

## Negotiating the Differend: A Feminist Trilogue

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Are we really willing to hear anything and everything [the Other] might have to say, or only what we don't find too disturbing? Are we prepared to hear what [others] say, even if it requires learning concepts or whole languages that we don't yet understand?

—Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman*

There is, after all, a difference between really attempting to think differently and thinking the Same through the manipulation of difference.

—Alice Jardine, *Gynesis*

**Michelle:** “Imagine that you enter a parlor,” writes Kenneth Burke. “You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion” (*Philosophy* 110). With this metaphor, Burke sets the stage for the so-called linguistic turn of late twentieth-century thought. This “parlor,” Burke suggests, is the rhetorical world in which we find ourselves, debating, conversing, and creating knowledge. The discursive and communal scene is constructed as a parlor, which connotes warmth and solidarity and indeed projects a cozy world of human dialogue (Gane 65). This metaphor has been embraced by many feminist theorists who claim that such a rhetorical style replicates “female ways of speaking” and that the cozy scene mirrors “feminine ways of nurturing” (see Brody; Lamb; Gearhart; Ruddick; and Flynn).<sup>1</sup>

**Roxanne:** This parlor has discursive protocols, however, and we feminists often enforce them by interrupting and ejecting each other from the parlor. For instance, in “Revolutionary Black Women,” bell hooks tells the story of how she felt dismissed by a group of black women planning a national conference. She writes,

As we sat in a circle talking about our experiences, those individuals who were most listened to all told stories of how brutally they had been treated by “the” black community. Speaking against the construction of a monolithic experience, I talked about the way my experience of black community differed, sharing that I had been raised in a segregated rural black community that was very supportive. . . . Before I could finish speaking, I was interrupted by one of the “famous” black women present, who chastised me for trying to erase another black woman’s pain by bringing up a different experience. Her voice was hostile and angry. She began by saying she was “sick of people like me.” (44)

Ultimately, hooks’ narrative “was reduced to a competing narrative, one that was seen as trying to divert attention from the ‘true’ telling of black female experience.” This is the “darker side” of solidarity.

**Michelle:** This is precisely why Lynn Worsham argues that feminism’s “most pressing task” is to confront this side of solidarity and to reformulate solidarity in such a way that feminisms can form an

alliance that does not protect us from our differences but finds in difference, disagreement, and even despair occasions to hear one another’s words; an alliance that recognizes that our histories and experiences are not only diverse in all the ways we have learned to name them, they are also intertwined in complex and mutually determining ways. The lesson to be remembered at the end of this century of struggle is that there is no need to eradicate difference to find solidarity. . . . (“After Words” 329)

**Diane:** To push Worsham’s idea a bit further, I would suggest, in fact, that it is *only* in our difference—or, rather, our *différance*—that something like solidarity becomes possible. That is, I would suggest that the lesson to be remembered after the incredible violence of the past century is that all we share is precisely what divides us, our inability to be-one and to be-at-one with ourselves and with others. There is a kind of solidarity that becomes available in this originary non-belonging (impropriety, imper-tinence) that precedes any and every condition of belonging.

**Michelle:** These are lessons *yet* to be learned, inasmuch as the feminist discourse community—a so-called inclusive and nurturing community—has required perhaps not an eradication of difference, but certainly a *disciplining* of difference. More specifically, although we feminists continually interrupt patriarchal discourses, we still remain resistant to any discursive disruption of our own discourse community, tending to

discipline such disruptions—as you, Roxanne, just evidenced (see Reynolds).

Although I agree with Susan Jarratt’s claim that “feminism is not a monolithic enterprise with a unified research agenda,” and hence that it is impossible to locate a feminist “we” or to represent a feminist “unity,” I would note that it is precisely this fictionalized “we” that is invoked (in order to discipline the disrupter) when naming her a “not we” (“As We Were” 2). And it is this rhetorical tour de force that allows contemporary feminism to embrace differences but finally to exclude *différance*. Judith Butler notes the problem: “Through what exclusions has the feminist subject been constructed, and how do those excluded domains return to haunt the ‘integrity’ and ‘unity’ of the feminist ‘we’ . . . ?” (“Contingent” 15). This “haunting” tends to be experienced by the “we” as a “trespassing” and as a rude “interruption” of the feminist conversation, manifesting itself as a difference that cannot be negotiated, as a *différance* that is unheard because the “hearing” of it would disrupt the safe space constructed by the sameness that constructs the “we.” Those excluded domains that haunt the unity of the feminist “we” assert a difference that may be “tolerated” but that is not yet “negotiated.” The result is, in Jarratt’s terms, a “superficial suturing” of difference that dismisses conflict, that guarantees that difference will be tolerated, but that *différance* will remain unheard (“Feminism” 110).

**Diane:** It might be helpful briefly to pull this distinction—that is, the distinction between difference(s) and *différance*—into tighter focus. While “we feminists” frequently do struggle to affirm our differences, “we” rarely manage to affirm the notion of a feminist *différance*. While the latter would embrace an unending play of differences and attend to the exclusions that are created in the name of feminist solidarity, the former retains an insidious and invidious standard, a “proper” feminist against which to judge difference. This approach operates through the ethic of tolerance that Jarratt describes, and it draws the line finally at what is *not* tolerable. It’s this line drawing that prompts the need and the desire to align oneself on the good side, to issue a feminist station identification that excludes in the name of inclusion and sets the stage for the differend, for unlitigable injustices *within* feminism itself.

**Roxanne:** Thus, the question posed by our trilogue is this: how can we feminists learn to *listen* for and negotiate difference and *différance*? Much is at stake in this question.

**Michelle:** These are, in my view, two different questions: How do we listen for difference(s)? And how do we listen for *différance*? Furthermore, each question calls for different (*différent*?) rhetorical strategies.

**Roxanne:** Let's begin, then, with the first question: how do we listen for differences? We know that our inability to hear difference where we need to is deeply disturbing to those who don't see themselves in our theories. Because of this problem, it is a commonplace in feminist circles to talk about the need to listen better to the voice of the Other (Anzaldúa; Rich). That is not to say that we have become better at this task. Krista Ratcliffe argues that feminism's presumed whiteness makes such a task nearly impossible, for whiteness is the unknown category and an absence; to listen for the effect of whiteness requires what Ratcliffe calls a "rhetorical listening," or a kind of interpretive invention.

Listening is a process, of course, but it is far too easy to believe that it can have quickly obtained tangible outcomes. For instance, when the Other is an "exotic" Other, we feminists often have a tendency to commodify her. In "Eating the Other," hooks describes this process: "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). We take in and embrace a construction of the Other, digest the Other, all the while failing to *hear* the Other. In this way, we acknowledge difference but fail to interpret it responsibly—as Ratcliffe puts it, we fail to "stand under" the discourse of the Other (44). Or, we assume the difference is so great that we fail to listen for commonalities. For instance, Barbara Kingsolver suggests that our inability to view the exotic Other as having common needs and desires (as when white people are surprised that Navajos like Coca-Cola) is another sign that we aren't listening (156-57).

This process is also at work when the feminist on the other side of the table is perceived as a sister insider, the unproblematic, nonexotic Other. Such was the case at a feminism and composition workshop titled "Negotiating Hierarchy, Negotiating Difference" that Ratcliffe and I designed to facilitate listening across difference. Listening occurred across difference as long as that difference was perceived to be exotic, but listening broke down within one group of feminists marked initially by their sameness. Difference came in the form of two feminists who challenged a roundtable discussion on political activism. They were accused of having the "wrong" theories and were dismissed.

**Diane:** I remember those feminists. [*Everybody laughs.*] Foucault engages the problem of hearing the Other in his preface to *The Order of Things*. He says that his book arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the "laughter that shattered . . . all the familiar landmarks of [his] thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography" (xv). The passage to which Foucault refers is from a Chinese encyclopedia, in which animals are divided into categories such as "sucking pigs," "stray dogs," the "frenzied" or "fabulous," those "having just broken the water pitcher," and those "drawn with a very fine camelhair brush." In the "wonderment" of this taxonomy, Foucault says, "the thing we apprehend in one great leap," the thing that is "demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*."

But, as you two have been suggesting, not everyone is "charmed" when they encounter another way of seeing, and not everyone admits so willingly that *any* given system of thought, including one's own, will necessarily make it impossible to think something. We are in Burke's territory here: "A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (*Permanence* 49). What goes by the name *comprehension* takes a critical turn here. It is no longer about *understanding*, or grasping what lies beneath; rather, it is about what Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen call "*interstanding*," or glimpsing what lies between—between the "I" and the "Other" (*Imagologies*, "Interstanding" 1). What is at stake in any "listening," in any striving for comprehension, is that which our own structures of thought have made impossible to think: the unthinkable, the unhearable. Really listening across worldviews operates as a straining toward interstanding, toward the in-between of the "seeing" and the "not seeing." Negotiation necessarily begins with such a listening. But it often happens that we feminist rhetoricians, in our effort to negotiate our own diversity, neglect this beginning point. When we do, we fail to recognize, in Jean-François Lyotard's terms, the "differends" that we create *in the name of solidarity*.

