

Reading Like a Feminist

Can social constructionism entirely dispense with the idea of essence? This is the central question I propose to address through a critique of the debates on gender and reading: what does it mean to read as a woman or as a man? When social constructionist theories of reading posit groups of gendered readers, what is it exactly that underwrites and subtends the notion of a class of women or a class of men reading? Precisely *where*, in other words, does the essentialism inhere in anti-essentialism? Although the present analysis focuses predominantly upon three recent pieces, Robert Scholes's "Reading Like a Man," Tania Modleski's "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation," and Gayatri Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," the dispute over "reading as woman" has a much longer history which includes Peggy Kamuf's "Writing Like a Woman," Jonathan Culler's "Reading as a Woman," and, most recently, the many contributions to the controversial volume *Men in Feminism*. In the background of all these investigations lies the question of essentialism and the problem of the vexed relation between feminism and deconstruction. How and why have the current tensions between feminism and deconstruction mobilized around the issue of essentialism? Why indeed is essentialism such a powerful and seemingly intransigent category for both deconstructionists and feminists? Is it possible to be an essentialist deconstructionist, when deconstruction is commonly understood as the very displacement of essence? By the same token, is it legitimate to call oneself an anti-essentialist feminist, when feminism seems to take for granted among its members a shared identity, some essential point of commonality?

According to one well-known American critic, feminism and deconstruction are fundamentally incompatible discourses since deconstruction displaces the essence of the class "women" which feminism needs to ar-

ticulate its very politics. The polarization of feminism and deconstruction around the contested sign of essence is perhaps nowhere so clear as in Robert Scholes's "Reading Like a Man," a piece which seeks to disclose the often subtle and frequently suspect strategies which, in this instance, (male?) deconstructors employ to master feminism and to put it in its place. Jonathan Culler's "Reading as a Woman," a study which endorses the "hypothesis" (rather than the experience) of a woman reading,¹ is, for Scholes, a classic example of the way in which deconstruction's de-essentializing gestures are merely re-phallogentrizing appropriations in the end. Specifically, it is Culler's premature repudiation of "experience" as a legitimate ground of feminist interpretation which Scholes objects to and which becomes the critical spur for his own speculations on the role experience might play in "reading like a man." I find Scholes's careful critique of Culler's "Reading as a Woman" both incisive and enormously suggestive, but not entirely devoid of certain mastering strategies of its own. It is these strategies that I wish to discuss here, while declaring all the same my fundamental agreement with Scholes's basic premise that the relation between deconstruction and feminism is by no means unproblematic or uncomplicated. The most serious (but also the most intriguing) problem with this essay is that it leaves the feminism-deconstruction binarism firmly in place – it reinforces and solidifies their antithesis in order to claim that deconstruction is bad for feminism. To secure this moral judgment, the hybrid positions of deconstructive feminism and feminist deconstruction are glossed over, rejected from the start as untenable possibilities – untenable because feminism and deconstruction are "founded upon antithetical principles: feminism upon a class concept and deconstruction upon the deconstructing of all such concepts" (208).

Everything hinges here, as Scholes himself is quick to point out, on the notion of "class." What he objects to, specifically, is deconstruction's rejection of what W. K. Wimsatt, following Locke, calls "nominal universality" (208), that is, nominal essence. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke makes the crucial distinction between what he calls "real" versus "nominal" essences. Real essence connotes the Aristotelian understanding of essence as that which is most irreducible and unchanging about a thing; nominal essence signifies for Locke a view of essence as merely a linguistic convenience, a classificatory fiction we need to categorize and to label.² When feminists today argue for maintaining the notion of a *class* of women, usually for political purposes, they do so, I would suggest, on the basis of Locke's nominal essence. It is Locke's distinction between nominal and real essence which allows us to work with the category of "women" as a *linguistic* rather than a natural kind, and for this reason Locke's category of

nominal essence is especially useful for anti-essentialist feminists who want to hold onto the notion of women as a group without submitting to the idea that it is "nature" which categorizes them as such. Scholes believes that feminism needs to hold onto this "linguistic/logical" (207) idea of a class of women in order to be effective. I would not disagree. I would, however, wish to point out that nominal essences are often treated by post-Lockians as if they were real essences, and this is what I perceive to be the main point of vulnerability in "Reading Like a Man."

