

Sexual Difference

A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice



The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective

Sexual Difference

Theories of Representation and Difference

GENERAL EDITOR, TERESA DE LAURETIS

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A Theory of Social-Symbolic
Practice

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The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy

An Introductory Essay

by Teresa de Lauretis

Italian feminism is not well known in North America. With very few, very recent exceptions, its critical texts are not translated, discussed, or cited by American and other anglophone feminists.¹ In presenting this text to them and others concerned with the development and elaboration of feminist thought and its relations to history and cultural practices, I shall especially resist the temptation of providing even a brief overview of a social, political, and intellectual movement whose history is still as ever in process, multifaceted, overdetermined, contradictory—in a word, emergent. The book you are about to read, however, is not only a major theoretical text of Italian feminism but one which, in elaborating a critical theory of culture based on the practice of sexual difference, also reconstructs a history of feminism in Italy from the particular location, the social and political situatedness, of its authors.

That this is only one possible history, one story that may be told out of the many documents and social memory of Italian feminism, and the experiential recollections of individuals and groups, is clearly stated in the book's original title, *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne* [Don't Think You Have Any Rights: The Engendering of Female Freedom in the Thought and Vicissitudes of a Women's Group]. The partiality and situatedness of the book's theoretical and historical project—a project *at once* theoretical *and* historical—are further emphasized by its attribution of collective authorship to the Milan Women's Bookstore [Libreria delle Donne di Milano], which one infers must be roughly coextensive with the "women's group" referred to in the subtitle. They are reiterated in the authors' introduction: "This book is about the need to make sense of, exalt, and represent in words and images the relationship of one woman to another. If putting a political practice into words is the same thing as theorizing, then this is a book of theory, because the relations between women are the subject matter of our politics and of this book."

The events and ideas recounted in the book, the authors continue, took

place between 1966 and 1986, mainly in Milan; they commonly go under the name of feminism. But in reassessing them retrospectively, in rewriting its history, the book renames it *genealogy*: "In the years and places we mention, we saw a genealogy of women being charted; that is, women appeared who were legitimized by referring to their female origin. . . . We are not certain that the history reconstructed in this book will really produce what we wanted, that is, to be inscribed in a female generation. We cannot be sure that, put to the test, our experience will prove to be only one of the many historical vicissitudes of the fragile concept of woman."

The bold injunction of the title, "Don't think you have any rights" (a phrase of Simone Weil's, cited in the epigraph), with its direct address to women and its unequivocal stance of negativity, sharply contrasts with the subtitle's affirmation of a freedom for women that is not made possible by adherence to the liberal concept of rights—civil, human, or individual rights, which women do not have *as women*—but is generated, and indeed en-gendered, by taking up a position in a symbolic community, a "genealogy of women," that is at once discovered, invented, and constructed through feminist practices of reference and address. Those practices, as the book later specifies, include the reading or rereading of women's writings; taking other women's words, thoughts, knowledges, and insights as frame of reference for one's analyses, understanding, and self-definition; and trusting them to provide a symbolic mediation between oneself and others, one's subjectivity and the world.

The word *genealogy*—whose root links it with *gender*, *generation*, and other words referring to birth as a social event—usually designates the legitimate descent, by social or intellectual kinship, of free male individuals. The intellectual and social traditions of Western culture are male genealogies where, as in Lacan's symbolic, women have no place: "Among the things that had no name [prior to feminist discourse] there was, there is, the pain of coming into the world this way, without symbolic placement." In this sense, Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own" may not avail women's intellection if the texts one has in it are written in the languages of male genealogies. A better figure of symbolic placement [*collocazione simbolica*] is Emily Dickinson's room, as Ellen Moers describes it, filled with the insubstantial presence of women writers and their works—a symbolic "space-time furnished with female-gendered references [*riferimenti sessuati femminili*]" which mediate her access to literature and poetry. Only in such a room may the woman "peculiarly susceptible to language," as Adrienne Rich has put it, be able to find, or to look for, "*her way of being in the world.*"² In other words, the authors suggest, the conceptual and discursive space of a female genealogy can effectively mediate a woman's relation to the symbolic, allowing her self-definition as female being, or female-gendered speaking subject. And lest it be misconstrued, let me anticipate right away that this notion of genealogy is not limited to literary figures but reaches into relationships between women in everyday life.

Woolf, Dickinson, and Rich are major points of reference in the critical genealogy of feminism in Italy, which, while distinct in its historical and

political specificity from both Anglo-American and French feminisms, nonetheless retains significant connections with them. Thus, if the terms *symbolic*, *genealogy*, *freedom*, and others, all newly inflected and recast in this text, come from the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Foucault, et al., the sense of their recasting can be traced to Rich's 1971 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," published in the collection *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979), which was translated into Italian in 1982. See, for instance, the passage I cited above about

the girl or woman who tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over in the "words' masculine persuasive force" of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salomé, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. So what does she do? What did I do? I read the older women poets with their peculiar keenness and ambivalence: Sappho, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, Edna Millay, H. D. (p. 39)

The notions of a woman's relation to the symbolic marked by "peculiar keenness and ambivalence," of a female genealogy of poets, makers of language, and of their active role in mediating the young woman's access to poetry as a symbolic form of being (female being or being-woman) as well as writing (authorship, author-ity), are all there in Rich's passage, although the first two are stated, the last one only suggested by negation. Nearly two decades later, the Milan feminists turn the suggestion into positive affirmation.

In her reading of Rich over and against a comparably influential text in the male genealogy of poststructuralist criticism, Barthes's "The Death of the Author," Nancy K. Miller uses this very essay by Rich to argue for a double temporality of intellectual history unfolding concurrently, if discontinuously, in the "women's time" of feminist criticism and in the "standard time" of academic literary criticism. With regard to Rich's later work, however, Miller questions the "poetics of identity" grounded in a community of women exemplified by "Blood, Bread, and Poetry" (1983) and the limitations set to feminist theory by what she takes to be "a prescriptive esthetics—a 'politically correct' program of representation."³ Instead, Miller proposes irony as a mode of feminist performance and symbolic production.