**Michelle:** Hence, listening for difference(s) always already precludes listening for *différance*. That is, I would argue that understanding difference(s) is all too possible, that it is our epistemological impulse to render difference(s) into the (self)same. We are altogether too good at knowing—that is, fashioning—the Other (exotic or nonexotic) into a tidy mirror image of ourselves. Roxanne, could you say more about Ratcliffe's notion of rhetorical listening? More pointedly, what is the desired

outcome of this listening? Is it to understand (that is, to name) difference(s)? Diane, maybe you could tell me if interstanding resists understanding. Indeed, does it resist even an understanding of that which is between?

**Roxanne:** Ratcliffe's project is to recover the concept of listening for the rhetorical tradition; as a feminist rhetorician, her goal is to employ listening to help us "hear discursive intersections of gender and race/ethnicity" (196). Her recent essay, "Rhetorical Listening," invites scholars to rethink what we mean by listening. And, yes, she seeks understanding. But she retheorizes this term as "standing under"—that is, "consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints" (205). She goes on to say, "Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics." She describes the process as follows: first, "[identify] the various discourses embodied in each of us and then [listen] to hear and imagine how they might affect not only ourselves but others" (206). What I most like about Ratcliffe's thought is that she deploys rhetorical listening to break the stalemate between traditional and postmodern formulations of rhetoric.

Michelle, your question (What is the desired outcome of this listening? Is it to understand—that is to "name"—differences?) conflates naming and understanding, which neither Ratcliffe nor I would do. Feminists could create taxonomies of differences all day long—both of the fantastic and of the common—and so not find any moments of understanding between them. Naming is part of the process of listening; it is not the end of the process. In the end, Ratcliffe seeks "more productive discourses about and across both commonalities and differences, whether these discourses be narratives or arguments, whether they be in academic journals or over the dinner table" (220). Clearly, the idea is not to sit down and name all the differences and then call it a day!

**Michelle:** Your comments foreground the varying ways in which you and I are using the term *understanding*. I suppose I am using *understanding* in a much broader sense—and perhaps carelessly—as a synonym for *knowing*. In the Borges example, which Diane mentioned earlier, it is naming (or the categorizing of difference) that makes knowing or understanding the world—or animals—possible. But knowing or understanding is dependent on naming. I am reminded of Nietzsche's example in "On Truth and Lying." He writes, "If I define the mammal and then after

examining a camel declare, 'See, a mammal,' a truth is brought to light, but it is . . . anthropomorphic through and through and contains not a single point that would be 'true in itself,' real, and universally valid, apart from man" (251). Thus, it is the naming of "mammal" that allows one to know or to understand a camel. Similarly, I am suggesting that the categorization of differences does presume an understanding. Understanding, as I see it, is a precondition for listening: it precedes rather than follows listening. And this is tied up with the epistemic process of knowing and making meaning—hence, my conflation of understanding and naming.

**Diane:** You also asked about interstanding, Michelle. Interstanding, as I understand it (which is perhaps different from Taylor and Saarinen's understanding)—sets out each time to spotlight the *impossibility* of this necessary and very operational phantasm that you are calling "understanding," this originary "agreement" that makes communication possible but that makes it possible only at the expense of wiping out that for which it can't account.

**Michelle:** I agree and disagree here. I think that understanding is the foundation that does *exist*, as in Richard Rorty's notion of "normal discourse"—that is, a discourse in which "[e]verybody agrees on how to evaluate everything everybody else says. More generally, normal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it." Rorty continues, saying that "episteme" is "the product of normal discourse—the sort of statement which can be agreed to be true by all participants whom the other participants count as 'rational'" (320). Again, an "agreement" is or has been reached before the conversation even begins. Yet, because this foundation is rhetorically constructed, it therefore does not *exist*—that is, it has no referential currency. It refers to nothing "true in itself."

**Diane:** According to your understanding of understanding, I'd say that interstanding does indeed *resist* understanding. Interstanding affirms the perpetual withdrawal of understanding that the differend indicates. A bit more should probably be said here about the differend itself. According to Lyotard, the differend is an unlitigable injustice, a "case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments." Lyotard explains,

“One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule)” (*Differend* xi). This unlitigable situation defines what Lyotard calls our postmodern condition: the condition in which “a universal rule of judgment between heterogeneous genres [of discourse] is lacking in general.”

In a looser sense, the differend has come to signify unresolved differences between two (or more) parties who don’t share the same rules of cognition—that is, who don’t operate within the same “genres of discourse,” within the same “language games” or “phrase regimens.” The differend, Avital Ronell explains, “carves out an abyss within interlocution; cables have not been set up to hear the other without static, warping, and constant interruption” (“Differends” 261). This is the problem we want to address. Specifically, we want to spotlight the abyss *within* feminist interlocution—an internal abyss—because there seems to be something like a “broken connection” dominating feminism’s thinking fields. The problem is not the static per se; that is, the broken connection is not the inevitable result of the postmodern condition. The problem, it seems, is that we feminists have not come to terms with this condition, that we have not yet developed the “incredulity toward metanarratives” that would encourage an affirmation of the incommensurabilities that feminism already houses (see Lyotard, *Postmodern* xxiv).

**Michelle:** Yes, and although most feminists would acknowledge that there is no one feminism, no final feminist “we” to which we could refer, many feminists appeal to a metanarrative of Feminism, to a belief that somehow that term is a placeholder for an implicit, unarticulated grand narrative—as if we all presume that we all know what we’re talking about when we talk about feminism. Yet, I don’t think anyone, if pushed, could quite narrate it because it is inarticulatable—due, in large part, to the incommensurabilities operating under the sign of feminism.

**Diane:** These incommensurabilities set the stage for the differend. Indeed, the differend frequently manifests itself in feminist discourse, and the response is often that one (feminist) attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the discourse of the other (feminist). A simple and well-known example: Teresa Ebert claims that “After . . . such ludic feminists as Luce Irigaray, Alice Jardine, Susan Suleiman, and Donna Haraway,

emancipation—the collective social struggle to end exploitation—becomes simply a metaphysical project: a metanarrative” (6). Here, Ebert becomes the loudspeaker for what she calls a “red feminism,” draws the line at what she calls “ludic feminism,” and gives us a peek at the list of names who land on the wrong side of that line. Yet, each of the so-called ludic feminists that Ebert lists also struggles in the service of a revised, postfoundational sense of emancipation. It’s not that these feminists give up the fight against exploitation, as Ebert seems to propose, but that their struggle adheres to *other* rules of cognition and judgment, rules that cannot be declared invalid simply because they are not Ebert’s, simply because they are not “red.” To judge one genre of discourse across the rules of another is to commit epistemological violence; it is, in this case, to drag the discourse of an/Other feminist into one’s own discourse arena *to be clobbered*. Or, more to the point for us today, Ebert’s declaration designates, via “the effects of irresponsible indictment,” the differend (Ronell, “Differends” 260).

**Roxanne:** Part of the problem is that we feminists want to act as the conscience for other feminists. Ebert is invested in what Lyotard calls a grand narrative (in her case, Marxism) and therefore feels morally justified in clobbering other feminists—especially postmodern feminists. In her grand narrative, some sisters really are the evil empire. Let me pause here to note that I have participated in such clobbering myself in the area of feminist methodology. In “Engendering Ethnography,” I used a pretty high moral tone to clobber David Bleich for failing to be “reflexive” about gender (216-17). Later, I retracted my statements after thinking more about reflexivity (“Disclosure”). As Butler argues, the very process that makes reflexivity possible is a process that has always already subjected us to social norms. We learn to exclude because we have been excluded; this process “haunts” us in our efforts to emancipate others and ourselves (*Psychic*).

How well we have learned to exclude and punish, especially in the use of gossip. We all have our examples, but let me share two from my own life. When I arrived at my first job, a graduate student came to me in private; she was very upset and said that she had heard a terrible rumor about me. She had heard that I had slept my way through graduate school (with male professors). I had a good laugh, because I had an all-woman, all-feminist dissertation committee and my taste runs to men my own age. A few years later, after I had continued Annette Kolodny’s efforts to build a women’s studies minor and was working with a number of women

graduate students, a rumor went around that I was sleeping with one of my students (I was not). Of course, the rumor was very murky in its origin, but it had the effect of raising questions about my professionalism. Now, suppose that I actually *had* given my colleagues something to talk about. What then? In fact, we have feminists among us who are the talk of the town for their sexual habits, and we feminists have not been very nice to them. We've even decided that certain feminists are not really feminists because of whom they have slept with. When we talk about ethics, we almost never talk about the ethics of our own gossip.

**Michelle:** Roxanne, I think we could come up with quite an impressive catalogue of both private and public indictments of other feminists. I am not suggesting, though, that feminists have cornered the market on mudslinging. What is disconcerting is how frequently feminist discourse deteriorates through the use of two logical fallacies, known also as ethical fallacies: guilt by association and *ad hominem* (or, perhaps more appropriately, *ad womanem*) attacks. It is not my claim that feminist discourse should avoid these logical fallacies in order to produce *more logical* rhetoric; rather, feminist discourse might want to rethink the way in which it often engages in ethical fallacies as a means of demonstrating moral outrage in order to draw the line between the good feminist and the bad feminist, as a way of avoiding dealing with the differend. The public indictments (such as those Roxanne points to) tend to conflate the professional and the personal. This happens so often that feminists have coined the term “trashing” to characterize what can happen in feminist criticism (see Gallop et al.).