While still subscribing to the "linguistic/logical" dimension of class, Scholes later goes on to endorse "the ability of women to be conscious of themselves as a class . . . bound by a certain shared experience" (212-13). What, then, does the category "experience" signify for Scholes? "Whatever experience is," he concludes, "it is not just a *construct* but something that *constructs*" (215). This definition sounds remarkably similar to Locke's description of "real essence" as the "something I know not what" which nonetheless determines the "what" of who we are. And what is it, exactly, that constitutes that "certain shared experience" which allows women "to be conscious of themselves as a class"? Could it be that which Scholes reprimands Culler for eliding, precisely that which Culler (in Scholes's opinion) rashly jettisons from consideration in his deconstructive third moment: namely, "the bodily experience of menstrual flow" (211)? Of course, not all females, in fact, menstruate. It may well be that Scholes wishes us to think of "experience" in the way Teresa de Lauretis suggests: "an on-going process by which subjectivity is constructed semiotically and historically" (*Alice* 182). But what distinguishes Scholes's understanding of experience from de Lauretis's is the former's hidden appeal to referentiality, to (in this case) the female body which, though constructed, is nonetheless constructed *by its own processes*, processes which are seen to be real, immediate, and directly knowable.⁵ Bodily experiences may seem self-evident and immediately perceptible but they are always socially mediated. Even if we were to agree that experience is not merely constructed but also itself constructing, we would still have to acknowledge that there is little agreement amongst women on exactly what constitutes "a woman's experience." Therefore we need to be extremely wary of the temptation to make substantive claims on the basis of the so-called "authority" of our experiences. "No man should seek in any way to diminish the authority which the experience of women gives them in speaking about that experience" (217-18), Scholes insists, and yet, as feminist philosopher Jean Grimshaw rightly reminds us, "experience does not come neatly in segments, such that it is always possible to abstract what in one's experience is due to 'being a woman' from that which is due to 'being married,' 'being

middle class' and so forth" (85). In sum, "experience" is rather shaky ground on which to base the notion of a class of women. But if we can't base the idea of a class of women on "essence" or "experience," then what can we base it on? Before tendering a possible answer to what is admittedly a vexing and frustrating question, much more needs to be said by way of rounding out my critique of Scholes's "Reading Like a Man."

By taking as his model of feminism a humanist or essentialist version, and by reading deconstruction as fundamentally anti-essentialist, Scholes forecloses the possibility of both an anti-essentialist feminism and an essentialist deconstruction. But recent work in feminist theory suggests that not only are these positions possible, they can be powerfully displacing positions from which feminists can speak. To take the first instance, an anti-essentialist feminism, Monique Wittig rejects unequivocally the idea of a "class of women" based on shared (biological) experience and bases her feminism on the deconstructive premise that, in Derrida's words, "woman has no essence of her very own" (31). To take the second instance, an essentialist deconstruction, Luce Irigaray bases her feminism on the bodily metaphor of "the two lips" in order to construct and *deconstruct* "woman" at the same time: for Irigaray, the very possibility of a radical deconstruction is based on the simultaneous displacement and *redployment* of essentialism – a "thinking through the body."¹ Such "hybrid" instances in feminist theory suggest that Scholes's feminism/deconstruction binarism is ultimately more harmful than helpful. It leads, for example, to such baffling statements as "feminism is right and deconstruction is wrong" (205). Mastery, in Scholes's work, operates along an ethical axis: feminism is disappropriated from deconstruction so that its alleged moral superiority might be protected from the ill repute and questionable designs of its powerful (male?) suitor, deconstruction. What we see in this piece is a curious form of critical chivalry; feminism, I would submit, has become the angel in the house of critical theory.

