

THE DIFFERENCE DEBATE

**The Politics of Feminist Literary Criticism in South Africa**

NANDIPHA SEPHUMA

2013

## **Declaration**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Programme of English Studies,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the School of Arts in the College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College, South Africa. None of the present work has been previously submitted for any degree or examination in any other University.

NANDIPHA SEPHUMA

Student number: 206522984

January 2013

As the candidate's supervisor, I have approved this dissertation for submission.

Dr. C. Sandwith

January 2013

## **Abstract**

This dissertation traces the development of the ‘difference debate’ during the 1990s. Using the ground-breaking Natal conference on ‘Women and Gender in Southern Africa’ as the central point of reference, the study aims to investigate the impact and legacy of the ‘difference debate’ in feminist criticism in the 1990s, and ultimately, the ways in which feminist scholars responded to the challenges posed by the ‘problem of difference’. The dissertation outlines the heated debates and intense disagreements that occurred during the decade that exposed previously nascent fissures in a purportedly unified feminist ‘sisterhood’. In this way, this brief intellectual history traces the trajectory of feminist debates over difference, race and gender, and the politics of representation, as articulated at the Natal conference on Women and Gender and in subsequent feminist scholarship. What emerges from these discussions are new strategies in which feminists embrace coalition politics as a way to move beyond the divisions that the concept of difference exposed. These feminist formations are orientated towards recognising and dealing with the differences between and among women, in order to account for gender as a fragmented and unstable concept. This dissertation therefore illuminates the ways in which the difference debate has had an indelible impact on contemporary feminist thought and in turn, has influenced the principles and methodologies of feminist literary criticism.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Corinne Sandwith, for her constant motivation and patience. Her guidance has been invaluable.

I wish to thank my family, friends and departmental staff at English Studies Howard College for their encouragement and support.

I acknowledge the Mandela Rhodes Foundation (MRF) for their generous scholarship and continued support towards this research. Opinions expressed in this dissertation are my own and are not to be attributed to the MRF.

## Table of Contents

Declaration .....	1
Abstract .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	3
Chapter 1 .....	5
Introduction: The Difference Debate .....	5
Defining Difference.....	10
Discussing Difference in South African Feminism.....	16
Chapter 2.....	19
Acknowledging Difference .....	19
Difference, Feminism and Writing.....	20
French Theory in a South African Frame.....	28
Black Criticism in a Feminist Frame.....	32
The Politics of Difference .....	36
Chapter 3.....	46
<b>Difference on the Agenda</b> .....	46
Women and Difference .....	49
Feminism in an African Frame.....	62
Conclusion .....	66
Towards ‘A Heterogeneous, Postcolonial Culture’ .....	66
Bibliography .....	69

## Chapter 1

### **Introduction: The Difference Debate**

The relationship between race and gender discourse – in theory, criticism and practice – has featured as a major preoccupation in the development of contemporary feminist scholarship in South Africa. Writers and theorists continuously confront the issue of “how questions of gender, race, nation and other identities interact in determining feminisms” (Hendricks and Lewis, 1994: 74). The aim of this dissertation is to examine the emergence and development of the ‘difference debate’ (1994: 74) within recent feminist criticism, and to interrogate the politics of formulating feminist theories on gender and women’s oppression. Within the limited parameters of this study, I will attempt a brief and selective historical overview of contemporary South African feminist criticism in which the concept of racial, social and cultural ‘difference’ is a significant theme. In doing so, I will be exploring the ways in which feminist literary and critical thought has incorporated considerations of race, culture and class into the representation and analysis of women’s experiences and gender relations in South Africa.

I examine this question through a detailed analysis of the intellectual responses to, and broader effects of, the 1991 conference on ‘Women and Gender in Southern Africa’<sup>1</sup>, an event which is considered a watershed moment in the history of feminist theorising in the country (Lund, et al, 1991; Lewis, 1992; Daymond, 1996). The Natal conference stands as a seminal indicator of the politics of feminist criticism in South Africa as it brought to the forefront important challenges to the dominant principles and assumptions of mainstream Western feminism. Furthermore, it exposed previously nascent debates about the inextricable relationship between gender, race, class and other categories of experience in depicting and understanding women’s subjectivity in South African literary production and criticism.

Ideally, academic conferences are convened with the intension of representing the present state of a field of inquiry by highlighting the most important and progressive research available. Ostensibly, these occasions serve as forums for open discussion and debate, and ultimately, aim to stimulate further dialogue and scholarship among intellectuals. Nevertheless, the structure and content of such gatherings are the result of specific processes of selection, categorisation, inclusion and exclusion. These not only reflect the interests and priorities of organisers and

participants, but are also indicative of the dynamics of power and the assumptions of authority that exist within particular intellectual and political spheres.

For feminism in South Africa, this was dramatically illustrated in 1991, a year into what was to become a decade of momentous transition and transformation in the nation's history. In February of that year, the Gender Research Group of the then University of Natal organised and hosted the "first conference on women and gender to be held in South Africa" (Lund, 1991: 20). On the one hand, the event was widely hailed as a ground-breaking moment for women's studies and feminist politics in the country. It served as the first forum in which the politics of gender, feminist scholarship and women's lived experience were treated as the primary focus of a conference held in South Africa, rather than treated as 'special' topics or marginal issues within broader intellectual and/or political agendas. The conference was also considered uniquely progressive in its intended inclusivity, as organisers hosted a group of approximately 300 delegates from the Southern Africa region, North America and the United Kingdom. The gathering was notable at the time for inviting a range of participants: both black and white speakers, female and male academics from multiple disciplines, as well as gender activists.

Despite these intensions, however, the Natal conference is also notorious for the intense conflicts and criticisms that emerged, unexpectedly, from the first day of proceedings. These conflicts caused disruptions and heated debates between delegates. Tensions were sparked by anger at the perceived underrepresentation and marginalisation of black women and feminist activists at the conference, in contrast to the overwhelming presence of white, middle-class academics and the predominance of their interests and views. Indeed, beyond the "masses of challenging feminist content" (Ballantine, in Lund, 1991: 21), the event was marked by frequent expressions of discontent and outright dissent from (mostly) black women and activists. The discernible tensions and polarities that emerged during the discussions became, in many ways, the most prominent outcome of the gathering.

The issues of racial and social difference that were highlighted during the conference on Women and Gender persisted subsequent to the event. The discussions moved from the conference hall and into feminist intellectual and political scholarship, where the arguments over race in particular intensified. Many post-conference responses voiced accusations of veiled and overt racism, academic insularity on the part of white academics, and the lack of legitimacy of Western feminist principles. Deep-seated racial and political issues underpinning these

exchanges were exposed, and this instigated prolonged debates amongst feminist thinkers and activists throughout the decade.

The neglect of the voices and interests of black women at the Natal conference was seen as a manifestation of the prevailing racial and ideological dynamics of the women's movement at the time. The movement was premised on the notion of 'sisterhood' formulated upon the idea of a group identity based on shared experiences of gender oppression. Instead, this image of a united front pursuing a common purpose was shown to be marked by deep divisions and contradictions. As a result of the arguments and objections expressed by black participants at the Natal conference, the underlying relations of power and the implicit hierarchies that existed within mainstream feminist academia at the time were dramatically exposed.

Through an assessment of the Natal conference and subsequent responses articulated by various commentators, this dissertation aims to outline the trajectory of the 'difference debate' as it developed within the South African context. The study examines the principle themes and key concerns that arose in relation to a set of broader issues particularly concerning the challenge to Western feminism, the legitimacy of representation and the need to develop new approaches to feminist work. In constructing a tentative historical overview of these discussions about the role of race in feminist criticism, this study therefore attempts to locate the critical perspectives and ideological positions that emerged in the development of the diverse feminist formations prevalent in the South African critical arena today. This endeavour aims to illuminate the feminist attitudes that informed (and were partly formulated through) feminist literary criticism in South Africa.

As outlined above, the conference on 'Women and Gender in Southern Africa' was a pivotal moment in this history. While the importance of the Natal conference is widely acknowledged and the event is frequently mentioned by feminists when documenting the history of feminism in South Africa, a direct examination of the conference and its influence on feminist debate has largely been neglected. For instance, according to Debby Bonnin's survey of "Women's Studies in South Africa" (1996), the Natal conference was a "landmark event in women's studies" (1996: 383). The writer further notes that,

[t]his conference, its debates, and their ramifications have posed an enormous challenge to women's studies in South Africa ... In terms of the development of South African feminism it was a point of no return. The



politics of difference, of race, of exclusion, of activism versus academia, of who controls women's studies, and of its relationship to the women's movement were openly challenged (1996: 383-384).

Beyond this acknowledgement, however, Bonnin's article fails to fully explore the ideological and pedagogical ramifications of the conference on women's studies. This is despite the clear indication that participants in Natal confronted issues that were fundamental to the theory and practice of feminism, and to the dynamics of feminist academia. Given that Bonnin's study concerns itself with the status and treatment of women's studies in South African universities, this omission is particularly surprising since the politics of knowledge production, and the role and positionality of the critic and researcher were some of the central concerns raised at the conference and in the ensuing critical discussions.

Similarly, in the introduction to the anthology *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory, and Criticism 1990-1994*, Margaret Daymond's consideration of the 1991 conference is limited to a recognition of the significance of the events within the women's movement. The anthology comprises of a collection of works that clearly illustrate the extent to which the concept of difference pervaded South African feminist theoretical and critical discourse from 1990 to 1994. In the volume's introduction, Daymond offers a detailed assessment of the political and ideological implications of these debates about gender, race and social difference. Within this discussion, however, Daymond's brief appraisal of the Natal conference does not fully interrogate the crucial role the events in 1991 had on the development of the 'difference debate'. Moreover, given the restricted time-frame the anthology encompasses, an exploration of the impact of the conference and the subsequent debates beyond 1994 is necessary. As this dissertation aims to show, the issues that emerged during the period Daymond surveys persisted during the nation's democratic transitional era (post-1994). It is also my contention that the 'difference debate' has had a lasting impact on the nature of current feminist formations in a post-apartheid context. Indeed, publications such as *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003), Meg Samuelson's *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women: Stories of South African Transition* (2007) and Pumla Dineo Gqola's *What is Slavery to Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory in South Africa* (2010), attest to the complexities of interrogating gendered and radicalised identities in ways that effectively reflect a diverse and fractured post-apartheid, postcolonial social reality.

In contrast to often cursory treatments of the conference and its legacy, Shane Moran's 1998 article, "Academic Exchanges," presents one of the few relatively detailed examinations of the conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa conducted in the late 1990s. In this piece, Moran considers the Natal conference a pre-eminent example of the 'crisis of legitimacy' facing South African academia. He too emphasises the importance of the conference given the contentious racial dynamics that were exposed and the debates that were instigated. However, Moran views this in relation to the nature of academia in general, without a specific focus on the implications for the development of South African feminisms. As such, there has been little investigation, to date, of the impact of the Natal conference on South African feminist criticism specifically. This is despite the numerous and often impassioned critical interventions into the debate by individual feminist scholars, as well as academic publications focusing on the issue of difference in subsequent years. This lack of recent critical attention is surprising given that the issues and concerns regarding the concept of difference and the intersection of race and gender that were discussed at the conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa in 1991, and in its aftermath, remain central to the current preoccupations and objectives of South African feminist politics and theory.

The salience of difference is still obvious at present. Public debate is often characterised by stark, and perhaps increasing, racial polarisation. Furthermore, prescriptive views on race, gender, sexuality, and so on, still prevail in popular discourse. A feature of many intellectual and political conversations is the almost immediate and frequently unquestioned recourse to race as the primary category of analysis on various issues, without an adequate apprehension of the role of difference. Such assertions, often based on exclusionary definitions of group identities, need to be examined and more nuanced arguments developed.

This intellectual history intends to focus on critical debates which engage with the relationship between race and gender in contemporary South African feminisms. At the same time, the issues that are highlighted have direct implications for feminist literary criticism specifically. Not only were feminist literary critics themselves part of these conversations, but the concern with difference allowed them to respond with increasing complexity to representations by, and of, marginalised women. By conducting this survey, then, I intend to supplement and extend the existing literature in the field by assessing the legacy of the 1991

conference and the ensuing 'difference debate', and their impact on feminist theory and practice in South Africa within a local, regional and global context.

Cheryl Hendricks and Desiree Lewis examine similar concerns with the concepts of difference and diversity in South African feminist criticism in their seminal article "Voices from the Margins" (1994). Hendricks and Lewis conduct an analysis of "[d]ebates around deconstruction and difference" (1994: 61) and survey the various, and often competing ideological perspectives of "racially subordinate" (1994: 62) women in South Africa and the way in which they challenge the dominance of mainstream Western feminist ideologies. The authors' examination of the 'difference debate' in South African feminist scholarship is useful for understanding some of the major critical positions that prevail within current feminist discourse in the country. By analysing specific key texts, this paper serves to build on Hendricks and Lewis's broad overview. They show how peculiar historical, racial, socio-political and cultural contexts both determine and transform the theories and strategies developed by women of various backgrounds. This dissertation highlights the need to illuminate the complex and diverse nature of this intellectual space, and to locate these formulations within the global currents of feminist theorisation.

### **Defining Difference**

As an examination of the Natal conference and subsequent scholarship will make clear, accounting for the politics of difference is vital to understanding current feminist orientations in South Africa. However, the definition of the concept itself has been a matter of extensive scrutiny, and controversy. As Kathy Davis argues, "the very fact of difference has become the leading subject of feminist theories in recent years," (2008: 71) both in international and local contexts. In grappling with the issue of difference, (one of the most significant themes, and possibly the central point of contention at the conference), South African women mirrored some of the definitive debates that have occurred within global feminism. As Davis notes, the debates that have dominated contemporary international feminist scholarship were largely precipitated by "two of the most important strands of contemporary feminist thought", namely, poststructuralist feminist analysis on the one hand, and oppositional critiques of black and third-world women on the other (Davis, 2008: 70). In varying ways, these strands of feminist theory have prompted the sustained critical attention to, and significant revision of, the notion of difference. In turn, these

ideas have contributed to major shifts that have occurred within feminist thought and practice globally. This formed part of the intellectual milieu in which the difference debate developed in South Africa.

This insistent emphasis on difference was initially foregrounded in contemporary women's studies when prominent feminist theorists in the late 1960s and 1970s began drawing on the postmodern and poststructuralist "project of deconstructing the binary oppositions and universalism inherent in modernist paradigms of Western philosophy and science" (Davis, 2008: 71). This poststructuralist 'project' gave rise to new thinking on representations of femininity and the construction of gender identity. The insights of poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan enabled women to question prevailing definitions and representations of womanhood, expose the social construction of normative feminine characteristics, and reformulate conceptions of sexual difference.

Of particular importance were the implications of Jacques Derrida's idea of '*différance*'. This concept expands on the Saussurian theory of language to show how signification operates by an infinite process of 'deferral and difference', where

meaning is constructed only by the process of referring to other (absent) meanings, with the consequence that the relatively stable structure of difference slides into and is destabilized by *différance* (Belsey, Moore, 1990: 244).

By highlighting the arbitrary, contingent relation between a sign and its meaning in language systems, Derrida radically problematises the notion of absolute knowledge and truth, and throws into doubt the assumed neutrality, authority and universal validity of Western philosophy.

As postcolonial critic Justin Edwards (2008) explains, Derrida's critique of the logocentrism of traditional theory also "expose[s] the cultural assumptions and dynamics of power that lie behind our everyday encounters with language" (Edwards, 2008: 18). Derrida reveals the implicit relationship of dominance and subordination that underscores "dichotomised hierarchies" (Edwards, 2008: 18) such as the 'speech/writing' binary. Essentially, he shows that in language, meaning operates through *différance*, and power operates through difference. Consequently, Edwards concludes, Derridean deconstruction based on the premise of *différance* exposes and radically challenges the "relations of power that ascribe privilege, priority and positive value to one term at the expense of another" (2008: 19). This uneven power dynamic is implicit in dualities such as self/other, subject/object, white/black, and male/female.

In turn, Derrida's challenge to the claim of universal meaning in language "coincided with Foucauldian perspectives on power that focused on dynamic processes and the deconstruction of normalizing and homogenizing categories" (Davis, 2008: 71). These ideas constitute a radical subversion of the assumption of universality of Western epistemology.

Derrida's theories, underpinned by the notions of *différance* and difference, influenced the work of preeminent feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. This group pioneered radical feminist approaches to language, identity and women's writing that developed and qualified psychoanalytic, postmodernist and poststructuralist insights to initiate a "two part project aimed at exposing the phallogocentric bias of the ruling discourse and formulating a woman-centered discourse" (Lockett, 1990: 7-8). Drawing, amongst others, on Derridean deconstruction, their feminist critique of dominant patriarchal ideology centred on the interrogation of the male/female binary. Hélène Cixous argues that

[i]t's the classic opposition, dualist and hierarchical...everything that is, everything that's organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that...acts upon us – it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition (cited in Ryan, 1990: 27).

