

# Importing Feminist Criticism

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'You are a feminist, aren't you?' It is surely a mark of the many achievements of the post-60s feminist movement that this question has to be accounted for in our practice as citizens and as academics in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> However, as yet another sign of our times, when it comes to defining what exactly we should be doing as Brazilian academic feminists in the late 90s the question becomes so complicated that one feels like giving it up. And this difficulty is, I think, part of what feminism has not been able to achieve.

It all began, we remember, in high hopes. Writing in 1970 in what came to be considered the 'first major book of feminist criticism', *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett set the agenda thus: 'As the largest alienated element in our society, and because of their numbers, passion, and length of oppression, its largest revolutionary base, women might come to play a leadership part in social revolution quite unknown before in history'.<sup>2</sup>

As we know only too well, things have not happened quite like this yet. And in our post-utopian moment, it doesn't really look as if there is much hope for radical change in the near future. But this is also another reason for us to be more interested than ever in feminist theory. Like all emancipatory theory, the aim of feminist theorists is to bring about a social reality in which their theories will no longer be essential and, after a while, not even intelligible. As Terry Eagleton puts it:

All emancipatory theory thus has built into it a kind of self-destruct device, and moves under the sign of irony. In the just society there would be no need for theorists to engage in the laborious expositions of the social mechanisms by which a group of individuals comes systematically to dominate another, since people would be horrified or incredulous at the very thought this could happen.<sup>3</sup>

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1 For an overview of Brazilian feminist movements in English, see Sarti, Cynthia, 'The Panorama of Feminism in Brazil', *New Left Review*, 173, Jan. Feb., 1989, 75-90.

2 Millett, Kate, *Sexual Politics*, New York, Doubleday, 1970, 363.

3 Eagleton, Terry, *The Significance of Theory*, Oxford and Cambridge, Blackwell, 1990, 33-34.

Meanwhile we could do worse than try to identify the theories that are more likely to help bring about their own destruction in a just social order.

This discriminatory exercise is a particularly relevant task for Brazilian academics. Having followed the familiar structural path of former colony-nowadays-peripheral-country, Brazil has always imported the ideas through which we try to make sense out of our particular lot in the international distribution of gains and losses. This need not be either good or bad but it is certainly a historical fact of our intellectual life. We have witnessed both the uncritical importation of ideas simply because they are fashionable and the fertile recourse to foreign ideas to help Brazilians understand the peculiarities of life on the periphery of capitalism.

Among Brazilian intellectuals, Roberto Schwarz<sup>4</sup> has come the closest to explaining the complex of reasons that determine the flux of misplaced ideas into Brazil. One of the things I have learned from his work is that there might be a way of making productive use of our particular positionality in Western ideological life: once the ideas we import - which may well be ideologies-as-false-consciousness in their place of origin - fail to describe, even falsely, the reality they purport to explain, they can reveal more clearly their ideological underpinnings. Thus there might be a way in which we can, by submitting the ideas we import to critical scrutiny, and more crucially, by testing them against our crude reality, contribute to a clearer assessment of their possibilities. A blunt way of putting this would be to say that walking the streets of São Paulo nowadays and being exposed to the appalling contrasts of seeing a beggar banging at the closed window of a BMW, it is very difficult to believe that all men/women are created equal. This ideology might have fared better when we could still think of Brazil as the land of opportunity. Given the new globalized world order, this is no longer the case.

This is the frame of reference in which I want to examine the importation of feminist theories to Brazil. As a teacher of English and American literature and, lately, more and more, of theories to Brazilian graduate and postgraduate students, it is part of my job to mediate between the ideas being developed in the Anglo-American academy and Brazilian intellectual life. It is then part of my job requirements to learn from the mistakes of the past and discriminate among the ideas we import.

I am well aware that one has got to be very careful while conducting this discriminatory exercise especially in times such as ours, when emancipatory theories, and thus the social movements they aim to clarify and support, are going through times of defeat and recoil, under siege either by the familiar

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4 Schwarz, Roberto, *Misplaced Ideas*, London/New York, Verso, 1992.

rhetoric of abuse or by the less familiar, and perhaps more dangerous because more insidious, rhetoric of the impossibility of substantive change. I am not sure how to deal with the latter, but I am positive that any contrary action will have to be collective.