But who is this errant knight dedicated to saving feminism, and from what country does he heed? What language does he speak? Does Scholes speak, read, or write as a woman or as a man? The final lines provide the answer we have all been waiting for:

We are subjects constructed by our experience and truly carry traces of that experience in our minds and on our bodies. Those of us who are male cannot deny this either. With the best will in the world we shall never read as women and perhaps not even like women. For me, born when I was born and living where I have lived, the very best I can do is to be conscious of the ground upon

which I stand: to read not as but like a man (218).

The distinction between the similes “as” and “like” is nothing short of brilliant, but does not answer a far more interesting question, a question which, through a series of rather nimble acrobatic maneuvers of his own, Scholes manages to side-step: namely, does he read as or like a *feminist*? It is the very slippages between “woman,” “women,” “female,” and “feminist” throughout the text that permits the writer to defer the question of reading as or *like* a feminist – the question, in other words, of *political identification*. I read this piece like a feminist; what it means to read as or even like a woman I still don’t know.

Scholes is not alone in his repudiation of Jonathan Culler’s alleged deconstructionist appropriation of feminism. Tania Modleski, in her “Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings” also takes Culler to task for “being patriarchal just at the point when he seems to be the most feminist,” that is, at the point “when he arrogates to himself and to other male critics the ability to read as women by ‘hypothesizing’ women readers” (133). What allows a male subject to read as a woman is the displacing series of repetitions which Culler adapts from Peggy Kamuf’s “Writing Like a Woman”: “a woman writing as a woman writing as a woman. . . .” But, to Modleski, the deconstructionist definition of a woman reading (as a woman reading as a woman . . .) simply opens a space for male feminism while simultaneously foreclosing the question of real, material female readers: “a genuinely feminist literary criticism might wish to repudiate the *hypothesis* of a woman reader and instead promote the ‘sensible,’ visible, actual female reader” (133). While I am not contesting that there are certainly “real,” material, gendered readers engaged in the act of reading, I nonetheless stumble over the qualifier “genuinely”: what is it, exactly, that might constitute for Modleski a “genuinely feminist literary criticism”?

Read alongside Scholes’s “Reading Like a Man,” Modleski’s “Feminism and the Power of Interpretation” proposes an answer that should perhaps not surprise us: “the experience of real women” (134) operates as the privileged signifier of the authentic and the real. Experience emerges to fend off the entry of men into feminism and, further, to naturalize and to authorize the relation between biological woman and social women: “to read as a woman in a patriarchal culture necessitates that the *hypothesis* of a woman reader be advanced by an *actual* woman reader: the female feminist critic” (133-34). Like Scholes, Modleski can appeal to experience as the measure of the “genuinely feminist” only by totally collapsing woman, female, and feminist and by prefacing this tricky conflation with the empirical tag “actual.”

Modleski objects to Kamuf's and Culler's ostensible position that "a 'ground' (like experience) from which to make critical judgments is anathema" (134). If this were an accurate assessment of Kamuf's and Culler's positions I might be inclined to agree, but the poststructuralist objection to experience is not a repudiation of grounds of knowing *per se* but rather a refusal of the hypostatisation of experience as *the* ground (and the most stable ground) of knowledge production. The problem with categories like "the female experience" or "the male experience" is that, given their generality and seamlessness, they are of limited epistemological usefulness. When Modleski does some hypothesizing of her own and presents us with her fictional "case of a man and a woman reading Freud's text," and when she informs us that "the woman, accustomed to the experience of being thought more sensual than intellectual, must certainly respond to it differently from the man," what "woman" and what "man" is she talking about? Can we ever speak so simply of "the female reader" or "the male reader" (133), "the woman" and "the man," as if these categories were not transgressed, not already constituted by other axes of difference (class, ethnicity, nationality . . .)? Moreover, are our reading responses so easily predictable, so readily interpretable?

