I would like to begin today by outlining briefly the particular conjunction of the personal and the professional that has led to my interest in the overlap (or interaction) of feminism and postmodernism. My current research has been into what I have been calling the “poetics” of postmodernism, the points at which aesthetic practice and our theoretical discourses (philosophical, literary, historical) overlap. My idea is that all these points we can see the common denominators that characterize our culture and to which we seem determined to give the wretchedly ambiguous label: postmodernist. If ever there was a four-letter word in the history of literature, it must be that free-standing, wonderfully contradictory prefix POST.

The model I have been using (since everyone has a model for talking about the postmodern—whether it be admitted or not) is the first relatively uncontested use of the term: that parodic, historically allusive recalling of the past of architectural forms that is called postmodern architecture—the work of Paolo Portoghesi, Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, and many others. Now, many theorists have argued that postmodernism represents a reaction against the homogenizing influence of mass culture of late capitalist society. And no doubt they are right. One of the manifestations of the reaction is what I will be talking about today: the renewed interest—not in the general, universal, central—but in the socially and historically specific, the particular, the de-centred (or ex-centric) of our culture: the local, the regional, the ethnic, the female.

And this is where the personal element enters for me. As the daughter of Italian working-class parents, I myself never had to renegotiate my culture or my language, for I was born in Canada, but my parents did. As a consequence, my ethnic roots have always been central to my identity (despite [or maybe because of] my having taken my husband’s name when I married several centuries ago—making me what I call a “cryptoethnic”). Because of these ethnic roots, the postmodern refocussing on the marginal and marginalized interested me personally. Being a woman added another
marginalized dimension to my interest—especially a woman in a largely male English department and university faculty.

The two concerns—ethnic and feminine—also turned out to be important in the art and literature I was studying, as they had been in my life and in that of the women in my family. Joe Pivato's recent work on Italian immigrant women—whose history has never been told—hit home. It spoke to me of my mother and grandmothers, but it also spoke to me of literature in Canada, for that history of silenced and silent women is being written by our novelists and poets and dramatists. Just as Rudy Wiebe gave voice to our native and Métis populations in his fiction, so Frank Paci and Mary di Michele, among many others, are giving voice to Italian-Canadian women—and men.

What we have witnessed in the years that have been labelled as those of postmodernism is the emergence into a broader public's view of distinct minority cultures—like the Italian-Canadian—and also of a wide variety of feminist work in literature and the arts. Both have had wide political and social impact, but what I discovered in my research was that neither has been discussed as a postmodernist phenomenon in itself. While clearly not all feminism could be seen as postmodern, the general concerns of feminism have certainly pushed postmodernism in directions it was not heading before. In other words, I'm not going to equate the feminist and the postmodern, but look at the points where they overlap and where mutual influences can be felt most strongly. I will concentrate on the feminist perspective because it cuts across race, class, and ethnic concerns.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that feminism has redefined the very objects and aims of study in literature, the arts, history, theory and (a little, at last) philosophy. Postmodern thought has challenged our liberal humanist notions of Man—that essentialized, idealized eternal creature—by forcing us to think about the gender of that so-called "universal" humanity. What feminism has done is argue that the predominant, traditional verbal and visual representations of women in our culture are not reflections or presentations of a biologically-given "female or feminine nature"—that is, natural and therefore unchangeable. What is argued is that, in fact, women LEARN to adapt to a socially determined notion of femininity which itself is a PRODUCT of those representations.

So, feminism is a "problematics," a complex, heterogeneous set of interrelated questions and concerns—with no one single answer. Feminism is a way of talking and writing, a discourse, and also a way of life. It is not just another "approach" to literature, that is, an abstract and theoretical category to be added to Marxist, New Critical, Crocean, or deconstructive
approaches to the study of literature. Feminism creates its concerns. For example, sexism is not a "thing" out there in the world. Feminism didn't name something which existed. Feminism created sexism, in the sense that it constructed it as a new concern for us. We didn't think about it before—just as we did not necessarily think about racism. This is not to say that sexism (and racism) are not real: they may be constructs of discourse, but they are constructs whose effects have changed real social relations.

Among the questions feminism has provoked, among the issues it has created, in this sense, are the following: what is the relations of the work of art to its social context? What is the position of our idea of gender in the production and understanding of art? What is the nature of our philosophical or ideological systems which allows us to see the world in terms of an implicit (or explicit) hierarchy of genders? And, of course, the more obvious issues of sex roles in the division of labour in the family and the economy; the changing roles of women in society, and whether gender is biological or socialized. The number of books, articles, and journals dealing with these and other topics is immense. In the United States there are over 500 women's studies program in operation; in Canada, we have not been so quick, and York University remains one of the important centres for these concerns.