Now, this is *not* to say that if a feminist takes on another feminist—dialoguing, debating, disagreeing—that this is “trashing.” Instead, this is critique and this is what we do as scholars, whether or not we are feminists. But there is a peculiar kind of attack, which feminists seem to have perfected, and it seems to be made in the name of drawing the party line. Much of this line drawing is done along generational lines. So-called second-wave feminist work condemns more recent work—*not* on its own terms but because it doesn't do the kind of feminism deemed acceptable. In her analysis of feminist rhetoric, Devoney Looser demonstrates that feminists of the 1970s represent themselves as having “had the ‘genuine,’ unpatriarchal career goals” and characterize younger feminists as “causing them ‘pain’ . . . ‘neglect[ing]’ the ways in which feminism is under fire in order to have ‘tidy’ lives, without ‘labor,’ without ‘other women.’ In other words, . . . [t]hey are the purebred origin; [the younger feminists] are

the mangy strays” (37). Rather than affirming the generational differences as a differend, they are dismissed as being spurious, inauthentic, and inappropriate—and, indeed, a threat to truly feminist goals. The line gets drawn once again. Feminists to the right (or left); all others, please leave the parlor (see also Hirsch and Keller).

Another form of trashing is initially less public but rapidly becomes common knowledge. I'm returning here to the rhetoric of the rumor, the power of gossip. Gossiping, or spreading rumors, is typically seen as a female or subaltern discourse. Its lack of status as a privileged discourse in no way, however, challenges its efficacy and power. In fact, it is an extraordinarily effective and ineluctable discursive force. Of course, rumor-mongering or gossiping is not a rhetorical form necessarily connected to feminism. However, I often hear of feminists employing it to once again draw the line between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate feminist behavior and thought.

As I suggested above, this kind of gossiping employs two ethical fallacies: guilt by association (she studied with so and so! That explains *everything!*) and *ad womanem* attack (did you see how short her skirt was?!). Not surprisingly, so much of this gossiping tends to focus on a feminist's sexuality. Remember Roxanne's anecdote; remember all of your own. This is rather predictable, particularly if you remember that in the *Gorgias* Plato distinguished the difference between “genuine” and “spurious” arts. Philosophy is deemed genuine; rhetoric is not deemed genuine. Of course, etymologically, the word “spurious,” as I have argued elsewhere, refers to someone of illegitimate birth; hence, rhetoric is a bastard child, as Plato specifically argues in the *Phaedrus*.

What feminist rhetoric does via trashing and gossiping is to distinguish the legitimate from the illegitimate, and all of this is wrapped up in the rhetoric of reproducing appropriate families: “generations,” “sisters,” “foremothers,” and “daughters.” Lynda Zwinger argues that feminist discourses “dramatize—and dictate—the process by which girls learn to be good daughters” (184). The feminist community is intensely invested in the reproduction of good daughters—and good daughters do not allow their reputation to be sullied, to have intercourse with inappropriate Others, lest they give birth to some bastard who threatens the purity of the community (see also Jardine 77). Jane Gallop argues that feminists attack other feminists, categorize them as “not-a-feminist,” in order to deal with difference. She writes, “It is like the classic distinction between good and bad women, which is how a lot of this feels” (352).

**Diane:** Feminist discourse does have a tendency to separate the “good” feminists from the “bad” feminists with the same rhetoric used to separate the good women from the bad (disreputable) women. Curiously, to be a feminist is always already to be the bad woman. Feminism, by definition, is *indecent*; its job is to take a step beyond the “decent,” beyond the sanctioned, the proper. Yet, feminism’s stage has been set primarily by what it fights against, and there is resistance to venturing too far from that stage, too far from the territory that is defined by the battle in which it’s engaged. This is understandable, of course, and it has served a purpose. But it seems to be time to push it further: if feminism is going to become what it is, if it is going to get beyond the merely reactionary and head toward what we might call the “genuinely” feminist, then it—we—will have to be willing to venture into the realm of the abject. In other words, assuming that we can define feminism as that which ex-scribes itself from phallogocentric in-scription, then feminism, in order to live up to itself, will have to have the guts to affirm what’s beyond phallogocentric recuperation.

This is the indecent: not that which the Law opposes but that which the Law must efface to hold itself together, and that which is re-obliterated each time by any force that opposes the Law on the Law’s own terms. To attend to the indecent would be to take on the Law by exposing what it cannot abide. This is why a thoroughly Nietzschean Ronell has suggested that if feminism’s going to live up to itself, it will have to develop “the courage of indecency”—the courage to attend to the absolute Other—and it will have to spend some time imagining what a truly post-patriarchal, post-phallo- and logocentric, post-oedipal community would look like, sound like, feel like (Interview 139).

This reimagining would have to posit “subjects” who are beyond egological forms of subjectivity, would have to posit a community of “*shattered egos*” who embrace their own *différance* and affirm the *absolute Other* (Ronell, Interview 150). This would be an altogether different task than simply tolerating another’s position or another’s difference. There’s nothing shattering about tolerance. As Michelle noted, tolerance protects the habits and structures of thought already in place, re-effacing what the Law has already given the squeeze. But embracing the absolute Other, that would be volcanic; that would let loose a feminist volcano. And that, I think, is feminism’s future.

**Michelle:** Diane, first, I think I’d abstain from using *genuine* as a modifier for feminism and thereby avoid those recalcitrant reproductive impera-

tives; second, I agree that what feminism needs is a “melt down,” a radical liquidification of its foundations. Unlike magma, this liquidification would not, once cooled, solidify into igneous rock formations.

No doubt you’ve all suspected that I am asking feminism to “heat” up its foundational category “woman.” Tania Modleski, of course, eschews such a call, bemoaning what she calls “feminism without Women.” Indeed, feminism has concerned itself with the task of discovering the “specificity of the female,” of positing a positive valence to the category “woman” and working to achieve rights and opportunities for those bodies that materialize within the category of “woman” (Kristeva, “Women’s” 21).

But the category “woman” has been found wanting by feminists for some time. As Nancy Fraser says, it has been found to repress “differences among women” and to repress “axes of subordination” other than gender, such as class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality (179). Fraser continues: “It therefore repressed what Deborah King has called ‘multiple jeopardy,’ the multiple forms of subordination faced by lesbians, women of color, and/or poor and working-class women” (179). According to Fraser, this has “created a double bind for women who are subject to multiple jeopardy: it effectively pressured them to choose between loyalty to their gender and loyalty to their ‘race,’ class, and/or sexuality. The either/or imperative denied their reality of multiple jeopardy, multiple affiliation, and multiple identity” (179). The work done in the name of “identity politics” has, thus, sought to discover the differences within that category and, in fact, to demonstrate how that category itself fictionalizes a universality that effectively “overwrites” other categories of oppression (Lu 242).

**Roxanne:** Yet, naming differences is an important part of negotiating a differend. For example, in my experience with teaching undergraduates, there are few differends more powerful or more debilitating than those that arise from racial or ethnic differences. White feminists often make two mistakes simultaneously when considering (or not considering) their African American sisters: first, thinking of African American sisters as the exotic Other; and second, thinking of African American sisters as complete Insiders. If a person is an exotic Other, we don’t interact with them. During her chair’s address at the CCCC convention, Jackie Jones Royster gave a ballroom full of people her e-mail address so that she might begin a dialogue with them about racial issues in composition and rhetoric. No one—not one person—wrote her. Somehow the audience

must have assumed that the problems that Royster outlined were somehow *her* problem and not *our* problem.

Pat Parker addresses this problem in a poem entitled “For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend.” She writes, “The first thing you do is to forget that i’m Black. / Second, you must never forget that i’m Black” (68). In other words, taking difference into account is complex; it involves actively affirming difference and yet also affirmatively forgetting it. The latter is important, or we assume that nothing in our lives can be compared or is the same. As Parker explains, “You should be able to dig Aretha, / but don’t play her every time i come over. / And if you decide to play Beethoven—don’t tell me / his life story. They made us take music appreciation too.”

**Diane:** Roxanne, wouldn’t you agree that naming is also part of the problem? It calls something to our attention, yes, but what gets sacrificed in the very act of naming a difference is *différance*. Certainly, it’s important to discover differences within the category “woman,” as you suggest, which implies cataloguing the various racial, ethnic, and class variables. But what’s so important in that endeavor is the way that the category “woman” itself disintegrates in the process of this cataloguing, a process that inevitably closes, as Butler suggests, “with an embarrassed ‘etc.’” (*Gender Trouble* 143). Ultimately, there is nothing, as Donna Haraway notes in her cyborg manifesto, “about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (155). Indeed, she continues, “Painful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention among women) along every possible fault line has made the concept of *woman* elusive, an excuse for the matrix of women’s dominations of each other.” This problem is in part why Margaret Morrison, for example, sets out “not to plug, cure, control, slap putty over leakiness or signs of fluidity or signs of the perpetual displacement of identity”; rather, she wants “to work at self-overcoming walls and closures (of gender, race, etc.) and to perform affirmative crumbings of the subject’s integrity” (“Celebrating” 207).

**Roxanne:** Ah, but that’s where it gets interesting. In reflecting on the problem of interpreting other lives through writing, Kingsolver says, “I can think of no genetic or cultural credentials that could entitle a writer to [write about others]—only a keen ear, empathy, caution, willingness to be criticized, and a passionate attraction to the subject.” She also admits that

she is “drawn like a kid to mud into the sticky terrain of cultural difference.” She writes, “How wondrous, it seems to me, that someone else can live on the same round egg of a world that I do but explain it differently—how it got here, and what’s to be done with it. How remarkable that other people’s stories often sound more true to me than my own” (154).

