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CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Kay Salleh

Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering . . . She doesn't 'speak', she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself; she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body, that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech . . . she *inscribes* what she is saying because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. Her speech even when 'theoretical' or political is never simple, or linear or 'objectified', generalized. She draws her story into history . . . There is not that scission, that division made by the common man . . . bound as he is by his antiquated relation servile, calculating to mastery.

Helene Cixous,
in *New French Feminisms*, p. 251.

As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is natural, the aims for which he keeps himself alive . . . are nullified.

Horkheimer and Adorno,
in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 54.

I

No political perspective has yet emerged which demonstrates a critical, reflexive awareness of its relation to masculine domination, but the last several feminist years have seen a promising beginning in this respect. This has taken the form of a move away from the original analysis and program for equality framed in terms of a fundamental similarity between the sexes, a move to reconsider what might be specific to the condition of being a woman.¹ The new political attitude is strong among the recent wave of American radical feminists; to cite two instances, the lesbian mother and poet, Rich, and the academic theologian, Daly. As the former notes, reflecting on the origin of the earlier feminist tendency to neutralize sexual differences:

The ancient, continuing envy, awe and dread of the male for the female capacity to create life has repeatedly taken the form of hatred for every other aspect of female creativity. Not only have women been told to stick to motherhood, but we have been told that our intellectual, or aesthetic creations were inappropriately inconsequential or scandalous . . . The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit . . .

Daly, taking up this problematic *difference* between the sexes outlines a project to reverse the reversals:

On the boundaries of the male-centred universities, however, there is a flowering of woman-centred thinking . . . Gynocentric writing means risking. Since the language and style of patriarchal writing simply cannot contain or carry the energy of women's exorcism and ecstasy, in this book I invent, discover, re-member.

Another simultaneous source of theorisation about *difference*, one whose voice has been schooled in dialogue with another tradition entirely, occurs among French writers like the psychoanalyst Irigaray and novelist Duras. Irigaray insists:

Woman's wish would not speak the same language as man's and it has been buried by the logic which has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.

. . . every [patriarchal] enunciation, every affirmation will develop and certify the recovery of the obliteration of the immutable connection of being to the material mother.

Duras again develops the theme of this repression, of the ultimate material base, with her own re-remembering of the language of the body of woman:

. . . I think the future belongs to women. Men have been completely dethroned. Their rhetoric is stale, used up. We must move to the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in the organism, the body.²

Yet this notion of *difference* is disturbing to many women right now, the first generation to experience a technologically guaranteed freedom from the imperatives of the body. Marxist feminists dismiss it simply as theoretical anathema, while for radical feminists it may undermine a good decade of self-affirming praxis. In short, if the 'woman question' can be said to exacerbate the *crisis in Marxism*, the notion of *difference* provokes a *crisis in feminism*, one which expresses itself in a variety of defensive postures. Hence, it is asserted that the current orientation of writing around the concept of *difference* is a retrograde turn for the movement; a new Jensenism or style of thought which by playing into the ideal-typical complementarity of 'male' and 'female', reaffirms *woman's identity* with the inferior realm of *nature*, the very ploy that patriarchal ideology has traditionally used to silence and constrain her. In the words of one feminist collective:

In order to describe and unmask this oppression, arguments that have recourse to nature must be shattered . . . Under the pretext that we are women, 'different', we are prevented from fully living the life of free and independent individuals.³

Difference is not understood by all feminists to imply an intrinsically natural state, but the point to be made here is that it is precisely those arguments that do have 'recourse to nature' which need to be examined. Not only does this routine feminist objection to what is called 'natural' rest on a gross oversimplification of the issues involved in that determination, it overlooks the possibility of some very radical implications -- epistemological, political, personal -- which might be had in *the practice of difference*.⁴ This paper will sketch a *critique of the political epistemology of patriarchal ideology* as this penetrates, in turn, conservative, Marxist and feminist thinking about *nature*. As such, the paper may contribute to the reinvigoration of a more reflective and dialectical Marxism, but its projects and potentials do not end there.

That the old dualisms such as nature versus culture represent the manifest symptom of an obsessional and intensely *repressive code*, has been plain to many feminists for some time, but the therapeutic exposure of these false identities with the deconstruction of the ideology of presence/absence, king/queen, light/dark, has only just begun. From the standpoint of a sociology of knowledge, the myth that as against man's cultural production things 'natural' are inherently inferior and impoverished, has a particular significance for patriarchal civilization. As the Frankfurt School have demonstrated, it grows out of the ancient *splitting* of the so called higher faculties from immediate sensuous experience; the predilection for the *static visual* and *manipulable* properties of objects; their formal *objectification* in specular terms and representation through *binary analytics* as against dialectical logic; *the cogito*; the ostensible dissociation of *pure fact* from value; and the *productivist* thrust towards *instrumental mastery* of the material environment culminating with modern industrialization and science.⁵ Each epistemological manoeuvre reinforces the others in turn, a self-legitimizing tradition that dies hard. The dissolution of this *cerebral armoury* by theorists of difference therefore, the critical search for an openly reflexive discourse, promises to be one of the more relevant and substantial achievements of contemporary social thought.

A *defence of difference* calls for the decentering of this deeply entrenched and overdetermined ideological constellation.⁶ In doing so, it is necessary at the outset to see how the complex is fabricated and sustained by means of several interlocking thematic dichotomies and their received implications. There are:

the artificial distinction between *nature* and *history*,
the conventional assumption that phenomena grounded in nature are necessarily *regressive*,
and that historically produced phenomena are necessarily *progressive*,
the historical gender differentiation between *masculine* and *feminine*

that is superimposed over the natural continuum of sexual variation,
the association of the masculine with the historical order by way of a
productivist problematic,
the association of the feminine with the order of nature by way of a
reproductivist problematic,⁷
the identification of productive activity with the *public* sphere,
the identification of reproductivity with the *private* sphere,
the concomitant *valorisation* of productive activity,
the complementary *de-valorisation* of reproductivity.