But my concern today is less with the institutional status of feminism than with feminism as a discourse which operates in both artistic practice and theory—and with where it has led our postmodern culture. Like much contemporary literary theory, postmodernist literature and art put into question a whole series of inter-connected concepts that have come to be generally associated with what we conveniently label as "liberal humanism": autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin—now a familiar list. To put these concepts into question, however, is not to deny them—only to interrogate their relation to experience. The particular process by which this is done in postmodernism is a process of installing and then withdrawing (or of using and abusing) those very same contested notions. You set it up—and then question it. In other words, criticism does not necessarily imply destruction, and postmodern critique, in particular, is a paradoxical and questioning beast. Some critics have argued, rather polemically, that postmodernism reflects not a radical uncertainty, but an unconsidered suspension of judgment, but in being so very categorical I think they miss the point of the postmodern enterprise: it is neither uncertain nor
suspension of judgment. It questions the very bases of any certainty (in history, subjectivity, reference) and of any standards of judgment: who sets them? when? where? why? Postmodernism marks less a negative “disintegration” of or “decline” in order and coherence, than a challenging of the very concepts upon which we judge order and coherence, and this is where feminist challenges have come in.

No doubt, this interrogative stance, this contesting of authority, is partly, at least, a result of the decentered revolt of the 1960s. I think it would be hard to argue that these challenges to our models of unity and order are directly caused by the fact that life today is more fragmented and chaotic than before; yet many have done so, claiming that our fiction (for instance) is bizarre, and even outdated and irrelevant, because life is more bizarre than ever before. This view is simplistic, to say the least, in the light of history (both social and literary). But whatever the cause, there have been serious interrogations of those once accepted certainties of liberal humanism, including that of Man. And these challenges have, in turn, become the truisms of contemporary theoretical discourse. One of the major ones—one that has come from both theory and aesthetic practice—has been to the notion of center, in all its forms. In postmodern psychoanalytic, philosophical and literary theory, the decentering of the self, the subject, and her (or his) pursuit of individuality and authenticity has had significant repercussions on everything from our concept of rationality to our view of the possibilities of genre and gender.

If the center will not hold, then, as one of the Merry Pranksters (in Tom Wolfe’s book, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test) put it, “Hail to the Edges!” The move that I mentioned—to valorize margins and borders—is clearly a move away from all centralization with its associated concerns or origin, oneness and monumentality that work to link to concept of centre to those of the eternal and universal. The local, the regional, and the non-totalizing are now reasserted as the centre becomes a fiction—necessary, desired, but a fiction nonetheless.

Much of the debate over the definition of the term “postmodernism” has revolved around what some (e.g. Jean-François Lyotard) see as a loss of faith in this totalizing impulse of humanist thought. Offered as alternatives to system-building are theories which privilege the dialogized or hybrid (like Bakhtin’s) or which contextualize the urge to totalize as only a momentary aspiration in the history of philosophy. Both Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis have been attacked as totalizing “meta-narratives,” yet one could argue that they have been fruitful in analyses of postmodernism precisely because their “split” model (class struggle or con-
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scious/unconscious) allows a very postmodern—that is, contradictory—anti-totalizing kind of totalization. But when the centre starts to give way to the margins, when totalizing universalization begins to self-deconstruct, then the complexity of the contradictions within conventions begins to be apparent. Cultural homogenization too reveals its fissures, but the heterogeneity that is asserted in the face of that totalizing (yet pluralizing) culture does not take the form of many fixed individual subjects, but instead is conceived of as a flux of contextualized identities: contextualized by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role, etc. I want to argue today that this assertion of identity through difference and specificity is a constant in postmodern thought, and that feminism has played a central role in this cultural change.

There is, however, a contradiction at the heart of postmodern theory. The de-centering of our categories of thought always, obviously, relies on the very centres it contests for its own very definition (and, often, verbal form). The adjectives used to describe the “different” may vary: hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, anti-totalizing, or uncertain—there are some common ones. So too may the metaphors vary: the image of the labyrinth without centre or periphery might replace our conventionally ordered notion of a library, for instance, as in Eco’s Nome della rosa, or the spreading rhizome might seem to us to be a less repressively structuring concept than the hierarchical tree (as it is in the work of Deleuze and Guattari). But the power of these new expressions is always paradoxically derived from that which they challenge. It may indeed be true, as Craig Owens has argued, that when the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, or its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, its lack of transcendence. But it is also clear that this definition of his relies on its inverting of a set of values which it contests. The contradictory nature of postmodernism involves its offering of multiple provision alternatives to traditional fixed unitary concepts—in full knowledge of (and even exploiting) the continuing appeal of those very concepts.

