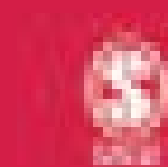


Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies



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Gendered Cultures

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This chapter charts the changing ways in which gender has figured in cultural production by feminist women since the 1970s, highlighting how shifts in discourse from 'women' to 'gender' have impacted on cultural practices and analyses. It suggests that the feminist archaeological/genealogical project of the 1970s and 1980s which served to change cultural canons by inserting women's work into them was predicated upon an unproblematic notion of women as socio-cultural entities whose identity as women was not in question. Debates about differences among women, rather than only between women and men, resulted in shifts in cultural preoccupations that increasingly led to the notion of femininity as constructed and gender as performance. This shift also marked a rise in interest in women's performance, film, and popular cultural work during the 1980s and 1990s, fuelled not least by advances in biotechnology. The 'cultural turn' in the social sciences of the 1990s created significant feminist work on the inter-relationship between the body, technology, and science which highlighted the increasing differences in content of women's/gender studies courses around the world. Technology and women's cultural positioning in the collapsing public and private spheres of globalized cultures are likely to dominate feminist agendas in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

The recognition that cultures are gendered has permeated women's intellectual work throughout the twentieth century. The anthropological writings of Margaret Mead, the literary criticism of Virginia Woolf, the writings of Gertrude Stein, the collages of Hannah Höch, for instance, all reveal a preoccupation with the gendered nature of culture that has antecedents in previous centuries but which began to be historicized predominantly during the last century. For the purposes of this chapter, I shall concentrate on the

period from the late 1970s onwards to indicate how gender has manifested itself in the Northwestern cultures of Europe and the United States, and how those manifestations have been analysed. As part of that process, I shall discuss the ways in which the language we use to speak about gender has changed during that period and the implications of those changes.

In writing about 'culture', I shall focus on 'concrete sets of *signifying practices* – modes of generating meaning – that create *communication orders* of one kind or another' (Polity Press, 1994: 2), and discuss 'high' cultural forms such as literature, performance, and art, as well as 'popular' cultural forms, such as cinema and television. My concern is to show how certain ways of manifesting and thinking about gender were expressed through particular signifying practices and modes of communication.

THE POWER OF BINARIES

One of the most powerful drivers of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s was the notion that women as a category of human beings universally shared a culturally completely entrenched experience of oppression by men. This experience was considered to be the foundation on which women should bond to make political and economic claims for equality with men. On its basis, two propositions were articulated. One was the binary divide between men and women, a divide that itself had a long cultural history in Western thinking and had been the basis on which women's oppression by men was justified (Grimshaw, 1986; Lloyd, 1984) the other, that 'sisterhood [was] global' (Morgan, 1984). The latter led to generalizations on behalf of women – in hindsight perhaps unjustified – such as Radicalesbians' wonderful assertion: 'What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion' (Radicalesbians, 1970: 17). But under the impact of these propositions, women began to demand spaces of their own, their place in the public sphere, the reform of the private sphere, and proper recognition of their contributions to society. The talk was of 'women' and of 'sex', not of 'gender', and, as the Convention for the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1975; my emphasis) indicates, the focus of the 1970s and early 1980s was on women as biocultural entities whose identity as *women* was not in question. Correspondingly, the first women's studies courses to emerge in the United States and other Anglophone countries during the 1970s and early 1980s had women as an unproblematic category at their centre.

The claims of the women's liberation movement on behalf of women were fuelled by two perceptions: the need to assert presence – that of women – and the need to explain absence or silence – also that of women. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, for instance, wrote of the 1970s that 'a dominant concern of women artists both inside and outside the Artists' Union was the male monopoly on exhibition space, not only within the establishment but in

the new alternative galleries then opening in London' (1987: 13). Similarly, Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1980) was intended as 'a powerful witness to great cultural loss' to account for an absence, already noted by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), of women from literature. Women, viewed as objects and consumers of culture,¹ began to assert their presence as subjects and producers of culture, not only within their immediate generation but also in relation to those preceding. This stance generated one of the major feminist cultural projects of the 1980s, the archaeological–genealogical 'thinking back through [our] mothers' (Woolf, 1929: 93). Across a vast range of signifying practices, women began to account for the absence of women from cultural production, to create genealogies, histories, and maps of women whose work had been suppressed in cultural histories, and to analyse this work.

