, or as existing in opposition to one another. A handful of scholars have worked against this, and the most common approach has been a genealogical one. In her essay “Bordering Theory,” British sociologist and feminist and sexuality studies scholar Diane Richardson asserts that, in response to queer theory and feminist theory being positioned against one another, “many writers have suggested that queer theory owes an intellectual debt both to lesbian and gay studies and to feminism. This would appear to be something that, to greater or lesser extent, feminist and queer theorists appear to agree upon.”²⁴ The problem with such genealogical work, she goes on to argue, is that in characterizing queer theory as emerging out of or as a critical response to feminism, it tends to place the former as superseding the latter. Richardson criticizes a genealogical approach for replacing the either/or relation of feminist and queer theory with a before/after one that

does not allow for an understanding of the ways in which feminist and queer theory are presently alive in and for each other. British feminist theorist Clare Hemmings, on the other hand, shows in her 2011 book *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* that including feminist theory in the genealogy of queer theory is in fact a political intervention that has the potential to redefine the present of both feminist and queer theory.

In her chapter on citation tactics, Hemmings examines the narratives told about the intellectual inheritances of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* as a means to uncover some of the ways in which queer theory is distanced from feminist theory. She discovers that Michel Foucault is consistently cited as the direct and exclusive intellectual influence on *Gender Trouble* and problematizes this in light of the fact that Butler engages with the work of Monique Wittig as much as she does with that of Foucault. Wittig’s disappearance from *Gender Trouble*’s intellectual genealogy, Hemmings argues, is enormously consequential for present understandings of feminist and queer theory. The elision of the lesbian feminist materialist Wittig in favor of Foucault in existing accounts of Butler’s intellectual genealogy draws a “theoretical strand” “from [male] poststructuralism to queer theory, a strand represented as parallel to or intersecting with, but never fully part of, feminist theory.”

In this intellectual mapping, queer theory becomes equated with poststructuralism and feminist theory with materialism. At its extreme, feminism is reduced to heteronormative materialism while queer theory is cast as a poststructuralist

---

reduction of sexuality to culture. Within this framework, in which queerness is defined as male and poststructuralist, “representation of Butler as feminist queer […] remains a contradiction in terms.” Hemmings proposes to rethink the relationship between feminist and queer theory by putting Wittig back into the intellectual genealogy of queer theory through citational practice.

If Hemmings’ strategy of recitation situates Wittig as a precursor to queer theoretical approaches to sex, gender, and sexuality in order to insist that there is a lesbian feminist materialist history of queer theory, I place French Feminism in queer theory’s intellectual genealogy in order to insist that there is a feminist poststructural history of queer theory. Indeed, the genealogical separation of queer theory from feminist theory turns feminism and poststructuralism, as well as feminist and queer, and queer and materialist, into contradictory terms. In short, it makes invisible the importance of French Feminism to U.S. academic feminism. “Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” argues that mapping French Feminism’s emergence and influence is not a matter of ensuring that queer theory acknowledge its intellectual debts, but rather of understanding the contemporary state of queer theory, particularly the contemporary state of queer theory in France. U.S. queer theory, I demonstrate, took shape in explicit

26 Ibid. The separation of feminist and queer theory through the association of the latter with male poststructuralism rather than feminist theory is evident even in works that explore the connections between feminist and queer theory. For example, in Intersections between Feminist and Queer Theory (2006), although the editors acknowledge that “[p]ostmodern feminist theories of gender and sexuality have been taken up by queer theory in ways that blur the boundary between feminist/queer writers, Judith Butler’s work being a prime example,” they nonetheless consistently cite Foucault as the key intellectual influence on Butler, Sedgwick, Diane Fuss, and Gayle Rubin, as well as define deconstruction as a “queer tool” (Casey et al., “Introduction,” 21 and 5).
conversation with French Feminism, and this link has decisively impacted its history across the Atlantic.

**Chapter Outline**

“Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” is structured in two parts. The first half of the dissertation maps French Feminism’s history from the perspective of the U.S., while the second half maps it from the perspective of France. Chapter 1, “French Feminism and the Problem of Essentialism,” begins with a review of the scholarly U.S. literature that first used the phrase “French Feminism” in the early 1980s in order to establish that the latter quickly became synonymous with the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva. I demonstrate that it was defined primarily as a body of work operating in a critically Lacanian psychoanalytic framework interested in the relationship between sexual difference, the unconscious, and language. This chapter also takes up an additional critical archive: the first scholarly reports to appear in the U.S. about feminism in 1970s France, a body of literature which, in fact, introduced feminism in France as a heterogeneous field extending far beyond Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva. This archival comparison leads to one of the foundational premises of the dissertation as a whole: that the U.S. invention of the category of French Feminism in the 1980s was, initially, less a matter of scholars being unaware of the variety of scholarship being produced in France and more a matter of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva being of particular interest to feminist critics in the U.S. because of their poststructural approach to sexual difference.
Although French Feminism quickly achieved hegemonic status in U.S. feminist literary criticism specifically—due in no small part to its association with French Theory, the discourse which at the time held the greatest currency in U.S. literary criticism, the body of work was also extremely controversial. French Feminism was vehemently critiqued as being both biologically essentialist and falsely universal—accusations that have largely adhered to the body of work and led it to ultimately fall out of favor. Why then did French Feminism ever galvanize and capture the attention of so many feminist literary critics? Were those scholars who took it up either wittingly or unwittingly guilty of essentialism and complicity with U.S. academic feminism’s lack of attention to differences among women? In other words, was the success of French Feminism a reflection and extension of broader problems in U.S. academic feminism? This is the implication of the critiques by scholars otherwise as diverse as, for example, white French feminist sociologist Delphy and black U.S. feminist literary critic Deborah McDowell.²⁷ Without adjudicating as to whether or not it was successful in doing so, Chapters 1 and 2 argue that French Feminism in fact gained traction among U.S. feminist literary critics to the extent that it was understood to be able to address some of U.S. feminism’s most pressing political issues.

Chapter 1 takes up the charge that French Feminism’s theory of sexual difference was biologically essentialist. By placing the work of French Feminism’s key proponents and practitioners, such as Jane Gallop, Toril Moi, and Alice Jardine, in the context of

²⁷ See: Delphy, “Invention of French Feminism” and McDowell, “Transferences.” I take up Delphy’s critique in Chapters 3 and 4 and McDowell’s critique in Chapter 2.
U.S. feminist literary criticism of the 1980s, I demonstrate that the early force of French Feminism lay in its perceived ability to offer a radically anti-essentialist approach to feminist literary criticism. Whereas the dominant form of feminist literary criticism at the time, gynocriticism, assumed a direct correspondence between the gender of a text and the biological sex of the author, French Feminism located the gender of a text in its textuality, thereby making the author’s biological sex irrelevant. Chapter 2, “French Feminism and the Problem of Universalism,” takes up the accusation that French Feminism’s focus on sexual difference was antithetical to thinking differences among women. I show that, while black feminist critics largely rejected French Feminism as consolidating U.S. academic feminism’s structural racism, postcolonial feminist critics, chief among them Trinh T. Minh-ha, took French Feminism up as a means of developing new analytic models for addressing racial differences between women.

If Chapters 1 and 2 chart the reasons for U.S. feminist critics’ initial interest in French Feminism, Chapters 3 and 4 turn their attention to French Feminism’s impact on the other side of the Atlantic. In Chapter 3, “French Feminism and the French Women’s Liberation Movement,” I document the strong reaction that the U.S. invention of French Feminism has provoked in some feminists in France. I show that the theoretical frameworks that scholars defined as French Feminism in the U.S., were, in France, associated with the most controversial group of the French women’s liberation movement, Psychanalyse et Politique (Psychoanalysis and Politics). Through a reading of archival sources located in France and debates over the history of the women’s liberation movement held in French newspapers and academic journals, the chapter demonstrates
that the violent split in the women’s liberation movement occasioned by Psychanalyse et Politique’s 1979 trademarking of the name “Women’s Liberation Movement” has resulted in an entrenched theoretical opposition between sexual difference feminists and materialist feminists. Although materialist feminism is the dominant mode of feminism in France today, this opposition continues to structure feminist debates. Within this context, the French reaction to French Feminism was overdetermined. For French feminist scholars, the U.S. invention of French Feminism was an extension of what they perceived as Psychanalyse et Politique’s attempt to take over the women’s liberation movement and, as such, could only be vehemently denounced and thoroughly rejected.

In Chapter 4, “‘Vous avez dit queer?:’ Queer Theory after French Feminism,” I tie the difficulty that U.S. queer theory has had traveling to France to French feminist scholars’ fervent critiques of French Feminism and to the context of the broader divide between sexual difference and materialist feminism in which those critiques take place.28 Because in France, the work of Judith Butler largely is queer theory, the chapter focuses on the feminist reception of Gender Trouble as a way of analyzing the larger issue of queer theory’s feminist reception. Drawing on feminist critiques of queer theory articulated in recorded conference presentations and published in French journals and newspapers in the last ten years, I show that materialist feminists in France have displayed a particularly strong resistance to queer theory, leveling against it the same objections they leveled against French Feminism. For these materialist feminists, the

---

28 The quote “Vous avez dit queer?” comes from Françoise Picq’s article “‘Vous avez dit queer?’ La question de l’identité et le féminisme.”
French publication of *Gender Trouble* represents the controversial “return” of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva to France through two filters: first, via their Americanized form as French Feminism, and then through the filter of Butler’s queer theory. A handful of French scholars have recently tried to reconcile queer theory and materialist feminism by arguing that the importance of Wittig to *Gender Trouble* indicates a materialist feminist component to queer theory. Noting Wittig scholars’ critiques of Butler’s reading of Wittig and considering the landscape of feminism in France outlined in the previous chapter, I argue that it will take much more than emphasizing Wittig’s influence on Butler to make *Gender Trouble* irreducible to the French Feminist theoretical framework materialist feminists in France associate it with. The larger arc of the dissertation’s argument goes something like this: a set of intellectual ideas was imported from France to the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s and repackaged in the U.S.; there, it became a formative part of queer theory’s intellectual genealogy, before it “returned” to France as a reluctantly-received “American” import called queer theory. The perception of queer theory as a U.S. body of work that bears the burden of the invention of French Feminism is one of the reasons the field has been met with such great resistance in France.
1. French Feminism and The Problem of Essentialism

Between 1975 and 1985 U.S. feminist literary criticism saw the dramatic appearance of publications delineating approaches to sexual difference radically at odds with U.S. feminist approaches to sex. Quickly dubbed “French Feminism” and associated with the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, by the late 1980s this emergent body of work had become hegemonic in U.S. feminist literary criticism. The sheer amount of literature variously dedicated to defining and introducing it, applying it, critically assessing it, or denouncing it throughout the 1980s and early 1990s points to its enormous influence. Plagued by accusations of essentialism since its inception, French Feminism has now largely been abandoned for offering an essentialist theory of sexual difference, one rooted in biologism and effectively collapsing the distinction between sex and gender that had become increasingly central to both movement and academic feminism in the U.S. This chapter returns to the moment of French Feminism’s emergence and shows that Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva interested feminist literary scholars working in the U.S. academy precisely because their theories of sexual difference were understood to offer an anti-essentialist response to the importance of the author’s biological sex that many critics saw as the centerpiece of U.S. feminist literary criticism.

---

1 For an overview of the major works involved in the U.S. construction of French Feminism, see Appendix A.
The few scholars who have tried to understand French Feminism’s formation and impact have framed it as a feminist response to the rise of the equally impactful French Theory, identified primarily with the work of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, in U.S. literary criticism. Several scholars contend that French Feminism allowed feminist literary criticism to become fully institutionalized within the U.S. academy and accrue prestige by engaging with the dominant literary theoretical discourse of the time. They also argue that it constituted a feminist response to the male-centeredness of theory.² This chapter adds a third, equally important factor to the rise of French Feminism: it was seen, by those who took it up, as an answer to issues intrinsic to U.S. feminist literary criticism. A widely diverse field, in the late 1970s and early 1980s U.S. feminist literary criticism was most defined by a focus on recovering and studying a female tradition of writing—a focus often referred to as “gynocriticism.” While French Feminism’s signature focus on écriture féminine (feminine writing) and concern with the relationship between sexual difference and literature are often likened to gynocriticism, I argue that French Feminism was in fact at odds with and at times even explicitly deployed against some of the central tenants of gynocriticism.³ Most significantly, while gynocritics, such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, made the

² Moses, “Made in America;” Gallop, Around 1981. In less positive terms, Barbara Christian posits the hegemony of French Feminism in feminist literary criticism as the effect of a feminist eagerness to “enter the halls of power,” a point to which I return more fully in the following chapter (“The Race for Theory,” 75).

³ Elaine Showalter, for example, who coined the term gynocriticism, discusses briefly French Feminism in her survey of gynocritical approaches to literature. See: Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness.”
biological sex of an author central to their analytic, feminist literary critics who took up French Feminism did so because they understood it to shift the locus of sexual difference away from the body and towards linguistic signification. In so doing, the proponents of French Feminism also embraced a radically different understanding of language than that which had previously characterized much of U.S. feminist literary criticism. Subtending the work of most gynocritics was a belief in the ability of language to truthfully represent women’s experience. Feminist literary critics who found French Feminism promising found it so because, influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, it viewed language as a signifying system which produced rather than reflected “reality.” Deployed as a critique of biological understandings of sex and of gynocriticism’s reliance on the sex of the author, French Feminism linked U.S. feminist literary criticism’s internal struggle over essentialism to a struggle over the function of language.

The differences between gynocriticism and French Feminism were also at the heart of a broader opposition between “Anglo-American” and “French” approaches to literature that came to define U.S. feminist literary criticism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As others have pointed out, the national designations did not refer to critics’

4 In addition to indexing different understandings of sexual difference and language, the “Anglo-American” and “French” designations also indicated different relationships to theory. Anglo-American criticism was considered pragmatic and anti-theoretical, whereas French criticism was considered highly theoretical. Nowhere is this more evident than in Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*, a text that I discuss below.
birthplace but rather to the theoretical traditions from which they drew. Because of the importance and pervasiveness of this divide, in this chapter, I eschew the use of the term “U.S. feminist literary critics” as much as possible in order to avoid homogenizing feminist literary critics working in very different traditions. When I do use it, I refer to feminist literary critics working in the U.S. academy and in an Anglo-American critical tradition. I more often use the term “U.S. feminist literary criticism” to refer to the field as a whole and thus understand it to encompass both those critics working in an Anglo-American critical tradition and those working in a French critical tradition.

The chapter is organized in four sections. In the first part, “Constructing French Feminism,” I chart the emergence of French Feminism in U.S. academic feminism, from the landmark 1980 anthology New French Feminisms, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron to Toril Moi’s canonical 1985 Sexual/Textual Politics. If the former began to define feminism in France as offering a critically psychoanalytic approach to sexual difference, in the latter the singular identification of French Feminism with the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva was fully articulated. Several scholars have argued that the picture of feminism in France offered by the U.S. construction of French Feminism was reductive, due to a lack of awareness of the breadth of feminist work in France. In contrast, I demonstrate that the U.S. formation and definition of

---

5 The Anglo-American/French binary has also been critiqued for eclipsing the work of black and Third World critics. See especially: Christian, “Race for Theory.” I return to this point more fully in the following chapter.

6 Adkins and Leonard, Sex in Question; Moses, “Made in America;” Duchen, French Connections.
French Feminism emerged not so much out of a lack of awareness of other forms of feminist thought in France but, rather, out of a particular feminist literary critical interest in critically psychoanalytic theories sexual difference. In the rest of the chapter I offer an explanation of why Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva’s understandings of sexual difference were of such interest to feminist literary critics working in the U.S. academy. In the second section, “French Feminism vs. Gynocriticism,” I place gynocriticism in the broader context of both U.S. feminist literary criticism and movement feminism and offer an overview of its central tenants and the accusations of essentialism to which it gave rise. I then outline the ways in which French Feminism constituted a radical departure from the gynocritical understandings of sex and language. Despite these differences, French Feminism was also accused of biological essentialism. In the third section of the chapter, “(Re)figuring The Body,” I examine the debates surrounding Cixous and Irigaray’s alleged essentialism and argue that the feminist literary critics who took up the work of Cixous and Irigaray did so in part because they understood it to open up the possibility of an anti-essentialist approach to the body. At stake in the different interpretations of these writers references to the female body were radically different understandings of the function of language. In the chapter’s final section, “What Is A Woman?,” I focus on feminist literary critic Moi’s turn to Kristeva as part of a critique of gynocriticism’s biological definition of sex and move towards a focus on the dissolution of sexual difference.7 Contrary to French Feminism’s reputation as biologically

---

7 The question is the title of a monograph by Toril Moi, indicating the centrality of the question to U.S. feminist literary criticism: Moi, *What Is A Woman?*. 
essentialist then, I argue that the body of work gained traction among feminist literary critics working in the U.S. academy for redefining sexual difference and offering a non-biologically essentialist approach to the study of literature so radical as to not only redefine “woman” but to question the very usefulness of that category.

1.1 Constructing French Feminism

In simple terms, one might say that French Feminism began to emerge as a defined body of work in 1980 with the publication of Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron’s instantly canonical anthology *New French Feminisms*. Despite the plural in the book’s title, the editors sketched a definition of post-1968 feminism in France that quickly became fully codified in subsequent work and culminated in the coining of the singular term French Feminism.\(^8\) The anthology includes translations of forty-five pieces by over thirty women writers, as well as eight anonymously or collectively authored manifestos and editorials. Taken as a whole, these selections represent an array of feminist thinking in France, from activist petitions, to outlines of materialist feminist

\(^8\) Except for those written by Simone de Beauvoir, all the included texts were published after 1968. Beauvoir finds her place in the anthology not so much as one of the “new French Feminists” but rather as a point of origin for this new generation of thinkers. The editors cast Beauvoir as making “the woman question” central to all disciplines and dimensions of human culture and, as Carolyn Burke posits in her review of *New French Feminisms*, many of the texts are presented as working out “the implications of [Beauvoir’s] analysis of woman as Other, in relation to man, the defining subject” (Marks and Courtivron, *New French Feminisms*, 7; Burke, “New French Feminisms,” 515). The editors’ framing of Beauvoir as central to the “new French feminisms” is reinforced by the fact that, with five selections, she is the most represented author in the anthology.
theory, to explorations of “feminine” writing. The anthology’s construction of a fairly singular, coherent body of work is not, then, the result of a lack of awareness of the breadth of feminist work being written in France. Rather, it is the editors’ own intellectual interests and disciplinary location that shaped their presentation of feminism in France. This is true of the U.S. construction of French Feminism more broadly, since other U.S. survey works and journals also published translations of a variety of French feminist scholars. Among the frequently present names, one finds Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy, and Colette Guillaumin, all of whom, from their respective disciplinary positions as a novelist, sociologist and an anthropologist, explicitly and vehemently rejected the psychoanalytic approach to sexual difference that came to define the U.S. construct of French Feminism. How and why, then, did the singular definition of French Feminism emerge and find traction despite evidence, in U.S. publications, of the plurality of feminist thinking in France?

9 Critics of the U.S. construction of French Feminism such as Adkins and Leonard argue that the lack of awareness of and interest in the work of other feminists in France, particularly the work of feminist materialists who opposed the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, was the result of a lack of translations and limited circulation (Adkins and Leonard, *Sex in Question*). I am suggesting that theorists such as Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin and Nicole-Claude Mathieu were less translated than Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva because their work did not capture the interest of the U.S. feminist literary critics who constructed French Feminism.

10 See for example: Oliver, *French Feminism Reader*. Wittig’s work is often assimilated to that of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, although it was, in its theoretical framework, much closer to that of Delphy and Guillaumin. I take up Wittig’s theoretical framework more fully in Chapter 4. For an example of the likening of Wittig to Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva see: Jones, “Toward An Understanding.”
Although Marks and Courtivron claimed to “reproduce the spectrum of new French feminisms since 1968,” *New French Feminisms* served less to give an overview of feminist thinking in France than to highlight the feminist work in France of particular interest to the editors.\(^{11}\) In their preface, entitled “Why This Book?,” Marks and Courtivron stated that the anthology was the result of their desire to “share with [their] American readers some of the excitement [they] have felt in [their] contacts with new French feminisms.”\(^{12}\) This excitement came specifically from their encounter with the group Psychanalyse et Politique (Psychoanalysis and Politics), one of the most controversial groups of the French women’s liberation movement.\(^{13}\) In their introductions, Marks and Courtivron single out the group as “one of the *most influential and radical* of the women’s groups” in France and “the *most original* of the women’s liberation groups in France and perhaps in the Western world,” demonstrating an enthusiasm they display nowhere else in the book.\(^{14}\) As their name suggests, Psychanalyse et Politique was steeped in a psychoanalytic framework. They were, however, critical of Lacan and argued, against him, that patriarchy was based on the repression of true sexual difference, a difference they importantly located in the unconscious and in libidinal drives. “Stimulated” by these ideas, as they put it, Marks and

\(^{11}\) Marks and Courtivron, *New French Feminisms*, xiii.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., x.

\(^{13}\) I explore the controversies surrounding Psychanalyse et Politique in France in Chapter 3.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, x and 33, emphasis mine.
Courtivron conflated French Feminism with this critically Lacanian theory of sexual difference.\textsuperscript{15}

Marks and Courtivron posited that French women’s “analyses ‘of the status of womanhood in Western theoretical discourse’ have led them to a variety of startling conclusions, among which the most frequently shared and propagated is that only one sex has been represented, that the projection of the male libidinal economy in all patriarchal systems—language, capitalism, socialism, monotheism—has been total; women have been absent.”\textsuperscript{16} The words of Cixous, whose understanding of sexual difference was very close to that of Psychanalyse et Politique, also frame the book in its opening and closing passages, making all the more explicit the anthology’s allegiance to a specific set of theoretical reference points. The organization of the anthology further cemented the construction of feminism in France as being defined by a critically Lacanian understanding of sexual difference as having been repressed. Even Carolyn Burke, a major U.S. proponent of the French Feminist theory of sexual difference, remarked in her 1981 review of the anthology that the arguments about sexual difference were “presented in a manner that suggests greater consensus than actually exists.”\textsuperscript{17} The final section of the anthology is a particularly indicative example of the way the collection minimized the

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, xi. Deconstruction is also important to French Feminism but it was not, initially, deployed as a defining characteristic of French Feminism the way Lacanian psychoanalysis was.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., xii.

\textsuperscript{17} Burke, “New French Feminisms,” 516-17.
heterogeneity of feminisms in France. Titled “Utopias,” the section projected a common utopian goal onto authors whose visions are in many ways radically incompatible, under the claim that “[c]ontextual differences are less important than textual similarities.”

Wittig thus found her place alongside Cixous despite the fact that she vehemently rejected the latter’s understanding of sexual difference. The editors’ belief in the transformative power of thinking of sexual difference as a matter of repression rather than oppression homogenized their presentation of feminism in France and lay the ground for its full codification as French Feminism.

Although it crystallized most clearly in Marks and Courtivron’s volume, U.S. academic feminist interest in critically psychoanalytic theories of sexual difference was already evident in protean form in scholarship pre-dating the anthology. Indeed, one might say that the seeds of the U.S. understanding of French Feminism as a psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference were planted as early as 1975 with the publication of two articles in Diacritics that foregrounded a French, feminist, critical focus on Lacanian psychoanalysis via Irigaray. In “Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy,” Shoshana Felman comparatively reviewed U.S. scholar Phyllis Chesler’s Women and Madness (1972) and Luce Irigaray’s Speculum of the Other Woman (Speculum de l’Autre Femme, 1974; U.S. translation 1985). She identified Chesler with a focus on “the material, social, and psychological female condition” consistent with U.S. feminist criticism’s tendency to offer an ethical and political discourse, a prescription for

---

18 Marks and Courtivron, New French Feminisms, 37.
action ultimately aimed at achieving socio-economic equality.\(^1\) Irigaray, on the other hand, she argued, reminded feminists that “women’s oppression exists […] in the very foundations of logos, reasoning, and articulation.”\(^2\) Over the roughly five-year period between 1975 and 1980, the deluge of articles opposing a French feminist practice aimed at disrupting the phallocentric Logos underwriting Western thought through a focus on the unconscious to a reformist, egalitarian U.S. approach to sex increased exponentially. Jane Gallop’s “The Ghost of Lacan, the Trace of Language,” published in the same issue of *Diacritics* as Felman’s article, as well as “The Ladies’ Man” printed the following year in the same journal, and “Psychoanalysis in France,” which appeared in *Women and Literature* in 1979, foregrounded a critical engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis as the major difference between French and U.S. feminisms. Carolyn Burke’s “Report from Paris: Women’s Writing and the Women’s Movement” and Elaine Marks’ “Women and Literature in France,” published alongside one another in *Signs* in 1978, presented French feminists as focused on bringing sexual difference out of repression through writing. The significance of *New French Feminisms* was that it consolidated the articulation of feminism in France as offering a psychoanalytic definition of sexual difference through the anthology form and made it stand for feminism in France as a whole rather than for a group or a few authors.

If there were any doubts as to French Feminism’s growing prominence as a

\(^{1}\) Felman, “Women and Madness,” 3.

\(^{2}\) Ibid, 4.
recognizable body of work, by 1981 it was fully secured with a special journal issue of *Yale French Studies* titled “Feminist Readings: French Texts/American Contexts” and two special sections in *Signs* and *Feminist Studies* respectively titled “French Feminist Theory” and “The French Connection.” Although it was their interest in the group Psychanalyse et Politique that led Marks and Courtivron to their understanding of feminism in France, across all the publications since 1975, it was the names of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva that consistently recurrent, accompanied by the increase in translations of their texts, leading French Feminism to become synonymous with their work.\(^{21}\) Toril Moi’s 1985 *Sexual/Textual Politics* in many ways bookended the period of French Feminism’s U.S. invention in so far as it epitomized the definitive understanding of French Feminism as a psychoanalytically oriented body of knowledge and as reducible to Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva by discussing them and Lacan exclusively in the books’ section on French Feminism.

What is crucial for my argument here is that the definition of French Feminism as a psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference was *disciplinarily* situated. The major figures who contributed to the U.S. construction of French Feminism—Marks, Courtivron, Carolyn Burke, Jane Gallop, Alice Jardine and Toril Moi—are all literary scholars. French Feminism might then best be defined as a U.S. feminist literary critical invention. As others have remarked, had the fields of history or economics, for example,  

---

\(^{21}\) For a publication history of U.S. translations of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, see Appendix B. I examine the relation of the three writers to Psychanalyse et Politique in Chapter 3.
been the sites of the elaboration of French Feminism, the arguments might have looked quite different.\textsuperscript{22} So, what exactly \textit{was} it about the French Feminist approach to sexual difference that so galvanized feminist literary critics working in the U.S. academy?