The focus of the present argument is on the first few themes, but this is not to suggest priority. In an overdetermined system, every term is co-equal with, and a corollary of, every other. This is how ideology works. Each time a term is used, its constellation of tacit connotations is brought into play to enforce its 'rationality',

The pervasiveness of this arbitrary and simplistic set of assumptions cannot be overestimated. They constantly recur, not only in the routine context of everyday life, but as a hidden *a priori* of both academic inquiry and activist polemic as well. Feminism likewise, whether of the bourgeois liberal Equal Rights Amendment variety, or the socialist sort, has assimilated most of these themes and biases in its analysis and practice. Even though the syndrome is an expression of patriarchal relations, these movements fail to give it serious scrutiny. Rather, in their tendency and self understanding as 'progressive', they continue to urge that woman is not different, not other, is 'constructed', part of history rather than nature. They selectively align with the traditionally valued facets of the constellation, bypassing the two dimensional complementarity contained in it. In doing so, feminism undermines the base of its own historical potential for contradiction of what is given.

II

The conceptual tic which perpetrates the dichotomy between what is 'of nature' and what is 'history', is a legacy of the tired conventional wisdom that passes for theory in *liberal empiricist inquiry*. The good university men with their 'two cultures', their bluster, male bonding mechanisms or plausibility structures, and more, their vested territorialities, are much to blame for this misuse of 'reason'. The fact that the distinction has no genuine ontological correlates at all and is generated by quite *ad hoc* knowledge traditions, continues to be disregarded. Psychologists still celebrate the rites of the nature-nurture controversy, and any talk of a dialectical mediation or interchange between 'the two orders' is quickly silenced by the spectre of Engels or Lysenko. Philosophers play for time by raising 'logical strictures' to the effect

that any projected reciprocity between two spheres, such as the natural and the historical, queries the independent status of their component elements prior to this mutual conditioning. Alternatively, there is the argument that to speak of some kind of autonomy, for two such phenomena, is to slip back into a tacit dualism again. These problems, or pseudo-problems about the relations between 'disciplines', plainly cannot be answered at this stage, because the 'established' conceptual means for this – observation languages, correspondence rules, theoretical schema – are inadequate even to a proper posing of the question.

The unwitting interaction of ideology and 'science' does not end here, however. Consequent upon which of the *two campus cultures* calls these neo-Kantian shots, either 'nature' or 'history' is accorded an ontological priority, understood in terms of ultimate determination or causality. And further, superimposed on this epistemic fallacy, is a tacit value stance which carries the implication that such ontological priority brings a moral primacy with it. So, *the naturalist* regards the order of nature as preceding the historical, existentially, as logically prior to it, and frequently as the source of fundamental moral precepts as well. To assume that the natural is ontologically prior to the historical is of course sheer nonsense. Time is a condition of all existents. To assume secondly, that what exists in nature is necessarily 'right', is a naturalistic fallacy. Finally, the fact that the natural order is known only 'through history', by subjects living through the medium of socially generated practices and technologies, is rarely considered at all here. The '*history man*' conversely, or woman of course, stands the argument on its head. Beginning with the assumed superiority of the moral or historical order, the Weberian world of meaningful action, she interests herself in the linear sequence from act, as cause, to material effect, and posits both the logical or causal and ontological or existential priority of 'enlightened' mind over matter. Yet there is no evidence from our cultural past that we as individuals necessarily learn from the experience of history, or more, that Reason learns from itself: the 20th century instantiates a barbarism equal to any. The historicist formula – 'nature = regress : history = progress' – is thus as empty as the naturalistic fallacy which implies its opposite.

Meanwhile, a hybrid of these two complacent caricatures of scholarship, sometimes finds advocacy among the left: self-styled '*materialist*' *feminists* so-called '*scientific*' *Marxists*, and others, who, while acclaiming the logical, existential and emancipatory primacy of the historical order, now remove the subject actor from it. And, while entertaining the dialectical mediation of 'natural' and 'historical' spheres in accord with the tenets of orthodoxy, concede final determination only to historically produced structures. This one-way dialectic is not merely an example of intellectual ineptitude, it is itself an ideological sleight of hand which preserves the ubiquitous patriarchal dual-

ism, and its crude commonsense, intact. Moreover, while these Marxists busy themselves with the vicissitudes of the economic factor, feminists who would trade with that model and reduce the analysis of sex specific power relations to it, find themselves properly hoisted. As materialists they claim to release the explanation of inequality from the machinery of deep structural biological causes and constraints, but the oppressive, the determination of 'biology', is evaporated only to have Ideology put in its place.

Counterposed to this, the feminist theorists of difference, who would draw on the possibility of active somatic forces, are labelled idealists or worse, 'bourgeois idealists'. This is because the latter are presumed to conduct their analysis from within a conceptual confinement to patriarchal discourse. Yet surely, it would be unfair to suggest that there are other kinds of theorising, namely histmat, which somehow remain unmollected by this potent presence. The following passage from Plaza exemplifies such concerns, and typically it works by setting up its opponent as a straw-woman:

. . . nature does not speak the difference, it supplies indications which we interpret as a function of social relations. The individual does not have a 'natural existence', he is always-already socialized, including in his 'biological irreducibility'. We shall not find true woman by eliminating the social from our questioning, because the social is always there, imposing its impressive construction . . . believing that we can economise on critical analyses by becoming attuned to the rhythms of our bodies, is to imprison ourselves totally in the patriarchal logic . . .⁸

