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0521592259 - Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism

Sara Ahmed

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## Introduction: Speaking back

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It is difficult to begin writing a book with a sense of anticipation that one's reader may already be feeling a sense of dread. I imagine you scowling, 'not another book on feminism and postmodernism'. And I imagine you yawning, 'hasn't enough been said?' Of course, the fantasies one has of 'the reader' or 'one's reader' are always impossible, always inadequate to their object. But, as someone interested in how feminism and postmodernism can and do speak to each other, I have a sense in which there is a critical reluctance to pursue a debate on or through these terms at all. So, one reader of my work comments, 'my heart did rather sink at the prospect of yet another book on feminism and postmodernism'. This prospect of readers with sinking hearts is, to say the least, alarming. To deal with this doubling of affect (the reader's sinking heart, the writer's alarm) I want to ask: is the difficulty simply the proliferation of books on feminism and postmodernism, or is the difficulty about how the proliferation has taken place and to what effect?

Indeed, at the first academic conference at which I presented my work in 1993 the conference organiser commented on how none of the papers on postmodernism had said anything new or different. She suggested to me that all the papers – which had offered very different positions and were shaped by diverse disciplinary frameworks – were simply re-staging an old debate. I found this judgement surprising and instructive. There was a sense of this 'thing' called 'postmodernism' that had taken over feminist debates (becoming a proper object of feminist dialogue in and of itself) such that any dialogue between feminism and postmodernism could *only* be a re-staging. Immediately then the institutional effects of speaking on postmodernism as a feminist announce themselves. In part, such an act of speaking on, about or to postmodernism is read as a sign of the exhaustion of feminist concerns. So one must ask yet another difficult question: why is there an assumption that the debate between feminism and postmodernism is already staged?

Partly, this difficulty relates to anxieties in Women's Studies about the role of theory that is perceived to be 'male'. As I discuss later, while I do

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not go along with such a dismissal of (postmodern) theory as ‘male’, I do think there remains an issue of authorisation that should be a troubling one for feminists. Citing postmodernism does authorise a certain kind of space within the academy that is predicated on hierarchy and exclusion. However, the response to this relegation of space within the academy need not be withdrawal from the debate. On the contrary, I take the issue of authorisation as my impetus: how can we read postmodernism differently *as feminists* and *for feminism*? To speak on postmodernism as feminists does not necessarily involve simply affirming this relegation of academic space. To this extent, our tiredness as actors on the stage may pose trouble (do we have to read this script?), but also could become more troubling (how can we do this differently?).

The critical perception that there has been a proliferation of writing on feminism and postmodernism is linked to the assumption that the act of bringing feminism and postmodernism together can no longer shift the terrain (in other words, that the terms of the debate have taken over its critical purchase). Think, for a moment, of my sub-title, ‘feminist theory and postmodernism’. I am self-conscious about how it may appear boring in its bluntness. But, boring or not, the sub-title has significance as a way of entering academic space. The sense in which this book is staging a debate is made clear by the ‘and’ which stands between the subjects, ‘feminist theory’ and ‘postmodernism’, forcing them apart, as it brings them together. The ‘and’ is not innocent. It carries with it the baggage of the ‘two’ that is constitutive of the debate within the academy. In other words, the ‘and’ introduces the debate as a question of critical *relationships* (think how it works without it – ‘feminist theory postmodernism’). The gesture of bringing two terms together in this way may appear to be organised by a desire to know or even document their relationship (feminism *and* postmodernism: are they alike? are they different?). Perhaps then, the perception that the debate on feminism and postmodernism can only be a tired re-staging relates to how the debate has been structured around the question of identity or difference. It is hence symptomatic that the relation between feminism and postmodernism has been conceived as *analogous* (Hutcheon 1989: 144). Consequently, with the stress on identity or difference, the question that has framed the debate has been: ‘is feminism (like) postmodern(ism)?’, or ‘should feminism be (like) postmodern(ism)?’

