December 1978. At a mostly male conference I hug, chat, eat, drink, listen with my sisters in philosophy. My body avalanches from its recent maternal swellings to the plateaus of a folded uterus, milkless breasts. I left my baby daughter in Chicago, who used to suckle 90 minutes at a time while I read The Women's Room. For the first time in fifteen months that warm red flow moves through my clitoral canals. No quiet transition, but a body revolution throbbing my back and neck. Clouded in this privately womanstate. I glide around the chandeliered ballroom finding one woman's face and another and another. Fervently we converse about the day's papers and each other's questions. We catch up on the news about each other's lovers or children or jobs.

That night in my restless sleep I dream. A ballroom filled with women, hundreds under the chandeliers, a reception after business at the Society for Women in Philosophy. I flit from one group of women to another, in smiling comfort. As I turn to find another friend I see her tall figure across the room, as though overlooking the sisterly crowd: Simone de Beauvoir. Then, just before I wake, a single object, shimmering: a glass of milk.

No other woman can occupy our dreams as the mother of feminist philosophy (who in her time, in her view, could only be a writing mother by leaving her body out of mothering, and I think she was right). Yet most feminists in the U.S. today find irredeemable flaws in Beauvoir's story of women's oppression and her hope for liberation. What has happened between the childhood and puberty of our feminist revolution?

In this essay I explore the shift in feminist thinking from a Beauvoirian sort of position which I define as humanist feminism to an analysis which I call gynocentric feminism. Humanist feminism defines women's oppression as the inhibition and distortion of women's human potential by a society that allows the self-development of men. Most feminists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including feminists of the early second wave, have been humanist feminists. In recent years a different account of women's oppression has gained influence, however, partly growing from a critique of humanist feminism. Gynocentric feminism defines women's oppression as the devaluation and repression of women's experience by a masculinist culture that exalts violence and individualism. It argues for the superiority of the values embodied in traditionally female experience, and rejects the values it finds in traditionally male dominated institutions. Gynocentric feminism, I suggest, contains a more radical critique of male-dominated society than humanist feminism. But at the same time, especially within the social context of anti-feminism backlash, however, its effect can be quieting and accommodating to official powers.

Humanist feminism consists in a revolt against femininity. Patriarchal culture has ascribed to women a distinct feminine nature by which it has justified the exclusion of women from most of the important and creative activity of society—science, politics, invention, industry, commerce, the arts. By defining women as sexual objects, decorative charmers, and mothers, the patriarchal culture enforces behavior in women that benefits men by providing them with domestic and sexual servants. Women's confinement to femininity stunts the development of their full human potential, and makes women passive, dependent and weak. Humanist feminism defines femininity as the primary vehicle of women's oppression, and calls upon male dominated institutions to allow women the opportunity to participate fully in the public world-making activities of industry, politics, art and science.

Women's liberation, on this view, consists in freeing women from the confines of traditional femininity, and making it possible for women to pursue the human projects that have hitherto been dominated by men. Any assumptions that women are not capable of achieving the excellence that men have attained must be suspended until women are allowed to develop their full potential. When gender differences are transcended in this manner, persons will be able to choose whatever activities they wish to pursue, will be able to develop their full human potential as individuals. Women's liberation consists in eliminating a separate women's sphere, and
giving women the opportunity to do what men have done. This implies that men will have to do more of the work traditionally assigned to women.

I call this position humanist feminist because it defines gender difference as accidental to humanity. The goal of liberation is for all persons to pursue self-development in those creative and intellectual activities that distinguish human beings from the rest of nature. Women's liberation means sexual equality. Sexual equality means bringing women and men under a common measure, judged by the same standards. We should judge all by the standards according to which men have judged one another: courage, rationality, strength, cunning, quick wittedness.

Humanist feminism, in one version or another, has dominated feminist accounts for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The feminist classics of Wollstonecraft, Mill and Taylor, as well as the views of many of the suffragettes in nineteenth-century England and the United States, exhibit the main outlines of humanist feminism. Until recently humanist feminism was also the dominant strain in contemporary feminism. Simone de Beauvoir's description of the oppression of women and her vision of liberation in The Second Sex (Beauvoir, 1952) stands as one of the most theoretically grounded and thorough articulations of humanist feminism.