As for the abuse, it may also have the pernicious effect of making us stop questioning and clarifying points among ourselves for fear of sounding like the opposition. No feminist, indeed no seriously committed intellectual, would want to align with the likes of a Dinesh D'Souza who, funded by a right wing foundation, wrote a nasty report on what he calls 'The Illiberal Imagination' describing feminist work on American campi as 'esoteric, vulgar, dogmatic, so full of political energy and yet ultimately futile'.<sup>5</sup>

For my part, I take the exactly opposite stand. I believe it is the very richness, variety and crucial relevance of feminist criticism that enables its critical examination. The main thrust in this brief analysis is to see whether my particular positionality in a peripheral country in the so called global village can help illuminate those points in some recent feminist criticism that are more likely to contribute to a more progressive practice. Of course this parameter of the progress in practice is something I also learnt from feminism as it has surely been 'part of the feminist dream to make feminist agitation unnecessary'.<sup>6</sup>

When talking about trends in feminist criticism I suppose it has become traditional (!) to follow the standard academic classification of feminist positions as liberal, radical or socialist/materialist. But once they try to describe situationally specific positions, those labels mean slightly different things in different environments. At the risk of oversimplification - but then there must still be a way of talking without introducing a thousand and one qualifications - I have chosen to retell specific encounters I had with those different trends and how useful they proved to be to my own practice as a reader, as a teacher and, of course, as a firm believer in the potentialities and in the necessity of social change.

Few positions can sound more attractive than the liberal ones defended by Annette Kolodny in her celebrated 1980 article 'Dancing through the Minefield'. Reviewing 'the fast and furious pace of inquiry' in the 1970s, she avers that the 'diversity of that inquiry easily outstripped all efforts to define feminist literary criticism as either a coherent system or a unified set of methodologies. Under its wide umbrella, everything has been thrown into

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5 D'Souza, Dinesh, *Illiberal Education: the Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, New York, Free, 1991, 210.

6 Stuart, Andrea, 'Feminism: Dead or Alive?' in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Rutherford, Jonathan (ed.), London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 29.

question: our established canons, our aesthetic criteria, our reading habits, and most of all, ourselves as critics and readers'.<sup>7</sup> She then goes on to provide a summary outline of the scope of feminist criticism at the time, showing how it was steadily moving from a position that involved 'exposing the sexual stereotyping of women', in both literature and literary criticism to 'beginning to record new choices in a new literary history' (144).

Her outline does not differ much from Showalter's<sup>8</sup> by now classical account of the main areas of feminist work, or of Stimpson's<sup>9</sup> more recent mapping. By reading them one does get to understand the meaning of the expression 'Girls, we have come a long way!'. They all highlight the multiplicity and the very real achievements of feminist criticism.

Kolodny and Showalter emphasize three main areas of work: 1) the exposure of the misogyny of literary practice, ranging from the stereotyped images of women to the exclusions and omissions in a male-constructed canon. Showalter calls this the properly *feminist critique* and points out how this kind of work has actively promoted the return to circulation of previously unknown works, thus demonstrating women had a 'literature of our own' and promoting the establishment of a female countercanon. 2) the construction of a female framework for the analysis of women's experience, focusing on the examination of the specificity of women's creativity as a specialized discourse, making visible a world of female culture, the task of gynocritics. Kolodny adds to this 3) the study of a particularly feminine language, *l'écriture féminine*, so central to the work of French feminist criticism.

Drawing on the central metaphor of mapping, Stimpson calls our attention to the continuities and expansions from the 70s into the 90s. She points out the continuation or complementing of gynocritics by the charting of cultural representations of gender, of patterns of masculinity and femininity, the task Alice Jardine calls gynesesis, and includes the activities of denouncing patterns of masculine dominance and exposing the unreliability of maps that 'misconstrue gender issues'. Finally Stimpson points out the overall contributions of feminism to the necessity of exercising a 'stimulating vigilance about the processes of map making themselves' (251).

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7 Kolodny, Annette, 'Dancing through the Minefield' in *The New Feminist Criticism*, Showalter, Elaine, (ed.), New York, Pantheon Books, 1985, 145.

8 Showalter, Elaine, 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' (1979) in *The New Feminist Criticism*, 125-143.