Now, in terms of the prevailing thematic dichotomies this passage reveals some interesting features. Note how the natural order, the biological, is confidently absorbed by the *man-made* order of social relations. Note how the subject is referred to as *he*, masculine, even though woman is the topic addressed. Note the detached and self-validatory emphasis on visible, *specular processes* as the author accounts for the fabrication of sexuality; it is from indications observed that the social *produces* its imposing construction. Note that the subject here is nothing more than the *manipulated object* of an 'always-already' there system of ideology; not a subject in fact, but a fixed identity, a *static* and *positivised* category. Note the respectable and 'hard-hitting' invocation of critical *analyses* and the trivializing juxtaposition of this to musical rhythm; the *derisory reference* to the female body, cultural object of abuse par excellence. Note the heightening of this with the masochistic allusion to imprisonment which follows. It is a masculine identified text in every respect. Plaza herself is entirely enclosed, not only by the favourite dualisms of the patriarchal chain, but by a functionalism of the discursive order, on the one

hand, and the heady rhetoric of the relations of production, on the other. Her argument is replete with unexamined devices taken over lock, stock and barrel from the logics-in-use of the patriarchal constellation. Plaza is still joined to an idea of woman as fundamentally the same as man.

In the light of *the positivism dispute*, or rather the Frankfurt contribution to it, the critics of difference can be seen to be invariably crude and anachronistic identity theorists by inclination. Plaza's insistence on situating analysis in the *here and now*, what is *immediate*, is a further example of this, and it is shared by another feminist materialist, Delphy. Plaza's writing opposes the *reality* of the social, to *representations* of it. Delphy too, insists that any praxis which focuses on dismantling such representations avoids confronting the reality, *vide economics*, of woman's exploitation. For her:

... [such] analysis implies in fact that we must change not the reality of women's lives, but [merely] the subjective evaluation of this reality.⁹

The adoption of the simplistic Marxist-Leninist theory of ideology is only too apparent here. Ideological and material structures are treated literally as 'structures', concrete, distinct and mutually impenetrable. There is no understanding of dialectical mediation through consciousness: ideology and language are mere epiphenomena reflecting mode of production. For the positivist, of course, what is real must be visible, specularisable, and above all, manipulable.

The fetishized and hierarchical *separation of ideology and science* is also found in this feminist writing. Plaza and Delphy both characterize difference theorists, who emphasise the specificity of woman, as 'proto-feminist'. As if some 'epistemological break' had occurred during the development of feminism, marking off what is properly scientific from what is only preparatory. This false antithesis penetrates the Marxist-feminist analysis of discursive structures, with quite amazing results. Consider the fashionable objection to difference developed out of the Birmingham Cultural Studies project. The materialist analysis, according to Adams, Brown and others of the *m/f* collective, must show how sexuality is constructed by a multiplicity of social practices:

... the concept of social agent as opposed to the inevitably totalizing concept of the subject is introduced here to register our own primary theoretical concern with the construction of positions for agents and positions always being defined with respect to specific social relations or combinations thereof... The problem of responsibility is dispersed into the particular sites, positions, statuses and agents of definite practices.¹⁰

Predictably, the line here is that to introduce the notion of woman as conscious subjectivity, as the slogan, *the personal is the political* does, is to relapse into the banal, moralizing categories of everyday life with its prevalent ideological climate of bourgeois *humanism*. But this scrupulous desire not to hypostatize the subject, simply renews and reinvigorates the very cultural negation of woman as subject/person in her own right, which must be the prime focus of any feminist critique. The philosophical urge not to hypostatize subjectivity is nothing less than an extension of the common patristic drive to annihilation of 'the other', be it object, woman, nature or whatever. An alternative to this monopolistic technique would be to approach objectivity through a more fluid and dialectical logic, an historically and existentially sensitive one. Subjectivity might be conceived, for example, as subject-in-process, active, constituting, politically engaged.¹¹ There is something essentially repressive in the Marxist structuralist desire to overcome all traces of methodological individualism. It seems to correspond to the familiar masculine perception of the effective political and ideological sphere as inevitably macro, visible and public: a continuation in fact, of the suppressed reality of the micro-political world wherein the masculine ego is nourished and sustained by means of the psychological surplus-value exacted from feminine labours of all kinds.

Beyond the evil of ideological humanism however, waits yet another gorgon, her twin sister *essentialism*. This represents the intellectual tendency to assume the existence of unproblematic causalities, a priori and unconditional entities or substances. In the eyes of Plaza, Delphy and Adams, those women who hypothesize a simple irreducible, pre-social origin of difference in the feminine body, commit precisely this error. The fact is, that advocates of difference do not at any point argue for a pure, unproblematic, naturally grounded femininity; the polarization of the argument in this way is simply a fabrication of the rigid *dualist* polemics of their critics. Further, Adams considers that 'naturalistic' readings of sexuality quite arbitrarily 'privilege' one specific discourse, namely, the biological. Thus, when one applies the word 'reproduction', it should be in its 'correct' sense as 'social reproduction; of the ideological formation. But why are the *abstracted* and *asceptic* concepts of position, site or status, not perceived to be arbitrarily privileged? Specular terms such as these, carry a very powerful legitimacy along with them, and it is just this kind of 'pull' that Adams uses to give epistemic superiority to her 'always-already' there discursive order over and above any possible *materialism of the body*. According to the pragmatist Adams, sexuality must be understood as a *constructed* relation to *objects*, because it is only by taking such relations into account that any 'effective political strategy' can be generated. Surely to objectify 'the other' subject within a political transaction, is the final sell out of the ends of an emancipatory practice by the means. This stylish but scrupleless structural analysis of feminism leaves us with nothing

but a closed synchronic clockwork, for unless there is politico-moral inspiration from outside of the given order, let alone a subjective will to act, there can be no praxis at all.