In light of Derrida's critique of binary oppositions, Cixous's comment suggests that the social relations of patriarchal Western culture mirror the implicit dynamic of domination and subordination that underscores the hierarchical male/female dichotomy. Cixous believes these hierarchical social dynamics are constructed through, and perpetuated by, phallogocentric language systems that ascribe discursive and ideological power to men. Simultaneously, women are defined – in opposition to the normative male subject – as 'Other', derivative and inferior. In order to challenge the repression of women's feminine nature, Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray and others subverted the orthodox conception of sexual difference as the simple distinction between – and opposition of – male-defined masculinity and femininity. They fundamentally rejected the traditional perception of these as natural, fixed and coherent categories of meaning. Drawing on various tenets of poststructuralism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis, thinkers such as Cixous and Irigaray asserted the primacy of sexual difference, on the one hand, while they attempted to reformulate the definition and representation of female subjecthood through a feminine discourse, on the other. Their arguments were underpinned by the notion difference, understood not as opposition, but as multiplicity and heterogeneity (Eagleton, 1996: 288). In turn, they

advocated a view of subjectivity as unstable, fragmented, contingent, and ultimately, subject to the 'free play of meaning'.

This reformulation of the prevailing notion of sexual difference that incorporated poststructuralist and postmodern points of view, offered a crucial alternative to conventional understandings of gender dynamics and the nature of patriarchal oppression. In turn, by deconstructing and reconfiguring the hierarchies of sexual difference between women and men, also implied diversity among, and difference within, women themselves, as individually constituted, gendered subjects. While not unproblematic in themselves, poststructuralist feminist insights encouraged the revision of the principles and strategies of mainstream feminism. Their influential theories on the role of language in the social construction of femininity went beyond the simple opposition of fixed definitions of male and female identity, and instead illustrated the fluidity and indeterminacy of gendered identities.

French poststructuralist feminism thus represented a major revision of traditional Western philosophy and the liberal humanist theoretical framework. It signalled an important shift towards accommodating and understanding the diversity of women as heterogeneous and decentred subjects and the re-inscription of womanhood in literature, theory and culture. These insights, along with the appropriation of deconstruction as a useful strategy in challenging patriarchal cultural forms, form a crucial critical framework that both directly and indirectly influenced the development of the 'difference debate'. Locally, feminist scholars drew on this work to challenge the hegemony of orthodox definitions and prescriptions of gender discourses. Their efforts to foreground the politics of difference in feminist criticism and to open feminist scholarship up to an acknowledgement of the diversity of women's subjectivity and lived experiences was, in part, influenced by this strand of feminism.

For Kathy Davis, the writing, theory and criticism of black and third-world women constitutes the second major strand of contemporary feminist thought in which the notion of difference formed a central theme. This concern with difference and the multiplicity and diversity of women's subjectivities forms the focal point of feminist thinking articulated by 'marginalised' women, who sought to "[understand] the effects of race, class, and gender on women's identities, experiences, and struggles for empowerment" (Davis, 2008: 71). For black and third-world women, the recognition of difference and focus on the diversity of lived experience arose from their acute awareness of the inequalities between women in their material

and social conditions. They began to recognise and articulate the differentiated ways in which various forms of oppression affected them across racial, economic, geographical and cultural divides. From this realisation, marginalised women sought to challenge homogenising and exclusionary feminist assumptions by theorising the “multiple ways of simultaneously experiencing identity, sexuality and difference in the construction of subjectivity” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997:14). Their interventions sought to assert contextualised representations of, and theories about, women of colour, rural and economically-disadvantaged women, and other subordinated women in order to challenge the dominance of white, middle-class western women in feminism.

In critiquing and reconstructing some fundamental principles of Western feminism, black and postcolonial feminist theories also advanced the critical discourse engaging with the role and effect of difference on gender and feminist praxis. For example, in *Gender in African Women's Writing*, Justine Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi argues that “[b]lack women defined and redefined the marginal position of black women as one characterized by double jeopardy, multiple jeopardy, and multiple consciousness” (1997: 14). These conceptualisations, along with the notion of ‘intersectionality’ (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1990), were introduced to illustrate the interrelations between racist, sexist and imperialist forms of oppression as experienced by marginalised women. Thus, they reconfigured the abstractions and totalising conceptions of dominant Western critical frameworks and understandings of difference in theories of gender, race, class and postcoloniality.

This second strand of feminism commonly associated with the difference debate was pioneered, in part, by an influential body of feminist work developed by African American women writers and scholars. Their work is renowned for the way in which they foregrounded subject positions that had, hitherto, been ignored and/or subsumed within both traditional and radical paradigms and discourses. Indeed, the work of African American feminists served as essential antecedents to the development of local black feminism in South Africa, and as some of the criticism under review indicates, black feminist thinking from the United States prefigured many of the arguments that developed in the difference debate in this country.

In her assessment of contemporary feminist literary criticism, Maggie Humm comments on the influence of African American feminist criticism and notes that,

Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, and Barbara Christian, together with Valerie Smith, Mary Helen Washington and Gloria T. Hull and Toni Cade Bambara among others, [were] undertaking a total reassessment of Black literature and literary history centering on Black women writers. In their research they [were] also discovering the differences and multiplicities of Black women's aesthetics (1994: 173).

These works were a crucial importation into South African critical discourse as black feminist criticism provided a major impetus and theoretical foundation for black women's objections to mainstream feminism in a local context.

Through various formative works, black feminist thought challenged the essentialism, ethnocentrism and "academic arrogance" (Lorde, 1984: 110) of white, middle-class feminists and the historic silencing of black women's literary and critical voices. Their oppositional stances were illustrated powerfully in canonical texts ranging from Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (in *Zami, Sister Outsider, Undersong*, 1984), and Alice Walker's pioneering womanist treatise *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), to Hazel Carby's "White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood", (in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Realism in 70s Britain*, 1982) and bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984). While identifying and asserting the value of the fundamental differences that define black women's subjectivity, social position and aesthetic practice, black writers such as Lorde, Walker, hooks and many others "attacked the misogyny of early Black studies...and the misrepresentations of white feminist critics" (Humm, 1994: 171). In doing so, these women undermined hegemonic constructions of 'women' as a collective identity and definitions which assumed the experiences of Western, privileged white women as normative.

As black women writers and scholars challenged their position of racial, sexual and economic subordination within their societies in this way, their experiences and criticisms had a deep resonance with black South African women who occupied a similar (although not identical) position of marginalisation in a racist and patriarchal society. At the same time, South African women were also influenced by the critiques of postcolonial feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak (1985) and Chandra Mohanty (1984). Their seminal work highlighted the inextricable links between patriarchy, racism and imperialism. They "address[ed] issues faced by women in light of the politics of difference, transnational solidarity building and anticapitalist struggles against globalization" (Edwards, 2008: 101-102) in order to redefine discursive constructions of



the 'third world subaltern woman', and redress the silencing of her voice and agency. As postcolonial theory and third-world feminisms developed, they provided another critical framework through which to highlight and interrogate the role of difference. These discussions constituted another aspect of the intellectual context in which the difference debate developed.

As all of these theories came to prominence in late the 1980s and onwards, they contributed to the contest of ideas already taking place in a tumultuous South Africa. The development of feminist theory and criticism in the country is inextricably linked to the multi-faceted ways and varying degrees to which local women writers, academics and activists, interrogated, contested, assimilated, adapted and reconstructed poststructuralist precepts, postcolonial insights and black feminist thought – amongst many other influences – in relation to their experiences and conceptualisations the idiosyncrasies of South African women's oppression and their struggle for emancipation.

### **Discussing Difference in South African Feminism**

In her examination of 'feminist scholarship and colonial discourse', Chandra Mohanty argues that

[a]ny discussion of the intellectual and political construction of 'third world feminisms' must address itself to two simultaneous projects: the internal critique of hegemonic 'Western' feminisms, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies. The first project is one of deconstructing and dismantling; the second, one of building and constructing. While these projects appear to be contradictory, the one working negatively and the other positively, unless these tasks are addressed simultaneously, 'third world' feminisms run the risk of marginalization or ghettoisation from both mainstream (right and left) and Western feminist discourses. (1991: 51)

In a similar vein, this intellectual history will address itself to South African feminists' critical engagement with the 'race-and-gender' dynamic as vital aspect of the development of contemporary feminism in the country. Viewed in light of Mohanty's comment, the difference debate can be broadly figured as a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. This process involved, on the one hand, a radical critique of the assumptions of mainstream feminist academia, particularly by black and other marginal women. Simultaneously, it occasioned a shift in the predominant conceptualisations of female subjectivity and gender oppression as well as a radical reconsideration of the nature of gender politics in local feminist criticism. A review of the

Natal conference, and the subsequent responses from feminist critics, such as this dissertation undertakes, thus reveals an image of feminist politics in South Africa as an undertaking that is equally preoccupied with the dismantling of old forms as well as the formulation and reformulation of the new, albeit fragmented forms, constructed around diverse intellectual and ideological perspectives.

This project consists of an historical survey of South African feminist criticism following the 1991 Natal conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa. The study will examine the issues of difference, representation and positionality as they were articulated in the conflicts that emerged during the Natal conference. In doing so, it takes into consideration the intellectual context and antecedent feminist theories and debates that preceded and anticipated the conference. For this reason, what I present here is not so much a literature review as an overview of the feminist criticism which this thesis takes as its primary object of inquiry.

The project therefore begins with an exploration of the 1990 issue of *Current Writing*, which focused specifically on ‘feminism and writing’, as an early articulation of the problems and debates that surfaced at the Natal conference and dominated later feminist criticism. It then goes on to consider the issues raised in the immediate aftermath of the conference, as reflected in Desiree Lewis’s article “The Politics of Feminism in South Africa” (1992) as well as in Margaret Daymond’s introduction to the 1996 anthology, *South African Feminisms*. I then examine the impact of the difference debate on the strategies and methodologies of feminist criticism as illustrated in the 1993 issue of the *Agenda* journal, as well as the three-part series on ‘African Feminisms’ published in *Agenda* in 2001, 2002 and 2003.

Through this discussion, I will examine these intellectual developments in terms of the ‘internal critique’ on the one hand, and the ‘formulation of new feminist concerns and strategies’ on the other. As Mohanty indicates, these are not considered distinct positions or stages. Paradoxically, they are opposite, simultaneous and complementary. It is not possible to neatly classify the works and arguments under review as being one or the other. And yet, this is a useful framework through which to view the progression of the difference debate. There are instances where the process of dismantling old forms is apparent. The articles from *Current Writing* and Desiree Lewis are exemplary of this mode of internal critique, even while the ideas expressed look towards new critical orientations. At the same time, the process of transition towards new formulations is discernable across the African Feminisms series.

This study, therefore, undertakes to isolate the major trends and nodes of inquiry that have developed in local feminist criticism after the Natal conference and seeks to locate these debates in relation to a set of broader issues which include representation, the politics of knowledge production, the relationship between theory and practice, and the race-class-gender-debate. Of particular concern will be to examine how these concepts are articulated within a specifically South African context.

Although limited in scope, in documenting articulations of the difference debate in feminist scholarship in the 1990s and early 2000s, this dissertation attempts, then, to illuminate the development of black feminist voices and the interactions between the ideas of black, white and international feminists in South Africa. Furthermore, this overview will give a brief survey of a crucial period in the progression the feminist movement in the country, against the backdrop of unprecedented social and political transformation.

At the same time, however, this intellectual history makes no claim to comprehensiveness, but aims to represent the major concerns that have developed in South African feminist criticism, that have continued salience in contemporary scholarship. I thus adopt the methods of the literary historian as I proceed, by a close, contextualised reading of some of the key texts of South African feminist criticism, to document the developments and shifts in feminist debate subsequent to the Natal conference. This study is therefore an overview that traces the history of ideas that preoccupy contemporary feminist literary criticism, in relation to a critical event and seminal theories that had a significant effect on the development of South African feminisms.

## **Notes**

- i. The conference on 'Women and Gender in Southern Africa' will also be referred to as 'the Natal conference', 'the 1991 conference' or 'the conference' for the remainder of this paper.

## Chapter 2

### **Acknowledging Difference**

The early 1990s were a tumultuous, yet progressive, era for feminism in South Africa. The country entered a phase of unprecedented social, political and institutional transformation as a framework for a democratic post-apartheid state was painstakingly negotiated. As Margaret Daymond (1996) has remarked, the period was marked by “momentous changes” (1996: xiii) in the arena of national politics. These changes inevitably had a definitive impact on all aspects of South African intellectual activity, including feminist academia and gender studies. Furthermore, as Shamim Meer (1997) notes, this “era of negotiations seems to have opened up space for new forms of organisations in the country and for discussion on a range of issues not seen ...previously” (9) in the feminist movement. At this time, critical engagement with ‘race and identity’ also became a major preoccupation (Meer, 1997:8), an engagement which merged with a related concern with ‘difference and representation’ (*Agenda*, 1993: 4). So while feminism and gender studies were still struggling for recognition and legitimacy within South African critical discourse, the insights and challenges presented by the concept of difference came to the forefront. Women took advantage of the promise of transformation to destabilise established thinking within the feminist movement itself, and to move towards the redefinition of feminist theory and practice in South Africa. Consequently, the emphasis in feminist activity shifted from ‘putting gender on the agenda’ to an attempt to define and elaborate “a clear theory and practice [that] could be developed for women in South Africa” (Meer, 1997: 8).

Given the destabilising nature of this revisionist project, and the turbulent political and intellectual atmosphere that prevailed, it is perhaps unsurprising that this process was wrought with tension and conflict amongst feminist academics and activists. Clearly, the acute disagreements and disruptions that occurred at the 1991 conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa were manifestations of these tensions. Here, tangible divisions over the future of feminism and the role of difference, particularly racial and cultural difference, in the theory and practice of feminism and women’s emancipation were exposed. The Natal conference intensified already-heated debates and, in its aftermath, feminist scholarship was dogged by the perception of insurmountable divisions between black and white women in the movement. Serious challenges were also made to the legitimacy of representation, specifically, white women’s

research on black subjects. This 'internal critique', emerging from within the movement and among women themselves, even resulted in the open rejection of Western feminism by some women. Most previous scholarship has examined these issues in terms of racial dynamics between black and white women. When interrogating the legacy of the Natal conference and the difference debate, however, it is also vital to account for the extent to which the divisions that developed may have been exacerbated by contradictory definitions of the concept of difference as well as by the limitations of treating categories of difference as discrete (rather than intersecting) factors.

### **Difference, Feminism and Writing**

The momentum of feminist thinking in the early stages of the difference debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s is reflected in the 1990 issue of literary journal *Current Writing*, as this volume illustrates the fissured intellectual atmosphere leading up to the Natal conference. The special issue on 'Feminism and Writing' focuses critical attention exclusively on feminist concerns in South African literary criticism and, particularly, on "the challenges of reading and re-reading women's writing in the current climate of potential change" when the problematics of difference were felt to be particularly acute (Daymond, 1990: i). Two central issues are discernable: on the one hand, the articles in this volume reflect the revisionist attitude that prevailed at the time as the assumptions of mainstream feminist theory were undermined by radical shifts in social conditions, including "the marked upsurge in writing by women, especially black women" (Daymond, 1990: i). In this regard, the issue thus documents the emergence of oppositional positions within feminist scholarship aimed at dismantling not only the assumptions of an androcentric South African academia, but also the norms of established feminist paradigms. On the other hand, however, the articles also highlight the significant problems involved in discussing the issue of difference and its implications for feminist analysis.

In an international context, these issues are highlighted in *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory* (1989), in which Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker present a collection of papers from the 13<sup>th</sup> University of Alabama Symposium on Literature and Language, held in 1986. This conference was convened with the specific aim of confronting the problematics of difference within feminism and critical theory and the implications for feminist

criticism of the politics of identity. When reflecting on the conference and its outcomes, the editors argue that disagreements over difference reflect

the very instability of the concept of 'difference' as an organizing principle; difference is shown to encompass sexual and experiential difference, as well as textual and positional difference – and often the difference between and among these deployments of the term goes unspecified" (1989: 7).

In a similar vein, the collection of articles in the 1990 *Current Writing* volume not only gives a telling impression of the diversity of feminist critical approaches being developed and applied in the early 1990s, but also initiates a dialogue that directly addresses the politics of difference in the development of a South African feminist tradition.