Now, there definitely is irony—whether intended or not—in a theory of sexual difference such as the one proposed by the Italian feminists that draws as much on the philosophical and conceptual categories of poststructuralism and the critique of humanism as it does on the classic texts of Anglo-American feminism—and recasts them all according to its partial, political project; an

irony most remarkable in that it underscores precisely the effectivity of the concept of genealogy. For while both Miller and the authors of *Sexual Difference* are feminist theorists fully conversant with poststructuralist critical thought, the latter trace their descent from Irigaray rather than Barthes. It is Irigaray's reading of woman's oblique, denied, repressed, unauthorized relationship to the symbolic order from Plato to Hegel and Lacan that resonates, for the Italian theorists of sexual difference, with Rich's "peculiar keenness and ambivalence" to language, and motivates their shared political standing as (in Rich's words again) "disloyal to civilization." Here is, for example, another Italian feminist, the philosopher Adriana Cavarero, writing "Toward a Theory of Sexual Difference":

Woman is not the subject of her language. Her language is not *hers*. She therefore speaks and represents herself in a language not her own, that is, through the categories of the language of the other. She thinks herself as thought by the other. . . . Discourse carries in itself the sign of its subject, the speaking subject who in discourse speaks himself and speaks the world starting from himself. There is thus some truth in man's immortality, which I mentioned earlier as a joke: in universalizing the finitude of his gendered being [*della sua sessuazione*], man exceeds it and poses himself as an essence that of necessity belongs to the "objectivity" of discourse.⁴

The history of philosophy, Cavarero continues, records in various ways the finitude that the thinking subject carries in itself *qua* thinking being, but is extraordinarily blind to the finitude of its sexual difference. While it would have been possible to start from a dual conceptualization of being-man [*l'esser uomo*] and being-woman [*l'esser donna*] as originary forms of being, Western philosophy has started from the hypothesis of the one and from the assumption of a "monstrous" universal, at once neuter and male, whose embodiment in individuals of two sexes does not concern its essence as thinking being but remains external to it. "The task of thinking sexual difference is thus an arduous one because sexual difference lies precisely in the erasure on which Western philosophy has been founded and developed. To think sexual difference starting from the male universal is to think it as already thought, that is, to think it through the categories of a thought that is supported by the non-thinking of difference itself" (48).

The question, then, for the feminist philosopher is how to rethink sexual difference within a dual conceptualization of being, "an absolute dual," in which both being-woman and being-man would be primary, originary forms. This is a question that subverts the categories of Western thought which, precisely, elide sexual difference as primary—as "being there from the beginning" in both woman and man—and relegate it to the status of a secondary difference contained in the gender marking [*sessuazione femminile*] of the being-woman: "Woman is thus the repository of sexual difference, which constitutively belongs to her (and thus constitutes her) since the process of universalization has excluded it from the male" (62). It is a question quite similar to the one posed by Irigaray throughout her readings of Western

philosophers in *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, and similarly located, framed from inside the philosophical discourse they both mean to subvert.

I will come back later to the notion of an originary or primary character of sexual difference. For the moment, I return to the Milan Bookstore and its history of feminism in Italy, where the critical reflection on sexual difference has been going on since the early, activist days of the women's movement but, in the more self-reflexive writings of the '80s, has been taking shape as both a theory of sexual difference and a theory of social practice: the theory of that particular and specifically feminist practice now emerging in Italy, which the book names *the practice of sexual difference* [*la pratica della differenza sessuale*] and proposes as the conceptual pivot of its critical and political project.

The first document of Italian feminism, in this history, was a manifesto issued in 1966 by a group known as Demau (acronym for Demystification of Patriarchal Authoritarianism). While centered on the contradictory position of women in society—which at the time and in the terms of its most progressive social thought, Marxism, was called "the woman question"—the Demau manifesto contained the suggestion that no solution could be found to the problem women pose to society as long as women themselves could not address the problem that society poses to women; that is to say, as long as the terms of the question were not reversed, and women were not the subject, rather than the object, of "the woman question." A further step in the development of what the Milan book calls "the symbolic revolution," namely, the process of critical understanding and sociocultural change whereby women come to occupy the position of subject, was the celebrated pamphlet by Carla Lonzi first published in 1970 with the title *Sputiamo su Hegel* [Let's Spit on Hegel]. Not coincidentally it is a philosopher, and a philosophy of history and culture, that are targeted in Lonzi's critique ("The *Phenomenology of Mind* is a phenomenology of the patriarchal mind," she wrote unhesitatingly), rather than an anthropological or sociological notion of patriarchy, though she was not a philosopher but an art historian and later a feminist theorist whose influence on the development of Italian feminist thought has obviously continued long after her untimely death. Also not coincidentally, therefore, her writing resonates not only with Marx's *Communist Manifesto* but even more distinctly with the manifestoes of the Futurist movement, which ushered into Italy and into Europe the very image of a cultural revolution, the avant-garde, in the first two decades of this century.

The idea of women as a social subject, the "Subject Unexpected by the master-slave dialectic," recurs in Lonzi's impassioned pamphlet, as it did in the first feminist manifesto, their stylistic and ideological differences notwithstanding; but Lonzi articulates it further, in a dimension at once utopian, historical, and philosophical. "The unexpected destiny of the world lies in its starting all over with women as subjects," she wrote. Yet, with regard to the political strategies of feminism, she argued against equality and for difference:

Equality is a juridical principle . . . what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture. . . . Difference is an existential

principle which concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one's experiences, goals, possibilities, and one's sense of existence in a given situation and in the situations one may envision. The difference between women and men is the basic difference of humankind.⁵

Hence, feminism's fight for women's equality with men is misdirected since equality is "an ideological attempt to subject women even further," to prevent the expression of their own sense of existence, and to foreclose the road to women's real liberation.

Evident in the above passages are the roots of the current concept of sexual difference as constitutive of one's sense and possibilities of existence. Elsewhere the ideal of a female symbolic or symbolic mediation is implied by negation ("the equality available today is not a philosophical but a political equality"), and the necessity of a politics of radical separatism is adamantly asserted against the grain of the Marxist analysis of culture that has shaped all of Italy's recent social movements, the women's movement included: women, Lonzi states, who for two centuries have tried to express their demands by joining in the political demands of men, first in the French revolution and then in the Russian revolution, but obtaining only a subservient role, now see that "the proletariat is revolutionary with regard to capitalism, but reformist with regard to the patriarchal system" (29). "Women's difference is in their millenary absence from history. Let's take advantage of that difference. . . . Do we really want, after millennia, to share in the grand defeat of man?" (20).

During the '70s, the better part of Italian feminism took the latter road, a radical anti-institutional politics, even as large numbers of women continued to work within the parties of the Left for women's rights and social equality, achieving major social reforms such as the legalization of abortion in 1978. But even for those women (and they were many) who continued to be active in Left party and union politics, the development of a feminist consciousness took place in small women's groups, in the form of the separatist feminist practice known as *autocoscienza*; and because the two forms of activism were necessarily and strictly separated in time and place, not only during the first decade of the movement but well into the '80s, Italian feminism was characterized by the widespread phenomenon of "the double militancy," a particular variant of what here was called "the double shift," with its distinctive contradictions and difficulties.