I feel the same way. As an ethnographer, I see my *job* as naming, and, yes, it is a “sticky terrain” at best. Still, when I wander into the parlor, I spend time, as Lyotard does, observing the conditions and contexts in which communication occurs—the words that are used, the problems that arise because of incommensurable phrase universes. Naming, like rhetoric, is neither good nor evil; rather, it is the condition we are thrown into by language. I will not be interested in refusing to name the differend, because it is, after all, what Lyotard hoped for. He writes, “Every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases” (*Differend* 13). That is a naming. And true empiricism, Gilles Deleuze has written, is not so different from theory. He suggests that “an empiricist” is “a pluralist” who follows the “logic of multiplicities” (*Dialogues* vii-viii). The researcher, he continues, analyzes “the states of things, in such a way that non-preexistent concepts can be extracted from them”; however, the “[s]tates of things are neither unities nor totalities, but *multiplicities*” (vii). The job of an empiricist is to search for and validate anomalies, to rejoice in the havoc that anomalies play in the creation of grand narratives. But to do that, one must *name*.

**Diane:** Yes, but you’ve skipped an important part in the middle of what you’ve quoted. Deleuze writes the following:

The essential thing, from the point of view of empiricism, is the noun *multiplicity*, which designates a set of lines or dimensions which are irreducible to one another. Every “thing” is made up in this way. Of course a multiplicity includes focuses of unification, centres of totalization, points of subjectivation, but as factors which can prevent its growth and stop its lines. These factors are in the multiplicity to which they belong, and not the reverse. *In a multiplicity what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is “between,” the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other.* Every multiplicity grows from the middle, like the blade of grass or the rhizome. (vii-viii; emphasis added)

**Michelle:** The excluded middle! [*Everybody laughs.*]

**Roxanne:** Yes, you caught me doing the quotation hopscotch. But I don't see a problem here. For instance, hasn't Deleuze done an incredible thing by naming the rhizome? Or, the nature of the thing that it *is* multiple? That is a naming.

**Diane:** Yes, I agree, but this particular naming—rhizome and schizo—simultaneously expresses the very impossibility of naming without also wiping out the excess that can't be contained within the name; that is, without “preventing [the multiplicity's] growth and stopping its lines,” as Deleuze puts it. So it's not that we could possibly *not* name; rather, in naming, or inscribing, it is necessary to realize that we simultaneously exscribe something. Thus, any naming comes with the responsibility of continuously responding to the call of what has been exscribed.

**Michelle:** Is not the ethnographer subjecting the Other to the violence of the name? I am thinking, of course, of Derrida's reading of Lévi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology*, where he writes, “To name . . . is the originary violence of language” (112).

**Roxanne:** The ethnographer is an author, just as Derrida is, and just as you are, Michelle. To be sure, there are some ethnographers who would ask you to buy their classifications as “True,” or who are not careful to show the seams of their work, seams that would show that they are authors. Yet, what is an author? In “What Is an Author?” Foucault has written very well on this subject, but Borges writes about this creature best. In “Borges and I,” the one called “I” (not Borges) writes,

Little by little, I am giving over everything to [Borges], though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things. Spinoza knew that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. (246)

The author, Borges, fabricates, lies, and makes the “I” (not-Borges) disappear in books. This insight is quite alive in anthropology, in rhetoric and composition studies, and in feminism. There are ethnographers and there are ethnographers, and some see their work as true in the way that novels seem true to us: important gauges (sometimes) of what could be

seen if we looked at the everyday through the eyes of *this* author, *this* ethnographer. I aspire to be like Zora Neale Hurston, who ends her brilliant folklore project, *Mules and Men*, with a little story that unravels the “Truth” of her entire book.

**Diane:** I remember your discussion of Hurston's truth-unraveling move in your essay “Engendering Ethnography.” The ending of that piece is very important because it reminds me that ethnography is *writing*; that is, it spotlights the “graphy” that is encapsulated in “ethnography” itself. Anthropology “proper,” so to speak—which asks or asked the question “What is Man?”—seems invested in running down an obsolete trace. But the “graphy” in ethnography—any ethnography, no matter what its relations with or fantasies about “truth”—cannot not be an exposure, an exposition of *différance*. Some ethnographers—Hurston and others—embrace this inevitability. Yet, in the end, it doesn't matter much whether it is embraced. No matter how much of a control freak one might be, if one writes, one involves oneself in, even collaborates with, this exposure.

**Michelle:** I suppose that many would argue, as does Jarratt, that we can avoid this problematic by utilizing—in Spivak's terms—a “double session of rhetoric,” which is a process whereby feminists are “simultaneously naming and reconstructing difference,” simultaneously “articulat[ing] difference while exposing the power relations at work in acts of naming” (“As We Were” 9). And Worsham argues that by attending to the specific temporal moment, one can avoid the pitfall of naming, which “tends to freeze difference in static categories and obscures the fact that our differences are constituted ‘in time,’ that how we listen and what we hear . . . have a lot to do with . . . ‘the specific gravity of hours’”—with the moment in time we find ourselves now (“After Words” 334).

I am doubtful, however, that one can know either the “power relations at work” or the “temporality” of the differend—other than those power relations and that temporality that have been named as such and that are always already subject to the “agreements” or “understandings” of “normal discourse,” or the phrase regimen that has generated the naming *and* the reconstruction of difference. Even if feminisms “give accounts of their practices, discover and describe the spaces in which they operate, and evaluate their effects,” how will the accounts which are rendered from differing phrase regimens or from “abnormal discourse” be heard (Jarratt, “As We Were” 11)? From what perspective? If one is materially and

temporally located in and among various strata of differences, how is it possible to hear that which is radically different and radically outside those spaces? Finally, I am arguing, it is not enough to say “we must make time to listen,” or, we must “dialogue” with Jackie Royster. I am arguing that we have not yet theorized how it is possible to listen to that which is beyond our understanding, that which is beyond our limits.

**Diane:** Yet, I think it is possible to listen beyond our limits—that is, so long as listening doesn’t imply understanding, or inasmuch as listening sets out to bust the initiatory “agreement” that you mention above, Michelle. In *The Differend*, Lyotard calls for a “straining toward unknown senses,” but he certainly wasn’t suggesting that the unknown could magically become known as a result of that straining. It is, rather, the other way around: in the straining, even what was presumed stable, presumed to be “known,” exposes itself as *beyond our grasp*. I hear Deleuze saying something similar in the quotation above, Roxanne—that the closer we look, the more the “knowable” disintegrates into wild ungraspable multiplicities. So we do not read the same Deleuze—even though we read the same Deleuze. In *Dictations*, Ronell, in her reading of Levinas, notes that the same sort of phenomenon occurs within conversation, suggesting that the experience of conversing with an/other sparks “the vertigo of expropriation. It’s not only the case that I am not identical to myself when I begin to converse with you,” she says, “but more severely, perhaps: you are no longer the one I have interiorized or memorized. Breaking the secret contract that sealed you within me, you, in Conversation, are no longer you, or the you at least of whom I have preserved an image” (xii-xiii). Clearly, this listening is not tied to understanding. It’s tied to an affirmation of *différance*, to a perpetual revving up of any settling of difference(s).

**Roxanne:** While I would agree, Diane, that one way of viewing the problem of difference is to affirm *différance*, to do so slaps a kind of phrase universe over injustices that Lyotard found quite namable and potentially understandable. The ethnographer is as potent as the theorist in exploring the differend; thus, when Michelle says that “the ethnographer subject[s] the Other to the violence of the name,” she points the finger at herself. There is no choice but to name if we are to write, and if we are to call all language-use violent (must we be this imprecise?), then we can exclude no one from this indictment.

But I want to be more precise. I agree with you both and affirm here that the concept of *différance* is powerful, and I would not like to lose it as one terministic screen for understanding differences within feminism. In my view, naming is a process of understanding (yes, even with all the baggage associated with the word), a process that does not move toward some Final Solution or totalizing grand narrative, but toward the little narratives that Lyotard calls “the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science” (*Postmodern* 60). As Kingsolver says so beautifully, “Bearing witness is not the same as possession” (155).

I embrace your view, but it is just one view, just as your Deleuze is not my Deleuze. Finally, when I read your work, Diane, I hear you asking your readers to understand the way that a recognition of *différance* busts up meaning. Why else bother to speak or to write? We enter your phrase universe here, and you ask us to go on a wild ride with you. You would not ask us to take a different train. You ask us to take *your* train, and not to miss its wildness. I mean no more than this when I speak of understanding.

**Michelle:** Roxanne, I hear you speaking to how we can listen to difference(s). But to listen to and for *différance*, I would argue, is to listen for what cannot be heard. Diane explains this process as a “straining toward,” which reveals the “known” as unknowable.

**Diane:** The issue, in my view, is *différance*. I don’t affirm it in order to deal with the problem of difference, as you suggest, because differences are simply symptoms of *différance*. We’re sort of talking at cross purposes, Roxanne, and that means we’ll need to be really careful with each other here. As you have described my approach, I would appear either to be caught in a performative contradiction (professing one thing but performing another) or else actually to be calling for a certain kind of understanding. I don’t feel comfortable in that description. *Différance* is my point of departure, a certain recognition and affirmation of a wild play of multiplicities, of radical singularity. Writing is a testament to it: writing is not a *means* of communication, as Jean-Luc Nancy has noted; rather, it is communication itself. Writing, any writing, no matter what is being said, operates as an exposition of finitude: being’s “infinite lack of infinite identity” (Nancy, *Inoperative* xxxviii). When you ask, “Why write if not to seek understanding?” I would say: one writes to respond to the call of writing itself, which is the call of the exscribed. Because to inscribe is also, simultaneously, to exscribe (there’s the inherent violence), the call is

perpetual. And it is, in my view, a *call*: it comes from elsewhere, from the Other, and I respond.