The volume's editor, Margaret Daymond, argues that at the heart of this feminist enquiry is 'the problematic of naming' and the recognition that,

within feminism itself, claiming the right to name oneself rests on a simultaneous, mutually liberating recognition of other women's difference. In this way, if feminists establish a way of working with the variousness of South African women, they will give a new slant to 'difference' and to 'other(s)' (1990: iii).

However, as the commentators in *Current Writing* exemplify, while there was a growing consensus regarding the importance of this recognition of difference, the implications of incorporating the concept of difference into feminist analysis and criticism remained highly contested.

Margaret Daymond's observations are in line with earlier ideas expressed at the 1986 Alabama Symposium that are included in Meese and Parker's publication. In Michèle Barrett's contribution to the debate, for example, she makes the point that "a new politics, recognizing 'the difference within' the idea of woman, is radically challenging to conventional feminist arguments" (1989: 37). She goes on to elaborate this new paradigm in the contemporary movement as a "deconstructive model [of difference], pointing to the 'difference within' woman as a category and women as a group" (1989:37.). While this recognition of 'difference within' would seem liberatory to marginalised women, as Daymond suggests, it is clear from Barrett's arguments, and from the discussions set out in the 1990 *Current Writing* issue, that this idea generated strong disagreements among feminists over the implications of acknowledging

difference in theory and in practice, within the movement. Despite the general consensus over the importance of accounting for difference in both theory and in practice, Barrett rightly cautions that it is vital to identify and interrogate “the different ways in which ‘difference’ has been constituted and deployed in feminist debates” (1989: 38). This is particularly relevant when examining the role of race in feminist formations in South Africa.

In her paper, Michèle Barrett goes on to differentiate between two predominant conceptions of difference that appear in feminist scholarship. On the one hand, she describes a ‘traditional sexual difference model’ which “draw[s] on the ‘difference between’ women and men” (1989: 37). On the other hand, she outlines a contemporary deconstructive model premised on recognising the differences among women themselves, a distinction which encompasses both ‘positional or textual’ difference and difference based on so-called ‘experiential diversity’. In defining the different meanings of difference formulated within the deconstructive model, then, Barrett distinguishes between linguistically determined difference, and difference based on experience. While the author concedes that the distinctions she proposes are somewhat artificial, her concern is to show that these three meanings of the concept, as used by feminist critics, are often conflated, resulting in confusion, disagreements and contradictions. They therefore need to be distinguished and carefully defined.

In the South African context, the currency of the ‘difference within’ definitions of the concept in the early 1990s, and the contradictions between them, are evident in the ‘Feminism and Writing’ issue of *Current Writing* (1990). A survey of the collection of articles illustrates the varying understandings of difference that were in operation at the time, as well as the tensions that arose as a result of the distinctions between these competing viewpoints. Ostensibly, the volume explores, from diverse perspectives, the question: “‘What exactly is feminism and how does a feminist locate herself within the arena of competing discourses that constitute the field of South African English literary studies in the 1990s?’” (Lockett, 1990: 1). As such, the volume reflects emergent debates in feminist scholarship in South Africa regarding the dismantling of dominant western paradigms and the construction of local forms of feminist theory, in line with Chandra Mohanty’s schema (1991: 51). At the same time, however, the contributors confront the issue of difference in determining, and complicating, theories and strategies for feminist politics in the country thus illustrating the problems feminists faced in acknowledging and incorporating the concept into local criticism.

In initiating the debate, Cecily Lockett presents the argument that South African feminists need to develop theories of gender that take cognizance of the specificity of South Africa's historical context, and particularly the dynamics of race and class. She frames this argument in the form of a critique of Western feminist paradigms developed by white middle-class women which she views as unsuitable for dealing with this society's "special circumstances" (1990: 2). Lockett proceeds through an interrogation of the two dominant modes of feminist thought, what she categorises as French feminism, on the one hand, and American feminism, on the other. For Lockett, "neither approach can be readily transferred to South Africa" (1990: 2) since, rather than emerging from the particular circumstances of the South African condition, these

discourses of feminism available to South African literary feminists ... have a history of almost 20 years, and developed out of the debates of the women's movement in America and England and, in France, from the philosophical context of structuralism and post-structuralism" (1990: 2).

The author, firstly, dismisses French feminism for "its failure to offer a woman-centered discourse for the much needed development of a theory of women's culture in South Africa" as it reflects the assumptions and interests of a 'western, privileged, bourgeois' female subject (1990: 8). Here, Lockett argues that French feminists' focus on *écriture féminine*, deconstruction and psychoanalysis is unable to sufficiently confront and account for the peculiarities and material conditions of South African society, especially when considering the lives and writing of black and marginalised women. For Lockett, the theoreticism of French feminism and its "lack of a cogent (gender) political programme of action" that engages with the race and class struggles in addition to gender politics, render the French model highly problematic in the South African context (1990: 7). Lockett acknowledges the explicit socio-historical emphases of American feminist theory, but asserts that this theory (along with the French strand) fails to "find a method that goes beyond the limits of the white, middle-class text" (1990: 14). Unlike French feminism, Lockett sees American feminism, and particularly gynocritics, as a "political form of criticism [which] confronts instances of specific historical and social oppression and challenges their validity" (1990: 9). Nevertheless, she also suggests that this model is still limited in the extent to which it is able to accommodate the factors of race and class within a gender framework, and particularly, its ability to understand the experiences and writing of black women in South



Africa. Ultimately, Lockett urges South African feminist critics to create a body of feminist knowledge specifically for the third-world, South African context, one that encompasses European, American and African perspectives through a dialogic interaction between the insights of gynesis and gynocritics as well as an indigenous womanist discourse highlighting black women's writing and oral literature (1990: 20).

For Lockett, a vital aspect of this South African feminist literary framework is that it can "accommodate the complexities of race and class within gender studies" (1990: 14), and particularly, that it recognises and accounts for the experiences and cultural production of marginalised black women in the country. As Lockett points out, black women's literary work has been limited by cultural and educational barriers, and has been further silenced by a lack of serious critical attention from the South African literary academy, rendering black women's literature in a marginal position within a paradigm of literary power that privileges white and black male writers over women. In redressing the oppression of black women's voices, Lockett suggests that

we will need to develop a more sympathetic womanist discourse for considering the work of black women in this country in place of the current feminist paradigms which only tend to condemn and silence black women writers (1990: 20).

In order to redress this historic silencing, she proposes the recuperation of oral literature within the literary critical paradigm and the application of Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's concept of womanism in the criticism of black women's writing. For Lockett, creating a space for black women's cultural production would be a definitive characteristic of an indigenous South African feminist literary theory.

While Lockett's article is strongly revisionist in its orientation, it drew equally strong criticism from various perspectives. This is shown by the responses included in the 1990 *Current Writing*. Articles from Pamela Ryan, Jenny de Reuck, Sisi Maqagi, Zoë Wicomb and David Schalkwyk all suggest that Lockett does not go far enough in redressing the shortcomings of prevailing feminist critical paradigms. These critics propose that, in fact, Lockett maintains and reinforces some of the assumptions of the mainstream feminist discourse that she finds so problematic. On one level, these responses address the inadequacies of Lockett's critique, particularly her dismissal of French feminism and her critical framework for the analysis of black

women's writing. On another level, however, the debate running through the *Current Writing* issue is also characterised by an underlying tension between conflicting conceptions of difference and the implications of developing theories based on the 'difference within' models of the concept. Each writer obviously recognises difference as a central premise in their arguments, and in particular, they wish to foreground the differences within the category of women. However, it becomes clear that their constructions and understandings of the concept differ and in some cases, are contradictory.

This tension is addressed perhaps most overtly in David Schalkwyk's article "The Authority of Experience or the Tyranny of Discourse: An Inescapable Impasse?" (1990). In this paper, Schalkwyk is primarily concerned with addressing Lockett's desire to exclude men from participation in feminist theorising and analysis. He faults her conception of sexual difference, which, he argues, is premised on a problematic feminist appeal to experience. According to Lockett,

a man, no matter how sympathetic and progressive his views, can never be in the same position as a woman who is a feminist critic: 'For a man the negotiation [between experience and feminism] is blocked, doubly contradictory: his experience is her oppression' (Lockett, 1990: 5).

However, for Schalkwyk, this leads Lockett to the untenable implication that men cannot form or 'negotiate' a feminist consciousness because they have no experiences of gender oppression. She implies, in fact, that men cannot engage in feminist theorising without appropriating feminist analysis to reinforce their own power.

Schalkwyk finds that Lockett's justification for this position is her problematic understanding of experience "as an irreducible given – as something owned by a sovereign consciousness and from which positions may be taken, action mobilised, meaning conferred upon the world" (1990: 45). He argues that dominant discourse, which Lockett rehearses rather than resists, constructs a seemingly 'inescapable impasse', with theories that assert the primacy of materiality (experience) on the one hand, and those that assert the primacy of language (discourse) on the other. His central contention is that, in her search for an indigenous South African feminism,

Lockett too readily polarizes the choices available to feminists in South Africa, and her survey poses false alternatives precisely because she has failed to let the voices of specific feminisms speak for themselves and because, in her aversion to 'theory', she has herself failed to examine the concepts upon which she places so much weight" (1990: 57).

For Schalkwyk, Lockett fails to consider the possibility of reconciling the principle of linguistic construction with an apprehension of materiality. He shows that in the same way that the notion of experience forms the basis for Lockett's distinction between black and white women, her understanding of sexual difference, that is, the difference between women and men, is also premised on this problematic definition of experience. He attributes Lockett's stance the explicitly political and pragmatic aims of her feminist project, her anxiety over reducing women's suffering and material oppression to the effects of discourse and to an implicit empiricism in her understanding of the relationship between materiality and language.

Instead, Schalkwyk argues that "language, far from being founded upon experience, is in fact partly constitutive of experience itself" (1990: 52). This is contrary to the dichotomy between "the authority of experience and the tyranny of discourse" (1990: 52) Lockett presents. Schalkwyk makes the telling point that "the appeal to experience as a basis of feminism has a pragmatic import rather than the status of epistemological exclusivity" (1990: 50). This renders problematic not only Lockett's exclusion of men from feminist theorising, but also her claims regarding the exclusivity of black women's experience. It is worthwhile to note that this criticism extends to many of the arguments proposed by women calling for a separatist black feminism or women's movement, such as Sisi Maqagi's (1990), under the various guises of 'womanism', 'motherism' and so on.

Schalkwyk's analysis brings into sharp relief the related contradictions Michèle Barrett identifies between and within the various definitions of the concept of difference, and how these contradictions manifest within feminist arguments. Reading Lockett in relation to Barrett's discussion of difference, it is clear that what Lockett proposes is a feminist paradigm that "[relies] on experience as the basis for theory and practice" (Barrett, 1989: 44), with race and class divisions necessitating varying critical perspectives within feminist literary criticism.

For the most part, Cecily Lockett uses the concept of difference to connote what is "effectively a recognition of diversity" (Barrett, 1989: 44) within the category of women. Throughout her article, she is careful to differentiate between the positionality of, and material

conditions experienced by, black and white women as distinct, racially-defined groups. This distinction centres on her claim that “where white women confront only gender oppression, black women are the victims of what is termed ‘triple oppression’ – racial oppression, class oppression and gender oppression” (1990: 14). In addition, Lockett cites Dabi Nkululeko to suggest that the western paradigms of French and American feminist theories are inappropriate for the South African context because they “fail to understand the complex situation of the Third World, where class and sex oppression are joined by colonial and racial oppression” (cited in Lockett, 1990: 14). Essentially, then, Lockett uses the idea of difference specifically to refer to ‘experiential diversity’ as the basis for rejecting the “specious claims of feminism to represent equally all women [and] to speak with one voice” (Barrett, 1989: 44). This suggests that, according to Barrett’s schema, Lockett’s feminist outlook is located within the deconstructive ‘difference within’ model of difference, based on experiential diversity.

Interestingly, like David Schalkwyk, Barrett also notes the problematic nature of the ‘experiential diversity’ definition of difference in contemporary feminism. She argues that the “taken-for-granted nature of experience in these discourses” locates them in “an empirical, humanist framework” (1989: 45), which echoes Schalkwyk’s assessment.

So, from the discussion above, it is evident that Lockett premises her call both for an indigenous South African feminism, and for the recognition of black women’s voices, on specific conceptions of ‘difference’ and ‘experience’. However, throughout Lockett’s article, the specific definition of these concepts goes unremarked and unexamined. Indeed, the author does not distinguish between the different meanings of the term implied by her arguments. As David Schalkwyk begins to show, then, one of the major problems with debates about difference is precisely that many commentators do not articulate or make explicit how they define and deploy the concept.

In one sense, Cecily Lockett’s article illustrates a strong revisionist impulse that permeated feminist thinking in South Africa at the time. Her account also reveals, implicitly, the dominant discourse surrounding the concept of ‘difference’ during the early stages of the difference debate. At the same time, however, the piece is illustrative of the elision that often occurs in arguments that deploy the concept of difference, and it soon becomes clear that these contrasting definitions of the concept of difference is an underlying factor in of many of the disagreements that characterised the difference debate.

This tension between experience and discourse, and between experiential diversity and positional difference, permeates the other responses to Lockett's article.

### **French Theory in a South African Frame**

One of the main points of contention raised by Cecily Lockett in the *Current Writing* debate was the role of French feminism within the context of South African feminist theory. By using the term 'French feminism', Lockett references the work of a group of feminist theorists from, or working in, France from the 1970s onwards. The most prominent of these figures included Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. As outlined in the Introduction of this paper, the work of these theorists was indeed crucial for the difference debate, especially as it developed in South Africa. However, Lockett seems to focus her definition of French feminism on specific aspects of their work, particularly, their literary theories and the concepts of *écriture féminine* and *jouissance*. In doing so, Lockett seems to underplay the vital contribution of the French school to theories of the politics of identity that were taken up and developed by poststructuralist and postmodernist feminists. This is an issue taken up by Pamela Ryan and Jenny de Reuck in their responses included in the 1990 *Current Writing* volume. Their pieces make a case for the relevance of these international feminisms in South Africa. At the same time, however, their contributions also illustrate the prevalence of a lack of clarity over the concept of difference.

Lockett's critique of French feminism is first confronted by Pamela Ryan in "The Future of South African Feminism" (1990). Here, Ryan illustrates the influence of critical exchanges between feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonial theory as critical discourses available to women in the early 1990s. She argues that the principles of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories can indeed be appropriated by local feminists given the social and political circumstances of a postcolonial South African society. Ryan's central concern is to show that the future of feminism in the country lies in "a criticism which affirms hybridity and difference and, at the same time, recognizes its political role 'in the world'" (1990: 28).

The author's critique of Cecily Lockett's stance on French feminism argues that it is both 'reductionist and indulges in dualistic thinking' (1990: 26). Lockett's reductionism is evident in her highly selective survey of French theories, a survey which overlooks, for example, Hélène

Cixous's work on deconstructing hierarchical binary oppositions. By limiting French feminism to *écriture féminine* and *jouissance*, Lockett overlooks this contribution to the politics of identity, and particularly the influence of poststructuralist perspectives, as well as the focus on language and subjectivity characteristic of psychoanalysis. For Ryan, these aspects of feminist theory are vital to bringing about social change.

Furthermore, Ryan argues that, in asserting the need for an indigenous South African feminist theory, Lockett wishes to 'guard against' the importation of foreign discourses, the imposition of white women's theories on black women lives, and the assimilation of feminist discourse into a predominantly male canon. For Ryan, this resistance – especially to imported feminist models – underplays or ignores the fact that “a post-colonial culture such as ours is of necessity a hybridized culture, what Laretta Ngcobo calls ‘a patchwork of the old, the new and the borrowed’” (1990: 28). Instead, Ryan proposes that some forms of appropriation are valid in developing a critical framework that reflects this hybridised postcolonial culture. Ryan argues that the most appropriate approach for feminists in South Africa is to draw on French and American feminist discourses, post-colonialism and cultural materialism, and by developing symptomatic readings of black women's writing (1990: 28).

To an extent, Pamela Ryan does agree with Cecily Lockett's call for women to rethink their approaches and strategies towards feminist theory, criticism and politics, particularly in light of the continued silencing and exclusion of black women's voices from the South African literary canon. Contrary to Lockett's revisionist project, however, Ryan contends that the key to the future of feminism in South Africa lies in women “being receptive to feminism's multiplicity and fragmentation” (1990: 28). What is needed is the recognition of the diverse and fractured nature of South Africa's culture and its tumultuous historical and political situation. Ryan thus advocates a revolutionary postmodernist feminism that acknowledges “its indeterminacies and its differences” (1990: 28) that aims to recognise and interrogate the complexities and repressed contradictions of the subject within a postcolonial society. This is a framework that is as much concerned with the differences among women and within feminist theory as it is with engaging with the race, class and gender struggles of the 1990s.