This feminist project changed the cultural landscape of Northwestern countries significantly and within a very short period of time. The work of many 'forgotten' women writers, artists, musicians, travellers, dressmakers, filmmakers, designers, photographers, playwrights, poets, and other cultural producers was rediscovered or uncovered, documented, reproduced, and analysed. In women-dominated academic disciplines such as literature and sociology, but also in history, art history, philosophy, archaeology, and other such subjects, feminist academics began 'the long march through the institutions' to integrate their newly recovered cultural foremothers' work into the canons of their academic field. Thus, where women educated in the period until the mid-1970s in literature, for example, were unlikely to encounter women writers other than Jane Austen and George Eliot, by the mid-1980s, virtually all English courses in the UK included 'women's writing' as one of their key and most popular modules in undergraduate courses, and writers such as Alice Walker and Virginia Woolf were routinely taught. These courses became one of the axes on which women's and gender studies degrees were built during the 1980s.

The reproduction of 'forgotten' cultural works by women was accompanied by a new scholarly–critical apparatus that underpinned the notion of a history of women's cultural work shaped by their sex-specific position in society. It resulted in classics such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Ann Oakley's *Subject Women* (1981), and Rozsika Parker's and Griselda Pollock's *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981). These texts produced powerful analyses of the cultural and economic oppression of women within and through patriarchy,² and served as key texts on 'women's writing' and 'women and representation' courses within women's and gender studies.

This revolution in educational content was in part made possible by the numerous feminist cultural production sites for women's work that, staffed by women, sprang up in the Northwestern countries. (Many of these sites disappeared by 2004.) Publishing houses such as Virago, the Women's Press, Daughters Inc., Naiad Press, and Onlywomen Press were established by

women with feminist ideological agendas, intent on transforming women's cultural, social, political, and economic lives by empowering them through reflecting back to women and articulating *their* experiences and views. The mid-1970s to the mid-1980s thus proved an enormously productive era for women whose cultural work began to find voice, support, and recognition. Feminist newspapers and journals such as *Spare Rib* and *Emma* appeared; publishers produced series such as 'Mothers of the Novel' by Pandora, 'Plays by Women' by Methuen, and the 'Feminist Sci-fi' series that the Women's Press inaugurated. Even staid presses such as Oxford University Press understood that there was now a market for 'forgotten' works by women and produced Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* in its 'World Classics' series in 1989. These texts enabled women academics to intervene in the canons of their subjects and to present their students with female role models of cultural creativity, thus suggesting the possibility of female subjecthood and agency in culture.

Feminist sci-fi created worlds separate from men and ruled by women promulgating conventionally womanly qualities, such as communalism, nurturance, and non-violence (Elgin, 1984; Gearhart, 1980; Russ, 1975; Wittig, 1969). Some of these texts came complete with inventions of new languages to articulate women's experiences. Suzette Haden Elgin (1984: Appendix n.p.), for instance, invented Láadan, which contained words such as *óothanúthul* to mean 'spiritual orphanhood; being utterly without a spiritual community or family', or *radama*, which meant 'to non-touch, to actively refrain from touching'. These utopias had their origins partly in the anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and partly in the feminist perception, articulated in Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), for instance, that men – through war, pollution, violence, and exploitation – are responsible for the gradual destruction of the world, and that 'The Will to Change' (Rich, 1971) required a separation of women from men.

Feminist sci-fi was only one of the means by which women began to 'appropriate' cultural forms that had been dominated by men. 'Gender and genre' began increasingly to be featured in courses on 'women's writing' as women began to appropriate and investigate popular genres, such as the detective novel, pulp fiction, and romance. Indeed, it was largely through this engagement with popular genres that popular culture began to take hold in women's studies courses in the mid-1980s, since these popular genres tended to be produced in textual as well as in televisual and filmic forms. The TV series *Cagney and Lacey*, featuring two women detectives, became as popular as the detective novels of Val McDermid, Claire McNab, and Sarah Dreher were to a lesbian readership. Popular culture – as became particularly evident in the interrogation of Harlequin romances, of Mills and Boon pulp fiction, and of the novels of Ann Bannon, for example – far from being analysed as a way of duping the unsuspecting masses, was reclaimed as a form that afforded its women consumers the satisfactions they lacked in their real-life

encounters with their men partners. Understanding female pleasure in consumption became an important feature of these recuperations.

FEMALE/FEMININE SPECIFICITIES

The archaeological/genealogical project and women's new cultural assertiveness went hand in hand with the search for female specificity, the notion that women's cultural production had traits and properties particular to women and derived from the specificity of their experience as distinct from that of men. Virginia Woolf had already articulated such potential difference in *A Room of One's Own* when she wrote:

I will only pause here one moment to draw your attention to the great part which must be played in [the future of fiction] so far as women are concerned by physical conditions. The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and so framed that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work...[T]he nerves that feed the brain would seem to differ in men and women, and if you are going to make them work their best and hardest, you must find out what treatment suits them. (Woolf, 1929: 74)

Woolf's notion that 'the book must somehow be adapted to the body' sprang from her complex and contradictory views of the importance of biology for cultural destiny – in the section quoted above, she proposes a necessary correlation between physiology and cultural production, grounded in her understanding of the biological differences between women and men.

