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VOICES FROM THE WILD ZONE:  
THREE VERSIONS OF THE FEMINIST AESTHETIC  
IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Feminism as a blueprint for political action is a derivative of the women's liberation movement. Whereas the foundations of the movement can be traced to the issuance of the Seneca Falls Declaration in 1848, the United States witnessed two major upsurges of feminism in the twentieth century. The passage of the 19th amendment in 1920 indicated the climax of the first phase, the struggle for universal suffrage. The second wave emerged as a result of a society-wide cultural, political, ethnic, and racial awakening in the 1960's, and as a backlash to the New Left's failure to take women's aspirations into account. The female aesthetic is the cultural arm of the second stage, or the modern feminist movement, launched by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

This essay concentrating on historical development, principal aims and objectives, placement in the macrocultural context, and methods of cultural polarization will perform a comparative analysis of three variants of American feminist thought, the white female, black female, and Chicana aesthetics. However, before proceeding any further, a clarification of terms is in order. Since the feminist movement cannot be treated as a monolithic unit, the expression "feminisms" appears to be more appropriate (Országh–Virágos 254). Among the ever-increasing feminisms, cultural, psychoanalytical, linguistic, lesbian etc., the white female, the black female, and the Chicana aesthetics are representatives of an extremely crowded arena emphasizing a transformational mode of literary critical practice. Feminist literary criticism, however, is only a component of a wide range of critical problems denoted under the umbrella term of feminist criticism

focusing on such diverse issues as the possibilities of the subversion and transformation of the patriarchal system, feminist historiography, the reconstruction of the canon, and stereotyping of women in literature and in visual arts. The phenomenon can also be categorized according to national and geographical origin as the French critical trend characterized by the de Beauvoir-Derrida-Lacan-Kristeva-Irigaray-Cixous-Wittig continuum is complemented by the British and American school, including the emergence of feminist criticism in Quebec (Országh–Virágos 254–55). Furthermore, this essay serves another purpose.

One of the main complaints of non-white feminist activists is mainstream America's neglect or ignorance of their contributions to women's cause. This effort at comparative analysis shedding light at different shades of a movement popularly conceived as a white monolith, attempts to set the record straight.

The aesthetics discussed here are only a small component of the conceptual labyrinth of feminism. Feminism can be viewed as a tree whose trunk is composed of one and a half centuries of women's liberation struggle. Feminism as a political theory would be represented by the tree's main branches, the smaller branches stand for the various feminisms from which feminist (literary) criticism is spawned giving rise to the female aesthetic. (Throughout the essay the terms "feminist and female aesthetic" are used with identical meaning)

### *The White Female Aesthetic*

Although this essay concentrates upon the American side of feminisms, the great figures of French feminism, Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, and Wittig deserve a passing look. French feminists, inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis, locate the motivating force behind female creativity in the repressed sphere of the mind. Julia Kristeva argues that female writing stems from the imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage of development during which the child mistakenly identifies himself as the Other. The derivation of female literary production from the pre-Oedipal stage is justified as in this pre-gender phase women are not constrained by patriarchal restrictions. This theory is also reminiscent of Jung's view of the source of creativity, with the pre-Oedipal phase functioning as women's "collective unconscious."

Whereas Kristeva originates female creativity and literary production from psychological repression, Luce Irigaray argues that women's language and writing stem from repressed sexuality. Following her "two lips" theory, derived from the anatomical characteristics of the female genitals, women's language is characterized by contiguity. Hélène Cixous' origination of female writing from the repressed female libido not only attempts to break from Kristeva and Irigaray's essentialism but underlines the difficulty in defining the female aesthetic:

*It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Cixous 340)*

For Cixous writing is a means of fighting against patriarchy, and is an expression of "repressed female sexuality" (Weedon 68). As a return to the body "an uncanny stranger on display," (68) the process in itself is a revolutionary act. Cixous considers language as a concealer of an invisible enemy, male syntax and grammar (qtd in Kolodny 149). The critical means of resistance against the phallogocentric order is *jouissance*, a multitiered experience of sexual pleasure (Stanton 77). Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969), promotes the image of the Amazon stepping beyond the sexual, political, and linguistic categories of the phallogocentric order (Jones 370).

The famous maxim that French feminists emphasize repression, their British counterparts stress oppression, and American feminists concentrate upon expression refers to the existence of an intellectual debate between French and American feminist thinking. The attempt to reconcile the theoretical French and the pragmatic American

perspectives gave rise to much of feminist literary scholarship in the U.S. in the 1980's. Similarly to Irigaray, Elaine Showalter representing the British-American line believes that female literary creation is sex defined and functions as a revolt against the view of writing as a phallic, or Oedipal process. According to the latter, the author through the writing process becomes a father to himself, suffering the "anxiety of influence," a term referring to the internal struggle a male writer must wage against his literary ancestors (Showalter 257). Perceiving writing as putting the "phallic pen on the virginal paper" reinforces that this activity belongs to the male domain (Showalter 250).