\textbf{1.2 French Feminism vs. Gynocriticism}

When French Feminism first began circulating in the U.S. in the late 1970s and early 1980s, U.S. feminist literary criticism was in the throes of “gynocriticism.” The term, coined by Elaine Showalter in her 1979 essay “Towards a Feminist Poetics” described a shared impulse among feminist literary critics to turn to the work of women writers, asking if women’s literature might be different from men’s and, if so, how. Earlier U.S. feminist literary criticism had focused primarily on studying the politics of women’s representation in works of literature by men, as well as in the institutionalization of literary studies, a focus referred to as the “Images of Women” phase after Susan Kopolman’s 1972 book \textit{Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives}. Gynocriticism thus represented a shift from woman as reader to woman as writer.\textsuperscript{23} Both approaches, however, made the author’s sex a central and determining

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{22} Moses, “Made in America;” Rapp, “Preface.”

\textsuperscript{23} One might consider Mary Ellman’s 1965 \textit{Thinking About Women} as marking the beginning of the “Images of Women” phase in U.S. feminist literary criticism and Elaine Showalter’s 1979 “Towards a Feminist Poetics” as marking its end, though of course “Images of Women” and “Gynocriticism” should be understood as representing a shifting focus in U.S. feminist literary criticism rather than a strictly sequential evolution of feminist literary criticism. One might also understand both gynocriticism and the “images
element of analysis. Indeed, one might say that the driving force of U.S. feminist literary criticism’s intervention since its emergence as a distinct field in the late 1960s had precisely been to politicize the sex of the author. In addition to feminist readings of male authors and the elaboration of a female writing tradition, such a politicization led feminist literary scholars to denounce the literary canon for its exclusion of female authors and to critique male critics’ approach to female authors. However, gynocriticism marked the emergence of a different kind of politicization of sex, one that reflected a broader shift in U.S. movement feminism.

Whereas the early years of second wave feminism had been characterized by a heavily social constructionist view of sexual difference that sought the “abolition of gender as a meaningful category,” the 1970s saw the growth and increasing hegemony within the feminist movement of a valuation of difference and femininity—a turn broadly of women” scholarship to be engaged in the study of the politics of “representation.” For a problematization of the sequential narrative of U.S. feminist literary criticism, see “The Attraction of the Matrimonial Metaphor” in Gallop, *Around 1981*.

Critiques of the literary canon did not just push for the incorporation of women writers into the canon. They also lead to debates over the very idea of canonicity, whether or not literary works should be judged, and how one might define a “good” work of literature in feminist terms. By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, the emergence of black feminist literary criticism and lesbian literary criticism also drew attention to feminist literary criticism’s insufficient attention to differences between women, a critique which is the subject of the next chapter. For a more comprehensive overview of U.S. feminist literary criticism from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, see for example: Belsley and Moore, *Feminist Reader*; Donovan, *Feminist Literary Criticism*; Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Criticism*; Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*; Gallop, *Around 1981*; Greene and Kahn, *Changing Subjects*; Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*; Price Herndl and Warhol, *Feminisms*. 
referred to as “cultural feminism.”²⁵ Earlier feminism, often referred to as “radical feminism,” had contested the biological logic at the heart of patriarchal justifications of women’s oppression and understood women’s oppression to be the result of the construction of gender itself. Cultural feminists saw women’s biological specificity as a positive source of difference and understood women’s oppression to result from the patriarchal repression of the female principle. While the early U.S. feminist literary critics might be said to share with radical feminism a focus on the social construction of gender and critique of femininity, in so far as gynocriticism turned to women’s writing and to theorizing a feminine aesthetic, it can, in the words of Jane Gallop, “also be understood to be a part of the movement termed cultural feminism.”²⁶

The “images of women” approach to feminist literary criticism and the feminist critique of male literary criticism, or “phallic criticism,” sought to identify male stereotypes of women, and to explain the reason for and impact of them. These early forms of U.S. feminist literary criticism critiqued the patriarchal construction of gender and its biologism. Mary Ellman, for example, argued that “the discussion of women’s books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips.”²⁷


²⁷ Ellman, Thinking About Women, 29.
Ellman accuses phallic criticism of judging the works of women authors in terms of their conformity to femininity, and, moreover, to a femininity grounded by male critics in the female body, as indicated by her reference to the “intellectual measurement of busts and hips.” For the feminist literary critic, phallic criticism reduces female authors to their biological difference. Shifting from a focus on the male critic to a focus on the male author, Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, thoroughly critiques the oppressive depiction of sexuality in the work of literature by such male avant-garde writers as D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet, drawing attention to the social construction of gender in the ideological sphere of literature as both representative and reinforcing of patriarchal culture.\(^\text{28}\)

In contrast to early U.S. feminist literary criticism’s staunch repudiation of biologism in literary criticism and critique of the social construction of gender in literature, gynocriticism focused on recuperating a tradition of female writing and theorizing its specificity. As Showalter put it:

> the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we […] focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture.\(^\text{29}\)

Showalter here ties gynocriticism to a rejection of existing literary criticism and theory which she considered to be inherently male. The goal was to develop new modes of

\(^{28}\) Feminist literary scholars have critiqued Millett for insufficiently attending to literary qualities of fiction and for holding a too uniform understanding of ideology. On the latter point, see: Kaplan, “Rethinking Sexual Politics.”

\(^{29}\) Showalter, “Feminist Poetics,” 131.
literary analysis that would allow feminist literary scholars to identify and study the expression of *authentic female experience*. Such a study would include the ways in which female authors positioned themselves in relation to male writing conventions, the ways in which their female experience became “the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature.”\(^3\) In her 1991 overview of the history of feminist literary criticism, Mary Eagleton has provided a particularly succinct summary of Showalter’s gynocritical approach to literature:

> The most popular sequence in a gynocritical reading is from reality, to author, to reader, to reality: there is an objective reality which the author apprehends and describes truthfully in her text; the reader appreciates the validity of the text and relates it to her understanding of her own life. In this paradigm author, character and reader can unite in an exploration of what it means to be female—they can assert a collective identity as ‘we women’—and the reader is gratified by having her anger, experience, or hopes confirmed by the author and narrative.\(^3\)

As in other forms of U.S feminist literary criticism including the “images of women” approach, in the gynocritical framework, literature is understood as a direct, transparent representation of reality.\(^3\)\(^2\) However, whereas earlier U.S. feminist literary criticism had critiqued femininity as a patriarchal construct and refused all appeals to biology, gynocriticism emphasized and positively valued the specificity of female experience.

> The gynocritical focus on the specificity of female experience quickly gave rise to

\(^3\) Ibid, 139.

\(^3\) Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Criticism*, 9.

\(^3\)\(^2\) In *Sexual Politics*, for example, Millett relates the sexist depiction of women in a text directly to the sex of the author which was, in turn, directly reflective of patriarchal society.
accusations of essentialism. In the context of the growing critique of the women’s movement for taking the experience of white middle-class women as the norm of women’s experience in the U.S. and of the emergence of black feminist literary criticism and lesbian literary criticism in the 1980s, gynocriticism was criticized for homogenizing female experience, erasing differences amongst women, particularly those of race, class, and sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{33} Furthermore, although it was often concerned with the social, legal, and historical context of women’s writing, in so far as it strove for a shared account of female experience, by the early 1990s, gynocriticism also seemed to many feminist literary scholars to be “dangerously close to biologism.”\textsuperscript{34} Naomi Schor defines essentialism, specifically biological essentialism, in the context of feminism as:

\begin{quote}
the belief that woman has an essence, that woman can be specified by one or a number of inborn attributes which define across cultures and throughout history her unchanging being and in the absence of which she ceases to be categorized as a woman. In less abstract, more practical terms, an essentialist in the context of feminism, is one who instead of carefully holding apart the poles of sex and gender maps the feminine onto femaleness, one for whom the body, the female body, that is, remains, in however complex and problematic a way the rock of feminism.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

This was precisely the criticism leveled against gynocriticism by the proponents of

\textsuperscript{33} See for example Allen’s 1992 critique of gynocriticism on these grounds: Allen, “Response to Elaine Showalter.” For a landmark text of lesbian literary criticism, see: Zimmerman, “What Has Never Been.” I take up black feminist literary criticism more fully in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{34} Eagleton, \textit{Feminist Literary Criticism}, 10.

\textsuperscript{35} Schor, “Essentialism Which Is Not One,” 40. Schor’s article is in fact a defense of Irigaray in the face of charges of biological essentialism. I turn to these critiques and the paradox of them below.
French Feminism throughout the 1980s. While French Feminism shared with gynocriticism a positive valuation of sexual difference and an interest in the ways in which sexual difference manifested itself in writing, it relied on a fundamentally different understanding of sexual difference and its relationship to language, one that challenged the central tenants of gynocriticism that threatened it with biological essentialism.

As established in the first section of this chapter, U.S. feminist literary criticism associated French Feminism with a critically Lacanian theory of sexual difference. The key concept of the French Feminist theoretical approach was the notion that the dominant order, what Lacan called the Symbolic—the very “signifying practices of our western culture”—were phallocentric. As Domna Stanton emphasized, for Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva women’s oppression was not just social and economic but rather embedded in the foundations of the Logos, “in the subtle linguistic and logical processes through which meaning itself is produced.” Such an understanding of the role of language was enormously appealing for literary scholars since, rather than making language a reflection of a pre-existing reality, language became constitutive of that reality and thus became a primary means of attacking patriarchy. Stanton thus argued that one of the valuable lessons U.S. feminist critics could learn from French Feminism was to question the notion that linguistic change follows economic, social or political change. French Feminism had the potential to teach U.S. feminist critics that linguistic change instead

36 Marks, “Women and Literature,” 836, emphasis mine.

precedes these changes. If language was phallocentric and thereby became the cause of women’s oppression, then patriarchy could and should be undone through the dismantling of phallocentric language, according to this view. Variously termed écriture féminine (Cixous), parler femme (Irigaray), or the breach of the semiotic (Kristeva), this dismantling consisted of reading for the subversion of the phallocentric Symbolic within language and writing in ways that let the subversive force of the unconscious flow into language. This approach was understood to carry the potential to destroy the systems that ordered meaning itself and, with them, their economic, social and political manifestations. Crucially, the subversive force to be inscribed in language was located in the unconscious and characterized by non-phallic, pre-Oedipal libidinal drives—what Cixous and Irigaray called the “feminine” and Kristeva the “semiotic.” Sexual difference was no longer to be found in the body but in the unconscious. By locating the challenge to phallocentrism in the unconscious, French Feminism completely overturned gynocriticism’s belief in the importance of the essentially female authorial voice. In the French Feminist framework, traces of the subversive feminine or semiotic could be found in both men and women’s writing.

For those feminist literary critics who engaged with it, French Feminism represented a way to move away from the biologically essentialist understanding of woman that they thought characterized gynocriticism. Marks and Courtivron argued that

---

As Marks put it in 1978, reading becomes the subversive act par excellence and “the study of language and the unconscious [which can only be accessed through language] must have the highest priority for all women desirous of liberation,” (“Women and Literature,” 842).
the lack of attention to the unconscious in U.S. feminist literary criticism resulted in an “essentialist” position and Marks stressed that sexual difference in French Feminism is not “the old meaning of difference as natural opposition.” Jardine also praised French Feminism for separating “gender (masculine, feminine)” from “identity (male, female)” so that the question of the author’s sex became irrelevant. French Feminism thus galvanized feminist literary critics in the U.S. academy because it shifted the emphasis away from the biological sex of the author and towards linguistic sexual differentiation. As Jardine put it, for French Feminism “the question of whether a ‘man’ or ‘woman’ wrote a text,” a central question in U.S. feminist literary criticism, “becomes nonsensical.” Feminist literary critics who took up French Feminism did so in an effort to fundamentally challenge U.S. feminist literary criticism’s dominant paradigm and suggest that the very foundational concept of U.S. feminist criticism was complicit with patriarchal ideology in its essentialism and should therefore be jettisoned entirely.

Paradoxically, however, French Feminism simultaneously developed a reputation for itself being biologically essentialist, and for re-inscribing the importance of anatomy to a sexual difference otherwise defined by non-biological, unconscious, libidinal drives. These critiques tended to pool around Cixous and Irigaray who elaborated their respective understandings of écriture féminine and parler femme in relation to the female


40 Jardine, Gynesis, 58.

41 Ibid.
body. They were considered by some feminist literary critics to conflate gender with sex and thus reproduce phallocentric reductions of women to their bodies, the very move the proponents of French Feminism sought to criticize in gynocriticism. While the scholars who took up the work of Cixous and Irigaray were primarily concerned with the ways in which these two writers reconciled psychoanalysis and feminism via a Lacanian focus on language, several also turned their attention to defending Cixous and Irigaray against accusations of biological essentialism. In the following section, I give an overview of these debates through the paradigmatic example of Irigaray and show that at stake were differing understandings of the relation between language and reality. In this respect, contestations over whether or not Cixous and Irigaray’s references to the female body were essentialist indexed a wider debate between the “Anglo-American” belief in the transparent nature of language and stress on historical and thematic criticism on the one hand and, on the other, “French” commitments to a Lacanian model of language that led to a focus on identifying and creating new forms of language.

42 Psychoanalysis had been systematically dismissed in U.S. feminist criticism as being biologically essentialist. Juliet Mitchell’s 1974 *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* was the first major attempt to reconcile the two, arguing that Freud’s understanding of sexual difference was not prescriptive but rather descriptive. Gallop perhaps more clearly than any other feminist critic in the U.S. pursued this work through a focus on Lacanian psychoanalysis. She argued that it was through an engagement with the function of language, which Mitchell lacked, that psychoanalysis become compatible with feminism. For Gallop’s critique of Mitchell, see: Gallop, “Ghost of Lacan.”
1.3 (Re)figuring the body

No text gave rise to more accusations of biological essentialism than Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together,” published in Signs in 1980. In this closing essay of This Sex Which Is Not One (Ce Sexe Qui N’En Est Pas Un, 1977; U.S. translation 1985) Irigaray built on her assertion, first developed in Speculum of the Other Woman, that existing language is phallocentric. This fact, she argued, disallows the expression of sexual difference and thus represses women: “If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story […] If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again. […] Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear.”

Women thus have two choices. They can either “remain in [men’s] order and reenact their system of commerce, where ‘we’ has no place” or they can invent a new language in which they do exist. Because the “unity, truth, and propriety of words” in men’s language “comes from their lack of lips, their forgetting of lips” and because men’s words are therefore a “gag upon our lips,” a new, woman’s language, would be elaborated in relation to female bodies, and, more specifically, to their lips.

In keeping with the properties of lips, women’s language

44 Ibid., 70.
45 Ibid., 72; 75.
would then be characterized by openness, multiplicity, and the collapse of dichotomies, including the subject/object dichotomy. “When Our Lips Speak Together” takes the form of a loving address from je (I) to tu (you), in which the two subject positions remain unfixed, undefined, and not clearly separate from each other. Je and tu might be two lovers or two lips:

Open your lips, but do not open them simply. I do not open them simply. We—you/I—are never open nor closed. Because we never separate simply, a single word can’t be pronounced, produced by, emitted from our mouths. From your/my lips, several songs, several ways of saying echo each other. For one is never separable from the other. You/I are always several at the same time.46

Having shown in Speculum of The Other Woman and again in This Sex that Western language is based on a logic of sameness that cannot accommodate sexual difference, Irigaray, like Cixous, proposes to bring sexual difference into being by inventing a language related to the female body.47 It was the different understandings of the nature of that relation that led to interpretations of Cixous and Irigaray as both essentialist and non-essentialist.

46 Ibid., 72

47 U.S. academic feminists were first introduced to Cixous’ theory of the relation between sexual difference and language through her 1975 “Laugh of the Medusa,” translated and published in Signs in 1976. Similarly to Irigaray, in this text Cixous articulated her understanding of language as phallocentric and repressing women’s true sexual difference. She too located women’s sexual difference in the unconscious and considered it to include bodily and pre-Oedipal maternal libidinal forces. In order to subvert the dominant linguistic order and realize women’s sexual difference, women must therefore write in “white ink” (881). By bringing women’s bodies and the repressed pre-Oedipal maternal into language, écriture féminine would, for Cixous as for Irigaray, initiate a symbolic revolution.
Many U.S. feminist literary critics deemed such an understanding of a sexually different language essentialist because it seemed to posit a natural, unmediated female body as the source of the specificity of women’s writing. In her 1981 introduction to *écriture féminine*, a term she used to refer not just to Cixous’ work but to Irigaray and Kristeva’s as well, Ann Jones most clearly articulated the charge of essentialism, arguing that Cixous and Irigaray defined women through “physiology” and “bodily instincts,” thus presupposing a “bedrock of female nature” and effectively positing an ahistorical female body, a body understood as a natural reality, as “a direct source of female writing.”

For Jones, the subject’s access to the “natural” body is always already mediated by socio-sexual arrangements, institutional networks of social power, and to believe in “an innate, precultural femininity” is to “overlook important psychosocial realities.”

Rather than as enabling a feminist literary criticism that would shed its reliance on the biological sex of the author, Cixous and Irigaray were read by many feminist literary critics as, on the contrary, turning biological sex into a causal agent.

Many of Irigaray’s commentators, however, understood Irigaray’s work to be of great value precisely because it provided a non-essentialist way of approaching the body. For example, two of Irigaray’s main U.S. proponents, Burke and Gallop, each understood the force of Irigaray’s writing to be her *reversal* of the logic that led her critics to deem

---


49 Ibid., 255.
her work essentialist.\textsuperscript{50} While they conceded that the body in Irigaray’s work is problematic and that Irigaray “seems to propose the possibility of a language that can reflect woman’s natural specificity, an un lamented language transparently expressing the real: a parole analogous to the female body, that would speak the female body directly,” they insisted that Irigaray does not posit women’s language as emanating \textit{from} the body.\textsuperscript{51} They argued that while Irigaray may at first appear to reproduce Freud’s infamous proclamation that “anatomy is destiny,” such an interpretation rests on a literal reading of anatomy that dangerously ignores the mediating function of language. From both Burke and Gallop’s perspective, the greatest effect of “When Our Lips Speak Together” is in fact to force the reader to “reconsider the status of anatomical referentiality,” to recognize that there is no real, unmediated body to which to appeal.\textsuperscript{52} It is, then, not the body that dictates language, but rather language that mediates anatomy. In Gallop’s words:

> [In speaking about male sex, Irigaray] is not speaking of male genital anatomy but rather of an already phallomorphic conception of male genitals, that actually has only a selective relation to male anatomy. Irigaray, for example, nowhere mentions \textit{les couilles}, the balls. Male genital anatomy does not determine phallomorphic logic, but rather phallomorphic logic determines a certain unitary perception of male genitalia. […][I]f phallomorphic logic is not based in anatomy but, on the contrary, reconstructs anatomy in its own image, then Irigaray’s

\textsuperscript{50} See also Fuss, “Luce Irigaray’s Language of Essentialism;” Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One.”


\textsuperscript{52} Gallop, “Quand Nos Lèvres S’Ecrivent,” 83.
vulvomorphic logic is not predestined by anatomy but is already a symbolic interpretation of that anatomy.\textsuperscript{53}

Much as phallomorphic logic has a synechdochial relation to male anatomy, so Irigaray’s female body comes to synechdochially, that is, tropologically, inhabit the lips. Since male and female anatomy have always been thought according to phallomorphic logic, “any reality to which we might refer—since realities, that is perceptions, are necessarily constructed—will already be phallomorphic” and Irigaray’s vulvomorphic body is not “any more ‘real’ in an essentialistic, numenal way” than the phallomorphic body.\textsuperscript{54} Because of this, the “poiesis of a new body,” such as the remetaphorizing of the female body seen in Irigaray, is the best hope for producing, even if only momentarily, a different, non-phallic body.\textsuperscript{55} For the proponents of Irigaray’s work, one of Irigaray’s main contributions was to provide, through a focus on the mediating function of language, non-essentialist ways of approaching the body. The conclusion they drew about what this meant for U.S. feminist literary criticism was significant: it need not then do away with the body but could, instead, focus on the role of language in constructing the body precisely as a means to wrest the body away from reductions to biological essentialism. By suspending the belief in the referentiality of language, it could avoid the polarized positions of either viewing “female biology as a liability and thus mirror[ing] the culture’s devaluation of the female body” or “arguing that female biology is in fact a

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 78-79.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 83.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 81.
powerful resource” that were playing out in the wider arena of U.S. movement feminism.  

At the heart of the debate over whether or not Cixous and Irigaray’s respective theories of écriture féminine and parler femme were essentialist, were radically different understandings of language. For critics such as Burke and Gallop, language is not referential in the sense that it does not directly represent a pre-existing, extra-linguistic “reality.” For the proponents of French Feminism, attending to the gap between signifiers and their supposed referents was politically crucial. Indeed, in addition to failing to take seriously the poetic nature of language, to believe in the simple referentiality of language was to ignore the ways in which reality is always already constructed by language. While Jones agreed that “working out self-representations,” and challenging “conventional narrative techniques, as well as grammar and syntax” which “imply the unified viewpoint and mastery of outer reality that men have claimed for themselves” were an important part of the struggle against patriarchy, she called for an examination of the “speaking, singing, tale telling, and writing of women in cultures besides that of the Ile de France […] in their social context” in order to “fill in an adequate and genuinely empowering picture of women's creativity.”  

In other words, feminist literary critics should analyze women’s writing as a “conscious response to socioliterary realities.”  

In this capacity, Jones rejoins Showalter who posits that “it ought not to be in language that we based our

________________________


57 Jones, “Toward An Understanding,” 258; 259; 260; 261.

58 Ibid., 260.
theory of difference.”

Indeed, as she turns to an explicit critique of French feminists, Showalter argues that the “problem is not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution.”

Therefore:

the first task of a gynocentric criticism must be to plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity and to describe the forces that intersect an individual woman writer’s cultural field. A gynocentric criticism would also situate women writers with respect to the variables of literary culture, such as modes of production and distribution, relations of author and audience, relations of high to popular art, and hierarchies of genre.

Showalter advocates connecting women’s writing to its socio-historical context, that is, historicizing the specificity of women’s literary production. In this respect, gynocriticism is not biologically essentialist in the sense of attributing a causal role to biological sex. Indeed, Showalter explicitly critiqued those gynocritics who did so. From a French Feminist perspective in which sexual difference is linguistic rather than biological, however, to speak of women’s writing, let alone emphasizing the distinctiveness of female authors, rather than examine feminine writing was to risk essentialism.


60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 32-33.

1.4 What Is A Woman?

If the controversy over Cixous and Irigaray was over whether or not they successfully wrested their concept of the feminine from femaleness, for feminist literary critics such as Jardine and Moi, Kristeva offered an alternative that would definitively provide U.S. feminist literary criticism with a feminist, anti-essentialist approach to literature. Rather than distinguishing between feminine and masculine writing, Kristeva focused instead on the interplay of what she called the symbolic and semiotic, within texts and subjects. Rather than bringing sexual difference into the Symbolic through the feminine as Cixous and Irigaray proposed, Kristeva argued that sexual difference was only symbolic and a true subversion of phallocentrism would be the dissolution of sexual difference.

In her first book, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (La Révolution du Language Poétique, 1974; partial U.S. translation 1984), Kristeva defined literary language as a dialectic between the symbolic and what she termed the semiotic. Following Lacan, she understood the symbolic as that which ensures intelligible communication, binding us to the social. The semiotic, on the other hand, she argued, translates primary, asocial, pre-Oedipal drives linked to an early, fusional attachment to the maternal body. While these drives are repressed by the symbolic, they reappear in poetic language where they can be detected in “phonematic devices (such as accumulation and repetition of phonemes or
rhymes) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm),” among others.\(^{63}\) The semiotic is, in other words, what gives literary language its poetic qualities. Kristeva thus defines literary language as a semiotic breach of the symbolic. In so far as the semiotic extols *jouissance*, those foreclosed pleasures of infancy, against the social structured by the symbolic, the semiotization of the symbolic constitutes a refusal of the paternal law. The artist has the potential to either destroy or transform the very foundation of the social because in “exporting semiotic motility according the border” through which “the symbolic is established,” he “introduces into the symbolic order an asocial drive.”\(^{64}\) Crucially, for Kristeva all subjects, whether male or female, are constituted by the dialectic between symbolic and semiotic. Kristeva was therefore not concerned with whether men or women write differently from each other but, rather, focused on studying the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic in different texts.

No text made a clearer argument for the importance of Kristeva’s work to U.S. feminist literary criticism or more explicitly posited the investment in French Feminism as a critique of gynocriticism than Moi’s 1985 *Sexual/Textual Politics*.\(^{65}\) *Sexual/Textual Politics* proceeds in three movements: an introduction in which Moi reveals the limitations of gynocriticism in dealing with an author like Virginia Woolf and showcases the productive possibilities of approaching Woolf through the work of Julia Kristeva; a

\(^{63}\) Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 86.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 70-71.

\(^{65}\) Although Moi does not use the term gynocriticism specifically herself and is more sweepingly critiquing U.S. feminist literary criticism, I use it here in so far as I focus on Moi’s critiques of such gynecritics as Showalter, Gilbert, and Gubar.
first part that reviews the major developments of U.S. feminist literary criticism since its inception in the 1960s and highlights their theoretical shortcomings; and a second and last part that critically assesses the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Moi’s larger argument is that “despite its often strong, explicit political engagement, [U.S. feminist literary criticism] is in the end not quite political enough; not in the sense that it fails to go far enough along the political spectrum, but in the sense that its radical analysis of sexual politics still remains entangled with depoliticizing theoretical paradigms.” One of those depoliticizing paradigms is the reliance on the biological sex of the author. Moi upholds Kristeva’s work as offering an “uncompromisingly anti-essentialis[t]” alternative to this U.S. feminist literary critical paradigm.

