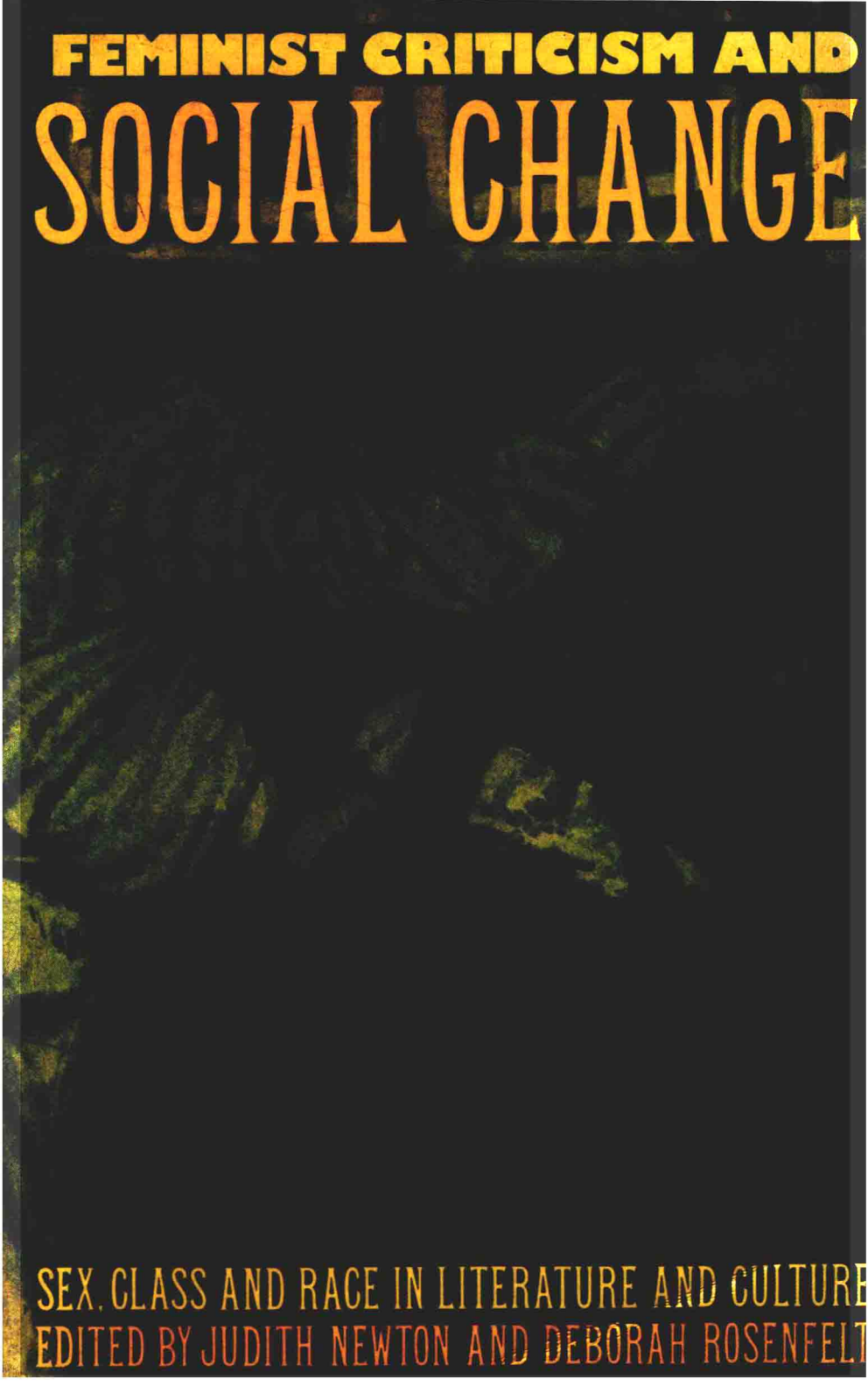
FEMINIST CRITICISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE



SEX, CLASS AND RACE IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

EDITED BY JUDITH NEWTON AND DEBORAH ROSENFELT

FEMINIST CRITICISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Edited by Judith Newton
and Deborah Rosenfelt

METHUEN
New York and London

First published in 1985 by
Methuen, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by
Methuen & Co. Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Printed in the USA