Showalter predicates her own theory on Shirley and Edwin Ardener's model positing society as a compound of dominant and muted groups. Whereas women belong to the muted, subordinated group, owing to a "lack of full containment," or perhaps overlap there exists a "wild zone." The wild zone, or independent female space is the source of women's creativity. While similarly to the French psychoanalysts' view Showalter considers the source of creative activity to be rooted in the unconscious, she concedes that the means of expression, or channels of communication are male dominated, and women are restrained to use the "master's tools." The wild zone manifests itself in three ways. Spatially it is an equivalent of an area in the dominant culture forbidden to men, experientially it indicates particularly female activities (childbirth, child rearing), and metaphysically corresponds to the imaginary (Showalter 261-262).

Rachel Blau Du Plessis argues that just as the Etruscan was a language unintelligible to the Romans, the female language appears Etruscan to the dominant socio-cultural order. Female writing is characterized by a porousness of communication, a secret language, a non-hierarchical structure, (131) and "non-linear movement" (135). In its "shapeless shapeliness"(132) it can be compared to a "verbal quilt" (136) representing the woman as a "leaf" in opposition to the "phallic tower" (133). Female writing performs a synthesis between opposing elements: love and ambition, mother and child, death and pleasure (134). Since woman is an incorporation of contradictions, she represents a strange liminality: an outsider by her sexual status and relation to the dominant group, yet an insider by social position (135) reminding one of DuBois' famous description of black consciousness:

“One ever feels his two-ness,—An American, A Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” (1013)

Thus the true meaning of women’s writing is located at the interstices.

Du Plessis offers the following definition of the female aesthetic:

*....the production of formal, epistemological, and thematic strategies by members of the group Woman, strategies possibly born in contradiction, overdetermined by two elements of sexual difference—by women’s psychosocial experiences of gender asymmetry and by women’s historical status in an (ambiguously) nonhegemonic group. (139–140)*

This definition is essentialist, and in its vagueness is reminiscent of Maulana Karenga’s view of the Black Aesthetic, and Raymund A. Paredes’ definition of Chicano literature. For Karenga, the determining factors are race and social relevance, for Paredes ethnicity and ethnic experience (74). A logical extension of Du Plessis’ s theory offers itself as the female aesthetic, a nonhegemonic marginal school of thought, can be applied to other nonhegemonic, marginal groups (149) supported by the fact that both blacks and Chicanos have had a subordinated historical status and have suffered from racial and ethnic asymmetry as well.

The term “epistemological” refers to the dominance of theory, compared to the higher degree of tangibility of the black feminist and Chicana feminist aesthetics. The emphasis on marginality makes woman the symbol of all oppressed groups expanding Zora Neale Hurston’s notion of the black woman as the “mule uh de world” (14).

Paralleling the black aesthetics’ committed and detached schools, the white female aesthetic can be divided into a radical and a more inclusive version. Carolyn Heilbrun and Catherine Stimpson point out that two types of female literary criticism exist. Following biblical analogy, demonstrated by its “righteous, angry and admonitory tone,” the radical trend adheres to the lines of the Old Testament, and the New Testament view seeks “the grace of imagination” (Showalter 243).

The white female aesthetic, like its other minority counterparts, was a response to a historical exclusion of women from American public discourse. Nina Baym asserts that the barring of women from literary theory was motivated by sexist male bias, and the prevailing contention that women were unable to produce "great works" (64). The excellent or great works were books replete with classical references, and the exclusion of women from higher education denied the former the opportunity of being familiarized with the classics. Also, just as the black male writer was forced to carry the stigma of eternal childhood, mainstream America had foisted on the white woman writer a similar image. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" the author, suffering from post-partum depression, is locked into the nursery, deprived of intellectual activities, and is condescendingly treated by her doctor husband, who believes that her disease is partly caused by her "imaginative power," and "habit of story making" (Baym 1532). Furthermore, as Leslie Fiedler argues, women writers' incessant production of "flagrantly bad best-sellers" against which male authors, the best of "our fictionists" (Baym 69) had to struggle, and Hawthorne's oft-quoted statement: "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash" (qtd. in Tompkins 101), underlined the woman writer as the enemy. In this view authorship was equaled with fathering a text and if literature was considered an attempt to achieve fatherhood on the part of the author, "then every act of writing by a woman is both perverse and absurd, and of course, it is bound to fail" (Baym 78).