Beauvoir's account of women's oppression depends on the distinction between transcendence and immanence. Transcendence designates the free subjectivity that defines its own nature, and makes projects that bring new entities into the world. The free subject moves out into the world, takes initiative, faces the world boldly, creates his own individualized life. According to Beauvoir, patriarchal society allows only men such transcendence. Masculinity entails no particular attributes, but in patriarchal society is identified with transcendence, free activity that fashions artifacts and history. A man is confined to no particular nature, but has all manner of projects open to him—he can be a soldier or an artist, a politician or a chef, a scientist or a gambler. To be sure, Beauvoir understands the class and race oppression that puts more limits on the possibilities of some men than others. Gender does not restrict oppressed men, however. The possibility of action is still open to oppressed men, in the form of wiley sabotage or open rebellion. Masculinity entails individual existence, where the person defines his own individual projects and creates his own nature.

Patriarchal culture confines women, on the other hand, to immanence. Immanence designates being an object, a thing with an already defined nature lined up within a general category of things with the same nature. Femininity is an essence, a set of general attributes that define a class, and which restricts women to immanence and being defined as the Other. Whereas a man exists as a transcending subject who defines his own individual projects, patriarchal institutions require a woman to be the object for the gaze and touch of a subject, to be the pliant responder to his commands.

Beauvoir discusses several respects in which femininity confines women's existence to immanence and the repetition of the species rather than individual existence. She finds female biology itself as in part responsible for rooting women in immanence; women's reproductive processes limit her individual capacities for the sake of the needs of the species. But gender determines women's oppression more significantly than biology. Whatever might be her position in the world, and whatever her individual accomplishments, a woman is appraised first as a woman, and only afterwards for her individual position or accomplishments. Others will evaluate her beauty or lack of it, ascertain whether her clothes are tasteful and becoming, whether her smiles, gestures and manner of speech exhibit charm. Whether a woman conforms to the requirements of feminine attractiveness is indifferent to them, or rebels against them, both her and other people's attitudes toward her will be determined by this definition. Women have been barred from the important business of government and commerce, or from fashioning products that achieve recognition, and instead have been expected to expend most of their energy keeping a home for husband and children. From early childhood women learn that the world of individual achievement is closed to them and that their primary vocation is to please and serve men. Thus women learn to be deferential, accommodating, and attentive to the desires of others.

The expectations of femininity which circumscribe the lives of women inhibit the development of their human possibilities. Beauvoir describes how in their childhood girls learn early that the world of action and daring is closed to them, and learn not to move freely and openly and do not develop an ability to fight (cf. Young, 1980). Women's sexual being is clouded with masochism (cf. Bartky, 1984), a desire to love the strong actor but not be actors themselves. Women often become timid and lacking in confidence, or fear that success will conflict with their femininity.

More than merely inhibiting their human possibilities, in Beauvoir's account femininity often produces mutilated or deformed persons. In my view this is the most ingenious aspect of Beauvoir's account. She explains characteristics that many have found undesirable about women as the effects of imprisonment in femininity. Despite the culture's denial, women are human subjects, full of creative energy, intelligence, and the desire to make their mark on the world. Patriarchal institutions, how-
ever, restrict their recognized activity to caring for their appearance, for a household, and for children. Women thus channel their creativity into these activities. They try to make a human project out of turning themselves into mannequins, keeping a house clean, orderly and pleasing, and raising children. These activities, however, belong to immanence, to objectification and mere life maintenance. Trying to make them the freely chosen projects of a transcending subject only produces a monstrous caricature of expressiveness and individuality: the haughty vanity of a woman preoccupied with her image in the mirror; the shrewish women who will not allow living action to occur in her house, for fear it will soil the rug or knock over a plant; the clutching mother who tries to mould her child's life according to her own plan.

To summarize, Beauvoir defines women's oppression as the confinement and mutilation of women's human potentials by patriarchal requirements that she be a pleasing and deferent object for men. Unlike femininity, masculinity does not entail confinement to an essence or nature, but the freedom to make oneself and assert oneself in the world. Women's liberation consists in freeing women from the confines of traditional femininity, and making it possible for women to pursue the human projects that have hitherto been dominated by men.

While Beauvoir's book remains one of the most sensitive, thorough and theoretically grounded descriptions of women's oppression under patriarchy, most feminists today find it deeply marred by at least two related factors. Beauvoir does not call into question the definition of being human that traditional Western society holds and she devalues traditionally female activity in the same way as does patriarchal culture.