At the centre of Ryan's argument is a postmodern conception of gendered identity that “denies the possibility of the coherent, individual self” (1990: 26). In light of Michèle Barrett's schema then, it is evident that Ryan uses the term 'difference' to connote 'positional or relational

difference', where, for example, the meaning of the concept 'woman' is "constructed through linguistic opposition rather than through absolute reference" (1989: 41). This implies the notion of women as decentred, heterogeneous subjects. Since her postmodern feminist outlook is founded on what Kristeva refers to as the imperative to "reject the validity of homologous woman" (cited, in Ryan, 1990: 29), Ryan's arguments can therefore be located in the deconstructive, 'difference within' model of difference, even though the author herself does not make this explicit.

However, it is also necessary for Ryan to qualify her views on the treatment of black women's writing. As we have seen, an important aspect of Ryan's position is her endorsement of Lauretta Ngcobo's description of black women's complex position within a hybrid culture. At the same time, however, she rejects the writer's desire to "integrate contradictions into a meaningful new whole" (1990: 28) as it is fundamentally opposed to the postmodernist view of the human subject as fractured and continually in flux. While it is clear that they are both positioned within the 'difference within' model, this distinction in their conclusions about the implications of acknowledging difference points to competing views over the specific meaning of difference and the nature of subjectivity. Nevertheless, Ryan would accept this disjuncture in their views as a vital aspect of the critical dialogue an inherently fragmented South African feminism must engage in.

Jenny de Reuck expresses a similar view in her article "Writing Feminism/Theoretical Inscriptions in South Africa", in which she signals an awareness of "the existence of competing regimes of truth in feminist theory" (1990: 30). Like Ryan, de Reuck is influenced by the debates regarding the problematic nature of subjectivity. Like Lockett and Ryan, she is also concerned with the exigencies of the social fragmentation and shifting socio-political conditions of South Africa's cultural and critical landscape. In light of these circumstances, de Reuck urges that "the site of struggle [must] be extended from the realm of discourse theory to include the specific material conditions out of which are constructed the power relations of a society" (1990: 33) in order for feminist theory to be relevant to the contemporary context. As a materialist feminist, de Reuck emphasises that an engagement with materiality and historical context must form a central priority within cultural and critical analysis and particularly in theories "seeking to transform oppressive ideologies in our discursive formations" (1990: 34).

In response to these imperatives, de Reuck advocates a materialist feminist approach to gender politics and criticism. To counter Cecily Lockett's charges, de Reuck argues that forms of British materialist feminism are able to accommodate both the theoretical focus of French feminism and the more pragmatic outlook of American feminism.

Like Ryan, de Reuck is adamant that a progressive feminist criticism in South Africa cannot be achieved by dismissing French and American feminist theories. She asserts their importance, affirming that "[p]hilosophically speaking, the feminisms which Cecily Lockett argues cannot 'readily be transferred to South Africa', are fundamental to any theorising about feminism" (1990: 30). With Ryan, de Reuck regards the insights of critics such as Cixous, Irigaray, Feral and Kristeva as integral to contemporary South African debates. De Reuck does not only consider their literary theories and critical analysis, but also the contributions to discussions about "the nature of subjectivity, the role of ideology in the inscription of the latter, and the implications for race-and-gender-construction of 'naturalized' cultural formations" (1990: 30).

In similar fashion, de Reuck resists Lockett's idea that racial difference "precludes [white women's] right to speak for or about black women" (1990: 31). She instead suggests that South African feminism cannot be developed by imposing a regime of academic separatism in which "the womanist black writer is opposed by the feminist white writer" (1990: 32). Her reasons for rejecting Lockett's proposal to develop a womanist discourse in South Africa arise from similar concerns: for de Reuck, womanist theory "exists within an explicitly racist construction of the subject" (1990: 32), and is thus inherently essentialist in nature and reinforces "patriarchal inscriptions of the female subject" (1990: 32).

It is in de Reuck's article that the meaning of difference is perhaps most ambiguous. In the first place, de Reuck's conception of difference is clearly located within 'the difference within' mode. She directly challenges essentialist feminist frameworks in which "'man' and 'woman' are reductively construed as monolithic, frameworks which allow no space for real differences that derive from their inscriptions in class, racial or historical terms" (1990: 32). At the same time, de Reuck holds that, "[i]nsofar as literary criticism is concerned, a materialist feminist orientation foregrounds the degree to which we are constituted by the myths and narratives of our historical moments and rejects a crude reflectionist model of literary representation" (1990: 33). While this comment suggests an apprehension of the material reality



of historical moments, it nevertheless reveals an emphasis on the discursive construction of experience (as ‘myths and narratives’). This implies a positional or textual definition of the subject, and indeed of the concept of difference. This is further reinforced by her recourse to poststructuralist arguments about the nature of the subject and arguments about there being no such thing as a world out there in which action unmediated takes place. De Reuck’s argument, then, does not necessarily resolve the ‘impasse’ between experience and discourse, but rather subsumes the former within the latter.

It is important to note, then, that an apprehension of the role and importance of difference is evident in all three articles. However, it is also clear that beyond the overt ideological differences, there is an implicit discord in what this concept of difference means to each commentator. This inevitably affects the way in which each responds to the demands of a shifting social, political, and literary context. These articles illustrate the complexity of resolving the competing definitions of difference, and the conflicting critical perspectives the concept generates. In this way, these discussions over legitimacy and appropriation foreshadow the more explicit disagreements that would come to characterise the difference debate in South Africa. Besides the assimilation of Western feminist philosophies, another crucial facet of these debates, however, emerged from the viewpoints offered by black women remarking on Cecily Lockett’s article and the state of feminist scholarship in South Africa.

### **Black Criticism in a Feminist Frame**

The 1990 *Current Writing* volume also includes responses from black women scholars who interrogate Cecily Lockett’s arguments in relation to the problematic dynamic between black and white women in the feminist movement and the marginalisation of black women’s cultural production in South African academia. Sisi Maqagi and Zoë Wicomb’s contributions not only signal the upsurge of black women’s interventions in the feminist arena, the authors also argue for – and are emblematic of – the importance and agency of black women’s critical voices. On one level, Maqagi and Wicomb share Lockett and other respondents’ concern with difference, race and gender. Firstly, they highlight the need to assert and recognise black women’s difference and position as ‘other’ in relation to white women. They also address the need to consider the category ‘women’ as heterogeneous, and develop feminist approaches that account for this. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they assert need to allow black and other

marginalised women to articulate their own experiences and theories about their oppression. On another level, while most commentators in the debate engage tangentially with the issue of black women's writing within broader theoretical discussions, Maqagi and Wicomb directly confront the marginalisation and misrepresentation of black women and the failure of many white feminists to adequately incorporate race as a critical factor in gender politics. In doing so, they illuminate issues that would become a central preoccupation in the difference debate both during and subsequent to the 1991 Natal conference.

In some respects, Cecily Lockett takes up a seemingly progressive revisionist stance in criticising mainstream feminism's silencing of, and inability to accommodate, black women's experiences and writing in dominant theories and analysis. As she argues, "it is our task as white South African feminists to listen to black women and not impose our supposedly superior theoretical insights onto their lives" (1990: 18). However, in their critiques, Maqagi and Wicomb expose significant blind spots in Lockett's critical framework in relation to the intersection of race and gender. The authors highlight the ways in which Lockett remains trapped within the white middle-class feminist framework she denounces, as she perpetuates assumptions that reinforce white women's racial privilege within South African society's power dynamics.

Sisi Maqagi is the first to point out, in her piece "Who Theorizes?" (1990), that Lockett does not sufficiently question the legitimacy of her position of privilege and relative power as a white academic reading and re-presenting the experiences and writing of black women. Hendricks and Lewis later refer to this attitude as a failure to 'shed the habit of power' (cited in Daymond, 1996: xix). In her critique, Maqagi charges that "[i]n her argument Lockett seems to ignore the fact that black women are able to, and should, theories about 'the social relations between the two segments'" (1990: 23). Maqagi's criticism of Lockett, and white feminists in general, is that their implicit and often insistent desire to 'assume the initiative' in conducting research on black subjects is an expression of white women's assumed position of intellectual authority (1990: 23). For Maqagi, this eagerness to 'do the work' for black women by positioning them as the object of inquiry perpetuates the marginalisation and silencing of black women's voices (1990: 23).

Maqagi concludes that, because of South Africa's stark racial inequalities, white women cannot identify with and/or legitimately theorise about the lives of black women and their racial oppression. Thus, she argues, "the question of whether [they] as white women, have the right to

speak for black women should not even arise” (1990: 22). Instead, Maqagi holds that theories about black women, and assessments of their cultural production, must be developed by black women themselves. Maqagi presumes that black women would presumably render more ‘authentic’ readings or representations of black experience. Her criticism of the racialised division of labour within mainstream feminism (with white academics writing about black subjects) is based on the erroneous belief that white women have access to, and can therefore represent, black experience. In her protest against this notion, then, Maqagi reveals an implicit apprehension of difference defined on the basis of ‘experiential diversity’, specifically in relation to race. Although Maqagi does not state this explicitly, her arguments strongly imply the exclusion of white scholars from theorising about the lives and writing of black women and the formation of separate fields of academic inquiry and cultural activity for black and white feminists based on this model of difference.

This suggestion, however, renders Maqagi’s argument problematic as it reveals an essentialised view of black and white subjectivities based on rigid racial divisions. This view fails to admit the heterogeneity within the categories of black (and white) women themselves. Earlier in the *Current Writing* volume, David Schalkwyk exposes the erroneous premises of such a call for academic separatism based on the ‘experiential diversity’ definition of difference. In a similar vein, Michèle Barrett remarks that “essentialism goes hand in hand with intellectual separatism” (1989: 44). Nevertheless, by illuminating the unequal power dynamics between white and black women in South Africa, and white academics and black women writers in particular, Sisi Maqagi shows that Lockett’s endeavour to ‘listen to black women’s voices’ inadvertently silences those very women in a position of marginality within feminist academia. Similar arguments would persist within the difference debate as feminist thought in South Africa became increasingly preoccupied with the role of race in gender politics.

In Zoë Wicomb’s “To Hear a Variety of Voices” (1990), the concern with asymmetrical power relations between black and white women, continues. As Wicomb explains, her postmodernist reading

take[s] as point of departure [sic] a conflictual model of society where a variety of voices will always render problematic the demands of one in relation to others and where discursive formations admit of cracks and fissures that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs (1990: 36).

In her contribution to the *Current Writing* debate, Wicomb argues that the major shortcoming of both 'Euro-feminism' and womanism is their inability to recognise these 'cracks and fissures'. In other words, they fail to fully accommodate the conflicting discourses that characterise and are expressed in South African cultural production, and specifically, through black women's literary voices. Instead, womanism, on the one hand, reflects the "orthodox position of deferring matters relating to gender in the interest of racial liberation" (1990: 35) in order to project a vision of "an homogeneous black community that will stand united against racial oppression" (1990: 37). Wicomb illustrates Lockett's argument advocating a 'sympathetic womanist discourse' itself ignores the contradictions expressed, for example, in the testimonies of black women whose experiences and literature speak of "the conflicting loyalties of race and gender" (1990: 41). Here, Wicomb shows that she differs from both Lockett and Sisi Maqagi in her understanding of difference. Drawing on postmodernist tenets, and recognising the discursive (rather than experiential or material) construction of identity and social constructs, Wicomb rejects the appeal to experience as the basis for separate frameworks for black and white women.

At the same time, Wicomb holds that Lockett's feminist approach also responds to "feminism's neglect of race [by insisting] on hierarchizing the issues in the order of race, gender and class" (1990: 40). Hence, it overlooks the negotiation of conflicting commitments to political activities and gendered domestic roles, implicit in the discourse of the black women cited in her article. This erasure is evident in Lockett's view of black women's writing as being primarily socio-historical record of everyday experiences under Apartheid. Wicomb's argument suggests that this prescriptive perspective ignores the linguistic construction of black literature and thus effaces the complexities of race and gender that are expressed in the discursive strategies of black women's writing. Sisi Maqagi expresses a similar dissatisfaction with Lockett's 'sympathetic' estimation of black women's writing, suggesting that it indicates a condescending tolerance for work that is inferior according to established or conventional standards (1990: 23).

Given the inadequacies of a womanist theoretical framework in dealing with the interrelations of race, class and gender, Wicomb questions Cecily Lockett's telling exclusion of the vast body of feminist work by black women in the United States, which she neglects in her discussion of 'American' feminism. In contrast, Wicomb believes that

a literary theory for South Africa has much to learn from these black feminists who insist on the incorporation of race and class as interlocking factors, and who...argue for a historically specific, anti-essentialist criticism, or...seek to expose the conditions under which literature is produced, published and reviewed. Gayatri Spivak, [1989], too, has written on the politics of interpretation and her application of postmodernist theory to Third-World texts, which at the same time questions the cultural specificity of theory, would be an obvious reply to Lockett's challenge (1990: 38).

For Wicomb, an emphasis on the intersection of – and contradictions between – the discourses percolating through South African women's cultural expression is central to the development of a feminist literary framework, a framework that takes into consideration the complexities of women's positioning within various social spheres and oppressive structures.

By offering these views, which largely stand against Cecily Lockett's assumptions and the dominant discourse of mainstream feminism, Sisi Maqagi and Zoë Wicomb's articles are important critical interventions by black feminists. They illustrate the concerns of black critics in relation to a predominantly white feminist academia, and epitomise the divergent priorities and perspectives that were emerging in the so-called 'sisterhood' of feminist culture in the country. Nevertheless, even as they represent the perspectives of black women on the margins of feminist criticism, Maqagi and Wicomb's contrasting viewpoints illustrate the extent of the disjuncture in the understandings of difference in South African feminist criticism.

### **The Politics of Difference**

The 1990 issue of *Current Writing* stands as a telling example of the complexities women faced in constructing a framework for feminist theory in South Africa. The critiques of mainstream feminism from a variety of ideological stances clearly illustrates that new approaches were needed, not only because of the shifting political circumstances, but also because of new ideas about the role of difference and its implications for feminist theorising. The significance of the 1990 *Current Writing* debate is highlighted by the inclusion of the articles discussed above in Margaret Daymond's landmark anthology of feminist criticism from the early 1990s, *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism 1990-1994*. As Daymond appreciates,

[t]he problem of power and authority is central to the forum section of the articles from *Current Writing* that are published here. By stimulating an awareness of the historical moment and helping uncover the

actual relations of power, this formal debate has helped expose what is at issue in the nurturing of a feminist culture (1996: xix).

Against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting political and academic atmosphere on a national scale, this debate signalled a growing engagement with the politics of gender within the context of massive democratic and racial transformation. It also exemplified the increasing visibility and vocality of black women who were in dialogue with established feminist theoretical and critical frameworks. In both these respects, this seminal volume can be seen as emblematic of the broader social, political and intellectual setting of the early 1990s.

As Tammy Shefer and Sibylle Mathis (1991) attest, a growing consideration of gender equality within political structures in the liberation movement was developing, along with an expanding corpus of research on gender issues. In turn, this contributed to a “significant rise in debate about women and gender in South Africa” from 1990 (1991: 14). These developments were highlighted by a number of key conferences and workshops that were held during this time, which set established gender firmly on the national agenda. These include the Amsterdam Malibongwe Conference, the ‘Women and the Law’ conference hosted by Lawyers for Human Rights, and the ‘Gender Today, Gender Tomorrow’ workshop organised by the ANC Constitutional Committee (Shefer and Mathis, 1991: 14).

These positive developments were, however, underscored by growing tensions, particularly in the academic arena. There was a growing perception of an impasse between the various ideological orientations and conflicting interests that were emerging within these feminist and political dialogues. As shown above, critics such as Pamela Ryan, Jenny de Reuck and Zoë Wicomb had begun speaking of embracing the inherent ‘fragmentariness’ of a South African feminist culture. At the same time, however, the desire for a movement and theory premised on “the unity between women” (Shefer and Mathis, 1991: 14) persisted within mainstream feminism. Indeed, the title of Shefer and Mathis’s article, “The Search for Sisterhood” signals the ongoing pursuit of a collective group identity, despite this being seen as standing at odds with the potentially divisive assertion of the notion of ‘difference’ demanded by black and other marginalised women. The arguments and discussions around these issues form a crucial aspect of the intellectual milieu within which the seminal Natal conference on ‘Women

and Gender in Southern Africa' was organised and held. Indeed, it was at this event that differences over these issues came to a head.

