

PREFACE

This issue of *Feminist Studies* is devoted to deconstruction. More accurately, it participates in the recent wave of retrospection and taking stock which has attended the apparent (but disputed) decline of deconstruction as an orthodoxy in U.S. literary criticism. Several of the essays in this volume raise questions about what Mary Poovey calls deconstruction's "project of demystification," a project necessarily presented here as more unified than it really is, but a project which has centrally consisted of exposing the artificial and hierarchical oppositions (man/woman, mind/body) that lie at the heart of Western thought. Where did this project come from, these essays ask, what has it meant, and what, if anything, is its future? Specifically, what has it meant and what will it mean for feminist scholarship and politics?

The reflections on deconstruction in this volume are marked, fittingly enough, by disagreement and by internal ambivalence and contradiction. Even those writers who argue for the usefulness of deconstructive strategies are sharply aware of their limitations and of the profound incompatibilities between most feminist politics and much deconstructive practice, between "philosophers," as Leslie Wahl Rabine puts it, "and members of a social movement dedicated to eradicating oppression through collective political action." As part of a political movement, for example, feminists find it necessary to take "yes-or-no positions on specific issues and to communicate them as unambiguously as possible," as Rabine observes, to claim access if not to "truth" then to limited truths, to believe in the possibility of social change and to articulate for themselves, through a study of history and through analyses of a specific present, how change has taken place and how it might be effected in the future. Of what ultimate use to feminism, then, is a philosophical program which is characterized by insistence on the arbitrary nature of all constructions of the "real," which adopts the strategy of "undecidability" to avoid the "metaphysical nature" of taking yes-or-no positions, which questions the agency behind change and our ability to know whether change is desirable, which insists that oppressive structures must be endlessly deconstructed, and whose relentlessly ahistorical tendencies in some cases render it incapable even of accounting for the changes we know have taken place. In particular, how can feminism be reconciled with a philosophical practice whose appropriation of

the feminine has often served the purpose of reinforcing masculine power.

The tension between feminism and deconstruction is deepened and the relation between them rendered more complex by the perception that many of the assumptions loosely labeled "post-modern," assumptions that deconstruction articulates with its own peculiar emphases and extensions, are assumptions that feminism and Afro-American criticism have helped to make current. Challenges to the notion of "objectivity," insistence on the social construction of human subjectivity, and the argument that all modes of knowing, even "scientific" modes, are political have all emerged, as Barbara Christian points out, not just in theories spun by "New Western Philosophers" but also in the process by which women and men of color have reflected on their own lives. Yet, feminist and black contributions to the construction of "post-modern" sensibility are regularly written out of critical histories, and male deconstructionists are given credit for "everything thought after Nietzsche."

The relation between feminism and deconstruction, therefore, is tense—perhaps never more so—but it is scarcely one of simple opposition. In "A Feminist Politics of Non-Identity," for example, Leslie Wahl Rabine describes some of the ways in which feminist theory and deconstruction have developed parallel lines of thought. Nancy Chodorow's account of male gender formation, Rabine suggests, overlaps with deconstructive accounts of the "phallographic" subject, a subject that must project internal difference onto a degraded "other" in order to maintain the illusion of unified identity. Zillah Eisenstein's account of a nonunified, nontotalized, noncentralized feminist politics, moreover, evokes deconstructive notions of "supplementarity" but is informed by political goals that deconstruction lacks. Other essays in this volume, Joan W. Scott's "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: or the Uses of Post-structuralist Theory for Feminism" and Mary Poovey's "Feminism and Deconstruction," focus on the way in which strategies or emphases which these essays identify primarily with deconstruction may be of use to feminists in current political struggles and in the development of feminist theory and practice in the future.

Scott, for example, takes on a debate that divides feminism itself and is particularly important to the development of positions and strategies in the contemporary feminist political movement.

On one side is the argument from equality which says sexual difference should be irrelevant to the way persons are treated by the legal system, schools, employment policies, and so forth; on the other is the argument from difference which claims that women must demand special treatment as a group. Using the example of the sexual discrimination suit brought against Sears by the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, and taking a deconstructive position, Scott argues that such an opposition obscures "a more complicated historically variable diversity . . . that is . . . differently expressed for different purposes in different contexts." From this perspective, women can refuse an impossible position in which we must either grant the conservative essentialist premise of natural difference or give up the powerful arguments from difference that must be made at certain historical moments. We must, Scott concludes, define an equality that rests on "differences that confound, disrupt, and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition."