Beauvoir fiercely rails at the male privilege that restricts such transcendence to men, but she does not question the value of the activities through which men compete with one another and achieve recognition. Power, achievement, individual expression, rationality, mastery of natural processes, are for her as for the patriarchal culture she criticizes, the most human values. She is a socialist, of course, and therefore asserts that the achievement of full humanity by both men and women requires the elimination of capitalist domination. She calls for a participation of women in these public world making achievements, but does not question the prominence male-dominated society gives to achievement itself, and to public activities of politics, competition and individual creativity.

Beauvoir's humanism identifies the human with men. She points out herself in several places that whereas women experience a contradiction between being human and being feminine, men do not experience such a contradiction. The other side of her impressive and often sympathetic account of how patriarchy has victimized women is her descriptions of the free subjectivity she claims it gives to men. Boys roam, climb, play rough, and very importantly for Beauvoir, learn to fight.

'Violence is the authentic proof of each one's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will: radically to deny this will is to deny oneself any objective truth, it is to wall oneself up in an abstract subjectivity: anger or revolt that does not get into the muscles remains a figment of the imagination. It is a profound frustration not to be able to register one's feelings upon the face of the world' (p. 371).

Men are allowed, encouraged, to be daring, to reach out and accomplish a project. Men are supposed to be rational, inventive and creative. Thus, the great achievements of humanity have been accomplished almost entirely by men: exploring the world, charting and mapping it, formulating theories of the universe, writing great plays, developing constitutions and ruling cities and states. Even less renowned or accomplished men have a privilege not accorded to women, the privilege of being in public: they can achieve some public recognition in the workplace, among comrades or cronies at the bar. Men's situation allows or encourages them to be free subjects transcending the given to bold new futures, confronting other subjects as equals.

The distinction between transcendence and immanence ensnares Beauvoir in the very definition of woman as a nonhuman Other which her brilliant analysis reveals as patriarchal. Defining humanity as transcendence requires setting human being in opposition to non-human objects and in particular nature. Fully human, free subjectivity transcends mere life, the processes of nature which repeat in an eternal cycle without individuality or history. Thus risking life and being willing to kill are cardinal marks of humanity, for Beauvoir as for Hegel. Taking control over one's needs and fashioning objects to satisfy them, confronting and mastering the forces of nature that threaten one's life or comfort, these are the aims of human projects (Hartsock, 1983, Appendix 2). Humanity achieves its greatest freedom, however, in the creation of moral ideals and works of art. For these express a wholly new and un-natural way of being in the world. Beauvoir's ontology reproduces the Western tradition's oppositions of nature and culture, freedom and mere life, spirit and body.

With those distinctions Beauvoir brilliantly shows that patriarchal culture has projected onto women all those aspects of human existence that participate in mere life. She does not, however, as Dinnerstein (1976) rereading her later does, call upon a transformation of culture in the direction of a greater acceptance of life, the body, and mortality.
Instead, she herself devalues women's lives insofar as she finds them closer to nature and the body than men's.

Beauvoir mirrors patriarchal culture in her exposition of the experiences of the female body. The young girl finds her pubic, clitoris less glorious than the boy's more apparent penis. At puberty girls react to menstruation with shame and disgust, though Beauvoir asserts this is due to the social status of femininity rather than to any natural reaction. Female sexuality is passive and masochistic (see Fuchs, 1980).

'Feminine sex desire is the soft throbbing of a mollusk. Whereas a man is impetuous, woman is only impatient; her expectation can become ardent without ceasing to be passive; man dives upon his prey like the eagle and the hawk; woman lies in wait like the carnivorous plant, the bog, in which insects and children are swallowed up. She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx vaguely feels herself to be' (p. 431).

Pregnancy is an 'ordeal' (p. 559) in which the woman submits to the species and must suffer limitations on her capacity to individualize herself. Beauvoir expresses with understanding and sympathy how many women take pleasure in pregnancy and nursing. But clearly she regards such pleasures as examples of women's resignation to their condition of immanence, one among many ways women agree to relinquish their freedom (O'Brien, 1981: 67–76). That pregnancy itself can be a human project (Young, 1984) is impossible in her ontological framework.

Beauvoir also devalues traditionally feminine activity, such as housework and mothering. The woman is imprisoned in her home, and since she is deprived thereof of activity, she loses herself in things and becomes dependent on them. Though she recognizes that housework and mothering are arduous and important tasks, in her account they have no truly human value. Housework has a negative basis: one gets rid of dirt, eliminates disorder and in performing it the woman is condemned to endless repetition that issues in no product, no work. Beauvoir finds cooking to be something of an exception here, and explains that women thus rightly take pride in culinary achievements; but even these are only to be consumed, not to stand as lasting artifacts.