Those differences were seized upon in the 1970s and early 1980s as part of the attempt to uncover and map women's specificity and to account for the differences – assumed, ascribed, and real – in women's and men's cultural productions and productivity. The case for the promotion of women's cultural production per se was partly made on the basis of its specificity and difference from that of men. Feminist linguists, for instance, attempted to show that women use language differently from men, revealing through their usage the internalization of the state of inferiority, dependency, and inarticulateness to which women have been reduced in patriarchy, as well as their assumed 'natural' tendency to be more supportive, cooperative, communicative, and nurturant than men (Spender, 1980). There was a connected and highly visible movement to reduce sexism in language through the invention of terms such as 'Ms' instead of 'Mrs' or 'Miss' to move beyond the pressure on women to identify their marital status (Miller and Swift, 1980). There were also attempts to create dictionaries sensitive to and expressive of women's language, women's use of language, and women's relation to language (Daly, 1978; Daly with Caputi, 1987; Mills, 1989; Wittig and Zeig, 1976).

Women's new cultural assertiveness, indexed by the attempt to create languages for/by women, was part of an attempt to celebrate women and

women's specificity by focusing on revaluing aspects of their selves that were abjected within patriarchal culture (Kristeva, 1980). The celebration included, importantly, women's bodies, specifically their vaginas and their menstrual cycle, regarded as quintessential aspects of women's particularity. Famously, US artist Judy Chicago created 'The Dinner Party' in the 1970s. It was a triangular multimedia installation of a table with thirty-nine china plates decorated with symbolic vaginas, all depicting women's achievements, and designed to re-vision 'the Last Supper from the point of view of those who'd done the cooking throughout history' (Chicago, 1975: 210). The same idea was later used in British playwright Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1984), whose opening scene featured a reimagining of the Last Supper. Feminists (re)claimed the artist Georgia O'Keeffe, whose flower paintings were adored for vulval connotations that seemed to be a celebration of the vagina, vaginal lips, and the clitoris. They also (re)claimed Frieda Kahlo's paintings, which, *inter alia*, feature the abject female body.

The portrayal of women's bodies in art aroused strong reactions. Rozsika Parker's piece on British artist Judy Clark's 'Body Works' exhibition, for example, was introduced with the following paragraph:

Judy Clark's recent exhibition aroused extreme reactions. While several women critics were swept into pseud's corner by their enthusiasm for the exhibition and the Tate was buying one of her works, many others were appalled. Judy makes works of art out of matter that is usually hidden or thrown away. She takes dust, urine, nail parings, menstrual blood etc., and mounts them with clinical care, creating an effect not unlike a museum cabinet. Her self-portrait consisting of hairs from all parts of her body and fluids from her nine orifices could hardly be further from the sweet plastic image of women celebrated in pop art. (1974: 37)

This introduction illustrates the over-investment within dominant culture in certain forms of femininity and feminine bodies (hairless, non-leaking, without menstruation, un-bodied indeed except in the plastic guise of the Barbie Doll), which prompted feminists to create new images of women and to expose their status as cultural constructs. This double exposure-celebration was evident as much in the installations of Mary Kelly as it was in the collages of Barbara Kruger or the photographs of Cindy Sherman.

The reclamation of women's bodies by women went hand in hand with the reclamation of women's minds, partly derived from the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. States and conditions, until then viewed within patriarchal culture as denoting women's mental incapacity and inferiority, were re-figured as strategies of female survival in a hostile, male-centred environment. Thus, 'hysteria' and post-natal depression in particular were reinterpreted by both feminist artists and feminist critics as women's ways of coping with worlds unsuited to their emotional needs. The poetry of Emily Dickinson, the diary of Alice James, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), and H D's *Her* (1927) were all rediscovered and reread as part of that phenomenon. Novels such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Eva Figs' *Days* (1974), Marie Cardinal's *The Words to Say It* (1975),

and Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) offered similar contemporary commentaries. The lives of writers such as Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath were re-examined from this same perspective. Sigmund Freud's case histories of hysterics were reread and reinterpreted by feminist artists working in a variety of media to reveal the inadequacy of psychoanalysis in enabling women to deal with their lives and suggesting, perhaps over-optimistically, that women's psychosomatic responses to their experiences of oppression had liberatory potential. 'Women and Madness' became one of the topics – part of the 'Women and...' tradition – which were commonplace in many women's studies courses.