In “Tropes of Conversion,” Roxanne, you and your coauthor Marta Brunner discuss “the rhetoric of the call” in detail. But, of course, I would make a distinction, as Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud do in *Just Gaming*, between responding to the call of God (being the addressee of an all-knowing addresser) and responding to the call of the exscribed (being the addressee of a wild *logos* that has no answers but that never stops talking). Both imply obligation, but not the same obligation.

**Roxanne:** I see your point. My language covered over what you do, so you rephrased. I was challenging us to try not to do that, which only illustrates what difficult work this is. What I do want to affirm, however, is that we are grappling with each other carefully here because the distinctions between our worlds matter. At the end of the day, that is what I mean by understanding, and what Ratcliffe means by “standing under” the discourse of another.

**Michelle:** If I may, I would also like to address Roxanne’s question of “Why else bother to speak or to write?” Although Lyotard does seek phrases for the differend, in *The Postmodern Condition* he also suggests that the postmodern would present the unrepresentable in order to impart a “stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (81). Hence, the naming done here is not in order to “supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” (81). I hear a call here for a kind of “writing” that is engaged in neither to communicate nor to further understanding, but rather to unrepresent, to unname. Turning to Jean Baudrillard’s distinction between production and seduction will help here. According to Baudrillard, systems of production have attempted to master, to dominate, to appropriate the unrepresentable, demanding that “[e]verything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of force, systems of concepts or measurable energy; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded” (34-35). The knowing subject as a function of systems of production writes in order to accomplish this demand. Seduction, in contrast, operates more according to the economy of the secret; it does not produce knowledge or demand that something answer to the reality principle. Rather, it is a challenge to the Real, demonstrating the reversibility of signs, the liquidation of metaphors. I would hope to write seductively rather than productively, thereby chal-

lenging rather than producing understanding, as I have been defining it.

The challenge for feminism(s) now, I’ve been suggesting, is to unknow, unname, unthink that which we presume to know (and the ethnographer presumes all—unavoidably—as the subject bound and determined to know). Can we attend to the differences that *cannot even be thought*, that, indeed, cannot even be catalogued materially (as racial, ethnic, class, or even sexual variables).

**Roxanne:** Again, there are only ethnographers, Michelle, not one essentialized Ethnographer. Some ethnographers work very hard on that which “cannot even be thought” in Western culture. And that work is valuable. It can have the same effect as Borges’ wild categorization of animals. By bending an ear toward those who do not exist for us Westerners, ethnographers can help show us our *absolute finitude*. Franz Boas, the father of modern anthropology in the United States, sent his students to study New World African cultures in order to make the horrors of racism in this country less possible to sustain. He sent them, in effect, to jam the machine. These anthropologists and folklorists thought that what they had to show was “true” in some way, but among this group were Ruth Landes and Zora Neale Hurston, both of whom wrote inventively about the people they studied and lived with, both of whom shook off the notion of their work as “True.” I see only ethnographers, not one grand Ethnographer stalking the Other, like the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man in the film *Ghostbusters*.

**Michelle:** I wasn’t setting the ethnographer apart for a special indictment, but as an example of a subject with a will to know. As always, there are ethnographers and there are ethnographers, just as there is writing and then there is writing. In “Writing against Writing,” Worsham refers to Kristeva’s distinction “between two styles of reading: the political and the postmodern” (83). In Kristeva’s view, the “political” reading is a “consequence of the epistemological attitude which consists, simply, of the desire to give meaning” (qtd. in Worsham 83). This reading appears to be so “natural, so fundamental that it [seems] beyond partisan interests” (83). In contrast, the postmodern reading “arises not from the desire to give meaning but from the desire to go beyond meaning to a topos of pure invention where discourse becomes more radically political to the extent that it approaches the heterogeneous in meaning” (84). Worsham uses this distinction to talk about writing as a commodifiable production and writing as a disruptive challenge to the epistemic (and to the rhetor as an

epistemic): “What could be more subversive to the epistemologist than to assert the existence of something that is not defined, that always exceeds every instrument of theorization?” (89-90).

My question is whether feminisms can begin to read and write “woman” in a postmodern way—that is, as something undefined and undefinable. Doing so will require feminists to think of “woman” not in terms of difference or differences but *différance*. Whereas “woman” has heretofore been theorized as the dialectical other of the male—that is, within the regulated terms of sexual dimorphism—and hence subject to the laws of negation and castration, our current agenda must be to discover the radical otherness of the sexes (all of them, and there are more than two).

**Diane:** Anne Fausto-Sterling is up to five and is still counting. [*Everybody laughs.*]

**Michelle:** It’s not a matter of counting higher and higher and of further naming and cataloguing (“herms,” “merms,” and so forth), thereby making all of the sexes accountable; rather, it is a matter of acknowledging the impossibility (or un-knowing the possibility) of doing so.

**Diane:** As Hélène Cixous suggests, in contrast to Luce Irigaray, sexual difference is multiple, intractable, “innumerable”; inasmuch as it is born of language, it’s a sexual *différance*, irreducible to genitalia and, therefore, always already effaced by phallogocentrism’s either/or mentality.<sup>2</sup> Most of us (feminists included), Cixous says, “are not [yet] strong enough, not [yet] agile enough” to cope with the “confusion, torment, or bewilderment” that the sexual “identity card” covers over (*Three* 50-51). Yet, as I said, I think feminism’s future lies in that direction, where *différance* is embraced and community is understood not as a communion of sameness but as what Nancy calls a “togetherness of otherness” (“Finite” 157).

Clarice Lispector offers a wonderful window into this future in her novel, *The Passion According to G.H.* When G.H. has a chance encounter with a cockroach, she is at first grossed out—horrified and immobilized. In the face of the “abominable,” she freaks. But when she begins to think through her own repulsion, to run it through her ethical channels, she recognizes that her inability to make a space for the absolute Other also makes it impossible for her to really love, to love without moderation. As she considers this, she looks again at the cockroach, which she’s partially smashed with the cabinet door. She examines the white paste oozing from

its crusty mass. Then, suddenly, in a confused fit of ethics and conscience (one that ought to look mighty familiar to liberals), she *takes it in*. She *eats* it. Or, rather, she tastes it, the white cockroach paste. This act immediately sends her into a puking fit; she vomits, vomits, vomits. In the throes of this spewing, she realizes her mistake: her act was heroic but it was not generous. She had attempted to take in the cockroach’s “roachness,” to incorporate it into herself rather than to affirm it as Other. In this moment, G.H. learns the lesson of lessons: the task of attending to the Other, the supreme task, involves not incorporating but affirming the Other’s otherness, resisting the urge to absorb it into the (self)same. Or, as Cixous puts it, the task is “to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification” (“Author” 171). Roxanne’s discussion about the exotic Other suggests much the same lesson.

**Roxanne:** May I just say that I work pretty hard to keep the cockroaches out of my house. And—while we’re on the subject—feminism has created its abject Others in order to highlight injustice and to create new cultural spaces for women. Do I have to embrace a rapist? I know that Foucault worked very hard to help sex offenders in France throughout his lifetime, and that he had some pretty controversial views of rape. Another way of asking this question is as follows: would feminism cease to exist if it were no longer possible to oppose at least *some* kinds of abject Others?

**Diane:** I think, on the contrary, that feminism becomes what it is in those moments when it manages to get beyond that kind of abjection and opposition, particularly since the very desire to rape or violate is, to a large extent, already an effect of phallogocentrism, of its identification/differentiation machine. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray notes, for example, that it is the very presentation (she says “fantasy”) of the body as “closed, solid, virginal” that prompts the urge to break violently into it, to conquer it via “forced entry” (201). If the body were understood as fluid, leaky, transgressive, if—and here I really would have to part with Irigaray—if *the* sexual difference were embraced as sexual *différance*, rape’s appeal would dissolve; forced entry wouldn’t make sense, and thus there would be no “treasure” to be found in rape, no gain, no glory.

I’m not saying here that rape is itself embraceable, that we should go out and support our local rapists. I’m saying that rape (as well as the abject status of the cockroach) is itself an effect of a certain ordering system—a phallogocentric ordering system—and that rape is what it is only within this system. Although we certainly must attend to rape victims right here,

right now, I think we also really have to move toward another style of thinking altogether, a nonreactionary way of thinking that would be post-phallogocentric and so post-androcentric. Until we can take that turn, rape tragically will satisfy a “need,” a “lack” that is a function of the system itself; simply fighting against this act from within the system that sets its conditions of possibility will get us nowhere.

**Roxanne:** I find this analysis—this naming of the problem—extremely helpful, for it exposes the differend in very interesting ways. But even if we were to imagine this non-reactionary space from which to think, what would that mean in the shortrun, where, for instance, injustices continue to occur from within the system we live in now?

**Diane:** Again, one doesn’t check out of the here and now. Attending to the Other is an imperative issued on many registers—for example, the physical, the emotional, the intellectual—and in all temporalities: past, present, future.