Although numerous first-hand accounts exist (in, for example, Lund, *et al*, 1991, and Horn, 1991), the remarkable events of the conference on 'Women and Gender' can be surmised from Tammy Shefer and Sibylle Mathis report on the conference proceedings in the journal *Work in Progress* (1991). In this report, the writers recount the efforts of conference organisers to create a historic forum in which a diverse gathering of feminist academics, researchers, women's organisations and activists engaged with research related to the themes of: 'race, class and gender in Southern Africa'; 'organising women'; 'culture and ideology'; and 'everyday life/women's experiences' (1991: 14). The authors explain, however, that the conference proceedings were also characterised by a "subtext" through which "[t]he legacy of apartheid South Africa was brutally evident throughout the proceedings. The inequalities and differences between women was an undercurrent of tension" (1991: 14). These tensions were brought to light as speakers voiced their objections to various issues, namely: the domination of white women academics; the positioning of black women as subjects of research; the marginalisation of black, lesbian and religious women; the privileging of academia over activism; as well as the opacity of the academic jargon that prevailed. As Shefer and Mathis indicate, given this atmosphere, inevitable conflicts emerged. Beyond the content of the conference papers and presentations, ultimately, the divisions manifested at the conference that dominated the agenda. Consequently, in the years that followed, the Natal conference would stand as a crucial reference point for the critical re-examination of feminism and the role of difference in South Africa.

One of the most incisive discussions of the conference, its conflicts and their implications, was presented in 1992 by Desiree Lewis. Her article, "The Politics of Feminism in South Africa" (*Staffrider*, 1992) offers an illuminating analysis of the events in terms of the ideological and political implications of the conflicts that arose. As one of the articles included in Margaret Daymond's *South African Feminisms* anthology, Lewis offers a particularly noteworthy account of the oppositional viewpoints voiced at the conference, and especially the arguments and attitudes of black feminists expressed during the process. Incidentally, this article formed the starting point for my exploration of the Natal conference, the difference debate and its legacy in feminist criticism. The article formed a crucial point of departure for this research as her vehement critique of feminist academia provides a surprising and fascinating perspective on

the state of feminism in South Africa at the time. In it, Lewis depicts South African feminism as a highly contested intellectual space characterised by “insularity and elitism” (1992: 16), and highlights the conflictual nature of the women’s movement. This was in sharp contrast to the perception of a women’s movement purportedly mobilised around notions of group solidarity and collective objectives in the gender struggle. Indeed, this assumption was dramatically exploded by the heated debates that ensued at the conference on ‘Women and Gender’, and particularly by the dissent of black women and feminist activists at the event, as reported by Shefer and Mathis in *Work in Progress*, and in Desiree Lewis’s account. The disruptions that occurred, and the objections raised at the conference, thus brought into sharp focus the concerns commentators expressed in the 1990 *Current Writing* ‘Feminism and Writing’ debate and that would continue to dominate the feminist agenda. During and after the conference, therefore, the role and politics of difference emerged as issues of priority for South African feminist thinking as a whole.

The influence of the Natal conference in intensifying this feminist debate is evident in Desiree Lewis’s article, as she interrogates some of the political and ideological factors that spurred the disruptions that occurred. For Lewis, one of the principle shortcomings of the feminist discourse dominating the conference was that “ideas surrounding ‘women’ as heterogeneous complexity, ideas that have been at the centre of international feminist debates in recent years...did not take the central position they demand to occupy in South Africa” (1992: 16). This gives an indication that these concerns, previously raised in forums such as the *Current Writing* volume, had remained in the margins until the Natal conference. Instead, the conference’s structure and content largely reflected the interests, priorities and preconceived notions of an ‘insular’, ‘elitist’ and ‘racist’ white middle-class feminist academia. As a result, the conference’s main agenda perpetuated racial privilege and domination by “establish[ing] restrictively normative boundaries for interpreting ‘women and gender in Southern Africa’” (1991: 16). Given the homogenising impulse of this hegemonic feminism, the problematics of difference and the divisions amongst women were only fully revealed through the criticisms and challenges of women who felt that they were excluded from dominant discourse and relegated to the margins of conference proceedings. As Shefer and Mathis’s report-back attests, even though they felt silenced by the conference’s main agenda, these women voiced their objections in discussion forums and side-line meetings. They demanded that their ‘difference’ be recognised,



accommodated and represented through an interrogation of 'gender' in relation to power and the interlocking factors of race, class, occupation, sexual orientation, religion, and so on.

One of the most prominent fault-lines to appear among women, and certainly the most remarked-upon, was the division between white and black women within the feminist movement. Desiree Lewis's account of the Natal conference outlines the major grievances and frustrations of black feminists in response to the specifically racial biases that were in evidence. As Lewis recounts,

[m]any black feminists emphasised two main arguments: there were a number of overt and covert ways in which they felt marginalised, objectified and degraded at the conference; [and] a large representation of a very small group of the women of Southern Africa as well as a sizeable contingent of women from abroad were unproblematically speaking for (there was some spurious wrangling about the distinction between 'about' and 'for') the majority of women of the region (1992: 17).

Lewis's description concords with several other commentators (whose impressions are recorded for example in Shefer and Mathis, 1991; and Lund, *et al*, 1991) who noted that one of the most pronounced areas of concern was the disproportionate representation of 'white middle-class women'. Many of the criticisms voiced were over the large number of white feminist academics who participated either as members of the organising committee, as speakers or as delegates. This strong disparity, when exposed, undercut the claims of unity, inclusion and sisterhood under which the gathering was convened, and revealed that the issue of representation seemed to have taken for granted by both organisers and a majority of the delegates. It revealed the ways in which mainstream feminists overlooked imbalances of power and social hierarchies as they manifested not only in society, but also within their own movement. The preponderance of white academics at the conference highlighted the often unacknowledged effects of racial privilege that distinguished white women from their black counterparts in terms of their access to educational and other resources, as well as their assumption of discursive authority in feminist scholarship.

For Lewis, the dominance of white women, and the concomitant underrepresentation of black and working-class women, inevitably led to the

elision of difference and a privileging and naturalizing of the experience of a distinct group here... 'White middle-class woman' provides the basis for defining gender identity, establishing feminist goals,

developing political strategies and isolating 'common experiences', yet 'white middle-class woman' simply becomes 'Woman'. (1992: 18).

From Lewis's point of view, then, the conference epitomised erasure of black women's voices and experience, and exposed the unequal power relations that characterised South African society. These were precisely the highly problematic dynamics that were routinely overlooked by hegemonic feminism's essentialist assumptions.

For many of the relatively small contingent of black feminists, the conference was a manifestation of a routine experience of 'othering' by dominant feminist discourse. Desiree Lewis's account of the tensions at conference is inflected with an obvious sense of anger, not only over the underrepresentation of black feminists, but also over the implicit ways in which black women were objectified and positioned as inferior in feminist scholarship. Lewis condemns the use of the conference logo, for example, as one instance of this objectification. She reads the image as echoing degrading apartheid and colonial representations of 'black woman' as plaintive, passive and burdened, "present only as object for scrutiny by the self-defining, theorizing subject" (1992: 16). For Lewis, the underrepresentation and silencing of black women perpetuated and reinforced this positioning: in research papers they were constructed as objects of inquiry, and during the conference proceedings, they were positioned as passive recipients of knowledge.

As Lewis' account shows, the Natal conference revealed the paradoxes within the dynamics of the South African feminist arena at the time. Firstly, the event showed that the image of a supposedly unified and homogenous feminist movement persisted even as the notion of 'difference' was increasingly recognised in mainstream feminism in the late 1980s and early 1990s (as indicated by the discussion in *Current Writing*). Secondly, it became clear that despite the inclusion of 'race, class and gender' as one of the conference themes, an engagement with these issues did not extend to the real-world context of the conference proceedings or feminist praxis. And thirdly, the Natal conference represented an occasion where marginalised women challenged their silencing by voicing their concerns, and yet they met with resistance from mainstream feminists themselves. As Lewis notes, black women resented the tendency of white women to dismiss their criticisms as a symptom of 'unacceptable false consciousness', while they, as black women, continued to experience racism, exploitation and marginalisation (1992: 16). Indeed, the dissatisfaction and criticism from black feminists over their 'silencing' was

further intensified by what many felt to be the inadequate and dismissive responses of mainstream feminists to their concerns.

The Natal conference stands as a critical moment in the development of feminism and gender politics in South Africa precisely because the event exposed the deep, and hitherto unspoken, problems of the feminist movement. The structure, content and demographics of the conference clearly illustrated that racial and class inequalities between women were still patently manifest. This was despite 'difference' and the role of race and class being recognised as important factors in interrogating gender within feminist discourse as well as the emergence of black women's voices. These fissures were evident in the lack of representation and participation of black women academics at the conference, even while black women's lives and cultural production dominated as 'subject matter' for research. At the same time, the 'acknowledgement' of difference, and racial difference in particular in feminist discourse, did not necessarily translate into material shifts in power between black and white women. Moreover, the paradigms, strategies or reading practices of white academics did not seem to significantly change either. This was evident as academics like Cecily Lockett were able to advocate racially-conscious womanism in a South African context, while simultaneously maintaining their position of authority and privilege, and, as Sisi Maqagi argues, continue to perpetuate the silencing of black women's voices. Given the lack of tangible change in the dynamics between marginalised and dominant groups of women within the feminist movement, then, "[c]onflict had to, and did, appear" (Shefer and Mathis, 1991: 14).

In the final analysis, Lewis contends that in order to begin developing 'Southern African feminism', "[w]hite middle-class feminism needs to acknowledge its complicity in relations of power and control, needs to subject its own structurally determined position to scrutiny and needs to liberate itself from normative illusions and assumptions of superiority" (1992: 18). Lewis's reading of the Natal conference shows the inadequacy of feminist scholarship in dealing with racial difference by simply 'including' and 'speaking about' black women, or 'listening to their voices'. Instead, her argument insists that the search for common ground begins with acknowledging and transforming the inequalities and social hierarchies that structure women's subjectivities differentially. Thus, for Lewis, self-reflection and a concerted interrogation of positionality are "central to our understanding of the condition of others' existence" (1992: 21).

At the same time, Lewis cautions that

[w]hat third-world, black, working-class, black working class or any other group of women have to say cannot be allowed to entrench itself as a new orthodoxy, but must be opened up to an expanding and non-hierarchical categorization of positioned interpretations of women's experiences (1992: 21).

In this way, the author offers an important qualification for the development of marginalised women's theories and interpretations that acknowledge the multiplicity of feminist voices.

What is clear from Desiree Lewis's analysis of the problems experienced at the conference and the accusations levelled at mainstream feminism is that the tensions that erupted were not isolated incidents. Rather these problems were a manifestation of the asymmetries of power that characterise feminist discourse, structures of knowledge production and South African society as a whole. The challenges and criticisms raised during, and subsequent to, the event thus exposed relations of domination and subordination that were consciously and/or unconsciously perpetuated within feminist academia. In turn, the turmoil forced women to confront the complex politics of difference, representation and knowledge production within their society, and specifically, within their own movement.

Subsequent to the Natal conference, much feminist discussion was focused on (re)defining difference. This involved finding ways of theorising about women that recognise the diversity and complexity that is inherent in considerations of women's subjectivity. Therefore, the issue of social difference came to the forefront of critical debate as feminists responded to the challenge of revising inherited Western-centric ideas and developing more adequate, diverse and representative feminist theories from within a local social context.

This process of revision and re-evaluation is aptly captured in Margaret Daymond's introduction to the *South African Feminisms* anthology, as she surveys the trends and issues that had preoccupied feminist scholarship from 1990 to 1994. In line with feminist thinking that was emerging at the time, Daymond outlines the difficulties inherent in defining a quintessential South African feminism, and indeed the inadequacy of such a definition. Instead, she argues that any conception of a singular or monolithic feminist theory or critical framework is undermined by the country's "social diversity" (1996: xv) and the multiplicity of experience. In general, scholars have come to acknowledge the almost infinite variety in women's lived experiences, social identities and their various positions in relation to structures of power. This demands new approaches that accommodate the variety of viewpoints arising from the intersecting social,

political, and cultural circumstances that shape women's subjectivities, their experiences of oppression, and their strategies of resistance. Consequently, theorists such as Daymond have instead opted to refer to a plurality of feminisms that have developed (rather than a single feminism). This shift in orientation is clearly signalled in her anthology's title.

Daymond's reading of the development of feminist culture in the country illustrates the ways in which the 'contestations' of the difference debate, however harsh and seemingly divisive, were a necessary response to new "socio-political developments" (1996: xxxv) in a transitional political moment. Her review shows that through these contestations, new imperatives for the feminist movement were being negotiated, and as she suggests:

what is now replacing 'sisterhood' is necessarily complex: a challenge to its universalism and its hidden power relations has to be pursued simultaneously with efforts to establish a community of purpose within the recognition of 'difference' (1996: xix).

Defining a new feminist agenda was difficult; events such as the Natal conference were showing that the notion of 'sisterhood' was an inadequate model for feminist organising and collaboration. At the same time however, the Women's National Coalition (WNC), established in 1992 to represent the interests of women on the constitutional agenda, demonstrated that the mobilisation of women was still a necessary– and powerful – strategy in the struggle for gender equality. In light of the achievements of the WNC, and the challenges of the Natal conference, Daymond holds that "what is finally at issue in conflicts such as these is whether a negotiated, rather than assumed, relationship of interests between women can be established" (1996: xx). For Daymond, then, feminist scholarship and politics must become increasingly orientated towards the search for terms under which women can be galvanised around gender issues, on the one hand, without effacing the differences between them on the other.

Citing Shireen Hassim and Cheryl Walker (1992), Daymond goes on to recount "some of the principles on which recognitions leading to a community of purpose might be based" (1996: xx), which include significant insights that had emerged from the difference debate in feminist discourse. Central to this is the acknowledgment of the divisions among *all* women and the recognition that "questions of power and privilege affect *all* groupings (class, ethnic, religious, age, etc.) and will constantly need to be negotiated" (1996: xxi). In addition, the politics of knowledge production must be addressed in recognition of the notion that "experience is not knowledge...[and] has to be investigated and reported, and no matter who does

it...enquiry itself is mediatory and constructive of knowledge” (1996: xxi). In Daymond’s assessment of the trajectory of feminist debate in South Africa, these issues represent “the practical and conceptual matters that will propel feminism as it takes its next steps in South Africa” (1996: xxxiv).

As the following chapter will detail, these concerns were taken up with enthusiasm in South African feminist scholarship. Women sought to move beyond the seemingly irresolvable impasse that the concept of difference posed, and instead advanced the difference debate through an interrogation of the ways in which a feminist culture based on both a recognition of diversity, and common goals, could be developed.

## Chapter 3

### **Difference on the Agenda**

As outlined in Chapter 1, the Natal conference was pivotal because it propelled the issue of difference to the forefront of feminist academia and politics in South Africa. To an extent, it also forced feminists to redirect and redefine some of the main preoccupations of the women's movement in a time of major transition. The responses to the conference, particularly those offered by black and other marginalised women, were largely concerned with critiquing prevailing feminist paradigms and deconstructing the dominant perceptions and positions in feminist theory. In particular, the ideal of a 'sisterhood' was undermined by an awareness of the fragmentation and multiplicity of women's identities, experiences and forms of oppression. Nonetheless, despite the conflicts that had developed as the difference debate played itself out in feminist academia and politics, South African feminists were clearly still committed to developing a progressive and revolutionary movement engaged in liberatory politics, criticism and theorising.

The 1991 Natal conference on Women and Gender was undoubtedly a significant moment for South African feminists. As the previous chapter illustrates, the event reflected deep seated tensions and fissures within the feminist movement during a tumultuous historical period. At the same time, it is evident that the debates and discussions raised were also underpinned by deeper ideological issues. In the first place, the challenges to the authority of mainstream feminist thought were, in part, an expression of the stringent and sustained critique of dominant Western feminist paradigms, mainly by marginalised women and revisionist feminist paradigms. Secondly, the event foregrounded the growing preoccupation with the deconstruction of the concepts of experience, gender and feminism itself in feminist inquiry. As discussed earlier, Chandra Mohanty (1991) considers this 'internal critique' – a process of 'dismantling and deconstruction' – a crucial phase in the intellectual and political formation of 'third world feminisms'. Equally crucial, however, was the corresponding process of 'building and constructing' new feminist frameworks and strategies based on context-specific responses to women's particular social, political, cultural and historical circumstances.

It is possible to chart the progression of the feminist thought in South Africa along this twofold trajectory, particularly in the aftermath of the 1991 Natal conference. On the one hand,

there was a re-evaluation of the hegemonic principles of Western feminism underway, and a growing resistance to the notion of feminism as an inclusive, united 'sisterhood'. Alongside – and indeed arising from – these debates, new discussions emerged in which women began to construct and explore new formations for feminism in South Africa. Key to this project was the development of new strategies to confront women's subordination in light of the implications and challenge of difference.