Autocoscienza [self-consciousness or consciousness of self, but the Italian word suggests something of an auto-induced, self-determined, or self-directed process of achieving consciousness] was the term coined by Carla Lonzi for the practice of consciousness-raising groups which Italian women adapted from North American feminism to suit their own sociocultural situation. They were intentionally small groups, unattached to any larger organization, and consisting exclusively of women who "met to talk about themselves, or about anything else, as long as it was based on their own personal experience." And while this form of gathering could easily be grafted onto traditional cultural practices in a

country more deeply conscious of gender and pervasively gender-segregated yet more thoroughly politicized than the United States, the impact of this first, specifically feminist, political practice was perhaps stronger and ultimately more significant for the development of feminist theory in Italy than in North America.

Here, easier institutional access and a less gender-segregated history of white women in the public sphere (e.g., in education, social work, and what is now called pink-collar work) favored the diffusion, much earlier on, of the sites and modes of feminist consciousness. From the relatively private environment of small women's groups, feminism could move into more public ones—academic Women's Studies programs, publishing and media enterprises, social service and law firms, etc. Concurrently, a greater social and geographical mobility made life in separatist communities seem more of a realizable possibility than it ever could in Italy—or than it actually can be in the United States, for that matter. Whence the different meaning and relative weight of the term *separatism* itself in feminist discourse in Italy and North America: there, it is mostly a "good" word, almost synonymous with feminism, and with positive connotations of intellectual and political strength for all feminists, regardless of sexual orientation or class differences. It lacks, in other words, most of the negative connotations that have accrued to separatism in this country and that, in my opinion, are due to more or less founded fears, on the part of feminists, of loss of professional status, loss of heterosexist privilege, or loss of community identity.

In Italy, on the other hand, if it valorized women's interactions with one another and the sharing of personal experience by conferring upon the latter an unprecedented social significance and analytical power, nevertheless the relatively privatized practice of *autocoscienza* could not fulfill the need for immediate political effectivity in the larger world that was the goal of the movement (and hence the practice of the double militancy); nor could it promote the public recognition of feminism as a critical analysis of society and culture, and not merely a narrowly political one. Above all, it could not envision (as this book's authors now can) a different symbolic order by reference to which women could be legitimated as women. Thus feminist thought found itself in a bind: it needed conceptual tools to develop itself and its relation to the world but, wishing to guard its own authenticity, it could use none except *autocoscienza*. Which for many had become insufficient.

In a sense, it can be argued retrospectively, the "static" separatism of the small group practice that marked the Italian movement in the '70s, in contrast with the more dynamic separatism (or "diffuse feminism") of the present day, reproduced and solidified the split between private and public existence typical of women's lives in general: a painful and contradictory rift between, on the one hand, the experience of a shared language and apprehension of female subjectivity and existence that occurred inside the movement, and, on the other, the daily confirmation of its incompatibility with, its utter otherness and alienation from, all other social relations outside the movement, where women's new

critical knowledge—their “sense of existence” or their “ways of being in the world”—were neither legitimated nor recognized. And where, on the contrary, sexism and a pronounced disregard for feminism continued to pervade, as they still do, all social intercourse. Yet, I would suggest, that experience of a harsh and protracted separateness, of social-symbolic defeat—in the impossibility for women to achieve what Lonzi called “philosophical equality” and to gain self-representation in the established symbolic order—may be just what enabled the subjects of that experience to reach the present-day critical understanding of their own different subjecthood (the theory of sexual difference) and to attempt to define the modes of its possible existence, the ways of living it out in the practice of everyday life (the practice of sexual difference).

Eventually, then, under the pressure of its own contradictions, the practice of *autocoscienza* evolved into other, more open and conflictual practices that expanded or created new spaces of female sociality: cultural activities, parties, dances, conferences, journals, group holidays and travel, teaching, and direct contacts with feminists in other countries, notably the “Politique et psychanalyse” group in France (also known as “Psych et po” from its former name, “Psychanalyse et politique”). This more dynamic and interactive, though no less separatist, mode of sociality and communication among women is regarded by the Milan authors as a breakthrough in the development of their theory of feminist practice. For among the results of the new practice of female relationships [*pratica dei rapporti tra donne*] was the necessity of coming to terms with the power and the disparity—the social and personal inequality—inherent in them, as well as with the erotic dimension of all relationships between women and *its* relation to power. This proved to be especially conflictual, indeed “scandalous,” in view of the ethos of parity (equality among women), nonaggressivity, and sisterhood in oppression that had characterized the past practice and self-image of the movement. Not surprisingly, these issues are still live as coals, and the views of the Milan authors very much contested.

A first formulation of the issues and perspective that inform *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* appeared in 1983 as a pamphlet of the Milan Bookstore publication *Sottosopra* [Upside Down] entitled “Più donne che uomini” [More Women Than Men] but better known as “the green *Sottosopra*” from the color of its print. It was this text, by national consensus, that marked a definitive turning point for all Italian feminists, whatever their positions, pro or against or ambivalent about its authors’ position.⁶ Several years of intense debate ensued, in many Italian cities and with many groups representing various tendencies within the movement. The debate has been rekindled since the publication of the book.

One of the major points at issue is the notion of *entrustment* [*affidamento*], a term proposed to designate a relationship between two women which, though recorded and variously accounted for in feminist and women’s writing, had not yet been named or formally addressed in feminist theory. Briefly, the relationship of entrustment is one in which one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor,

or point of reference—in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between her and the world. Both women engage in the relationship—and here is the novelty, and the most controversial aspect of this feminist theory of practice—not in spite but rather because and in full recognition of the disparity that may exist between them in class or social position, age, level of education, professional status, income, etc. That is to say, the function of female symbolic mediation that one woman performs for the other is achieved, not in spite but rather because of the power differential between them, contrary to the egalitarian feminist belief that women’s mutual trust is incompatible with unequal power.

Sexual Difference questions this belief on the basis of the experience of social defeat and personal disempowerment that women in the movement have admitted to, and that led to a weakening of energy, a leveling of women’s fantasies, and a stifling of female desire (“within feminism, the politics of equal rights had no theoretical grounding but was nourished by the weakness of female desire, in its reluctance to expose itself, in its lack of symbolic authorization”); and it forcefully argues that the disparity, which does exist in the world as constructed and governed by the male social intercourse, is invested in women by dint of their subjection to the institutions of the male social contract, i.e., by their being objects of the male symbolic exchange. To confront that disparity and to practice it in the relationship of entrustment establishes the ground of a symbolic exchange between women, a female social contract whose terms can be defined autonomously from the male social contract.