Finally, Poovey suggests that deconstruction's challenge to hierarchical and oppositional logic, if taken to its logical and radical extension, might open the door to examining the "fixity of the anatomical categories," to multiplying "the categories of sex, and to detach reproduction from sex." Such a focus on the social construction of sexual identity, she argues, "goes beyond the more common understanding of social construction that many feminists now endorse because it deconstructs not only the relation between women and certain social roles but also the very term 'woman' as well." Such an extension of deconstruction would challenge the basis of our social order and might "create the conditions of possibility for as yet unimagined organizations of human potential."

At the same time, however, these essays raise questions about the degree to which feminism would have to modify deconstruction to make it useful in more than a radically limited way. Poovey, for example, ultimately suggests that "feminism will so completely rewrite deconstruction as to leave it behind," while Barbara Christian, in "The Race for Theory," and Marnia Lazreg, in "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing As a Woman on Women in Algeria," focus on the ways in which deconstruction has resisted feminist revision and has instead distorted feminist practice. Thus, Christian suggests that deconstructive jargon in its ugly incomprehensibility is a language that "mystifies rather

than clarifies" and makes "it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene." As a critical orthodoxy, she points out, deconstruction has had the effect, on the one hand, of silencing many – by establishing a hierarchy between theoretical and practical criticism, by limiting the range of ideas that are deemed valuable, and by narrowly defining what "theory" is. On the other hand, the seductive status of deconstruction in the U.S. literary critical scene has prompted some "of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean black, women, Third World)" to speak in its terms, terms alien to their real "needs and orientation," alien, in particular, to their goals as persons hoping to reach a political constituency. Theory, as Christian points out, may take many forms, may be "beautiful and communicative." Black women have "continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world," and feminists in general have written theory in languages that maintain a sense of connectedness to daily life and to a human identity specifically situated in the world.

Both Lazreg and Christian also suggest how deconstruction, despite its project of unmasking artificial and simplifying oppositions, imposes its own. Constructs like "the other" and "the periphery," rather than rendering the world more complex, rather than moving us to consider the different ways, say, that women inhabit the category "woman" or "other," simplify social relations by organizing them according to one principle. This simplifying tendency, both argue, bears a resemblance to the tendency of other ideologies of dominance that dehumanize people by stereotyping them and by denying them variousness and complexity. In her analysis of writing on women in Algeria, Lazreg describes culturally specific instances in which primarily white Western academic feminists have employed deconstructive categories so as to unthinkingly collapse women of color, women of North Africa, and women of the Middle East into one undifferentiated and essentialized "other." When a feminist borrows "male power as knowledge," Lazreg suggests, and uses it against other women, "feminism as an intellectual movement presents a caricature of the institutions it was meant to question" and the feminist herself represses her own femaleness, glossing over "the fact that the representer remains far from having achieved the freedom and capacity to define her self."

Several pieces in this volume also address the forms of French feminism associated with deconstruction and inaccurately identified as "French feminism" itself. What is called "French feminism," according to Poovey, participates in the demystifying project of dismantling artificial oppositions and so of calling the dominant symbolic order into question, but it focuses on what she calls a "recuperative program" of attempting to imagine "some organization of fantasy, language, and reality other than one based on identity and binary oppositions which is currently the dominant mode and therefore equated with the dominant sex, men." This feminine language is imagined as one which came "before" the dominant symbolic order and is "based on" the female body. Like the female genitalia, which are multiple rather than singular, this feminine language celebrates "plurality and semantic indeterminacy."