This process was nonetheless fraught with difficulties and disparate views, as well as vigorous debate between competing theoretical and political standpoints and strategies. In view of the polarities brought to light at the Natal conference, women were faced with a choice between two strategies in order to move past the impasse. On the one hand, some thinkers were in favour of developing separatist movements based on the desire for autonomy and self-representation by marginalised women, which, in some arguments, involved the outright rejection of the label of feminism. Some commentators, on the other hand, advocated the continued search for a feminist theory and practice sufficiently able to accommodate differences among women while still allowing for a sense of common purpose and cooperation.

The contestations between these viewpoints were particularly acute in the years following the 1991 conference, a time during which the issue of difference gained increased prominence and urgency in feminist discourse. During this period, women sought to redefine and re-orientate feminist activity within the context of socio-political transformation and imminent democratic and constitutional change. Given the complex relationship between the national liberation struggle and the gender struggle, the transitional era inevitably gave rise to new challenges and new imperatives for women in South Africa, many of whom were committed to both national liberation and gender equality, and saw them as inextricably linked.

With the dissolution of apartheid developing into a concrete reality, many women turned their attention to ensuring that women were sufficiently included in the national policy-making processes and institutional changes that were taking place. The role and status of women in the drafting of the new constitution was given particular priority (Meintjes, 1993; Daymond, 1996). For the nation, these political reformations implied dramatic shifts in racial dynamics that had been entrenched by decades of institutionalised racial discrimination. For feminists, these shifts also intensified questions about the role of race within the feminist movement and feminist



scholarship. The difference debate gained increased momentum within this context, especially as more black women were asserting their voices within South Africa's academic institutions.

This chapter will explore in more detail the way in which women responded to these challenges following the Natal conference. Primarily, it traces the ways in which women developed ways of dealing with difference by either embracing intellectual separatism, or by finding ways to work across the boundaries of difference.

These developments were perhaps best captured through the growing body of feminist scholarship making its way into a variety of academic journals at the time. The Natal conference stands as an important moment that dramatically revealed the need to confront the issue of difference. However, this was dealt with in heated, fleeting exchanges and resulted in provisional resolutions between groups and individuals who were present at the proceedings. In contrast, academic journals facilitated sustained dialogue about the concept of difference and made the debates available for wider public discussion. Indeed, several accounts of the events that occurred at the conference were reported in journals, allowing for more in-depth analysis and review of the dynamics and issues raised. Clearly then, given the cost, time-constraints, and institutional barriers involved in producing book-length studies, the momentum of the difference debate was sustained, in part, by the frequency and regularity of journal articles dedicated to the issue in feminist journals. These publications allowed for a variety of voices to be heard, and this meant that the debate took on a somewhat dialogic structure, as commentators were able to respond relatively quickly to new insights and arguments.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the Durban-based feminist journal, *Agenda*. Since its inception, the *Agenda* journal has sought to "provide a forum for comment, discussion and debate on all aspects of women's lives [as well as] to understand the position of women within South African society" (Meer, 1997: 6). More specifically, the journal can be credited with giving some of the most useful and sustained critical attention to the debates on gender, feminism and difference taking place in South Africa during the 1990s.

In addition to publishing individual articles that took up the issue of difference, race and identity spanning at least seven issues published in the 1990s (Meer, 1997: 9), *Agenda* also dedicated entire volumes to addressing themes such as 'Women and Difference' (1993) as well as 'Race, Identity and Change' (1997). More recently, the journal featured a three-part series to explore 'African Feminisms' (2001, 2002, and 2003). This scholarship played a crucial role in

documenting and expanding on the transitory (and usually tempestuous) debates that arose and occasionally disrupted conferences, meetings and workshops throughout the decade (Meer, 1997: 2). Collectively, the journal's issues also revealed the attitudes and ideological orientations of South African women, and the multiplicity of voices that make up the feminist landscape. Furthermore, these publications also capture the currency, rigour and dialogic nature of feminist discourse addressing the difference debate, as it was gaining momentum and increased prominence in the aftermath of the 1991 conference on Women and Gender.

### **Women and Difference**

The 1993 'Women and Difference' issue of the *Agenda* journal stands as a prime example of these trends, as it served as a forum to allow a variety of voices to take stock of the difference debate. The aim, in particular, was to interrogate the meaning and nature of the concept of difference and its implications for the women's movement and feminist activism and scholarship in South Africa. The publication sought to extend both local and international debates confronting the controversies over the role of difference in feminist and gender politics and analysis. Beyond this, however, the articles featured also illustrate a crucial shift in prevailing perspectives in South African feminist discourse. The articles demonstrate a change in focus from merely critiquing dominant frameworks, towards an emphasis on exploring coalition politics as a feminist strategy. However, as the following discussion will show, significant disagreement remained over this transition.

What was also at issue was the need to delineate new imperatives guiding the research on, and representation of, women's experiences, especially across boundaries of difference. Critics also had to deal with the changing conceptions of gender and identity that were emerging from these dialogues. As the "Editorial" article notes (*Agenda*, 1993), the theme connecting the articles was the growing awareness that

[o]ne important aspect of the debate is the link between difference and power. The power invested in those who are in an advantaged position and represent others underlies the tensions experienced..." (1993: 2).

This theme is taken up and explored in various ways in this intellectual dialogue. The articles demonstrate the ways in which women attempted to understand and deal with 'difference' in

order to navigate the complexities of not only a changing women's movement, but also of an imminent democratic transformation.

As detailed in the "Editorial" article, the difference debate was one of the hottest issues in the broader context of gender discussions at that time (*Agenda*, 1993: 2). As such, the central preoccupation throughout the issue was the examination of legitimacy, power and identity in light of the implications of difference. Through such an examination, contributors also sought to find ways to define feminist endeavour in a way that would address and move beyond the tensions and divisions within the movement that had manifested so dramatically at the Natal conference.

The urgency of the difference debate was given added impetus when similar conflicts disrupted the 1992 International Conference on Women in Africa and the Africa Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and Academia, held in Nigeria. The persistence of tensions within the feminist arena after the Natal conference was patently evident when similar questions over legitimacy and positionality in feminist scholarship arose during this regional forum. In this case, strong disagreements arose over "the issue of representation ... [as] ... the controversy centred around whether white women should be allowed to read proceedings at a conference on women in Africa" (*Agenda*, 1993: 2). Here, the divisions over difference took on distinctly racial overtones and the conference was dogged by calls for the exclusion of white women from participating in the proceedings. Ironically, it was within the context of an international conference addressing 'women in Africa and Africans in Diaspora', that a powerful call to institute a form of intellectual separatism within feminist scholarship arose.

These events form the backdrop of a terse exchange that is documented in two issues of *Agenda* between Lumka Funani (*Agenda* 1992; *Agenda*, 1993) and Fidela Fouché (*Agenda*, 1993). These women present two opposing views over the question of whether white women can legitimately conduct research about, represent, and even do feminist work with, black women in the gender struggle. This dialogue exemplifies not only the polarities that undergirded an ostensibly united women's movement, but also the heated emotions that carried over from the conferences and into the subsequent academic discussions. More importantly, the exchange also reflects the contestation over establishing feminist strategies that could most appropriately deal with the problematics of difference, as the argument for a separatist black women's movement was weighed against the counterargument in favour of working across boundaries of difference.

Lumka Funani addresses one side of the debate in the controversial piece “Nigeria Conference Revisited”, which appeared in the ‘Women and Health’ issue of *Agenda* (1992). In this article, Funani responds to the Nigeria Conference question by arguing unequivocally that white women should not, and cannot, speak for or represent black women in feminist academia. Funani challenges the legitimacy of white academics’ work on the basis that white women’s research about black women re-enacts the oppressive racial dynamics structured by the apartheid system. As she suggests, their positions as researchers and theorists stems from racial privilege and its educational advantages. Therefore, even by using their positions in academia to focus critical attention to black subjects, they continue to exercise the racial privilege this system guarantees them. Furthermore, Funani maintains that by not allowing black women to represent themselves, white women who conducted research on black subjects were essentially perpetuating the exploitation of black women and their experiences in order to advance their own academic prestige. Similar sentiments were previously articulated by thinkers such as Sisi Maqagi (*Current Writing*, 1990), as detailed in Chapter 1. Thus, Funani premises her call for the exclusion of white women from theorising about black women’s lives on her perception of the highly unequal, racially-defined, dynamics of knowledge production that prevailed in South African academia.

At the same time, Funani gives her support to a divided intellectual and political practice based on an apprehension of experience and ‘lived knowledge’ as the basis of difference. The writer is at pains to emphasise that white women cannot understand the lived experiences of black women who suffer not only gender oppression, but also systematic brutalisation and racial oppression under a system that was specifically designed to maintain the racial privilege of white South Africans. By constructing difference in terms of ‘experiential diversity’, Funani suggests that only those who share the lived experiences of these circumstances can accurately speak about, interrogate and challenge them. In light of this, Funani denies the authenticity of white women’s representations of black women in their research and activism. Funani’s exclusionary view is forcefully conveyed in her statement that “[i]t is legitimate and justifiable for only black women to protest for what we so broadly and confidently know about our suffering” (1992: 65). Ultimately, she advocates a research and political practice that excludes white women from interpreting black lived experience in Africa and that prevents them from engaging in gender activism on black women’s behalf. To an extent, this view also excludes black women in the

African diaspora from doing the same. In arguing that white women should conduct research and interpret experience within their own (racial) group, while black women do the same, advocates a rigid academic separatism as the way forward in the gender struggle.

Funani's stance, however, is directly opposed to the position adopted by the rest of the South African delegation at the Nigeria conference. The joint statement issued by the South African representatives at the Nigeria conference in response to the conflicts that arose is included as a counterpoint in Funani's 'Nigeria Conference Revisited' article. In the statement, the South African representatives "suggest that all South Africans, irrespective of race should be permitted to participate fully in this conference" (cited in Funani, 1992: 67), implying that white women can and should present papers on African women. Nevertheless, Funani concludes that: "[black women] need [their] own space to explore [their] own realities, first, before we can make this space available to others" (1992: 68).

Despite objections to her arguments, Funani maintains, in a follow-up *Agenda* article, that research of black experiences conducted by white academics "will only finally relate findings and insights that have been the work of 300 years of oppressive rule and human brutalization" (1993a: 57). In the article, "The Great Divide", published in the 'Leisure and Recreation' issue, she reiterates that this research "has absolutely no value to a community that has *never* accepted their situation as normal, nor representative of who they really are (1993a: 57). In her response to criticisms levelled against her highly contentious view of the issues raised at the Nigeria conference, Funani is unwavering in her opposition to white women's participation in research with black women as subjects, and continues to advocate for a separatist black women's movement that excludes the participation of white women.

In the following issue of *Agenda*, 'Violence in Focus' (1993), Fidela Fouché responds to Lumka Funani's sharp critique of the politics of knowledge production and white women's representation of black subjects. In particular, Fouché's article, also called "Nigeria Conference Revisited", challenges Funani's call for a racially divided feminist politics and scholarship in South Africa. As a retort to Funani's charges, Fidela Fouché suggests that the separatist vision that Funani advocates essentially amounts to a different form of racial segregation. She illustrates her point by posing the question of: "whether, in principle, the cure for apartheid can be more apartheid?" (1993: 39). Her arguments imply that this would be an unproductive and regressive strategy for feminists to pursue. In addition, Fouché goes on to dispute what seems to be

Funani's suggestion that all research conducted by white women on black experience has been detrimental to racial liberation and has perpetuated black people's exploitation. Instead, Fouché argues that "a blanket condemnation of white women by black women is ... as inaccurate and as unfair as white women's facile generalizations about black women" (1993: 40). This shows that Funani's assessment of the politics of knowledge production in South Africa is in itself essentialist in its generalisations about white women.

Fouché also interrogates Funani's problematic appeal to experience and the concept of 'lived knowledge' as the justification for invalidating (white women's) research across boundaries of difference and calling for an autonomous black feminist theory. According to Fouché, this view is premised on the assumption that "people whose experience is divergent simply cannot communicate their experiences to each other" (1993: 40). She points to the danger of such a claim as she shows that, taken to its logical end, it would "invalidate all historical, sociological and anthropological research" (1993: 40), not only across racial divides, but across all categories of difference and experience. In this way, the writer illustrates the problems inherent in Funani's arguments for intellectual and political separatism within feminism.

Turning from Funani's exclusionary outlook, Fouché urges that debates about difference should not only lead to the recognition of heterogeneity amongst women and the development of a variety of critical voices. It is important that these discussions, along with the other important insights to emerge from the difference debate, also lead to the acknowledgement of commonality among women as well. Recognising both difference and commonality would open avenues for white women to conduct progressive research about, and represent the voices of, black women. Reciprocally, it would afford black women the opportunity to represent themselves and white women as well. Underscoring Fouché's response is a desire to maintain the basic principles of solidarity and equality within the women's movement, while rejecting spurious claims of a feminism based on an unproblematic, non-racial, undivided sisterhood among women. Indeed, elsewhere Fouché explicitly discounts what she refers to as the 'sisterhood myth' (1994).

The exchange between Funani and Fouché is emblematic of the polarised views that characterised feminist scholarship at the time. It brings into sharp relief Audre Lorde's realisation that "[t]he future of the earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference" (cited in *Agenda*, 1993: 3). This prescient statement is cited in the introduction of the 'Women and

Difference' issue of the *Agenda* journal where the editor indicates that the aim of the volume is to explore and chart 'the way forward' for feminism in South Africa. The issue was especially timely, appearing as it did in the aftermath of (and perhaps because of) the Natal and Nigeria conferences, a time when the difference debate was one of the most controversial and critical issues on the feminist agenda. The 'Women and Difference' issue therefore provided a forum for sustained and in-depth interrogation of the issues at stake, as well as a space for women to articulate possible strategies to move beyond this impasse.

In this volume, Amanda Gouws intervenes in the Funani-Fouché exchange, and extends the debate in her article, "The Angry Divide" (1993). The title not only references Lumka Funani's piece "The Great Divide" and the issue of the divisions within the women's movement. It also addresses the anger and resentment that often underscored the discussions over the question of 'who writes for whom', especially across racial divides. As Gouws remarks, this anger can have a divisive, and ultimately debilitating effect on feminist dialogue. At the same time, appropriate responses to this anger can serve as an impetus for collaboration and mobilisation. Rather than reinforcing exclusion and separatism, as she implies Funani does, Gouws argues that in moving forward,

we will have to learn to deal with the divides, to understand and honour the safe spaces and to come to terms with our own racist and sexist selves. But most of all, we have to teach each other about our different ways and our different oppressions" (1993: 69).

On the one hand, Gouws recognises the way in which the racial dynamics of South African society have resulted in disparate lived experiences and oppression between and among women in the country. As a result, she acknowledges that "self-presentation of the oppressed is a necessity – it is a way to empower themselves and give themselves a voice" (1993: 68). She also argues that it is an important part of feminist praxis to recognise these differences and enable marginalised women to speak in their own voices.

At the same time, however, Gouws argues: "separatism is inherently dangerous because it presents us with a one-sided reality where it is impossible to raise the consciousness of the oppressors" (1993: 68-69). For Gouws, therefore, Funani presents an untenable approach for feminism in South Africa. Instead, Gouws suggests, in response to the question 'who speaks for whom?', that

white women should not speak **for** black women, neither should men speak **for** women. Yet, if research meets the requirements of feminist research, white women can speak **about** the experiences of black women...or black women can speak about the experiences of white women and men can speak about the experiences of women (1993:68).

Here, Gouws proposes that it is possible for legitimate research on and representations of the 'other' to be rendered, as long as academics approach the work conscious of, and explicit about, difference and their position in relation to the subject. Gouws acknowledges the racial divisions that were created and entrenched by colonialism and the apartheid system, but for her, it is important for white women to continue to speak about black women while facilitating the self-presentation of the oppressed. This will enable women to find allies in each other in the same way that women have found allies in some men in the gender struggle. Nevertheless, Gouws cautions that white women's work on black women, and vice versa, should be informed by a critical awareness of their positionality, and the recognition that

[t]rue feminist research attempts to come to grips with the subjective experience of the subjects of study. The researcher herself should be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter...the beliefs of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for the claims advanced in the results of the research (1993: 67-68).

Furthermore, to facilitate and develop such progressive feminist research requires an understanding of the complexity of, and divisions within, black womanhood by both white and black researchers. In this respect, Gouws urges the development of multifaceted approaches that take into consideration the fact that "black women are exposed to multiple jeopardy in different ways at different times and one type of oppression may weigh heavier at one point than at another" (1993: 69). This necessitates theoretical models that analyse race, gender and class as independent yet intersecting factors. Gouws thus supports and continues Fouché's call for cooperation and a search for commonality among black and white women as a way of addressing the tensions arising from the problem of difference for feminist analysis and activism in South Africa, while also emphasising the necessity of self-reflection and self-reflexivity as part of the research process for all women.