The problem with the question, ‘what is the nature of their relation?’, is that it assumes that the terms themselves, ‘feminism’ and ‘postmodernism’, are not in question or questionable. I would argue that the gesture of bringing the terms together must not allow them to be stabilised as assumed reference points. In order to refuse stabilising the

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terms as reference points, we need to deal with the institutional politics of definition and naming. What does it mean to designate a text as postmodern? What does it mean to designate a feminist text as postmodern? Such questions may remind us that these two terms, 'feminism' and 'postmodernism', are not simply stabilised by the demand to describe their relationship. That demand takes certain forms over others. It is not so much a demand to know whether postmodernism is feminist (from those who write as postmodernists), but on whether feminism is postmodern (from those who write as feminists). In other words, postmodernism is the assumed reference point in a debate that has largely taken place within feminism and, as a result, has authorised feminism's reflection on itself through either affirmation or disavowal – 'I am (like) you' or 'I am not (like) you.'

Where the debate on postmodernism has taken account of feminism it has been in terms which imply its role in authorising the relationship (see Arac 1986). For example, Craig Owens considers the 'fact' of the absence of women figuring in the postmodern debate (Owens 1985: 61). He also notes that the postmodern debate has been scandalously indifferent to the question of sexual difference (Owens 1985: 59). Despite this, Owens maintains that he will not construe the relation between postmodernism and feminism as being one of antagonism, but will negotiate a course between them (Owens 1985: 59). And indeed, he moves on to argue that the feminist insistence on difference and incommensurability is not only compatible with, but *an instance of*, postmodern thought (Owens 1985: 62). Here, the indifference of postmodernism to the question of sexual difference is noted and at once excluded from the problem of defining the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. The dialogical model of the relationship (a 'course between'), gives way to an asymmetrical power relationship whereby feminism is placed as an instance of, and hence derivative of, the postmodern. Here, feminism is defined in terms of – or in the terms of – postmodernism itself.

We need to ask the following question: under what conditions is feminism included within, and excluded from, postmodernism? Such a question echoes the work of Meaghan Morris. She asks, 'under what conditions women's work *can* "figure" currently in such a debate?' (Morris 1988: 12). Morris observes how although few feminist theorists have positioned themselves *in terms of* the postmodern debate, many of the male theorists 'cited' by postmodern bibliographies also do not position themselves in this way. Given this, she argues, male postmodernist bibliographies function as patriarchal frames (Morris 1988: 13). So while some feminists are typically cited as being influenced by

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postmodernism (and in this subordinate sense, as being included within it), feminist work is not given the status of originating or charting the field. Here, feminism's inclusion *as* postmodern also defines the terms of its exclusion; feminism is spoken of ('you are part of us'), but does not speak (or, more precisely, is not heard).

The importance of feminists entering the debate on postmodernism may be precisely in order to undo such gestures of authorisation whereby postmodernism comes to define the terms of feminism's existence. Rather than staging the debate by considering feminism's relationship to postmodernism in terms of identity or difference, feminism needs to ask questions of postmodernism: we need to speak (back) *to* postmodernism, rather than simply speaking *on* (our relationship to) it. Instead of assuming identity or difference as expressive of the relation between feminism and postmodernism, this book will ask the polemical question, 'which differences matter, here?' in the very event of speaking back. This agonistic role of speaking back not only opens the stage by interrupting the designation of postmodernism as a reference point, but also re-figures the vitality or animation of the feminist whose speech is no longer authorised from a single place. Your sinking heart and my alarm become not end points that signal the tired gestures of the actors on the stage we inhabit, but moments that move us to look elsewhere within the staging itself.

### Questioning postmodernism

Why then assume, in the first instance, that postmodernism is questionable? Does this mean starting with the question, 'what is postmodernism?' I would argue quite the opposite: to begin to question postmodernism as a term that has a set of precise effects is *not* to ask the question, 'what is postmodernism?' Such a question assumes that postmodernism has a referent, that there is something (out there or in here) which we can adequately call postmodernism. So, for example, Scott Lash defines postmodernism as a cultural paradigm specific to, and pervasive of, contemporary society, which describes cultural change, type and stratification (Lash 1990: ix). Fredric Jameson also defines the contemporary state of crisis as constituting a condition of postmodernism, though he constructs postmodernism as a cultural dominant which cannot exhaust the meanings of the contemporary (Jameson 1986: 53). At the same time, there has been much appeal to the indeterminacy of the term 'postmodernism' and the multiplicity of its configurations. Occasionally these two insights are brought together, such that the indeterminacy of the term 'postmodernism' is read as a

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symptom of the indeterminacy of the thing itself: ‘the very semantic deferral associated with this complex morpheme [postmodernism] is a perfect enactment of that which it is involved in signifying’ (Whitehouse 1989: 2). On the one hand, postmodernism is read as indeterminate and as potentially signifying *anything* (that is, as lacking in boundaries *per se*), while on the other, it is stabilised as a reference point for the contemporary re-figuring of modernity, whether that re-figuring is traced in cultural, political, intellectual or epistemological terms (Burgin 1986: 49).