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Feminist criticism and social change.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. American literature—History and criticism—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Feminist literary criticism—Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. Marxist criticism—Addresses, essays, lectures. 4. English literature—History and criticism—Addresses, essays, lectures. 5. Social history in literature—Addresses, essays, lectures. 6. Sex role in literature—Addresses, essays, lectures. 7. Social classes in literature—Addresses, essays, lectures. 8. Race relations in literature—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Newton, Judith Lowder. II. Rosenfelt, Deborah Silverton.
PS152.F46 1985 810'.9 85–15209
ISBN 0–416–38700–4
ISBN 0–416–38710–1 (pbk.)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Feminist criticism and social change: sex, class and race in literature and culture.
1. Sex differences (Psychology) in literature
I. Newton, Judith L. II. Rosenfelt, Deborah S.
809'.93353 PN56.S52

ISBN 0–416–38700–4
ISBN 0–416–38710–1 Pbk

FEMINIST CRITICISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

For Anna – JUDITH NEWTON

For Florence Howe and Tillie Olsen,
who will not approve of everything here
but whose passion for both literature and social change
has nurtured and challenged my own – DEBORAH ROSENFELT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors and publisher would like to thank the following for permission to reproduce copyright material:

The editors of *Conditions* for chapter 1, Barbara Smith, 'Toward a black feminist criticism', reprinted from *Conditions Two* (1970), pp. 25–44; Paul Lauter for chapter 2, 'Race and gender in the shaping of the American literary canon: a case study from the twenties', from *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983), pp. 435–63; Verso and New Left Books for chapter 4, Michèle Barrett, 'Ideology and the cultural production of gender', from Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, chapter 3, London: Verso Editions, 1980; Feminist Studies, Inc., c/o Women's Studies Program, University of Maryland, College Park, Md 20742, for three chapters: chapter 5, Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the body: toward an understanding of *l'écriture féminine*', reprinted from *Feminist Studies* Volume 7, no. 2 (1981): 247–63; chapter 10, Deborah Rosenfelt, 'From the thirties: Tillie Olsen and the radical tradition', from *Feminist Studies* Volume 7, no. 3 (1981): 371–406; and chapter 11, Leslie W. Rabine, 'Romance in the age of electronics: Harlequin Enterprises', revised from *Feminist Studies* Volume 11, no. 1 (1985): 39–60; Georgia University Press, for chapter 6, Judith Newton, '*Villette*', from Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction 1778–1860*, chapter 3, Atlanta, University of Georgia Press, 1981; The Women's Press Ltd. for chapter 7, Cora Kaplan, '*Aurora Leigh*', Introduction to *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, London, The Women's Press, 1977; Laurence & Wishart for chapter 8, Sonja Ruehl, 'Inverts and experts: Radclyffe Hall and the lesbian identity', from R. Brunt and C. Rowan (eds), *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, London, Laurence & Wishart, 1982; Greenwood Press for chapter 9, Barbara Christian, 'Shadows uplifted', from Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976*, Westport, Ct, Greenwood Press, 1980, pp. 3–34, 253–7; and Routledge & Kegan Paul for chapter 12, Annette Kuhn, 'Real women', from Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, 131–55. Chapter 3, Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the subject: deconstructing the text', is revised from Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London, Methuen, 1980, pp. 103–25.

PREFACE

The essays in this collection represent an attempt to theorize about and to practice a materialist-feminist criticism of literature and culture. The criticism in this volume is 'materialist' in its commitment to the view that the social and economic circumstances in which women and men live – the material conditions of their lives – are central to an understanding of culture and society. It is materialist in its view that literature and literary criticism are both products of and interventions in particular moments of history. It is materialist too in its assumption that many, perhaps most, aspects of human identity are socially constructed. It is 'feminist' in its emphasis on the social construction of gender and its exploration of the intersections of gender with other social categories like class, race and sexual identity. It is feminist in its emphasis on relations of power between women and men, though it insists on examining them in the context of other relations of power and it assumes that such relations of power and the ways in which they are inscribed in texts change with changing social and economic conditions. Finally, this criticism is ideological – concerned with the relation of ideology, especially though not exclusively ideologies of gender, to cultural practice and to social change.