**Michelle:** I concur with Diane in that if we truly did embrace *différance*, we would dissolve sexual difference and the phallogocentric economy that gives rape its currency, its meaning, its motivation. But I would like to attend to the question “What about rape?” insofar as that question has served as a rhetorical trump card, laid to foreground the limit, the dividing line between “feminists” and “ruined” feminists. Indeed, the question of rape (which serves as a rhetorical marker for feminists to exhibit their moral outrage at the violence inflicted on real women, real bodies) ironically serves to inflict its own kind of violence on “real” women who profess another feminism. That is, I am suggesting that *this* particular question serves as one of the formidable gatekeepers for the feminist community; specifically, it serves to discipline feminists. Let me use a personal example (and the irony of doing so is not lost on me). Years ago, I gave a conference paper on Baudrillard’s notion of seduction as a third term that could help us to rethink subjectivity and agency, to rethink these notions outside the active/passive binary. I used Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen* as an example of how this could be accomplished rhetorically—that is, how Helen had been seduced rhetorically beyond the binary. However, as you know, Helen of Troy (the mythological character at least) had been abducted by Theseus and then by Paris. It could be argued, of course, that Helen had not been seduced but raped, and the rape question was posed to me by a prominent feminist in the audience. Let me

just say that this is a woman whose work I greatly admire, a woman who has supported me professionally in innumerable ways. Thus, I do not retell this tale in order to trash her but to demonstrate the rhetorical force of the question. The question was posed no doubt with sincere concern for “real” bodies that are raped. But the question that evening served another, perhaps unintentional purpose, as well. It served quite effectively to announce that the work I was doing was patently *not* feminist. This question, I am suggesting, is so overdetermined that it serves to draw the boundaries for acceptable and unacceptable feminisms. By doing so, this question itself calls for a differend, and we would do well to ask ourselves why this rape question is so nonnegotiable. If we were to attend to the differend, we would have to address ourselves to such questions as why *this* is our rhetorical limit. Is there a way to negotiate it without merely tolerating it?

**Roxanne:** The person you are speaking to right here and now finds this question a difficult one personally. This is *my* limit—I am not speaking for all feminists here. Nor do I think that the question of whether or not we embrace the rapist is *the* question (I wouldn’t know how to judge that point). I am trying to imagine the most abject human in order to imagine the embrace of the indecent, and for this feminist right now, that is the abject human (with apologies to Foucault). I can certainly think of others; we can all think of others.

Isn’t this an interesting differend? We’ve been talking about thinking beyond categories as a way to understand the nature of our differends. Yet, the differend can be as simple as listening to each other speak from *within* our categories. Butler also suggests that we are flung into our subjectivities by multiple external forces, so we also need to take that into consideration when we negotiate our differences. In *The Psychic Life of Power* she writes, “social power produces modes of reflexivity at the same time as it limits forms of sociality. In other words, to the extent that norms operate as psychic phenomena, restricting and producing desire, they also govern the formation of the subject and circumscribe the domain of a livable sociality” (21). When we reflect on ourselves and our condition, we speak from within these limits.

I am experiencing a differend here in your response to me in this moment. You speak across me to a different feminist at a different time. As you reach across time, however, you make this a generic moment and therefore you’ve missed speaking to me. Obviously, the moment you are talking about—a different moment in time—was used to stop you and to

dismiss you. But I'm not dismissing you; I'm not dismissing Diane. I'm struggling to imagine myself embracing the indecent. This struggle began while reading Diane's *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* as a work in progress; it's a struggle I want to have.

**Michelle:** First, I wouldn't argue that the rape question is *the* question. I am suggesting that it can serve as a rhetorical trump card. And, here—for you asked the question—it is *the* question at hand. Second, I agree that I did reach across you, so to speak, to another moment in time. But, third, I don't know how my doing so necessarily demonstrates that I have missed speaking to you. Still, I will try again. Tell me why this is your limit. You drew it as such in your response. And, yet, you end your response by saying you want to struggle nonetheless. Could you speak to this more? If you did so, perhaps this would also clarify how we can “listen to each other speak from within our categories.” What categories do you presume we are currently inhabiting? What “multiple external forces” are you referring to as you find yourself “flung”?

**Roxanne:** You are asking great questions here; in fact, let me make a mimetic aside and say that I had to go away to think about it. Actually, and I'm not making this up (as Dave Barry says), I went away in order to hear Jane Hill, Regents Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Arizona, talk about how whiteness is a condition that causes many (white and non-native) Southwesterners to go out and accumulate artifacts from other cultures. [Roxanne looks down at her Zuni ring.] This question is tricky, because even coming to understand how we see ourselves from external logics is a difficult, though not impossible, process. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler begins to examine how subjection and subjectivity are flip sides of the same coin. She argues that all self-understanding is a paradox. For instance, if we want to understand ourselves, we must begin with the law, for all subjects begin life with a “passionate complicity with law, without which no subject can exist” (108). And if we would critique the law, we must first realize that a critical review of the law will not “undo the force of conscience unless the one who offers that critique is willing, as it were, to be undone by the critique that he or she performs” (108). The difficulty of overcoming conscience forms the powerful theme of “melancholy” in *The Psychic Life of Power*.

Thus, if I am to embrace the rapist, I must first critique the law. A critique of the law will begin to undo me as a subject. That is, the law teaches me to see my body in a particular way, so rape is part of the horror

show of threatened violence through which I understand myself as “woman.” Not pretty, but true. I know there is a problem here, and I can see where you come from, but subjectivity is not easy to overcome. That's the best I can do.

Now back to the cockroaches. If I promise to try to reach toward a recognition of *différance*, will you promise not to make me eat a cockroach, girls? [Everybody laughs.]

**Diane:** That may have been an unproductive metaphor. What wants to be said here doesn't really have anything to do with insects per se. I don't think it's helpful to ask yourself, “Could I eat a cockroach?” or “Could I embrace a family of them?” But what I think Lispector is trying to address—or, at least what I was trying to address through her text—is that there is nothing ethical or particularly progressive about “eating” the Other, absorbing the Other into the (self)same. Liberal agendas continue to founder on this score. The (self)same makes use of the strategies of repulsion, assimilation, and exclusion to perpetuate a kind of relay race against otherness, strategically passing the baton among its strategies whenever necessary. When repulsion is no longer acceptable, then assimilation takes over. But when there is excess that can't be absorbed (and there is always excess), then the baton is passed to exclusion/excretion/effacement. What's at stake in the race is any possibility for an affirmation of the Other *as* Other—not an affirmation of the Other as “just like me” but an affirmation of the Other as *absolute* Other. To attend to the Other as Other, we'd need a major attitude adjustment, a serious interrogation of aesthetics, for one thing, that would push us into a kind of post-aesthetic space.

**Roxanne:** Please say more about what you mean about “post-aesthetic space.” I thought we were talking about the physical act of rape.

**Diane:** I think the physical act and the aesthetic approach are intricately intertwined. Lispector is one of Cixous' most important inspirations because Lispector embraces a kind of post-aesthetics. (That's not really a good word for it—an aesthetics beyond aesthetics.) She has learned to respect the between-us space, the space between the I and the Other, and to respect it even when the Other is not (yet) considered “beautiful.” Cixous notes, for instance, that both Rilke and Lispector—through their poetry, their words, their approaches—have managed to bring a rose into the room, to bring it to life, with their words. “To get to the heart of the

rose,” Cixous says, “we have only to take the rose’s path, to go to it according to its way. Approaching with such an absence of self, with such lightness, without disturbing its proximity . . . [that now] there is a rose in the room” (“Clarice” 75). Cixous applauds both Rilke and Lispector for their capacity to write a rose to life by granting it its space and its otherness, but as she continues, she makes a distinction:

Now, maintaining, and keeping the same elements, the same tenderness, the same respect, Clarice can replace a rose with a turtle. But Rilke could replace it only with a unicorn. . . . But Clarice with a cockroach. But Rilke no. But Clarice with an oyster. But Rilke only in lacework. (75)

Cixous’ point is not to trash Rilke but to illustrate what she calls Lispector’s “most beautiful of lessons: *the lesson of ugliness*.” Lispector has lost her “fear of the ugly,” and she herself notes that this loss is “a very great good. It is a delight,” for with this loss goes all limitation, the artificial restrictions of the “decent” (13). In the instant that the restrictions collapse, the excessive generosity of Being rushes forth. Exuberance is G.H.’s response to this rush; she gets high on it; and it leads her to conclude that “joy is imund.” In English, Cixous notes, *imund* translates as *unclean*. But in French and Brazilian, it means *out of the world* (*Three* 116-17). As soon as “you cross the line the law has drawn by wording, verb(aliz)ing, you are supposed to be out of the world,” Cixous says—and that means phallogocentrism’s world, the only “world” we know. This is the point that both Lispector and Cixous are trying to make: real joy, exuberance, lies in this embrace of excess, of overflow; it lies in this affirmative leap out-of-the-world. “Joy is imund,” they say; it’s beyond the law, beyond the decent—and “it is not unclean” (*Three* 117).