The vivisectors of difference are not always as sophisticated as this. The *Questions feministes* manifesto, for example, under the predictable heading 'back to essences' states:

First we protected ourselves from the orthodox Left, which is on our right because it eliminates sex struggle. Now we must defend ourselves against a new Right: a new attack with the good old rhetoric on sex differences, but this time offered by women, which eliminates historical and dialectical materialism in order to give voice to the naked truth of women's eternal bodies . . . The very theme of difference, whatever the differences are represented to be, is useful to the oppressing group: . . . the fact that blacks have 'a sense of rhythm' while whites do not is irrelevant and does not change the balance of power . . .
12

Now, while *innate* difference is rejected both by liberals and materialists on principle, *acquired* difference is accepted as 'real'. But history has already demonstrated for us that materially produced difference, that which marks the proletariat off from those who own the means of production for example, is equally amenable to translation into domination. The existence of biologically related difference is not the only source of political hierarchization. If men, or more relevantly women, can be turned into prisoners of *nature*, they can just as readily be enslaved by their conditioning and objective circumstances to become prisoners of *history*. Nevertheless, for many feminists, an invocation of biologically mediated differences is tantamount to a revival of the old debate over race and I.Q. and so the ghost of Jensen is invoked. Hence, while progressive thinkers deem it admissible to concede of I.Q. or other variations *among* members of a given ethnic group, only a racist, it is argued, will entertain the possibility of any systematic variation *between* ethnic groups. If such difference *could be* demonstrated conclusively, and measurement procedures, let alone the spurious I.Q. concept itself, are certainly inadequate to the job at the moment, then such a demonstration would not of itself be racist however. What is racist, is *the assignation of different political rights and statuses to those who are judged inferior by a criterion of difference*. Similarly, to suggest that some fundamental and inalienable differences between the assorted sexes may exist, is not of itself sexist or potentially fascist. This is certainly a faulty deduction. The weakness in the 'materialist' objection however, is compounded by yet another misplaced analogy. Jensen was concerned with *quantitative* difference, which is particularly open to translation on to a scale of political

sub- or superordination. Feminist difference, given that we would be prepared to endorse it, describes a *qualitative* configuration. If Jensen's findings were received as justification for the continuing subordination of the wretched of the earth, the feminist advocates of difference speak to a new political order, where what has been suppressed in man by patriarchal culture and devalorised in woman, will be liberated. There is no parallel with Jensen here, a clear qualitative distinction stands between repressive violence and the violence of deconstruction exercised in the name of the oppressed.

In the lonely hour of the last instance, feminists find themselves truly encircled. Either they reject the effective materialism of a biological determination in the name of freedom, and then embrace a thorough going and equally ideological and constricting total causality of historical structures over and above the individual 'agent'. Or, they may open up their notions of determination and the dialectic to include (a) biology mediating the behaviour of (b) conscious historically located subjects, but, at the risk of capitulating to the corrupt semantics of the patriarchal dreamtime. The present argument takes up the second course but, by using the deconstructive capacity which is immanent to difference, attempts to displace and invert the mythical coherence of the 'woman as nature' allusion.

III

It is clear that the hierarchical distinction between natural and historical 'orders' and the conventional valuations of these is sustained only by a series of underhand devices. Laying this critique of academic and leftist scientism aside for the time however, a digression into 'science itself' seems to be called for in order to ask what 'hard evidence', if any, might be adduced in support of an organic basis for sexual difference. The predominant *specularity*, *splitting* and *manipulation* of reality, with ensuing linguistic *hierarchization* which go to make up patriarchal discourse, are very apparently at work in biology. In order to 'demonstrate' one must make 'analytically separate', 'design and control', locate 'operationalizable indicators', apply 'standard techniques', 'extricate' variables, formulate 'measures', 'categorize', 'scale', 'classify' and 'order'.

And yet the pure and perfect mono-causalism that this *disciplinary* and *instrumental* empiricism demands, is clearly inadequate to the explanation of sexual identity. Rather, it seems that this is an *overdetermined* process arising from a continuing *complementarity*, *fusion* and *interchange* of at least six classes of 'variable': chromosome type, genital indication, endocrine production, metabolically based behavioural traits, socialized role and preferred sex object type. These determinants likewise are not unidimensional factors but

express themselves along a continuum of potentials, except, of course, the arbitrary and uncomfortable cultural sex role dichotomy imposed over their perverse intersecting mesh. According to case study data, these forces, whose outcome is sexual identity, can exist in any particular combination and to any degree in any particular individual subject.¹³ *An indisputable and immutable sexual dualism thus does not hold up at an empirical level.* Again, not only is the ubiquitous knowledge stratification false at this level, but the human laboratory itself, is a battlefield for the would-be autonomous category of the 'biological object', on the one hand, and the all pervasive socio-political presence of the 'knowing subject', on the other. Finally, the 'standardized techniques' and their ever so social plausibility mechanisms, if Kuhn has anything to say, challenge the very same positivist laws of analytical separability during the legitimation of consensual science as well. Is the persistent, yet inadequate, thrust towards firm positive knowledge nothing but fraud then? Has an alternative, the obverse of this naive, one dimensional rationalism been culturally *suppressed as a way of knowing?*

What would such a method look like? It might, for example, apprehend its telos in a *concentric* rather than direct scan; the object being experienced from several tangential points, kaleidoscopically, as it were: such a knowledge being based not on mere appearance, formal visual properties, but derived from the more diffuse *kinaesthetic* modality of touch. An emphatic, cyclic, *reflexive logic* is supposed, without incisive categorical boundaries between the knowing subject-in-process, object, and its representation. The artificial dualisms of masculine and feminine, history and nature, signifier and signified would be replaced by a *metabolism* of subject and field; the very body of the noun being dissolved in the liquid realism of *non-identify*: a *both/and* logic rather than either/or, contradiction would be enjoyed. Nor any qualms about 'objectivity', for a new 'definition' of it is offered. This is not so much anti-system as a way of coming to a *moving comprehension* of the whole in all its moments. There would be no interest in control, invariant factors, functions and expedient significance levels. A knowledge of the texture and timbre of qualities in their intricate perversity is sought, a communion with the object rather than its penetration by the divisive agency of instrumental reason.