Thomas Jefferson's condescending rejection of Phillis Wheatley's poetry based on the prevailing concept of Anglo-Saxon superiority and Hume's guidelines making the "taste of an intelligent man" an adequate basis of criticism is not only an example of racism, but of contemporary sexism as well (Baker 149). Du Plessis asserts that women's exclusion from public discourse and education led to the development of "an aesthetics which in many respect was feminine" (147) and gave rise to a "mother tongue" (148), a form of linguistic resistance to male scholarly discourse.

As Heilbrun argues feminist criticism and by expansion the female author faced three types of reception: "has been scorned, ignored, fled from, at best reluctantly embraced" (qtd. in Gilbert 37). J. Hillis Miller's comments reflect the first two of these approaches:

*I believe in the established canon of English and American literature and in the validity of the concept of privileged texts. I think it is more important to read Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton than to read Borges in translation, or even, to say the truth, to read Virginia Woolf (qtd. in Gilbert 38)*

Following Virginia Woolf's prescription for great art, the female aesthetic emphasizes androgyny. While Du Plessis claims the existence of a female psyche, a feminist version of negritude (143), there are crucial differences, as the former favors racial exclusivity. The concept of negritude emphasizes the existence of a Negro value system and presents black people as warm, expressive, and community-oriented human beings. The American version of this school of thought is based on the dichotomy of mind and soul, the former representing the rational Eurocentric thinking, the latter the human and intellectual warmth of the black community. Thus negritude is separatist and exclusive, the notion of the female psyche is integrationist and culturally inclusive.

The female and black aesthetics emphasize their connection to "the rhythms of the earth," their "sensuality, intuition and subjectivity" (Du Plessis 150). Several female aestheticians consider the woman's body as a colony, viewing feminism as a decolonizing movement. Christiane Rochefort asserts that women's literature represents the artistic and creative production of the colonized (Showalter 259). By putting women's culture and women's literature on the periphery, a definition for the former is needed. Showalter argues that female culture has two principal characteristics: egalitarianism and community orientedness (261). Gerda Lerner reflects on the liminality of women's culture. She rejects the notion of a subculture, as women's social functions place them in the "general culture" and when confronted by "patriarchal restraint," they convert the latter into complementarity, a greater appreciation of the woman's function (Showalter 261). Consequently, Lerner sees women as integral elements of the mainstream, or primary core, and assigns them to the secondary core simultaneously.

Virágos argues that any culturally stable society is capable of maintaining a balance between two kinds of constituent elements: a

primary core and numerous secondary cores. The primary core in this case refers to “mainstream America,” and the secondary core is informed by numerous subcultures. The division between dominant and muted groups parallels the distinction between the primary and secondary cores. However, if one considers the wild zone and the men’s section on Ardener’s imaginary circles as separate areas, the notion of centrifugality and centripetality can be applied.

In its general thrust the white female aesthetic is non-divisive. The New Testament version suggests integration. Du Plessis promotes Woolf’s notion of androgeneity and integrationism. The radical feminist approach, viewing the male as the enemy, demonstrated by Cixous and Rich among others, is divisive or particularistic. The female aesthetics is an important element of multicultural (MC) America. Its inclusive main trend is pluralistic as Virágos’s MC1, and the radical version qualifies as MC2. Furthermore, the notion of the primary core must be considered. Since American civilization is a result of a balancing act between culturally divisive, centrifugal, and uniting centripetal forces, the white, middle-class version of the female aesthetics is centripetal toward the primary core. However, if one accepts feminism as a subculture, radical feminism emphasizing gender-based oppression and calling for cultural independence, it is centrifugal to the primary core and centripetal in relation to the secondary core.

The primary core is a multi-tiered concept containing icons of American history, literature and popular culture on one level, and the notions of philosophical Americanism, mythological explanations, affective Americanism, and a volitional component on the other (Virágos 31–32).

Consequently female aestheticians’ efforts, replacing the stereotyped “feminine mystique” with professional women, expand the canon, bringing new icons into the public discourse in the process. The emphasis of gynotexts over androtexts serves this purpose as well. Philosophical Americanism, as well as a reference to one of the “sacred documents of the republic” (Virágos 32), is prevalent in the Seneca Falls Declaration’s adoption of the ideas of the Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, the Amazon, fashioned after Wittig’s *Les Guerillères*, brings the superhero, one of the integral figures of the cultural mainstream into mind. Also the promotion of the New



Woman, who would in turn invent the New Man (Davidson 61) recalls the mythological element of the core.