9 Stimpson, Catharine, 'Feminist Criticism' in Greenblatt, Stephen and Gunn, Gilles, *Redrawing the Boundaries*, New York, The Modern Language Association, 1992, 251-270.

If we turn from these useful theoretical mappings to the critical practice they chart we begin to understand the accomplishments of feminist criticism and how much there is in this tradition to be learned from and to be taught to our students, thus contributing to the continuation of successful efforts. There is very little objection to the introduction of women writers in foreign literatures syllabi. The problem is slightly more perceptible in Brazilian literature where the kind of arguments reported in Anglo-American feminist criticism can crop up: why not teach the old great male writer's canon? It is precisely at this point that feminist theory can help clarify the terms of the argument, demonstrating the power structures that really operate in canon formation. But on the whole, and judging by twenty years of practice, I would say that Brazilian universities tend to be more open to change than American or British universities. The reasons for this remain to be analyzed: maybe the leftist leaning of most Brazilian intellectuals is part of the explanation, or, the grimmer prospect, this could simply be a case of society not putting any pressure on academic activities, viewed as alien to concrete social issues.

Whatever the case may be, in the concrete classroom or postgraduate seminar situation, we have to turn to an examination of the socio-political outlook informing those descriptions of feminist criticism, its objects and aims. It is at this point that we begin to doubt their ability to help bring about a situation in which they will no longer be necessary. Or, in other words, when we turn from the question of 'what to do' to the other necessary question to be directed to any avowedly committed theory of 'why we do it' we begin to establish some grounds for dissension.

Both Kolodny's and Stimpson's positions presuppose the existence of a democratic society where all we need is to learn and teach each other that all voices should be equally heard and valued. This is hardly tenable in the American context. In Brazil, where inequality is the rule, this is outright idealistic. Stimpson ends her essay by claiming feminist criticism should take into account the 'multiplicity of tongues and discourses' and she approvingly quotes Mary Jacobus's contention that feminist criticism should be a movement, 'a getting together, and getting across... its itinerary incomplete, its destination deferred' (267). Similarly, Kolodny believes that feminists should firmly side with pluralists and concludes that 'our task is to initiate nothing less than a playful pluralism, responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none...' (161).

Since she is not a naive reader or critic, Kolodny concedes there might be some difficulty in retaining this pluralist stance: 'The very idea of pluralism seems to threaten a kind of chaos for the future of literary inquiry while at the same time it seems to deny the hope of establishing some basic conceptual model which can organize all data - the hope that always begins any analytical exercise' (161).

Looking back from the vantage point of the late 90s, after the impact of post-structuralism, this does not seem to be the fundamental problem in her enticing defense of pluralism. We have been taught to despair of any overall perspective guiding our inquiry. Indeed we have been theoretically forbidden to have a totalizing stance. However the main problem in retaining this pluralistic stance is not the fear of chaos but the false assessment it entails of the concrete socio-historical conditions of the women's movement and, more to the point here, of feminist literary criticism as one of its 'many academic arms'. No one would want to defend reductionism or dogma, or, as Kolodny puts it, a 'party line', but surely both Stimpson and Kolodny seem damagingly to underestimate the real structures of the world we live in. This has of course consequences for their evaluations of criticism. They fail to take into account the fact that like all types of secular criticism, feminist literary criticism is in the world and in our world so far, be it in Kolodny's and Stimpson's first world or my own and my students' third, the concrete socio-historical conditions preclude pluralism which demands we reach some sense of equality - pluralism among non-equals has historically meant, at its worse, capitulation to the most powerful and, at its best, the endless proliferation of diversities.

This is already the case in some of the responses to Kolodny's essay where women criticized the absence, in her pluralistic sisterhood, of black and of lesbian feminist criticism.<sup>10</sup> This endless proliferation of diversities seems to be a characteristic of our fragmented and fragmentary times, one that seems to corroborate the impossibility of radical change. The plea for one way of reading for each sub-group seems more conducive to disjunction than to any sort of collective action that might lead to change - as such it is one of the most suitable ideologies at the service of maintaining the status quo. If, as a teacher, I failed to point this out to my students I would certainly be stimulating them to contribute one more variety to this pluralistic fantasy land, namely Brazilian feminist criticism, struggling for its place among the equivalent varieties.