It seems to me that feminism’s future lies in affirming the so-called indecent; in fact, I’d say feminism’s home lies in that affirmation. But that also suggests that we feminists are a long way from home—and also that we’ll never finally arrive, that at best we’ll be always on our way home, on our way out of the world that phallogocentrism has made. The question for me is to find a way to chart this expropriating course home. How do we set our sights on an exuberant feminism that refrains from becoming phallogocentrism’s “answering machine,” as Ronell puts it—a feminism that’s beyond reaction, that overflows boundaries, and that embraces its own *différance*? In short, how do we avoid “a *ressentimental* [feminist] politics” (Ronell, Interview 127-28)?

**Michelle:** In my view, the difference is between feminism as a politics or feminism as an ethical way of being.

**Diane:** Yes, I agree, Michelle, except that this ethics *is* an/other politics, a post-phallogocentric ethico-politics of self-overcoming, as Nietzsche might put it.

**Roxanne:** You know what I’ve already said about self-overcoming, about how hard it is. However, I agree with Michelle that seeing feminism as an ethical way of being is very attractive. It seems to me that we can start working toward this goal by learning to negotiate differends. But we’ll have to strain to *hear* the differend before we can negotiate, and it seems to me that we must first decide that straining is worth doing. Our understanding of time can get in the way here; Lyotard teaches us that capitalism’s tick-tick-tick can leave us believing that there is no time to do this kind of intellectual work.<sup>3</sup> We trash each other in private instead. We fail to write e-mail to Jackie Royster.

We must make time, and we must forestall our urge to trash. When there is a differend, we must decide what is at issue, what terms are being invoked by each party, and, I would add, what each party needs. In this way, the differend is a problem that rhetoric and rhetoricians can begin to resolve.

**Michelle:** Once again, this is the difference, as I see it, between listening for differences and listening for *différance*. When negotiating *différance*, how is one going to be able to decide what is at issue? How can one know?

**Roxanne:** I don’t know how to answer that question. But I have seen that considering some feminists as the exotic Others encourages us to hold them at a distance to look at but never engage, or to engage them as a project, as Parker suggests. Considering some feminists as the sister-insider encourages us to think of them as the same as us, and to hold them to our own private standards. The truth is that all feminists—including those I count as my closest friends—are both exotic Others and sister-insiders. We are within *ourselves* both exotic Others and sister-insiders. Maybe that is the place to begin.

I’d like to tell a story about a classroom moment in which a differend became hearable. It occurred in a writing class that I taught composed of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. One day a racial issue arose in small group discussion. Two African American students came to me to talk

about it—one of them in tears. The white students—some of whom were of the “we are all Americans” school of thought—were displaying their ignorance with a little muscle. I therefore asked students to read an essay by bell hooks and to respond to it, but this time they had to dialogue through what I called an ethnographic listening exercise. I explained to them that their job was to sit in a circle and discuss the essay, but they had to do it in the following way: a student spoke, and the student to his or her right had to repeat everything the speaker said. The speaker then had a right to correct the student ethnographer if she or he had not listened well enough or needed more explanation in order to offer a responsible paraphrase. The most important phenomenon was the emotional one: students who didn’t hear were most often corrected through being told stories that explained why an issue was painful or difficult or confusing. The most extraordinary event in the class was the discovery that three students of twenty (one black, two white) had been to the same race-awareness camp called “Any Town.” An exercise that lasted three class meetings culminated in one student singing the “Any Town” anthem to the class. The differends that separated these students were at least partially exposed. And while I’m not going to claim that we negotiated these differences, I will claim that my students and I heard each other’s differences in more dynamic ways.

As I said before, I am an ethnographer, and my goal in life is to teach and exhibit what Hurston called a “formalized curiosity” (*Dust Tracks* 127). I like the word *curiosity*, because curiosity is a desire. It is like lust, or greed, or love—it is a basic human need. I wonder if we could find a way to become curious about differends as opposed to furious or judgmental. If so, then we have found a way to harness a basic human desire as a way of responding to difference.

**Michelle:** When I make a call for listening, I am calling for (mis)understanding.

**Diane:** Michelle, do you really mean you’re *calling* for it? Does that suggest that (mis)understanding is something that we must consciously will? While I certainly think communication’s ethical task is to communicate the withdrawal of understanding, and though I’m always calling for the exposition and affirmation of this withdrawal, I would not say that misunderstanding per se needs to be *called* for. I’d say it precedes us, and that in fact, “we,” to a large extent, are a function of “it.” In “What is it That the Audience Wants?” I hear you calling for “just sending,” for

a sending/writing/speaking that does not require a return, and for a listening that does not rush to judgment, that does not presume to understand. But here, you’re calling for misunderstanding itself. Are you, perhaps, busting something of a Deleuzo-Guattarian move, one analogous to their call to make the multiple?

**Michelle:** No, I’m not consciously working out of Deleuze and Guattari here. As I briefly mentioned before, I think that understanding is something that precedes listening. Of course, this understanding is a fiction, but it is a pretty powerful one—one that predisposes us to hear certain things and to exclude others. I further think that understanding is impossible because of the instability of language—that is, because of *différance*. A (mis)understanding would be an embrace of *différance*, would be (as you noted) a sending/writing/speaking that does not presume to understand, does not presume to know. I suppose (mis)understanding would be an attending to the impossibilities rather than the possibilities of understanding. Perhaps I could compare this call to Lyotard and Thébaud’s notion of paganism wherein “the gods do not speak to me, even when I consult them. As they say, they signify, they do not speak. . . . And their oracles are always very dangerous because they lend themselves to misunderstanding. There is no truthfulness [no understanding], in fact, quite the contrary”—only “ceaseless negotiations and ruses” (42-43). This kind of sending/writing/speaking *is* dangerous. But I think this is a danger we are obligated to risk if we are to negotiate *différance*.

Of course, it is *safest* to say we will tolerate difference, safest to say we will listen to the Other in the communal parlor insofar as we empathize with the exoticism of the Other (or actually insofar as “we” constitute the Other as exotic). Yet, to negotiate *différance*—not just difference—within the feminist community is going to require, indeed, that we risk the parlor itself. In the beginning of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we are introduced to a tightrope walker—a man who risks himself constantly, who risks the abyss. The rope over the abyss is infinitely divisible, a series of points, a series of gaps. Hence, it could be said that a line is a “fiction,” just as a point is a fiction and just as a subatomic particle, like an electron, is mostly space. Similarly, the feminist community is a fictional body, a line drawn as a logical convenience, which, once drawn, constructs a dot-to-dot picture that ignores the abyss of difference that exists between each dot.

The tightrope walker “lives ‘unphilosophically’ and ‘unwisely,’ above all *imprudently*, and feels the burden and the duty of a hundred

attempts and temptations of life—he risks *himself* constantly, he plays the wicked game” (Nietzsche, *Beyond* 125). Likewise, the future feminist might be the one who risks the tightrope, risks the whole, and acknowledges the gaps, the distance, and the *différance* that constitute the fictional line upon which we walk: the feminist community. Thus, for Nietzsche, the notions of distance and the “tragic pathos” become the “pathos of distance”—a pathos based not on consensus, not on the collapse of difference but rather on dissensus, difference, distance.

How to risk *différance*? How to listen to the differend? The answer: by coming (together) in writing. Communication, according to Georges Bataille, only takes place between two people who risk themselves. To illustrate this risk, I remind you of Cixous’ use of her monogram of “H” as a figure of the “ladder of writing”—as an “I” and another “I” connected by a horizontal bar, a passageway between the two shores, which we risk, as tightrope walkers. Learning to walk this walk, talk this talk, write this write will require the cultivation of in/*différance*. This word, spelled thus, does not indicate a crass insensitivity to the Other; on the contrary, it indicates an attentiveness to the Other, to the differend, to the spaces between women, to the radical differences between us and the radical *différance* that characterizes the differend.

**Roxanne:** Ethnography is a form of writing—literally, a writing about culture. And *if* you go forward with this project, you will be naming the spaces between women, because to write is to name.

**Michelle:** Again, I think that there is writing and then there is writing: a postmodern writing or a writing as seduction will *decodify* Truth or truths upon which the epistemic project rests; and this writing would demonstrate an in/*différance* to know.

**Diane:** Obviously, I think this is very important, Michelle, this explicit busting of the epistemic project. I’m into it, too. But I also think, on another register, that we are where we are today in this postfoundational space because this project is crumbling on its own. I think this crumbling is inevitable because writing—no matter what the intent of it—is always exposing *différance*. There are, of course, explosive texts that are in your face about it (which we love); and then there are constipated texts that try really hard to hold onto themselves (or, to put it another way, texts that try very hard to be self-cleaning, to put the house of being in order). But a reader who is attuned—as you noted earlier when you cited Worsham’s “Writing against Writing”—will notice the mess, the wild *différance*

that’s stuffed under the beds, hidden in the closets of a text. In that sense, even the “self-cleaning text” (that’s Ronell’s phrase) actively busts its own project.<sup>4</sup>

**Michelle:** I agree. Although I laid out the distinction between epistemic writing and postmodern writing as two distinct things, I wouldn’t claim, as you suggest I do, that one writing is rhetorical and the other is not, meaning that one kind of writing undoes itself and the other is impervious to such a self-undoing. To make this point, I could point to Paul de Man, who looks at the “rhetorical question” as a pretext to talk about the distinction between “literal” and “figural” meanings. He writes,

It is not so that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation. . . . The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. (10)

All of that is to acknowledge that writing is always already a rhetorical question: it is impossible to draw the line between rhetoric as epistemic and rhetoric as seduction.