As a wife, the woman is absolutely dependent, not in control of her life. This makes her dangerous for raising children, since she tends to be smotheringly possessive or brutally resentful. Even the best of mothers, on Beauvoir's account, do not attain transcendence—that is, full humanity—by caring for and loving their children: they only make it possible for their children to do so. Beauvoir thus devalues women's reproductive labor (Jaggar and McBride, 1985: Young, 1979).

Beauvoir's concrete descriptions of women's lives are full of insights, sympathy and an understanding of the variations in each individual existence. (She does not, however, systematically examine variations in women's situation due to structural considerations such as class and race.) The over-all picture she offers, however, portrays woman only as victim—maimed, mutilated, dependent, confined to a life of immanence and forced to be an object. She rarely describes the strength that women have had and the earthly value of their work: ways women have formed networks and societies among themselves, the lasting beauty of the caring social values women often exhibit. While she expresses outrage at the selfishness, blindness and ruthlessness of the men who benefit from the mutilation of the personhood of half the human race, she finds little to criticize in the modern humanist conception of individuality and freedom.

II

Gynocentric feminism defines the oppression of women very differently from humanist feminism. Women's oppression consists not in being prevented from participating in full humanity, but in the denial and devaluation of specifically feminine virtues and activities by an overly instrumentalized and authoritarian masculinist culture. Unlike humanist feminism, gynocentric feminism does not focus its analysis on the impediments to women's self-development and the exclusion of women from spheres of power, prestige and creativity. Instead, gynocentric feminism focuses its critique on the values expressed in the dominant social spheres themselves. The male-dominated activities with the greatest prestige in our society—politics, science, technology, warfare, business—threaten the survival of the planet and the human race. That our society accords these activities the highest value only indicates the deep perversity of patriarchal culture. Masculine values exalt death, violence, competition, selfishness, a repression of the body, sexuality and affectivity.

Gynocentric feminism finds in women's bodies and traditionally feminine activity the source of more positive values. Women's reproductive processes keep us linked with nature and the promotion of life to a greater degree than men. Female eroticism is more fluid, diffuse and loving than violence-prone male sexuality. Our feminine socialization and traditional roles as mothers give to us a capacity to nurture and a sense of social cooperation that may be the only salvation to the planet. Gynocentric feminism thus defines the oppression of women quite differently from the way humanistic feminism defines it. Femininity is not the problem, not the source of women's oppression, but indeed
within traditional femininity lie the values that we should promote for a better society. Women's oppression consists in the devaluation and repression of women's nature and female activity by the patriarchal culture.

In distinguishing between humanist feminism and gynocentric feminism I intend to mark out two tendencies or poles of feminism, which are held in various forms and degrees by different feminists. Feminism of the nineteenth-century in the United States was marked by an oscillation between humanist and gynocentric feminism. For most of the period of the suffrage movement the humanist position prevailed, but the movements of moral motherhood and social housekeeping had a more gynocentric cast. In contemporary feminism both tendencies have been present, often in uneasy union. Nevertheless I think it is appropriate to distinguish periods of contemporary feminism when one of these tendencies has been stronger. Until the late 1970s feminism in the U.S. was predominantly humanist feminism, but in the mid and late 1970s feminism has shifted more in the direction of gynocentrism.

The distinction between humanist feminism and gynocentric feminism cannot be mapped onto the more commonly held way of classifying feminism into liberal, radical and socialist (Jaggar, 1983). The set of position often referred to as liberal feminism is indeed a species of humanist feminism, and to the degree that these positions are still held by many feminists, humanist feminism is still a strong tendency among feminists. Many of those who called themselves radical feminists in the early and mid-seventies, however, asserted something similar to the humanist feminism position I have identified as Beauvoir's. They found women's oppression as located primarily in confinement to femininity, which they claimed made women dependent on men and inhibited women's self-development. and they often called upon women to develop skills and attributes traditionally associated with men—physical strength, mechanical ability, assertiveness, etc. Similarly, until recently most feminists who called themselves socialist feminists held humanist feminism positions like that of Beauvoir. They took socialism as a necessary but not sufficient condition of the self-development of all human beings, and took the goal of feminism to be the elimination of gender differences and the requirements of femininity which inhibit the full development of women's human capacities.