The volume is divided into two sections: theoretical essays and applied criticism, both exemplifying typical concerns of materialist-feminist criticism. The first group of selections examines race, ideology, feminist criticism and the literary canon from a materialist-feminist perspective, and explores the ways in which other current critical discourses such as those of deconstruction, psychoanalysis and French feminism might be useful to a feminist and materialist criticism. The second group of essays represents examples of feminist-materialist criticism in practice.

Although most of the contributors to this volume are, inevitably, white middle-class women, we have attempted to present a spectrum of approaches by drawing together authors who are British and American, white and of color, lesbian and heterosexual. Most of their essays have been published before in journals and as chapters in books, but they acquire new dimensions of meaning when presented as part of a collective critical endeavor.

We begin with Barbara Smith's classic essay 'Toward a black feminist criticism', which argues for the recognition in feminist criticism of black women's literary traditions and for the inclusion of a lesbian feminist perspective in our readings of texts. Smith asks all of us to consider

how our 'thoughts connect to the reality of black women's writing and lives'.

Paul Lauter's 'Race and gender in the shaping of the American literary canon: a case study from the twenties' applies a materialist-feminist perspective to the formation of the literary canon. Lauter argues that the canon of American literature is itself a historical construct, the product of specific forces, events and institutional formations in American history rather than a natural emergence of the 'greatest' of literary works. In revealing the historicity of aesthetic judgments and the resultant suppression of work by women and people of color, Lauter lays the basis for proposing new categories of American literary history, categories that will be inclusive and pluralist rather than exclusive and monolithically male, white and middle class.

From the contours of literary history and the role of ideology and the critic in producing it, Michèle Barrett's 'Ideology and the cultural production of gender' and Catherine Belsey's 'Constructing the subject: deconstructing the text' (revised from Belsey's *Critical Practice*) move us to the terrain of current debate about the meaning and political implications of ideology. For many of us a first encounter with a criticism that explicitly and demandingly asserted its engagement in the struggle for progressive social change was with Lillian S. Robinson's now classic essay, 'Dwelling in decencies: radical criticism and the feminist perspective' (originally published in *College English* 32 (1971)). Robinson persuaded many of us of the inadequacy of less politically informed approaches. Belsey and Barrett consider, in a more elaborate and nuanced way than Robinson's pioneering polemic, the relationship between changing social institutions and dismantling repressive ideologies of gender. Just as Lauter suggests new categories for writing literary history, Belsey and Barrett pose a set of critical foci through which one might elaborate a materialist-feminist analysis of culture and literature.

Where Belsey considers the intersection of materialist-feminist approaches with deconstruction and psychoanalysis, Ann Rosalind Jones in 'Writing the body: toward an understanding of *l'écriture féminine*' examines the intersection of a materialist-feminist approach with French feminism (the latter itself a mixture of several discourses). What both essays suggest is the range and flexibility of materialist-feminist criticism in its capacity at once to critique and to use other current critical discourses while infusing them with a more historically grounded understanding of culture and gender.

The section of applied criticism focuses on English and American work of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both Judith Newton's study of *Villette* and Cora Kaplan's essay on *Aurora Leigh* locate these exemplars of the female 'great tradition' in relation to the class structure and sex/gender systems peculiar to the Victorian England and Italy of Brontë and Browning. Newton explores the implications of Brontë's contradictory relation to the ideology of woman's sphere for the structure and language of *Villette*. Kaplan views *Aurora Leigh* as a textual terrain on which issues of gender difference, class warfare

and the relation of art to politics intersect to produce 'the fullest and most violent exposition of "the woman question" in mid-Victorian literature'. These two detailed readings suggest the compatibility of a materialist-feminist approach with the deepest understanding of literary form and language; they suggest, that is, the ways in which an understanding of history and an understanding of literature can interpenetrate to illuminate one another.

Sonja Ruehl's 'Inverts and experts: Radclyffe Hall and the lesbian identity' applies Foucault's concepts of discourse and reverse discourse in an analysis of Radclyffe Hall's popular lesbian classic *The Well of Loneliness*. Ruehl shows how Hall, speaking from within the historical category of 'invert' developed by Havelock Ellis, was able to initiate the transformation of that category. The essay makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of the social construction of sexuality and sexual identity – as distinct from, though intersecting with, the social construction of gender and class.

