Surfaces

Introduction
Roundtable 2

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There is something about indexing, especially indexing a book like *Feminism Beside Itself*, which forces you to go beyond treating each essay in isolation. You are led instead to do reading that goes beyond the diversity of personal styles and approaches, a reading that brings to your attention points of worry, themes, and questions which are common to all the texts. You also find yourself having fun with the logic of this indexing business because it is, after all, a rather fastiduous job. So you play with its logic, pushing it to absurdity. And you want to include a couple of joke-entries; you want to put side-by-side the names of such famous people as Aristotle and Madonna, Tina Turner and Shakespeare. Or you have fun registering Clarence Thomas under the "Anita Hill" entry of this strange directory: "Clarence Thomas: see Anita Hill"... She tells the story.

At one point, led by this indexing logic, I even found myself sending the reader from the "women" entry to a very succinct definition on page 187: "feminism's greatest problem." The phrase is taken from Rosalyn Delmar's "What is Feminism" where she argues that "Women, in a sense, are feminism's greatest problem."[**1**] What is at stake here, Cyrania Johnson-Roullier points out, is the question of difference, or more precisely, that of multiplicity and the threat it poses to an idea of identity understood in terms of unity. What strikes me

first here is that this discussion about the multiple identities of feminism seems to follow directly from a recognition of the multiplicity of identities that one finds among women. It is as if the connection was both representational and mimetic, as if talking in terms of plural identities of feminism would ensure a more ethical account, or a more "just"-in the sense of "realist"-representation; in other words, the goal seems to be to ensure that justice would be done to the various identities of women "out there." There is, however, a danger in this kind of thinking, which can turn out to be a false cure for feminism's acute case of post-monolithic mea-culpa syndrome. By facing the empirical reality of differences among women, the temptation is great simply to turn the problem of difference "*and*" feminism into difference "*within*" feminism, into a problem to be settled in terms of only more of "*a*" feminism. In this way, we do not end up rejecting otherness as much as accommodating it within an horizon of consensual integration of difference. In "Authenticity is Such a Drag," Sabina Sawhney rightly argues that such a gesture can only lead us to add another item to the list of all our "others," all finally to be incorporated into "some version of a global McSisterhood."[**2**] Following the suggestion made by Valeria Wagner in her own essay, I would suggest that we should consider the possibility that opening feminism *to* difference means not accommodating difference "*within*" feminism but rather opening the door to difference *from* feminism. In such a horizon of dissensus, we would be forced to question the very terms and discursive modes through which feminism has until now thought itself.

The point is, therefore, not to discard a previous, rather monolithic Idea of feminism for a revised, more appropriate one that could be agreed upon by more women, but to try instead to think of feminism without recourse to an Idea at all.[**3**] This is a suggestion that could be equivalent-and here I am opening the question for discussion-to an argument made by some of the panelists: that we should move beyond Identity, beyond the necessity for feminism to adopt an Idea of itself.

Pushing this even further, I would argue that we need to do more than simply multiply the narratives that allow us to produce Identities, that is to say we need to do more than multiply histories or even *H*istories. We should question instead the very structural logic that guides our production of these individual narratives as well as the logic by which we make them fit into a larger narrative frame. In this sense, it is not enough to allow for the proliferation of a larger number of narratives; we must

also pay attention to (and explore) new modes of narrativity-a work which has been done mostly through philosophical reflection but also-and I would suggest often more successfully-through poetic or literary experimentation. The idea is thus not only to allow for the production of more histories or *H*istories of feminism, or for the production of new revolutionary ones (the modernist temptation). Rather, we should irreverently divert the narratives with which we are already familiar from their assigned end, an end which, more often than not, has had to do with the construction of an identity. This may mean, for example, allowing for difference not within but from *H*istory as a narrative genre.

Here we may not be far from the call, made by Karin Cope and Alessandra Tanesini, that we pay attention to the question of ethics and politics, without waiting first for the "metaphysical" question of identity to be solved. At the same time, we should consider whether feminism must start thinking about this question of identities by paying attention to the "common sense" versions of feminism held by women who refuse to identify themselves as feminists, that is, start paying attention to a cluster of small narratives which do not fear contradiction. It may not be an uninteresting approach; it may map for us the kind of logic that is involved when one disregards-rather than attempts to "move beyond"-identity as a construct, refuses to go by an Idea of feminism, choosing instead to pay attention to the more urgent issues of ethics and politics.

NOTES

1. Feminism Beside Itself, ed. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) p. 187.

2. Sabina Sawhney, Authenticiy is Such a Drag in Feminism Beside Itself, p. 205.

3. Here I am making an argument suggested to me by my reading of Bill Readings' book on the question of the university, The University in Ruins (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).