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Feminism and its Differences¹

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It is reported that in 1989, during a poetry reading at Stanford, Audre Lorde addressed her audience with these words: "I am a Black feminist lesbian warrior poet mother doing my work," and then she added: "who are you and how are you doing yours?" I have never met Audre Lorde, but what I will say today is a response to her question, and dedicated to her—an attempt to record a sort of dialogue in different wavelengths that may contribute to the building of that "house of difference" she so poignantly envisioned in her biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1982).

So let me start again and say that I am a white feminist lesbian warrior theorist mother doing my work, which is to speak to you about theory at this moment, place and time, and to teach and write theory elsewhere and otherwise. For my work now is with "theory." And I will say in all sincerity that I wish I could write poetry or science fiction, I wish I could make films. But I cannot. I don't know how and probably wouldn't be any good at it if I tried. I wish I could call myself a poet, rather than a theorist, as Audre Lorde or Adrienne Rich can. In the culture of the country where I grew up, being a poet is still more prestigious, more respected, than being a critic, a theorist, or a philosopher: the apex of Italian culture is represented by Dante, not Thomas Aquinas. Of course, both Dante and Aquinas were eminently political writers, as is Audre Lorde, but it was Dante, the warrior poet, whose biomythography, *The Divine Comedy*, fired the imagination of an entire culture and shaped its dreams and nightmares for centuries to come.

Like the work of the philosopher, mine is less far-reaching, more limited in its range of readers and its impact on the world; whatever the word "theory" may mean (and it means a great variety of things, depending who you ask), "theory" is in fact more humble than poetry, if only we look outside the college classroom or the humanities convention hall: there is no Nobel prize, no Pulitzer prize for cultural theory, let alone feminist theory. However, inside, in North American universities, "theory" has recently acquired a certain degree of prestige and is thus open to attacks, on the one hand, and to demands for accountability, on the other. While accountability is important, and especially so in a social movement such as feminism, which is both political and intellectual, remarkably, accountability seems to be demanded much more of theory than of poetry. At any rate, my work is with theory, and that is why I've been asked to speak here, today, to address some questions that are "most urgent in the theoretical formulation of feminism and its differences."

Feminism and its differences. Differences within feminism are there, to be sure, and many and serious. Those having to do with race and sexuality are

perhaps the most serious, but others too—differences in class, ethnicity, language, educational background, disciplinary methodology, generational, geographical, even gender differences (for those who are concerned with the place of men in feminism); and differences within feminism in relation to theory. But before discussing those differences and the conflicts that they give issue to, I'd like to say right off that whatever differences exist in feminism, they are never simply differences within feminism, intra-feminist conflicts or divisions "internal" to it—conflicts internal to Women's Studies, for example. Instead, they are always an effect of the political and intellectual engagement that feminism has, necessarily, with the world "outside," so to speak, the social reality "external" to feminism but in which, in turn, feminism itself exists, that is to say the world of the Profession, the university institution, linked as it is to other social institutions, and so on. (The quotation marks around "internal" and "external" are intended to denaturalize the notion of boundary between feminism and what is thought of as its outside, its other, non-feminism. For, even as we must speak of divisions within feminism, of a feminist political thought, a feminist discourse, a feminist consciousness, etc., we nonetheless well know that no permanent or stable boundary insulates feminist discourse and practices from those which are not feminist.) And, in a similar way, the differences of feminism are not simply differences and divisions between women but also, equally important, they are differences and divisions within women; that is to say, they are produced as effects of difference and division in each woman's subjectivity.

The most recent flurry of debate that is exercising the Profession (especially the social sciences, but the humanities as well) with regard to feminism and theory is the alleged opposition between poststructuralism, or postmodernism, and feminism—the latter usually specified as cultural or radical feminism, and seen by its opponents as essentialist, separatist, or even worse, both together, while the former, according to its opponents, would be guilty of elitism, obscurantism, and dependence on what they call "male theory." But because, as I said, theory has become a measure of prestige in the academy, and because feminism has, of course, a direct and historically proven interest in theory, a situation has developed whereby, while only feminist theory appears to be valorized and legitimated academically, then all feminist critical writing, whether it is or even whether it wants to be theoretical or not—all feminist critical writing must claim what I would call the right to theory.