Similarly to its black and Chicano counterparts, the feminist aesthetics employs methods of cultural polarization. Any essentialist rhetoric is dependent upon conation and dichotomizing devices including “wedge issues,” and “versus patterns” (Virágos 21). Essentialism, based on “alleged or real in-group specificity” (Virágos 21) is manifested in Irigaray’s emphasis on the female anatomy. The notion of conativity is present in *l’écriture féminine*’s view of the writing process as a revolutionary act against patriarchy.

One of the most frequently deployed wedge issues is rape defined by Brownmiller as a “conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” ((qtd. in Beard 135). Andrea Dworkin, viewing all male-female relations as rape, considers the latter a political crime. Sexual harassment, with the survivor deciding the nature and gravity of the crime (Beard 153) is also a frequently employed dividing tool.

By viewing rape and sexual harassment as a political crime, radical feminists promote centrifugality and cultural separatism. Having assumed the right to define, a move is made from the phallic order, making the woman, the heretofore defined one, the definer. The woman as a definer of rape becomes the interpreter of herself as a text, launching herself on an evolutionary process from a passive victimized object to a subject signifying agency.

The establishment of versus patterns is prevalent in Showalter’s notion of gynocriticism as well. In order to battle the neglect and hostile attitude toward feminist criticism, gynocriticism views and interprets literature from a female point of view, constructs paradigms based on the female experience, breaks away from male criticism, and promotes the idea of a female culture (Weedon 155).

Du Plessis, putting forth the both/and vision of the female aesthetics, favoring monism over dualism, betrays conativity as the former is believed to bring forth a non-hierarchical system (132). Consequently, the artist is a producer of a social product designed to will a better world into being. The very view of the female artist as a site for the reconciliation of the domestic and public sphere (139) is also conative, as history has proven the unfeasibility of the above. Conativity is also present in the transformational notion that the feminist aesthetic will help the overthrow of existing forms (144).

## *The Black Female Aesthetic*

While the white middle-class version of feminism is essentialism oriented, black and Chicano feminists emphasize race, class, and ethnic origin in addition to gender. According to Barbara Smith the roots of black feminism are the home peopled by strong Amazon-like female figures. Her description of “strong, fierce women who could stop you with a look out the corners of their eyes” (xxi) brings Wittig’s Amazon to mind. The view of the home as a source of black feminism is somewhat ironic, as black males regard black feminists as people who left the race, a group without a home (xxii). Reaffirming Hurston’s description of the black woman as the “mule uh de world,” (14) Smith describes the double discrimination black women are exposed to. As the white man handed the load of the world to the black man to carry, the latter passed it on to black women. The black woman is a subject of two-fold oppression, once due to her skin color, and again due to her sex.

The blues, another source of black feminism, commemorated black women’s aspirations for freedom both in the public and in the private spheres (xxiii). The notion of black women’s independence is also present in their concept of marriage, where the institution is viewed as a “pragmatic partnership” (xxiv).

Smith argues that *The Color Purple* (1982) demonstrates that the rural South and the “lives of our mothers” housed the origins of the movement (1). Celie’s experiences display the interlocking systems of oppression, as her subordinated status was reinforced by her sex and her economic position. The rural South compelled black women to fight myths. For Celie political equality and racial liberation did not mean freedom from the incestuous advances of her stepfather, and racism, demonstrated by the mayor and his wife’s response to Sofia’s efforts to reaffirm her personal integrity, was not the primary enemy. The very act of writing Celie engages in is a revolutionary act as her writing leads to the weakening of patriarchal restraints.

Referring to mature women and “outrageous, audacious, courageous or, willful behavior” Alice Walker defines black feminism as womanism (qtd. in Smith xxiv). However, the term “womanism” is not clearly delineated. Arguing that a womanist is committed to the survival of all people regardless of gender, both Walker and Anna

Julia Cooper emphasize centripetality and posit humanism as the school's main characteristic (Karenga 43).

Besides Alice Walker the centripetal thrust of womanism is reaffirmed by Vivian Gordon and Clenora Hudson Weems. The former believes that black women are integral partners of black men in their struggle against racism, the latter views the "Africana woman" as a "companion to the Africana man" in his fight for emancipation (Karenga 296).

Anna Julia Cooper is considered one of the forerunners of the black feminist movement. Her *A Voice from the South* (1892) protested against racism, sexism, and classism and pointed at the dual nature of philosophical concepts:

*There is a feminine as well as masculine side to truth, that these are related, not as inferior or superior, not as better or worse, not as weaker or stronger, but as complements—complements in one necessary and symmetric whole (Karenga 285)*

Furthermore, Cooper's belief in the priority of community development over individual grievances foreshadows a rejection of the basic tenet of feminism summed up in the slogan "the personal is political." She recognized that the goals of the black feminist movement and of the global empowerment of oppressed people are universal:

*...when race, color, sex, condition, are realized to be the accidents, not the substance of life.... then woman's lesson is taught and woman's cause is won—not the white woman nor the black woman nor the real woman, but the cause of every man or woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. (798)*

On the other hand, black feminists along with their Third World sisters reject the racism of white feminists and view black men as the primary obstacle to their cause. Smith considers feminism as a school of thought dedicated to examine the way Third World women live, treat each other, and what they believe. Black feminism, by denying

that sexual identity determines women's relationship to power, is non-essentialist.