The centre may not hold, but it is still an attractive fiction of order and unity that postmodern art and theory continue to exploit and subvert. That fiction takes many forms in the institutions of culture and, in many of them, its limitations are becoming the focus of attention. The very walls of the traditional museum and the very definition of a work of art come under fire in the performances of Albert Vidal, for instance. His “The Urban Man” is a kind of anthropological performance ritual in which Vidal spends 5 hours a day in a major public place in a city
(such as Miami's Metro Zoo or the Place d'Youville in Quebec City) offering to passers-by an "exhibit" of postmodern man about his daily business: eating, napping, phoning. Similarly, the notion of the physical book is challenged by formally hybrid "intermedia," and, of course, the categories of genre are regularly challenged these days. Fiction looks like biography, autobiography, history, especially in the writing of women. And theoretical discourse joins forces with autobiographical memoir and Proustian reminiscence in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, where a theory of photography grows out of personal emotion with no pretense to objectivity, finality, or authority.

The ex-centric, the off-center: ineluctably identified with the center it desires and is denied. This is the paradox of the postmodern and its images are often as deviant as these decentering words suggest: the freak—often female too—is one example, as in films like Carney or novels like E. L. Doctorow's *Loom Lake*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, and Paul Quarrington's *Home Game*. The three-ringed circus becomes a metaphor for a pluralized and decentered world where there is only ex-centricity.

Another form of this same move off-center is to be found in the contesting of centralization of culture through the valuing of the local and peripheral: not New York or London or Toronto, but William Kennedy's Albany, Graham Swift's fens country, Frank Paci's northern Ontario. Postmodern architects similarly look to the local idiom and ethos for their forms. Postmodern painters, sculptors, video artists, novelists, poets, and film-makers join with these architects in collapsing the high/low art hierarchy of earlier times, in an attack on high art centralization of academic interest, on the one hand and, on the other, on the homogeneity of consumer culture which adapts, includes, and makes all seem accessible by neutralizing and popularizing.

To collapse hierarchies is not to collapse distinctions, however. Postmodernism retains, and indeed celebrates, DIFFERENCES against what has been called the "racist logic of the exclusive." The modernist concept of "alienated otherness" is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries (such as self/other) that conceal hierarchies. When Edward Said calls for theory today to have an awareness of the differences between situations in its critical consciousness of its position in the world, he is going beyond the early Foucauldian definition of modernity in terms of otherness alone. Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, not the binary opposition and exclusion suggested by the idea of otherness.

I suspect that it is again to the 1960s that we must turn to see the roots of this change, for it is those years that saw the inscribing into history
of previously “silent” groups defined by differences of race, gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, native status, and class. The 1970s and 1980s have seen the increasingly rapid inscribing of these same ex-centrics—especially women—into both theoretical discourse and artistic practice as andro-, phallo-, hetero-, Euro-, and ethno-centrisms have been vigorously challenged. Think of Doctorow’s novel *Ragtime* with its three paralleled families: The Anglo-American establishment one and the marginal immigrant European and American black ones. The novel’s action disperses the center of the establishment family and moves the margins into the multiple “centres” of the narrative, in an allegory of the social demographics of urban America. In addition, there is an extended critique of American democratic ideals through the presentation of class conflict rooted in capitalist property and moneyed power. The black Coalhouse, the white Houdini, the immigrant Tateh are all working class, and because of this—not in spite of it—all can therefore work to create new aesthetic forms (ragtime, vaudeville, movies).

Feminism played a central role in these cultural changes, but—before it—in North America came another battle, the battle against racism. To assert the CULTURAL importance of the sixties’ civil rights movement in the United States is not to deny its POLITICAL significance. Indeed the rise of militant black protest in literature in the 1960s had direct political consequences. Since then, black (and more recently ethnic) literature has also forced a reconsideration of: cultural specificity, the canon, and our methods of analysis, and this has had repercussions beyond the borders of America, for it is possible to argue that it literally enabled feminist and other forms of protest. What Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls a “signifying black difference” challenged the ethnocentrism that made “the black” into a figure of negation or absence—just as ANDROcentrism absented women.