I would of course want Brazil to develop a body of feminist criticism concentrating on the localized manifestation of gender trouble in Brazil. It is just that unless we learn how to think of the national in terms of its interconstitutive relation to the international, of gender oppression as another instance of an oppressive social order, we risk turning feminist criticism into another item in the current marketplace of theories, into one more optional reading code among many equivalent others.

The main 'attraction' of this liberal position is that it turns our eyes from unpleasant reality and enables us to speak as if we lived in the best of worlds, as

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10 See Showalter, Elaine, 'The Feminist Critical Revolution' in *The New Feminist Criticism*, 13.

if we were, to use Kolodny's metaphor, dancing past the minefield, as if we could all afford to be equally tolerant in a free interpretive community. In Brazil it is perhaps easier to see through this ideology – our daily lives give the lie to such promise. Tolerance is a luxury granted to the unimportant, interpretation can be various, but it is invariably the dominant version that gets enforced. The concept of community in a country where the distribution of wealth is among the worst in the whole world is untenable. Positing a feminist theory of a non-existing egalitarian world is more likely to hinder than to promote the consciousness raising and the mobilization which the struggle necessary to get to this world requires.

That would certainly be a radical practice. But in a turn that should hardly surprise us, 'radical' can be used to mean a number of things. Concerning feminist literary criticism it has acquired another connotation in the past ten years: according to Sabina Lovibond, in the 90s, radical 'has changed its meaning from a tendency marked out by the view of *men* – rather than, say, capitalism – as women's "main enemy", to a more updated sense defined 'not in terms of any particular activism, but by the questioning of certain untenable theoretical assumptions – and so to the authoritarian power struggles which these assumptions are held to sustain'.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense radical feminism has joined in the ranks of what we call, for lack of a better word, poststructuralism. As we know, poststructuralism is marked by the linguistic turn, the awareness, at first, of the obvious fact that language is practical consciousness, that it is through language that we relate to reality. This awareness is then radicalized into the assumption that everything is a text, or, to quote the name of the father, that '*il n'y a pas de hors texte*.' One of the characteristic moves in a poststructuralist reading is to submit language to close scrutiny and thus reveal its concealed binary oppositions, which the critic then proceeds to track down, and deconstruct.

And throughout the 80s, in Brazil as elsewhere, the most visible branch of poststructuralism in literary criticism was, of course, deconstruction. One of its many lures for 'subordinate groups' – whether women or third world countries – lies precisely in its questioning of the hierarchies concealed in binary oppositions. From this perspective, centre is no longer to be seen as superior to periphery, male to female, model to imitation, or signified to signifier. Of course it remains to be seen whether this break at the level of rhetoric would actually enable us to recognize, balance out, or combat the hierarchical relations of actual subordination out there, where language is not a play of signifiers but a human practice enmeshed in social conditions in which struggle, not free play, is the rule.

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11 Lovibond, Sabina, 'Can Feminists Mean what they Say?' *New Left Review*, 220, Nov-Dec 1996, 98.

There has been a lot of discussion on the potentialities of an alliance between poststructuralism in general - and deconstruction in particular - and feminism. Of course the aim here is not to tell the whole story, but to try to see which parts of the story are more relevant to the practice of committed academic feminism in Brazil in its inevitable dialogue with Anglo-American feminism.

I suppose it would not be too 'centered' to consider Gayatri C. Spivak's work as paradigmatic of mainstream radical feminism. Her name is certainly often quoted in Anglo-American, as well as in Brazilian, criticism in discussions of deconstruction and feminism, as proof of the success of such a marriage. An examination of the main characteristics of her work, however superficial, may help us gauge the potentialities of this 'other' of liberal feminism. No sparer of words, Spivak herself tells us the advantages she sees in deconstruction: 'My attitude to deconstruction can now be summarized: first deconstruction is illuminating as a critique of phallogentrism; second, it is convincing as an argument against the founding of a hystero-centric to counter a phallogentric discourse; third as a 'feminist' practice itself, it is caught on the other side of sexual difference'.<sup>12</sup>

This vigilance over the substitution of one 'centrism' for another has certainly been beneficial in pointing out the deadlock of merely aiming to trade one form of domination for another. This has made it easier for us to recognize the dead end of posing, for instance, a separatist feminism. The insistence of deconstructive readings on the impossibility of fixing meanings once and for all has contributed to a much-needed work of carefully worded conceptual innovation and to the blurring of long established boundaries. It is useful to remember that the early feminist slogan 'the personal is political' aimed at giving the lie to the ideological separation of public and private, and, by exposing it, contributing to its deconstruction.