Questions of women's relation to their body and the cultural manifestation of that relation were central to the work of certain feminist theorists living in France, in particular Luce Irigaray (1974; 1977), Julia Kristeva (1974; 1977) and Hélène Cixous (1981a; 1981b). Responding to a biographically based sense of displacement regarding their country of birth in the case of Kristeva and Cixous and within patriarchy, the influence of psychoanalytic thinking, and the interrogation of language as 'man-made', these feminists began a celebratory re-visioning of the relation of the maternal to language. They juxtaposed the semiotic (understood as utterances based on instinctual and bodily drives, the pre-linguistic state of the infant who still experiences unison with the mother, *jouissance*, the cyclical, the repetitive, the polysemic – that is, utterances with indeterminate or multiple meanings) with the symbolic (utterances governed by the entry into language, the law of the father, repression of instinctual and bodily drives, linearity, prohibition, closure through singularity of meaning). Kristeva and Cixous (together with Clément, 1975) suggested that the semiotic, as manifested in certain cultural forms, particularly but not only in poetic writing and in performance, had the potential to disrupt the symbolic order.

Neither Kristeva nor Cixous attributed the capacity for producing *écriture féminine* (translated into English as 'writing the body') – as cultural work that manifested the traits of the semiotic came to be known – exclusively to women; indeed, Kristeva's work was critiqued for its failure to engage with women's cultural work in preference to explorations of writings by men. However, both viewed the relation of the semiotic to the maternal as a key disruptive force against the dominance of the masculine order in culture and associated the production of *écriture féminine* significantly with women and also with gay men.

Although the notion of an *écriture féminine* was severely critiqued by materialist feminists and by feminist critics who thought that the process of the translation of bodily drives into signifying practices remained unexplained by Kristeva's and Cixous' work (for example, Jones, 1985), it nonetheless proved highly suggestive as an explanatory model for experimental, avant-garde, post-modern cultural work, such as the writings of Clarice Lispector and Christine Brooke-Rose, and the performance work of Mnouchkine and Pina Bausch. The concept of *écriture féminine* thus became very influential during the 1980s

in disciplines such as English, theatre, and performance studies. Increasingly, performance, the female body as spectacle in a diversity of settings, came under interrogation.

In contrast to Kristeva and Cixous, Irigaray centred her theoretical work much more on female morphology. Juxtaposing the unitary penis (or the phallus as its symbolic expression) with the two labia of the vagina and the clitoris, Irigaray posited a decentred female sexuality whose diffusion disrupts the phallic order, the symbolic as expressive of a male cultural economy. She argued that women are both literally and metaphorically *The Sex Which Is Not One* (1977). As such, women operate outside the male-centred or phallogocentric culture, requiring its revaluation based on women supporting each other rather than seeking support from men. It was this latter idea, based on the notion of an absolute difference between women and men, which made Irigaray's work particularly popular among Italian feminists.

DIFFERENCES

In Italy, the sense of women's difference from men resulted in a movement outside of academic institutions and inspired by reading the work of cultural foremothers, such as Virginia Woolf, to promote a new socio-symbolic contract between women, necessitated by the view that women were outside of men's economy in every sphere. The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (1990) suggested that women's empowerment and participation in culture and in the public sphere more generally could only come about through women empowering each other, achieved via an explicit contract, based on trust, between 'the woman who wants to know' (that is, a woman with less knowledge and fewer resources) and 'the woman who knows' (a more powerful woman). Italian feminism was one of the few feminist contexts that focused significantly on theorizing the unequal relations among women as opposed to the unequal relations between men and women.

Italian feminism never gained the same popularity as French feminism in the Anglophone world. The work of one of French feminism's key theorists, Luce Irigaray, did not generate anything like the reception afforded to Kristeva and Cixous. The popularity of the different feminist theorists in part depended on the very different receptions of psychoanalytic theory in France, Italy, and Germany, where psychoanalysis was integrated into feminist political practice (see Sapegno, 2002) and the Anglophone countries, where feminism was more strongly invested in materialist and empirical traditions. In those countries, socialist feminism played a greater role than it did in continental Europe.

What feminisms in all Western countries during the 1970s and until the mid-1980s shared was a sense that women were constructed as the new redeemers, capable of promoting change through activating their specificities

in the service of that change. This included the re-figuring of the meaning of 'woman' and 'womanhood', since 'woman' stood – within patriarchal culture – for all that was secondary, and more radically, since the notion of 'woman' was, as some argued, itself invested with patriarchal values. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) dictum that 'One is not born, one becomes a woman' was picked up in particular by lesbian writers such as Monique Wittig (1981) and Marilyn Frye (1990) to argue that 'woman' as a category was not natural but socio-cultural, and therefore inscribed with patriarchal values. The latter made 'woman' a construct of the male imaginary, utterly separate from what actual women were really like, and thus rendered the term 'woman' to describe those usually subsumed under that heading useless for the purposes of connoting these same people.