What is important to recall, however, is that difference operates WITHIN each of these challenging cultures, as well as AGAINST the dominant. Blacks and feminists, ethnics and gays, native and “Third World” cultures, are not monolithic movements, but consist of a multiplicity of responses to a commonly perceived situation of marginality and eccentricity. And there have been liberating effects of moving from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of decentering (difference), because that centre used to function as the fulcrum between binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, West/East, objectivity/subjectivity—the list is now well known. But if the center is seen as a construct, a fiction, not a fixed and unchangeable reality, the old either-or begins to break down, and the and-also of multiplicity and
difference opens up new possibilities.

The autobiographical novels of black American men in the 1960s have given way to a more structurally and ideologically complex form in the years since, likely partly because of the new voice of black and ethnic women writers. But these women were aided in their particular “voicing” specifically by the rise of the women’s movement too. There seems to be a general agreement that—like the Québécois separatist and black civil rights movements, and like the French and Italian intellectual left activists of May ’68—the American New Left was both male and sexist. The reaction of women against this took a very “sixties” form: a challenging of authority (male and institutional); an acknowledgement of power as the basis of sexual politics; a belief in the role of sociocultural context in the production and reception of art. All of these would form the basis of the paradoxes of postmodernism in the immediate future, as feminists and others recognized that sexism, heterosexism, racism, capitalism and imperialism intersect in complex, often contradictory ways.

In a special issue of the journal, *Critical Inquiry*, called “‘Race,’ Writing, and Difference,” Henry Louis Gates calls race “the ultimate trope of difference.” From his male black perspective, that may seem the case. Of course, for feminists, woman has taken on that metaphoric role. In both cases, however, it is difference that defines; it is difference that is valued in and for itself. Most theoretical discussions of difference owe much to the work on the differential system of language and its signifying processes by Saussure, Derrida, Lacan and others. As I just mentioned, the concept of otherness has associations of binarity, hierarchy, supplementarity that postmodern theory and practice seem to want to reject in favor of a more plural and deprivilizing concept of difference and the ex-centric. Postmodernist discourses—either those BY women, ethnics, and others, or those PROVOKED BY their stands—try to avoid the trap of reversing and privileging the other, of making the margin into a center, a move that many have seen as a danger for deconstruction’s privileging of writing and absence over speech and presence or for some feminism’s “gynocentralizing” of a monolithic concept of Woman as other than Man. Postmodern difference is always plural and provisional; it is always, to borrow Barbara Johnson’s phrase, a “critical difference.”

I mentioned at the start that postmodernist theory and practice, despite what I have just asserted, have been seen as resolutely white male phenomena. Some have argued that even feminism has been influenced largely by male models of thought: Mill, Engels, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Marx, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Lacan. There are
a number of ways of explaining—or recuperating—this fact. One could, as does Alice Jardin, admit the maleness of influence, but argue that feminism's reconceptualization of difference would automatically be gendered as female. The potential essentialism of her assertion of “supplementary jouissance” as defining Woman is as problematic as her (unproved) assertion itself. The credibility of such a view is undermined considerably by her conflation of the “female” with “modernity” (male modernity: Joyce, Céline, Pound) as, of course, do Kristeva, Irigaray, and Montrelay. Another way of dealing with the maleness of models like that of deterritorialization (from Deleuze and Guattari) is to argue that were we to accept that male and female are merely illusions within a system of power we could deploy the model without fear of its maleness interfering with feminist analysis. But postmodern thought would reject the glossing over of the differences both AMONG the “minoritarian” groups’ members and FROM the dominant culture.

The multiple, the heterogeneous, the different: this is the pluralizing rhetoric of postmodernism that rejects both the abstract category of single “otherness” often created by coercive separation and unequal privileges, as well as by the more concrete relegation of the “other” (such as the female or ethnic) to being the “object for enthusiastic information-retrieval” in Gayatri Spivak’s terms. The language of margins and borders marks a position of paradox: both inside and outside. Given this position, it is not surprising that the form that heterogeneity and difference often take in postmodern art is that of parody—the intertextual form that is paradoxically an authorized transgression: its ironic difference is set at the very heart of similarity. Feminist photographers like Silvia Kolbowski and Barbara Kruger use ads and commercial fashion plates in new parodic contexts in order to attack the capitalist production of homogeneous images of women.