Starting about the mid- to late-seventies, many of those called radical feminists and those called socialist feminists increasingly moved toward a more gynocentric feminism and several of the writers treated in this section are self-identified socialist feminists. Those calling themselves radical feminists moved toward gynocentric analysis first, but by the late seventies this mode of feminism had become increasingly influential even among those who might in other ways be called liberal feminists. In the herstory of the contemporary women's movement I find at least three factors that have produced this shift from humanistic to gynocentric feminism: anti-feminist reaction to feminism, the emergence of black feminism, and the development of women's history and feminist anthropology.

Anti-feminists have identified feminism solely with humanist feminism. In their perception feminists eschew femininity, devalue traditional womanhood and want to be equal to, that is, like, in identity with, men. Anti-feminist women have sneered at such a naive claim to eliminate difference, and have argued without difficulty that treating men and women equally will often lead to injustice for women (Wolfast, 1978). Early during the second wave of the women's movement, moreover, anti-feminists protested what they regarded as feminist denigration of women. Many women take pride in the homes they decorate and bring warmth to, and regard their caring for children as a noble vocation. They claimed. They dress well and do their hair to please themselves, not because men require it of them. How dare you feminists assert, we don't want to be like men, competitive, unfeeling, getting high blood pressure and ulcers at the office or cancer in the factory. Anti-feminists screech this line, even though contemporary feminism has changed considerably in response to such protests of anti-feminist women. One of the first jobs of black feminists was to attack the victim/dependent image of women's situation that held sway in the women's movement in the early 1970s. Our women, they said, have rarely had the luxury to be housewives, kept relatively comfortable by men, having their capacity to act smothered by diapers, corsets and girdles. On the contrary, to survive, black women typically learned to be tough, physically strong, clever, but usually also warm, sexy and nurturant. Black women have suffered endless injustice and humiliation, but it has not maimed their spirits, for they have acted with brilliance, courage and righteousness (Stack, 1975: Davis, 1981). Through such discussion the women's movement learned that the typical account of femininity as entailing weakness and dependence had a class and race bias.

The work of feminist historians also promoted awareness of the differences in women's situations and the historical specificity of bourgeois femininity, as well as a sense of women as active participants in history. We discovered the mother rulers of Mycinae and the wisdom of the witches. We found that in most cultures women's work contributes as much or more than men's work to the subsistence
of the family and village, and we recovered the contributions women have made to agricultural development, diplomacy, healing, art, literature, music, philosophy. We reconstructed the lives of peasant and proletariat women and saw them as providing crucial strength and foci of resistance for dominated classes. From the protests of some feminists against the humanist image of women as forced to be inactive, less than human, and from these concrete studies of women's lives and action, a new focus on the positivity of women's culture was born.

Gynocentric feminism has received a number of expressions in the U.S. women's movement in recent years. Artists and poets have been among the leaders of developing the images of celebration of this more positive understanding of women's history and contemporary self-understanding. Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, for example, laboriously and beautifully recovers whole aspects of women's history and locates them within images of female genitalia and objects that rely on traditionally female arts.

Within the sphere of political activism, gynocentric feminism perhaps is best represented in the feminist anti-militarist and ecology movements of the last five years. In the Women's Pentagon Action or the action at the Seneca Army Depot, for example, a major aspect of the political protest has been the use of symbols and actions that invoke traditional labor, such as weaving, spinning, birthing, mothering. Feminist anti-militarist and ecological analysis has argued that the dangers to the planet that have been produced by the nuclear arms race and industrial technology are essentially tied to masculinist values (Blumenthal, 1981; Young, 1983). The burgeoning movement of feminist spirituality entails a similar analysis, and promotes values associated with traditional femininity.

A number of prominent recent theories of contemporary feminism express a gynocentric feminism. I see Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978) as one of the first written statements of a gynocentric feminism in the second wave. It shows that one of the first steps of gynocentrism is to deny the nature/culture dichotomy held by humanists such as Beauvoir, and affirmatively assert the connection of women and nature. Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) I see as a transition work. In it Daly asserts an analysis of the victimization of women by femininity that outdoes Beauvoir, but she also proposes a new gynocentric language.