Both Modleski and Scholes are right to insist that critical interpretation has everything to do with power. Why, then, do I find Modleski's eloquent concluding invocation of "female empowerment" so distinctly *disempowering*? Her words are strong, emphatic, a political call to arms: "the ultimate goal of feminist criticism and theory is female empowerment. My particular concern here has been to empower female readers of texts, in part by rescuing them from the oblivion to which some critics would consign them" (136). Perhaps what is discomfiting is the singular, declarative, and prescriptive tone of this guideline for political action. But it is more than a question of tone. Exactly which readers is Modleski speaking for, to, and about? Does she propose to rescue *all* female readers, including "third world" readers, lesbian readers, and working-class readers? Are not some female readers *materially* more empowered than others, by virtue of class, race, national, or other criterion? For that matter, are not *some* female readers more empowered than *some* male readers? Do these more privileged readers need to be "rescued"? Modleski seems to be as committed as Robert Scholes to saving feminism from the appropriative gestures of men (even well-intentioned ones): "feminist criticism performs an escape act dedicated to freeing women from *all* male captivity narratives, whether these be found in literature, criticism, or theory" (136). Though "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation" presents itself as a materialist investigation of "reading as woman," no allowance is made for the real, material differences between women. In the end, this ma-

terialist piece is curiously a-materialist in that the differences between women which would de-essentialize the category of Woman are treated, by their very own omission, as *immaterial*.

All of this brings me to a possible way to negotiate the essentialist dilemma at the heart of these theories of "reading like a man" (Scholes), "reading as a woman" (Culler), or reading like a "female feminist critic" (Modleski). It is by no means insignificant that nearly every piece in the volume *Men in Feminism*, of which Scholes's "Reading Like a Man" is one of the more noteworthy contributions, manifests a preoccupation with the question of place, specifically with the problem of where men stand in relation to feminism. Paul Smith wishes to claim for men the privileged space of displacement, usually reserved in deconstruction for Woman, in order to mark the difference of feminism, the subversive presence within. Stephen Heath speculates that the obsession with place is a male obsession with decidedly phallic overtones: are men "in" or "out" of feminism? Still others, Cary Nelson and Rosi Braidotti, suggest that men have no place (or at the very least no *secure* place) in feminism; according to this line of thinking, men may need feminism but feminism doesn't need men.⁵ While place emerges as the recurrent theme that pulls together the twenty-four disparate essays which comprise *Men in Feminism*, I am also struck by how many of these articles inevitably come round to the question of essence, eventually invoke essentialism as the real impediment to theorizing men "in" feminism. An unarticulated relation between essence and place seems to motivate each piece. While it is no doubt imperative to continue to investigate the place of essence in contemporary critical discourse, perhaps we should be interrogating not only the place of essentialism but the essentialism of place; one question might provide us with a gloss on the other. The remainder of this article will demonstrate that the essentialism in "anti-essentialism" inheres in the notion of place or positionality. What is *essential* to social constructionism is precisely this notion of "where I stand," of what has come to be called, appropriately enough, "subject-positions."

To understand the importance of place for social constructionist theory, we must look to Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist psychoanalysis. Lacan's return to Freud is, above all, a project which seeks to reclaim the place of subjectivity as a destabilizing and decentering force from the work of ego psychologists who, through their unquestioned allegiance to Western humanism, seek to re-encapsulate the subject within a stationary, traditional Cartesian framework. It is during the "pre-subject's" passage from the Imaginary into the Symbolic that the child, under the threat of castration, recognizes the different sexed subject-positions ("he," "she") and finally assumes

one.⁶ It is especially significant that throughout his work Lacan always speaks in terms of the *place* of the subject. His subversive rewriting of Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito ergo sum*) as "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" provides a good case in point (166). The emphasis in Lacan's anti-cogito falls on the "where"; the question "who is speaking" can only be answered by shifting the grounds of the question to "where am I speaking from?" But it is important to remember that the place of the subject is nonetheless, ultimately, unlocalizable; were we able to fix the whereabouts of the subject in a static field of determinants, then we would be back in the realm of ego psychology. What is important about Lacan's emphasis on *place* is that thinking in terms of positionality works against the tendency of concepts such as "subject" or "ego," or "I" and "you," to solidify. The "I" in Lacanian psychoanalysis is always a precarious and unstable place to be – "intolerable," in fact, in one critic's estimation (Gallop, *Reading* 145).