In Spivak's written work one can trace a similar movement. There is a deliberate fusion and confusion of the 'accepted' limitations of the roles of an academic feminist: the essays collected in her *In Other Worlds* present no hierarchic separation between theory - Spivak's own and the ones she discusses - and her practice both as a teacher and as a literary critic. She thus helps us recognize the fact that the separation of these three activities in our practical lives as academics is impoverishing and reifying, part and parcel of the fragmenting tendencies feminists set out to oppose. And yet, in spite of her liveliness and her impeccable (always a plus in our times of crisis of representation and of the assertion of identity politics) personal credentials - she describes herself as a

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12 Spivak, Gayatri C., 'Displacement and the Discourse of Women' in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, Krupnick, Mark (ed.), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983, 184.



deconstructive, feminist, postcolonial woman - her work can also be seen as an illustration of some of the crucial problems of radical feminism.

One risk inherent in poststructuralism is what has already been called the exorbitance of language, that is the move from an initial recognition of the polysemic character of the sign to a kind of position in which the signifier, the text, language, takes over the signified, the referent, real life, and reigns autonomous. Rather than difference or surplus we have here language in itself and for itself. In such a position language is, as Kathi Weeks puts it, 'attributed a determinative power that isolates and exaggerates its constitutive force'.<sup>13</sup>

Let me try to illustrate this by producing a very quick reading of one of Spivak's most renowned texts, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in which she discusses a central theoretical problem for Brazilian feminists, that is, how to insert a dominated group (and we would be dominated, in this sense, on at least two counts, as women and as third world people) into a hegemonic culture.

More than two thirds of the text consists of refuting other theorists, lined up, or so it seems to my reading, not according to the contributions they have made to the theme of the article but as if they were all equivalent in their roles of producers of discourse. Or maybe it is precisely because language is seen as autonomous that one can quote Marx and Deleuze, Gramsci and Derrida in one breath, disregarding their different historical and ideological commitments. This levelling of real differences can hardly commend the practice of the apologists of 'la différance'.

Spivak's interventions are certainly designed to produce badly needed politically useful readings and yet the experience of going through the barbed network of her style demonstrates what is lost in the rarefied atmosphere of theory for theory's sake. She discusses the notions of representation in Marx, of the desiring subject in Deleuze and Guattari, ideology in Althusser, power in Foucault, law as codified by Hindus, grammatology in Derrida. After a dazzling display of learned quotes - 92 footnotes in a 37-page article - she presents her 'solution':

Yet I remain generally sympathetic in aligning feminism with the critique of positivism and the defetishization of the concrete. I am also far from averse to learning from the works of Western theorists, though I have learned to insist on marking their positionality as investigating subjects. Given these conditions and as a literary critic, I tactically confronted the immense problem of the consciousness of the woman as subaltern. I

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13 Weeks, Kathi, 'Subject for a Feminist Standpoint' in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, Makdissi S., Casarino, C., Karl, R. (eds.), New York/London, Routledge, 1996, 95.

reinvented the problem in a sentence and transformed it into the object of a simple semiosis. What does this sentence mean? <sup>14</sup>

This can certainly also be read as an instance of the fetishization of language and its abuse. It is as though once you deconstruct the mutually constituting opposition between language and other real social practices one is thus enabled to inaugurate a way of thinking that posits solutions at the level of language as solutions at the level of other real social practices. I am not of course saying that there is a way of apprehending reality other than through language, nor am I disregarding the very real power of words. What I am objecting to here is the treatment of language as autonomous, which makes one believe that by turning a problem into a sentence one has solved it. This can turn the radical feminist into the 'ideal' opposition from the point of view of the current order: since all radicalism is reserved to rhetoric, the job of maintaining the social order of things can go on without much disturbance.

