

Tender Buttons: Misprisions of the Feminine and Millennial Appropriation

This is the country where Vita ran away with Violet. From this computer, Gertrude Stein's country place, Bilignin, is not too distant. What was Alice's *omelette aux fines herbes* really like before the age of hormones and intensive pest control? Out of the window, a plump mimosa nods in the spring breeze above the hazy blue coastline. Around the corner a lava of cement covers one of the most beautiful regions of the world. We have made nature redundant. Pine trees, cypresses, brush, and blooming fruit trees survive in spots, promising more natural enclosures further inland. But the future is right here, already spent before its coming, the tame black squirrel with its mangy tail hobbling on the minute, electronically enclosed front garden.

Many miles down the same coast, on a nature reserve in the Italian Riviera, where the Goddess once ruled her shrines and the Madonna is now worshipped in the sanctuaries, the local authorities of the Cinque Terre have permitted construction of a huge fish farm. It was the only unpolluted stretch of coastline left in the area. The denaturing of context has become commonplace, from artificial insemination to fish farms, even though we may both dread and welcome its signs. Is it the nostalgia for a point of origin in clean waters that makes us mourn the constant, inconsiderate erosion of our earth's resources?

In the culture of this stretch of land, women and men alike have been taught to care about things, animals, and people. The fabric of the world, like any worn piece of cloth, needs constant mending. But somehow women themselves were never mended and were always on the mend. Last year, a man on trial for rape was acquitted on the grounds that he could not have taken off the woman's jeans without her help. Seeing a pair of jeans now makes us wonder when violence will cease to be a woman's problem and become the responsibility of all beings. Some Italian feminists, upholders of difference, believe that there exists a primary women's politics concerned with the sphere of personal relations that does not

communicate at all with the official politics of men. One may not endorse their analysis, possibly on the grounds that we are all implicated in a ceaseless un/raveling construction of global—not just male-to-female—networks of power, requiring constant translation. But these women have detected a “glocal” problem that expresses the need for a collective becoming-other, a need to enact some feminine measure of enabling desire, which may or may not be the policy of turning the now gendered apparatus of care into a global structure beyond gender.

Walking the unspoiled wood paths of the Cinque Terre, it seemed far-fetched to read the change from the Goddess to the Madonna, the substitution of an all-powerful matriarch with a figure of patriarchal mediation, as a form of early denaturalization of the feminine, a form of encroachment on the female body writ large on the natural world. Yet so it is read by our women’s histories and fictions. Umpteen science fiction stories tell tales of expropriated women’s bodies and functions or the recoding of gender through reproductive practices, genetic mutation, transplants, and prosthetic surgery. But this same denaturalization, no longer a fiction, is also being read as an enabling escape from the curse of anatomy. In vitro fertilization, cloning, and even male extrauterine pregnancies offer possibilities beyond the strictures of a given sex or gender. It can be difficult, at times, not to see this process as an ongoing basic power struggle between women and men. More than a quarter century ago, in a visionary passage, Shulamith Firestone (1970) proposed her famous neomarxist equation recommending that, just as the workers must appropriate the means of production, women must appropriate the means of reproduction. But this heroic resolution appears obsolete in the present complex material world of technoscience, made up by so many visible and invisible actors and agencies—human, not human, cyborg. “Reproductive politics are at the heart of questions about citizenship, liberty, family, and nation,” says Donna Haraway; hence, they are at the heart of “a conscientious feminist search for what accountability to freedom projects for women might mean” (1997, 189, 191).

Haraway’s words urge us to decode and challenge what she calls the informatics of domination, to be alert and conscious of the paradoxes of technoscientific culture, to look at reproductive politics both as the reproduction of hegemonic discourses and as a process of denaturalization that can enable a plurality of recodifications of gender—for in the paradox (re)lies the challenge.

“Feminisms at the Millennium” itself is a title informed by paradox. On the one hand, it refers to the plurality of feminist challenges to hegemonic cultures; on the other, it places this plurality within the chronotopic con-

finer of Western culture or, more precisely, of Christianity. What year will it be in the Jewish calendar or the Islamic one? How many other numbers will be attributed to this year? In light of these questions, the phrase “feminisms at the millennium” indicates a glocal paradox or, rather, suggests that we question the paradox of glocality. If the term *feminisms* suggests a plurality of voices, the term *millennium* suggests a hegemonic process of “inglobation,” not so much a hybrid between private and public, local and global, but a process of assimilation where the local becomes global. Like the Y2K computer bug: a glocal paradox that, on the one hand, threatened a worldwide collapse of computer systems, the informatics of domination, and the hegemonic structures of technoscientific discourse located in the access and use of informatic technology and, on the other, exposed the global implications of the local, Western-Christian matrix of such discourse, even for the majority of the world population who do not participate in such technologies and power.

“Think different,” says the now famous slogan of Apple computers, echoing many feminist slogans. Think through, across, with, and within differences, contemporary feminisms might add. Yet if the challenge of feminisms is to decode and recode hegemonic structures of discourse, it should also go the other way and address the ways hegemonic discourse — for example, technoscience — decodes and recodes feminist discourses, slogans, and terminologies. Apple’s ad for its new, “colored” iMac provides an interesting glocal paradox for feminist reflections.

By implementing a user-friendly interface, Apple literally brought the computer into our homes. On the Internet, we can connect a “personal” computer with a global network of computers. We can make glocal connections. And, now, Apple’s latest “interfacial” revolution comes “in colors.” According to Steve Jobs — the man behind Apple’s commercial “resurrection” — the option of choosing the color of one’s computer interests its user-buyer more than its megahertz. And what user-buyer does Apple have in mind, we might ask? A puzzling question if we consider the iMac ad and how it stresses this color feature. In the ad shown on Italian television, the iMac monitor is presented in its various color options (tangerine, grape, strawberry, and lime) on a white background. The monitors appear on screen in sync with the rhythm of a Rolling Stones song, “She’s a Rainbow,” which says, “She comes in colors everywhere / She combs her hair / She’s like a rainbow / Coming colors in the air / Oh, everywhere / She comes in colors.” There is no other comment to the monitor images except the Apple slogan at the end of the ad, “Think different.” And what user-buyer does Apple have in mind, we might ask again? What is the difference between the discursive structure of address in this ad and that of a car ad

in which the car's beauty and appeal are equated to that of a sexy woman? If we are beginning to suspect that Apple might be thinking of a male user-buyer, the Italian case scenario not only reinforces this suspicion but eliminates other possible answers. If in fact we turn on an Apple computer in Italy, "she" will tell us, with a smiling face, "Benvenuto in Macintosh," using the masculine to address her user, as if she were welcoming a man. Once again, the machine is feminized, the user-buyer-controller is conceived as male. Is it a question of denaturalization or renaturalization? Whose context is it? And in any case, whose culture? Whose (cultural) reproduction? "Think different." Where does this leave us feminists at the millennium?

*Dipartimento di Filologia Moderna
Università di Firenze*

References

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