Moi stages her critique of gynocriticism’s essentialist reliance on authorial sex through a critique of Elaine Showalter’s reading of Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own and Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert’s theory of feminine creativity. In A Room of One’s Own Woolf famously advocates for androgyny, suggesting that the state when “sex is unconscious of itself” is the most desirable position from which to work as a writer. Showalter argues that Woolf’s celebration of androgyny amounts to a refusal of feminist

---

66 For an excellent critique of the opposition Moi sets up between French and U.S. feminisms, see Chow, “When Whiteness Feminizes.”

67 Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, 87-88.

68 Ibid., 164.

69 Woolf, Room of One’s Own, 93.
engagement. In Showalter’s view, Woolf “evade[s] confrontation with her own painful femaleness” which leads her to “choke and repress her anger and ambition,” her “feminist awareness.”\textsuperscript{70} Woolf’s desire to transcend sex rather than to deal with the difficulties of being female in a patriarchal society lead, Showalter argues, to a withdrawal from the world that culminates in death. She thereby faults Woolf for not adequately dealing with the importance and implications of her biological sex. Moi rejects Showalter’s criticism of Woolf, arguing instead that Woolf rejects the “essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology.”\textsuperscript{71} She sees Woolf as being aligned with Kristeva, for whom “it is not the biological sex of a person, but the subject position she or he takes up that determines their revolutionary potential” which, for Moi, amounts to a “feminist” “refusal of biologism and essentialism.”\textsuperscript{72} Moi also critiques Gilbert and Gubar as similarly problematic to Showalter in their emphasis on biological sex. She argues that Gilbert and Gubar, who in their influential \textit{The Madwoman in the Attic} (1979) developed a theory of female creativity in response to the patriarchal ideology of artistic creativity, offer an essentializing theory in so far as they don’t distinguish between female and feminine. Their theory of female creativity thus runs the risk of positing its object as a “natural, essential, inborn quality in all women.”\textsuperscript{73} Furthermore, argues Moi, “[t]o posit all women

\textsuperscript{70} Showalter, \textit{Literature of Their Own}, 264; 286.

\textsuperscript{71} Moi, \textit{Sexual/Textual Politics}, 9.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 65.
as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine is precisely the move that enables the patriarchal powers to define, not femininity, but all women as marginal to the symbolic order and to society.”

A feminist approach to literature would move away from biological sex entirely.

For Moi, Kristeva offers a theoretical way out of the issues presented by Showalter, Gilbert, and Gubar, and gynocriticism more broadly. In Moi’s view, Kristeva both displaces the centrality of biological sex and successfully separates the feminine from femaleness, thereby “enabl[ing] feminists to counter all forms of biologistic attacks from the defenders of phallocentrism.” Furthermore, in Moi’s reading, Kristeva in fact advocates for the dissolution of sexed identities. Indeed, Moi writes: “the opposition between femininity and masculinity does not exist in pre-Oedipality,” therefore, “[a]ny strengthening of the semiotic, which knows no sexual difference, must therefore lead to a weakening of traditional gender divisions.” Moi thus sees Kristeva as offering up a “feminist vision of a society in which the sexual signifier would be free to move; where the fact of being born male or female no longer would determine the subject’s position in relation to power, and where, therefore, the very nature of power itself would be transformed.” In this framework, feminist literary criticism would read for the

74 Ibid., 166.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 165.
77 Ibid., 172.
inscription of the semiotic, traces of the absence of sexual difference.

So radical was Kristeva’s separation of the subversion of the phallocentric Symbolic from an author’s sex that Jardine felt the need to reconcile it with justifications to nonetheless study the specificity of texts by women. Although similarly enthusiastic about Kristeva’s work as Moi, Jardine was also concerned that such an approach as Kristeva’s ran the risk of becoming complacent with a patriarchal privileging of texts by men and the dismissal of texts by women. Indeed, Kristeva herself tended to privilege the texts of the male avant-garde, such as the work of famous French modernist writers Lautréamont and Stéphane Mallarmé. While Jardine agreed “with Kristeva that it is ultimately more important to investigate sexual differentiation in a text than to attempt to isolate sexual identity or specificity,” she used Kristeva’s theory of writing to outline a possible non-essentialist mode of nonetheless studying women’s writing.\textsuperscript{78} Jardine suggested that women have a historically specific relationship to the maternal and, therefore, to the dialectic between the semiotic and symbolic. These might provide initial reference points for reading women’s fiction, as part of larger project of mapping the topology of symbolic and semiotic signifying practices. Far from being biologically essentialist, then, the French Feminism represented by Kristeva in fact moved towards undoing the very category of “woman.”

In the U.S. of the 1980s the new wave of so-called “French Feminism” was hailed as offering a way out of preexisting theoretical dead ends. For those who championed French Feminism, the dominant framework of gynocriticism was seen as myopically

\textsuperscript{78} Jardine, “Theories of the Feminine,” 14.
focusing on inscribing women into history and the literary canon, based on a biologically based concept of woman. French Feminism, on the other hand, was defined as operating in a critically Lacanian theoretical framework focused on disrupting the phallocentric Symbolic through a new form of writing that would bring the disruptive, unconscious, pre-Oedipal drives into language. Feminist literary critics working in the U.S. thus understood the French feminist concept of sexual difference to have radical potential for rethinking the foundational analytic category of U.S. feminist criticism: woman. Not everyone agreed as to whether or not French Feminism was successful in this regard. But as it was perceived by a handful a highly influential feminist literary critics in the U.S., in particular through a focus on the three figures of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, French Feminism nevertheless found an immense amount of traction because it seemed to offer an anti-essentialist framework for U.S. feminist literary criticism. At the same time as the construction of French Feminism was leading feminist literary critics to question the definition of “woman,” the category was coming under scrutiny from a different direction. U.S. feminist critics began critiquing the category of “woman” for its erasure of differences between women. This marked a shift away from the singular “woman” and towards the plural “women” as the subject of feminism. In this landscape, French Feminism itself, so recently hailed as a rejuvenating force for U.S. feminist literary criticism, itself came under fire: increasingly, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva’s work on how to think the difference between men and women was accused not only of biological essentialism, but also of being unable to account for differences among women, leading to charges of being falsely universal. It is to this concern that the next chapter turns.
2. French Feminism and the Problem of Universalism

The 1980s saw a growing critique of both movement and academic feminism for failing to account for differences amongst women—particularly those racial and class differences that were understood to be all the more urgent in the context of the conservative backlash of the 1980s and the New Right’s targeting of the black family through its attack on the welfare state.¹ Within U.S. feminist literary criticism, scholars began to problematize the unitary subject of “woman” that had hitherto organized the field. The rejections of French Feminism as biologically essentialist analyzed in the previous chapter were thus intimately tied to rejections of French Feminism as being falsely universal.² For example, in 1981, in addition to denouncing what she perceived as

¹ While some attention was paid to sexuality in the 1980s, particularly through lesbian literary criticism, sexuality didn’t emerge as a major site of women’s difference until the 1990s. For a feminist overview of the rise of conservatism in the 1980s, see: Eisenstein, “Sexual Politics of the New Right” and Ruth, “Feminist Analysis of the New Right.” For a feminist response to the New Right’s targeting of black families, see: Zinn, “Family, Race, and Poverty.” The critique of feminism’s inattention to race and class, and the ensuing focus on the ways in which the latter interact with women’s sex-based oppression, culminated in the emergence of “intersectionality”—a term coined by critical legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989—as a key feminist theoretical paradigm. See: Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection.” For other important work analyzing the intersection of sex, race, and class in the 1980s, see especially: Dill, “Race, Class, Gender” and King, “Multiple Jeopardy.”

² Universalism has a very distinct valence in the context of France. This chapter is concerned not with how the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva relates to the French understanding of universalism but, rather, with the controversies surrounding French Feminism’s ability to account for differences amongst women, particularly racial differences, in the U.S. For an overview of the relation between feminism and universalism in France and how it plays out in a French-U.S. transnational context, see for example, Fassin, “Purloined Gender.”
the attribution of causal agency to biological sexual difference in theories of *écriture féminine*, Ann Jones argued that one of the major problems with French Feminism was that it suppressed “variations in class, in race, and in culture among women” and asserted that “there is nothing universal about French versions of *écriture féminine*.” As French Feminism achieved hegemonic status in U.S. feminist literary criticism of the 1980s, black feminist critics who had previously largely ignored it began to speak out against it. In 1987 and 1995 respectively, Barbara Christian and Deborah McDowell critiqued the U.S. feminist literary critics who took up French Feminism for ignoring race and for reproducing the very racism of U.S. academic feminism that had recently come under fire. The denunciation of French Feminism as complicit with racism has been extremely powerful: today, French Feminism is largely remembered as, and dismissed for, relying on a falsely universal notion of sexual difference incompatible with thinking about race. In short, the French Feminist focus on sexual difference has been cast as antithetical to a focus on social differences.

Against the entrenched reputation of French Feminism as being at odds with thinking women’s racial differences, this chapter argues that one important group of thinkers did in fact draw on French Feminism to challenge the racism of U.S. academic feminism: postcolonial feminist critics. Scholarship in the last fifteen years or so has contended that the growing focus on Third World women under the aegis of transnational

---

3 Jones, “Towards An Understanding,” 255 and 260. Jones here rejoins Gayatri Spivak’s critique of “French Feminism” in “French Feminism in an International Frame.” However, as I argue below, Spivak borrows from French Feminism even as she warns against universalizing it.
feminism has directed attention away from U.S. women of color, particularly black women. This chapter suggests that the narrative of French Feminism as universally white has obscured Third World women’s contributions to rethinking racial formations and racist logics, including in the U.S. If black feminist literary critics did not take up French Feminism to think about race, this has perhaps less to do with any essential incompatibility between French Feminism and thinking about race, and more to do with the chasm between the two bodies of work’s approaches to literature. As Hazel Carby has argued, black feminist literary critics such as Barbara Christian and Barbara Smith tended to assume a direct correspondence between reality and fiction while critics like McDowell and herself advocated a “materialist” approach to literature that would pay attention to conditions of production and, in the case of Carby, account for “the cultural production of black women intellectuals within the social relations that inscribed them.”

Race was thus understood as a historical, social, and economic construction that was reflected in language rather than as being embedded in the very foundations of meaning. But it was precisely the French Feminist critique of the Western phallocentric

---

4 In 2005, Sandra Soto argued that “just as it became clear that women’s studies finally needed to attend in a meaningful way to the critiques by feminists of color, a new body of scholarship suggests that a heightened engagement with the racialized dimensions of gender in the United States is fundamentally incommensurate—in fact, at odds—with the exigencies of understanding ‘gender in a transnational world’” (“Where in the Transnational World,” 121). A year later, in 2006, Karla Holloway similarly argued that the “transnational imperative” has meant that “[a]lthough race matters and evidence of ethnicity seem to occupy our academic and political projects, Black folk themselves disappear form view and white folk are protected from analysis” (“Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood,” 1 and 14).

5 Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 17.
understanding of difference that postcolonial feminist theorists, such as Trinh T. Minh-ha and Gayatri Spivak, found so promising for challenging U.S. academic feminism’s racism. Rather than furthering the opposition between difference and differences, these critics leveraged the French Feminist critique of the subject/object dichotomy structuring Western understandings of difference to open U.S. academic feminism up to the question of radical alterity between women.

The chapter is organized in three sections. In the first part, “The Race for French Feminism,” I examine Christian and McDowell’s critiques of the racism underlying French Feminism’s hegemony in the U.S. academy of the 1980s and show that these narratives frame the emergence of French Feminism as representing the displacement of the importance of race in U.S. feminist literary criticism. In positing French Feminism as antithetical to thinking about race, these crucial indictments of the institutionalized dismissal of work by women of color paradoxically make invisible work that, drawing on French Feminism, did attempt to think women’s racial differences. It is to this work that the next two sections turn. In “‘The ‘inscription and de-scription of a non-unitary female subject of color:’ Ecriture Féminine’s Different Theory of Difference,” I show that for some feminist critics working in the U.S., the theory of sexual difference developed by Cixous and Irigaray in their elaborations of écriture féminine offered a new and productive way of conceptualizing difference that opened up the way for recognizing women’s racial differences. Trinh in particular offered a trenchant critique of tokenism in U.S. academic feminism and argued that a new concept of difference was needed to adequately address race. I demonstrate that Trinh found this new concept of difference in
the work of Cixous and Irigaray and that she drew in particular on Cixous’ elaboration of *écriture féminine* to propose a form of writing the body as a means of inscribing women’s racial differences. In “‘Learn[ing] to learn from them:’ Heterogeneity Beyond the Same/Other Boundary,” I show that Kristeva’s work, although often controversial, also offered specific concepts, such as the abject and the semiotic *chora*, that were of use to feminist critics interested in working against racism in general and racism with U.S. academic feminism in particular. Iris Marion Young uses Kristeva’s concept of abjection to understand contemporary forms of racism and Spivak echoes some of the French scholar’s central tenants in her intervention into U.S. academic feminists’ approach to studying Third World women. While Young is not a postcolonial feminist theorist, I have chosen to include her work on abjection and racism because it contributes to the larger argument of this chapter which is that, despite French Feminism’s reputation as being antithetical to anti-racist projects, some feminist critics working in the U.S. did in fact draw on it to think about race. Throughout, my aim is not to measure the value or adequacy of French Feminism for thinking racial differences between women; nor is it to consolidate or enhance the hegemony and privilege of French Feminism that has indeed contributed to sidelining important literary theoretical work by women of color. My point is rather that, in a context in which the institutional value of French Feminism was overdetermined, certain feminist critics, particularly postcolonial feminist critics, found in that body of work conceptual tools with which to challenge the racism of U.S. academic feminism and let women’s racial differences emerge. The chapter thus recasts the opposition between French Feminism and race and, in so doing, challenges the twin
presumptions of the whiteness of French Feminism and of the untheoretical nature of work on race.

2.1 The Race for French Feminism

The swift rise of poststructuralism in U.S. literary criticism of the 1980s culminated in the term “theory” becoming synonymous with poststructuralism. While many white U.S. feminist literary critics focused, via French Feminism, on the value of poststructuralism for feminism, others, particularly black feminist literary scholars, critiqued the new hegemony and monolithic definition of theory. One of the most important of these critiques came in the late 1980s from Barbara Christian, who, in “The Race for Theory,” offered an avowedly “paranoid” reading of the “takeover” of “theory” in literary criticism.6 As the word play in her title suggests, she argued that theory, understood as poststructural theory, was a highly racialized academic formation meant to prevent the incorporation into the canon of work by people of color. Noting that theory emerged on the literary critical scene just as “the literature of peoples of color, black women, Latin Americans, and Africans began to move to ‘the center,’” she framed the poststructural turn in literary criticism as a reaction against the rising prominence of non-canonical works that threatened both the established canon and the literary theory

---

developed out of that canon. In addition to silencing and displacing non-canonical writers, in her view, the mandate to theorize had “co-opted” black, women, and Third World writers “into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation.” She thus considered poststructural theory to be inherently at odds with feminist and anti-racist politics. While feminist literary critic Deborah McDowell rejected Christian’s framing of theory as being, in and of itself, against the interests of anyone who is not a white Western male, in 1995, she concurred that, in the “narrow usages” to which it was put, theory had become “an ideological category associated with the politically dominant.” Such a narrow definition of theory was problematic for McDowell because it rejected any form of thinking and writing that did not participate in its discourse as uncritical and of little value.

Crucially, Christian and McDowell extended their critique of the structures of political dominance at work in literary theory at large to French Feminism specifically. Christian highlighted the privilege French Feminism enjoyed in feminist literary criticism

7 Ibid., 71.

8 Ibid., 68. She also argued that theory discredited non-canonical literature’s claim to politics by lapsing into depoliticized relativism: “the literature of blacks, women of South America and Africa, and so forth, as overtly ‘political’ literature was being preempted by a new Western concept which proclaimed that reality does not exist, that everything is relative, and that every text is silent about something—which indeed it must necessarily be” (Ibid., 73). For an overview of the ways in which poststructuralism was considered by some to give way to relativism and hence to depoliticize feminism, see: Nicholson, “Introduction.”

at the time of her writing, a privilege which, she argued, both ignored and sidelined the
work of women of color, thus reproducing the racism of U.S. academia:

That tendency toward monolithism [that defines theory] is
precisely how I see the French feminist theorists. They concentrate on the
female body as the means to creating a female language, because language,
they say, is male and necessarily conceives of woman as other. Clearly
many of them have been irritated by the theories of Lacan for whom
language is phallic. But suppose there are peoples in the world whose
language was invented primarily in relation to women, who after all are the
ones who relate to children and teach language. Some native American
languages, for example, use female pronouns when speaking about non-
gender-specific activity. Who knows who, according to gender, created
languages.\textsuperscript{10}

For Christian, U.S. feminist literary critics had given in to the “race for theory” in order
to gain power and, in so doing, had become narrow and prescriptive. In their rush to
develop theories, they failed to “take into account the complexity of life—that women are
of many races and ethnic backgrounds with different histories and cultures and that as a
rule women belong to different classes that have different concerns.”\textsuperscript{11} In other words,
they failed to take into consideration the differences amongst women and to develop
theories that would be of relevance to women other than those of the white middle-class.

McDowell similarly posits that the feminist literary critics who took up French
Feminism were disinterested in race and furthered the racist and nationally coded division
of theory/practice at work in literary theory at large. McDowell draws attention to the
fact that in the now canonical book of feminist literary theory, \textit{Sexual/Textual Politics},

\textsuperscript{10} Christian, “Race for Theory,” 75-76.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 75.
Moi explicitly positions the writing of black women and lesbians as being politically but not theoretically important. According to Moi, black feminist literary criticism is grounded in the same methodological and theoretical frameworks as the white Anglo-American feminist literary criticism she dismisses as less theoretical and therefore less politically radical than French Feminism. McDowell argues that such a dichotomy, which pits black feminist literary criticism as antithetical to poststructuralist theory, has less to do with how these theories diverge and converge, and much more to do with the circulation of power and privilege in the academy. Thus it is not, for example, that black women are not writing theory, but that their work is not recognized as such.

McDowell identifies a similar polarization between black feminist criticism and theory at play in Gallop’s account of her own intellectual trajectory. In a conversation with Marianne Hirsh and Nancy K. Miller in 1990, Gallop states: “I didn’t feel the necessity of discussing race until I had moved myself out of a French post-structural orbit and began talking about American feminist literary criticism.” Gallop links her lack of interest in race at the time she was focusing on French poststructuralism, including French Feminism, to the fact that racial difference is a “serious political” matter rather than a “high theoretical” one. McDowell is not only critical of Gallop’s lack of engagement with the question of race and implicit dismissal of black feminist criticism as less theoretical than French Feminism. She also critiques Gallop’s “conversion

12 Quoted in McDowell, “Transferences,” 108. For the original conversation, see Gallop et al., “Criticizing Feminist Criticism.”

13 Quoted in ibid., 110.
narrative.”

At the time of the conversation with Hirsch and Miller, Gallop had, in her own language, transferred her desire for approval from French men, and Lacan in particular, to African-American woman, and specifically to McDowell herself. Although Gallop did not know McDowell, the latter “read black feminist critic.” McDowell sees in this transference a reduction of herself to a “counter to an academic feminism now submitting to what Gallop calls the pressure of race.” McDowell clarifies that her goal is “neither to expose weaknesses in Jane Gallop’s thinking nor to suggest that they are particular to her.” Her argument is rather to show that, even as Gallop turns to the question of race, she participates in an instrumentalization of McDowell that is racist in so far as it reduces McDowell to a function (black feminist critic) that does not require Gallop to know anything about McDowell’s “humanity.” Furthermore, McDowell argues that in Gallop’s narrative, which includes the description of a shift from being anxious about not being high class enough for French theory to worrying about being too high class, race:

14 Ibid., 110.
15 Quoted in ibid., 108.
16 Ibid., 110.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid. McDowell compares Gallop’s relation to herself to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s relation to Sojourner Truth more than a century before. McDowell’s point thus stems less from a personal desire to contest a reductive portrayal of herself and more from a desire to identify the repetition of racist patterns of thought within feminism.
equals lower class equals black feminist, a multiplication of equations that helps to construct an identity, a subjectivity for black feminist thinking among the general critical discourse of the time. Although black feminist criticism can be marked at one point, as being on an yet unfinished trajectory, it is consigned to the status of the permanent underclass. In that sense, the identity of black feminist criticism [...] has been solidly fixed to a reference schemata and a racial stigmata in a history we’ve read before.¹⁹

Although Gallop has become interested in the question of race, the way in which she narrates her shift in fact adheres, according to McDowell, to the very racist framework that made U.S. feminist critics interested in French Feminism dismissive of race.

Christian and McDowell offer important critical diagnoses of how power and privilege circulate within academic feminism. They also give insight into the racism at work in the ways in which French Feminism gained traction while the kind of black feminist literary criticism developed by such scholars as Barbara Smith was marginalized.²⁰ However, both reduce French Feminism to a monolithic body of work, much as they criticize poststructuralism of doing to theory. They also uniformly dismiss French Feminism and its U.S practitioners as being uninterested in the question of race, thereby consolidating the very sidelining of race they wish to counter and reinforcing the whiteness of poststructuralism they rightly find so problematic. In what follows, I problematize the idea that the feminist critics who took up French Feminism in the U.S. were not concerned with race or that French Feminism’s politics were at odds with anti-racism.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110-11.

²⁰ Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.”
2.2 The “inscription and de-scription of a non-unitary female subject of color:” Ecriture Féminine’s Different Theory of Difference

A handful of scholars, such as Elizabeth Grosz, Carolyn Burke, and, as I will spend most of this section discussing, Trinh T. Minh-ha, have argued that the concept of sexual difference at the heart of Cixous and Irigaray’s respective notions of écriture féminine and parler femme opens up the possibility of a different kind of difference, one that does not rely on the same/other binary that has historically structured Western thought. This new understanding of difference was crucially elaborated through a critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I therefore offer a brief overview of Cixous and Irigaray’s critique of Lacan before turning to the ways in which Trinh drew on the French Feminist rethinking of difference to think racial differences between women.

According to Lacan, the social and cultural world is structured by the symbolic order, which is, to borrow a phrase from Dylan Evans, “essentially a linguistic dimension.” Adopting a Saussurian understanding of linguistic signification in which meaning is constituted through difference rather than positive value, Lacan posits the

21 Trinh, Woman, Native, Other, 43.

22 I mention Grosz here not as a U.S. feminist critic since she was not working in the U.S. at the time she wrote Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists (1989) and was not in conversation with U.S. academic feminism. I cite her rather as a major scholar of Irigaray and indicative of a feminist interest in the French Feminist rethinking difference.

23 Evans, Dictionary, 203.
symbolic as the cause of differentiation: being the realm of signifiers, the symbolic is also the realm of discrete entities. Subject/object distinctions thus belong to the symbolic order. The symbolic order, however, emerges at the expense of another order, that of the real. The real is a realm without differentiation and thus without subject/object distinction and without signification. It is the realm of the child’s pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal, fusional relationship with the maternal body. In order to enter the symbolic order and become a discrete subject, the child must renounce and repress his or her bond to the maternal body. For Lacan then, the repression of a maternal bond is constitutive of the symbolic and, thus, of signification. In other words, signification requires the repression of the attachment to the maternal body and the emergence of the subject/object binary. It is this Lacanian understanding of the symbolic as necessitating the repression of the maternal that Cixous and Irigaray refuse. By bringing the drives attached to the maternal body into language, écriture féminine asserts that the repression of the maternal bond is not necessary to signification. For Cixous and Irigaray, there can then be signification without the subject/object binary.

Écriture féminine constituted a radical rethinking of interpersonal relations because of its implication that the self need not be radically separate from others. This is what Grosz stresses about Irigaray’s work:

Irigaray wants to make room for a language of love among women, of sexual pleasure that is truly beyond the law of the phallus. These relations partake of the preoedipal relations between mother and daughter, without, however, recreating their roles. Resurrected in the present, this lost paradise of mutual affection does not resemble the psychoanalysts’
description of preoedipal crises over the need for individuation. There is no need to seal off the self from the other.  

The resurrection of pre-Oedipal relations is not a resurrection of indifferentiation but rather of differentiation without absolute separation. Burke makes a similar point in commenting on Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together:” “the use of a double subject (tu/je) reaffirms the desired mutuality of female relations in writing. In this text, which attempts to embody female difference, however, tu and je are not fixed persons. Fluid and changing, they are at once two lovers, two aspects of the self, and more, as the reader is gradually drawn into an exploration of plurality.” By opening up the symbolic order to the pre-Oedipal relations between child and mother, écriture féminine undoes the subject/object dichotomy that separates the self from the other. This means that difference no longer relies on othering. For those who saw in écriture féminine a positive contribution to feminist literary theory, the task became to subvert patriarchal language, to dephallicize it, to bring the repressed maternal into language and thereby to create a symbolic revolution in which difference could be expressed without Othering. Although Grosz and Burke did not explicitly connect their interest in rethinking difference to thinking about differences among women, Trinh did.

In Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, Trinh joins other black and Third World feminists in critiquing U.S. academic feminism for its

24 Grosz, Sexual Subversions, 299.

Writing in 1989, she focuses less on the pervasive absence of women of color in U.S. academic feminism and more on the ways in which the latter has attempted to address such absences. In responding to the “scarcity of Third World women’s voices in debates” by creating “special Third World Women’s issues” for example, U.S. academic feminism constructs Third World feminist scholars as both different and special in ways that replicate rather than undermine racist logic. For Trinh, the tokenization at work in special journal issues (or special conference sessions, or certain invitations), partakes of the same “ideology of separatism” that underwrites the imperialist Western policy of “separate development,” a policy which works “toward your erasure while urging you to keep you way of life and ethnic values within the borders of your homelands.” White U.S. academic feminism routinely asks Third World women to perform authenticity, to provide “the possibility of a difference,” but one that will “not go so far as to question the

26 She explicitly aligns herself with postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak, Chicana scholar and author Gloria Anzaldúa, Asian Pacific poet Mitsuye Yamada, black feminist critic and poet Audre Lorde, black feminist novelist Alice Walker, and Native American poet Lesli Marmon Silko. Although she is most concerned with articulating Third World women’s difference, Trinh posits her intervention as both deeply allied with and relevant to black U.S. feminism, as evidenced by her references to the work of black U.S. feminists. While Trinh cannot therefore be accused of making black women’s bodies disappear, her work might be criticized for homogenizing women of color. For example, Trinh makes no clear distinction between race, color, and ethnicity in Woman, Native, Other. One might argue in response, however, that the reframing of difference at the heart of Trinh’s book would allow the heterogeneity of the category “women of color” to be articulated. For critiques of postcolonial and transnational feminism’s homogenization of women of color, see respectively: Sharpe, “Is the United States Postcolonial,” and Soto, “Where in the Transnational World.”