To many of you, I hope, this phrase will recall the title of Barbara Christian's article "The Race for Theory," published in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1987). She is rightly concerned with the consequences of the prestige or academic "power" that nowadays accrues to those who join the race for theory, in particular "black, women [and] third world [critics who] have been influenced, even coopted, into speaking a language . . . alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation" (52). "I have no quarrel," she adds, "with those who wish to philosophize about how we know what we know. But I do resent the fact that this particular orientation

[literary theory] is so privileged and has diverted so many [Afro-American literary critics] from doing the first readings of the literature being written today" (57). Christian's point is well taken: entering the academic race for the few prestigious chairs that major universities, under slight pressure by affirmative action, hold out as jeopardy prizes to minority scholars (and I include white women in this term) may often result in "instant theory," unassimilated concepts and opaque, obscure writing, which is indeed liable to charges of "jargon." For, much like stereotypes, "jargon" is a sort of shorthand for avoiding to tackle the complexities of an issue or to extricate the layers of meaning packed into a term, a word, an image, a concept. A concept we may or may not find useful for our "needs and orientation"; and in the latter case, we need to develop and articulate other, more useful, concepts and terms.

Nevertheless, the race for theory is not one we can halt by simply opposing it or simply joining it. For what happens then is that the institution, the intellectual world "external" (and in the main unfriendly) to feminism, quickly turns around and defines two types of theory, high and low, according to their respective grades of sophistication, as gasoline is priced by its octane content: a low-grade type of critical thinking (i.e., feminism) is contrasted with the high-test theoretical grade of poststructuralism from which some feminists would have been smart enough to learn. But as one feminist theorist who's been concurrently involved with feminism, women's studies, psychoanalytic theory, structuralism and poststructuralism, semiotics, and film theory from the beginning of my critical activity, I know that learning to be a feminist has grounded, or embodied, all of my learning and so en-gendered thinking and knowing itself. That engendered thinking and that embodied, situated knowledge (in Donna Haraway's phrase) are the stuff of feminist theory, whether by "feminist theory" is meant one of a growing number of feminist critical discourses—on culture, science, race, subjectivity, sexuality, writing, visual representation, social institutions, such as ethnicity or heterosexuality, and so on—or, more particularly, the critical elaboration of feminist thought itself and the ongoing (re)definition of its specific difference.

In either case, feminist theory is not of a lower grade than that which some call "male theory," but different in kind; and it is this essential difference that concerns me, as a theorist of feminism, as well as the various differences, debates, internal divisions and polarizations that have resulted from feminism's engagement with the various institutions, discourses and practices that constitute the social, and from its self-conscious reflection on that engagement. That is to say, I am concerned with the divisions that have marked feminism as a result of divisions (of gender, sex, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) that exist in the social itself; I am concerned with the discursive boundaries and subjective limits that feminism has defined and redefined for itself contingently, historically, in the process of its engagement with social and cultural formations; and I am

concerned with the paradoxes and contradictions that constitute the effective history, the essential difference, of feminist thought.

In one account that can be given of that history, feminist theory has developed by a series of oppositional stances not only vis-à-vis the wider, "external" context—the social constraints, legislation, ideological apparatus, dominant discourses and representations against which feminism has pitched its critique and its political strategies in particular historical locations—but also, concurrently and interrelatedly, in its own "internal," self-critical processes. For instance, in the '70s, the debates on academic feminism vs. activism in the United States defined an opposition between theory and practice which led, on the one hand, to a polarization of positions either *for* theory or *against* theory in nearly all cultural practices and, on the other, to a consistent, if never fully successful, effort to overcome the opposition itself.

Subsequently, by the mid-80s, the internal division of the movement over the issue of separatism or "mainstreaming," both in the academy and in other institutional contexts, recast the practice/theory opposition in terms of lesbian vs. heterosexual identification, and of women's studies vs. feminist cultural theory, among others. Here, too, the opposition led to both polarization (e.g., feminist criticism vs. feminist theory in literary studies) and efforts to overcome it by an expanded, extremely flexible, and ultimately unsatisfactory redefinition of the notion of "feminist theory" itself as any kind of writing, in verse or in prose, any kind of verbal, visual or performed expression that is oppositional or critical or only descriptive, but bearing witness to women's oppression.

Another major division and the resulting crucial shift in feminist thought were prompted, at the turn of the decade into the '80s, by the wider dissemination of the writings of women of color and their critique of racism in the women's movement. The division over the issue of race vs. gender, and of the relative importance of each in defining the modes of women's oppression, resistance, and agency, has also produced an opposition between a "white" or "Western feminism" and a "U. S. Third World feminism" articulated in several racial and ethnic hyphenations, or called by an altogether different name, like Alice Walker's "womanism." The term "women of color," which began to circulate at that time, has precisely that sense, and is a theoretical as well as a political term. The assumption of an identity as "women of color" in the United States (and similarly of a "black" identity in Britain) on the part of women from highly diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds—Asian, Native American, Black American and Caribbean women, Chicanas, Latinas, etc.—is an example of personal-political consciousness that is not simply based on ethnic or cultural differences vis-à-vis the dominant white culture; and it is not at all the opposition of one set of cultural values, presumed to be stable in a given ethnic minority, to the presumed equally stable values of the dominant majority. In other words, the identity as a woman of color is one not given but acquired,

attained, and developed out of the specific historical experience not of ethnicity but of *racism* in the white- and male-dominated society of the United States today; and it is developed out of an understanding of the personal-political need for building community across, in spite of, in tension, even in contradiction with the cultural values of one's ethnic background, one's family, one's "home."