Naming the fact of disparity among women was certainly the decisive step. It meant breaking with the equalization of all women and their consequent submission to the distinctions set by male thought according to its criteria and the needs of men’s social intercourse [*dei commerci tra uomini*]. It meant that among women there can and must be established a regime of exchange [so that] from being objects of exchange, as they were in the male world, women can and must become subjects of exchange.

Only a generalized social practice of entrustment through disparity, the book implies, can change the affective contents, symbolic meaning, and social value of women’s relations to one another and to themselves, and produce another structure of symbolic exchange and other practices of signification. But how can trust be given to the powerful (woman) when power has been the means of women’s oppression, by other women as well as men?

The examples of the relationship of entrustment given in the book range from the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth to the relationships between H. D. and Bryher in Greece described in H. D.’s *Tribute to Freud*, between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, Emily Dickinson and (the writings of) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mme du Deffand and Mlle de l’Espinasse, and from the “Boston marriages” back to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. What these have in common, besides the intimately complex and often erotic nature of the bond between the women, is the symbolic recognition, the value or valuation of human, gendered worth that each one is capable of conferring upon the other,

their formal social differences notwithstanding. Although their roles and symbolic functions with respect to one another may have been as different as their social or personal powers, yet each woman of each pair validates and valorizes the other within a frame of reference no longer patriarchal or male-designed, but made up of perceptions, knowledges, attitudes, values, and modes of relating historically expressed by women for women—the frame of reference of what the book calls a female genealogy or a female symbolic. The recognition of mutual value is thus made possible by their inscription in a symbolic community for which the authors again borrow a phrase from Adrienne Rich, “the common world of women” (and here Mlle de l’Espinasse serves as the negative example). But all this does not yet explain the concept of entrustment through disparity, in which consists the originality of this theory of female social-symbolic practice as well as its major difficulty, and on which are predicated two other crucial notions—the notions of female freedom [*libertà femminile*] and of the originary nature of sexual difference.

Again, since this theory of sexual difference is also a theory of social practice, we must go back to the history of the women’s group whose critical autobiography, as it were, is written in *Sexual Difference*. By the early ’80s, as women’s politics had effectively pushed social legislation toward a degree of emancipation unprecedented in Italy, the process of women’s assimilation into (male, or male-directed) society was well on its way, and the need for a discourse that could account for sexual difference by concepts other than victimization and emancipation was all the more urgently felt. The group began a project of reading literary works by women, especially novels, hoping to find in their contribution to Western culture some expression of “what human culture does not know about the difference in being a woman. What it was exactly, we could not know then, because what was missing was a ‘language,’ that is, a symbolic structure of mediation.”

Their method, therefore, was “experimental,” from the perspective of literary criticism. Very simply, they treated the texts as they would have their own words, as parts of a puzzle to be solved by disarranging and rearranging them according to extratextual, personal associations and interpretations, and thus erasing the boundaries between literature and life. This practice of reading (based on the group’s previous experience of a collective, wild form of psychoanalysis, which they named “the practice of the unconscious”) led to a division in the group regarding the preferred writers and the contest of interpretations: some women, like their favorite writers, were seen as authoritarian “mothers” prevaricating over the preferences and interpretations of the others, who thus felt cast in the role of daughters. The admission of disparity among women—if only, in this case, in matters of literary authority or critical persuasiveness—was at first shocking but subsequently liberating. “We were not equal. . . . Mentioning the disparity present in our relations apparently freed us from the constraint of representing them according to an ideal of neutral, genderless justice, and cleared our minds of the image of this kind of justice as well as of the guilt feelings and the resentment that this neutral authority introduced into our

relations.” And not by chance, the authors remark, the inequalities among the members of the group emerged and were named in connection with the mother.

The next step, though not an easy one, was to understand that the source and point of reference of women’s worth as female-gendered subjects was a female-gendered one—in other words, to understand that, while figures of authority such as God, the Father, the party, or the state delegitimize and erase all actual difference, a figure of female authorization or symbolic mediation is necessary to “legitimate female difference as an originary human difference.” That figure, inscribed in the writings and words of other women, and embodied in the gestures and practices of female relationships in daily life, was named *the symbolic mother* [*la madre simbolica*], the term signifying at once its power and capacity for recognition and affirmation of women as subjects in a female-gendered frame of reference, and its transcendence with regard to individual women’s subjectivities and differences. “Our favorite authors helped us to represent the female source of authority and to represent it together with the revelation of our diversity. . . . Included in the common horizon of sexual difference, different female words could be affirmed, and even clash, without fear of destroying each other.”

As a theoretical concept, the symbolic mother is the structure that sustains or recognizes the gendered and embodied nature of women’s thought, knowledge, experience, subjectivity, and desire—their “originary difference”—and guarantees women’s claim to self-affirmative existence as subjects in the social; an existence as subjects not altogether separate from male society, yet autonomous from male definition and dominance. As a guiding concept of feminist practice, in the relationship of entrustment, the notion of the symbolic mother permits the exchange between women across generations and the sharing of knowledge and desire across differences. It enables, as the book’s authors put it, the alliance “between the woman who wants and the woman who knows,” that is to say, a mutual valorization of the younger woman’s desire for recognition and self-affirmation in the world, and the older woman’s knowledge of female symbolic defeat in the social-symbolic world designed by men. For there, the relation of daughter to mother is thought of as “natural . . . variously overlaid with affect and loaded with emotions, but without symbolic translation, that is to say, without figures or rules”; whereas, in redefining the mother-daughter relationship as a symbolic one, the concept of the symbolic mother extends it beyond the confines of the “natural” and the domestic to enable an alliance, a social contract between them. Without that social contract and the structure of symbolic mediation that supports it, no freedom or self-determination exists for women: “as long as a woman asks for reparation, no matter what she may obtain, she will know no freedom.”