27 Trinh, Woman, Native, Other, 84.

28 Ibid., 82 and 80.
foundation” of the field or its practitioners. Trinh thus accuses white U.S. academic feminism of responding to its lack of attention to racial differences between women by taking up the same meaning of difference as separation and division that also fuels Western imperialism and functions as “a tool of self-defense and conquest.” Such an understanding of difference works to secure rather than challenge the hegemony of those already in power.

Crucially for Trinh’s argument, both white U.S. academic feminism and Western imperialism rely on a traditionally Western, identitarian notion of difference. Both comprehend entities “as absolute presences—hence the notions of pure origin and true self” and difference is that which distinguishes one “identity-authenticity” from another. According to this logic, X is X, Y is Y and X can never be Y. For Trinh, within the context of U.S. academic feminism, this means that not every woman gets to count as a woman, as exemplified by the title of the edited collection by Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell-Scott, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Trinh therefore critiques U.S. academic feminism’s “[y]earning for universality, the generic ‘woman’” because it “tends to erase difference within itself.” In addition to erasing differences between women, the search for an authentic female

29 Ibid. 88.

30 Ibid. 82.

31 Ibid., 90 and 89.

32 Ibid., 97.
identity retains male identity as the reference point. Here Trinh indicts in particular the work of Judith Kegan Gardiner, which delineates the specificity of female identity by comparing it to male identity. Thus it is not French Feminism but a certain form of white U.S. academic feminism that Trinh criticizes for searching for a difference between men and women at the expense of differences amongst women. Indeed, Trinh’s critique of Gardiner echoes Irigaray’s critique of the Western logos as only being able to think difference through analogies and other means of comparison that keep men as the reference point and, therefore, prevent the emergence of true sexual difference. Although Trinh does not explicitly refer to Irigaray here—indeed Woman, Native, Other blurs the lines between theory and poetry and thus does not follow standard academic citation practices—the general familiarity with French poststructuralism evidenced throughout the text and the presence of Speculum of the Other Woman in the selected bibliography suggests that the convergence of Trinh’s intervention with the work of Irigaray is more than coincidental. Because the search for an essential, identitarian difference, be it a female difference or a racial difference, “can never be anything more than a move within the male-is-norm-divide-and-conquer trap,” Trinh proposes to rethink the very notion of difference.

Against the difference as identity model, Trinh advocates for a form of difference that would undermine identity: “If feminism is set forth as a demystifying force, then it will need to be able to question thoroughly the belief in its own identity,” that is, it will

33 Ibid., 101.
need to be able to question its hitherto defining reliance on an identitarian concept of woman.\textsuperscript{34} The goal of feminism should therefore not be to add women into existing identitarian discourses but rather to embrace, as Trinh does, what might be considered the credo of sexual difference, namely the assertion that “[w]oman can never be defined.”\textsuperscript{35} In contrast to the pervasive understanding difference as that which distinguishes between unified subjects or fixed identities, Trinh promotes “difference understood also as critical difference from myself.”\textsuperscript{36} In a passage reminiscent of Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Trinh highlights that such a model of difference involves not just rethinking the self as a divided self but also rethinking the subject/object border: “I/i can be I or i, you and me both involved. We (with capital W) sometime include(s), other times exclude(s) me. You and I are close, we intertwine; you may stand on the other side of the hill once in a while, but you may also be me, while remaining what you are and what i am not.”\textsuperscript{37} Although highly critical of identity, Trinh explicitly rejects Kristeva’s proposition to dissolve sexed identity on the grounds that to do so is to “disregard the importance of the shift that the notion of identity has undergone in woman’s discourses.”\textsuperscript{38} As her book’s subtitle—\textit{Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism}—suggests,

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 104.
Trinh is importantly invested in the ways in which non-white women’s writing can subvert the duality between “woman” and “ethnicity” at the heart of U.S. academic feminism and let a new reality emerge. In this regard, she both takes up and furthers the project of *écriture féminine*.

The whole first section of *Woman, Native, Other* is a meditation on how to “*[w]rit*[e] in the feminine. And on a colored sky.” Trinh thus proposes to conjoin feminine writing, *écriture féminine*, with the project of inscribing race. If language “partakes in the white-male-is-normal ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations” one may question the world by questioning how to write. For Trinh feminine writing does not shore up “Woman” and “kill women” because it constitutes not an authorial, authoritative writing of the self but rather “the emergence of a writing-self.” Quoting Cixous, she posits feminine writing as a disruption of identity. Writing in the feminine and on a colored sky is, like *écriture féminine*, a writing of the body for Trinh. To write the body is to go against the suppression of difference in the name of theory, a suppression which both Christian and McDowell fault French Feminism for: “From jagged transitions between the analytic and the poetical to the disruptive, always shifting fluidity of a headless bottomless storytelling, what is exposed in this text is the inscription and de-scription of a non-

---

39 Ibid., 28.

40 Ibid., 6.

41 Ibid., 28.
unitary female subject of color through her engagement, therefore also disengagement, with master discourses.” Here Trinh again explicitly aligns herself with Cixous, for whom master discourses “annihilate[...] sexual difference,” and agrees that feminine writing avoids fixed meanings. Writing the body is “a way of making theory in gender, of making of theory a politics of every day life, thereby re-writing the ethnic female subject as site of differences.” Woman, Native, Other draws on French Feminism, and particularly on the work of Cixous, to advocate for an anti-identitarian notion of difference that would allow for the plurality of “woman” to emerge. Extending the notion of écriture féminine to a notion of simultaneously writing the sexually different and colored body, Trinh aims to disrupt the unitary, white, female subject at the center of U.S. academic feminism. Indeed, Woman, Native, Other is itself an attempt to write the feminine on a colored sky.

2.3 “Learn[ing] to learn from them:” Heterogeneity Beyond the Same/Other Boundary

While the concepts of sexual difference and écriture féminine at the heart of Cixous and Irigaray’s work enabled Trinh to counter U.S. academic feminism’s racist elisions and tokenization of women of color, other feminist scholars, such as Young and

42 Ibid., 43.

43 Quoted in Trinh, 43.

44 Ibid., 44.

45 Spivak, “French Feminism,” 156.
Spivak, turned to Kristeva’s work to approach the problem of women’s racial differences. Young used Kristeva’s theory of abjection to understand contemporary group-based oppressions, including racist oppression, and to call for a cultural revolution as well as a revolution of the subject. While Spivak accused Kristeva of othering racially different women, I argue that the model she suggests for First World feminists to relate to Third World feminists has important affinities with Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic *chora* as radically heterogeneous to the symbolic.

In her 1990 “Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia,” Young argues that Kristeva’s theory of abjection—developed in *Powers of Horror (Pouvoirs de l'Horreur*, 1980; English translation 1982)—is useful for understanding, and therefore outlining possible responses to, contemporary group-based discriminations such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and able-ism. Young does not explicitly connect her contribution to thinking through racial differences amongst women. However, she argues that consciousness-raising activities in the women’s liberation movement against racism between women can serve as the model for the kind of consciousness-raising for which she advocates on a broad scale. This suggests that Young’s attempt to rethink subjectivity by drawing on Kristeva’s notion of the abject would also be productive for addressing racial differences amongst women. Kristeva defines the abject as that which blurs boundaries between the self and the other. Because subjectivity for Kristeva (as for Lacan) is coextensive with the subject/object distinction, the presence of the abject is intolerable. Neither subject nor object, it faces one with the
“limit of [his or her] condition as a living being.” Abjection then is a matter of life and death for the subject who encounters it and must, therefore, be “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable,” in a word, abjected. Abjection, then, is the process whereby a subject demarcates itself from that which is not itself but yet not safely not-itself either. Abjection safeguards the subject.

Young historicizes the importance of abjection to group-based discrimination in contemporary society. Group oppression, she asserts, is no longer primarily enacted through laws or policies as it once was. Instead, it is enacted in “informal, often unnoticed and unreflective speech, bodily reaction to others, conventional practices of everyday interaction and evaluation, aesthetic judgment, and the jokes, images and stereotypes pervading visual, oral, and print media.” As oppression shifts away from what she calls “discursive consciousness,” a tension emerges “between wanting to distinguish oneself from the others and yet having to admit that they are basically the same.” Whereas when oppression was conscious the targeted group was clearly positioned as an other, contemporary group-based discriminations are structured in part by unconscious dynamics best explained by the concept of abjection. The consequent

46 Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’Horreur*, 11, translation mine. All subsequent translations are mine unless otherwise noted.


48 Young, “Abjection and Oppression,” 211.

49 Ibid., 209.
fear and loathing associated with certain groups is the consequence of the dominant subject’s fear of loss of identity.\(^\text{50}\)

Because it operates at the level of the unconscious, discrimination based on abjection cannot be addressed through formal laws or policies. Young proposes institutionally and media supported consciousness-raising as a strategy for addressing abjection. She expounds in a passage worth quoting in its entirety:

Such consciousness raising can be considered a kind of social therapy, confronting the anxieties and fears of difference expressed by the abject. One aspect of the task is to dislodge the association between issues of identity and fears of identity loss, on the one hand, and particular groups projected as different, on the other. Issues of separation, identity, fears of identity loss, and death will be with us as long as humans have consciousness; but these issues need not be played out on the register of group differences. Since to some degree contemporary denials or devaluations of group difference express such a mastering of subjectivity, for consciousness raising to be ultimately effective requires not only severing the link between identity and fear of difference, but in loosening the desire for unity in the experience of subjectivity and identity itself. The straight, rational, organized, articulate, consistent paradigm of the ‘mature’ person must give way to a personality less preoccupied with ‘self-control’ and more open to entrance form others. Cultural revolution, that is, entails revolutionizing the subject’s self-recognition, to allow for a plural and shifting process, rather than insisting on being a single coherent identity.\(^\text{51}\)

While drawing on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Young moves away from Kristeva’s assertion that the dissolution of a firm subject/object boundary leads to psychosis.\(^\text{52}\)

Indeed, Young suggests that subjectivity need not demarcate itself so drastically from

\(^{50}\) Abjection doesn’t explain why certain groups become associated with disgust, but how once they do “these associations lock into the subject’s identity anxieties” (Ibid., 208).

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 213.

\(^{52}\) I address Kristeva’s association of the dissolution of the subject/object boundary with psychosis more fully below.
others and that, in fact, giving up on such a need will produce positive social change. Similarly to those feminist literary theorists who heralded *écriture féminine* as ushering in a new understanding of difference, Young uses Kristeva’s theory of the abject as a springboard for radically rethinking the subject/object dynamic. If those who took up *écriture féminine* proposed dephallicizing language through experimental writing as a way of realizing difference without othering, for Young, what is needed is a “cultural revolution.” Such a revolution would take place in more than just writing since Young defines culture not as essentially linguistic the way Cixous and Irigaray do, but rather as comprising “images, stories, expectation of speech and comportment, interactive habits, and the like.” It is these that “foster the oppression or domination of some people” and which, therefore, must be changed.

While Young finds Kristeva’s theory of the abject useful for moving feminist inquiry beyond the need to other, Spivak, in her earlier “French Feminism in an International Frame” (1980), critiques Kristeva’s 1974 *About Chinese Women* (U.S. translation 1975) precisely for othering Chinese women. Spivak’s essay highlights the contradiction at work in Kristeva’s text. Kristeva posits listening for the eruptions of the pre-Oedipal maternal, what she calls the semiotic *chora*, in the symbolic, that is, listening for what is *heterogeneous*. Yet, in othering the women of China she subsumes them within a same/other logic that prevents her from hearing their differences. Rather than wholly discounting Kristeva, Spivak in fact draws on the French feminist’s invitation to

53 Ibid., 212.

54 Ibid.
listen to develop a way for First World women to interact with Third World women that would recognize and learn from the differences between them.

*About Chinese Women* is a series of notes and reflections occasioned by Kristeva’s 1974 trip to China with the *Tel Quel* group. In it, Kristeva argues that whereas patriarchal monotheism in the West has repressed the maternal, maternal power is still present in Chinese society. The Communist Party may invite women to assume a symbolic function as a means of repressing the feminine but, because the symbolic, in China, includes traces of the pre-Oedipal maternal due to the persistence of the strong matrilineal tradition of ancient China, it nonetheless gives women access to their real power. The major problem for Spivak is that such a conclusion is based on “extremely dubious” evidence because Kristeva approaches Chinese women with a “colonialist benevolence” that relies on gross generalizations and fails to listen for the nuances of Chinese history and culture. In particular, Spivak faults Kristeva for giving an overview of Chinese history in terms of millennia, using hardly any archival evidence, and turning speculations into historical fact. When it comes to Chinese literature, Kristeva “seems to blunt the fine edge of her approach to literature” and “gives the most stupendous generalizations about Chinese writing.” She relies on extremely free translations of Chinese texts, offers no real textual analysis, and takes literature as translating experience, as if the mediation of representation were an exclusively Western


56 Ibid., 161 and 160.
problematic. Furthermore, in Spivak’s view, Kristeva’s assertion that the pre-Oedipal maternal is less repressed in contemporary Chinese women than in Western women is derived from accounts of the lives of great women rather than on any primary research or analytic experience of Chinese women. Spivak therefore argues that, although Kristeva criticized the 18th century Sinophiles for deforming Chinese systems “in order to assimilate them into their own,” she in fact is close to them in her “wishful use of history” and oversimplification of Chinese literature.57

The greatest problem for Spivak with such a colonizing approach is that it produces a self-centered text that, in the end, fails to know anything about Chinese women. While claiming to be “about Chinese women,” the eponymous text it is in fact decidedly about Western subjectivity. Nowhere is this more evident for Spivak than in Kristeva’s encounter with Chinese peasant women in Huxian square: “Her question, in the face of those silent women, is about her own identity rather than theirs: ‘Who is speaking, then, before the stare of the peasants at Huxian?’”58 Although Spivak does not fully develop this line of argument in her essay, what is striking about this self-centered encounter with Chinese women is not only its obvious othering, but also the ways in which it is at odds with Kristeva’s own directives.59

57 Quoted in ibid., 160 and ibid., 160.

58 Ibid., 158.

59 Rey Chow also reads this moment in Spivak’s text, contrasting Spivak’s subjectivating attribution of “envy” to the Chinese peasant’s stare described by Kristeva to Kristeva’s objectification of them as silent objects. Spivak, however, pointedly refuses attributing
In the first half of the book, “On This Side,” Kristeva argues that, in the West, patriarchal monotheism has emerged at the expense of an earlier religion focused on fertility and the maternal and, in so doing, has repressed the pre-Oedipal maternal body that threatens the symbolic structured by the Law of the Father. If this diagnosis of women’s position in the patriarchal symbolic is similar to Cixous and Irigaray’s, Kristeva differs radically from them in her proposed solution. She suggests that what is needed is to “summon […] the echo of our pleasure, of our madness, of our pregnancies—into the order of speech and social symbolism.”60 This is not an embrace of the kind of symbolic revolution advocated by Cixous and Irigaray in their elaborations of écriture féminine. Indeed, while Cixous and Irigaray advocate opening up the symbolic to the pre-Oedipal maternal, Kristeva believes such a move would result in psychosis. Instead, she suggests that traces of that pre-Oedipal maternal may be summoned by “listening; by recognizing the unspoken in speech, even revolutionary speech; by calling attention at all times to whatever remains unsatisfied, repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible, disturbing to the status quo.”61 Kristeva develops the concept of the semiotic chora to further explicate what it is that one is listening for. As Moi succinctly puts in The Kristeva Reader, the semiotic chora, associated with pre-objectal, pre-Oedipal drives, that is, with the 

subjectivity to the silent native, as Chow discusses and as I develop further below. See: Chow, “Where Have All The Natives Gones?,” 32-33.


61 Quoted in ibid., 158.
maternal body (one of the translations of *chora* is womb), constitutes the “heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory.”  

62 Crucially, in this pre-Oedipal universe, “‘I’ is heterogeneous.”  

63 In the symbolic realm of same/other distinction, however, “I am only like someone else: mimetic logic of the advent of the ego, objects and signs.”  

64 Listening for the pre-Oedipal maternal, for the outbreak of the semiotic *chora*, would then mean listening for that which is heterogeneous, that which does not partake of the same/other distinction. This is precisely what Spivak reads Kristeva as failing to do in *About Chinese Women*, in which, as Spivak so poignantly demonstrates, Chinese women are cast as the Other to Kristeva’s Western subjectivity.

However, Spivak also uses her critique of Kristeva to develop an approach to women’s differences that has much in common with Kristeva’s invitation to listen for that which subverts Western phallocentrism. The broader argument of “French Feminism in an International Frame” is about moving away from the question “what can I do for them?” that informs Western feminists’ attempts to think of Third World women and, instead, towards an ability to “learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that

62 Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*, 13. It is this heterogeneity that leads Kristeva to her critique of the Lacanian theory of language, which, according to her, homologues the real with the symbolic. If the real becomes homogeneous with language through Lacan’s exclusive reliance on the Saussurian sign in his model of language, Kristeva marks the real’s heterogeneity through the semiotic *chora*.


64 Ibid.
their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by our superior theory and enlightened compassion.”

As Spivak’s framing story about the washerwoman by the river on the Bihar-Bengal border suggests, such an approach requires listening to these women’s differences without collapsing them into a homologizing same/other binary; it requires listening to the heterogeneity amongst women in order to hear their differences. A few years after “French Feminism in an International Frame” Spivak would famously argue, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that, no, “[t]he subaltern cannot speak” and that “[t]he subaltern as female cannot be heard or read.” In this now canonical essay, Spivak argues that to endow the silent image of the subaltern with a voice, with subjectivity, as many scholars working in the West do, is to assimilate the subaltern into the Western logos and thus to homologize her into an imperialist same/other binary. In other words, to translate the subaltern’s discourse into the Western logos is to force it into relation with the Western scholar’s own paradigm and is thus yet another imperialist gesture of domination. Against this, Spivak insists that “the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.”

Going back to “French Feminism in an International Frame,” I, therefore, do not mean to suggest that in inviting U.S. feminists to listen to Third World women Spivak is implying that the subaltern can speak and be heard in the Western logos without being assimilated into it. Rather, I mean precisely that Spivak is enjoining U.S. feminist intellectuals to try to grapple with the

65 Spivak, “French Feminism,” 155 and 156.

66 Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 308.

67 Ibid., 284.
heterogeneity of the subaltern subject, to listen for that which subverts the Western logos built on the homologizing same/other binary. In this sense, Spivak’s invitation rejoins Kristeva’s commitment to listening for the outbreak of the semiotic chora. Thus while she rightly critiques Kristeva for the latter’s Western imperialist approach to Chinese women in About Chinese Women, Spivak’s emphasis on the heterogeneity of the subaltern subject and efforts to find ways for the Western feminist intellectual to pursue her “circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” suggests that the Kristevean project of learning to listen for the heterogeneity foreclosed from the Western logos may be useful to Western feminists’ efforts to learn to learn from Third World women. 68

In this chapter, I have argued that, by critically engaging with the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, certain feminist scholars working in the U.S., particularly postcolonial feminist scholars, outlined ways in which academic feminism might conceptualize and attend to racial differences among women. These thinkers drew on French Feminism’s critiques of the Western logos and tools to subvert the same/other dichotomy structuring the imperialist, racist figurations of race at the heart of U.S. academic feminism’s racism. Problematizing the figuration of French Feminism as representing the displacement of work on race in U.S. feminist literary criticism, this chapter thus works against the dichotomy between “feminist theory” and “race,” a dichotomy that consolidates the whiteness of both feminism and poststructuralism and reinforces the categorization of feminist work on race as untheoretical.

68 Ibid., 308.
3. French Feminism and the French Women’s Liberation Movement

If the first two chapters of this dissertation focused on U.S. academic feminists’ construction of and responses to French Feminism, this chapter turns to the French context and examines French feminists’ reactions to the U.S. invention of French Feminism. As early as 1980, feminists responded to the U.S. body of work with anger, dismay, and confusion—an affectively charged rejection of French Feminism that continues to inform feminist debates today. This chapter offers a history of the struggles over the representation and history of the women’s liberation movement in order to account for the reactions to and impact of French Feminism in France. In so doing, it contributes to the ongoing project of writing the little-known history of the women’s liberation movement by tracing the enmeshment of theoretical disagreements with vitriolic power struggles between one group of the movement known as Psychanalyse et Politique and the rest of the movement. Most significantly, the chapter provides the first account of the history of the entrenched opposition between sexual difference feminism and materialist feminism, two intellectual approaches whose stark rejection of one another structure French feminist debates to this day.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. In the first section, “French feminists respond,” I analyze the reactions of feminists in France to the U.S. construction of French Feminism, from 1980 to the present. I highlight the fact that the French feminist scholars who denounce French Feminism associate it with a group of the women’s liberation
movement called Psychanalyse et Politique—alternatively known as Psych et Po, or Psychépo. I then outline the series of binary oppositions—between sexual difference, essentialism, and antifeminism on the one hand and materialist feminism, constructivism, and feminism on the other—mobilized in these responses, and the ways in which they continue to play out in contemporary feminist debates. In “Là-bas on appelle çà French Feminism,” I excavate the practical and theoretical connections between Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva and Psychépo that led French feminists to associate these writers and Psychépo. I give an overview of Psychépo’s theoretical framework, pointing out its convergences with the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, and drawing attention to the dichotomies at play. The third and fourth parts of the chapter turn to the debates over the representation and history of the women’s liberation movement. In “Women’s Liberation Movement™,” I examine the primary scandal surrounding Psychépo: the group’s legal trademarking, in 1979, of the name “Mouvement de Libération des Femmes” (“Women’s Liberation Movement”). The majority of the participants in the movement vehemently denounced the trademarking as an act of appropriation. The most vocal opponents of Psychépo claimed that its actions made a part of the movement stand in for the whole, thereby making invisible the work of others in the movement, particularly materialist feminists’ whose views were often diametrically opposed to those of Psychépo. In “Writing the History of the MLF,” I focus on the ways in which the 1979 conflict over the representation of the movement re-emerged in 2008, when Psychépo and others within the movement had violent public disagreements over the dating of the movement’s beginning. This recent struggle simultaneously indexed and consolidated the
absolute divide between materialist and sexual difference feminists in France, and indicates that the tension between Psychépo and other feminists, particularly materialist feminists, is still very much alive. The history charted by this chapter thus goes something like this: the 1979 scandal over Psychépo’s trademarking of the name “women’s liberation movement” cemented preexisting theoretical oppositions between sexual difference and materialist feminists into an absolute divide. The 2008 conflict over the dating of the movement further entrenched that position. In the midst of this, French Feminism, with its association with Psychépo, recapitulated and reinforced these oppositions, adding a national flavor to them. Feminist work in France today is structured around an opposition between two constellations of geographical and theoretical ideas, understood to be fundamentally incompatible: in this model, the U.S. is associated with French Feminism, sexual difference, essentialism, and antifeminism; this constellation is, in turn, seen as diametrically opposed to the materialist feminism, constructivism, and feminism associated with France. In tracing the historical emergence of this opposition, I lay the ground for understanding French feminists’ rejection of queer theory, a rejection that is the subject of my last chapter.
3.1 “Un système d’oppositions dichotomiques”

In her contribution to Robin Morgan’s 1984 anthology *Sisterhood is Global*, Simone de Beauvoir condemned “[s]uch books as Elaine Marks’s *New French Feminisms*” for giving “a totally distorted image of French feminism.” Beauvoir’s dismay at the U.S. representation of feminism in France is far from singular. A decade later, in 1995, Delphy noted that “[m]ost feminists from France find it extraordinary to be presented, when abroad, with a version of their feminism and their country of which they had previously no idea.” For Delphy, the chasm between French Feminism and feminism in France is so deep that she posits French Feminism as “an Anglo-American invention quite literally: Anglo-American writings that are ‘about’ it are it.” Similarly, U.S. scholar Judith Ezekiel, who has spent a considerable amount of time in France and has close ties to French feminist institutions and scholars, has stated that “what is called ‘French Feminism’ in the U.S. bears little resemblance to the multifaceted social movement in which I’ve been active.” U.S. historian Claire Moses has also stressed a disconnection between French Feminism and feminism in France: “Much has been

1 Kraus, “Anglo-American Feminism Made in France,” 171. The quote translates to: “A system of dichotomous oppositions.”


3 Delphy, “The Invention of ‘French Feminism,’” 190.

4 Ibid.,194.

5 Quoted in Moses, “Made in America,” 258.
written in the United States about a ‘French feminism’ influenced by Lacanian 
psychoanalysis and by other poststructuralist explanations for women’s condition […]

This ‘French feminism,’ however, is strikingly different from the feminism I encounter in 
France where, as a historian, my work affords me frequent opportunities to meet and talk 
with feminists.” For these scholars, all of whom share a commitment to materialist 
feminism, French Feminism does not represent feminism in France, in the sense that it 
does not correspond to any reality of feminism in France. According to Delphy, the fact 
that, in the 1990s, French feminists could not “recognize themselves in the picture they 
[were] presented with [abroad],” and the fact that “a ‘French Feminism’ [had] been 
created unbeknownst to them in English-speaking countries” was “a source of deeply-felt 
irritation.” This is still the case some twenty years later. As recently as 2013, Cornelia 
Möser, a feminist scholar working at the prestigious French national research institution 
the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), observed that, in France, 
French Feminism “provokes, at best, incomprehension.”