This prising apart of the connotations of 'woman' from the denoted women had its antecedents in a process that had already set in during the late 1970s, namely, the debates among women about their differences from each other. Lesbians and Black women, women from working-class backgrounds, women with disabilities, and women from Third World countries had all begun to question the notion that women constitute a unitary category subsumable under the assumption that 'sisterhood is global'. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in particular came in for severe criticism for failing to recognize that 'the problem that has no name' as she called it, which besets the young suburban wife who wants more than husband, home, and children, was hardly shared by all women (hooks, 1984). A shift occurred in feminist rhetoric, away from the focus on differences between women and men, and towards an exploration of differences among women. The 1980s saw a huge rise in cultural production from women who are Black, lesbian, working class, and diversely able, fuelled by a newly legitimated assertiveness of women from different backgrounds and with diverse agendas and needs.

One of the most powerful developments was the emergence of literature by Black American feminist women such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou, whose work was widely represented in curricula throughout the Northwestern world. Their writing reworked histories of slavery and racial oppression to foreground the narratives of women's experiences of those histories, and did so in high-cultural forms (Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), for instance, was an epistolary novel). Their work indicted not only White people but also Black men for failing Black women through incest, domestic violence, abuse, abandonment, and neglect. Their indictments of Black men caused major debates within Black communities in which Black women insisted on their right to speak out against oppressive practices within their own communities, while Black men argued that it was a betrayal of the Black race in the face of oppression from Whites (Wallace, 1990). The focus within Europe on Black American feminist writing during the 1980s conveniently and regrettably drew attention away from the cultural work by women from diverse ethnic backgrounds creating that work within Europe. Black and Asian women in the UK, Algerian women

in France, Turkish women in Germany, and Arab women in Sweden continued to have great difficulties to achieve cultural visibility.

One reaction to African American feminist writing was the emergence of so-called Third World voices. Promoted through the advocacy of the need for subaltern studies, it enabled the voices of women from the poorest countries in the world, such as India and Latin America, to be heard. Its best-known proponent is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988) inaugurated feminist engagement with the concept of subaltern studies and with the question of 'Third World' women's cultural production. This work shifted the focus away from fiction, which was predominant in Black American feminist work, to autobiography, a form that became extensively theorized by feminists during the 1980s and 1990s (for example, Evans, 1999; Smith, 1987; Stanley, 1992). Autobiographies, in particular of women engaged in revolutionary and resistance movements, became the dominant Third World cultural expression read in Northwestern countries. Chief among these was perhaps *I, Rigoberta Menchú; An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), for which the eponymous heroine won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Mahasweta Devi's (1988) story 'Draupadi', championed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, was made into a successful film, 'The Bandit Queen'. These texts reinforced the importance of the recognition of differences among women.

Another source of the recognition of differences among women were the so-called sex wars among lesbians: in the 1980s, 'vanilla sex' was juxtaposed with more aggressive forms of sexual behaviour, such as sado-masochism. Just as 'women of colour' differentiated themselves from White women and from each other and exploded the notion of a 'universal' Black woman, so lesbians began to lay claim to a diversity of identities. The lesbian feminism of the 1970s was repudiated in favour of a revival of the butch/femme dynamic associated with 1950s' bar culture (Nestle, 1992) and the use of strap-on dildos and sado-masochistic sex (Califia, 1988). This aggressive lesbian sexuality was condemned by some lesbian feminists as an expression of penis envy (Jeffreys, 1994). Nevertheless, this 'lesbian sexual revolution' spawned a wide range of performance work and literature, including lesbian erotica, fiction, plays, poetry, and research into lesbian sexual history. This work re-engaged with issues of role-playing in lesbian culture and became a key contributor to the shift from 'women' to 'gender' in culture during the 1990s, a shift that was spearheaded by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).

GENDER-BENDING

Role-playing within lesbian culture, in particular the adoption of accoutrements associated with certain kinds of masculinity or femininity such as moustaches and lipsticks, helped to generate the concept of 'gender-bending',

of playing with gender while refusing to be identified with either the masculine or the feminine sex. Out of it arose a new debate about sexual and cultural identities, in part subsumed within 'queer theory', which challenged conventional thinking about sex, sexuality, and gender identity (Smyth, 1992).