Black feminism deconstructs several myths. The abolition of slavery after the Civil War did not mean the liberation of black women. Unlike for black men, racism is not the sole concern for black women, as the elimination of racial discrimination would not put an end to sexism and sexual oppression. An additional damaging myth, not taking into consideration that the movement aims to improve the situation of all non-hegemonic groups, contends that the scope of black feminism is narrow (Smith XXVI–XXIX).

The primary purpose of black feminist aesthetics is to struggle against the “simultaneity of oppression” (XXXII) based on interlocking modes of forcing black women into submission. Black feminism demonstrates that this “triple jeopardy” (XXXII) rests on race, class, and sexual orientation components. The movement, similarly to the black aesthetics, is a political program, rather than a means of evaluation of artistic products created by black women. As Smith asserts, black feminism emphasizes organizing and day-to-day activity over theory, and its primary concerns, home truths, include a wide range of issues from abortion through sexual harassment to welfare rights (XXXV).

Black feminists reject the sexist blueprint for blackness created by the Black Power Movement and the black aesthetes (XL). Furthermore, the movement struggles against being viewed as the Other. Black feminists, unlike their white, middle class counterpart, do not fight against the black family, and similarly to *l'écriture féminine* believe in the existence of a black female language. The latter assertion is justified by Smith's discovery of a “specifically Black female language” in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker (Toward a Black Feminist Criticism... 174).

The black female aesthetician combats such stereotypical descriptions of African-American womanhood as the “mammy” and the “castrating matriarch.” The former is represented by the cantankerous, yet well-meaning Mammy adored by Scarlett in *Gone With The Wind* (1939), by Idella in Ossie Davis' play “Purlie Victorious” (1961), or by Dilsey in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the latter is suggested by Nanny, the invincible grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), by Mama

holding the family together in Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959), and by Bigger Thomas' mother in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) or by Granny in Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). The black male view of black women is nonetheless offensive, suffice it to refer to LeRoi Jones' derogatory comments, "I have slept with almost every mediocre colored woman," (qtd. in Smith 202) or Ishmael Reed's complaint over the meager sales of his books:

"Maybe if I was one of those young *female* (sic) Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women , who can *do no wrong* (sic)" (qtd. in Smith....Toward A Black Feminist ....173). Finally, another damaging image of black womanhood, being a traitor to the Black Power Movement, or a "female Uncle Tom," is presented by Jimmy Garrett's 1968 drama, "We Own The Night."

Black and white feminism share a common historic background as both are products of the society-wide upheaval of the 1960's. While both movements base their origin on earlier events, the abolition struggle of the 1830's and the enslavement experience respectively, the second stage of American feminism paved the way for the emergence of its black counterpart. In 1973 black women dejected over the racism of their white peers broke away from the feminist movement to establish the National Black Feminist Organization. The other axis of creation was the Black Power Movement from which, alienated by the movement's sexism, many black women separated. A third foundation of black feminism is the everyday life of black women, who similarly to white women became aware of their captivity in the "feminine mystique" (Smith 272-74).

Unlike its white middle class counterpart, black feminism is not an umbrella term for essentialism-oriented social and cultural criticism. The movement's primary concern is the elimination of the "triple jeopardy," the interlocking system of race, class, and gender-based subordination. One of the movement's primary goals is to fight for the recognition of black women's humanity: "We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough" (Smith 275). Black feminism, demonstrated by its concept of rape of a black woman by a white man, introduces the notion of racial-sexual oppression. Here a wedge issue is used and the scope of rape expands from a political to a racial crime. Black feminism, singling out capitalism and patriarchy as the

causes behind women's oppression, tends to move toward the left on the political spectrum. The notion of "the personal is political" is expanded as race and class issues are included.

Black feminism occupies a centripetal position in its relation to the black aesthetic as it does not call for separation:

*Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. (Smith 275)*

Racial solidarity acts as a centripetal force in the black community. In its rejection of the racism of white feminism black feminism is centrifugal, a mutuality of concerns i.e., patriarchy notwithstanding. The situation of black feminists is much reminiscent of Du Plessis' view of the white female aesthetic. The followers of this school are outsiders by race and economic status, yet insiders according to their final objective: the elimination of the patriarchal imperative. The "jugular vein mentality" (XL), the anti-Semitism of some black feminist activists betrays a centrifugal attitude between secondary cores, as the oppressed becomes the oppressor (XLIV).