Tacking back to 'the privileged discipline' of 'natural' science though, and again, leaving aside the shaky credentials of its 'always-already hard' data, what are the reported characteristics of the 'female' constitution repeatedly said to include? Besides the cyclic and labile rather than continuous pattern of gonadotrophic hormone activity, a precocious linguistic facility is recorded; less acuity of spatio-visual and manipulative skills, but greater sensory acuity in the modalities of touch, hearing, smell, taste and pain; finally a global and empathic rather than focussed analytic orientation to the immediate environment, 'field dependence', is described. How do these miscellaneous

observations vie with what theorists of difference have to say about the 'feminine'? Encounter Daly, reeling in horror at the dissection of reality, the pitting of subject over and against object; her call for a rich and multi-sensory awareness, woman's syn/gynaesthesia, as she names it:

Journeying centreward is Self-centering movement in all directions. It erases implanted pseudo dichotomies between the Self and 'other' reality . . . ¹⁴

Woman's consciousness, she writes, takes the form of a:

. . . *ludic cerebration*. This is the free play of intuition in our own space giving rise to thinking that is vigorous, informed, multi-dimensional, independent, creative, tough. It arises from the lived experience of be-ing.¹⁵

Irigaray meanwhile, tells us:

. . . all Western discourse presents a certain isomorphism with the masculine sex: the privilege of unity, form of the self, of the visible, of the specularisable, of the erection (which is the becoming in a form). Now this morphologic does not correspond to the female sex . . . the female sex would be, above all, made up of '*two lips*' . . . they are neither identifiable nor separable one from the other. Besides, instead of that being the visible or the form which constitutes the dominant criteria, it is the touch which for the female sex seems to be primordial. . . .¹⁶

Specular culture is based on the notion of unity, presence, identity; the tangible positive. The female morphologic suggests a principle of non-identity, an absolute defiance of the classic, patristic Aristotelian rules of Identity, Contradiction and Excluded Middle; the old logic of 'this' and not 'that'. A subtle notion of non-identity, sensible to the comprehension of subject and of object not as 'thing', but as flow and *continuum*. From this point, the static formal logical mode, instrumental rationality and the productivist ideology, as mutually reinforcing monomarks can be recognised for what they are:

. . . to place genitality in a privileged position amounts in fact to according a privileged status to the values which unify, but also the values of *production*, the values of 'making' and with the aim of bringing to light something visible and which would be proof of the efficiency of 'making' . . .
. . . Western thought has been dominated by the physics and

mechanics of solid matter whereas the feminine refers much more to a mechanics of fluids, which has barely been elaborated.¹⁷

It is possible to interpret this radical *difference* in several ways. If one assumes that the 'natural' human sexual disposition is inherently a cluster of *bimorphic* potentials, the generous concentric sensibility can be seen as residual in the patriarchal male, latent but actualisable under certain conditions.¹⁸ So described, the so named 'feminine' morphologic simply mirrors the obverse, alien or unconscious and repressed side of the pre-dominant patriarchal form of objectification and its highly reified order. Given this reading, difference would appear to be reducible back to an originary, polymorphism in 'both sexes', a matter of degree, so to speak. Irigaray's text, despite a heavy emphasis on the specificity of woman, does support this reading:

... is there not in what has been historically constituted the 'unconscious', some censored, repressed, element of the feminine. Certain functional criteria attributed to the unconscious, like non-contradiction, contiguity, etc. are, I think, close to [what is called] female sexuality and language ...¹⁹

If, on the other hand, one would play up this difference and link the 'supplementary' morphologic with the fusional and nurturant 'female' phases of the genito-endocrine continua, as Rich does, for example, then a philosophical position is presented which occasions difference once and for all in woman's particular biological maturation. A third possibility would be to combine these two theories of determination arguing for a complex and continuous overdetermination of femininity as *both* originary or natural *and* secondary or compounded by historical pressures. However, in terms of political rights, it is irrelevant whether such traits might be found more often in people labelled 'females' or in 'males'. *What is pertinent to our collective emancipation, is that they represent natural human capacities which have not been historically objectified and valued in the formation of an oppressively specular and exclusively 'masculine' culture.*

The arch scholasticism of the debate whether difference is naturally or historically constituted demands closer scrutiny. The tie between woman and nature is one that not only Marxist feminists, but even theorists of difference themselves will bend over backwards from making. It's not a surprising fact. The misogynist ambivalence towards the natural functions of the female body is well established in the feminist literature. De Beauvoir's simultaneous assertions and denials surrounding 'anatomic destiny', 'the infirmity of the abdomen', 'the curse of femininity' and so on, have had a good bit to do with it too. But now, even Daly's archivist par excellence of masculine resentment appears to be running with the pack:

. . . in their frantic fixation upon what they lack, biophilic [life affirming] energy, and in their fanatic indifference to the destruction they wreak upon the Other – women and Mother Nature – the phallic-ologists coalesce. Their corporate merger is the Mystical Body of Knowledge which is their gynocidal gynaecology.²⁰

So far so good, but then:

Not only disparagement, but also glorification of woman's procreative organs are expressions of male fixation and fetishism. These disproportionate attitudes are also demonically deceptive, inviting women to react with mere derivative fetishism, instead of deriding these fixations and focusing on the real 'object' of male envy, which is female creative energy in *all* of its dimensions . . .²¹

Irigaray displays a similar inhibition at times:

And to try to discover a possible imaginary for women through the re-touching movement of two lips, does not signify a *regressive* return to the anatomical, nor to a concept of 'nature', and nor to a recall of genital norm . . . Rather, it is a matter of re-opening the auto-logical and tautological circle of representative systems – and their discourses – so that women may speak of their sex.²²

Her own exclusion of 'the natural' is yet another instance of the far-reaching influence of patriarchal meta theory on feminism, with its bifurcation of man-producer, and the rest – nature, woman, body, invisible substrata of production to be managed and controlled. The ideological suppression, schizophrenic that it is, assumes the by now familiar form of a double-think, and this can be seen operating at several levels here. The *first rationalization* assumes that it were philosophically more convincing or at least acceptable, for a theorist, especially if she bears only the miserable accreditation of a woman theorist, to define difference in terms of a 'spiritual' or intellectual capacity. A *second rationalization* dresses up difference in the guise of an elusive 'existential project or search', hence Irigaray avoids the 'reductionist trap' of biological essentialism by writing of woman's essence as 'not yet being'. A *third rationalization* is offered by readers of Irigaray who would bypass brute animal force by suggesting that her references to feminine sexuality have simply a 'metaphorical' relation to the repressed unconscious discourse. Finally, a *fourth rationalization* seems to be lurking behind all the

others. It is a species of salon mentality, a drawing room delicacy that prefers not to mention what goes on under the petit-coat. To recall Rich's words:

The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit . . . ²³

Given all this, it is one thing to recognise the very many qualifications which must be applied to a reading of the literature in this field, it is another to arbitrarily dismiss 'the mammalian function' of the human female because culturally this is accorded little value, or for liberated women it is simply *infra dig*. The sensitivity of feminism to the possibility of an irreducible difference arising from the reproductive process is understandable, but it should be expendable at this stage. If one accepts a dialectical explanation, the reciprocal modification of genetics and environment, interaction of natural and cultural forces, as the better investigators and feminist analysts do, then it is incoherent to turn around and rule the exploration of this complicated phenomenon out of bounds. Against the scientism of its comrades, a genuinely dialectical approach like that found in the Frankfurt writing, recognises the interchange and *complementarity* of 'subject and object', of designated 'material and ideological' spheres and draws on an implicit model of linguistic overdetermination in the dissolution of falsely contrived cultural identities and polarities. It sets up a technique for displacement and inversion of privileged discourses in order to unravel the convoluted semantics of gender; has a keen awareness of the duplicity of ideological constellations and a notion of woman, whatever she may be, as certainly *de-naturalised* by patriarchal discourse. The so called 'natural woman', the 'feminine', is understood merely as a fabricated *ideal type*, a de-valourised persona which having become reified with time, is historically taken for granted, even by herself, as *second-nature*.²⁴ Far from envisaging some correct and fixed formula for femininity, this analysis attempts to expose the intricacy of woman's constitution within a culture she has seemingly contributed so little towards 'producing': 'her nature', and self-understanding, strictured by layer on layer of superimposed and double-binding mythical themes.

Consequently, when Irigaray disparages the 'regressive' return to 'nature' she stumbles on the patriarchal grid, forgetting precisely the message of her own analysis, the need for woman to be able to speak for, and somehow from, herself.²⁵ Irigaray loses this precisely when she most needs it and so cancels the critical touch of her own critique. As she, herself, says:

There is no feminine metalanguage. The masculine can partly look at itself, speculate about itself, represent itself and describe itself for what it is, whilst the feminine . . . cannot

describe itself from outside in *formal terms* except by identifying itself with the masculine, thus by losing itself.²⁶

Precisely because woman's effort to speak has been repressed since the dawn of linear time, it has no substance of its own, no formal 'visible' nouns. Whatever discourse she chooses to express herself 'in' must be second-hand, second-nature, and it will distort and falsify her experience. Irigaray herself succumbs to this even while attempting to describe it. But, what her analysis has shown for the most part is that while woman's language is dumb, when it comes to constructing its own thesaurus, it has nevertheless inflicted its borrowed content with its own perverse syntax. The characteristic structure of 'feminine' thought has always, mirage like, insinuated itself across and behind the man-made void; the linguistic front for a consciousness that has lost all sensuous connection to its original mater-real core. The invaluable message of Irigaray's recovery of the feminine is nothing less than this human capacity for dialectical thought: in her 'permissible' difference, woman becomes the permanent practice of *negative dialectic*, the living embodiment of *transgression*:

She is not infinite, but no more is she a unity, letter, figure, number in a series, proper noun, unique object, (of a) perceivable world, simple ideality of an intelligible whole, entity of a substance, etc. This incompleteness of her form, of her morphology permits her, at each instant, to become something else . . .²⁷

IV

Patriarchal ideology pulsates like an octopus: if the feminist would avoid the corrupt embrace of the tentacle of difference with its image of woman as *other*, the tentacle of *same* still promises to draw her to its heart. In the face of this *double mystification*, feminism has had two options on which to build a political strategy. First, it can go ahead and posit woman as radically other, based on an attempted reconstruction of what is fundamentally female, take up the search for origins and flirt with the traditional patriarchal ascription of 'natural' womanhood. Or second, it can nominate difference as totally socially contrived, take its legitimation from the here and now, what is *immediate, valorised* and *masculine*, and fall under the tentacle which tears out the specificity of woman to urge that she is simply the same as man, only less so. The first tack is rejected particularly by Marxist feminists for its essentialism, in that irreducible female qualities are postulated. The fact that these may exist in residual form in the male, and in any case, are always historically mediated is overlooked. Nor is it understood that the second and preferred strategy, which pragmatically assimilates qualities of the ascriptively masculine to its *double de-natured ego*, demonstrates a parallel essentialism at

its root; an adoption of the naturalistic phall-acy which these feminists are blind to because of their latent identitarian adherence to the patriarchal ethic.