And even in terms of the theory itself this severance from social reality shows its effects. Carried away by the intoxicating power of words over things, an impelling theorist like Spivak can produce the following sentences: A position against nostalgia as a basis for counterhegemonic ideological production does not endorse its negative use. Within the complexity of contemporary political economy, it would, for example, be highly questionable to urge that the current Indian working-class crime of burning brides who bring insufficient dowries and of subsequently disguising murder as suicide is either a use or abuse of the tradition of sati-suicide. The most that can be claimed is that it is a displacement on a chain of semiosis with the female subject as signifier, which would lead us back into the narrative we are unraveling. Clearly one must fight the crime of bride burning in every way. If however this work is accomplished by unexamined nostalgia or its opposite, it will assist actively in the substitution of race/ethnos or sheer genitalism as a signifier in the place of the female subject.(313)

Once one has crossed the boundary that prevented one from talking about the murder of women in terms of a 'displacement in the chain of semiosis with the female subject as signifier' one is always-already on the road that leads from exorbitance to irrelevance to any practical end: in which ways opposing crime can be affected by a nostalgia for lost origins? Of course one could say that there is a (always this word) difference: if you oppose bride burning as an abuse of sati (nostalgically craving true sati) then you are implicitly celebrating as oppressive practice which could be revived. If you oppose it as a use of sati

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14 Spivak, Gayatri, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Nelson, C., Grossberg, N. (eds.), Basingstoke/London, Macmillan, 1988, 296.

(always wrong) then you can fall into a colonial complacency and provide an alibi for colonial violence. It is a bit harder to explain what difference all this would make to the actual bride being burnt.

The abuse of the role of language seems to go hand in hand with the hypostatizing of theory: rather than as a useful way of exploring and defining the variations of practice, theory begins to be regarded as an end in itself, an absolute. It is as if once we are able to word the correct theory, which would not be the one with the greatest explanatory power but the one least prone to be attacked on the grounds of logocentrism or essentialism, our problems will be solved. On the one hand this radical interest in theorization has increased the debate among feminist theorists. On the other, it has turned most of their interventions into an alien speech whose possible connections to the practice they set out to transform are hard to see. It is instructive to notice how those practices end up by isolating the radical feminist, who seems to assign herself the impossible task of effecting change in strictly theoretical terms. This can either turn the theoretician into the sole bearer of a transformation that is, by definition, social, thus reversing her role to that of an essentially romantic heroine, or, if she is honest, to disappointment and despair. A good example of this can be found in Catharine MacKinnon's outburst:

Sometimes I think to myself, MacKinnon, you write. Do you remember that the majority of the world's illiterates are women? *What are you doing?* I feel that powerfully when I think about what brings us all here - which is to make the changes we are talking about. When someone condemns someone else for the use of jargon, they tend to suppose that they themselves speak plain plate-glass. I'm not exempting myself from this criticism but saying that I see it as fundamental to developing a politics of language that will be deconstructive.<sup>15</sup>

I am very sympathetic to the feelings expressed by those sentences but cannot fail to point out to my students, when we read MacKinnon's useful article, that her uneasiness stems from the fact that she starts out from the premise that theory can effect change by itself. This position presupposes an overvaluing of the role of theory - and of the theorist - which is made possible, in her case, by the poststructuralist supervaluation of language. Having been trained in the newspeak of language as the last determining instance, a brilliant member of a prestigious American university like MacKinnon has unlearned to recognize her own text both as a response and as a symptom of her situation.

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15 MacKinnon, Catharine, 'Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective' in *Marcism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 206.

It is at this point that one has to divert one's students' attention to materialist feminists, the very ones who insist that we should always attend to the material conditions in which any activity, verbal or non-verbal goes on. This holds equally true for literary criticism. As Catherine Belsey puts it:

Since culture is a material practice, and since literary criticism is itself a component part of culture, it follows that feminist criticism is itself a cultural phenomenon. Feminist criticism cannot in these circumstances be defined in advance, identified in its essential nature eternally and universally, sought out in earlier epochs and recognized in its unchanging correctness. Feminist criticism takes a position at and in relation to a specific cultural and historical moment. And in that sense it is necessarily a product of its own present.<sup>16</sup>