Yet, while French scholars and a handful of U.S. scholars repeatedly claim that 
French Feminism does not resemble feminism in France and find this variously 
“puzzl[ing],” “frustrat[ing],” “irritat[ing],” or “baffling,” they also consistently associate 
French Feminism with Psychépo, one of the most singular, powerful, long-lasting, and

6 Moses, “Made in America,” 241.

7 Delphy, “The Invention of ‘French Feminism,’” 191.

8 Möser, Féminismes en Traductions, 289.
intensely controversial groups of the French women’s liberation movement.⁹ Committed to a critically Lacanian understanding of women’s oppression and liberation, Psychépo held frequent meetings which any woman could join—the separatist nature of these meetings was a hallmark not just of Psychépo but of the women’s liberation movement in general. Scholars, activists, and interested women alike passed through the group, with attendance numbering anywhere between ten and three hundred at any given meeting.¹⁰

In her 1984 overview of feminism in France Beauvoir asserts that:

The French women’s movement […] is in constant danger, because of the existence of such groups as Psych. et Po. which pass themselves off as the women’s movement and exert considerable influence, thanks to the unfortunately all-too-warm reception the general public has given their ideology—a convenient neo-femininity developed by such women writers as Hélène Cixous, Annie Leclerc, and Luce Irigaray, most of whom are not feminists, and some of whom are blatantly anti-feminist. Unfortunately this is also the aspect of the French women’s movement best known in the United States.[…] On the contrary, one of the most interesting contributions to real French feminist theory is the radical-feminist critique of neo-femininity which has surfaced, particularly in Questions Féministes (now Nouvelles Question Féministes).¹¹

Similarly, in her 1995 critique of French Feminism, Delphy, one of the members of Questions Féministes and founding editors of Nouvelles Questions Féministes, claims that:

In constructing ‘French Feminism,’ Anglo-American authors favored a certain blatantly anti-feminist political trend called ‘Psych et po,’ to the

---


¹⁰ Interview with Françoise Picq, Paris, October 2013.

¹¹ Beauvoir, “Feminism—Alive, Well, and in Constant Danger,” 234.
detriment of what is considered, by Anglo-American as well as French feminist historians, to be the core of the feminist movement […] They promoted as “major French feminist theorists” a “Holy Trinity” made up of three women who have become household names in the Anglo-American world of Women's Studies […]: Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray. This was in spite of the fact, which was never revealed to the non-French public, that the first two are completely outside feminist debate in France and, not being considered feminist theorists, can hardly be considered “major feminist theorists”; and in spite of the fact, which is well-known and has been dealt with diversely by Anglo-American exporters, that at least the first two not only do not call themselves feminists, but have been known to actually denounce feminism.¹²

The similarity of these passages is striking and indicative of the wider French feminist attitude towards French Feminism. In addition to associating French Feminism with Psychépo, Beauvoir and Delphy are adamant about pointing out Psychépo’s antifeminism.¹³ Beauvoir links this antifeminism to an ideology of what she calls “neo-femininity” and Delphy goes on to link it to the concept of sexual difference. The appeal of French Feminism, she claims, “is that of ‘difference’ and, more precisely, of ‘sexual difference.’”¹⁴ Both then, associate French Feminism with Psychépo’s theoretical position and find this dangerous. While Beauvoir does not fully articulate the nature of the danger she perceives in Psychépo’s framework, Delphy proceeds to a robust critique of sexual difference in French Feminism which she concludes is essentialist and, 


therefore, “not compatible with feminist analysis.”\textsuperscript{15} In this respect, Delphy’s critique of French Feminism importantly echoes materialist feminists’ critique of Psychépo and sexual difference.\textsuperscript{16} Like Beauvoir, Delphy goes on to promote materialist feminism as constructivist, anti-essentialist, and thus truly feminist.

As the preceding analysis suggests, the French reaction to French Feminism is structured by a series of homologies and dichotomies. In 2005, Cynthia Kraus argued that feminists in France characterize French Feminism as an “ideology of difference” and homologize it to what has come to be known in France as “sexual difference feminism” in opposition to “egalitarian feminism.”\textsuperscript{17} Crucially, for Delphy the opposition between difference feminism and egalitarian feminism doubles as an opposition between essentialism and constructivism, psychoanalysis and materialism, antifeminism and feminism. Kraus points out that this series of binary oppositions is used not only to critique French Feminism but also importantly to define feminism in France, including materialist feminism. The latter “is produced negatively through a series of mutually exclusive oppositions [...] It is what French Feminism made in the USA and difference feminism made in France is not, that is, their exact opposite.”\textsuperscript{18} This widespread reaction to French Feminism continues to shape how these oppositions play out in contemporary

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 194.

\textsuperscript{16} See for example: Guillaumin, “Question de Différence;” Kandel, “Presse ‘Antiféministe;’” and Delphy, “Protoféminisme et Antiféminisme.”

\textsuperscript{17} Kraus, “Anglo-American Feminism Made in France,” 173.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 174.
feminist debates in France, particularly debates about gender.\textsuperscript{19} As I argue in the following chapter, it has also played a significant role in determining the French reaction to queer theory.

How might one explain this strong, influential, and long-lasting system of dichotomies that structure feminist research in France? Moses has argued that “[d]ifferences about the nature of women […] caused contentious disagreement […] but it was only after 1980, when the theoretical debate over sexual difference became enmeshed with a power struggle for control of the MLF [women’s liberation movement], that this one issue came to define the split within the French women’s movement.”\textsuperscript{20} The break between Psychépo and the rest of the movement turned the tension between sexual difference feminism and materialist feminism into an irreconcilable opposition. The French rejection of French Feminism as representing an essentialist theory of sexual difference is thus linked to the history of the women’s liberation movement. French feminist scholar Élénie Varikas contends that

to reduce “French” feminism to certain theoretical positions is not only to obscure the fact that the majority of feminist struggles took place outside and sometimes against these positions; it is not only to obscure the most influential positions in feminist thought in France; it is thereby to hinder any reflection on the conditions in which these multiple positions emerged, on their relationship to women’s political practice, on what makes their social and academic acceptability or unacceptability, on their subversive dynamic. From this point of view, it is surprising how little commentary the transformation of the women’s liberation movement into

\textsuperscript{19} See: Kraus, “Anglo-American Feminism Made in France” and Möser, \textit{Féminismes en Traductions}.

\textsuperscript{20} Moses, “Made in America,” 245-46.
a group’s trademark has generated in U.S. discussions of “French Feminism.”

Varikas is correct that very few U.S. publications have taken up this piece of the history of the French women’s liberation movement; indeed, it is virtually unknown in the U.S. However, French discussions of French Feminism do not delve into that history either. Varikas, while stressing the importance of Psychépo’s trademarking of the name “women’s liberation movement” to the French reaction to French Feminism, does not herself flesh out the connection. Nor does Kraus, for example, link the dichotomies surrounding French Feminism to the struggle over the representation of the women’s liberation movement. The latter is an “absence-presence” in French discussions of French Feminism: rarely explicitly engaged with, it structures the discussions. The rest of this chapter takes up the history of the women’s liberation movement that hauntingly informs the French reaction to French Feminism.

3.2 “Là-bas, on appelle ça French feminism”

The connection between Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, and Psychépo—largely invisible in the U.S., inescapable in France—is based on both theoretical and concrete


22 I borrow the concept of an “absence-presence” in French feminist discourse from Mösé, Féminismes en Traductions, 8.

23 Picq, Libération des Femmes, 368. The quote translates to: “Over there, they call it French feminism.”
connections between each of the three writers and the group.\textsuperscript{24} If French Feminism figures Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva as sharing a critically Lacanian interest in the relationship between sexual difference and language, this interest is also shared by Psychépo. However, while this critical orientation is known in the U.S. as “French Feminism,” it is, in the work of Psychépo, known as post-feminism—a term the group used to mark their vehement rejection of feminism as reformist. This was, significantly, not a rejection of the attempt to change women’s status through legal reform but a condemnation of any theoretical framework not invested in sexual difference. In a conversation with U.S. feminist writer and activist Kate Millet, Antoinette Fouque, the founder and leader of Psychépo, and the most vocal spokesperson of its general views, asserted that feminism and women’s liberation are antithetical: “In a liberation movement’s struggle, one meets the enemy and the adversary. The adversary is not directly the enemy, but plays the game of the enemy. Revolution is war. Feminism is the adversary of the Women’s liberation movement, of any liberation movement, of any anti-imperialist movement.”\textsuperscript{25} In Fouque’s view, feminism “plays the game” of patriarchy rather than changing the game, meaning that it is reformist and therefore a part of the patriarchal system rather than a radical critique of it—a view she would espouse publicly

\textsuperscript{24} The only real mention of Psychépo in the U.S. literature on French Feminism is in Marks and Courtivron’s \textit{New French Feminisms}. See chapter 1 for a discussion of that reference.

\textsuperscript{25} Fouque and Millett, “Kate Millett, Antoinette Fouque, Rencontres…,” 14-15. Throughout the chapter, I represent Psychépo’s views through Fouque. The reasons for this are historical: Psychépo published very few statements, and the few available archival traces of the group’s position are ones articulated by Fouque.
until as little as a month before she died, in January 2014, when she called feminism a “voluntary servitude” to patriarchy.\textsuperscript{26} Not only considered complicit with patriarchy, feminism is further understood to be a “root of Patriarchy,” a structural part of patriarchy, vital to it, a contributor to its growth.\textsuperscript{27}

Patriarchy, according to Psychépo, is based on the denial of sexual difference and it is this denial, this foreclosure of difference, that is the root cause of women’s oppression. The project of women’s liberation should therefore be one of becoming woman, of realizing sexual difference. Feminism, in Psychépo’s terminology, designates any commitment to women’s liberation that maintains that difference is the source of oppression. This definition would include materialist feminists such as Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy or Colette Guillaumin who, in their work as scholars, and in the case of Wittig as a novelist as well, strongly oppose psychoanalysis and theories of sexual difference but advance their own analysis of the roots of women’s oppression and aim for a complete social, political, and economic revolution.\textsuperscript{28} The feminism rejected by Psychépo is not, then, the kind of feminism that would in the U.S. be called “liberal,” a term used to describe a feminism interested in legal reform. Indeed, as U.S. historian Claire Moses explains, “U.S. liberal feminism finds no counterpart within the French

\textsuperscript{26} Vandel, “Antoinette Fouque.”

\textsuperscript{27} “La Différence Internée,” 13.

To mark its distance from feminism, Psychépo adopted the term post-feminist:

We wanted to affirm that we are not feminist. Which meant, which means: feminism is not the arrival point of our revolution. We are neither ante, nor anti, but “post-feminist”: we work for heterosexuality, for the advent of the other. [...] Our enemy is not man but phallocracy, that is, the imperialism of the phallus. [...] And there are men who have begun to understand that feminism is mostly ‘up you get so I can take your place, in your phallocratic society without changing it.’ What we wanted, what we have done, is to transform our condition of excluded-interned in this world, not into emancipation (included-interned) but, through the “great leap outside,” into independence.

While Psychépo tries to distinguish post-feminism from antifeminism, for the group’s opponents, like Delphy, the distinction falls away. In rejecting feminism, Psychépo is for many simply anti-feminist. If, for Psychépo, feminism is mired in phallocracy, post-feminism is represented as an escape from phallic rule in so far as it brings about the other, woman. It does this not by bringing women into the phallic polis, as feminism is figured as doing, but by leaping beyond into a new space not governed by the phallic empire. This space outside of patriarchy is the space of sexual difference.

For Fouque, sexual difference is linked to libido. Against Lacan, and with Cixous and Irigaray, she believes that there are two libidos. The uterus, she claims, is not just a biological organ but also a psychical one and women are génitrices; they have the creative genius of giving birth. Women’s libido, which she calls libido creandi—a term evoking women’s biological capacity to procreate in order to indicate a broader ability to

---

29 Moses, “Made in America,” 247.

create—in contradistinction to the Lacanian phallic libido, has been foreclosed by patriarchy. This *libido creandi* entails a reconnection with the mother’s body, the recovery of a primary homosexual attachment to the mother. Since Fouque considers the Symbolic to be founded on matricide, the entry of the *libido creandi* into the Symbolic is for her coextensive with the advent of women as truly sexually different. As with Cixous and Irigaray writing is understood to be a primary means of women’s libido entering the Symbolic. Women’s writing has the potential to realize the *libido creandi* by, in Fouque’s words, “rearticulat[ing] procreation and sexuality in an elaboration of [women’s] genitality, in the time of the production of the living text.” This understanding of the *libido creandi* as linked to a “homosexuation to the mother” and a recovery of the connection with that body as allowing new forms of writing, is also reminiscent of Kristeva’s theory that in some avant-garde, experimental writing, a pre-Symbolic connection to the mother emerges, a trace of what she calls the semiotic *chora*. Psychépo distinguishes itself from Kristeva, however, and rejoins Cixous and Irigaray, by asserting that for true sexual difference to appear a symbolic revolution is needed. As one of Psychépo’s slogans attests: “Long live the symbolic revolution.”

In addition to sharing theoretical affinities, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva shared important practical connections with Psychépo. Of the three “French Feminists,” Cixous

31 For more on her concept of the homosexual attachment to the mother see the documentary about her: Bertucelli, *Antoinette Fouque, qu’est-ce qu’une femme?*.


was by far the one most closely associated with the group. Looking back on her first encounter with Antoinette Fouque, she writes:

Already 1975. That’s when she calls me on the phone. Antoinette Fouque. I had never heard such audacious talk so imperatively recall all banished words, so naturally weave analytic science with reading. In the hour, we talked myths, figures of women from all eternity, theaters of the percussions and survivals today just as yesterday. I was stupefied. I had never imagined that such a person could exist: a woman of thought fully engaged in action, making thought instantly pass onto a front, an incredible force of demystification. She asks for a text for des femmes, that instant I say yes.\(^{34}\)

Cixous and Fouque’s theoretical convergence is palpable in this excerpt, as is Cixous’ admiration for Fouque. Cixous explains that the meeting with Fouque was particularly welcome as until then she had felt rather alone in what she was doing, despite having had for that very reason created a doctoral program in Etudes féminines (Feminine Studies) in 1974. After this phone call Cixous gave Fouque Souffles to be published by Psychépo’s publishing company des femmes. However, she sent her next book to the Gallimard publishing house, not realizing that “one could belong to a movement.”\(^{35}\) After Fouque expressed hurt and confusion at Cixous’ decision to publish elsewhere, Cixous went on to publish about thirty works with des femmes until a falling out in 2008.\(^{36}\) Cixous also published a number of articles in Psychépo’s newspapers and journals. Although Cixous

\(^{34}\) Cixous, “Arriver,” 207.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) This fall out was mentioned to me in an interview with Cixous in October 2013, but the reasons for it were not given.
explained in 1976 that she did not agree with all of Psychépo’s positions and that this kept her “at a distance,” she was also explicitly “in a position of sympathy.”

Despite similarly important theoretical convergences between Psychépo and Irigaray’s understandings of patriarchy as having repressed sexual difference, Irigaray’s relationship with the group was much more fraught than Cixous’. In 1971 Fouque and others from Psychépo taught a course on psychoanalysis at Vincennes, the experimental university that Cixous helped found in the wake of May 1968. At the end of May 1970, Psychépo invited the intellectuals and psychoanalysts Marie-Claire Boons, Michèle Montrelay, Irigaray, and Kristeva to a meeting at the home of Marie-Claude Grumbach, Fouque’s life partner, in the hopes of interesting them in “the question of women.” Although each declined the subsequent proposal to work with Psychépo, Irigaray did invite Psychépo to Vincennes where she too was teaching. Irigaray became Fouque’s analyst, in addition to Lacan, and in 1974 taught a seminar on psychoanalysis that many Psychépo women attended. Although Fouque and Irigaray shared a fundamental understanding of the symbolic as being monosexual and a fervent desire to bring about real sexual difference, there was also a distinct limit to their shared vision. In Speculum of the Other Woman and This Sex Which is Not One, whose understandings of sexual difference are very close to those of Psychépo’s, Irigaray implicitly criticized the group:

37 Cixous, “Interview with Hélène Cixous,” 23. Cixous mentions that there are non-viable contradictions in Psychépo’s positions but says she doesn’t approach them with these because they are the product of trying to take one’s place in History and are thus inevitable in initial stages of struggle. She is also against marginalization, which she sees as inherent to Psychépo’s practice.
“As for me, I refuse to let myself be locked up in one ‘group’ of the women’s liberation movements. Especially if this group gets caught in the trap of exercising power, if it presumes to determine the ‘truth’ of the feminine, to legislate was it means ‘to be a woman,’ and to accuse women who might have immediate objectives different from its own.”

Irigaray saw Psychépo as perverting the promise of sexual difference by imposing a dogmatic vision of the feminine. Conversely, Irigaray’s seminar led to accusations by Psychépo that she was usurping women’s painful life stories for her own professional advancement. The violent falling out that ensued between Irigaray and Psychépo meant that des femmes never published any of Irigaray’s texts, despite their theoretical affinities.

While Psychépo was more closely associated with Cixous and Irigaray, its leadership was also in contact with Kristeva. Aside from attending a Psychépo meeting in April 1971, Kristeva was not involved in the women’s liberation movement, but her work on Chinese women converged with that of Psychépo and, in 1975, des femmes published About Chinese Women. In addition to sharing an interest in psychoanalysis and Maoism, both were extremely critical of feminism. In her interview with Psychépo, published that same year in the prestigious journal Tel Quel, Kristeva agreed with Psychépo’s suggestion that feminism serves the interest of capitalism, asserting that

---

38 Irigaray, Ce Sexe, 161.
40 Interview with Françoise Picq, Paris, October 2013.
“[f]eminism may constitute merely a demand for the most vigorous rationalization of capitalism.”

Seen from the U.S., the divergences I have noted—Cixous and Irigaray’s critiques of Psychépo, Kristeva’s more distant and brief interaction with Psychépo—may overshadow the connections I have just outlined. Seen from France, however, these theoretical, material, institutional, and historical links are extremely powerful and significant, forming the background for the assertion, in this section’s title, that in the United States, Psychépo’s post-feminism is known as “French Feminism:” “Là-bas, on appelle ça French feminism” (“Over there, they call it French feminism”). The first recorded assertion linking French Feminism with Psychépo, the phrase was pronounced at a January 1980 meeting of the women’s liberation movement in which women gathered to discuss Psychépo’s recent trademarking of the movement’s name.

3.3 Women’s Liberation Movement™

On November 30th 1979, to the great consternation of other groups and individuals of the movement, Psychépo trademarked the name “Women’s Liberation Movement.” Earlier that year, the group had created and officially registered a nonprofit organization named “Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF)”—“Women’s Liberation Movement” and its acronym, equivalent in English to “Women’s Lib.”

41 Kristeva, Julia Kristeva: Interviews, 101.

42 The creation of the non-profit organization was announced in Le Journal Officiel of October 30th 1979 and reported in the feminist newspaper Histoires d’Elles: “Mouvement
this new legal entity, it went on to trademark the name “Women’s Liberation Movement” and its abbreviation “MLF,” as well as the movement’s symbol, the Venus sign with the letters “M,” “L,” “F” printed above (Figure 1).\(^\text{43}\) This triggered a widespread reaction. Women who considered themselves to be a part of the women’s liberation movement but did not belong to Psychépo were vehemently opposed to the group’s legal actions and immediately condemned them. Three months later, in early 1980, one of the feminist journals born out of the movement published a petition signed by twenty-one groups and journals denouncing the founding of the non-profit organization and the trademarking of the name.\(^\text{44}\) This was soon followed by a series of publications, most notably a collection of essays prefaced by Simone de Beauvoir, critiquing Psychépo’s actions.\(^\text{45}\) While the de libération des femmes (MLF)” became an “association governed by the 1901 law, with juridical power” (association régie par la loi 1901, avec pouvoir juridique). See: “MLF,” 10. According to Picq, Fouque, Grumbach and Boissonas had already created a non-profit association named “Mouvement de libération des femmes-Psychanalyse et Politique” (Women’s Liberation Movement-Psychoanalysis and Politics) on September 5th 1979 but then evidently opted to remove the qualifier “Psychanalyse et Politique.” See: Picq, Libération des Femmes, 365.

\(^{43}\) See the announcement of the trademarked MLF in Cassandre, “1979: L’Odyssée d’une Marque,” 50. On the implications of the trademark, see also: “Aux Termes de La Réglementation des Associations 1901,” 829.

\(^{44}\) See: “Le Mouvement de Libération des Femmes Restera-t-il la Propriété Privée d’Un Groupe?.” The petition was also published in Questions Féministes 7, February 1980 but without the information about who had signed it. See also: Bernheim, Mouvement de Libération des Femmes.

\(^{45}\) Association Mouvement pour les Luttes Féministes, Chroniques d’une imposture, du mouvement de libération des femmes à une marque commerciale. The title translates as:
opposition to Psychépo arguably included everyone in the movement who was not a part of Psychépo, the materialist feminists were often the most vocal opponents of Psychépo’s actions. Psychépo had long been controversial, plagued by accusations that Fouque irresponsibly psychoanalyzed the group’s members to maintain authority over them, rumors of intolerance for dissent within the group, allegations that its publishing company _des femmes_ did not properly pay its authors, and concerns about the fact that the group’s deployment of multiple commercial enterprises was made possible by one woman’s very considerable inheritance. But the legal events of 1979 turned controversies based largely on reports from women who had defected from Psychépo into a legally grounded scandal. It also marked the definitive split between Psychépo and the rest of the movement.

The name “Women’s Liberation Movement” was coined in 1970, in the wake of the now famous demonstration at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26th 1970. Ten women, _Chronicles of an Imposture, from the women’s liberation movement to a commercial brand._

46 Sylvinna Boissonas, heiress to the Schlumberger oil fortune, has been of member of Psychépo since its early years. The group’s infamous reputation was officially sparked by a 1977 article published in the leftist newspaper _Libération_ in which Nadja Ringart, a former member of Psychépo, decried the group’s use of psychoanalysis, claiming that it led to a sect-like nature, and accused Psychépo of Stalinism in its political analysis, writing, and discussions. See: Ringart, “La Naissance d’Une Secte.”

47 The date is significant because the demonstration was in solidarity of women in the U.S. who were striking for women’s equality. The date had been chosen in honor of women gaining the right to vote in the U.S. on that same day in 1920.
including Delphy, Wittig, and the novelist Christiane Rochefort, laid a wreath at the base of the arch to commemorate the wife of the unknown solider buried there. They carried signs that read “Even more unknown than the unknown solder, his wife” ("Encore plus inconnu que le soldat inconnu, sa femme") and “half of mankind are women” ("un homme sur 2 est une femme") (Figures 3 and 4). The demonstration was interrupted by the police and the women were driven away in police cars, to their great pride.48 Reporting on the event, the press declared that the “woman’s liberation movement” had been born. Women refused the singular “woman,” but the pluralized term “women’s liberation movement” was subsequently adopted to designate the intellectual and activist work on women’s condition that had emerged in the aftermath of the student revolution of May 1968. The term was widely used and encompassed a large variety of groups, including Marxist and Maoist groups, neighborhood consciousness-raising groups, university working groups, radical feminist groups, and Psychépo. Women from all of these groups attended meetings and demonstrations organized in the name of the women’s liberation movement. “Women’s liberation movement” did not therefore represent a unified theoretical or political position but rather designated the collectivity of women working on behalf of women’s liberation. Despite important theoretical and political differences, the various participants in the movement frequently came together to work towards political change: dominant issues traversing the movement included fighting for free and legal abortion, denouncing violence against women, and re-

48 The women leaned out of the police cars, imitating police sirens to draw attention to their arrest. For a fuller account of this event, see: Picq, Libération des Femmes, 19-20.
articulating the relationship between women’s liberation and other leftist revolutionary projects. By the end of 1979, the movement had gained national recognition and achieved significant results. Most notable perhaps, were its collective efforts that lead to a five-year legalization of abortion in 1975 under the Loi Veil, a law that would be permanently renewed in 1979. By the time Psychépo trademarked the name in November 1979, the women’s liberation movement had about a decade of activism behind it and concrete political gains. The movement was, however, slowing down, setting the stage for the ensuing battle over its future.

According to Fouque, the movement was in “great danger” of being effaced by what she saw as its internal fracturing, the increasingly frequent abandonment of the word “liberation” in feminist rhetoric, the turning of “MLF” into a derogatory term, and the potential co-optation of the movement by the rising socialist party which would come to power in the 1981 election.49 It was, in short, in her opinion, in danger of disappearing because of its lack of cohesion, autonomy, and control over its representation—and was therefore in need of a drastic intervention. Fouque thus framed the creation of the non-profit organization and trademarking of the name “Women’s Liberation Movement” as an attempt to secure the movement’s uncertain future. Turning it into an independent, legal entity and controlling the right to its representation would give the movement “a minimum of anchoring, stability” which it so “urgent[ly]” needed.50 Doing so, however,


50 Ibid.
in the context of a movement that had as a whole prided itself on its unique structure and
independence from any kind of institution required some explanation, not least because
Psychépo had itself been very vocally opposed to institutionalization.51

Assuring detractors that the movement was neither an organization nor a party,
Fouque described it instead as “a form which we have invented; yes, the movement is the
specific form of the art of revolution, one that assures the failure of totalitarianism and
the politics of omnipotence.”52 The creation of the association loi 1901 was consistent
with this, Fouque argued, in so far as the association loi 1901 is the supplest legal status
existing in France. In fact, the historical origin of this legal status coincided with the
movement’s commitment to autonomy. The particular type of nonprofit that the MLF
became was developed in 1901 to guarantee individuals the right to free association, that
is, the right to associate without prior approval from the government. It was, in short,
created as a guarantee of political independence. Founding an association loi 1901 named
“Women’s Liberation Movement” was meant to legally and symbolically mark the
movement’s autonomy from any political party, especially the rising socialist party,
which Psychépo was afraid would co-opt the movement because Michel Rocard, a
prominent socialist politician had talked about “incorporating” women.53 The association

51 The suspicion of institutions was directly linked to the May 1968 revolution. For a
history of May 1968, see: Ross, May ’68. For examples of Psychépo’s resistance to
institutional formations, see the early years of their journal des femmes en mouvement.

52 Fouque, “Interview,” 53.

53 Ibid.
loï 1901 status also confers a certain number of rights, including the right to ownership, thereby enabling trademarking (the ability to commercially profit from a registered name and/or symbol), as well the right to control the trademarked entity’s representation. The owner of a trademark has a monopoly over its use. As the official representative of the registered entity, the owner is also able to sue for defamation or unlawful competition anyone who uses it in a derogatory way or in a way that might harm the owner’s commercial interests. Fouque argued that these particular aspects of the trademarked entity Mouvement de Libération des Femmes-MLF™ gave Psychépo the form of control over the representation of the movement required for it to survive. Many women of the movement, however, interpreted Psychépo’s attempt to save the movement through becoming its legal representative as a dangerous act of appropriation.