Freedom, here, is not understood in libertarian terms as freedom from all social constraint. On the contrary, the female freedom which the Milan group envisions for women entails a personal and social cost, a symbolic debt. For if, on the one hand, women owe nothing to men—since women’s social survival has required the acceptance of both subordination and irresponsibility on their

part, and hence, they state, “there is no social contract between women and men”—it is not the case, on the other hand, that women owe nothing to no one, a belief fostered by the politics of victimization prevalent in the movement. On the contrary, women owe women, and the price of female freedom is the symbolic debt each woman has toward other women, i.e., toward the symbolic mother. “The relationship of female entrustment is a social relation, and we make it the content of a political project. The symbolic debt toward the mother must be paid in a visible, public, social manner before the eyes of everyone, women and men.” It is paid in “the responsibility [a woman] assumes toward other women out of her belonging to the female sex.” Moreover, as the politically and consciously assumed practice of disparity brings to light the hidden or unconscious conflicts and emotions of the ancient (patriarchal) relationship with the mother, it opens up the possibility and the critical elaboration of new symbolic forms of female authority that can effectively legitimate a woman’s subjecthood and thus render unto her not emancipation (under the law of the Father) but full social agency and responsibility as a woman. That is the meaning of the book’s original subtitle, “the engendering of female freedom.”

A freedom that, paradoxically, demands no vindication of the rights of woman, no equal rights under the law, but only a full, political and personal, accountability to women, is as startlingly radical a notion as any that has emerged in Western thought. It is bound to appear reductive, idealist, essentialist, even reactionary unless one keeps in mind, first, the paradox on which it is founded and which has been the first task of feminist thought to disentangle—the paradox of woman, a being that is at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and yet unrepresented; a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled. And hence the task of feminist philosophy: “thinking sexual difference through the categories of a thought that is supported by the non-thinking of difference itself.” Second, one should be mindful that this paradox is not solely discursive, but is grounded in a real contradiction for women in the world designed and governed by men, a conceptual and experiential contradiction in which women are necessarily caught as social beings, and which no other political or social thought but feminism has seen fit to consider. And third, one cannot read the book and not be constantly reminded that its radical theory of sexual difference is historically and culturally located. The authors openly admit the limited, partial, and situated nature of their knowledge, embodied in the “vicissitudes,” the history and the practices, of their group: “We see the necessity of entrustment because it appeared to us, but we cannot demonstrate it completely because we do not see it completely. This admission does not weaken our arguments. It means that our arguments have partly been dictated to us [by] the power of things which are not under our control, but which are favorable to us.”

The book’s closing remark that female freedom comes about neither by historical necessity nor by pure chance, but by a kind of favor, of *kairós*, a

particular historical convergence, suggests to me an unwonted connection. The concepts that articulate this theory of sexual difference (genealogy, symbolic mother, female freedom, female subject—terms drawn from Western critical discourse but otherwise inflected and drastically recast) and the original feminist practices which ground the theory and to which the theory gives formal expression (*autocoscienza*, entrustment, disparity, female relations) mark an epistemological rupture in the continuum of Western thought. This rupture, it seems to me, has the quality of that “leap in the open air of history” which, according to Benjamin, “blast[s] a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history,” where the latter is understood as “progression through a homogeneous, empty time.”⁷ Seen in this light, the conception of sexual difference as “originary human difference” proposed by *Sexual Difference* is less an essentialist—biological or metaphysical—view of woman’s difference (from man) than a historical materialist analysis of “the state of emergency” in which we live as feminists. An emergency that, as Benjamin says of other oppressed and revolutionary classes, “is not the exception but the rule” (257).

In other words, this is not the sexual difference that culture has constructed from “biology” and imposed as gender, and that therefore could be righted, revised, or made good with the “progress of mankind” toward a more just society. It is, instead, a difference of symbolization, a different production of reference and meaning out of a particular embodied knowledge, emergent in the present time but reaching back to recognize an “image of the past which unexpectedly appears to [those who are] singled out by history at a moment of danger” (255). I offer that suggestion simply for further thought, and turn briefly to consider some of the responses, objections, and reverberations that *Sexual Difference*, like the green *Sottosopra* before it, has sparked across the spectrum of Italian feminism.

The magnitude of the debate and its repercussions at all levels of feminist politics, including the oldest and strongest women’s organization in the Italian Communist Party (PCI), are evidence of the importance, timeliness, and theoretical strength of a feminist political theory based on a radical separatist stance. Which is also, of course, its major difficulty in obtaining consensus (to say nothing of implementation) as a theory of political and social practice. The objections have ranged from the personal, *ad foeminam* charges of authoritarianism, prevarication, and intellectual elitism brought against the authors by a subset of the Milan Bookstore collective itself, to more general objections of political vanguardism and (bourgeois) class bias.⁸ Especially intense has been the debate around such notions as the wish to win, the symbolic mother and the symbolic debt to the mother, the practice of disparity and its correlative, entrustment, with their explicit reference to social hierarchies and personal inequalities. On the other hand, this theory’s unprecedented influence on progressive political thought, as represented by the second-largest party of Italy, the PCI, is stated in no uncertain terms by Livia Turco and Rossana Rossanda in the first issue of *Reti*, a new cultural journal of communist women published in Rome by Editori Riuniti under the editorship of Maria

Luisa Boccia. The terms *feminist* and *feminism*, *sexual difference*, *female authorization*, *female reference*, [symbolic] *mediation*, even *female society* (“La società femminile” is the amazing title of Boccia’s editorial in the inaugural issue) recur throughout the journal, whose project is to elaborate the positions stated in the “Women’s Charter” [*Carta delle donne*], an official intervention by women members of the PCI in the direction of the party itself.

Reversing or subverting over sixty years of PCI theory and praxis on “the woman question,” the Charter and the journal demand not only equality but also difference for women, insisting on the necessity for communist women to be both communists and feminists at once: “women are not a constituency to be added on [to party membership] but a different constituency, whose centuries-old history of difference, positively exploded in the past few years, entails a reconstitutive *self-consciousness* and thus a rethinking of the *entire* horizon and method of the party. . . . This is historically new, one of the problems facing a left-wing party today,” writes Rossanda. But, she immediately adds, “the men of the party, who are still *the* party today,” have not yet registered this fact or seen the necessity of a radical transformation of society that will prioritize the gendered subjects, rather than the objects, of social development.⁹ Then, addressing herself specifically to *Sexual Difference*, Rossanda compares it with the political method implicit in the “Women’s Charter”: whereas the latter brings feminist issues and theory into direct confrontation with the party as the crucial political institution of Italian social life, she argues, the practice of entrustment is a simpler form of social relations, which shifts the emphasis away from the economic, the institutional, the mass levels, and toward an elitist, interest-group, and potentially hierarchical model of political practice based on dyadic relationships between “female-gendered individuals [*individui donne*]” (42).