This is no doubt a less inflated role than inaugurating a playful pluralism or deconstructing patriarchy along with the rest of Western metaphysics. And yet this may be one of the strengths of materialist feminism. Whether or not they use what Belsey wryly calls the 'unspeakable', 'unacceptable' adjective Marxist, materialist feminists start from an awareness that being a feminist is not a universal or essential category, but as all categories, it is determined by social and economic location. Thus there is little hope of changing the situation of women and leaving all the rest in place. As Teresa Ebert puts it: 'To disrupt, undo, or exceed the gender binaries requires a collective social struggle not on the level of ideological constructions but, more importantly, against the systematic socioeconomic relations requiring and maintaining the specific forms of gender and sexual difference.'<sup>17</sup>

In the most interesting materialist feminist interventions, this awareness does not lead to a defeatist attitude, something like: 'since what we really need is a revolution, there is no point in doing anything right here.' On the contrary, to recognize that the pressures and processes of gendering are social and historical in character amounts to recognizing that they are open to reversal and resistance by women's and men's actions here and now.

Nonetheless a materialist has, by definition to take into account her own positionality. This means she is very unlikely to believe she can effect change on

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16 Belsey, Catherine, 'Afterword' in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Wayne, Valerie (ed.), New York, Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1991, 261.

17 Ebert, Teresa L., 'Ludic feminism, the Body, Performance and Labor: Bringing *Materialism* Back into Feminist Cultural Studies', *Cultural Critique*, 23, 1992-93, 39.

her own. If she is an academic, she is less likely than her liberal and radical counterparts to believe that any sort of revolution will begin in academia. Yet her own academic work is informed by the need to address the specific in terms of the general and to uncover the seeds of change in the materials she has to work with.

A good example of the potentialities of this sort of work can be found in Susan Willis's book *A Primer for Daily Life*. An American academic with 5 children she draws both from her intellectual theoretical heritage and from the ways in which the larger socio-historical processes clarified by theory can be read in the most trivial aspects of domestic life. In 'Learning from the Banana', she explains that her project of looking at the phenomena of daily life is inspired by Walter Benjamin's materialist approach to history as defined in his Arcades Project. Her challenge is to read culture by looking backwards into history and thus 'recognize moments of rupture in a cultural fabric that appears all too continuous.'<sup>18</sup>

A citizen of the leading country in late capitalism, Susan Willis fully understands Lukács's development of commodity fetishism as being both a subjective and an objective phenomenon. 'Under capitalism, human qualities and the sensual dimension of experience are objectified and abstracted - or detached from people - so that they become commodities in their own right, 'reified' or 'aestheticized'. A critical reading would be the one that points ways in which we could reverse - or break through - 'the process so as to recover and affirm all the human qualities that the commodity form negates by abstraction'(8).

The originality of her project is that she proceeds to present creative oppositional interpretations not only of works of literature but of many other social practices of contemporary life: she juxtaposes a series of 'readings' of the ideologies of cleanliness expressed in the arrangements of goods in the supermarket, the gender training structured in children's toys, the commodification of women's fitness programmes, the culture of domestic labour: she directs her critical attention to the most common sites for gendering processes in contemporary urban societies.

She also draws evidence from... her children's own reactions. It is enlightening to see Cassie's and Cade's remarks quoted alongside Adorno and Benjamin. It is not that Willis subscribes to the levelling of theories that is one of the effects of the current commodification of everything, including of theories of culture. It is just that she recognizes that theoreticians can teach us a lot because they have grasped fundamental aspects of the ways and reasons of

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18 Willis, Susan, *A Primer for Daily Life*, London/New York, Routledge, 1991.

practice whereas children have not grasped them, or perhaps haven't been grasped by them, yet: 'It is extremely important for academics and intellectuals to heed a community of voices including racial minorities, the elderly and children. Some of the best creative writers have opened their ears and consciousness to childhood experience'. 'Children recognize the contradictions adults take for granted because they are not yet fully inscribed in capitalism either as producers or reproducers of the system'(26).