Those who opposed Psychépo’s action severely disagreed with the diagnosis the group used to justify its legal actions. Although the movement had slowed down by 1979, these participants in the women’s liberation movement did not understand it to be in the kind of crisis that Psychépo did. Rather, for these women, Psychépo’s trademarking of the name was the crisis that constituted a “grave danger for the future of the whole Women’s Liberation Movement.”54 For those who signed the petition against Psychépo’s trademarking of the name, controlled legal representation of the movement did not ensure its existence of but, on the contrary, precipitated its effective demise by perverting it

54 “MLF,” 10.
beyond recognition. Picq voices a widespread understanding of the movement and its relationship to representation:

Rebellious inheritor of May 1968, it’s a radically new type of movement which invented itself in the meeting of women without presuming to represent them and which refused to be represented by anyone. No one was to appropriate the collective name. The leaflets were signed “a few activists” or “activists of the MLF”; the articles were signed with first names or pseudonyms.55

For those who opposed Psychépo, one of the defining specificities of the movement was its amorphous, chaotic, anti-hierarchical character and its refusal to become a party or organization with a unified analysis of women’s oppression or singular path towards liberation—in short its refusal of representation, in the sense of legal representation or delegation. This was understood to be part of its revolutionary nature and strength. In becoming the official representative of the women’s liberation movement, Psychépo came to represent the movement in its entirety. This gesture was not perceived as stabilizing the movement for the future but rather as a self-serving attempt on Psychépo’s part to “appropriate all of [the movement’s] work, to claim all of its benefits, to become at once its present incarnation and its posthumous statue.”56 For the women who opposed Psychépo, the women’s liberation movement and legal representation were essentially incompatible.

The vehemence of the responses to Psychépo’s trademarking of the name was fueled by precedents, which gave Psychépo’s opponents cause to think that the

55 Picq, “MLF: Année Zero.”

trademarking was more than a symbolic gesture meant to create an official record of the movement. To those who were not part of Psychépo, the group’s legal actions appeared to be part of a systematic, orchestrated and malicious take-over. According to the original call for a collective response against the trademarking, Psychépo had already tried to appropriate the movement by calling its monthly general assemblies “General Assembly of the Women’s Lib” in 1972 and 1973, and by calling its commercial enterprises, which included a publishing house, bookstores and several serial publications, “des femmes” (“of women”)—both appellations suggesting that Psychépo belonged to and represented all women. In addition, Psychépo’s detractors claimed that the group presented itself everywhere and especially abroad as the women’s liberation movement rather than a group of the movement, by publishing tracts under the name “women’s liberation movement” and, finally, by its supporters attempts to head the October 6, 1979 march in favor of permanently legalizing abortion while holding up the letters “M,” “L,” “F” (Figure 2).57 Because of these previous actions and because Psychépo’s previous recourses to the judiciary system, the group’s now legal claim to represent the whole movement was seen as the apotheosis of a consistent attempt to become the sole representative of the movement and seemed likely to be, and indeed was, legally enforced.

Psychépo had already had successful recourse to litigation against its opponents in 1977. Following a dispute between Psychépo’s publishing company des femmes and one

57 The march was a demonstration in favor of making permanent the Loi Veil that had temporarily legalized abortion. See: “M.L.F.,” 3.
of its former employees, a large collective of approximately forty women produced a documentary denouncing the practices of des femmes. The 1976 film features the testimonies of five women who published with or otherwise worked with des femmes, all of whom claimed that they were not paid what they were due and that their calls and letters were never answered. The forty-nine-minute, black-and-white Il Ne Fait Pas Chaud (It’s Not Hot) begins with a short spoken-word performance by singer Brigitte Fontaine and ends with a testimony of her negative experience with des femmes. Between Fontaine’s appearances, the documentary consists of interviews with the aggrieved parties offering their own stories of how the publishing company wronged them. Des femmes sued the collective who produced the film for defamation, eventually winning the lawsuit in 1979 because of the plaintiffs’ lack of sufficient evidence proving they had been inadequately paid. Des femmes also won a case lodged against them by one of their former employees, Mireille Deckonninck, who testified in the film, for the same reasons. Combined with Psychépo’s considerable wealth and multiple commercial enterprises, these court cases cemented the group’s already considerable power. Psychépo

58 Il Ne Fait Pas Chaud. See also: Mouvement de libération des femmes, Génération MLF, 198 and 200.

59 The women who testified were, in order of appearance: Brigitte Fontaine, Monique Piton, Mireille Deconninck, Erin Pizzey, and Catherine Leguay.

60 des femmes en mouvements 12-13, 83.

61 The dispute between Mireille Deckonninck and Psychépo had also led to an occupation of the bookstore des femmes on October 12th 1976. See: Mouvement de libération des femmes, Génération MLF, 200 and Il Ne Fait Pas Chaud.
then also took legal action regarding the trademark “Women’s Liberation Movement”: that same year, in 1979, they sued the small French feminist publishing house Tierce for unlawful competition (*concurrence déloyale*) after it signed a text condemning the creation of the organization and trademarking of the name “Women’s Liberation Movement” along with eleven other publishing houses (none of the rest of them French).62 The creation of the non-profit organization and trademarking of the name, along with its legal enforcement, gave credence to the fear that Psychépo’s actions were more than a perfunctory attempt to create a judicial trace of the movement.

The conflict around Psychépo’s inscription of the women’s liberation movement into the legal system centered around two radically different understandings of whether or not the movement was compatible with legal representation. This divergence was politically and affectively significant because both sides shared the belief that the survival of the movement was directly tied to its representation. For Psychépo it was a matter of inscription into official historical records and controlled representation, while for its opponents it was a matter of eschewing univocal representation. Its widespread association between having a group stand in for the movement and appropriation that haunts French feminists rejection of French Feminism. In so far as French Feminism has three scholars associated with Psychépo representing feminism in France, it appears to many scholars to replicate what they perceive as Psychépo’s attempts to become the sole representative of the women’s liberation movement. The frequent assertion that French

62 Picq, “MLF: 1970, Année Zéro.” Picq also argued that the lawsuit was ludicrous in so far as Tierce was a small publishing house with little money and des femmes is a large and well-endowed publishing house.
Feminism is a misnomer because Psychépo and many of the writers associated with it denounced feminism can be interpreted as indexing a sense that French Feminism adds insult to injury by taking on the term “feminism” and thus potentially making invisible the work of those who claimed the term and opposed Psychépo on both a political and theoretical level.

3.4 Writing the History of the Women’s Liberation Movement

If the political issues of representation raised in the 1979 scandal were important enough to determine the reactions to French Feminism, they also inform a contemporary battle over the history of the movement. In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze the 2008 controversy over the dating of the movement to outline the legacy of the 1979 conflict and the fusion of political disagreements with theoretical ones that strengthened the opposition between sexual difference and materialist feminists.

In October 2008, the French media, following a brief from Psychépo, announced and celebrated the 40th anniversary of the women’s liberation movement. According to the newspapers, the movement was founded on October 1st 1968 by Antoinette Fouque and Monique Wittig, when a group of fifteen women, aged 17 to 33, met in Paris, in a small, empty studio on Rue Vaugirard lent by novelist Marguerite Duras. For others, however, including Wittig, Fouque’s dating of the movement to 1968 constituted yet another strategic appropriation of the movement. Participants in the movement who had previously opposed Psychépo’s trademarking of the name, such as Picq and Delphy,
responded with a series of articles in French newspapers contending that although decisive meetings happened between 1968 and 1970, and although the mutual awareness of several groups was determining, the movement’s beginning dates to 1970. These scholars and activists agreed that it is the first public appearances of the movement that mark its beginning. Thus Picq, a former member of Psychépo and the author of a history of the movement explained:

There were ten of them that August 26th 1970 offering a spray of flowers to the wife of the unknown soldier, even more unknown than the famous soldier under the Arc de Triomphe. It’s that day that journalists, copying the American “Women’s Lib,” talked for the first time of a movement which they baptized Woman’s liberation movement. [...] Hence the surprise at the announcement of a “birthday” that would date the founding of the MLF to 1968. If 1970 is generally considered the initial year of the movement it is because the first collective publication- a special issue of Partisans (May) was titled- in all historical innocence- “Women’s Liberation, Year 0.” It’s also that the year 1970 was rich in events and demonstrations.63

Rather than conceptualizing beginnings as tied to individual names, Picq collectivizes and de-privatizes the notion of beginning by thinking of it in terms of a critical confluence of groups and individuals. 1970 then dates the movement’s beginning because it marks a shift from women’s private meetings to a public social movement.64 Others rejected the concept of a social movement’s founding or creation. Caroline Fourest, a


64 For more on the reclaiming of 1970 as the date of the movement’s birth see the following newspaper articles: AFP, “40 Ans Après;” Des femmes du mouvement, “L’Héritage Féministe Détourné;” Nouvelobs.com, “Des Militantes Commémorent;” as well as Storti, “Le MLF, 40 Ans?”
younger feminist interested in the history of the movement wrote: “Let’s remember this simple truth: no one founded the Women’s liberation movement. One does not decree a social movement, especially one made up of such a multitude of currents and groups.” Fouque responded in an article in the French newspaper Libération to the critiques of her history of the movement by arguing that it is because the group she led with Wittig was the first independent, woman-only group that it can be considered to mark the beginning of the movement. Indeed, two of the movement’s defining characteristics are, everyone agrees, the separatist nature of its meetings and its independence from any other groups, parties or organizations. Arguably, Fouque’s invocation of Wittig as cofounder of the movement was intended to mitigate accusations of megalomaniac appropriation since Wittig’s theoretical stance was vehemently opposed to that of Fouque. However, those who opposed Psychépo, including Wittig herself, saw this as another one of Psychépo’s tactics to appropriate the movement. This controversy over the dating of the movement was important enough to resurface again just a few years ago around Fouque’s death, and with as much, if not more, vitriol, showcasing how alive the memory of the 1979 scandal still is.

On February 20th 2014, Fouque, by then easily the most controversial figure of the women’s liberation movement, passed away. According to her obituaries, Fouque fought tirelessly for women’s liberation. She co-founded the women’s liberation movement in


66 For Wittig’s response to Fouque’s narrative, see: Wittig, “Monique Wittig raconte….”
October 1968, created a publishing house and opened several bookstores dedicated to women’s writing, and eventually worked for women’s rights in national and international politics directly. Throughout, she is represented as a feminist theorist and pioneer, a historic figure of women’s liberation. The content and the form of this narrative, however, were immediately contested. Several newspapers articles by younger feminists who had not participated in the women’s liberation movement took up the task of explaining that Fouque did not cofound the women’s liberation movement but retrospectively declared herself the cofounder of the movement. Annette Lévy-Willard in particular argued that the focus on Fouque as the representative of the movement eclipses those who disagreed with her as well as the great many women who, collectively, succeeded in legalizing abortion, rendering rape a punishable crime, and initiating laws on equality. At stake in this recurring debate, then, was much more than dates. It was the very definition of the women’s liberation movement that was being disputed. For both Psychépo and its opponents, history was a primary terrain of struggle for women’s liberation movement. However, although both sides understood the writing of history as eminently political, they had very different diagnoses of what constituted patriarchal history and what constituted an anti-patriarchal, and therefore liberatory, form of history writing. Both sides accused each other’s history of being complicit with patriarchy, revealing the high stakes of these debates: women’s liberation.

67 See for example the obituary in Le Monde by Elisabeth Roudinesco.

68 See for example: Lévy-Willard, “Quand On Réécrit l’Histoire du Féminisme” and “Il Etait une Fois le Féminisme,” as well as Grosjean, “Antoinette Fouque.”
For Psychépo, the problem of women’s liberation was a historical one. Women, the group posited in 2008, have been absent, foreclosed from history. Thus, “the goal of the movement is to make [women] appear- as differentiated place” because “the move from the feminine condition to the historical condition of women, that is liberation.”  

The break from patriarchy, the historical end of phallic imperialism, was thus coextensive with the emergence of women into history. In order to inscribe women into history, however, “[o]ne would need to have the courage to deconstruct men’s history in order to write women’s.”  

The advent of women was a matter of history writing that required more than simply adding women’s names to existing history. It necessitated a different kind of historical writing. The development of women’s writing registering their *libido creandi* was thus the *sine qua non* of women’s emergence into history. Psychépo also understood such history writing as necessitating a break with genealogical logic, including any lineage with feminism:

The reliance on Simone de Beauvoir’s name is key for all evaluation of Franco-American feminism. The feminists of 1979 are today claiming to be of yesterday. Today as thirty years ago. In order to be fathered without danger: Simone de Beauvoir is past. She is thus a handy father for her ambitious sons. Because of the American need to justify oneself in the name of antecedents, as one can see in the American declaration of independence which is a series of “in the name of…,” the Americans have always been caught in a legitimizing fantasy: the right to justify oneself from a past. Feminists authorize themselves of their ancestors. […] We don’t want this chaperoning, this official paternalism.

---

69 *des femmes en mouvement* 2, 36 and Fouque “Qu’est-ce qu’une Femme?,” 24.

70 Fouque “Qu’est-ce qu’une Femme?,” (emphasis mine).
The only thing that feminism has gained in sixty years is the right to vote: this is not the path for us.\textsuperscript{71}

Amidst the rampant anti-Americanism common to most revolutionary leftist groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Fouque assimilated genealogical logic to patriarchal lineage and accused feminism of reproducing this patriarchal structure of legitimation.\textsuperscript{72}

Thus, for example, while Psychépo's publishing company \textit{des femmes} published a history of feminism, the group refused to figure in it.\textsuperscript{73} In Psychépo's post-feminist framework, feminist history was another permutation of patriarchal history. Fouque stressed that to date the movement to 1970, as those who opposed Psychépo did, was to deny its \textit{origins} and to thus be complicit with a patriarchal foreclosure of maternal creation:

from October 1968 to May 1970, the date of the public outing of the MLF at the University of Vincennes, there were two years of meetings and actions in Paris and the suburbs, trips in Europe, meetings. Memories, date books, meetings notes, flyers and photos attest to this. The women who lived through this time are some still here, living archives, actresses and writers of their own history, of which they offer testimonies in \textit{Génération MLF 1968-2008} […] By dating the movement to 1970] two years of life are effaced, two years of struggle eradicated, in order to make 1970 the “year zero.” Thus the recognition of the MLF by the media- its legitimizing by a society of the spectacle-, at the offering of the spray of flowers to the wife of the soldier at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26\textsuperscript{th} 1970 is thus substituted for its real birth. But to value the baptism over the birth comes down to depriving women of their creative power.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71}“Un Colloque Féministe,” 12.

\textsuperscript{72} For an overview of Psychépo’s anti-americanism, see Ezekiel, “Anti-féminisme et Anti-américanisme.”

\textsuperscript{73} The book published was: Albistur and Armogathe, \textit{Histoire du Féminisme Français}.

\textsuperscript{74} Fouque, “Droit de Réponse.”
In Fouque’s account (and despite Wittig’s protests) she and Wittig were the creative, maternal origin of the movement that must be acknowledged in order to restore to women their creative power and thereby enable women’s liberation. Beginning should be synonymous with origin. For Fouque, dating the movement to 1970 not only constituted a misrepresentation of history but it was also more seriously complicit with the matricide on which the Symbolic is based. The justification for dating the movement to 1968 was thus based on the commitment to disrupting the historical foreclosure of sexual difference. One could either write history in ways that reinforced the patriarchal erasure of sexual difference or write history in ways that would bring women’s sexual difference into view.

For Psychépo’s critics, however, it was precisely the rejection of feminist history that constituted patriarchal history. For these women, the recovery and writing of feminist history was a cornerstone of women’s liberation. Feminists from the movement deplored their own lack of knowledge of feminist history—evidenced by the 1970 slogan “Women’s Liberation: Year Zero”—as well as, according to Picq, the derogative “caricature of [feminists] in official history.” Delphy further argued that this lack of knowledge “delayed and handicapped the rebirth of a movement that had to reinvent

---

75 Picq, Libération des Femmes, 245. The dating of 1970 as the “year 0” of women’s liberation was made official by the publication in 1970 of a special issue of the journal Partisans entitled “Libération des Femmes, Année Zéro” (Women’s Liberation, Year Zero).
everything, including the idea that we have legitimate reasons to revolt.”

Feminists came to understand patriarchy as having buried past feminists’ struggles and appropriated for itself their gains, thereby minimizing and delegitimizing feminist struggle. Feminists therefore understood Psychépo’s post-feminism, its rejection of feminism, as being complicit with patriarchy rather than as constituting a radical break from it. According to Nadja Ringart, a former member of Psychépo, “Antoinette, in her haste to designate enemies, presented a superficial and caricatured image, an image imposed by men, of feminists in history.”

The feminism posited by Psychépo as the enemy was for these women a fantasmatic one, a “fully constructed straw man” in the words of the editorial collective of a 2008 special section of the feminist journal ProChoix on the origins of the movement, a univocal myth.

The participants in the movement and few younger feminists who opposed Psychépo thus claimed that the absolute break with feminism entailed by Psychépo’s narrative was in fact a reproduction of patriarchal history. The two opposite understandings of the politics of history underwrote the conflict over the dating of the movement. For those who oppose Psychépo, dating the movement to 1968 was to privatize the movement and attribute founders to it. It, therefore, also threatened to erase other women’s claims to the history of the movement, particularly feminist claims to the movement, thus reproducing patriarchal history.

76 Delphy, “Nouvelles du MLF,” 792. This realization led some of the movement’s earliest publications, Le Torchon Brûlé in particular, to discuss the history of feminism.


I have shown that Psychépo’s critically Lacanian interest in sexual difference led the group to elaborate a post-feminist theory of history. Psychépo’s goal was to bring sexual difference into being by writing history in a way that would acknowledge women’s creative powers, their libido creandi. The group practiced this form of history in its own writing of the women’s liberation movement’s history. However, this history of the movement was, and indeed continues to be, severely contested. While Psychépo understood its history to be a post-feminist political practice, the rest of the women’s liberation movement understood this history to be an extension of Psychépo’s 1979 trademarking of the movement, that is an extension of the group’s effort to appropriate the movement and become its sole representative. Aside from Picq, those who opposed Psychépo’s actions on a theoretical level, materialist feminists, were also the most vocal opponents of Psychépo’s political actions. They considered Psychépo’s representation of the movement to be particularly dangerous because of the theory behind it. The political conflicts over the representation of the movement and theoretical disagreements thus fueled each other to the point that the two became fused. The U.S. invention of French Feminism further reinforced the intractability between materialist feminists and sexual difference by recapitulating and extending pre-existing conflicts, and continues to inform present debates.
Marque française

*Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*

Marque française non en vigueur

**Marque** : MLF MOUVEMENT DE LIBERATION DES FEMMES

**Classification des éléments figuratifs** : 02.09.14; 24.17.15; 26.01.03

**Classification de Nice** : 9 ; 16 ; 41 ; 42

**Produits et services**

Livres, revues, périodiques, imprimés, affiches, papeterie, caractères d'imprimerie, photographies, clichés, films, enregistrements magnétiques et photographiques, édition, abonnement, prêt, distribution, diffusion de livres et de tout imprimé, production, location, distribution de films, d'enregistrements magnétiques et phonographiques, d'appareils de cinéma et accessoires divertissement, spectacle, éducation, imprimerie.

**Déposant** : Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, (Association-1901), 12, rue de la Chaise, 75007 PARIS., FR

**Numéro** : 15147

**Statut** : Marque enregistrée

**Date de dépôt / Enregistrement** : 1979-11-30

**Lieu de dépôt** : INPI PARIS

**Inscription** : 1.Transmission de propriété no 47021 (BOPI 1982-25)

Figure 1: Trademark registration, now expired. Source: INPI.
Figure 2: Women from Psychépo try to take the lead of the march while holding the letters "M," "L," "F," at the October 6th 1979 demonstration to preserve the Loi Veil. Photograph: Catherine Deudon.
Figure 3: Demonstration at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26th 1970. Carrying the wreath: Christine Delphy. Carrying the banner to the right: Monique Wittig. Photographer unknown.
Figure 4: Police stops the demonstration at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26th 1970. To the left of the police officer: Monique Wittig. Photograph: Catherine Deudon.
4. “Vous avez dit queer?:” Queer Theory after French Feminism

The first two chapters of this dissertation analyzed the U.S. academic feminist construction of and interest in French Feminism. I argued that, despite French Feminism’s reputation for being biologically essentialist and falsely universal, the scholars who took it up did so precisely because they understood it to offer a way out of the essentialist and universalizing paradigms of U.S. feminist literary criticism. These U.S. feminist literary critics either hailed French Feminism for successfully separating the linguistic inscription of gender from the sex of the author and thus freeing feminist literary criticism from the essentialist specter of biology, or praised it for focusing on the ways in which the body is always already mediated by language and thus offering an approach to the body that was not biologically essentialist. Others still, concerned with both movement and academic feminism’s failure to address differences among women, particularly racial differences, argued that, by rethinking the subject/object binary structuring Western subjectivity and interpersonal relations, French Feminism opened up new ways of thinking about difference that would allow feminism to better address differences among women. Having argued in Chapters 1 and 2 that the appeal of French Feminism for U.S. academic feminists was due in part to its perceived ability to address some of the most pressing issues of feminist politics, I turned, in Chapter 3, to the reactions of feminists in France to Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva’s transatlantic success.

---

1 Picq, “Vous avez dit queer?:” The quote translates to: “You said queer?”
In the U.S., French Feminism’s hegemony was coextensive with vigorous debates about its ability to adequately address the issues its proponents claimed it to resolve. This led it to ultimately fall out of favor with the majority of U.S. academic feminists, such that French Feminism is now largely considered to refer to a distinctly passé moment of U.S. feminist literary criticism. In France, however, the very existence, let alone influence of French Feminism, was met with incredulity, anger, and dismay from the beginning of its emergence in the late 1970s. I argued that French feminists’ reaction to the U.S. construction of French Feminism was linked to the history of the French women’s liberation movement. In particular, I focused on the moment when Psychépo, a group with which Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva were all associated at some point and which shared their commitment to sexual difference, trademarked the name “Women’s Liberation Movement.” It was at this juncture, I suggested, that what had been a heated debate between materialist feminists and sexual difference feminists turned into an entrenched, and largely intractable, opposition between the two. Arguably the predominant form of feminism in France today, materialist feminism continues to be animated by an absolute suspicion and rejection of any work that is even remotely reminiscent of Psychépo.

In this final chapter, I consider the ways in which the success of French Feminism in the U.S. helped generate one of the canonical texts of queer theory, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, and contend that this indebtedness has significantly shaped the reception of U.S. queer theory by French materialist feminists. Several French feminist scholars have recently attributed the resistance of feminists in France to “la théorie du genre”
(“gender theory”) to the legacy of the debates surrounding French Feminism and Psychépo. Theorist Cornelia Möser, for example, contends that in “la théorie du genre,” a phrase usually used to refer to “postmodern approaches to gender,” “many feminists in France s[ee] themselves confronted with the category of French Feminism” as well as Psychépo, in so far as the debates are “heavily marked” by an analogy between “postmodern feminism,” and “difference feminism, a.k.a. Psychanalyse et Politique.”

This chapter extends this argument to the feminist rejection of queer theory. I map the conversations that explicitly engage with queer theory and note the importance of Gender Trouble to them. While “la théorie du genre” and “queer theory” are often used synonymously in France and converge in the work of Butler, particularly Gender Trouble, I understand the two to be distinct. Most significantly, I suggest that conversations about “la théorie du genre” and queer theory mobilize different archives and are structured by discrete, though at times intersecting, sets of issues.³ By attributing French materialist feminists’ refusal to seriously engage with queer theory to the history

2 Möser, Féminismes en Traductions, 189-190. Postmodern feminism and difference feminism are explicitly linked by Françoise Picq, who speculates that “if postmodern feminism, while not absent in France, does not much interest feminists, it is perhaps because the postmodern philosophers are too easily assimilated to the difference strand of the M.L.F” (Quoted in Möser, Féminismes en Traductions, 190). On the link between the feminist debates over gender and French Feminism and Psychépo, see also: Kraus, “Anglo-American Feminism Made in France,” and Galster, “Chemins du Féminisme.”

³ One might think of “théorie du genre” and “queer theory” in France as forming a Venn diagram with Gender Trouble representing the overlap between the two circles. Unlike existing work on the reception of Gender Trouble that has placed it in the context of “la théorie du genre” while at times conflating the latter with queer theory, I study the “queer theory” circle.
of the women’s liberation movement and its perceived recapitulation in the construction of French Feminism, this chapter implicitly argues that the transnational circulation of ideas is simultaneously generative and disabling. The U.S. invention of French Feminism has both contributed to the emergence of U.S. queer theory and impeded its uptake in France.

The chapter is structured in three parts. In the first, I situate my focus on the feminist reception of *Gender Trouble*. I show that Judith Butler’s work, especially *Gender Trouble*, has in France largely become synonymous with queer theory. The book, however, has encountered substantial resistance from feminist scholars in France in general, and from materialist feminists in particular who repeatedly dismiss queer theory in conference presentations and journal articles. Christine Delphy’s critique of queer theory serves as a powerful case study, demonstrating that French materialist feminists’ rejection of queer theory echoes their rejection of French Feminism and is predicated on an understanding of queer theory as focusing on discursive and symbolic elements at the expense of the material. In other words, I argue that materialist feminists’ often “caricatured” depiction of queer theory, their refusal to seriously engage with the body of work, and, in many cases, their outright rejection of it, is one of the ongoing effects of the violent splitting of the women’s liberation movement that took place in 1979 when Psychépo trademarked the name Women’s Liberation Movement. In the last few years, a handful of feminist scholars in France have not only noted but actively begun working to undo the perceived opposition between materialist feminism and queer theory. French

---

4 Noyé, “Féminisme Matérialiste et Queer.”
feminist critics such as Elsa Dorlin and Sophie Noyé have suggested adopting a genealogical approach that would show the materialist feminist influence on queer theory. Dorlin, in particular, advocates (re)placing Wittig as a major source of influence on *Gender Trouble*. The second and third parts of this chapter put forward a comparative reading of Wittig and Butler that emphasizes the different strategies they develop to counter the heterosexual production of the categories of sex: while Butler draws on Wittig’s analysis of the heterosexual regime, she rejects Wittig’s turn to lesbianism and instead promotes parody as a means of subversion. Many Wittig scholars have in turn accused Butler of misreading Wittig and attributed what they perceive as her erroneous interpretation and consequent turn to parody to a lack of engagement with Wittig’s materialist framework. I argue that, given the landscape of feminism in France, it will take more than adding Wittig as a source of influence on *Gender Trouble* to wrench the latter from the accusations of anti-materialism to which it has given rise. This chapter is thus both a contribution to understanding the relative absence of queer theory in France, and to recent efforts to recast the opposition between materialist feminism and queer

---

5 Hemmings makes a similar suggestion in order to counter the U.S. positioning of Foucault as the main, often exclusive, influence on *Gender Trouble*. As I discussed in the Introduction, according to Hemmings, such a narrative works to equate queer theory with male poststructuralism and feminist theory with materialism. At its extreme, feminism is reduced to heteronormative materialism while queer theory is cast as a poststructuralist reduction of sexuality to culture. While French efforts to undo the opposition between materialist feminism and queer theory bear important connections to Hemmings’ *Why Stories Matter*, I focus here on French scholars’ work as part of my analysis of the specificity of the opposition between materialist feminism and queer theory in France. For more on Hemmings’ positioning of Wittig as an important influence on *Gender Trouble*, see chapter 5, “Citation Tactics,” of *Why Stories Matter*. 