Such constructions of postmodernism as a reference point for ‘the contemporary’ take for granted the discursive apparatus of ‘postmodernism’ itself, that is, its status as a signifier. This taking-for-granted of ‘postmodernism’ through assuming its referentiality is connected to the opening up of its potential to signify anything (its unboundedness). Ferguson and Wicke, for example, discuss postmodernism as a name for ‘the way we live now’, at the same time as they consider its status as a ‘porous capacious’ signifier, ready ‘to leap over borders and confound boundaries’ (Ferguson and Wicke 1994: 1–2). The effects of this doubling are extremely problematic. The link between indeterminacy and reference mean that the referential function of postmodernism is generalised without limits. Postmodernism refers to unboundedness (or the unboundedness of contemporary sociality): it refers to its own impossibility as referent and hence comes to mean *potentially anything*.

The way in which postmodernism comes to mean potentially anything returns us to the problematic of the ‘now’ within Ferguson and Wicke’s narrative (‘the way we live *now*’). Such a concept of postmodernism as the ‘now’ inscribes postmodernism as in the present and so *present to itself*. Postmodernism, as the now which is outside the temporality of passing (time), here constitutes the fantasy of an arrival, a fantasy which slips from ‘now’ to ‘here’ (postmodernism as the here of the now). We might also want to consider the ‘we’ within Ferguson and Wicke’s narrative: who is the ‘we’ that inhabits postmodernism (‘the way *we* live now’)? The fantasy of a generalisable and unbounded postmodernism translates quickly into a fantasy of an *inclusive* postmodernism: a postmodernism that speaks to and for all of us. I would argue, in contrast, that this postmodern ‘we’ is constituted through acts of exclusion and othering – that the apparent ‘unboundedness’ of the postmodern both constitutes and conceals its boundaries. We could hence ask the following question: who is the ‘not-we’ of postmodernism that lets this ‘we’ take place, or take its place?

Is there, for example, a relation between the ‘we’ of postmodernism

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and the West? In post-colonial theory, the use of ‘postmodernism’ as a term for all contemporary re-writings of the script of modernity has been read as a form of imperialist mapping. As Helen Tiffin suggests, the posing of analogies between post-colonial fictions and American and European ‘postmodern’ fictions, on the simple grounds of coincidence in non-realist narrative forms, obscures or conceals the differential political and historical context of such writing in such a manner that post-colonialism is understood only in relation to transformations in Western culture (Tiffin 1988: 171–4). Tiffin elaborates, ‘the so-called “crisis” of European authority continues to reinforce European cultural and political domination, as potential relativisation of its epistemology and ontology acts through such labelling once again to make the rest of the world a peripheral term in Europe’s self-questioning’ (Tiffin 1988: 171).<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of other forms of re-writing from marginal spaces and subjects as a sign of a postmodern crisis in identity here re-incorporates the fractured histories of those others into a Western identity (where, in some sense, the West re-figures its identity through the crisis posed by the other). The West calls the other to speak, but hears the speech as a sign of a crisis that already belongs to the West. An inclusive or generalisable postmodernism – a postmodernism which knows no limits (or does not know its limits) – hence becomes a form of symbolic violence.<sup>2</sup>

The potential of the name ‘postmodernism’ to incorporate others through the language of crisis represents what is at stake in the assumption that postmodernism has no limits (whereby the loss of limits becomes a sign for ‘the way we live now’). Such an unbounded postmodernism has a hegemonic function – it is a way of bringing differential and contradictory phenomena back to a single reference point or meaning. Here, every-thing, in the event of being named as postmodern, becomes just any-thing like any other-thing.<sup>3</sup> Posing questions to postmodernism such that it cannot speak for others means giving up the assumption that it has a direct referential relation to ‘the way we live now’: it means giving up the assumption that postmodernism is a generalisable condition. To avoid the hegemonic function of a generalisable postmodernism, we also need to pay attention to the instability of the term without designating that instability as a symptom of what postmodernism already is. Tracing the movements of the signifier ‘postmodernism’ means precisely refusing to see postmodernism as boundless.