Our essays on American literature look at black and working-class writers and at mass culture. 'Shadows uplifted', the first chapter of Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The development of a tradition 1892–1976*, explores the intersections of economic relations in the antebellum South, ideologies of race and gender, and portrayals of black women in literature. Deborah Rosenfelt's study of Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*, 'From the thirties: Tillie Olsen and the radical tradition', suggests that contemporary feminists, who justifiably value Olsen as a shaping voice of contemporary literary feminism, have not sufficiently understood the roots of her vision and her work in the radical social movements of the 1930s; her essay analyzes the relationship between Olsen's class background, her work as a writer and her commitment as an activist. Leslie W. Rabine's essay on Harlequin Romances discusses the ways in which this popular genre adapts ancient narrative patterns to the tensions specific to a particular moment in history. Rabine locates in Harlequin Romances a power hierarchy between male boss and female workers, a hierarchy in which class structure and the sex/gender system reinforce one another. Within this hierarchy, modern working women's conflicts between desire for love and desire for work, between an impulse toward submission and the assertion of autonomy, play themselves out to an enforced reconciliation. Finally, Annette Kuhn in her essay on 'Real women' decodes the cinematic language of both Hollywood films and documentary to reveal the intersections of gender, ideology and film form. She suggests one mode of feminist intervention in mass media: appropriating the documentary form to feminist concerns and visions.

We hope these essays, diverse as they are, suggest together the efficacy of a criticism committed to an understanding of the complex relations among history and literature; consciousness and ideology; gender, culture and power; art and social change. The criticism here differs in appreciable ways from that produced by feminists with a more cultural or traditionally literary orientation. It is a criticism distinct also from that produced by traditional Marxists, for

whom gender is not a major category of analysis. In our introduction we want to explore more fully the qualities and vision that characterize this kind of criticism and to situate it in the world of criticism and the broader world of political engagement and practice.

Judith Newton
Deborah Rosenfelt
March 1985

INTRODUCTION
Toward a materialist-feminist criticism

JUDITH NEWTON AND
DEBORAH ROSENFELT

Lillian Robinson once said that the most important question we can ask ourselves as feminist critics is 'So what?' Implied in that question is a view most of us share – that the point of our work is to change the world. But to begin with the question 'So what?' is to take on the task of asking other questions as well – like what is the relation of literature and therefore of literary criticism to the social and economic conditions of our lives? Most feminist critics still work within a central insight of the women's movement – that gender is socially constructed and that its construction has enforced unequal relations of power. From that insight it is a relatively short step to the assumption that products of consciousness, like literature and literary criticism, are also socially constructed, and that they too are political. Like women's studies generally, in fact, feminist criticism began with the assumption that we make our own knowledge and are constantly remaking it in the terms which history provides – and that in making knowledge we act upon the power relations of our lives.[1]

As feminist critics, for example, we speak of making our knowledge of history, choosing to see in it not a tale of individual and inevitable suffering, but a story of struggle and relations of power. We speak of making our notion of literary texts, choosing to read them not as meditations upon themselves but as gestures toward history and gestures with political effect. Finally, we speak of making our model of literary criticism, choosing to see in it not an ostensibly objective reading of a text but an act of political intervention, a mode of shaping the cultural use to which men's and women's writing will be put.[2]

This reconstruction of our knowledge, however, has been a form of struggle, a political action carried out upon our culture and ourselves, for to assert that literature and culture are political is radically to challenge modes of thinking that are dominant in our world. For those of us trained as literary critics,

moreover, these modes of thinking are apt after a long apprenticeship to seem like deeply ingrained aspects of ourselves, and our struggle with our culture, in particular, to seem like a struggle with ourselves.[3] For literary studies, more than most other disciplines, has divorced the study of ideas and language from the study of social conditions and has fostered a view of intellectual activity as a solitary individual enterprise rather than as a project with social origins and political consequence.[4] As feminist critics, therefore, many of us have implicitly committed ourselves to resist an extended history of training in our craft. We have committed ourselves to resist a view of literature – formalism – that sees literature and literary critics as divorced from history, a view still perpetrated – despite their air of currency and French fashionableness – by much of the post-structuralist criticism now dominant in Britain and the United States.[5] We have also committed ourselves to resist a view of history still beloved by humanities departments, the view that history, especially modern history, is the essentially tragic story of individual suffering, a suffering often universalized and guaranteed permanency as part of the human condition. This is a view, of course, which permits us to 'see' literature and history in relation but which nullifies what is potentially radical in such a vision by denying the possibility of meaningful social change.