**Diane:** This attentiveness you call for, Michelle, this in/*différance* (good word) would suggest an affirmative approach to the differend. When faced with a differend, our options are few: we might leap into irresponsible indictment, delegitimizing discourse; we might fall into frustrated silence and just say, “that’s that”; or, we might interpret the differend otherwise, not as a threat or a roadblock but as an exposition of *différance*. Furthermore, we could approach that exposition affirmatively—by attending to the Other, as Michelle suggests. Or, as Roxanne puts it, we could become curious rather than furious. In fact, Ronell describes what she calls “the affirmative differend” in her essay, “The Differends of Man.” This version “talks and negotiates; it listens and articulates itself responsively rather than reactively”; that is, it rigorously explores the limits of the differend proper and strives toward the conditions of “colegitimacy” (262).

**Michelle:** Diane, I must interrupt to say that I still hope that we can ditch the “legitimacy” language and find new metaphors or rather metonymies (see Brady).

**Diane:** I do appreciate this concern, Michelle; it’s a significant one. At the same time, I think it’s very important to recognize the extent to which we’re trapped in the iterable, stranded in here with old and dangerous words that are packing (humanist) pistols. Even “I” is a worn out concept-metaphor that trucks with all sorts of self-inflated ego-ideals that have a really nasty history. Yet, you repeatedly say, “I argue that . . .” And why not? It’s a good word that makes that marvelous tightrope analogy operational. It is necessary, though, that it be reworked, worked over until it mutates, explodes with multiplicitous possibilities. You and I both rework the concepts of “woman” and the “feminine” so that they will not be stranded, victims of their unfortunate histories. The three of us—here, I’ll “out” us all—have recuperated the term *slut* over the last several years, slapping each other with that label in the most celebratory fashion and with admiration and affection. [*Everybody laughs.*] It’s a good word.

**Roxanne:** I protest!

**Diane:** Similarly, when *legitimate* can simultaneously refer to me and to the absolute, misunderstood, inappropriate Other, the term can no longer go on as it once did. A little semiotic insurrection has been initiated. Likewise, when *genuine* is uttered in a way that is in no sense attached to a presumption of universal grounds or standards, it mutates. This mutation is not nothing. I’m all for new idioms and neologisms, but I also want to re-inhabit the already iterable and, as Cixous might say, make old terms “steal and fly.” I think becoming attuned to these little semiotic revolutions is an important part of negotiating the differend affirmatively.

**Michelle:** I’m all for semiotic revolutions. I think my tactic, however, is slightly different. I do—as you point out—transvalue “woman” and the “feminine”; I do so by working the term to its extreme: I take these two concepts with an always already negative valence within a phallogocentric economy, and I work their so-called negative baggage and pack and pack that baggage until it explodes (and calls attention to the previously unacknowledged packing).

**Diane:** The affirmative differend, as Ronell writes, encourages perpetual negotiation by “introducing a complication into the itinerary of differ-

ences [that are] viewed as sheer oppositionality or incommensurability” by pointing up, that is, the movement, the kicking and screaming of *différance* that is covered over in the very laying out of differences (“Differends” 265). Here is a hypothetical example: if Teresa Ebert were to show any interest in listening, in opening the conversation anew with so-called ludic feminists, then Haraway, for instance, might say to her: “According to your descriptions, you strive for liberation, I play with language; you work against oppression, I laugh at oppression. But I don’t recognize myself in your descriptions, in the oppositions you’ve established.”<sup>5</sup> This response would call into question the differences upon which Ebert bases her claim; it would, that is, set *différance* into play again by thwarting the oppositional logic that forces differences to crystallize, to become “nameable.”

At the end of *The Newly Born Woman*, Clément and Cixous enter into dialogue with each other about several things, including Freud’s Dora. After a long exchange in which they seem to be talking at cross-purposes about hysteria, Clément finally says to Cixous: “Listen, you love Dora, but to me she never seemed a revolutionary character.” This is Clément’s attempt to halt the play of differences, to draw a line between herself and Cixous, to locate Cixous on the opposite side of a single issue, and to call *that* the reason for their inability to come to agreement. But Cixous won’t stay put, won’t, in fact, acknowledge this line at all. Cixous responds, “I don’t give a damn about Dora; I don’t fetishize her. She is the name of a certain force, which makes the little circus not work anymore” (157). Cixous’ impatient response indicates, again, an attempt to thwart the oppositional logic that would sacrifice *différance* in the name of naming differences, and naming them in order, finally, to arrive at understanding.

The affirmative differend says: “Let’s talk; let’s start this conversation again in other terms.” Here “let’s talk” means “let’s listen,” because this kind of conversing implies a prior and perpetual listening. Ronell notes that this is “a mode of talking as listening,” listening for and exploding the presumed oppositions that establish the impasse (*Differends* 265). And not so that it might lead magically toward understanding. Rather, this approach implies an attentiveness to the other *as* Other, an attentiveness, as Michelle put it, to the radical differences that characterize the differend. It implies, that is, the necessity for a *perpetual* listening, a continuous straining toward the other. The goal is not to talk a little in order to clear things up, finally and fully. The goal is to open an ongoing state of talking as listening, to open a finely tuned ear for differends and the will toward negotiation, toward negotiating a feminist *différance*.

**Roxanne:** What we are negotiating here in this conversation, it seems to me, is the possibility of naming a process and, perhaps, an attitude toward attending to the Other and to feminist *différance*.

**Michelle:** Or, perhaps, the possibility of unnamng the processes or the attitudes that preclude attending to the Other.

**Roxanne:** To be rigorously engaged in naming means, in my view, to rigorously attend to what is not easily named. Otherwise, there is no reason to go into the field. We have been grappling over the control of linguistic and symbolic means of representing what we see as the problem behind feminist trashing in the parlor. In the grappling we have seen a few of the differends between us. In the end, we cannot merely say, “See, feminist ethnographers and post-feminist philosophers can talk without trashing each other.” Nor can we ask, “Can feminists and postmodernists be friends?” To negotiate is to struggle, to be hurt, to be confused, to become angry. If we are to stop trashing, we must see the struggle to listen as worth it, even when (and here I hear my sisters Michelle and Diane saying, “especially when!”) understanding is forestalled, and the only celebration at the end of the day is that we have strained to hear and no one has been ejected from the parlor.

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## Notes

1. This project began as an effort to both perform and negotiate feminist differends at the Second Biennial Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference in Minneapolis. We are grateful to the conference organizers—Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Hildy Miller, Lisa Albrecht, Laura Gurak, and Ann Browning—for providing a marvelous forum for us to explore our ideas.

2. For an intricate teasing through of what Irigaray might mean by “sexual difference,” see Cheah and Grosz.

3. Here Roxanne is indebted to Lonni Pearce, whose seminar paper “Lyotard’s Discussion of the Economic Genre in *The Differend: Implications for Pedagogy*” helped her think about the way capitalist notions of time can interrupt meaningful intellectual reflection.

4. In “Namely, Eckermann,” Ronell puts this much better than I can when she discusses this “self-cleaning text,” or what she also calls “hygienic writing”: “Each thinking text, to the extent that it develops strategies of protection against outside interference or parasitism, is run by an immunological drive. Perhaps every text can be shown to be phantasmically producing antibodies against the autoimmune community it has established within itself (a within that is constantly leaking, running an exscription machine, exposed precisely to a contaminating ‘outside’” (159).

5. This hypothetical scenario is based on an exchange between Lacoue-Labarthe and Lyotard at the Cerisy-la-Salle colloquium on August 1, 1982. Ronell describes the scene in “Differends,” and Lacoue-Labarthe published his remarks in *diacritics* in 1984 under the title “Talks.” Two years prior to this exchange, at another Cerisy-la-Salle Colloquium, Lacoue-Labarthe and Lyotard experienced a breakdown in communication, a roadblock in their discussions. The dispute that had led to two years of on-again and off-again silence between them hinges on Lyotard’s definitions of “modernism” and “postmodernism,” definitions that leave Lacoue-Labarthe trapped in the former but free Lyotard to romp in the latter. Carefully laying out what he considers the terms of the original conflict, Lacoue-Labarthe begins:

Reading you, my first reaction is to say to myself: there, it is very clear; I am on the side of the modern and he of the postmodern, that is what unites us (since the one does not go without the other) and what separates us (since there is a moment when the division is made, and must be made violently). And everything over which we diverge, over which we have come many times to argue, comes down to this: I regret, he experiments; . . . I am nostalgic, sad, . . . reactive, . . . pious; he is affirmative, gay, . . . active, pagan. A great separation of “values,” and I don’t exactly find myself on the best side. (“Talks” 25)

Lyotard’s own phrase universe, then, leaves Lacoue-Labarthe trapped on the bad side of a binary opposition. This is a threshold of their differend. And from here, Lacoue-Labarthe makes his affirmative move. It looks for a second as if he will launch an argument in favor of his own pomo candidacy. Instead, he goes after the opposition itself: the dichotomy established between the modern and the postmodern. He doesn’t recognize himself entirely in nostalgia and regret, he says. The era is given to mourning, but one can bear it lightly; one can even “secretly rejoice.” But Lacoue-Labarthe doesn’t really “believe” in Lyotard’s notions of “postmodernism” either; he’s skeptical. In his view, this either/or doesn’t cut it; he himself figures as the excess for which it cannot

account: he can't find a place in this opposition. It's right here, he says, in this blurring of the line drawn between them that "the discussion can begin [again]" (25).

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