Black male criticism castigates black female literary production for several reasons. Works by black female authors provide a monolithic image of black men as sexist, black female writers assign gender top priority and reinforce the negative stereotypical images of black men held by the white community, fail to provide an Afrocentric approach to male-female relations, and emphasize victimization over agency (Karenga 288–289).

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) functions as the refutation of these arguments. While the male characters at first appear to be the incarnations of the savage brute: Fonso rapes Celie, Mr. treats Celie like an animal, and Harpo yearns to beat Sofia, Mr.'s subsequent transformation indicates a deviation from the stereotypical mold. The issue of male-female relations is viewed in a non-WASP light, as the female and male characters end up in forming a commune type living arrangement. Finally, Celie's development from sexual, cultural, and economic peonage to feminine consciousness and business ownership demonstrates the author's emphasis on agency.

In comparison to white feminism, black feminism (black womanism) is not characterized by conativity or versus patterns and does not suffer from the domino principle either as it does not distort the meaning of black or white feminism. However, Alice Walker's belief in the life-saving power of writing reveals a touch of conativity: "It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are 'minority' writers or 'majority.' It is simply in our power to do this" (33).

### *Chicana Feminism*

Chicana feminism is also the product of the 1960's. Just like black women, Chicanas face triple jeopardy, as sex and class discrimination are coupled with social and economic disadvantages suffered due to ethnic origin. Marcela Lucero reaffirms the notion of triple jeopardy in her theory of a "tri-cultural person in a triple bind oppression." The Latina self is caught between the Anglo woman, Mexican-American culture and the Chicano man (Ortega and Saporta Sternbach 13).

Chicanas have also been relegated to the private sphere, and had to fight against two damaging, extremist images of Mexican-American womanhood, Malinche, *La llorona*, or the traitor woman and *Virgen of Guadalupe*, the pure, angelic female. According to Ortega and Sternbach, the term "Latina writing" refers not only to literary products of Chicana authors, but to women writers representing other groups sharing Latina concerns (11). The Latina aesthetics has one so far unuttered or emphasized criterion, attachment or ties to the working class. A working class origin is needed to function and interpret cultural contexts which include: race, economy, ethnicity, the political, social, ideological, and artistic spheres (Ortega and Saporta Sternbach 12).

Latina writing, seeking the woman's space in these cultural contexts, emphasizes a matriarchal heritage, based on a long line of female forebears. Chicana writers restructure the patriarchal family by presenting an expanded family of women, and a central, patriarchal figure is replaced by a matriarchal character (Ortega and Saporta Sternbach 12). Latina writing follows Bloom's thesis of male writing as the author struggling with the "anxiety of influence" in this case contends with the frustration of the "mother's" impact. The central role of the mother presents a female version of Bloom's theory. While

male writing is driven by the manifestation of a father and son conflict, Latina literary production commemorates the clash between the mother and the daughter (Ortega and Saporta Sternbach 12).

Latina feminism or the Chicana aesthetic fights against the partial truths of the “official hegemonic ideology,” as the mainstream discourse is characterized by omissions and gaps. The Chicana aesthetic attempts to fill the gap by deconstructing the angel and prostitute stereotypes. Consequently, Latina writing at first offers a “negative definition” of Chicana identity, establishing what Chicana women are not, than it proceeds to give an affirmative description of the Latina character and its historical and macrosocial surroundings (Ortega and Saporta Sternbach 13).

According to Catherine Belsey feminism is based on the cultural construction of the self. Feminist consciousness arises when the self is considered a speaking subject. For women in general this process is very painful as speech and language are elements of the phallogocentric socio-symbolic order. A Latina needs to be inscribed into two symbolic orders, the mainstream, or hegemonic culture, and the Spanish language mother culture. Since the Self has to continuously negotiate between two cultures—belonging to neither, rejected by the first and accepted by the second, a devalued form of discourse itself—a Latina develops a negative view of herself. Owing to this continual balancing between two cultures, or a constant liminality, one of the most defining characteristics of Latina writing is bilingualism (Ortega and Saporta Sternbach 14).

Chicana feminism’s main objectives are the fight against gender inequality and against the interlocking systems of oppression. An additional function of Latina writers is to act as a chronicler of their personal lives and of their community as well. A Latina writer also projects a New Person forged by her fight against racism and sexism (Ortega and Saporta Sternbach 16). Writing not only serves as the expression of the self, or the demonstration of achieving the status of “speaking subject,” but guarantees the Chicana author’s mental equilibrium, and protects her psychic integrity.