But given that knowledge is constructed and that remaking knowledge is a form of struggle against our culture and ourselves, and given our training as critics in particular, it is not surprising that we should still be immersed in critical practices which it is against our interest to maintain, that our primary assumptions and our theory, our theory and our practice, have not always developed hand in hand.[6] Thus, despite our assumption that ideas, literature and culture are socially constructed, that mental oppression is rooted in the material conditions of our lives, much of our literary theory implies a version of the world in which women are oppressed, for the most part, by literary constructs or in which female counter-myths are more powerful than (or as powerful as) economics.[7] Rather than elucidating the complex web of relations – social, economic, linguistic – of which literature is a part, we disassociate ideas from material realities. This disassociation replicates and enforces a habit of mind already dominant in the culture at large and blunts the radical edge of feminist critical intervention. As Lillian Robinson observed in 1970, there is 'a kind of idealism to which we become susceptible when we explore the question of feminine consciousness. For we, too, have a tendency to ignore its material basis.'[8]

This looseness of our hold upon the material is also reflected in the fact that applied feminist criticism frequently offers little explicit history at all while its implicit history tends unwittingly to recapitulate the politics of the English departments and the culture in which we were trained. Much feminist criticism, that is, although it assumes the existence of unequal gender-based relations of power, implicitly constructs those relations in such a way as to

render them tragic – unchanging, universal, monolithic. Many feminists still identify an emphasis upon the universal and unchanging with 'patriarchy'. In so far, however, as our own constructions of history obscure historical change, cultural complexity and women's agency, they themselves replicate the habits of thought they intend to challenge. They produce, in fact, a feminist version of 'the' human condition.[9] This tendency to tragic essentialism in regard to male domination is the obverse of an inclination to comedic essentialism on the other side of the equation. This essentialism, for example, subsumes women into the sisterly category of 'woman' despite real differences of race, class and historical condition, or posits women's nurturing and relational qualities as in themselves a counter to male domination.[10]

These inclinations in feminist criticism, of course, are part of larger currents in feminist theory and politics as a whole. Polarization of the masculine and the feminine, or of male and female; denigration of the masculine or the male as violent and possibly irretrievable; valorization of male power into a 'monolithic and unchanging out there'; the construction of women as at once totally dominated and essentially good; and the celebration of a unifying woman's nature have in varying ways characterized the discourse of cultural/radical feminists in England and the United States, some women in sectors of the peace and antipornography movements and many French feminists.[11] These theoretical tendencies, of course, have been expressed in a variety of political actions, including 'Take Back the Night' marches, ritual theater at military bases and campaigns for more stringent laws against pornography. Such actions, whether one agrees with them or not, have been visible, dramatic and sometimes effective.[12] But more than ever – in a context of backlash and cutbacks, the absence of a unified progressive movement, the rise in the United States of the New Right and Moral Majority, and economic hard times – the theoretical constructions of history on which they rest seem too simplistic adequately to analyze the possibilities and priorities for long-term political struggle.

In the United States, where feminist poets have powerfully influenced feminist politics, this tendency has sometimes expressed itself in poetic language imbued with a kind of wishful thinking. In an article about the role of feminist poets as theoreticians and political spokeswomen, for example, poet and critic Jan Clausen writes of three poems by Judy Grahn, June Jordan and Susan Sherman that while their optimistic conclusions about women's power are strong and moving, 'their impact seems to rest more on our *desire* to believe their closing assertions than on the intrinsic credibility these assertions possess based on what we know of the world'. Clausen then warns feminist poets and leaders to avoid 'the rote chanting of slogans we are unable to make real, the temptation to dish up to the audience what it wants or has learned to expect in the way of exhortation and uplift'.[13] It is of course the nature of poetry to work better as rhetoric than as analysis, and we need poetry to

inspire as much as we need analysis to guide us. Still, Clausen advises us not to confuse inspiration with understanding.