Another recurrent emphasis in Lacan's work, useful for our purposes here, is his insistence on the *construction* of the subject's sexuality rather than the *de facto* assignment of a sex at birth. Lacan teaches us in "The Meaning of the Phallus" that we assume our sex, "take up its attributes only by means of a threat" – the threat of castration (Mitchell and Rose 75). It is because the birth of the subject does not coincide with the biological birth of the human person (Freud's fundamental insight into the problem of sexuality) that Lacan can speak in "The Mirror Stage" of "a real *specific prematurity of birth* in man" (4). Jane Gallop describes our delayed entry into subjectivity this way: "the child, although already born, does not become a self until the mirror stage. Both cases are two-part birth processes: once born into 'nature,' the second time into 'history'" (*Reading* 85). The 'I,' then, is not a given at birth but rather is constructed, assumed, taken on during the subject's problematic entry into the Symbolic. Lacan's focus on the complex psychoanalytic processes which participate in the constitution of the subject is, of course, a pre-eminently anti-essentialist position and, as we shall see, it has profound implications for the way in which we think about the subject who reads and the subject who is read.

I turn now to the theory of subject-positions most recently deployed, to brilliant effect, by Gayatri Spivak in her work on the subaltern. Spivak borrows and adapts her theoretical terminology not from Lacan but from Michel Foucault, although Lacan's theory of subjectivity is everywhere in the background here. It is in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that Foucault elaborates his own notion of subject-positions as one of the four fundamental components of "discursive formations." Recognizing this obvious debt to

Foucault, it is equally important to situate Spivak's turn to subjectivity in the context of her interest in the Subaltern Studies group, a Marxist historical collective devoted to the project of exposing and undermining the elitism which characterizes traditional approaches to South Asian culture.⁷ Spivak's main critique of Subaltern Studies is, in fact, the classic critique generally levelled against materialists – namely, a failure to address adequately questions of subjectivity. Although deconstructivist in their goal to displace traditional historiography, the members of Subaltern Studies nevertheless rely on certain humanist notions such as agency, totality, and presence. Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" is a sharp and discerning reading of the way in which the collective's entire attempt to "let the subaltern speak" falls prey to a positivistic search for a subaltern or peasant consciousness, which, in Spivak's opinion, can never be ultimately recovered.⁸ What is strikingly different about Spivak's reading of Subaltern Studies is that she does not dismiss their essentialism out of hand. In fact, she reads the collective's humanist ambitions to locate a subaltern consciousness as "a *strategic* use of positivistic essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (205). Wittingly or unwittingly, Subaltern Studies *deploys* essentialism as a provisional gesture in order to align themselves with the very subjects who have been written out of conventional historiography:

Although the group does not wittingly engage with the post-structuralist understanding of "consciousness," our own transactional reading of them is enhanced if we see them as strategically adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness, that would fall prey to an anti-humanist critique, within a historiographic practice that draws many of its strengths from that very critique. . . . If in translating bits and pieces of discourse theory and the critique of humanism back into an essentialist historiography the historian of subalternity aligns himself to the pattern of conduct of the subaltern himself, it is only a progressivist view, that diagnoses the subaltern as necessarily inferior, that will see such an alignment to be without interventionist value. Indeed it is in their very insistence upon the subaltern as the subject of history that the group acts out such a translating back, an interventionist strategy that is only partially unwitting. (206-207)

Spivak's simultaneous critique and *endorsement* of Subaltern Studies's essentialism suggests that humanism can be activated in the service of the subaltern; in other words, when put into practice by the dispossessed themselves, essentialism can be powerfully displacing and disruptive. This,

to me, signals an exciting new way to rethink the problem of essentialism; it represents an approach which evaluates the motivations *behind* the deployment of essentialism rather than prematurely dismissing it as an unfortunate vestige of patriarchy (itself an essentialist category).