The interesting thing about Rossanda’s article is not her ideological objection, which follows predictably from the historical contradiction of PCI women, as she herself describes it, unable to be both communists and feminists at once. It is rather her strategic move to grant political status to the theory of sexual difference, to take its feminist critical lesson to heart, and then to appropriate or absorb its conceptual novelty into her preferred position (the Charter’s) while reducing the book’s concept of a *diffuse social practice* of sexual difference to a *political model*, or “method,” of narrow, personal, and hierarchical proportions. This strategy is not unique to her, though as a major figure of the Italian Left, Rossanda commands a higher degree of persuasiveness and national visibility than most of the other women who have publicly engaged in this debate.¹⁰

Other objections have been less guarded and more impassioned, revealing their stakes in rather transparent ways. For example, Grazia Zuffa, also writing in *Reti*, laments the turn of feminism from the “‘free’ feminist politics” of the early *autocoscienza* groups to the current “necessary and thus obligatory” practice of disparity and symbolic mediation. The appeal of entrustment, she fears, is all too reminiscent of the appeal that the psychoanalytic relationship

has on women, with its controlling definition of subjectivity. Isn’t the symbolic mother really a projection of paternal authority vested in its familial enforcer, the social or real mother? That, one infers, would be bad enough. Worse still if the symbolic mother is the figure of a female social contract (as it indeed is), for then the whole theory is founded on a “radically separatist practice” and on refusing the male-female dialectic (or, as she awkwardly puts it, “on affirming the non-dialectic with the masculine [*nell’affermazione della non dialettica col maschile*]).”¹¹ Such “homosexual fundamentalism,” she concludes, is a very long way and quite a different thing from “separatism as traditionally understood” in feminist politics. In other words, when the meaning of separatism shifts from the “traditional,” socially innocuous, women’s support group, in which women could let down their hair and commiserate with one another on personal matters, to a new social formation of women with no loyalty to men and intent on changing the world on their own—this is going too far.

Here we find ourselves on more familiar terrain, as Zuffa’s homophobic sentiment lends itself easily to transcultural translation into Anglo-American feminism, where the term *separatism* has always carried the connotation she bluntly acknowledges, even as it is seldom stated in so direct a way as to reveal the heterosexual fundamentalism that motivates the objection. But unlike North America, where lesbianism has been a visible—if by no means unopposed or undivided—presence within the women’s movement, and an acknowledged influence on the development of feminist thought, Italy has had no history of lesbian feminism, though it has a lesbian history that is now beginning to be told, and though lesbians have been active in the movement all along as women and as feminists, if not as lesbians.¹²

In a very intelligent essay entitled “Double Movement,” published in a special issue of *DWF* on “Belonging” [*Appartenenza*], Ida Dominijanni does not so much object or adhere to the theory of sexual difference as take up its implications in her critical reading of the history (again, *a* history) of the movement and the current stakes of feminism in Italy. And in one of the rare honest statements I have encountered in the pervasive silence that enshrouds lesbianism in Italian feminist writings, Dominijanni admits: “I will not even mention here [among the various forms of women’s political identity or ‘belonging’] the most unnamed of all belongings, if we can call it that: women’s homosexual or heterosexual choice, on which Italian feminism has rightly chosen not to split itself, as happened in other countries, but which today is becoming a major cause of opacity in the theoretical and political debate.”¹³ And she goes on to another topic. But again extraordinarily, the same journal issue runs an article by Simonetta Spinelli, “Silence Is Loss,” which argues for the necessity of coming out and theorizing lesbian identity and subjectivity as distinct from feminism. For the material specificity of lesbian desire and the embodied knowledges that can sustain a collective lesbian identity have remained “the unsaid of the movement,” as she puts it, and the price to lesbians has been the nonbelonging to oneself as well as others, the loss of identity and finally of community.¹⁴

Whether or not Italian feminists are right (as Dominianni believes) in not splitting the movement over what might well be called the lesbian question, Spinelli's intervention in the current debate on sexual difference hits very close to home when she indicts the inadequacy of a theory "that starts from me but in some oblique way also avoids me." Although she does not seem to be speaking directly about *Sexual Difference*, a passage from the book actually sustains her objection: "Living in a community of women was an extraordinary experience. The most amazing discovery was the intense eroticism present there. *It was not lesbianism, but sexuality no longer imprisoned in masculine desire*" (emphasis added). This is a troubled statement—and the only one where the word *lesbianism* appears in the book. What is meant by lesbianism, then, if it is not a female sexuality unfettered or autonomous from masculine desire and definition? Two are the possible readings of the statement.

One is that lesbianism is still understood, by the authors as by Italians in general, in terms of Havelock Ellis's sexology: as a form of sexual inversion whereby a woman would assume a masculine identification vis-à-vis her (female) sexual object choice. This is not only a prefeminist notion that does not recognize lesbianism as a form of autonomous *female* sexuality, although it has gained some credibility even among lesbians since its inscription in Radclyffe Hall's famous novel *The Well of Loneliness*; but, more important, it is also a notion that would contradict the rest of the statement, for it forecloses the possibility of *any* form of female sexuality autonomous from the masculine. Havelock Ellis's definitions of homosexuality and inversion are in fact predicated on the male-centered conceptual structure that Irigaray cleverly called "hom(m)osexuality" or "sexual indifference," where "the object choice of the homosexual woman [can only be understood as] determined by a *masculine* desire and tropism."¹⁵ The point of her pun was precisely to make visible the male-centeredness of the structure and its absolute negation of female sexuality in itself. However, in view of the bearing that Irigaray's thought has had on the authors of *Sexual Difference*, I should add that her more recent positions on the issue of feminist politics have taken quite a different turn from what her earlier works suggested, and caused the distance between Irigaray and the Milan collective to become more clearly visible.

In a public conversation held at the Virginia Woolf Center in Rome, not coincidentally a few months before delivering an invited address to the 1989 National Congress of the Italian Communist Party, Irigaray stated: "Promoting homosexuality to [the status of] a political problem seems extremely ambiguous to me. This, in my opinion, is a cause of paralysis in the women's movement." And in response to the question from the floor "How long will lesbians have to hide their sexual choice?" she answered, "Forever!"¹⁶ The great value of Irigaray's thought for the Milan Women's Bookstore collective consisted primarily in her emphasis on the articulation of sexual difference in the symbolic; in this sense, her work not only served very effectively the Milan collective's effort to counter the rights-oriented, sociological arguments of much Italian feminism, but also contributed significantly to the Milanese theorization of

sexual difference as a social-symbolic practice and to their project of delineating or (re)constructing a female symbolic. However, Irigaray's long-known dissociation from any feminist political practice, as well as her more recent insistence on an ethics of sexual difference that will favor the final, and optimal, union of woman and man (both of which may account for her elision of lesbianism from the political/ethical domain and for her recent paradoxical rapprochement with the PCI), is in striking contrast with the political positions publicly reiterated by the authors of *Sexual Difference* and explicitly articulated in the book.