As Ortega and Sternbach argue, the main elements of Latina aesthetic are interlingualism, intertextuality, and a struggle for a “woman, life, and mestizaje affirming discourse” (18). The story of Malinche, reflects the Chicana/Latina experience. Driven by the mother’s intention to please Malinche’s stepfather, so the latter could



make his son (Malinche's half brother) the sole beneficiary of his estate, the young girl was sold to the Tabasco Indians as a slave. Later she was transferred to Hernan Cortez, in captivity she made use of her bilingualism eventually functioning as a guide and interpreter for Cortez. Furthermore, she became his lover, and her children are considered to be the first Chicanos (Moraga 52).

The myth mirrors the position and image of the Chicana. Malinche was betrayed and treated as an object twice, once by her mother, and once by her captors, the Tabasco Indians. She was caught between two cultures, the domestic one represented by the mother, and the macrosocial one indicated by the Tabasco males. The mother-daughter conflict of Chicana myths stems from the Malinche story as well, as both her stepfather and mother call her "la chingada" (Moraga 53). Consequently, a Chicana feminist shares the fate of Malinche in two aspects: she is rejected by her own people for allegedly adhering to white feminist theories and models, and is sexually oppressed by Chicano men.

While black feminism emphasizes the political aspects of the writer's role, Chicana feminism favors the spiritual level. According to Ana Castillo the writer functions as a relator, and must call on the Chicana woman to love herself (Binder 37). Sandra Cisneros sees the Chicana author's role as an artist and teacher (Binder 68), positing awareness and consciousness of oneself and community as the crucial elements (Binder 69). Lucha Corpi presents a different view of Malinche, as an intellectual woman and the originator of "mestizaje," the mother of the race (Binder 82). Veronica Cunningham compares writing to a romantic relationship during which the lover brings the best out of a person, extracting certain truths from the inside (Binder 92). This view is the opposite of the phallic concept of writing as the latter emphasizes invasion and by extension domination, the former points to co-operation and harmony.

According to Rebecca Gonzalez the Chicano author must contribute to the rich ethnic cultural tapestry of the U.S. (Binder 94). Angela Hoyos argues that writing, similarly to Bloom's view, is creation, as the artist produces order from chaos, and "plays god" (Binder 113). Similarly to Rudolfo Anaya, a Chicana author must promote a harmony with the cosmos, and must gain her artistic strength from spiritual values (Binder 115).

Consequently, the Chicana aesthetic assigns the following role to the author: a promoter of psychological well-being, a teacher, a catalyst toward self-actualization, and a booster of ethnic pride and consciousness. While black feminism is overtly political, mostly associated with Marxism, Chicana feminism emphasizes the psychological and spiritual well-being of the community.

According to Evangelina Vigil love is one of the most important forces that can save the Chicana community. Vigil and Hoyos emphasize spirituality based on Elihu Carranza's Chicanismo, promoting the harmony of the individual with his community, a moral duty "to make woman as he is with woman as he ought to be" (Treacy 87). Vigil, unlike the main trend of Chicana culture, is culturally nationalistic (Treacy 88) and centrifugal. She equates Mexicanness with femininity, as the latter includes nurturing and people-orientedness based on the family and the cultural legacy of matriarchy (Treacy 89).

Gloria Anzaldúa describes the Chicana condition with the Aztec term, *nepantlism* or being "torn between options" (Alarcón 99). The Chicana is a site of a cultural struggle in which the tenets of white culture debase and devalue Mexican culture, and both Chicano and Anglo culture confront native-American culture, placing the Chicana in the dilemma of the "mixed breed," demonstrated by the Malinche myth (Alarcón 98).

The historical background of Chicana feminism is similar to black and white feminism as it stems from the same era, the 1960's. Chicana feminism's main nurturing force is black feminism as the "woman, life, and mestizaje affirming discourse" is a Chicana equivalent of womanism. In its overall objectives it appears to be centripetal, and similarly to womanism emphasizes the common participation of Mexican-American women and men in the fight against gender and racial oppression. Chicana feminism with such exceptions as Evangelina Vigil's cultural nationalism exerts a centripetal force in the macro-cultural context, striving to stay away from versus patterns.

While white feminism is essentialist, black feminism is overtly political, Chicana feminism stays on the spiritual level. All three feminisms strive to promote the image of the new person, represented by Wittig's Amazon, Weems' *Africana Woman* and the reinterpretation of the Malinche myth. Whereas white feminism is primarily confronted with the concept of universal patriarchy, black

and Chicana feminist thought, compelled to negotiate between mainstream America and a “domestic culture,” are caught between two discourses.