Sometimes the opposition to difference rests on practical grounds. If one concedes otherness at the level of nature, the argument goes, woman's fertility for example, this will only subserve her long standing alienation from the *productive* sphere and hidden exploitation within the domestic unit. Yet this point rests on an obvious non sequitur. There is no logical reason to assume that the *de-valorised* act of *reproduction*, and the morphologic which may sustain this, is intrinsically connected with 'woman's lot', activities such as cooking and cleaning. The issue here, is really the concern that under the prevailing modes of production and reproduction, where a woman may have no other resources than that of bondage to a gainfully employed spouse, she is often obliged in her state of forced labour, to bear children in return for economic subsistence. Yet there is the possibility of a time when she might actively determine the conditions of her existence, and in such a society, practise the choice to mother in accord with her capacity and desire. Such is the inheritance of historical materialism however, that few feminists are able to envisage this in a context of political emancipation. True victims of the patriarchal constellation and its fetish for 'making' and 'having', they have forgotten that the reproduction of life itself, not the production of 'visible' goods, is 'always already' *the first historical act*. This point, in its turn, is seen as a concession to 'feminine masochism'; an objection which again self destructively accepts a tacitly masculine definition of what it is to suffer. Surely to excise the womb is equally a masochistic act?

Not only does much contemporary feminist policy, especially the local Australian variety, display a silent admiration for the complacent self evaluation of the *productivist problematic*, ultimately, the so called radical objections to difference are founded on *petit-masculine*, and hence *reformist*, premises. This feminist would exchange the mythical second nature of her primary socialization for an updated but equally deferential one, manufactured around instrumental and individualistic standards of male attainment. What is more, these quite ad hoc cultural criteria would be imposed across the board in the name of equality for all. This model of emancipation, which arrives as women relinquish the sense of their common difference, simply accelerates the entropic, fissional divide and rule of the prevailing hegemony. Instead of ignoring, what have become with 'history' uniquely female 'natural' capacities, it is crucial to rediscover, revalue and reintegrate in culture these hitherto neglected dimensions of experience if a real social alternative is to be made.

If the character of patriarchal ideology is such that it dissociates and *privileges the specular* from other sensory modes, locks consciousness in the *either/*

or, imposes a constellation which requires the ab-ject subject to process experience oppositionally, then feminism's assimilation of this cognitive style is total capitulation. In working from within the rigid ideological dichotomies of this thought jacket and positivising their political stance in terms of what is immediately valued, the 'materialist' adversaries of difference confuse the *appearance* of liberation for its *essence*. Their feminist platform is historically static and undialectical. *By rejecting the arbitrary patriarchal inclusion of woman within nature, this feminism joins forces with that same discourse and its destructive exclusion of nature from within man.* It turns its back on what is extra cultural among human faculties; the possibility of a form of objectification marginal to the 'production' of patriarchal discourse.

To introduce a specific essence or otherness into discussion of the woman question, does not have to mean that conventional role stereotypes are accepted uncritically, any more than discussing woman in terms of sameness does. A thorough going and consistently dialectical analysis of sex/gender politics, premised on deconstructive techniques, is guarantee against that. Such an exercise of difference, defiant of the categorical strictures which bolster the integrity of the patriarchal grid -- biology/culture, body/mind, sense/intellect, woman/man, regress/progress, other/self -- would show how these supposedly separate orders mutually interpenetrate, metabolise and transform one another. This is where the concept of difference in its *libidinal and epistemic continuity*, offers feminism the foundation for a third political strategy; an ecological one, which transcends the foreclosed quality of the earlier two.²⁸ The difference through which we live our lives now falls short of a genuine complementarity because the ideological constellation which defines it, is not only oppositional, it is *both* symmetrical *and* asymmetrical or skewed, at the same time. Femininity is engendered in culturally negative, under-productive roles. Woman's re-presentation, is a contradiction in terms, for she is simply absent, other supplementary, denied by a discourse which perpetuates her erasure. If woman, or rather 'the feminine' is nothing but the embodiment of non-identity and transgression, a 'movement of play permitted by the lack or absence of a centre',²⁹ then she should take up this metaposition, the somatic and symbolically grounded difference which is 'given' her, and turn it towards a political practice which de-centres 'the giving' order. The second, imitative, 'masculinising' wave of feminism has reached its limit.

NOTES

1. As far as possible the terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used in this paper where *historically produced* or culturally defined gender types are implied, while the terms *female* and *male* are used where reference is made to *biologically located* sex differences. A central purpose of the paper however, is to break down all such

dualisms as hard and fast categories by emphasising their reciprocal conditioning. The designations *woman* and *man*, are commonly employed to describe a blend of nature and culture, biology and history, but confusingly, these must carry not only an *immanent* or everyday ideological sense, but a *transcendent* or potentially critical one as well. Rather than invent neologisms to cope with this semantic bifurcation, day to day ideological usage will be denoted throughout this paper by inverted commas.