The distinction between sex as a biological given and gender as a form of acculturation, widely taken for granted during the 1970s and early 1980s, unravelled with developments in biotechnology. Cultural theory began to question the objectivity of science, the fixity of biology, and the teleology of sexo-cultural destinies in favour of an understanding, underpinned by the work of postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, that all material manifestations are culturally mediated and therefore malleable. In this view, biology and the body as conventionally conceived are portrayed as themselves the products of certain forms of acculturation and as such are not 'given' but 'made'.

Queer theory, gender-bending, and challenges to biological givens undid many of the binaries on which, at the very least, much feminist thinking had been based. The classic distinction between female and male, on which the feminist politics of the 1970s had been founded, began to dissolve. In popular culture, that dissolution was played out through figures like the singers David Bowie, Madonna, and k.d. lang. Lesbian culture saw the emergence of a debate about sexo-cultural identity through the rise of voices from within the transsexual and, increasingly, the more diverse transgender communities, which had been excluded from the women-only venues of lesbian culture (Bornstein, 1994). It also saw the emergence of the drag king (Volcano and Halberstam, 1999), a gender-bending figure outside the binary gender regime.

POPULAR CULTURES

Many of these changes in women's cultures during the 1990s were accompanied by debates about power and identity that shifted attention away from the feminist preoccupations of the 1970s and early 1980s,³ and onto issues of sexual identity and power structures. The 1990s thus saw a focus on the re-sexualization (Grosz and Probyn, 1995) and the empowerment of women (Wolf, 1994), encapsulated in popular cultural figures such as Lara Croft and Buffy the Vampire Slayer or, within mainstream culture, the ladette, the pretty woman who can hold her own among the lads in terms of drinking, sexual assertiveness, and the pursuit of money, fame, and career. The American TV series *Sex and the City* became emblematic of this figure.

Some viewed cultural phenomena such as Madonna or *Sex and the City* as liberatory for women, part of the g-r-r-r-l culture that emerged during the 1990s. That culture was embodied, *inter alia*, in the zap actions of the Guerrilla Girls who sought to assert women's place in culture through witty and provocative interventions designed to expose cultural gender bias. Indeed, being witty,

provocative, assertive, in-your-face, publicly visible, and politically concerned were the hallmarks of g-r-r-r-l culture. Its growling (hence 'g-r-r-r-l') refusal to be conventionally 'girly', while claiming a heterosexually assertive femininity, became one of the trademarks of 1990s' feminism.

Others were more sceptical of the emancipatory potential of ladette culture. Indeed, one might argue that the gun-toting Lara Croft, the aggressive sexuality of certain contemporary singers, the promotion of sado-masochism among women, and other similar phenomena have resulted in a masculinization of female culture, not matched, significantly, by a feminization of masculine cultures. Despite repeated pronouncements of masculinity in crisis, especially since the decline of certain major male-dominated industries such as steel, coal, and shipbuilding since the early 1980s, there has not been a significant cultural swing in male mainstream cultures towards traits conventionally associated with the feminine.⁴ Instead, it has resulted in a sense of vacuum regarding male role models, increasingly filled by a perception of young men's rising lawlessness on the one hand, and their preoccupation with a new consumerism on the other (Campbell, 1993).

The masculinization of women's cultural production is one way to think about the plays of Sarah Kane (2001), for instance, the British playwright whose suicide in 1999 articulated a violence against self that had already made her plays infamous. Her work marks the collapse of gender distinctions in culture in favour of a rise in violence, aggression, breakdown of family, community, and relation through action-packed narratives that centre principally on the violent expression of power structures between people whose only way of relating to each other is through domination, humiliation, and degradation – by men of women, by women of men, by men of men, and women of women. A very recent version of this phenomenon were the by-now notorious images of the American woman, Pfc. Lynndie England, degrading and sexually humiliating male Iraqi prisoners of war in the infamous Abu Ghraib Prison in Baghdad. The sense of outrage was doubly unsettling to feminists (Ehrenreich, 2004; Enda, 2004.)

Kane's plays produce, in condensed and shocking form, a tabloid view of the world dominated by incest, rape in many different forms, war, murder, abuse, domestic violence, sadistic brutalization, the collapse of the very fabric of environments. These events exist outside a moral order, uncontained by value systems that transform, transcend, or redeem them. They speak to both a radical enfranchisement and a radical disenfranchisement effect of worlds without moral orders. It is worth noting that this kind of work, described by some as 'post-feminist', has been difficult to integrate into feminist cultural preoccupations other than through the, in a sense quite dated, notion that the writer is a woman.