I do, however, have some serious reservations about treating essentialism as “a strategy for our times” (207). While I would agree with Spivak that a provisional return to essentialism can successfully operate, in particular contexts, as an interventionary strategy, I am also compelled to wonder at what point does this move cease to be provisional and become permanent? There is always a danger that the long-term effect of such a “temporary” intervention may, in fact, lead once again to a re-entrenchment of a more reactionary form of essentialism. Could it be that the calls, such as Spivak’s, for a strategic essentialism might be humanism’s way of keeping its fundamental tenets in circulation at any cost and under any guise? Could this be “phallocentrism’s latest ruse”?⁹ It may well be a ruse, but in the end I would agree that the risk is worth taking. I cannot help but think that the determining factor in deciding essentialism’s political or strategic value is dependent upon who practices it: in the hands of a hegemonic group, essentialism can be employed as a powerful tool of ideological domination; in the hands of the subaltern, the use of humanism to mime (in the Irigarayan sense of ‘to undo by overdoing’) humanism can represent a powerful displacing repetition. The question of the permissibility, if you will, of engaging in essentialism is therefore framed and determined by the subject-positions from which one speaks.

We return, then, to Foucault’s poststructuralist definition of “a subject” as “not the speaking consciousness, not the author of the formulation, but a position that may be filled in certain conditions by various individuals” (115). It is not difficult to translate Foucault’s approach to subjectivity into a general theory of reading. For example, we might ask: what are the various positions a reading subject may occupy? How are these positions constructed? Are there possible distributions of subject-positions located in the text itself? Can a reader refuse to take up a subject-position the text constructs for him/her? Does the text construct the reading subject or does the reading subject construct the text? In “Imperialism and Sexual Difference,” Spivak concludes that “the clearing of a subject-position in order to speak or write is unavoidable” (229). Now it is not clear exactly what Spivak means by this claim; is she referring to a clearing *away* of a previously held subject-position or a clearing the way *for* a particular subject-position? The ambiguity is instructive here, for when reading, speaking, or writing, we are always doing both at once. In reading, for instance, we bring (old) subject-positions to the text at the same

time the actual process of reading constructs (new) subject-positions for us. Consequently, we are always engaged in a “double reading” – not in Naomi Schor’s sense of the term,¹⁰ but in the sense that we are continually caught within and between *at least* two constantly shifting subject-positions (old and new, constructed and constructing) and these positions may often stand in complete contradiction to each other.

Nothing intrinsic to the notion of subject-positions suggests that it may constitute a specifically *feminist* approach to reading; it is, however, especially compatible with recent feminist reconceptualizations of the subject as a site of multiple and heterogeneous differences. This work seeks to move beyond the self/other, “I”/“not-I” binarism central to Lacan’s understanding of subject constitution and instead substitutes a notion of the “I” as a complicated field of multiple subjectivities and competing identities. There is some disagreement over whether or not this new view of the subject as heteronomous and heterogeneous marks a break with Lacan or represents the logical outcome of his theory. Teresa de Lauretis persuasively argues the former case:

It seems to me that this notion of identity points to a more useful conception of the subject than the one proposed by neo-Freudian psychoanalysis and poststructuralist theories. For it is not the fragmented, or intermittent, identity of a subject constructed in division by language alone, an “I” continuously prefigured and preempted in an unchangeable symbolic order. It is neither, in short, the imaginary identity of the individualist, bourgeois subject, which is male and white; nor the “flickering” of the posthumanist Lacanian subject, which is too nearly and at best (fe)male. What is emerging in feminist writings is, instead . . . a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language. (Feminist 9)

Mary Gentile, another feminist film critic, agrees, arguing that it is precisely a woman’s “tentative” subjectivity (a result of ambivalent positioning as a castrated object in the Symbolic order of the subject) which allows us to see subjectivity as a nexus of possibilities “where there is no clear split between ‘I’ and ‘not-I,’ but rather a range or continuum of existence” (19). My own position on the question is more closely aligned with Constance Penley’s reasoning that the seeds of a theory of the subject as dispersed, as multiple, can already be found in Lacan’s notion of the subject as a place of contradiction, continually in a state of construction. This view holds that without Lacan’s concept of the “split subject,” divided against itself, these new feminist theories of identity would not be possible (145). In any

case, what we can take away from this specific debate on Lacan's theory of subjectivity are the strategy of positing the reader as a site of differences and the notion of the reading process as a negotiation amongst discursive subject-positions which the reader, as social subject, may or may not choose to fill.