The other, perhaps closer reading of the passage from *Sexual Difference* cited above is the one suggested by Spinelli: that the authors' conception of an autonomous female sexuality avoids lesbianism "in some oblique way," bypasses it, circumvents it, or disclaims it. In other words, one might ask more bluntly, is this a theory that dare not speak its name? The authors' insistence in public debates that their theory is not lesbian but rather homosexual—that is to say, predicated on the notion of social-symbolic practices and same-sex relationships between and among women—may be seen as a considered political choice and an appeal for hegemony on the part of a militant social movement which, after all, potentially involves all women. Or it may be seen, perhaps concurrently, as yet another effect of the social and discursive dominance of the institution of heterosexuality which, even in a radically separatist theory of social practice, imposes the excision of the very figure of female subjectivity that is most capable of signifying the resistance to that dominance and the unqualified rejection of that institution.¹⁷ Thus, Spinelli's essay is a powerful ironic counterpart to the homophobic objections that have met the Milanese proposal of a radically separatist theory of social practice. For if that proposal does in fact articulate a position that, at least in the North American context, might be read as a lesbian feminist position, yet its consistent dodging of the crucial questions of sexuality, fantasy, and the erotic in the definition of sexual difference all but drops the lesbian specification by the wayside. Whether this will, itself, end up "splitting the movement," or whether it will cause *Sexual Difference* to lose its most radical, antipatriarchal edge, and thus lend itself to appropriation by dominant social-symbolic discourses, remains to be seen.

A third reading, or explanation, of that troubling statement was offered by one of its authors, Luisa Muraro, in a personal letter she wrote to me on September 12, 1989, in response to a manuscript version of this introductory essay which I had sent to her. It is not only fair but also useful to the reader that her views on this particular issue be given space in this introduction. Muraro writes:

The essay you cite by Ida [Dominianni] is truly intelligent, but the argument about not splitting the movement is not applicable to us [the Milan Women's Bookstore collective], who have notoriously authored conflicts and splits in it (even though we are sorry about that). Moreover, it is wrong (in our opinion, of course) to claim that not mentioning choice (hetero- or homosexual) is a "major cause of opacity" in the

current debate. . . . Why? (1) for the reason fairly obvious, although not to be disregarded, that many of the differences between women, like this one, are induced or overdetermined by a social order that is not autonomous; (2) for the reason that we are working exclusively toward female freedom, which is the only thing that can constitute a goal common to all women, and hence the reason of a politics of women; and this makes us *relatively* indifferent to the possible consequences and possible uses of that freedom. That a woman may freely love no one or the whole of humanity, that she may make love with other women, with men, with nobody, with children or animals—these are but consequences, each worthy of attention and respect as a source of experiences and knowledges valuable in strengthening female freedom.

From the way you speak of lesbianism, it almost seems as if you are making sexual choice a principle or a cause or a foundation of freedom. If that were what you thought, I would say to you: no, the principle of female freedom is of a symbolic nature. It is not an actual behavior, however valid and precious such behavior may be toward the empowering of women in society. Did I manage to make myself clear?

You see, the two opposite kinds of criticism (represented by Spinelli and Zuffa in your references) both come from a lack of understanding of this point: that in order for us to enter the symbolic order we must start from silence, we must clear everything out—*the place of the other must be empty*.

On the other hand, I realize, I do more and more every day, that it is difficult (impossible?) to transform a symbolic order and create freedom by political activism; but this is our gamble, and you are among the few who have understood that this indeed is the gamble. This is why I insist and ask you to think about it precisely in relation to this question of lesbianism.¹⁸

And think about it I shall, and so will other readers of this book, whose provocative answers open up each time a more difficult and crucial question.

Up to now, in its effort to define female desire and subjecthood in the symbolic, without sufficient attention to the working of the imaginary in subjectivity and sexual identity, *Sexual Difference* has provoked very serious objections and opposition from all sides, as well as wide support, including support among women in the PCI. As has been pointed out, this theory of female social-symbolic practice makes little space for differences and divisions between—and especially within—women, and so tends to construct a view of the female social subject that is still too closely modeled on the “monstrous” subject of philosophy and History. However, this is not biological or metaphysical essentialism, but a consciously political, materialist formulation of the specific difference of women in a particular sociohistorical location where, for instance, race or color has not been at issue; and where, if sexuality is now emerging as an issue, it is not merely against, but in part owing to, the very strength of this theory of sexual difference.

As another contributor to the theory well said it, “by essential and originary difference I mean that, for women, being engendered in difference [*l'essere sessuate nella differenza*] is something not negotiable; for each one who is born female, it is always already so and not otherwise, rooted in her being not as

something superfluous or something more, but as that which she necessarily is: female.”¹⁹ If the project of this feminist philosophy can be rightly criticized for its unquestioning acceptance of the classic, unified subject of philosophy, nevertheless the notion of essential and originary difference represents a point of consensus and a new starting point for feminist thought in Italy.²⁰

And here it could as well, I would suggest, for without this basic feminist assumption—basic, that is, to feminism as historically constituted at the present time—the still-necessary articulation of all other differences between and within women must remain framed in male-dominant and heterosexist ideologies of liberal pluralism, conservative humanism, or, goddess forbid, religious fundamentalism. Finally, then, the partial, bold, provocative, contradictory, controversial, and highly original theoretical proposals of this book should prove to be of much value to the ongoing elaboration of feminist theory in English-speaking contexts, as well as to the reflection on the limits and possibilities of our increasingly difficult feminist political practice.

TERESA DE LAURETIS

NOTES

1. Two recent books have been published in the United States on Italian feminism, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna: Feminism in Italy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), and Judith Adler Hellman, *Journeys among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and one in Britain on feminist film, Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti, eds., *Off-Screen: Women and Film in Italy* (London: Routledge, 1988). Also in Britain some extracts from a publication of the Milan Bookstore were recently edited and introduced by Rosalind Delmar, “Writers and Readers,” *Red Letters*, no. 9 (n.d.): 17–34. Delmar is also the translator of the Italian classic feminist novel, Sibilla Aleramo's *A Woman* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980). An earlier article by Mary Russo, “The Politics of Maternity: Abortion in Italy,” *Yale Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1977): 107–27, is a rare example of American feminist theoretical writing dealing with the Italian women's movement in the '70s.

2. Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 39.

3. Nancy K. Miller, “Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader,” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 109–111.

4. Adriana Cavarero et al., *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987), pp. 45 and 49; my translation. Diotima, the collective author of the homonymous volume, is a “philosophical community” of academic feminists which has, however, some significant overlap with the more militant feminism of the Milan Libreria delle Donne. The members of the collective and authors of *Diotima* are Adriana Cavarero, Cristiana Fischer, Elvia Franco, Giannina Longobardi, Veronica Mariaux, Luisa Muraro, Anna Maria Piussi, Anita Sanvitto, Wanda Tommasi, Betty Zamarchi, Chiara Zamboni, and Gloria Zanardo.

5. Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta femminile, 1974 [1970]), pp. 20–21; my translation.

6. No individual authors' names appear in the pamphlet, or in *Sexual Difference*, as customary in the Italian movement practice of collective authorship, a practice no longer followed as strictly as it was in the '70s except by long-standing groups such as the Milan Libreria delle Donne. Any Italian feminist, however, would be able to name at least some of the individuals in the group and knows that the authors of both the green *Sottosopra* and *Sexual Difference* include the two women most directly associated with the Libreria, Luisa Muraro and Lia Cigarini. For a full documentation of the movement in Milan, see Anna Rita Calabró and Laura Grasso, eds., *Dal movimento femminista al femminismo diffuso: Ricerca e documentazione nell'area lombarda* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1985).

7. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 263 and 261. For this very interesting connection between radical feminist theory and Benjamin's "Theses," I am indebted to the original work in progress of Kathy Miriam, doctoral candidate in History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

8. See, for example, Laura Lepetit et al., *Una libreria e i suoi doni: Lettera aperta dalla Libreria delle donne di Milano*, pamphlet dated Ottobre 1987.

9. Rossana Rossanda, "Politica: significati e progetti. Le diverse strade della Carta e dell'affidamento," *Reti: Pratiche e saperi di donne* 1 (1987): 40-41; my translation.

10. Only two men thus far have publicly expressed their opinions in the debate spurred by the Milan collective: the philosopher Franco Rella was highly critical, while Mario Tronti, philosopher and politician of the Left wing of the PCI, was more favorable (personal communication by Luisa Muraro).

11. Grazia Zuffa, "Tra libertà e necessità. A proposito di *Non credere di avere dei diritti*," *Reti: Pratiche e saperi di donne* 1 (1987): 52; my translation.

12. A valuable contribution to the history of lesbian activism and its relation both to the women's movement and to the "diffuse feminism" of the '80s is Bianca Pomeranzi's "Differenza lesbica e lesbofemminismo," published in *Memoria*, a journal of women's history. But it is sadly remarkable that the most comprehensive and up-to-date account of lesbianism in Italy is a paper in English by Liana Borghi, Gloria Corsi, Simonetta Spinelli, and Alessandra Perini, "Italian Lesbians: Maps and Signs," presented at the International Conference on Gay and Lesbian Studies at the Free University of Amsterdam (December 15-18, 1987) and published in its proceedings, *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?*, pp. 112-25. Borghi is also the author of one of the first texts of lesbian fiction in Italy, a wonderful and funny novella, *Tenda con vista* [Tent with a View], published in 1987 by Estro Editrice in Rome (one of the two lesbian small presses currently operating in Italy, the other being Felina Editrice). Estro is also the publisher of the major contribution to lesbian cultural history that has appeared in Italy, Rosanna Fiocchetto's *L'amante celeste: La distruzione scientifica della lesbica* [Heavenly Lover: The Scientific Destruction of the Lesbian], 1987. The only other lesbian publication is the monthly bulletin of CLI [Collegamento fra le lesbiche italiane], a national organization based in Rome.

13. Ida Dominijanni, "Doppio movimento," *DWF [DonnaWomanFemme]* 4 (1986): 25; my translation.

14. Simonetta Spinelli, "Il silenzio è perdita," *DWF [DonnaWomanFemme]* 4 (1986): 52; my translation.

15. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 99. On the paradox of what I call *sexual (in)difference* and how it works in lesbian representation and self-representation, see Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2 (1988): 155-77.

16. *Incontro con Luce Irigaray*, Dispense [Working Papers] del Centro Culturale "Virginia Woolf," Rome, 1988, pp. 8-10; my translation.

17. See Rosanna Fiocchetto, "Quattro luoghi comuni," *Squaderno*, no. 1 (giugno 1989): 5-9.

18. I thank Luisa Muraro for this and other very useful comments, and for several points of information and clarification that I also incorporated into the final version of the essay as it appears here.

19. Adriana Cavarero, "L'elaborazione filosofica della differenza sessuale," in *La ricerca delle donne: Studi femministi in Italia*, ed. Maria Cristina Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi-Doria (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), pp. 180-81; my translation.

20. See Rosi Braidotti, "Commento alla relazione di Adriana Cavarero," in *La ricerca delle donne: Studi femministi in Italia*, ed. Maria Cristina Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi-Doria (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), pp. 188-202.

Note on Translation

Any act of translation is fraught with problems. The dense substratum of connotations, resonances, and implicit references that the history of a culture has sedimented into the words and phrases of its language is often simply untranslatable; thus the act of translation is often a rewriting of the original language (in this case, Italian) and a reconfiguration or interpretation of its plurivocal meaning by means of connotations and resonances built into the words and phrases of the second language (in this case, American English). For example, Italian does not normally use the word *gender* for the sex-based distinction between female and male, as English does. Instead, Italian uses *Sesso*, "sex," and the adjective *sessuato/ sessuata*, "sexed," where the English would say "gendered," as in the phrase "gendered thinking" (*pensiero sessuato*) or "gendered subject" (*soggetto sessuato*). The phrase "sexed subject" is also used in English, however, with a meaning distinct from "gendered subject." The translation "gendered subject" was preferred here because it better conveys the sense of the original Italian. As for the common phrase *il sesso femminile*, it was more often rendered by the traditional English equivalent, "the female sex." Another problem is posed by the adjective *femminile*, which is translated as "female," although it also corresponds to the English "feminine." The latter, however, is strongly resonant with "femininity," the ideological construct of woman's "nature," which feminism has taken pains to deconstruct; alternatively, outside the context of feminist discourse, the phrase "feminine freedom" sounds rather like an advertisement for "personal hygiene" products. Thus, in spite of the biological connotations that hover around the term *femiale*, that term was preferred in most instances: *libertà femminile*, for example, is translated as "female freedom."