Parodic double-voicing or heterogeneity is not just a device which allows contesting assertions of difference. It also offers a textual model of collectivity and community of discourses. The text, but even the title alone, of Québécois writer, Yolande Villemaire’s La Vie en prose points both to the parodic contesting of the clichéd romantic vision of “la vie en rose” and also to the name of an important women’s journal in Quebec, La Vie en prose. Such assertion of community—both intertextual and ideological—is never, however, intended as a move towards homogenization. Postmodern art—like feminist theory and practice—is always aware of difference, difference within any grouping too, difference defined by contextualization or positioning in relation to others. Postmodern art
shares feminism's concern for context and for the enunciative situation of discourse: that is, the contextualized production and reception of the text. The concern is to contextualize difference, not to deny or reduce it.

To be ex-centric, on the border or margin, inside yet outside is to have a different perspective, one that Virginia Woolf once called "alien and critical," one that is "always altering its focus," since it has no centering force. Today we can find this new perspective in both art and theory, from the explorations of female narcissism in the video performances of Joan Jonas to the overt concern for respecting difference that can also be seen within postmodern theoretical discourse these days. Feminist theory offers perhaps the clearest example of the importance of maintaining an awareness of the diversity of the history and culture of women: their differences of race, ethnic group, class, sexual preference. It would be more accurate, of course, to speak of feminisms, in the plural, for there are many different orientations that are subsumed under the general label of feminism: images of women criticism; canon-challenging and women's literary history; separatist or women-centered gynocriticism; feminist "critique" of patriarchal ideology in male texts; psychoanalytic studies of female subjectivity; theories of écriture féminine or parler femme, lesbian attacks on heterosexism; Marxist-socialist contextualizing; deconstructive interrogations of cultural constructs; women's perspectives on Afro-American, "Third World," native, and colonial experience and identity. And the list could go on. These different feminisms range from liberal humanist to radical poststructuralist in orientation. They consider women as both writers and readers. These kinds of feminism all integrate theory and practice (or experience) in a way that has had a profound effect on the nature of postmodernism, where theoretical and artistic discourses can no longer be neatly separated.

When Gloria Hull polemically stated that "Black women poets are not 'Shakespeare's sisters'" in response to writing for a volume with that title, she forcefully illustrated the position of the ex-centric towards one particular and dominant center—liberal humanist discourse. Women, ethnicns and other minority cultures have all contested the humanist assumption that subjectivity is produced by eternal values and causes, arguing instead, in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, in Alice Doesn't, that identity is constituted by "one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and effect) to the events of the world." However, unlike the male, white, Euro-centred poststructuralist discourse that has lately most forcefully challenged humanism's integrated ideal of subjectivity, these more
ex-centric positionalities know that they cannot reject the subject—the self—wholesale, because they have never really been allowed it. Their ex-centricity and difference have denied them access to Cartesian rationality and relegated them to the realms of the irrational, the mad, or at least, the alien. As Catherine Belsey has taught us, women—and ethnics—participate in two contradictory discourses: the liberal humanist one of freedom, self-determination, and rationality for all and also one of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition—for some.

It is not enough, however, to move the marginal to the center. Postmodernism does not invert the valuing of centers into that of peripheries and borders as much as use that paradoxical doubled positioning to critique the inside from both the outside and the inside. Just as Padma, the listening, textualized female reader of Salman Rushdie’s novel—*Midnight’s Children* pushes the narration in directions its male narrator had no intention of taking, so the ex-centric have not only overlapped in their concerns with postmodernism, but have pushed it in new directions. For instance, I would argue that the perspective of these inside-outsiders is what added to postmodernism the issues of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender to complement the class analysis of ideology done by marxists. The never fully articulated, but always present system of preconceptions which govern a society includes these differences, differences that challenge the possibility of mastery, objectivity, impersonality, differences that do not allow us to forget the role of power, of those social arrangements of patterned disparity. They have not allowed theory or criticism or art to pose as apolitical. This kind of political motivation within postmodern theory and practice owes much to specifically feminist and marxist challenges to the relations both with modes of representation and with expectations in consumption.