One way in which postmodernism comes to be bound as a particular way of intervening in the world (rather than as a generalisable condition of the world) is to think of postmodernism, not as something that simply

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exists as such, but as something which is constructed through the very writings which assume its existence. Such an approach is taken up by Steven Connor in *Postmodernist Culture*. He argues against an analysis which questions ‘what is postmodernism?’ and calls instead for an analysis of what the discourse of postmodernism is doing. Connor asks, ‘how and why does the discourse of postmodernism flourish?’ (Connor 1989: 10). This shift enables postmodernism to be examined as a discursive space which *does something*, rather than simply meaning or expressing something.

Connor does not examine exactly what this shift may imply in terms of a specific politics of interpretation. In some sense, his text still presupposes the value of postmodernism by sliding from what it does as a discursive space to its location in the academy as a power structure which produces knowledges (Connor 1989: 10–11). By doing so, he defines the effects of postmodernism as an *expression* of the institutional power of the academy. However, thinking of postmodernism as produced within institutional limits is precisely to understand the contested nature of its knowledges and boundaries. In *Ludic Feminism and After*, a book which takes a stand against postmodernism and ‘postmodern feminism’, Teresa Ebert cites one of the readers of her work: ‘Ebert is, I fear swimming against the tide’ (Ebert 1996: xi). Here, postmodernism and ‘postmodern feminism’ are figured as dangerous tides (a force of nature, no less!), against which critics of postmodernism are lone, even lonely, swimmers. However, I do not think this is a useful representation of the status of postmodernism and ‘postmodern feminism’. We cannot assume that postmodernism has a fixed role and identity within the institutional apparatus of the academy (as an orthodoxy or a consensus). Indeed, having experienced the effects of postmodernism in very different academic departments (in one case, it was excluded as a danger to reading, in another it was taken as a sign of reading), I can immediately see that its institutional status is always contested. Postmodernism then does not constitute *an* institution or *a* discourse, but is constituted through both institutional and discursive limits.

Postmodernism may be constructed and stabilised by particular texts that cite themselves as being either postmodern or about postmodernism. However, it also exceeds any such inscriptions. It brings into play broader inter-textual practices involving, for example, ways of reading, ways of constructing bibliographies on postmodernism, and ways of teaching on postmodernism. This means that texts that do not explicitly cite themselves as postmodern will be read and taught as part of a postmodern critical tradition (the work of Jacques Derrida comes to mind). Postmodernism *does* something as a textual formation whose

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meaning is yet to be decided, but which remains determined by its very citation in an inter-textual field of reference. Reading postmodernism as an inter-textual space for the negotiation of meanings and values will enable us to trace how postmodernism is stabilised in the specificity of its inscriptions (in theoretical and cultural texts), and yet is open to renewal, transformation and *dis-placement* in the gap between those inscriptions, the name of postmodernism, and the inter-textual horizon within which that name circulates.

The question, ‘what is postmodernism doing?’, might lead us to another question, ‘where is postmodernism?’ At one level, this question seems to assume that postmodernism has a location that is stable and fixed (postmodernism is here or there). However, this question may invite us to consider how postmodernism is produced in differential and potentially antagonistic sites both within and beyond the academy. The question, ‘where is postmodernism?’, requires a more direct confrontation with the issue of disciplinarity. To some extent, postmodernism is more easily reduced to an object or referent when the boundaries of disciplines are taken for granted – so, for example, if we restrict our readings of postmodernism within a given discipline (literature, sociology, philosophy, law etc.), then postmodernism is more clearly locatable in a set of questions, texts and authors (= a canonical postmodernism) which can then come to stand for, or stand in for, what postmodernism actually is. However, by thinking more reflexively about how postmodernism is produced within disciplinary formations, we can then work across disciplines, to consider the multiple sites of its production and dissemination.

This book takes the risk of moving across such disciplinary boundaries, not as a way of refusing a canonical postmodernism (such a refusal would be impossible), but as a way of understanding the limits of its production. The risk, of course, in reading texts from different disciplinary formations as examples of postmodernism, is that we might assume we are reading ‘the same thing’. However, it is also important that we do not reify disciplines: the citing of postmodernism across disciplines might not involve ‘the same thing’, but those citations have an intimate relationality or connection. In *Differences That Matter*, I will read texts that have come to be read, taught and known as postmodern, closely and critically, without then attempting to produce a theory of postmodernism as simply, ‘the same thing’. Rather, the book will raise the question of how the writings of postmodernism might relate to each other in terms of the constitution of their objects, rather than assuming that such connections are determined by the singularity of the name, ‘postmodernism’.