Because the oppositional stance of women of color was markedly, if not exclusively, addressed to white women in the context of feminism—that is to say, their critique addressed more directly white feminists than it did (white) patriarchal power structures, men of color, or even white women in general—once again that division on the issue of race vs. gender led to polarization as well as to concerted efforts to overcome it, at least internally to feminist theoretical and cultural practices. And once again those efforts met with mostly unsatisfactory or inadequate results, so that no actual resolution, no dialectic sublation has been achieved in this opposition either, as in the others. For even as the polarization may be muted or displaced by other issues that come to the fore, each of those oppositions remains present and active in feminist consciousness and, I want to argue, must so remain in a feminist theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific and emergent history.

Since the mid-'80s, the so-called feminist sex wars have pitched "pro-sex" feminists vs. the anti-pornography movement in a conflict over representation that recast the sex/gender distinction into the form of a paradoxical opposition: sex and gender are either collapsed together, and rendered both analytically and politically indistinguishable, or they are severed from each other and seen as endlessly recombinable in such figures of boundary crossing as transsexualism, transvestism, bisexuality, drag and impersonation, cyborgs, etc. This last issue is especially central to the lesbian debate on sadomasochism, which recasts the earlier division of lesbians between the women's liberation movement, with its more or less overt homophobia, and the gay liberation movement, with its more or less overt sexism, into the current opposition of radical S/M lesbianism to mainstream-cultural lesbian feminism, an opposition whose mechanical binarism is tersely expressed by the recent magazine title *On Our Backs* punning on the long-established feminist periodical *Off Our Backs*. And here may be also mentioned the opposition pro and against psychoanalysis which, ironically, has been almost completely disregarded in these sexuality debates, even as it determined the conceptual elaboration of sexual difference in the '70s and has since been fundamental to the feminist critique of representation in the media and the arts.

This account of the history of feminism in relation to both "external" and "internal" events, discourses, and practices suggests that two concurrent drives, impulses or mechanisms, are at work in the production of its self-representation: **an erotic, narcissistic drive** that enhances images of feminism as difference,

rebellion, agency, self-empowerment, daring, excess, subversion, disloyalty, pleasure and danger, and rejects all images of powerlessness, victimization, subjection, acquiescence, passivity, conformism, femininity; and **an ethical drive** that works toward community, accountability, collective empowerment, sisterhood, female bonding, belonging to a common world of women or sharing what Adrienne Rich has called "the dream of a common language." Together, often in mutual contradiction, the erotic and the ethical drives have fuelled not only the various polarizations and the construction of oppositions but also the invention or conceptual imaging of a "continuum" of experience, a global feminism, a "house of difference," or a separate space where "safe words" can be trusted and "consent" be given uncoerced.

That the two drives often clash or bring about political stalemates and conceptual impasses is not surprising, for they have contradictory objects and aims, and are forced into open conflict in a culture where women are not supposed to be, know, or see themselves as subjects. And for this very reason perhaps, the two drives characterize the movement of feminism, and more emphatically lesbian feminism, its historically intrinsic, essential condition of contradiction, and the processes constitutive of feminist thought in its specificity. As I have written elsewhere, the tension of a twofold pull in contrary directions, the critical negativity of its theory and the affirmative positivity of its politics, is both the historical condition of existence of feminism and its theoretical condition of possibility. What I am suggesting, in other words, is that the tension between the two drives is the condition of possibility and effective elaboration of feminist theory; and it is most productive in the kind of critical thinking that refuses to be pulled to either side of an opposition and seeks instead to disengage it from the fixity of polarization in an "internal" feminist debate, and to reconnect it to the "external" discursive and social context from which it finally cannot be severed except at the cost of repeatedly reducing a historical process, a movement, to an ideological stalemate.

Seen in this larger, historical frame of reference, feminist theory is not merely a theory of gender oppression in culture, as is too often reiterated in Women's Studies textbooks; nor is it the essentialist theory of women's nature which some oppose to an antiessentialist, poststructuralist theory of culture. It is instead a developing theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also—and at times more prominently—race, class, ethnicity, and any other significant sociocultural divisions and representations thereof; a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history.

We should not cover over or do away with conflicts or with differences, but we should continue to articulate and to examine them, listening to one another and also, on occasion, not listening. But keeping in mind that image of the house

of difference in which Audre Lorde, the warrior poet, inscribed exactly the sense of my theoretical argument. And so, as I began, I should like to end with her words:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self. . . . It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather [than] the security of any one particular difference. (226)

NOTES

¹ This talk is adapted from my essay, "Upping the *Anti* in Feminist Theory," in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).