134
theory. While the French opposition between materialist feminism and queer theory is mirrored in part in the U.S. debates over French Feminism, the history of the women’s liberation movement adds a distinct and affectively charged challenge to overcoming the seeming intractability between materialist feminism and queer theory in France.

4.1 “Trouble dans la réception”

As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the emergence of queer theory in France is often dated to the mid-1990s: in 1996, Marie-Hélène Bourcier, now considered an “eminent representative of queer theory in France,” founded Le Zoo, the first queer group in France; in 1997 the Centre Pompidou held the “Gay and Lesbian Studies” conference organized by Didier Eribon which saw the presence of Bersani and Sedgwick among others; and in 1998 Le Zoo began offering queer seminars in both university (Sorbonne) and community settings (Gay and Lesbian Center of Paris). While the work of Butler, Sedgwick, Gayle Rubin, Teresa de Lauretis, and Lee Edelman was not translated until the 2000s, and mostly not until the second half of the 2000s, this did not prevent thinkers in France from working with and thinking through some of the seminal texts of U.S. queer theory. Bourcier remarks that Gender Trouble, for example,


7 Machart, “Les Mariés de l’An II.”
has “enjoyed a politically efficacious oral circulation in France since 1996.” If the lack of translations does not equate to a wholesale absence of queer theory in that pivotal decade, the number and timing of the translations nonetheless speak to the status, or rather lack of status, of queer theory in French academia at large. The fifteen years separating the U.S. publication and French translation of *Gender Trouble* (*Trouble Dans Le Genre*) especially gesture to queer theory’s lack of traction in France when one considers how quickly the book was translated into other languages. While the French translation dates to 2005, the German translation, for example, appeared as early as 1991. A decade after the translation of *Gender Trouble*, queer theory remains marginal to French intellectual production and is often met with incomprehension or outright rejection.

Although in the U.S. *Gender Trouble* remains an important reference for queer theory in so far as it is retrospectively considered to mark the emergence of a distinctly queer critical orientation, the arguments over language and identity at its heart have been absorbed into queer theory before giving way to other emphases, such as affect and new materialism. In France, however, not only is *Gender Trouble* the main representative of U.S. queer theory, it also remains the *texte de référence* for any conversation about queer theory. Despite occasional references to Sedgwick, Rubin, de Lauretis, Bersani, or the untranslated Michael Warner, it is Butler whose name is consistently, and often

---

8 Bourcier, “Cultural Translation,” 94.

9 Ingrid Galster notes “a massive refusal to become acquainted with […] queer theory” (Galster, “Chemins du Féminisme,” 251).
exclusively, associated with queer theory. A survey, from 1990 to the present, of Le Monde and Libération, two of France’s most reputable and widely circulated newspapers also known for being generally left leaning and fairly intellectual in their orientation, shows that when the word “queer” appears it is almost always associated with Judith Butler, who is at times referred to as “the muse of queer theory” or even “the worldwide muse of the queer movement.” One also finds several mentions of “Judith Butler’s queer theory” (“la théorie queer de Judith Butler”). This latter expression might signify “queer theory according to Judith Butler,” or “the kind of queer theory practiced by Judith Butler.” However, the possessive also captures the prevalent idea in the French imaginary that queer theory was invented by and properly belongs to Judith Butler.

The conflation of queer theory with Butler is not only a product of the French media. French academics themselves, including scholars of gender and sexuality, have frequently made the two synonymous. While scholars are more likely to address other theorists as well and thus avoid reducing queer theory to Butler exclusively, they almost never fail to mention Butler and, more significantly, engage with Gender Trouble more substantially than with any other text. In an article on the cultural translation of queer theory between the U.S. and France, Bourcier outlines what “French queers” did with Gender Trouble and why Undoing Gender is less helpful than the earlier work to the

---

10 The other name regularly associated with queer theory is that of Paul B. Préciado, a Spanish philosopher with strong ties to French academic and intellectual circles.

11 Birnbaum, “Nouveau Nationalisme” and “Discorde des genres.”

needs of contemporary French queer politics. Dorlin, another major proponent of queer theory in France, acknowledges that “Butler is sort of considered the pope of all things queer” and, in an interview about queer theory, explains the latter through an overview of *Gender Trouble*. However, while a few scholars interested in queer theory have mined *Gender Trouble* for its usefulness to a specifically French context, the book has engendered more fierce rejections and dismissals than serious engagement, whether critical or approbatory.

While *Gender Trouble* started circulating in France as early as 1996, it is 2005, the year of *Gender Trouble*’s translation into French, that marks the official moment of the French reception of Butler’s thought. In 2005, the Ecole Normale Supérieur (ENS), one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in France, organized a day-long colloquium around the translation of *Gender Trouble*. While the French publication of *Gender Trouble* was first published in the U.S. in 2004 and translated into French a year after *Gender Trouble*, in 2006 (*Défaire le Genre*).

This is a point made by Jérôme Vidal, the founding editor of Editions Amsterdam, one of the most important publishing houses in the French translation of U.S. queer theory. See: Vidal, “Trouble dans la Réception.” A handful of scholars have also speculated as to why *Gender Trouble* was not translated earlier. They attribute the fifteen year gap between the U.S. and French publication of the book to an overall timid politics of translation of U.S. works of gender and sexuality studies, as well as to Butler’s association with French Theory at a time when the French largely reject “la pensée soixante-huit” (“1968 thought,” that is, the kind of thinking associated with the May 1968 revolution). Fassin also argues that by 2005, a certain kind of gender trouble had arisen in France, particularly in relation to the legalization of same-sex civil unions (PACS), making *Gender Trouble* relevant to French issues. See: Vidal, “Trouble dans la Réception,” Jami, “Judith Butler,” and Fassin “Résistance et Réception.”
did not go unmarked, it was not of particular interest to feminist scholars. The conference was attended by famous philosophers and intellectuals, but not by scholars famous for their contributions to feminism, and began with a long debate about whether or not Butler is Lacanian.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, the translation of \textit{Gender Trouble} itself happened at the impetus of a group of French philosophers rather than feminist scholars.\textsuperscript{17}

After an initial lack of interest in \textit{Gender Trouble}, French feminists scholars quickly began resisting the book. In debates over “gender theory,” one of the main feminist criticisms of \textit{Gender Trouble} has been that, by arguing that sex is always already gender, it debiologizes the body and, in so doing, risks making “women” disappear as political subjects.\textsuperscript{18} The other main criticism directed at \textit{Gender Trouble} and queer theory more generally in France—as well as in the U.S.—has been that it is not materialist. The most noteworthy French example of this kind of materialist feminist critique of queer theory has come from Christine Delphy, arguably one of the most influential feminist thinkers in France of the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, who continues to be a major figure of feminism in France. Delphy’s strong adverse reaction to queer theory is of particular interest because of the important convergences that also exist between her work and that of Butler. Not only does Delphy agree with Butler that it is gender that makes sex legible and authoritative, she also formulated a similar thesis in her 1991 article

\textsuperscript{16} See: Jami, “Judith Butler.”
\textsuperscript{17} Jami, “Judith Butler,” and Möser, \textit{Féminismes en Traductions}, 215.
\textsuperscript{18} Picq, for example, rhetorically asks: “This fashionable theory: queer” “does it not, by making ‘women’ as a group disappear, risk burying feminism as a political project?” See: Picq, “Vous avez-dit \textit{queer}?,” 5.
“Penser le Genre.” Delphy herself has even acknowledged that materialist feminism and queer theory share a denaturalization of sex, in so far that they do not take biological sex to be the foundation on which gender is then built, but rather the reverse—an important commonality that sets them off against most other forms of feminism in France. On what grounds then does Delphy reject queer theory?

While Delphy has yet to publish a critique of queer theory, she frequently stages an opposition to this body of work in conference presentations, debates, and interviews. Her argument in favor of the superiority of materialist feminism is particularly clear in a 2012 talk she gave at the University of Lausanne. In it, Delphy argues that despite a seeming similarity, materialist feminism and queer theory are opposed on many points. She argues that materialist feminism and queer theory have different political goals and strategies: materialist feminism aims to destroy gender through collective action and social movements whereas queer theory aims to multiply rather than abolish gender through individual acts of transgression. She also argues that materialist feminism and queer theory have different understandings of sexuality. Whereas for materialist feminism heterosexual obligation is one of the realms which makes possible women’s economic

19 Delphy, “Penser le Genre.”

20 Delphy, “Genre et Race.” She argues that materialist feminism is better suited to addressing race than queer theory. Delphy has strong ties to Lausanne since it is the editorial seat of Nouvelles Questions Féministes (NQF), the journal she co-edits and which she founded in 1981 after a violent split among the editorial collective of Question Féministes (QF) over the question of lesbianism (a point which I address below) and consequent ending of the journal. Her naming of NQF provoked the ire of former members of QF because all editorial members of QF has previously agreed not to use the name “Questions Féministes” in future endeavors.
appropriation by men, for queer theory, according to Delphy, sexuality is the only realm in which gender-based oppression is exercised, and heterosexual obligation is the end all and be all of gender-based oppression. In Delphy’s analysis, queer theory understands the ultimate goal of women’s oppression to be to ensure heterosexual obligation. Delphy thus faults queer theory for failing to take into account the link between sexuality and other social realms, such as the economy. According to her, this elision amounts to naturalizing sexuality. Thus while both materialist feminism and queer theory appear to be constructivist in the sense that they both understand sex to be socially constructed, queer theory for Delphy is not constructivist enough.

These are the same types of critiques as the ones leveled at Psychépo and French Feminism outlined in the previous chapter. In “The Invention of French Feminism: An Essentialist Move,” Delphy argued that “[i]f there is something that is the most

21 In this regard, Delphy’s rejection of queer theory is reminiscent of the split amongst the QF collective. While Wittig argued that women’s oppression was the effect of the regime of heterosexuality, Delphy and others rejected the primacy accorded to sexuality, mainly on the grounds that it broke solidarity with heterosexual women. However, in so far as Wittig’s analysis remained explicitly concerned with the economic appropriation of women, the main force of Delphy’s critique of queer theory—that it fails to take the economy into consideration and therefore naturalizes sexuality—is specific to that body of work.

22 In the question and answer period after Delphy’s talk, several members of the audience challenged the oppositional relation between queer theory and materialist feminism that structured Delphy’s presentation. These scholars suggested that queer theory and materialist feminism are not necessarily opposed or incompatible as she claims them to be, a point to which I return below (the scholars were not identifiable as they were not filmed and their names not stated). Delphy was also accused of making queer theory into a straw man, misrepresenting it in a way that was reductive and insulting, and was challenged on her conception of queer theory as naturalizing gender and sexuality.
particularly American in French Feminism, it must be the belief that presumes, even when it does not say so, the existence of a primal individual, and reduces social construction to ‘social conditioning’ or ‘socialization.’”

According to Delphy, Butler believes that one “can opt out of gender on an individual basis,” which presupposes “an individual—or universal—nature, one that somehow pre-exists ‘social conditioning;’” the belief that “individual volition” that might undo gendered subjectivity amounts to a kid of “philosophical ‘idealism.’” Butler thus fails to “assume […] a truly social constructionist view.” What is still lacking, for Delphy, is a notion that human arrangements are “both social—arbitrary—and material: external to the action of any given individual.”

Delphy goes on:

It is difficult not to link this defect in social constructionist thinking in the United States to the way in which the only contesting of essentialism comes from women who are steeped in “French Theory.” French Feminists and French Feminism are being “reprocessed” as “postmodern,” and even though some, such as Linda Nicholson, point out the incompatibility between the essentialism of classic French Feminism and the structuralism of “poststructuralism,” the two are inextricably connected in the dozens of titles and mind-blowing new appellations that seem to crop up every day.

Inasmuch as one can make sense of the frenzy of incessant renaming that has seized Anglo-American academe, it appears that the heady mixture of Foucault and Derrida has given rise to something called “theory of discourse” or “deconstructionism.” In this theory every-thing is a text, and the old contest between “reality” and discourse has been done away with: better, it has been won by discourse, of which “the text” is the best incarnation. All other things—such as social practices, institutions, belief systems, and subjectivities—are only bad approximations of the text.

\[23\] Delphy, “Invention of French Feminism,” 204 and 205.

\[24\] Ibid., 205

\[25\] Ibid.
Thus what seems to have happened is that as soon as it was rediscovered and used against essentialism, social constructionism was watered down: it was conceptualized as constructionism without the power of society behind it; or, the power of society was reduced to that of an always interpretable and, moreover, multiple “discourse.”

While the argument is here addressed to Butler’s theory of gender in *Gender Trouble*, one sees the same logic extended to sexuality in queer theory. By pointing out the convergence between critiques leveled at queer theory on the one hand and Psychépo and French Feminism on the other, I am suggesting that materialist feminists’ lack of serious engagement with queer theory is predicated on and shows the ongoing effects of the unresolved history of the women’s liberation movement.

Delphy’s critiques are exemplary of the general reaction to queer theory amongst materialist feminists. In 1993, Eléni Varikas, for example, argued that queer theory gets rid of the materiality and historicity of relations of force and domination. She also criticized queer theory for focusing on acts of language and subversion, as strategies of emancipation. A year later, in 1994, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, an active participant in the women’s liberation movement and one of the materialist feminists associated, like Delphy, with the journal *Questions Féministes*, similarly argued that “to believe, like the queer movement, that one could create an egalitarian eroticism by ‘displacing’ categories of though without attacking their roots is inconsequential: illogical and risks recuperation.” More recently, in 2014, Noyé has explained that in France many

---

26 Ibid., 205-06.
27 Varikas, “Choses Importantes.”
28 Mathieu, “Dérive du Genre,” 300.
materialist feminists consider queer theory to take place in a postmodern and poststructuralist paradigm and, in so doing, position it in direct opposition to materialist thought:

These materialist feminists denounce the idealist, relativist, individualist, possibly naturalizing politics of queerness; they reproach them for their inability to image collective strategies of resistance, their refusal to aim for the reverse of the system of gender and more generally of systems of domination.²⁹

While Noyé does not endorse this reading of queer theory—indeed, as I expand upon below, she aims to loosen the opposition between materialist feminism and queer theory—the quote powerfully summarizes the various accusations made by materialist feminists against queer theory.³⁰

A handful of scholars in France have recently noted that the opposition between materialist feminism and queer theory has prevented any real dialogue and put forth suggestions on how to move beyond such a deadlock.³¹ Noyé, a graduate student in political theory at Sciences Po, an elite public institution of higher education with a focus on research, suggests that it would be possible to rethink the opposition by showing points of convergence in order to think of possible points of alliance between materialist feminism and queer theory. She outlines two useful approaches for doing so: a

²⁹ Noyé, “Féminisme Matérialiste et Queer.”

³⁰ For another example of the materialist feminist rejection of queer theory see: Barthélémy et al., “Le Tournant Postmoderne.”

genealogical one that would “retrace the complexity of each current and thus nuance the sometimes fixed and caricatured perception we have of them today” and a focus on recent work that has explicitly tried to bring materialist feminism and queer theory together. While Noyé develops the latter by studying queer critiques of neoliberalism, feminist philosopher Dorlin gestures to the former. Wishing to counter the reductive perception of queer theory as derealizing domination and being only about language, Dorlin points out that the analysis of sexuality that Butler borrows from Wittig comes out of materialist feminism. As the editors of a special issue of Agone have pointed out, however, Dorlin does not focus on Butler’s reading of Wittig, only the fact that she reads her. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline Wittig and Butler’s different strategies for countering the oppressive regime of heterosexuality because this difference goes to the heart of French materialist feminists’ rejection of Gender Trouble and must, therefore, be taken into account when considering strategies for reconciling materialist feminism and queer theory. Indeed, Butler rejects Wittig’s aim to destroy the heterosexual categories of sex through lesbianism, preferring instead to subvert the categories through parody. Wittig scholars, in turn, have accused Butler of misreading Wittig by failing to take into account her materialist feminist framework. Given that the materialist feminist framework so important to the history and theoretical project of feminism in France in general, and to Wittig’s work in particular, is so little known to

32 Noyé, “Féminisme Matérialiste et Queer.”


34 Barthélémy et al., “Le Tournant Postmoderne.”
U.S. academic feminists who associate feminism in France primarily with French Feminism, in what follows, I explain Wittig’s framework at some length. I focus in particular on her definition of heterosexuality as a political regime distinct from erotic desire since it is this distinction which Wittig scholars accuse Butler of misunderstanding.

### 4.2 Lesbian Desire vs. the Regime of Heterosexuality

In her preface to *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Wittig cites Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Christine Delphy, Collette Guillaumin, Paola Tabet and Sande Zeig as “the most important political influences” on her theoretical writing since the mid 1970s.\(^{35}\) With the exception of Zeig, these thinkers form the core of the French materialist feminist group associated with the journal *Questions Féministes*, founded in 1977. Wittig’s understanding of sexuality must thus be considered in the broader context of French materialist feminism. Coming out of a Marxist and socialist tradition and heavily influenced by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex (Le Deuxième Sex, 1949; U.S. translation 1952)*, French materialist feminists leveraged an analysis of capital and labor with a radical denaturalizing of the category of sex. Their fundamental commitment was to the unveiling of the ideological and material institutions embedded in labor/capital systems of oppression that create the categories of sex.

\(^{35}\) Wittig, *Straight Mind*, xiv.
The French materialist feminists extend traditional dialectical materialism by including in it the previously excluded class of sex. Delphy, who is credited in France with having coined the term “materialist feminism” in her 1975 article “For A Materialist Feminism” (“Pour un Féminisme Matérialiste; U.S. translation 1981) states in that same article that what she and the other French materialist feminists derive from Marx is a historical analysis of oppression. The French materialist feminists, however, do much more than simply apply a Marxist analysis of class to sex: the knowledge of women’s oppression is not only “an expression of materialism” but also an extension of “a materialist point of view to something materialism has ignored, i.e. the oppression of women” which constitutes “a renewal” of materialism.36 As Wittig puts it, classical dialectics, or dialectics as understood by contemporary Marxists at the time, “does not allow one to conceive of the opposition of men and women in terms of class conflict.”37 It is, therefore, up to feminists to appropriate the concepts of materialism and to redefine them, leading to both a transformation of the foundational concepts of dialectical materialism and to profound epistemological consequences.

The materialist focus on sex and the feminist rewriting of materialism transformed not only the concept of sex but also recast the meaning of the traditional Marxist concepts of class, capital, labor, and the material. Delphy, for example, “changed the Marxist concept of class” by “showing it to be obsolete since it does not take into

36 Delphy, “Materialist Feminism,” 60.

37 Wittig, Straight Mind, xiii.
account the kind of work that has no exchange value,” such as certain sexual and reproductive labor. As British sociologists Lisa Adkins and Diana Leonard point out, these new definitions of traditional materialist terms “recast the meaning of the ‘economic’” by extending economic causality and its analysis to spheres that had been thought to be beyond history. The “economic” was now revealed to be organized “through the contradictions, the exploitative relations which exist, between the social groups ‘men’ and ‘women.’” The French materialist feminists thus showed that what is considered labor or the material is subject to change, a point to which I return at the end of this chapter.

Materialist feminism furthered its epistemological revolution by denaturalizing accepted teleology: as Wittig states it, “A materialist feminist approach shows that what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact the mark imposed by the

__________________________

38 Adkins and Leonard, Sex in Question, 14.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 For more on this point, see: Ibid., 13-15. It should be noted here that the Questions Féministes position was controversial in contemporary Anglophone materialist feminisms, such as that of Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh. Barrett understood the constitution of gender “largely in terms of ideology” and “dismissed any form of materialism that attempted to understand gender in terms of determinants which had not been specified by Marxism;” leading her and McIntosh to critique and, ultimately, dismiss Delphy’s analysis and French materialist feminism more generally. This helps to explain the relative absence of French materialist feminist accounts and theories in Anglophone materialist feminism. For a gloss of the debate between Barrett and McIntosh and Delphy around materialism’s ability to account for gender and the very way in which materialism was being thought, see Leonard and Adkins, Sex In Question.
Categories of sex are not grounded in nature or biology but constituted through socio-historical economic relations: “there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses.” If sex is not grounded in nature, the illusion of “an ‘already there’ of the sexes” has to be produced. Guillaumin coins the term sexage to designate the process and institution that creates sex. Echoing servage (serfdom) and esclavage (slavery), sexage is used to designate “physical appropriation itself” and refers to the social relations “in which it is the material unit which produces labor which is appropriated and not just the labor power.” The category of sex is thus materially constituted through the appropriation of women and their labor and through masculine


43 Ibid., 2.

44 Ibid., 4.

45 Guillaumin, “Practice of Power,” 75. The French materialist feminists homologize the logic of slavery (and serfdom) and their critical notion of sex. For Wittig, “[t]he category of sex is the category that ordains slavery for women, and it works specifically, as it did for black slaves, through an operation of reduction by taking the part for the whole” (Wittig, *Straight Mind*, 8). This homologization has been criticized and proven problematic for U.S. feminists, though it bares striking similarity to the development of materialist feminism in the U.S., which was itself deeply influenced by and tied to the Civil Rights Movement. Teresa De Lauretis, for example, points out the important relation between materialism and the black feminist movement in the United States: The “redefinition of oppression as a political and subjective category that is arrived at from the specific standpoint of the oppressed, in [materialist feminists’] struggle, and as a form of consciousness-and thus distinct from the economic, objective category of exploitation rejoins the original formulation of oppression and identity politics given in the mid-1970s by the U.S. black feminist group, the Combahee River Collective” (De Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects,” 140). For a critique of arguments that homologize race and sex, especially in legal regimes, see Janet Halley, “Like-Race’ Arguments.”
property rights. The materialist feminists, particularly influenced by Guillaumin’s work on the mark of race, seek to show how labor and ideology are intertwined in the marking operation: a certain division and alienation of labor shapes the body into sexual difference, and ideology consequently imagines this difference as natural:

sex is taken as an “immediate given,” a sensible given, “physical features,” belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as others but marked by a social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived.

Similarly for Delphy, “society locates the sign that marks out the dominants from the dominated within the zone of physical traits.” For the French materialist feminists, sex only becomes perceptible, that is, certain psychical traits only acquire meaning, within the system of domination that is sexage.

Wittig posits that sexage, which produces and sustains the categories of sex, is itself the effect of heterosexuality: “A materialist feminist approach to women’s oppression destroys the idea that women are a ‘natural group’” and “lesbian society

46 As articulated most clearly in bodies of legal codification, such as the Code Civil: In France, formal political rights (right to vote and to be elected) were granted in 1945 but certain civil and familial rights kept (married) women in a position of civil minority, such as the need for the husband’s permission in order to either travel (passport demand) or contract (signing leases, deeds, estates, etc). The automatic designation of the husband as sole head of household made the availability and legal right to contraception and abortion especially crucial considerations in the fight over the appropriation/disappropriation of women’s bodies.

47 Wittig, Straight Mind, 11-12.

48 Delphy, “Rethinking Sex and Gender,” 35.
destroys the artificial (social) fact constituting women as a ‘natural group.’ A lesbian society pragmatically reveals the division from men of which women have been the object as a political one and shows that we have been ideologically rebuilt into a ‘natural group.’”\(^{49}\) The “artificial (social) fact” that creates women is heterosexuality, an ideologically powerful political order.\(^{50}\)

To emphasize her extension of the materialist critique of the order of sex into the realm of sexuality, Wittig names her “political and philosophical approach” “materialist lesbianism.”\(^{51}\) She describes “heterosexuality not as an institution but as a political regime which rests on the submission and the appropriation of women.”\(^{52}\) Just as servage is the institution produced by a feudal regime, so sexage is the institution engendered by and necessary to the regime of heterosexuality. The heterosexual regime becomes self-reproducing because it “imposes on women the rigid obligation of the reproduction of the ‘species,’ that is, the reproduction of heterosexual society.”\(^{53}\) Sexage thus subtends the economy of heterosexuality: “compulsory reproduction of the ‘species’ by women is the system of exploitation on which heterosexuality is economically based.”\(^{54}\) Consequently for Wittig, the only way to overcome the conflict between the sexes is to “destroy,


\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., xiii.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
philosophically, and symbolically the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women,’” which is to say then, that one must also destroy heterosexuality.\textsuperscript{55} She thereby suggests that there could be a form of subjectivity that did not depend on or reinforce the categories of sex and there could be another configuration of the social that would not be coterminous with the regime of heterosexuality.

In order to destroy the categories of sex and the regime of heterosexuality, Wittig, in her theoretical essays, explicitly deploys the lesbian as a utopian figure and subject position. Lesbians function for Wittig as emancipatory subject positions rather than as beings distributed and assigned to an identity category by the binary operations of sex and sexuality. The point is to defy and escape the categorical logic of heterosexuality. Lesbians are beyond sexage and the sexes: thus Wittig can (in)famously claim that “lesbians are not women.”\textsuperscript{56} The assertion is a critical move and projection into a utopian future. The use of paradox makes apparent the violent contradictions inside the normative understanding of sex and sexuality and simultaneously gestures towards a possible future in which the paradox would have dissolved. When Wittig writes about lesbians in her essays, she is not theoretically elaborating an empirical existence so much as describing and creating a subject position that both anticipates the dissolution of the categories of sex and suggests an already realized possibility of overcoming the alienation of sex.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., xiii.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 32.
While Wittig herself does not use the word “desire,” many of her critics do so in order to emphasize the distinction between sexuality as a political regime and sexuality as erotic desire, a distinction crucial to Wittig’s work. If heterosexuality is theorized as a political and economic regime of domination, then it is implicitly posited as distinct from, rather than a consequence of, desire. Furthermore, since the regime of heterosexuality generates and relies upon the categories of sex, and since lesbians are beyond the categories of sex, lesbianism cannot be homosexuality and, in its erotic expression, might be more accurately described as desire. Writing about The Lesbian Body, for example, Teresa de Lauretis asserts: “That the book is about desire (non-phallic desire, to be sure) was always clear to me.”57 In The Lesbian Body, Wittig stages a fully erotic relationship between two lovers, “j/e” and “tu,” that destroys the historical, imaginary and symbolic categories of sex borne by heterosexual logic and thereby adds desire to her arsenal of war machines.58 If sexual categories are part of the logic of the straight mind, desire, on the other hand, is beyond and outside of the realm of sex. The force of desire to unsex “j/e” and “tu” is nowhere more evident then in the creation of a new body, one that is not symbolically organized, charged, and eroticized into and along the heterosexual categories of sex that rely upon the primacy of genitals. The desire between “j/e” and “tu” displaces the genitals as a primary erotogenic zone and eroticizes the entire body, thus

57 De Lauretis, “When Lesbians Were Not Women,” 58. On the importance of desire to Wittig’s work, see also: Crowder, “Universalizing Lesbian Materialism.”