2. Rich, A., *Of Woman Born*, New York: Bantam, 1977, pp. 21-22; Daly, M., *Gyn/ Ecology*, London: Women's Press, 1979, pp. 23-24; Irigaray, L., *Co sexe qui n'en pas un*, Paris: Minuit, 1977, p. 55 and *Speculum*, Paris: Minuit, 1974, p. 202. (Translations from Plaza, see note 8 below); Duras, M., from a selection of the French writing recently become available in English translation with Marks, E. and de Courtivron, I., (ed.), *New French Feminisms*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, p. 238. See also the comprehensive overview and celebratory appraisal of the new attitude in Eisenstein, H. and Jardine, A., (eds.) *The Future of Difference*, Boston: Barnard College Women's Centre, 1980.
3. Editorial collective of *Questions feministes*. 'Variations on Common Themes', reprinted in Marks and de Courtivron (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 214.
4. The play of meanings here is deliberate and perverse. On the epistemological practice of *difference/differance* as *deconstruction, erasure, negative dialectic*, see Derrida, J., *Writing and Difference*, Bass, A., (transl.), Chicago University Press, 1978 and Adorno, T., *Negative Dialectics*, Ashton, E. (transl.), London: Routledge, 1973. The focus of Derrida's attack is the western metaphysics of *presence*. For a development of this and other commonalities between the critical theory of the Frankfurt school and post-structuralism, see Salleh, K., 'On the dialectics of signifying practice', *Thesis Eleven*, 1982a, 5. My paper 'Dialectics, problematics', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1983,13 provides a general introduction to dialectical methods in social theory.
5. The renunciation of the senses was originally linked to patriarchy by Freud, S., *Moses and Monotheism*, Strachey, J., (ed.), London: Hogarth Press, 1974, p. 90. The idea is elaborated in Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Penguin, 1973 and turned into trenchant epistemology critique by Marcuse, H., *One Dimensional Man*, London: Abacus, 1972. An independent analysis which converges with both the Frankfurt position and Derrida's project, is Irigaray's treatment of *specular* rationalism. Compare Irigaray, *op. cit.* where the adjective *specular* is used to describe the unique validity attributed by patriarchal cultures to knowledge derived from the visual sensory mode.
6. The term *constellation* representing the multiple determinations at work on a concept at any given moment, is from Adorno, 1973, *op. cit.*
7. The feminist elucidation of these two problematics, so crucial to an understanding of the woman question, has not yet advanced very far. Some remarks appear in my papers 'Of Portnoy's Complaint and Feminist Problematics', *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 1981, 17 and 'nature in trouble', *ANZJS*, 1982b, 18. Freud's insights into *productivism* are worth noting. He believed women were 'less creative' than men because they did not sublimate so much; . . . *with every tool man is perfecting his own organs*: Freud, S., *Civilization and its Discontents*, J. Strachey (ed.), New York: Norton, 1961, p. 37.
8. Plaza, M., 'Phallic power and the psychology of woman', *Ideology and Consciousness*, 1978, 1, 4, pp. 6-7.
9. Delphy, C., *The Main Enemy*, London: W.R.R.C., 1977, p. 38.

10. Adams, P. and Minson, J., 'The 'Subject' of Feminism', *m/f*, 1978, 2, pp. 52-53.
11. The concept of subject-in-process is Kristeva's. For a simple English language introduction to her work see Kristeva, J., 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *T.L.S.*, 1973, October 12, 1249-50. There is a discussion of the relevance of this to both the crisis in Marxism and to a feminist sociology of knowledge and practice in Salleh, 1982a, op. cit.
12. Editorial Collective of *Questions feministes*, Marks and Courtivron, op. cit., pp. 218-9.
13. Two accessible accounts of this material can be found in: Lloyd, B., and Archer, J. (eds.), *Exploring Sex Differences*, London: Academic Press, 1976 and Lambert, H., 'Biology and Equality', *Signs*, 1978, 4, 1. A somewhat uncritical review of research in the field is presented in the film *The Fight to be Male*, (A.B.C. television, August 1980). I owe my own formulation to the very excellent seminars on the biology and psychology of sex/gender given by Anne Oakley, John Forrester, Denise Riley and others at Social and Political Studies, University of Cambridge, Trinity Term, 1981.
14. Daly, op. cit., p. 6.
15. *Ibid*, p. 23.
16. Irigaray, L., 'Woman's Exile', *Ideology and Consciousness*, 1977, 1, pp. 64-65.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 66-71 (my italics).
18. These conditions are discussed in my paper 'On the dialectic of signifying practice', op. cit. Irigaray's account of the feminine morphologic bears some affinity to Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora as locus of extra social drives. The semiotic designates the subjective process which is logically and temporally prior to the constitution of the ego in the symbolic or cultural medium. Kristeva, J., *Polyogue*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977, and *About Chinese Women*, Burrows, A., (transl.), New York: Urizen, 1977. A parallel between the two theorists is developed by Feral, J., 'Antigone and the Irony of the Tribe', *diacritics*, 1978, Sept. The present position attempts to resolve Irigaray's emphasis on the specificity of the female morphologic with Kristeva's assumption of an original human bisexuality.
19. Irigaray, 1977, op. cit., p. 70, (my addition).
20. Daly, op. cit., p. 60.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 10 (my italics).
22. Irigaray, L., 'Misere de la psychanalyse', *Critique*, 1977, 365, pp. 876-97: translation from Morris, M., 'A-mazing Grace.', *Intervention*, 1982, 16, p. 88 (my italics).
23. Rich, op. cit., pp. 21-22.
24. See Adorno, 1973, op. cit., and commentary by Salleh, 1981, op. cit.
25. The question of 'who' speaks, 'when' and from 'where', is a very real issue for any academic feminist who would apply the metalanguage of her 'discipline' to analysis of woman's predicament. She must engage with the jargon 'impersonally', in order to communicate her message in a way that is plausible to colleagues, yet even so, she is attempting to deconstruct those same structures of legitimation in order to demonstrate both their oppressiveness and their-ultimate fallibility. It is a fine line to tread but there is no alternative unless it is separatism. The problem pervades the present paper, needless to say. Similarly, in order to con-

front the dualist thematic, its prevailing dichotomies must constantly be drawn into the argument, but this should be recognised for what it is -- a contamination of the text and peripheral to the dialectical structure of the argument-in-process.

26. Trigaray quoted and translated by Plaza, *op. cit.*, p. 65 (my italics).
27. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
28. Salleh, K., 'Deeper than Deep Ecology: the eco-fem connection', in D. Bennett, (ed.), *Environment, Ethics and Ecology*, Australian National University Press: 1984 (forthcoming), explores this political convergence.
29. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

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