The backlash against feminism, that is 1970s' feminism, which was documented by Susan Faludi (1992) and Marilyn French (1992), led to debates, already hinted at in the preceding paragraph, about the possibilities of 'post-feminism' (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter, 1995; Modleski, 1991) and ushered

in a new kind of heterosexually invested feminism as articulated by Naomi Wolf (1991), for example. This trend was accompanied by the rise of consumerism and the commodification of identities:

When, in my travels, I asked women who hated the word 'feminism' to describe to me a version of feminism that could capture their aspirations, they replied with striking unanimity, 'That Nike ad. You know – "Just do it."' (The phrase that was most often quoted by 'insider' feminists, in contrast, was Audre Lorde's quote about the master's tools never dismantling the master's house.) (Wolf, 1994: 49)

The changes in women's position in Northwestern countries since the 1970s, including women's greater participation in education and in the labour market, opportunities for control over one's reproductivity through contraception and abortion, changes in the possibilities for and attitudes towards divorce and cohabitation, mean that women, especially younger women who had grown up in the 1980s, increasingly think of equality between women and men as something that has been achieved. The dead hand of conservatism has further depoliticized them so that the issue of consumption became a key concern in the feminisms of the 1990s, stimulated by the conservatively inspired propagation of 'choice' as the fuel firing consumerist, individualist, and anti-communitarian attitudes.

GENDER/S, BODIES, AND TECHNOLOGY

That notion of 'choice' has also been consistently replayed in the debates around gender/s, bodies, and technologies that have been a mainstay of 1990s' culture. 'Gender' replaced 'women' as the term of reference within many feminist debates, for both good and ill. Those roots of this change, which connected to the refusal of the term 'woman' as invested with male-centred values and to an anti-essentialist attitude towards the meaning of 'woman', helped women to engage with diversity among themselves and revealed the extent to which men were also not a unitary category. Especially in film, these roots led to an explosion of the production of gender-bending movies, such as those by the Spanish film maker Pedro Almodovar, and films such as *Torchsong Trilogy*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *She Must be Seeing Things*, *Paris is Burning*, *Boys Don't Cry*, and performance pieces such as Claire Dowie's monologues (1996), which were widely used in women's/gender studies courses, and afforded women the opportunity to consider gender outside of conventional norms.

The roots of the replacement of 'women' with 'gender', however, that connected to the equal opportunities policies which had led to equality discourses proclaiming the end of the need for feminism were much more problematic. It was through those routes that popular cultural forms showing women as on a particular kind of par with men (equally violent, equally sexually voracious, equally ruthless), as epitomized by the female stalker movie *Fatal Attraction*, or indeed by *Sex and the City*, became popularized. In fact,

they showed how unliberated women still were from the heterosexist norms that measured women's worth – properly and not least internalized by many women themselves – in terms of their affiliation with a man, and repositioned women as ultimately at the behest of their instincts and emotions, unredeemed by reason of any kind.

A different set of developments of the 1990s came from the so-called 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, advanced by one phenomenon particularly important for the 1990s and the arena in which the most important feminist interventions of that decade were made: the culturalization of the 'hard' sciences. Advances in biotechnology and in gene modification technology in particular, impacting directly on people's daily lives through crises in food production and changing possibilities of medical intervention in reproduction, for instance, led to major political campaigns to enhance 'the public understanding of science', not least because governments were not prepared to bear the costs of errors of judgement.

Within feminism, that culturalization of the sciences went hand in hand with an explosion of writing on the body, and, indeed, within feminist cultural production one might describe the 1990s as the decade of the body. Its antecedents were the debates about test-tube babies and *in vitro* fertilization which had come to a specifically gendered head when a team of male doctors facilitated the birth, in 1978, of Louise Brown, the first so-called test-tube baby. The proliferation of medically assisted reproductive technologies led to a flurry of scientific, medical, legal, and cultural activity in which women's 'ownership' of reproduction was increasingly called into question, culturally underpinned by films such as the *Aliens* series, for instance, and the powerful and sustained revival of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818). Body preoccupations also led to feminist interrogations of the cultural manufacture of the female body (Bordo, 1993; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994) and to a new destabilization of the body as a given biological entity.

One effect of this sense of the body as 'made' or 'achieved' rather than given was an extensive feminist engagement with body modification, in particular through plastic surgery, but also through sport, as detailed in the film *Pumping Iron II*, for instance. The malleability and cultural manufacture of gender, replayed as the malleability and cultural manufacture of the body, created fierce debates about such interventions (Davis, 1995; 2003). The debates about cosmetic surgery and other body modifications were imbricated in the feminist discourse about female genital mutilation, race oppression through the privileging of the White body as the beauty norm, women's 'right to choose', and the ethics of bodily intervention in general.