Gouws instead presents a compromise position which recognises the importance of "safe spaces... where the oppressed can debate their own conditions" but which also upholds the value of integrated debating forums "where (black) women can make sure others are not speaking on



their behalf” (1993: 68). In sum, Gouws rejects academic separatism as a strategy for bridging ‘the angry divide’ in feminist scholarship.

As shown above, Gouws argues that acknowledging positionality is key to ‘true feminist research’ that can legitimately traverse the boundaries of difference. The issue of positionality is also taken up in the article “(Re)searching Difference”, by researchers Jacky Sunde and Vivienne Bozalek. The central question they confront in this piece is “whether women in different race, class and ethnic positions, where those positions reflect historical differences in power, can write about the experiences of other women” (1993: 29). The authors attempt to gauge the implications of the difference debate on feminist theorising as they interrogate their own pedagogical and methodological approaches in conducting sociological research. In particular, they are concerned with examining their own positions as white middle-class women conducting research about, and with, black students. The authors scrutinise the legitimacy of their teaching, research and representation of black experience in their studies in relation to their own race and class positions, and consider how these dynamics affect their research and the relationship between researcher and the subject. This article is, therefore, is exemplary of the self-reflexive mode that signals a move towards the formation of a progressive, inclusive feminist strategy that challenges claims for separatist movements.

To put their self-examination into context, the writers begin by describing the state of feminist discourse following the Natal conference. They note the intensification of the difference debate that seemed to have led to an ‘impasse’ between black and white women at both organisational and academic levels. In doing so, they offer a revealing illustration of the ethical and ideological dilemmas faced by feminists, especially white feminists at the time. This leads them to explore the questions raised by the issue of difference in their own work, and the ways in which the concept has shaped contemporary debates. In part of their discussion, Sunde and Bozalek also describe the influence of international black feminists’ thought on their own critical perspectives and on South African feminist discourse in general. They reflect on the ways in which black feminists’ racial analyses of gender and feminism challenge “universalist notions implicit in other feminist discourses” (1993: 31), as well as poststructuralist and postmodernist insights on the “contradictory nature of identity... [and the] ... acceptance of the transitory, constantly shifting nature of subjectivity” (1993: 31). Both these schools of thought disrupted the assumed authority of conventional feminist principles and approaches to reading and

representing the 'other'. Against this intellectual backdrop, in which difference came to the fore as a central issue in feminist theorising, Sunde and Bozalek recognise the need for new approaches for writing and teaching that will enable women to move beyond the impasse facing feminists in the early 1990s.

In response to these imperatives, Sunde and Bozalek essentially reiterate the prevailing viewpoint, expressed throughout the 'Women and Difference' edition of *Agenda*. They argue that on a pragmatic level, "coalition politics around specific issues provides a means for moving forward" (1993: 35) and for organising and activism in the women's movement. On the level of feminist scholarship, the writers echo Marjorie Mbilinyi's recommendation that "the only way women in positions of power – in any context – can work with other women is through their involvement in participatory action or transformative research" (cited in Sunde and Bozalek, 1993: 34). The authors envisage new approaches to feminist theorizing for South African women that draw on the insights of the difference debate, approaches that incorporate an awareness of the shifting and often contradictory nature of women's identities. Like Mbilinyi, they also propose that feminist researchers must change from conceptualizing and analysing women's oppression at the level of grand narrative in favour of more nuanced gender analysis. What is also crucial is the acknowledgement of positionality, one that involves the self-reflection of the researcher and their effect on the research process (1993: 34). Sunde and Bozalek thus conclude that for feminist research to move beyond the problematic of difference, and the seeming impasse that had developed, "the responsibility lies with the writer to ensure that the text is transformative praxis" (1993: 35).

These and similar issues traverse the discussion of 'Women and Difference', as all the contributors grapple with the question of "how [to] incorporate difference in a united women's movement" (Meer, 1997: 12). A clear example of this preoccupation is Asha Moodley's piece "Unravelling the Strands". Moodley documents discussions arising from two exploratory workshops organised by the *Agenda* collective to "unravel the various strands of difference – to 'unpack' them in order that we might obtain a fuller understanding of the underlying presumptions and attitudes" (1993: 12). The aim of this discussion was to rethink difference and the implications of conflicts over difference for feminist politics and scholarship. As such, the participants confront the question of whether or not "women in South Africa want a united women's movement in the first instance?" (1993: 12). It is clear from the variety of responses

Moodley records that this issue exposed ambiguous and contested positions, and revealed split priorities among a number of women.

Of particular concern was the term 'united', a word that often signifies an assumed homogeneity and disguises the erasure of minority voices. Participants expressed the sentiment that in order to achieve unity and inclusivity, the advancement of the women's movement must be contingent on recognising the heterogeneity of women and the multiple facets of their lived experiences.

Despite this hesitation, Moodley reports that "[t]he pointer in our group was certainly towards the creation of negotiated, principled and strategic alliances or coalitions, based not on expediency but on a genuine need for each other" (1993: 16). As the writer elaborates: "Coalition building implies a rigorous examination of the attitudes, prejudices and specific ignorances which prevent coalitions from succeeding" (1993: 17). With this, Moodley suggests that the creation of coalitions is dependent on women recognising and being open to difference among participants and partners. This is what makes alliances strategic, negotiated and provisional. So, instead of imposing a superficial and problematic goal of a united sisterhood, Moodley suggests that women negotiate strategic relationships across barriers of difference, rather than assuming shared gender identities, experiences and feminist goals.

This attitude was reflected in several other commentaries offered in the *Agenda* issue, suggesting that a general political mood of negotiation prevailed. This may have been shaped by the context of transition, constitution building and imminent democratic transformation. For example, a similar consensus emerges from a discussion conducted and documented by Sheila Meintjes's in "Dilemmas of Difference". In this discussion addressing "the consequences of present 'differences' in South African politics" (1993: 37), there was a general agreement regarding the need to orientate feminist strategies towards an affirmation of difference and building coalition politics. Indeed, both Moodley and Meintjes' reports show that beyond the theoretical shifts taking place in academia, in a real-world context, a collaborative – rather than a separatist – feminist approach based on this coalition politics was emerging as the most appropriate way to deal with difference.

In advocating this reconciliatory approach, both Moodley and Meintjes's accounts make it clear that the impetus for new approaches and strategies also stems from a desire to move beyond

the immediate past ... [as] its particular character had been its fixation on unity with diversity, with the injunction that differences – however much awareness there was of their existence – should be suppressed in the interests of a tenuous, undefined unity” (Moodley, 1993: 13).

In order to achieve progress, it was also necessary to deal with the anger and frustration of marginalised, particularly black, women over the uneven power relations that continued to prevail within the women’s movement and feminist academia. It was also critical for women to address the continued dominance and privilege of white middle-class women, presenting a powerful challenge to the concept of ‘sisterhood’ (Moodley, 1993: 12).

However, as Moodley explains,

...the fundamental issue appears to be that of representation – who speaks for whom - and was raised quite strongly at the conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa in Durban in January 1991... By all accounts, it was echoed with a hitherto unexperienced vehemence and stridency at the first International Conference on Women in Africa and the Africa Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy held in July 1992 in Nsukka, Nigeria... (1993: 12).

The legacies of these conferences are evident in the continued preoccupation with the legitimacy of representation in South African feminist research, writing and politics across barriers of difference, and specifically, the debate over the validity of white women’s writing and research on black and marginalised women.

It is precisely this issue that Amanda Kemp confronts in her article, “Ain’t Nothing like the Real Thang” (*Agenda*, 1993). Kemp addresses the debate about the legitimacy of representation across boundaries of difference as she recounts the criticism she received in response to her portrayal of the eminent black feminist Audre Lorde. Specifically at issue was her choice to “concentrate on texts that dealt with homophobia in the African-American community and her first experience of making love to another woman” (1993: 25). As Kemp recalls, her performance was met with resistance as some audience responses implied the question: “What makes you think you have the right to do this piece if you don’t assert a lesbian identity?” (1993: 26). The negative responses to her performance reflect the continued debates regarding difference, experience and identity in feminism. Certainly, these objections parallel the arguments of black women who questioned the legitimacy of white women’s representation and interpretation of black experiences. In both instances, these objections stem from the tendency to define the concept of difference in terms of what Michèle Barrett refers to as ‘experiential

diversity'. The validity of Kemp's portrayal was thus challenged on the basis that she, as a heterosexual woman, did not share, and therefore could not relate to, the lived experience of Audre Lorde as a lesbian woman, and the discrimination and oppression lesbian women are routinely subjected to. As one respondent explained: "It's like a white person loving and teaching black literature, but never having to go into a store and get stared at...It felt dishonest" (1993: 26). As Kemp notes, the suggestion is that women who are not black lesbian feminists cannot, and should not, represent a black lesbian feminist's life and works.

Furthermore, it implies that the basis of an 'authentic' representation is shared lived experience. In response to these criticisms, however, Kemp justifies her right to re-present Audre Lorde's words and experiences, including her appropriation and performance Lorde's lesbian identity. In her article, the writer challenges the concept of authenticity in representation, arguing instead that: "[e]very representation is inauthentic. It is not the real thing. The real thing existed at one point in a particular time in a particular place, experienced by a particular individual" (Kemp, 1993: 25). In doing so, she challenges the notion that shared experience immediately confers epistemological authority that validates certain representations and invalidates others. Kemp's argument instead emphasizes the importance recognising that difference exists between and within all women. This means all research and representation (regardless of shared experience) involve working with and across difference, and it is necessary that such work is done in a self-reflexive and 'honest' way.

Kemp thus boldly urges that women recognise that "[a]uthenticity is a sham" (1993: 27). Indeed, this seems to mirror Sunde and Bozalek's suggestion that "[n]o research is ethical" (1993: 34), that "...we cannot truly do ethical research in an unethical world – but what we can do is direct our work towards political action for the solution of this dilemma" (Sunde and Bozalek, 1993: 35). Kemp argues, further, that not only does she have the right, but also the responsibility, to represent the 'other':

I have the responsibility to represent someone whose difference destabilizes me and my notions of 'natural, good, normal'. The key is to acknowledge that you are travelling, that you are not striving for authenticity but honesty (1993: 28).

For the author, then, critical approaches to research or representation that foreground positionality in the endeavour for honesty, rather than authenticity, are at the core of a transformative – or in Kemp's terms, revolutionary – theory and praxis for feminists.

Crucially, Kemp's piece turns attention to the issue of difference among black women (in this case, on the basis of sexual orientation), an issue that several commentators have argued is often ignored in feminist analyses that privilege race as the principle determinant of experience and category of difference. A similar point is made by Gouws, and Sunde and Bozalek in relation to the elision of class divisions. In defence of her portrayal of Audre Lorde, Kemp argues that a black and/or lesbian woman writer, researcher or performer does not have an inherent understanding of another black lesbian woman's experiences. She asserts that every representation or interpretation of experience constitutes an act of appropriation and mediation – that is, 'crossing the boundaries' of difference (Kemp, 1993: 27). The author thus concludes that, in order to forge a revolutionary and 'honest' feminism, it is contingent upon black women to recognise and evaluate the dynamics of difference and power among women who are "biologically female and sociologically 'black'" (1993: 28). She urges that the existence of difference is inevitable, regardless of shared racial, gender, class and/or sex identities and their apparent commonalities. This argument challenges the validity of intellectual separatism as a viable feminist strategy, as Kemp shows that shared lived experience cannot validate the authenticity of representations of black experience, even by black women themselves. At the same time, discounting the notion of authenticity and acknowledging difference, even within distinct social groups, allows women to develop ways of working across the boundaries of difference to transform their feminist strategies.

Overall, the 1993 issue of *Agenda* documents feminists in South Africa exploring new strategies to respond to the changing trends within gender discourse at this time. These transformations stem, in part, from the crises of the Natal conference on Women and Gender and the Nigeria conference, and women's engagement with the challenges of difference. On the one hand, the problematics of difference lead some women to pursue separate and completely autonomous feminist frameworks that expressly excluded the participation of those outside of their groups. This spoke to the acute desire for self-definition, particularly for marginalised women who had, hitherto, been 'spoken for' and positioned as Other in mainstream Western feminism. The shortcomings of this approach were highlighted, however, as critics pointed out that a system of separatism along the boundaries of difference was premised on a homogenising tendency similar to that of the Western feminist theories they denounced.

On the other hand, given the political atmosphere, and the very real fractures that were apparent in the movement, other South African feminists recognized the need to develop feminist activity organized through, and orientated around, the formation of strategic coalitions between groups of women across the barriers of difference. This was seen as the most effective way to achieve the elusive balance between mobilization around gender issues, on the one hand, and the imperative to acknowledge difference and multiplicity among women on the other.

While debunking the myth of sisterhood and its homogenising vision of inclusivity and commonality, these feminist thinkers also rejected the tendency towards academic separatism, as shown by Kemp, Gouws, Moodley, Meintjes in the 'Women and Difference' issue of *Agenda*. They challenged theories that deployed the concept of difference as a justification for intellectual and political exclusion. As such, they cautioned against the reactions of some black and marginalised women who responded to the inadequacies of Western feminism by perpetuating one-dimensional understandings of difference, experience and identity. It is clear that, while these commentators assert the validity and legitimacy of research on, and the representation of, the Other across boundaries of difference, they also highlight the imperative to redirect academic and activist endeavour towards finding more sensitive, nuanced, participatory and, ultimately, transformative feminist theory, analysis, praxis and methodology. Thus, transformative feminist frameworks would allow women to recognise the differences between and within them, and enable them to work across the boundaries of difference through self-reflexivity, collaboration and coalition-building. This movement towards working across difference is embodied in the three-part 'African Feminisms' series published by the *Agenda* journal in 2001, 2002 and 2003.

### **Feminism in an African Frame**

Following on from the turmoil of the early 1990s, South African feminist consciousness in the later in the 1990s and in the 2000s showed a marked shift from a preoccupation with responding to the peculiar exigencies of the country's transitional moment, towards an increasingly regional and global outlook within a newly liberated democracy. In many ways, the emergence of scholarship focusing on the intersection of African cultural and political identity, and gender, emerged as a result of third world feminism and postcolonial theory's impact, as women sought to develop cross-border and regional relations in the global South to destabilise the hegemonic 'centre-margin paradigm' (Hendricks and Lewis, 1997). At the same time, local discussions

about difference were highlighting the shortcomings of insulated and exclusionary feminist strategies and schools of thought while encouraging the expansion of the critical and political field. These developments in feminist criticism are exemplified in three special issues of the *Agenda* journal.

At the beginning of the new decade, and 10 years after the Natal conference, the *Agenda* journal launched the 'African Feminisms' series to mark its fiftieth publication. As the series editor, Lou Haysom, details, this project, was conceived in order to "anchor debate about women and gender equality geographically, conceptually and politically on the much wider canvas of the African continent" (2001: 2). In one sense, advancing the idea of African feminism would seem inimical to the postcolonial and postmodern emphasis on the need for theory to be localized and context-specific. It would seem that naming a regionally defined feminism encompassing goes against the prevailing resistance to overgeneralisations about women, in general, and third world women in particular. In fact, in their seminal article "Voices From the Margins" (1997), Cheryl Hendricks and Desiree Lewis strongly criticize previous permutations of this concept for the way in which "feminists who work under the banner of 'African feminism' have developed essentialist ideas very similar to those of womanists" (1997: 68). As Hendricks and Lewis show, while African feminism advanced subversive anti-imperialist challenges against colonial and racist discourse, this was often premised on generalized and romanticized constructions of African femininity, as well as "the tendency to deny traditional patriarchy" (1997: 68). The authors thus question the 'political value' of scholarship described as African feminism at the time.

In another sense, however, the *Agenda* 'African Feminisms' series constitutes a reconfiguration and re-appropriation of the term, turning from African feminism as a singular, homogenising theory, towards 'African feminisms' as a body of scholarship and ideas that encompass a variety of critical and theoretical perspectives. The series does not attempt to develop a singular set of principles or a cohesive school of thought. Rather, it showcases the eclecticism of feminist and gender scholarship on the continent and in the African diaspora. As Haysom notes,

[c]ritical perspectives are included from black feminists, African feminists, womanists and Islamic feminists, providing a convergence of voices and ideas emanating from postcolonial feminist work (2001: 3).



This represents a conscious strategy to recognise difference and cultivate diversity within these discussions. A second notable aspect of the editorial approach throughout the series is to make a point to address the silences in the publication. For example, in the ‘Editorial’ article of the inaugural issue, Lou Haysom foregrounds the logistical constraints of the project to account for the predominance of South African commentators in discussions of African feminisms. This allows readers to contextualise the arguments, and acknowledges the existence of other viewpoints outside of a South African framework. This self-reflexive stance, along with the focus on collective dialogue and diversity exemplify the key features of transformative feminist scholarship that enable women to not only deal with difference, but to also work across the boundaries of difference.