As Mary Poovey and June Howard both note, the "French feminist" program has been embraced by some U.S. feminists and found deeply problematic by others for its return to biology and essentialism. In her review of several books on feminist theory and criticism, "Feminist Differings: Recent Surveys of Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism," Howard describes this as a split between feminist critics subscribing to deconstructive theories, with their emphasis on language and their assumption that nothing outside language exists, and feminist critics pursuing a politics based on experience. Far from imagining this as a battle between potential orthodoxies, however, Howard maps a history and future for feminist criticism that overlaps with but is not the same as the history of U.S. literary criticism as a whole, with its "race for theory," its rise and fall of orthodoxies, its hawking of theoretical commodities, its pursuit of status and power. This feminist history is not a tale of competing markets and rhetorical power moves but of complex, internally dissenting community and hard-won collective effort. Thus, Howard suggests that feminists may already be moving beyond the impasse between deconstructive theory and the politics of experience, to a position in which the historical usefulness of both orientations may be comprehended. In materialist feminist criticism, in particular, she identifies a practice that is both theoretical (drawing on feminist, cultural materialist or Marxist, and poststructuralist traditions) and political, actively engaged in the reading of literature and of

"history," attentive to language and to what was once known simply as "the world."

This movement beyond this construction of a complex, internally differing community can best be effected by defining for ourselves a feminist identity that is inhabited "more self-consciously" and "provisionally" than before, and if there is a single recurring theme to this volume it is this evocation of a feminist identity and politics that are provisional and various. This provisional feminist identity, of course, has obvious affinities with some French feminist definitions of the feminine, but, beyond, it also has affinities with that heightened consciousness about the multiplicity and fluidity of subjectivity and the impossibility of "objectivity" that has marked much deconstructive practice, despite its contradictory tendency to simplify the world. Thus, Nicole Brossard, in the series of poems we publish here, deals with feminist resistance to male "figuration" of the female subject and with the difficult and political process of reimagining that figure, that identity, not as something fixed but as something multiple and in process. In "Writing – and Reading – the Body: Female Sexuality and Recent Feminist Fiction," Molly Hite finds affinities between the "French feminist" project of "writing the body" and a nonessentialist project of "writing about" the body so as to resist male figuration and so as to reconstruct the body from a feminist perspective. Feminist reconstructions, Hite suggests, break with male descriptions of the female body as one that is fragile, static, open, waiting to be filled, and often figure it instead as that which is multiple, various, linked with "superabundance or excess." Like "writing the body," "writing about the body" aggressively asserts the reality and independence of female sexual desire, but the latter does so without appealing to a "real" basis for feminist experience unsullied by discursive practice."

Finally, in "Constructing a Self: A Brazilian Life Story," Daphne Patai, whose writing is characterized by a consciousness about "objectivity" which can only be seen as coming after deconstruction, nonetheless resists what Lazreg and Christian see as another legacy of deconstructive practice, the tendency to simplify the world into subject and other. Fighting the impulse to situate herself at the "center of the universe," as a white academic interviewer, Patai attempts instead to "acknowledge the authority and creativity of the speaker weaving her own text," Marialice, a

working-class woman living in Brazil. Rather than assuming that women and men are "dominated by the word," as Lazreg puts it, Patai reads Marialice's refusal to recognize her oppressive work relations as more than a narrative of false consciousness. Rather, Marialice's effort to humanize her work relations, her attempt "to make sense of events that are beyond her control and to establish a place for herself in terms of the things that are within her control," is seen also as an expression of her attempt to hold onto humanity and goodness. Patai, that is attempts to write out of an identity that acknowledges its partiality and limitations in order to be open to the multiplicity, the complexity, and value of another.

This invocation of multiplicity is echoed elsewhere in this volume, in Rabine's argument that feminist politics embrace many positions and that each position must be analyzed for lacking full truth; in Scott's argument for seeing the multiple differences located in specific historical moments; in Christian's assertion that her method of reading is not fixed but relates to "what I read," as a strategy in remaining "open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender"; and in the "we" of this preface which must evoke the variousness of our editorial board. This heightened consciousness, however, whatever its debt to deconstruction, is informed here by a feminist politics which makes all the "difference." Thus, the rejection of "objectivity" is embraced not on principle, not so as to avoid taking yes-or-no positions, but for the purpose of inhabiting them with greater consciousness of their incompleteness. The constructed and fluid nature of subjectivity is embraced not for the purpose of declaring "the death of the subject," of denying historical human agency, but for the purpose of opening up the self to the complexities and human realities of those who are different but also not different, those to whom we wish to listen and to speak, those with whom we wish to forge loyalties and ties, and to create an internally differing but united political community.

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