For Foucault, which subject-positions one is likely to read from is less a matter of "choice" than "assignation." Spivak's work clarifies for us that these "I-slots" are, in fact, institutional subject-positions – "social vacancies that are of course not filled in the same way by different individuals" (*Other* 304). Though it is always dangerous to speak in terms of "choice" within a poststructuralism which deconstructs such notions as agency and free will, Spivak still provides us with a modicum of movement between institutional subject-positions. Her own reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver" moves carefully and deliberately among the "I-slots" of author, reader, teacher, subaltern, and historian. I see two major difficulties in applying Foucault's notion of subject-positions to either a strategy or a theory of reading. First, it leads to an inclination to taxonomize, to list one's various categorical positions in linear fashion as if they could be easily extracted and unproblematically distinguished from each other. Second, such a reading can easily lend itself to stereotyping, that is, to labelling "kinds" of readers and predicting their institutional responses as Tania Modleski does with her hypothetical male and female reader in "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation." Spivak seems to anticipate this objection when she rightly insists that "all generalizations made from subject-positions are untotalizable" (304); yet her discussions of "the Indian reader," "the Marxist-feminist reader," and especially "the non-Marxist anti-racist feminist readers in the Anglo-U.S." who, "for terminological convenience," she categorizes under the label "liberal feminism" (254) all seem to point to a totalizing picture supporting and upholding each "I-slot." Perhaps it is inevitable that we turn to such labels "for terminological convenience" (after all, how else are we to make any distinctions at all between readers?), yet the phone book compiling of "I-slot" listings can be unsettling if what we wish to emphasize is not the fixed differences between subject-positions but the fluid boundaries and continual commerce between them.

What is particularly surprising to me about the recent men in feminism debates is not the preoccupation with essence and place but the immobility, the intractableness of the privileged terms "men" and "feminism." Robert Scholes and Tania Modleski both work to *reinforce* the bar between men/feminism, each in effect erecting a defense against the incursions of the other. For although the goals of their critical projects are much the same, if not identical (to rescue feminism from the mastering impulses of deconstruc-

tion), these critics who are more allies than combatants nonetheless position themselves on opposite sides of the asymmetrical binarism: Scholes electing to read "like a man," and Modleski choosing to read like a "female feminist." Stephen Heath, on the other hand, has argued that "female feminism" can only be viewed as a contradiction in terms. Building on Elaine Showalter's influential "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year," Heath concludes that a man reading as a feminist always involves a strategy of female impersonation (28). But is there not also a mode of impersonation involved when a woman reads as a feminist, or, indeed, when a woman reads as a woman? Heath tentatively suggests that "maybe the task of male critics is just to read (forget the 'as') . . ." (29), but Scholes is right to insist that we never "just" read, that we always read *from somewhere*. The anti-essentialist "where" is essential to the poststructuralist project of theorizing reading as a negotiation of socially constructed subject-positions. As its linguistic containment within the very term "displacement" might suggest, place can never be entirely displaced, as it were, from deconstruction.