There have been, of course, important counters to this polarization of male domination and female powerlessness and to this utopian celebration of female virtue, with the essentialism or universalism which so much of it implies. A dialectic of criticism and self-criticism has continued to characterize feminist debate over pornography, peace, the gender gap, French feminism and sexuality, and new work by feminist scholars continually reworks our history and theory. Theories of gender construction advanced by feminist theorists like Gayle Rubin, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Jane Flax, for example, have re-emphasized the idea that gender identity and ideologies of gender, as one part of a sex/gender system, are socially constructed rather than innate and that they are created by women as well as men, despite women's lesser access to cultural power.[14] Feminist history by historians like Mary Ryan and Judith Walkowitz has, in addition to its other contributions, countered the ahistorical quality of much feminist psychoanalytic theory by illuminating the ways in which constructions of gender and sexuality have changed with changing historical situations.[15] And an extensive literature by feminist anthropologists has corrected the ethnocentric bias of many white western theories about the subordination of women, women's culture and women's nature in the present.[16]

In feminist literary criticism, similar tendencies have invited us to tighten our hold upon the material and have challenged us to interrogate the tragic conceptions of history we have inherited. These currents appear most consistently and consciously in the work of feminists who are also socialists, but we refer to work in which such currents dominate as 'materialist-feminist' rather than 'socialist-feminist'. We do so because the former term is more inclusive and because it reminds us that materialist analysis appears, however unevenly, in the work of many feminist critics who do not consider themselves socialists (especially in the United States where Marxism and socialism are so marginalized and negatively viewed by the culture as a whole).[17] The boundaries, that is, between materialist-feminist criticism and other feminist criticisms are fluid.[18] What this means is that analysis and critique will inevitably be self-analysis and self-critique. What it also means, since all of us are situated in history and since we and our work change with changing circumstances, is that analysis and critique must address themselves not to individuals but to their work. Still, even given this fluidity of boundaries, we can make distinctions that help to define a materialist-feminist critical practice.

We have said that most feminist criticism shares a materialist assumption: that gender is socially constructed and that its construction enforces unequal power relations. But materialist-feminist criticism is for the most part doubly committed to materialist analysis. It is committed out of its concern with gender relations and it is committed out of its concern with the economic.

Many materialist-feminist critics, in fact, have a triple or quadruple commitment by virtue of being racial and/or lesbian liberationists as well. Barbara Smith's essay in this volume represents this quadruple commitment. Understanding the intersections of multiple oppressions, however, as June Howard reminds us, is not 'a simple choice of perspective but a long labor'.[19] And to most materialist-feminist critics the labor of constructing and using a theoretical position entails a double work shift: work on the power relations implied by gender and simultaneously on those implied by class, race and sexual identification; an analysis of literature and an analysis of history and society; an analysis of the circumstances of cultural production and an analysis of the complexities with which at a given moment in history they are inscribed in the text.

Like other feminists, materialist feminists are also concerned with the importance of ideas, language and culture to women's oppression. This emphasis on culture, indeed, is one of the central contributions of the women's movement – along with the black liberation movement that preceded it – to political thought.[20] What a materialist-feminist criticism tends to mean, therefore, aside from more work than one is used to, is more focus on material realities than in most feminist criticism and more power granted to ideas, language and culture than in much traditional Marxist criticism – that is, in much Marxist criticism written before the 1970s.

For the materialist-feminist critic this analysis of ideas, language and culture frequently takes the form of discussing ideology. The term 'ideology,' a staple of critics working within a Marxist tradition, or at least of critics familiar with that discourse, has been defined in various ways. Terry Eagleton, for example, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, provides a familiar working definition: ideology is 'that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as "natural", or not seen at all'.[21] Ideology, however, is not simply determined by the economic and the political but may be thought of as having a relative power and life of its own. What this means, in the words of Annette Kuhn, is that 'ideology is not necessarily a direct expression of ruling-class [or gender] interests at all moments in history and that at certain conjunctures it may even move into contradiction with those interests'.[22] Ideology, then, is not a set of deliberate distortions imposed on us from above, but a complex and contradictory system of representations (discourse, images, myths) through which we experience ourselves in relation to each other and to the social structures in which we live. Ideology is a system of representations through which we experience *ourselves* as well, for the work of ideology is also to construct coherent subjects: 'the individual thus lives his [or her] subject-ion to social structures as a consistent subject-ivity, an imaginary wholeness.'[23]

In materialist-feminist and in much current Marxist work, as the preceding