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Introduction

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**Reading postmodernism**

A concern with what postmodernism is doing requires a commitment to *close reading*. Close readings may serve to demonstrate how postmodern texts establish their own limits and boundaries, as well as how this process of de-limitation does not (and cannot) fix postmodernism into an object. Close readings may suspend general judgement on postmodernism *per se* (as part of an ethical and political commitment not to read postmodernism as generalisable in the first place). However, the possibility of judgement is not negated by closer reading: indeed, getting closer to the text also involves a form of distancing (without which closeness would constitute the violence of merger). Moving from proximity to distance, a closer reading of postmodern texts makes judgements through engagement. This approach to closer readings is hence bound up with ethics, with the meta-discursive question of what makes some readings more just than others.

To exemplify such a practice of closer reading we can consider Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. This text has come to have the status of one of the primary articulations of postmodern theory. Such an authority takes the form of the *authorisation of definitions*: Lyotard's text is often cited for the purposes of defining the postmodern. Indeed, the repetition of catchphrases lifted from *The Postmodern Condition*, 'postmodernism is a crisis of legitimation', or 'postmodernism is the end of meta narratives', is readily apparent in recent discourses on postmodernism. Given this process of dissemination which quite clearly has moved through and beyond the actual text in question, the name 'Lyotard' has become a part of the cultural, political and economic dynamic called 'postmodernism' that his text originated to report on, or describe, at the request of the Conseil des Universités of the government of Quebec. The circulation of phrases from Lyotard's text has become, in itself, an event within the world of politics, to which we might suppose that the text, in its 'reflection' on this world, maintains a relation of exteriority. The absence of such a position of exteriority in the descriptions offered by Lyotard can be seen as symptomatic of the problem of defining the postmodern itself, the ways in which such definitions have a purchase and authority which are productive rather than merely descriptive.

Given the material effects that the circulation of *The Postmodern Condition* has produced through its authorisation of a certain concept or definition of the postmodern that has disseminated throughout public discourses and bodies of knowledge, then it can be read, not merely as a position on, but an instance of, the so-called postmodern. As such, a

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close and rigorous reading of the text may help us to engage the discursive space of postmodernism as *doing* something rather than merely expressing something. So how do the definitions offered by the text construct their own object? In *The Postmodern Condition* the term *modern* is used, 'to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a meta-discourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth' (Lyotard 1989: xxiii). The term *postmodern* is used to designate an incredulity towards meta-narratives which is simultaneously a product of, and presupposed by, progress in the sciences (Lyotard 1989: xxiv). Here, 'the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements' (Lyotard 1989: xxiv). *The Postmodern Condition* can be read as constructing the relation between modern and postmodern in terms of the contrast between a belief in structure, totality and identity, and a belief in difference, dispersal and heterogeneity. Although the text is describing shifts in knowledge which we may define as postmodern, those shifts are actually organised into particular forms by the text itself. Hence, we could think of postmodernism as involving particular ways of constructing the values of difference, dispersal and heterogeneity (through or against a reading of modernity), rather than seeing postmodernism as expressive of those concepts or values *per se*.

So while we can think of *The Postmodern Condition* as a commissioned report on knowledge, we can also think of it as a text which employs *its own methods*. One method of analysis which is employed by Lyotard is his use of narrative pragmatics. Early on in *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard defines narrative pragmatics by an event of exclusion: that is, he distinguishes a pragmatic analysis of the narrative function from one which focuses on extrinsic details such as the institutional assignment of subject positions (Lyotard 1989: 20). His analysis of the narratives of the Cashinahua people suggests that the pragmatics of those narratives are 'intrinsic'. Details such as the assignment of the role of the narrator 'to certain categories on the basis of age, sex, or family or professional group' are hence excluded from his model of the pragmatics of the transmission of narratives (Lyotard 1989: 20).

However, this passage on the pragmatics of the transmission of the Cashinahua's narratives complicates the distinction that Lyotard explicitly makes. Lyotard links the authority of the narrator or storyteller to the prior post of being a listener: 'the narrator's *only* claim to competence for telling the story is the fact that he has heard it himself. The