### *Summary*

According to Mukarovsky the function of aesthetics is threefold as it isolates the object, turns it into a self-referential sign, and forces the reader to utilize the totality of his or her experience in order to “contemplate the specific manner of the work’s organization” (Ickstadt 31). In the case of the female aesthetics, in addition to the aesthetic role, pragmatic functions can be discerned. Showalter’s gynocriticism separates female writers’ works from the rest of literature, views gynotexts as the autonomous texts of female experience, and through the establishment of new paradigms it relies on the readers’ experience. Lillian Robinson in her subscription to the female aesthetic also emphasizes the dominance of the aesthetic side as alternative feminist readings and efforts widen the range of the canon reinforcing the self-referentiality of female literature.

The black female aesthetic views literary production as one of the signs of black women’s independence and at the same time reinforces the self-referentiality of the “mule” as the signifier of the black female experience. In the case of Chicana literature *Malinche* acts as a signifier of the Mexican–American experience, and an attempt at cultural independence, demonstrated by *Vigil*, is also present. These two aesthetics emphasize the pragmatic aspects of the text and of the author, including didactic, communicative, religious, and political functions. The black and Chicano aesthetics’ struggle against the multiplicity of oppressions place both on a political level. The black female aesthetic with its effort to coopt black males into its struggle against racial injustice appears to satisfy the requirements for a communicative function. Sandra Cisneros’ view of the Chicana author as a teacher and a promoter of Chicano consciousness shows a didactic side. Angela Hoyos’ concept of writing as creating order from chaos, or “playing god,” and the movement’s emphasis on spiritual values manifested by the notion of Chicanismo elevates the Chicana aesthetic to the level of religious mysticism.

The domination of essentialism in the white female aesthetic deserves a further look. Unlike its racially or ethnically tinged

counterparts, white feminism is middle-class based. Thus, in this case female alterity can only be justified by anatomical factors as women's social position assures an insider status. White women are not caught in the grip of interlocking oppressions as sex-based disadvantages are not coupled with race or ethnicity-induced discrimination. Whereas white feminist thought according to Heilbrun had to contend with being "scorned or ignored," Black and Chicana feminists experienced a greater degree of hostility. In both cases minority males angrily rejected the former as traitors to their cause, as followers of black feminism are considered to have "left the home," and the myth of Malinche's treason signifies the Chicana experience.

Feminist theory examines the relationship between male and female discourses in four possible ways. Feminist critique aims to identify and offer means of elimination of traditional barriers toward women's social and cultural progress: sexism and the patriarchal society. Feminist extensions challenge women's cultural and historic exclusion by providing alternative knowledges and histories. Feminist deconstruction undermines the binary structures of patriarchal theory, weakening such dyads as identity-difference, mind-body, subject-object, and reality-representation. Also, feminist deconstruction achieves a reversal of the relations between these binary terms by exchanging the position of the subordinated and the dominant. Feminist explorations attempt to change the linguistic foundation of women's oppression, to develop "autonomous woman defined categories and forms of utterance" in order to fight against patriarchal constraints (Blain 362–364).

The four components of feminist thought are reflected to varying degrees in the schools discussed above. In the case of white feminism critique, deconstruction, and exploration are dominant. As feminist critique is dedicated to offer means of elimination of barriers to women's social and cultural advancement, the centrifugal views of radical feminism, and the concept of a female culture are indicative of this purpose. The movement's broadsweeping effort to fight against the division of the world into public and private spheres, and its attempt to undermine the notion of gender demonstrates a desire to deconstruct such fundamental dyads of patriarchal theory as "public-private," and "sex-gender." Du Plessis' notion of a female culture and mode of expression qualifies as feminist exploration, or an attempt to eliminate the linguistic foundation of women's subservient position.

Gerda Lerner and other female historians' efforts to provide alternative knowledges and histories are elements of feminist extensions.

In the case of Black and Chicana feminism critique is dominant. In addition to sexism and the notion of the patriarchal society, race and ethnicity-based discrimination along with economic considerations are discerned as obstacles to women's advancement. It is noteworthy that one of the reasons for the advent of black feminism is the racism of white feminists, and Afrocentric womanism emphasizes the irrelevance of white feminist theories to the black female experience.

Finally, Du Plessis' notion of the applicability of the female aesthetic to the experience of any marginal group must be qualified. Whereas she claims the non-hegemonic nature of the female aesthetic and points to women as a "historically non-hegemonic group," (149) this statement is only valid in reference to the patriarchal society as the racism of white feminists' underlines the existence of hegemonic thought within their ranks.

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