Let me return, in conclusion, to the question I deferred at the beginning of this consideration of gender and reading: upon what grounds can we base the notion of a class of women reading? Both "class" and "women" are political constructs (on this question I am most influenced by Monique Wittig) but what, we might ask, is "politics"? Politics is precisely the self-evident category in feminist discourse – that which is most irreducible and most indispensable. As feminism's *essential* component, it tenaciously resists definition; it is both the most transparent and the most elusive of terms. The persistent problem for feminist theorists of locating a suitable grounds for a feminist politics finds perhaps its most urgent articulation in Donna Haraway's impressive work on "cyborg politics": "what kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective?" (75). Her answer: a class of women linked together "through coalition – affinity, not identity" – affinity based on "choice" rather than on "nature" (73). My own inclination is to tackle these same questions of identity, politics, coalition, and feminism from the opposite direction. Whereas Haraway posits a coalition of women as the basis of a possible feminist socialist politics, I see politics as the basis of a possible coalition of women. For Haraway, it is affinity which grounds politics; for me, it is politics which grounds affinity. Politics marks the site where Haraway's project begins and where mine ends. In both cases, politics operates as the privileged, self-evident category.

The slippage in the above paragraph from "class" to "coalition" is not merely accidental. I intend to suggest by this shift an anti-essentialist

reading of “class” as a *product* of coalition. Coalition precedes class and determines its limits and boundaries; we cannot identify a group of women until various social, historical, political coalitions construct the conditions and possibilities for membership. Many anti-essentialists fear that positing a political coalition of *women* risks presuming that there must first be a natural class of women; but this belief only masks the fact that it is a coalition politics which constructs the category of women (and men) in the first place. Retaining the idea of women as a class, if anything, might help remind us that the sexual categories we work with are no more and no less than social constructions, subject-positions subject to change and to historical evolution. I am certainly not the first feminist to suggest that we need to retain the notion of women as a class for political purposes. I would, however, wish to take this conviction to its furthest conclusion and suggest that it is politics which feminism cannot do without, politics that is essential to feminism’s many self-definitions. It is telling, I think, that anti-essentialists are willing to displace “identity,” “self,” “experience,” and virtually every other self-evident category *except* politics. To the extent that it is difficult to imagine a *non-political* feminism, politics emerges as feminism’s essence.

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| Notes | 1 | Adapting Peggy Kamuf’s strategically reiterative formulation of “a woman writing as a woman,” Culler concludes that “for a woman to read as a woman is not to repeat an identity or an experience that is given but to play a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman, which is also a construct, so that the series can continue: a woman reading as a woman reading as a woman” (64). | 3 | properties of gold depend” (Locke, 13.6). Locke discusses real versus nominal essence in numerous passages of <i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> , the most important of which are 2.31; 3.3; 3.6; 3.10; 4.6; and 4.12. |
| | 2 | For example, the nominal essence of gold (Locke’s favorite example) would be “that complex idea the word gold stands for, let it be, for instance, a body yellow, of a certain weight, malleable, fusible, and fixed;” its real essence would be “the constitution of the insensible parts of that body, on which those qualities, and all the other | 4 | For Scholes’s project to “save the referent,” see “Reference and Difference” in <i>Textual Power</i> (86-110). |
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- Stephen Heath, "Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory" (41-46); Cary Nelson, "Men, Feminism: The Materiality of Discourse" (153-72); and Rosi Braidotti, "Envy: or With My Brains and Your Looks" (233-41), all in Jardine and Smith.
- 6 For a more detailed reading of the constitution of the sexed subject, see Lacan's "The Mirror Stage" in *Ecrits* (1-7).
- 7 For a summary statement of the collective's theoretical positions, see Guha (esp. vii-viii).
- 8 For Spivak's full critique of essentialism in the Subaltern Studies group, see *Other* 202-07.
- 9 The phrase is Naomi Schor's: "what is it to say that the discourse of sexual indifference/pure difference is not the last or (less triumphantly) the latest ruse of phallogentrism?" ("Dreaming" 109). This is implicitly a critique of Foucault's anti-essentialism, suggesting that both essentialism and anti-essentialism can have reactionary effects.
- 10 For Schor's helpful definition of "reading double" as reading both for and beyond difference, see "Reading" (250).
- 11 Spivak insists hers is merely a reading strategy and not a comprehensive theory. The distinction she makes between these two notions is not entirely clear; is it possible to employ a reading strategy outside a larger theoretical framework?

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