58 Language is, of course, for Wittig one of those crucial war machines. See for example: “The Trojan Horse” in Straight Mind.
divesting sex of its supposedly necessary and causal link to desire. Wittig’s destruction of
the primacy of genitals and eroticization of the entire body through a material work with
language is most explicit in the ten bold lists of body parts and bodily secretions. The
“VAGINA” for example, is no more or less symbolically charged than “THE
DIAPHRAGM,” “THE ANUS,” “THE ROOF OF THE MOUTH,” “THE
CONNECTIVE TISSUE.”59 While there are no specifically male body parts in the list,
the male body is not replaced by a female body, or the phallus by the vagina. Rather, just
as the lesbian is beyond the categories of sex, so the lesbian body cannot subscribe to
binary physical sex. As Diane Chisholm puts it: “Just as Wittig’s ‘lesbian’ is not a
‘woman,’ so her lesbian body is not a female body; instead, the lesbian body signifies a
categorical resistance to the ‘myth of Woman’ and withdraws support from any critical
venture that would recuperate the sign of ‘woman’”: in the same sense that lesbianism is
an anti-heterosexuality, “the lesbian body is an anti-body.”60 The lesbian body is an
escape from binary embodiment and categorical systems of the straight mind. If this new
body, or anti-body, is (partially) created through a listing of body parts that fragments and
proliferates the body into multiple and equally valued parts, the desire between “j/e” and
“tu” also allows for a creative reunification of all parts as one new body (“THE
LESBIAN BODY”) which creates a new radical subject: (“I speak to you. I start to
throw up, I suffocate, I scream, I speak to you, I want you with such a marvelous force

59 Wittig, Corps Lesbien, 23 and 113.

that all of sudden the fragments come together, not a finger is missing from you not a section”). Wittig also includes in one of the ten lists of words the equation “THE REPRODUCTION [XX + XX = XX].” Lesbian desire, the “want” between “I” and “you,” is here explicitly beyond the reproductive logic of the heterosexual regime of sexuality and creative of new subject positions beyond sex. Lesbians, through their desire for one another, create each other. It is these very definitions of heterosexuality as a political regime distinct from erotic desire, and of the lesbian as figure who has escaped the categories of sex produced by the regime of heterosexuality, that Wittig scholars accuse Butler of misunderstanding in _Gender Trouble._

### 4.3 The Trouble with _Gender Trouble_

Although _Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity_ has become canonized as a genitive text of queer theory, it was, as its subtitle suggests, originally written as an intervention into _feminist_ theory. In her 1999 preface to the book, Butler explains that, as she was writing _Gender Trouble_, she understood herself to be in an “embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism, even as [she]

---

61 Wittig, _Corps Lesbien_, 175 and 130.

62 Ibid., 144. In the original French: “J/e te parle. Un vomissement m/e vient, j/e m/étouffe, j/e hurle, j/e te parle, j/e te veux avec une force si merveilleuse que tout soudain les fragments s’assemblent, il ne te manque pas un doigt pas un tronçon.”
understood the text to be part of feminism itself.” She goes on to specify that in 1989 she was “most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory” that, in addition to having “homophobic consequences,” disciplined, restricted, and prescribed the meaning of gender. As the first two chapters of this dissertation have shown, Butler was producing her work in a U.S. academic environment where feminist literary theory of the 1980s was being shaped by French Feminism. Butler herself explicitly states that “[s]ome of these kinds of [habitual and violent] presuppositions were found in what was called “French Feminism” at the time and they enjoyed great popularity among literary scholars and some social theorists;” Gender Trouble was initially staged as a critique of “the heterosexism at the core of sexual difference fundamentalism.” The concerns at the heart of Gender Trouble emerged then as a response to the prevalence of French Feminism in U.S. feminist theory of the 1980s and the book was intended as an intervention against some of French Feminism’s central tenants. One might then expect feminists in France to have greeted Gender Trouble with open arms or, at the very least, open minds. Why then has it, on the contrary, been met with such great resistance, such that it is rarely even seriously engaged?

Six years prior to Gender Trouble’s French translation, Butler acknowledged that

63 Butler, Gender Trouble, vii.
64 Ibid., viii.
65 Ibid., viii-ix.
“[i]f the text runs the risk of Eurocentrism in the US, it has threatened an ‘Americanization’ of theory in France for the few French publishers who have considered it.” She understands the threat of Americanization represented by *Gender Trouble* as being linked to the book’s indebtedness to French Theory. While her book draws extensively on that of French theorists, she is aware that her work is one of “cultural translation,” that while *Gender Trouble* is rooted in French Theory, it is American in its construction. This makes the text, in Butler’s own words, “foreign to a French context.” I would add, more specifically, that its indebtedness to French Feminism has made it *doubly* foreign to a French feminist context dominated by materialist feminism. In the post-MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, Women’s Liberation Movement) French feminist context in which there is an absolute divide between the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva on the one hand, and that of materialist feminists on the other, the fact alone that Butler engages at length with Irigaray and Kristeva, even critically, makes her work immediately suspect. Möser, for example, notes that “in France, in the debates over *Gender Trouble* […], Butler’s reference to Luce Irigaray immediately ties her to the Psychépo current.” Moreover, *Gender Trouble* is intensely concerned with the relation between psychoanalysis and feminism and, while Butler

66 Ibid., x.
67 Ibid., ix.
68 Ibid., x.
critiques elements of Irigaray and Kristeva’s work, she retains the critically Derridean and Lacanian framework characteristic of French Feminism. Thus, despite being a critique of French Feminism, to a French feminist audience, especially to French materialist feminists, Gender Trouble looks like the (re)introduction of French Feminism into France via Butler’s queer theoretical lens, perhaps not least because her emphasis on parody as a form of subversion echoes Irigaray’s work on mimesis.\footnote{Jami asserts that Butler “solicits French theory (Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault) and French feminism (Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva), which is not to please the materialists that are the majority of French feminists” (Jami, “Judith Butler,” 206). Vidal notes that the works of U.S. feminist critics with whom Butler is also in conversation, such as that of Denise Riley, bell hooks, Teresa de Lauretis, Drucilla Cornell, and Donna Haraway, are not available in France, which “risks producing a strong distorting effect in the perception of her books, consequently brought back only to French theory or French feminism ([…] Butler far from being an eminent representative of French feminism, mobilizes French theory to critique it).” See: Vidal, “Trouble dans la Réception,” 235.} What then of Dorlin’s claim that the important influence of Wittig on Gender Trouble might help loosen the binary opposition between materialist feminism and queer theory at work in the French reception of the latter? As mentioned above, Dorlin implies that, given Wittig’s association with materialist feminism, Wittig’s strong influence on the arguments in Gender Trouble indicates a materialist component of the work. While Wittig’s work is indeed crucial to the book’s argument, Wittig scholars have argued that Butler misreads Wittig and critiqued Butler for a lack of materialism.\footnote{U.S feminist critics also accused Butler of a lack of materialism. Butler responded to these critiques and clarified her understanding of materialism in Bodies That Matter, a point to which I return below.}
Monique Wittig’s theoretical and fictive works provide the basis for two of Gender Trouble’s most famous claims: that sex is always already gender and that the binary identity categories of sex and gender are the naturalizing and self-legitimizing effects of the heterosexual regime, or what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix. However, Butler rejects Wittig’s goal of destroying the oppressive categories of sex produced by heterosexuality and her deployment of lesbian subjectivity as a strategy for doing so. For Butler, “Wittig calls for a position beyond sex that returns her theory to a problematic humanism based in a problematic metaphysics of presence.”72 She presents two main objections to Wittig’s strategic turn to the figure of the lesbian. First, she argues, the category of lesbian breaks solidarity with heterosexual women in the same way that the saying “feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice” does;73 it amounts to “separatist prescriptivism.”74 Second, defining lesbianism as the exclusion of heterosexuality makes lesbianism dependant on heterosexuality for its definition, foreclosing the possibility of resignification and thus ultimately “consolidat[ing] compulsory heterosexuality in its oppressive forms.”75 She goes on:

Wittig appears to believe that only the radical departure from heterosexual contexts—namely becoming lesbian or gay—can bring about the downfall of this heterosexual regime. But this political consequence follows only if one understands all “participation” in heterosexuality to be a repetition and consolidation of heterosexual oppression. The possibilities

72 Butler, Gender Trouble, 169.

73 This well-known phrase is attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson.

74 Butler, Gender Trouble, 173.

75 Ibid., 174.
of resignifying heterosexuality are refused precisely because heterosexuality is understood as a total system that requires a thoroughgoing displacement.\textsuperscript{76}

Butler proposes to undo the oppressive effects of the binary categories of sex not through the wholesale destruction of heterosexuality, and hence sex, but, through a “thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest ‘sex,’ but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of ‘identity’ in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic.”\textsuperscript{77} Significantly, Butler promotes parody as strategy for permanently problematizing identity because of its ability to reveal the performative aspects of sex and gender. In parody the authentic or the original is presented as an effect, thereby revealing the phantasmatic quality of the notion of an original. Parodic representations of gender would reveal that all gender is a failed copy with no original, and could open up a gender configuration beyond the heterosexual matrix that imposes a rigid and binary understanding of gender in the service of naturalizing heterosexuality. Through subversive repetition and parody, cultural configurations of sex and gender could proliferate, be rendered culturally intelligible, expose the unnaturalness of binary sex, and thereby displace the force of the heterosexual norm. Thus whereas Wittig promotes the destruction of the categories of sex through the destruction of the regime of heterosexuality, not unlike Marxism promotes the destruction of classes through the destruction of capitalism, Butler proposes to subvert their meaning through subversive

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 164-65.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 174.
mimetic practices. Notably, the section on Wittig in *Gender Trouble* is followed by one entitled “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,” the last section before the conclusion “From Parody to Politics.” In other words, Butler’s reading of Wittig leads directly into her theory of gender performativity and subversive mimesis.

Many scholars have argued that Butler’s accusations of humanism and “separatist prescriptivism” are based on a misreading of Wittig. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, claims that Butler “failed to understand the figural, theoretical character of Wittig’s ‘lesbian’ and its epistemological valence,” and suggests that Butler misreads Wittig “as if [the latter] had been arguing that all women should become lesbian or that only lesbians could be feminist.”78 Diane Griffin Crowder similarly asserts that in *Gender Trouble* Butler “fundamentally misapprehended Wittig’s conception of the social group ‘lesbians,’” and contends that in Butler’s reading, “[i]t is as if Wittig was advocating a simplistic lesbian separatism based on a romanticized notion of a lesbian essence that preexists and is only repressed by male dominance.”79 For both, Butler’s rejection of Wittig’s emancipatory figuration of lesbianism is rooted in the different definitions of lesbian operative in the two thinkers’ work. Crowder is most explicit on this point. For her, Butler relies on

a definition of ‘lesbian’ that is the current popular one—a woman who loves women—but is at odds with Wittig’s purpose. She wants to eliminate the categories *women* and *men* in order to eliminate compulsory heterosexuality. In her fictions she avoids the words *women* and *men*


79 Crowder, “Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism,” 70.
almost entirely, and her essays make it clear that a “woman-loving woman” is not at all her definition. […] It is not desire or sexual practice that defines a lesbian but a political, social, economic, and symbolic action of refusing the myriad institutions that comprise heterosexuality.80

In Crowder’s reading, Butler understands “lesbian” to refer to desire or sexual practice rather than an institutionally enforced political regime. Because of this difference, from a Wittigian point of view, Butler’s strategy of subversion is doomed to fail: “As a materialist who understands the materiality of discourse, Wittig does not believe that the heterosexual regime can be modified or subverted by playing or citing roles differently, inasmuch as there roles are still scripted by that regime.”81 Furthermore, she and Butler have different goals: whereas Wittig understands the lesbian to exist beyond the categories of sex, to destroy them, Butler focuses on the systematic failings within gender. Crowder goes on to argue that Wittig’s critique of difference “directed at ‘difference’ feminists, such as Hélène Cixous,” “would apply equally to those within queer theory who believe that promulgating ‘differences’ will ‘make a difference,’ in the sense of bringing heteropatriarchy down.”82

Crucially, Crowder attributes the different understandings of lesbian at work in the two scholars’ writing to the different theoretical frameworks in which these authors operate: the feminist materialist and the poststructuralist. In ““From the Straight Mind to

80 Ibid., 71. Crowder levels this critique not just at Butler but at other “postmodern” feminist and queer theorists who similarly take issue with Wittig’s figure of the lesbian.

81 Crowder, “From the Straight Mind to Queer Theory,” 497.

82 Ibid., 499.
Queer Theory,” she argues that many feminist and queer theorists’, including Butler’s, rejection of Wittig’s concept of lesbian is based on a “rejection, or misunderstanding, of the materialist foundation upon which [that concept] rest[s].”83 In a previous essay, she also states that “[…i]f American feminists have not always understood Wittig’s thought it is perhaps because they lack the tradition of materialist feminism developed in France by Wittig, Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Colette Guillaumin and others.”84 Crowder is careful though not to suggest that Butler is therefore not materialist and in fact stresses Butler’s attention to the material in subsequent work, perhaps most especially Bodies That Matter and in her published conversation with Nancy Fraser.85 For example, she notes that Butler has “responded to earlier criticisms of her work as voluntaristic by distinguishing performance from performativity and by emphasizing the obligatory nature of the latter” and “criticized how other queer theorists have deformed feminist thought and literalized performativity as a mode of voluntarism untouched by larger socioeconomic forces.”86 However, as Delphy’s reaction to the gender theory of Gender Trouble indicates, the book has largely been dismissed by French materialist feminists as moving away from the material to the discursive and has been associated

83 Ibid., 491.
84 Crowder, “Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism,” 64. Teresa de Lauretis has similarly noted the importance of Butler’s “poststructuralist” framework to her interpretation of Wittig. See especially: De Lauretis, “When Lesbians Were Not Women,” 56.
85 Butler, “Merely Cultural.”
86 Crowder, “From the Straight Mind to Queer Theory,” 487 and 498.
with French Feminism. In fact, the rejection of *Gender Trouble* has been so thorough that although *Bodies That Matter* has been translated into French (*Ces Corps Qui Comptent*, 2009; original U.S. publication 1993), it has gained very little traction in France and is rarely cited by French scholars. The French materialist feminist reception of *Gender Trouble* thus remains locked in a materialist/anti-materialist opposition that corresponds to a historically overdetermined opposition between materialist feminism and French Feminism.

Given the seeming intractability of these dichotomies, it seems unlikely that a genealogical approach will warm materialist feminists to queer theory. Much will need to be done in order to differentiate Butler from the French Feminism she critiques and to give queer theory a face that is no longer reducible to previous readings of *Gender Trouble* as an extension of French Feminism and as anti-materialist. If I have shown in the previous chapter that, as it “returns” to France, French Feminism raises the specter of Psychépo and if I have suggested in this chapter that queer theory is rejected by materialist feminists on the same grounds that they reject French Feminism, then one might ask: what is needed in order for French academic feminism to move beyond the entrenched divisions that have resulted from the violent split of the women’s liberation movement almost forty years ago but that continue to silently structure the field?

In connecting the French materialist feminist rejection of queer theory to the U.S. invention of French Feminism, this chapter has stressed the importance of thinking about the transnational travel of ideas as a feedback loop. The movement of ideas from one national context to another impacts not only the place of “arrival” but also that of
“departure,” showing the two to be caught in an endless cycle of permutation: the place of arrival becomes a site of new departures and the place of departure that of new arrivals. In this circular pattern, there is no origin or end point. Indeed, the story of the U.S. invention of French Feminism told by this dissertation takes place in a long and ongoing history of Franco-American intellectual relations. The feedback loop is an open circle. The travel of theory between France and the U.S. intersects with travels to and from other places, such as Algeria (Cixous’ birthplace) and China (Maoism was hugely influential to French thought of late 1960s and early 1970s, including that of Kristeva), to name only a few examples. In studying the French materialist feminist resistance to queer theory this chapter has also importantly challenged the prevailing assumption that the transnational travel of ideas is inherently productive. Instead, the chapter has argued that transnational intellectual circulation takes place in complex networks of power and that, as a result, certain forms of intellectual exchange may actively hinder others. Hugely generative in the U.S., the invention of French Feminism has helped to consolidate theoretical oppositions and impede the feminist uptake of U.S. queer theory in France. These asymmetries matter to our understanding of transnational feminist influence and the ongoing traffic of ideas and activism across national, linguistic, and political spheres. My hope in committing my labors to these issues is to extend the insights of transnational feminism to the travel of theory within the West.
Epilogue

This dissertation emerged from my own personal and intellectual travels between France and the U.S. Raised in Paris by U.S. born parents, I moved to Northampton as a young undergraduate where I discovered that U.S. feminist and queer theory harbored a French canon previously unknown to me, one which had accrued enormous prestige on this side of the Atlantic. Seduced in particular by Judith Butler’s assertion, via her reading of Monique Wittig, that “sex proves to have been gender from the start” and by her deployment of Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection in *Bodies That Matter,* I decided to pursue graduate work in the U.S.¹ But while I was becoming trained in the “French” underpinnings of U.S. feminist and queer projects, my regular returns to France made clear the incommensurability between such “Frenchness” and the conversations taking place in France. Whereas U.S. feminist and queer theory were centered on “gender,” in France “sex” remained the central analytic of feminist scholarship and queer theory was effectively non-existent. Despite, or indeed because of, U.S. feminist and queer theory’s indebtedness to French Theory and French Feminism, an unexpected disjuncture opened up between the intellectual environments I inhabited in France and the U.S.

The disjuncture turned into an epistemological problem when I began to read the materialist feminist literature by French activists and scholars and realized its centrality to the work of Wittig. Like most U.S. scholars, I had been reading Wittig in the context of the American invention of French Feminism. Why were key French feminist thinkers

¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 154.
such as Christine Delphy, Collette Guillaumin, and Nicole-Claude Mathieu virtually unknown in a U.S. feminist theory so interested in French thought? How did reading Wittig in the context of these authors affect interpretations of her work and its political implications? In an attempt to grapple with these questions, this dissertation began as a corrective to what I perceived as the conspicuous absence of French materialist feminism in U.S. academic feminism. But this approach posed a major problem. It implicitly adhered to a realist model of historical representation according to which French Feminism was a “bad” copy of feminism in France in need of correction. Such a recuperative impulse consolidated rather than challenged the fantasy of transparent travel that subtended the construction of French Feminism in the first place and thus ran the risk of reproducing what I saw as one of the limitations of existing critiques of its invention. My project therefore moved away from a focus on the lacunae in U.S. academic feminist understandings of feminism in France, and towards a historicization of French Feminism’s U.S appeal and transatlantic effects. In displacing loss as an origin story and thereby eschewing a narrative of lament, I choose instead to tell the story of the U.S. invention of French Feminism and its implications on both sides of the Atlantic. “Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” thus brings Franco-American intellectual relations into the purview of the transnational, thereby redefining what counts as the transnational and newly problematizing the effects of the travel of both activist and critical practices.

In U.S. feminist scholarship, the transnational almost exclusively refers to a focus on the relation between the West and non-West, most often figured as the Third World
or, more recently, the global South. There are good historical reasons for this. Transnational feminism emerged largely as a response to the racist, colonialist, and imperialist underpinnings of Western feminism, exemplified in the fantasy of “global sisterhood” and Western feminism’s attempts to “rescue” Third World women. The problem with confining transnational feminist theory to analyses of, and critical interventions into, the dynamics between the West and non-West is that it paradoxically ends up reinforcing Western imperialism by tagging the West as knowable, transparent (in contrast to the unknowability and opacity of the non-West) and configuring relations between Western nations as exempt from unequal power dynamics and the kind of complex political effects that characterize the encounter between West and non-West. Defining the transnational as transit out of the West also exports the labor of thinking the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation, and global capital to those scholars working on non-Western contexts, and implies that these issues are not salient to studying intellectual relations between Western nations. In other words, to exempt the travel of ideas within the West from transnational analyses is to reinforce Western imperialism by homogenizing the West and opposing it to the rest of the world.

“Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” works against the West/non-West binary that continues to haunt transnational feminism by attending to the difference within the West. If transnational feminism has crucially focused on the heterogeneity of Third World nations, it has tended, like the rest of U.S. academic feminism, to leave the West fairly uniform, as evident in the prevalence of such terms as “Euro-American.” This dissertation has focused on “Franco-American” intellectual relations and argued that the
dash does not represent a direct, transparent connection between two complimentary or immediately compatible intellectual traditions—as in two pieces of puzzle that easily fit together and complete a picture—but rather indexes a complex set of mediations and historical, intellectual, and political effects. To be clear, my point is not to displace attention away from the global South or other historically understudied parts of the world, nor to consolidate the centrality of the West—or indeed the overdetermined privilege of French thought—in U.S. academic feminism. On the contrary, my contention is that developing a transnational analysis of Franco-American intellectual relations offers a way of critically attending to the privilege of French thought and, in highlighting the historical, intellectual, and political incommensurabilities within the West, is in solidarity with the anti-imperialist impulses of transnational feminism.

How does one think transnationally within a Western context? In its critical history of the circulation of feminist and queer theory between France and U.S., this dissertation offers a methodological approach for studying the movement of ideas within the West grounded in the necessary opacity of transnational travel. At the heart of the project are interdependent commitments to historicization and developing a double vision. Moving beyond U.S understandings of France and French understandings of the U.S. and instead seeing double required that I build two distinct archives. In order to be able to historicize the U.S. invention of French Feminism, I assembled a comprehensive archive of the U.S. journal articles, interviews, and books relating to French Feminism, as well as of translations of French feminist thinkers, from 1975 to 1985, the period of French Feminism’s emergence and almost immediate assumption of a hegemonic, if
controversial, status in U.S. academic feminism. I also surveyed major U.S. feminist journals and general histories of the U.S. so as to map the immediate intellectual context of French Feminism and place in its broader historical context. In order to be able to historicize the French reactions to the U.S. invention of French Feminism’s and the latter’s effects on French intellectual life, I developed an archive comprised of four major components: an exhaustive collection of the French scholarship dealing directly with the U.S. construction of French Feminism, a survey of feminist scholarship published in France in the 1970s, primary and secondary documents about the history of the French women’s liberation movement (including oral histories collected through interviews and documents obtained through archival research), and a comprehensive assemblage of newspaper articles and scholarly publications about queer theory published in France between 1990 and 2016. In the process, I mapped the material conditions for the possibility of French Feminism’s U.S. invention by charting the institutional hubs of its production and the personal and professional ties that linked certain writers in France to feminist scholars working in the U.S. While this material awaits later development into the conversation about transnational intellectual travel, it is clear that institutions play a key role in facilitating the movement of ideas from one national context to another.

The adoption of a double vision through the development of two distinct archives allowed me to historicize the U.S. interest in French Feminism and the French responses to the latter’s U.S. invention in a way that went beyond the theoretical, historical, and political quarrels saturating both U.S. and French work on French Feminism. Doing so has allowed the dissertation to account for the incommensurability between feminist and
queer theory in France and the U.S., as well as some of the effects of this incommensurability, without recapitulating assumptions about the possibility for transnational travel. As the first work to my knowledge to have charted the transnational feedback loop of historical, intellectual, and political effects of the travel of a set of theoretical ideas within the West, it is my hope that “Inventing ‘French Feminism:’ A Critical History” has both demonstrated the importance of undertaking such work and provided a theoretical and methodological framework for doing so.

1975


1976


1978


1979


1980


1981


Special issue of Yale French Studies on French Feminism including:


Special section of *Signs* on French Feminism, including:


Special section of *Feminist Studies* on French Feminism, including:


Note: of the special journal issues and sections, only *Signs* published articles by feminists based in France (Cixous, Irigaray, and Fauré). *Yale French Studies* and *Feminist Studies*
were entirely made up of articles by U.S. based feminist critics writing either about French Feminism or using a French Feminist theoretic.

1985


Appendix B: Major U.S. Translations of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, 1972-1990

1972

1974

1975
Cixous, Hélène. “At Circe’s, or the Self-Opener.” Translated by Carol Bové. boundary 2 3, no. 2 (1975): 387-397.

1976
1977


1978


1980


1981


1982


1983


1984


1985


1986


1987


1988


1989


**1990**

Works Cited


Bell-Scott, Patricia, Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, and All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982.


Bertuccelli, Julie. *Antoinette Fouque Qu’est-Ce Qu’une Femme?*. 2008. Film.


des femmes en mouvement 2, February 1978, 36.


“MLF,” *Histoire d’Elles* 18, December 1979, 10.


http://www.contretemps.eu/interventions/f%C3%A9minisme-mat%C3%A9rialiste-queer.


“Un Colloque Féministe à New York ‘Le Second Sexe Trente Ans Après,’” des femmes en mouvement hebdo 1, November 9-16, 11-12.


Biography

Katherine A. Costello was born in Paris, France on December 7th, 1984. She received her B.A. in Women’s Studies and Comparative Literature from Smith College in January 2007. Since then, she has received a graduate fellowship and dissertation award from the Literature Program at Duke University, two summer research fellowships and a conference travel award from the Graduate School at Duke University, and two travel awards from the Women’s Studies Program at Duke University. She is also the recipient of the Julian Price Graduate Fellowship in the Humanities and the Women’s Studies Dissertation Fellowship. She obtained her PhD in Literature and Graduate Certificate in Feminist Studies from Duke University in May 2016.