In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said has urged that theory today base itself in experience. He writes: “Criticism cannot assume that its province is merely the text, not even the great literary text. It must see itself, with other discourses, inhabiting a much contested cultural space.” He seems not to have noticed that feminism, among other ex-centric perspectives, has been doing just this for some time now—taking a position within the historical and political world outside the ivory tower. Terry Eagleton, however, has noted in his recent introduction to literary theory that: “It is in the nature of feminist politics that signs and images, written and dramatized experience, should be of especial significance. Discourse in all its forms is an obvious concern for feminists, either as places where women’s oppression can be deciphered, or as places where
it can be challenged. In any politics which puts identity and relationship centrally at stake, renewing attention to lived experience and the discourse of the body, culture does not need to argue its way to political relevance."

Indeed there are many who have claimed the radical political potential of feminist theory, especially in conjunction with marxis and/or deconstruction. The thematization of writing and difference as anti-patriarchal subversions of oppression is also clear, however, in women's fiction and poetry and drama. And the political power of the creative process has been claimed not only by women but also by black and ethnic male writers. The right of expression—however implicated in liberal humanist assumptions of subjectivity—is not something that can be taken for granted by any of these ex-centrics. But the problematizing of expression—through contextualization in the enunciative situation—is what makes the ex-centric into the postmodern. Many theorists have argued that the major modes of feminist thought are contextual—social, historical, cultural. And post-Saussurian or poststructuralist theory has been one of the strongest forces in moving the emphasis from linguistic and textual system to discursive process, to semiosis or the mutual overdetermination of meaning, perception and experience in the act of signifying. And this is the theory most often associated with postmodernism. The reasons for the association are fairly obvious. Both share a concern for power—its manifestations, its appropriations, its positioning, its consequences, its language. So too do some forms of feminism, of course. All work to challenge our traditional essentialized anchors in God, father, state, and Man through acknowledgement of the particular and the different. So too does the work of feminist historians in its study of the exclusions that inevitably result from attempts to form totalizing unities or neat evolutions—exclusions of the historical experience of an entire gender. The same is true in literary history, of course, as the female ex-centrics have challenged the canon. There is even starting to be visible a similar contesting of the conventions and institutions of the visual arts, but their protective boundaries (against high art's contaminating affiliation with other cultural practices) seem to have been stronger. The recent show in Toronto (at Harbourfront) brought from Italy by Renato Barilli and called postmodernist—the art of the Nuovi-Nuovi—was entirely male in representation. It isn't surprising, then, that feminists have begun identifying art history and art institutions as forms of patriarchal culture and have begun to challenge the values and ideas constructed within them as part of its programme of cultural politics. This is why feminists have resisted, as I mentioned at the start, the attempts to make feminism into just another new approach to culture: this process
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would reduce feminism to another methodology among many; it would work to dismantle it as a set of political beliefs and to reformulate it as a fashionable style within the academic institution.

And it is wise to resist this recuperation: for that has been the fate of postmodernism: what has not been called—and denigrated as—postmodern these days? While I do not want to argue a relationship of identity between the postmodern (in theory or practice) and the feminist, there is little doubt in my mind as to the commonality of their concerns. For instance, the feminine, the ethnic, the black—all these ex-centricities have managed to break down the barrier between academic discourse and contemporary art, art which is usually marginalized, not to say, ignored, in the academic context. Feminism has shown the impossibility of separating the theoretical and the aesthetic, the political and the epistemological. As Stephen Heath has proclaimed: "Any discourse which fails to take account of the problem of sexual difference in its own enunciation and address will be, within a patriarchal order, precisely indifferent, a reflection of male domination."

But it has not just been female ex-centricity that has done this to our postmodern culture; the ethnic revival of the sixties has been well documented by our social scientists in North America. The situation in Europe is different, of course, but here there has been a whole rethinking of what “difference” means in a modern, urban, industrial society which was expected to efface ethnicity completely. Instead, ethnic identity has gradually changed from being what one theorist called a “heathenish liability” to being a “sacred asset”—and I would argue that this has happened in conjunction with a general postmodern valuing of the different, the off-centre, the marginal, a valuing that feminism has done much to enable.

Feminist practice—in theory, criticism, and art itself—has posed new questions regarding the role of culture in the construction of patriarchy. It has addressed the tacit definitions of gender, class, culture that are operative—and dominant—at any given historical moment. It has joined with the postmodern in moving us away from general universal truth, to specific, contextualized truths. It has forced us to see gender in relation to race, class, ethnicity and other forms of power relations—not as natural, unchangeable power relations, but as constructed by particular social, economic and political forces. It has overlapped with our postmodern concern for exposing the relationships between meanings produced at the level of culture and meanings produced at other levels of the social formation. In other words, feminism and postmodernism have taught that and how we both make—and make sense—of our culture.