In her introduction to the inaugural edition of the ‘African Feminisms’ series (*Agenda*, 2001), Desiree Lewis captures the “high degrees of cross-fertilisation across national and continental boundaries ... [and the]...enormous geographical and political fluidity within ‘African feminism’” (2001: 4). In this article, Lewis outlines the principles around which ‘African feminisms’ were being redefined, reoriented and re-aligned. In contrast to her view of African feminism expressed with Cheryl Hendricks in “Voices From the Margins”, Lewis illustrates that difference was no longer seen as a justification for separatism, but rather as the impetus for opening up previously obscured areas of concern and new approaches to theorizing about African women’s identities. Lewis’s account of African feminisms signals the re-appropriation of the term, turning from the referring to a single theory to connote a diverse body of scholarship. For Lewis, this is characterised by a plurality of theoretical and critical perspectives with a

shared intellectual commitment to critiquing gender and imperialism coupled with a collective focus on a continental identity shaped by particular relations of subordination in the world economy and global and social and cultural practices (2001: 5).

This shared commitment and common focus on women’s struggles and agency in Africa connects theoretical insights across geographical and continental boundaries, as well as across racial and cultural boundaries (Lewis, 2002: 5). This is clearly illustrated by the range of critical voices represented across the ‘African Feminisms’ series.

Throughout the ‘African Feminisms’ series, the insights and lessons learned from the difference debate are evident. Ultimately, the series reflects

the need to value different kinds of knowledge - knowledge gained through theories learnt within the academy, as well as that obtained through lived experience. On a continent as diverse as Africa, where disparities between rich and poor, urban and rural etc [sic] are so evident, it is essential that all women feel they have the legitimacy to speak. It is through speaking and giving voice to the multitude of experiences that new theories arise, which will in turn generate new kinds of action, informed through the richness of diversity (Moolman, 2002: 2).

Both in its editorial approach and its content, the 'African Feminisms' series offers a model for transformational feminist scholarship that moves beyond the problem of difference. It is this approach to scholarship that will allow women to further explore the shifting definitions of feminisms in Africa, the changing contexts of feminist scholarship and practice, and the contested spaces and identities that characterize the contemporary movement.

#### **Notes**

- i. The 1992 International Conference on Women in Africa and the Africa Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and Academia will also be referred to as the 'the Nigeria conference' for the remainder of this paper.

## Conclusion

### **Towards 'A Heterogeneous, Postcolonial Culture'**

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the politics of race in gender studies and the concept of difference have commanded persistent critical attention, particularly in feminist criticism in South Africa. The emergence of the intersection of race and gender as a prominent part of the feminist agenda is possibly one of the most significant transformations of contemporary feminist scholarship. The political and intellectual atmosphere of this era, when the theories of second-wave feminism were being imported and assimilated, affected the feminist orientations of local feminists and drew attention particularly towards issues of difference, representation, legitimacy, positionality, race and racism in gender studies and feminist theory and practice.

By tracing the trajectory of the difference debate during South Africa's decade of political, social and racial transformation, it is possible to not only construct a brief history of a concept that had a ground-breaking impact on feminist discourse in the country, but to also present a useful overview of the major theoretical debates that have preoccupied feminist scholars during the last two decades. However, in conducting such an intellectual history, there is no claim made to comprehensiveness. Within the limited ambit of a dissertation, there is no scope to explore, for example, other major concerns to emerge during this time, such as the significance and status of oral literature in black women's cultural production, the strengths and limitations of 'gender and development discourse', the spectre of gender violence or the catastrophic effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on women and communities at large.

Nevertheless, through this investigation into the formation of a 'discourse of difference' in South African feminist criticism in the 1990s, it is possible to isolate three significant patterns to emerge from this intellectual and political defining moment.

In the first place, the legacy of the shifts, revisions and opening up of new theoretical, critical and creative feminist avenues that occurred in the 1990s is reflected in the prevailing image of contemporary feminism in South Africa as consisting of an amalgamation of diverse, and often competing, ideas, strategies and identities. Indeed, it is now more apt to speak, as Margaret Daymond (1996) does, of South African 'feminisms', adopting the plural form rather than the singular 'feminism'. The seemingly slight change is profound in that it reflects the new consensus that "cultural feminism in South Africa does not form a singular, coherent movement"

(1996: xiv). It highlights the perception of women and gender as historically determined, context-specific concepts, characterized by heterogeneity and multiplicity, undermines any conception of a singular or monolithic feminist theory or construct. In the last two decades, there has been a distinctive shift from previous efforts to achieve – or impose – a universal, cohesive ideological framework for the analysis of gender. Instead, contemporary feminist scholars have recognized and begun documenting the almost infinite variety of gendered experience, and the concomitant plurality of feminisms that have emerged, which reflect the interrelation of gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and so on. It is evident, then, that any account of feminism in South Africa must take into account this fragmentation of feminist perspectives, which is, in some ways, a defining characteristic of gender studies and feminist politics within South Africa’s “developing, heterogeneous post-colonial culture” (Daymond, 1996: xix).

Paradoxically, this paper seems to, at times, emphasize and mirror the black-white binary that initially characterized the formation of positions in this debate (and underlies most conventional research on these issues). However, this is done consciously to highlight the dialogic nature of the debate. For this study, it was important to highlight the ways in which women spoke across these predetermined boundaries, which in turn allowed them to transcend them in some senses through dialogue and critical engagement. The first chapter, for example, shows how Zoe Wicomb and Sisi Maqagi’s, as black feminists, pieces are in conversation with the views of Cecily Lockett, and the predominantly white academia, within the sanctioned forum of the 1990 issue of *Current Writing*. Meanwhile in *South African Feminisms*, Margaret Daymond responds, directly and indirectly, to the concerns and criticisms of women like Desiree Lewis from her position as a white, middle-class academic confronting her own racial privilege. Another classic example of this dialogue among women is the various exchanges between Lumka Funani and Fidela Fouché (and Amanda Gouws) across the ‘great divide’, which, while potentially divisive, occasioned a rethinking of standpoint theory and positionality. Accordingly, then, this dissertation does not attempt to represent a comprehensive account of feminist literary criticism of the 1990s, but to instead illuminate and outline a range of ideas and arguments that developed in this dialectic manner within feminist scholarship around the issues of difference, race, representation and positionality.

Secondly, this study details a shift in the aims and imperatives of feminist scholarship and activism throughout the decade. Indeed, the texts under review are emblematic of this

process of expansion in feminist dialogues. Through the often heated debates over difference, gender and race, and the politics of representation, it is clear that the possibility and legitimacy of 'authentic' research or representation has been undermined. Instead, contemporary feminism calls for 'honest' approaches to research and representation that foreground positionality and difference. In conjunction with this, the focus of feminist activity on cooperation and alliance building is gradually replacing out-dated models of an essentialising 'sisterhood' on the one hand, and the blunt polarities of intellectual and political separatism, on the other. In line with the insights expressed in the 'Women and Difference' *Agenda* issue, then, Margaret Daymond advocates the formation of negotiated and provisional 'communities of purpose' among diverse groups of women. These communities would be orientated around common goals, while alert to and 'respectful' of the differences between them, in order to meet the challenges of shaping a contemporary feminist culture in the context of a rapidly changing society in South Africa.

This presents a model for theorising within the field of feminist literary criticism. One of the major concerns within feminist literary criticism was the challenge to the legitimacy of representation put forth during the difference debate. Embracing strategies underpinned by self-reflexivity and honesty opens avenues for literary critics to speak on the diverse works of women of all races and cultural backgrounds.

And finally, it is clear that the concept of difference itself, and the ways in which it affects women's lived experiences is subject to contestation. As such, it would be productive to expand the interrogation of this concept to include an examination of the concept of intersectionality as a complimentary, and in some ways contradictory account of the interaction of social determinants of experience. With these changing perceptions and new insights, it is clear therefore, that the difference debate, arising from a moment of crisis, can also be seen as a moment of transition.

## Bibliography

Arnott, Jill. 1996. "French Theory in a South African Frame? Gayatri Spivak and the Problem of Representation in South African Feminism". In: Daymond, Margaret (ed.). *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism 1990-1994*. New York: Garland, pp 77-89.

Barrett, Michèle. 1989. "Some Different Meanings of the Concept of 'Difference': Feminist Theory and the Concept of Ideology". In: Meese, E. and A. Parker (eds.). *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Barry, Peter. 1995. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bazilli, Susan. 1991. "Feminist Conferencing". *Agenda*, No. 9, pp. 44-52.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4547953> [Accessed: 25/02/2010]

Belsey, Catherine & Jane Moore (eds). 1990 (1989). *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London: Macmillan Education LTD.

Bonnin, Debby. 1996. "Women's Studies in South Africa". *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 378-399.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004540> [Accessed: 25/10/2010]

Bozalek, Vivienne & Jacky Sunde. 1993. "(Re)searching Difference". *Agenda*, No. 19, pp. 29-36.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065993> [Accessed: 25/10/2010]

Campbell, Catherine. 1993. "Identity and Difference". *Agenda* No. 19, pp. 45-63.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065996> [Accessed: 25/10/2010]

Carby, Hazel V. 1997 (1982). "White Women Listen!: Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood". In: Mirza, Heidi Safia. *Black British Feminism: A Reader*. London: Routledge.

Collins, Patricia. 1989. "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought". *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 745-773.

- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6, pp. 1241-1299.
- Davis, Kathy. 2008. "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful". *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 67-84.  
[http://www.kathydavis.info/articles/Intersectionality\\_as\\_buzzword.pdf](http://www.kathydavis.info/articles/Intersectionality_as_buzzword.pdf) [Accessed: 28/9/2011]
- Daymond, Margaret J. (ed.). 1996. *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism 1990-1994*. New York: Garland.
- Daymond, Margaret, Driver, Dorothy, et al. 2003. "Introduction". In: Daymond, Margaret, Driver, Dorothy, Meintjes, Sheila, Molema, Leloba, Musengezi, Chiedza, Orford, Margie & Nobantu Rasebotsa (eds.). *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Daymond, Margaret. 1990. "Preface". *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. i-v.
- de Reuck, Jenny. 1990. "Writing Feminism: Theoretical Inscriptions in South Africa". *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 30-34.
- Eagleton, Mary. 1986. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- "Editorial". 1993. *Agenda*, No. 19, pp. 2-3.
- Edwards, Justin. 2008. *Postcolonial Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fouché, Fidela. 1993. "Nigerian Conference Revisited". *Agenda*, No. 16, pp. 39-41.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065556> [Accessed: 06/08/2010]
- Fouché, Fidela. 1994. "Overcoming the Myth of Sisterhood". *Transformation*, No. 23, pp. 78-96.  
<http://www.transformation.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/transformation/article/view/639/455> [Accessed: 26/08/210]
- Funani, Lumka. 1992. "Nigerian Conference Revisited". *Agenda*, No. 15, pp. 63-68.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065587> [Accessed: 23/02/2011]
- Funani, Lumka. 1993. "The Great Divide". *Agenda*, No. 17, pp. 55-57.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065523> [Accessed: 27/08/2010]

- Gouws, Amanda. 1993. "The Angry Divide". *Agenda*, No. 19, pp. 67-70.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065998> [Accessed: 06/08/2010]
- Gqola, Pumla. 2010. *What is Slavery to Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Hassim, Shireen & Cherryl Walker. 1992. "Women's Studies and the Women's Movement." *Transformation*, No. 18, pp. 78-85.  
<http://www.transformation.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/transformation/article/view/554/370> [Accessed: 26/08/2010]
- Hassim, Shireen. 1991a. "Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics in South Africa". *Transformation*, No. 15, pp. 65-82.  
<http://www.transformation.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/transformation/article/view/554/370> [Accessed: 26/08/2010]
- Hassim, Shireen. 1991b. "Putting Women on the Agenda: Some Issues and Debates". *Agenda*, No. 9, pp. 10-13.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4547943> [Accessed: 26/08/2010]
- Haysom, Lou. 1997. "Editorial: Race, Identity and Change". *Agenda*, No. 32, pp. 2-3.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4066400> [Accessed: 28/08/2010]
- Hendricks, Cheryl & Desiree Lewis. 1994. "Voices From the Margins". *Agenda*, No. 20, pp. 61-75.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065873> [Accessed: 06/08/2010]
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Power and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Hofmeyr, Isabel. 1992. "Feminist Literary Criticism in South Africa". *English in Africa*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 89-102.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40238689> [Accessed: 25/08/2010]
- hooks, bell. 1982 (1981). *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto.
- hooks, bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Horn, Patricia. 1991. Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa: Another View of



the Dynamics. *Transformation*, No. 15, pp. 83-88.

<http://www.transformation.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/transformation/article/view/555/371> [Accessed: 26/08/2010]

Kemp, Amanda. 1993. "Ain't Nothin' like the Real Thang". *Agenda*, No. 19, pp. 25-28.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065992> [Accessed: 25/10/2010]

Kuumba, M. Bahati. 2003. "Introduction: African Feminisms in Exile: Diasporan, Transnational and Transgressive". *Agenda*, No. 58, pp. 3-11.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4548089> [Accessed: 23/02/2011]

Lewis, Desiree. 1992. "The Politics of Feminism in South Africa". *Staffrider*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 15-21.

Lewis, Desiree. 1994. "Women and Gender in South Africa". In: Maphai, V. (ed) *South Africa: The Challenge of Change*. Harare: Sapes.

Lewis, Desiree. 2001. "Introduction: African Feminisms". *Agenda*, No. 50, pp. 4-10.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4066401> [Accessed: 06/08/2010]

Lockett, Cecily. 1990. "Feminism(s) and Writing in English in South Africa". *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1-21.

Lorde Audre. 1993 (1984). "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House". In: *Zami, Sister Outsider, Undersong*. New York: Quality.

Lund, Francie. 1991. "Impressions: Conference on 'Women and Gender in Southern Africa'". *Agenda*, No. 9, pp. 20-23.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4547946> [Accessed: 06/08/2010]

Maharaj, Zarina. 1994. "Subversive Intent: A Social Theory of Gender". *Transformations*, No. 24, pp. 41-54.

<http://www.transformation.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/transformation/article/view/644/460> [Accessed: 25/02/2010]

Maqagi, Sisi. 1990. "Who Theorises?". *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 22-25.

Meer, Shamim. 1997. "Feminist Agendas in Activism and Academia – the Challenge for

Agenda". *Agenda*, No. 34, pp. 5-16.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4066238> [Accessed: 26/08/2010]

Meese, Elizabeth & Alice Parker. 1989. "Grins...Without the Cat': Introductory Remarks on the Difference Within". In: Meese, Elizabeth & Alice Parker. *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Meintjes, Sheila. 1993. "Dilemmas of Difference". *Agenda*, No. 19, pp. 37-42.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065994> [Accessed: 25/10/2010]

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2002 (1991). "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Poetics of Feminism". In: Essed, Philomena & David Theo Goldberg (eds). *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*. Malden: Blackwell.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991 (1984). "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". In: Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Russo, Ann & Lourdes Torres (eds.). *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Moodley, Asha. 1993. "Unravelling the Strands". *Agenda*, No. 19, pp. 11-20.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4065990> [Accessed: 25/10/2010]

Moran, Shane. 1998. "Academic Exchanges". *Alternation*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 215-239.

Msimang, Sisonke. 2002. "Introduction: African Feminisms II: Reflections on Politics Made Personal". *Agenda*, No. 54, pp. 3-15.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4548069> [Accessed: 25/10/2010]

Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. 1997. "Introduction". *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ryan, Pamela. 1990. "The Future of African Feminism". *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 26-29.

Samuelson, Meg. 2007. *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South African Transition*. Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press.

Schalkwyk, David. 1990. "The Authority of Experience or the Tyranny of Discourse: An

Inescapable Impasse?”. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 45-62.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. “Three Women’s texts and a Critique of Imperialism”. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 243-261.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988 (1985). “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. In: Nelson, Cary & Lawrence Grossberg (eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Walker, Alice. 1984 (1983). *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. London: Women’s Press.

Walker, Cheryl. 1991. “Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945: An Overview”. In: Walker, C. (ed.). *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*. London: James Currey.

Wicomb, Zoë. 1990. “To Hear a Variety of Discourses”. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 35-44.

Wolpe, Annmarie. 1998. “‘Where Angels Fear to Tread’: Feminism in South Africa”. In: Mouton, Johann, Muller, Johan, Franks, Peter and Themba Sono (eds.). *Theory and Method in South African Human Sciences Research: Advances and Innovations*. Pretoria: HSRC Press.