When discussing processes of gendering, she quotes two different answers given by her children to the ordinary question one asks children about their toys. In the mid-seventies, Cassie (then aged three) could still answer that her teddy was both a boy and a girl, whereas ten years later, her son Cade (then four) declared his dinosaurs to be 'just boys and boys'. Cassie's answer gives notice of the young child's recognition of 'polymorphous, or multidimensional sexuality'(25). While Cade's syntax affirms the possibility of masculine and feminine, his words affirm that boys can only be boys and play with boys. For Willis, her two children's remarks may have to do with stronger sexual pressure on boys but their difference has more to do with history. These trivial remarks reveal, with remarkable clarity, that gendering processes change according to historical conditions. Cassie's comments reflect the mid-seventies, the hopeful moment of feminist conquests in the 60s and 70s, while Cade speaks for the mid-eighties and 'the absolute retrenchment of gender based on essentialized notions of sex'(26).

The montage obtained from the juxtaposition of theoretical insights and trivia does not prescribe a course of action but highlights the interpenetration of the abstract - the socio-economic organization of capitalism or patriarchy - and the concrete - the way children express gendering processes through their relationship with toys, or the way we exercise in a nautilus machine or young girls play house. She then takes advantage of her specific positionality as a woman, a mother and a cultural critic to show how we can recognize, through critical reading of those practices, the way in which 'the contending social forces that shape history come together for us in daily life'(158).

This way of reading daily life aims at recognizing in all our commodified practices and situations the fragmented and buried manifestation of utopian social relationships. This is far from an easy task, particularly because the cultural critic herself is immersed in the structures she wants to change. As Susan Willis puts it: 'If we argue for change but maintain the structures of thought generated by capitalism, our actions fall short of transformation.' So too with gender. 'The struggle to liberate gender does not aim at providing more genders, more commodified forms to choose from, but to enable people to experience gendering through human interaction and social practice' (35).

All this is of course a long way from Millett's hoped for revolution. Willis is adamant her readers realize that:

the strong but facile temptation is to assume that the mere discovery of utopia in mass culture somehow constitutes the transformation of daily life. Such is the basis of a simplistic and celebratory notion of cultural politics. The real struggle is to use the recognition of utopia as impetus for fundamental social change. (181)

Living in the third world means being daily confronted by the very real difficulties of change and transformation. It may well be because of this material fact that this modest, but realistically feasible, role for materialist feminism seems to sound a persuasive note. Moreover, Willis's position entails the awareness that feminist cultural criticism should be part of the effort to look for the seeds of a better society for both women and men. In a country like Brazil, where so many different but related forms of oppression are readily visible, positing the task of feminism as the one of becoming another voice in the fight for much needed social change does not amount to ascribing to feminists a secondary role. On the contrary, this position seems to take into account the fact that a politics which takes as its starting point only personal and experiential modes of being, as if those modes took place in a realm other than the one of material social life, can only effect localized and, in the end, easily incorporated, modifications.

My students who read a number of Anglo-American feminist positions seem to recognize relevance when they see it, and put it to critical use in a fashion that is one of the few signs of hope in an otherwise very bleak cultural scene. Inspired by Willis's 'Learning from the Banana' a male student of mine handed in an essay entitled 'Learning from Blacks and Gays'<sup>19</sup> in which he extends Willis's ways of reading cultural practices to an examination of the meanings and values constructed in two current Brazilian gay and black magazines. No doubt the increased circulation of those magazines in the last ten years is a positive sign in a macho and racist society such as ours. However, there remains much more to be achieved. My student concludes that the celebratory tone that marks some of those publications is misguided once they fail to show that blacks and gays are being incorporated as consumers and not as producers of goods or of meanings. As Claudia, a character in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, puts it, this is certainly 'adjustment without improvement'.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Castro, José Arlindo F, 'Learning from Blacks and Gays'(unpublished).

20 Morrison, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*, Simon & Schuster, 1970, 22.

Arlindo's essay illustrates the fact that living in a peripheral country does not necessarily condemn Brazilian intellectuals to merely copying or uprooting foreign ideas from their socio-historical base, thus emptying them of any social meaning. He manages to use Willis's materialist feminist reading creatively to help explain a local manifestation of a more general phenomenon: he demonstrates how one dominated group can learn from the struggle of another dominated group, can 'translate' the real specificity of each struggle into its more general aspect thus opening up the road to an awareness of the necessity of more fundamental change.

If teaching and learning from one's students that feminist criticism is one of the many necessary ways to change, to moving from the world of women and men as we found it to the world as we want it to be, then I am very glad I can consider myself a feminist.