Symptomatic of those debates about the body was the work of French artist Orlan (1993) who infamously staged a series of body modification operations during the 1990s that were simultaneously transmitted into galleries around the world in which she tellingly declared '*ceci est mon corps...ceci est mon logiciel...*' (this my body...this is my software...) and sought to explore

the use of plastic surgery for the purposes of self-transformation. Some feminists interpreted such transformations as reflections of the repressive nature of heterosexist body regimes that encourage women to work towards 'unnatural' body shapes through diet, fitness, and intervention regimes that are ideologically problematic and questionable health risks, while others interpreted them as enabling women to take control of their bodies and be the shape they choose.⁵

The association of body with software made in Orlan's work is telling because of the pervading sense in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century of the imbrication of technology in body manufacture. The meaning of changes in technology for women and in culture has become one of the most important preoccupations of women's and gender studies in recent years. Within this context, feminists have been particularly concerned to analyse the culturally specific and gendered nature of both science and technology, thus becoming mediators in the struggle for the public's understanding of science through the medium of culture.⁶ One of the most abiding images for that struggle is the figure of the 'cyborg', manufactured by Donna Haraway to account for the imbrication of technology in the body and the dissolution between the boundaries of 'natural' and 'un- or non-natural' body/body parts: 'A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (1991: 149). Feminists' reading of technology has centred extensively on the impact of virtual technologies and environments such as cyberspace on our understanding of gender (Stone, 1996; Wolmark, 1999) and on questions of the post-human body. As such it has served not only to insist on the body as manufactured but also on the potential for change that such understanding entails.

MATERIAL REALITIES: OTHER HORIZONS

The cultural turn in the social sciences which has led, *inter alia*, to a cultural turn in the syllabi of women's and gender studies courses in Northwestern countries and in the Anglophone countries around the world is radically different from the kinds of agendas which dominate women's and gender studies courses in other regions of the world. The Asian Institute of Technology, for instance, has as two of its objectives 'to facilitate increased participation of Asian women in professions in science, technology, environment, and resource management' and 'to gain for women access to the status and authority in the larger society that participation in technological planning and decision-making bring' (Griffin, 2002: 23). Here, a different kind of instrumentality prevails, concerned with the education of a new ruling elite of professionals and a preoccupation with the material conditions of women's lives that has become an increasingly smaller part of the agenda of women's studies in Northwestern countries.

Such instrumentality is frequently born out of a continuing or indeed only awakening recognition that women's material conditions remain atrocious in many parts of the world, with little access to resources and self-determination of any kind. As an effect of globalization, such instrumentality is additionally and equally importantly born out of the demands of supranational organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that women *as a resource* be utilized more effectively in the development of Third World economies. The resourcing of women – giving them resources and using them as resources – thus becomes a key issue for feminism, requiring critical engagement in a context where the seduction of resources (being given grants, investments, etc.) may lower resistance to the interrogation of the meanings of that resourcing.

As the twenty-first century progresses, technological developments in relation to the material conditions under which they occur will probably remain a key area of debate among feminists. 'Gender' has replaced 'women' as the term of reference in many feminist discourses, even though the meaning of 'gender' in the context of supranational and development agendas, for example, remains 'women'. As culturally conservative and culturally progressive environments achieve greater proximity in Northwestern Europe and beyond, and as certain cultural and economic contexts are becoming 'feminized', it becomes possible to envisage renewed battles over the cultural positioning of women and 'woman' in the collapsing public and private spheres that characterize the early twenty-first century.

NOTES

1 It is worth noting that women in the shape of the muse (as servants to men's cultural production) and as bearers of culture (in the context of nationalism and war) had occupied service functions in relation to both men and culture.

2 The term 'patriarchy' has become both deeply unfashionable since the 1980s and highly contested since it is thought that the 'rule of the father' has been superseded by the 'rule of the brothers', that is by cohorts of younger males rather than by a single all-powerful father figure.

3 It is, perhaps, worth remembering here that the seven demands of the women's liberation movement were: (1) equal pay; (2) equal education and job opportunities; (3) free contraception and abortion on demand; (4) free twenty-four hour nurseries, under community control; (5) legal and financial independence; (6) an end to discrimination against lesbians; (7) freedom from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status. An end to the laws, assumptions, and institutions that perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women. (Feminist Anthology Collective, 1981).

4 One cultural phenomenon, however, that has arisen in this context, is the production of films from the Northern industrial UK about men's needs to become spectacular bodies and insert themselves in cultural forms associated with women as an antidote to the end of the industries that occupied them (for example, *The Full Monty*; *Billy Elliott*; *Brassed Off*).

5 See Roach Anleu, in this volume.

6 See Weber, in this volume.

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