Carol Gilligan's critique (1981) of male theories of moral development has had a strong influence on the formation of gynocentric analysis. She questions dominant assumptions about moral valuation and affirms forms of moral reasoning associated with traditional femininity. Following Chodorow (1978), she argues that gender socialization creates in women a relational communal orientation toward others, while it creates in men a more oppositional and competitive mode of relating others. These gender differences produce two different forms of moral rationality, a masculine ethic of rights and justice, and a feminine ethic of responsibility and care. Traditional moral theory has ignored and repressed the particularistic ethic of care as pre-moral. Women's moral oppression consists in being measured against male standards, according to Gilligan, in the silencing of women's different voice. The dominance of those male centered values of abstract reasoning, instrumentality and individualism, moreover, produce a cold, uncaring, competitive world. Both the liberation of women and the restructuring of social relations require tempering these values with the communally oriented values derived from women's ethic of care (cf. Gould, 1983). While Gilligan herself would reject the label of gynocentric feminist, her work has exerted an enormous influence on feminists in fields as diverse as mathematics and philosophy, providing the foundation for a revaluation of attributes associated with femininity.

Mary O'Brien (1981) articulates a gynocentric critique of traditional political theory starting from the biological fact that the reproductive process gives women a living continuity with their offspring that it does not give men. Women thus have a temporal consciousness that is continuous, whereas male temporal consciousness is discontinuous. Arising from the alienation from the child they experience in the reproductive process, masculine thought emphasizes dualism and separation. Men establish a public realm in which they give spiritual birth to a second nature, transcending the private realm of mere physicality and reproduction to which they confine women. Patriarchy develops an ideology of the male potency principle, which installs the father as ruler of the family and men as rulers of society, and substitutes an intellectual notion of creativity for the female principle of life generation. The contemporary women's movement has the potential to overturn such a conception of politics that is separated from life continuity because out of female reproductive consciousness can come a politics based on women's experience of life processes and species continuity.

Nancy Hartsock's theory (1983) of the feminist standpoint from which she analyses patriarchal culture is a more sweeping version of gynocentric feminism. She argues that the sexual division of labor provides men and women with differing experiences that structure different standpoints upon nature and social relations. Based on Chodorow's theory of the development of gender personalities. Hartsock argues that men experience the relation of self and other as one of hostility and
struggle. The sexual division of labor also removes men from the needs of the body, from the vulnerability and basic demands of children and the aged, and provides men with an instrumentally calculative relation to nature. This division of labor, she argues, produces a way of thinking about the world Hartsock calls abstract masculinity, which organizes experience and social relations into binary oppositions in which one term carries greater value than the other. This standpoint of abstract oppositions in which one term carries greater value than the other. This standpoint of abstract masculinity has determined the primary structure of Western social relations and culture. This male dominated culture's values are both partial and perverse. It embodies sexuality where desire for fusion with other takes the form of domination of the other. Masculine consciousness denies and fears the body and associates birth with death. The only sense of community generated by abstract masculinity, moreover, is the community of warriors in preparation for combat.

From women's experience Hartsock claims we can both criticize masculinist values and conceptualization, and develop a better vision of social relations. The gender personalities women develop in relation to their mothers give them a propensity to feel more connected with others than men. The experiences of menstruation, coitus, pregnancy and lactation, which challenge body boundaries, give women a greater experience of continuity with nature. Women's labor in caring for men and children and producing basic values in the home, finally, gives them a greater rootedness in nature than men's work gives them, a more basic understanding of life processes. These attributes of women's experience can ground. Hartsock argues, a form of conceptualization which does not depend on dichotomous thinking and which values connections among persons more than their separation, as does abstract masculinity.

While Sara Ruddick (1980, 1983) is careful to claim that any recovery and revaluation of traditionally feminine attributes must be infused with a feminist politics, her notion of maternal thinking provides another example of a gynocentric feminist analysis. She argues that the specific daily practices of mothering generate specific modes of thinking motivated by the interests in preservation, growth, and the acceptability of the child to the society. Maternal practice is not restricted to mothers, but exists wherever such nurturing and preservation interests prevail. She suggests that maternal thinking provides anti-militarist values that feminists can use in promoting a politics of peace.

Writing within a very different intellectual current than American feminists, using rather different assumptions and style, several women in France in recent years have developed distinctive versions of gynocentric feminism (Jardine, 1982). I shall mention only Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Like a number of other contemporary French thinkers, Irigaray (1980, 1981a, b) describes phallocentric culture as preoccupied by a metaphysics of identity dominated by visual metaphors. Male thinking begins by positing the One, the same, the essence, that generates binary oppositions in which the second term is defined by the first as what it is not, thus reducing to its identity. Phallogocentric discourse defines the opposition male/female in just this way, woman is only not a man, a lack, a deficiency. Preoccupied with the straight, the true, the proper, men establish relations of property and exchange in which accounts are balanced. Women in the phallocentric system have been silenced and separated, exchanged as goods among men. Irigaray proposes that women must find and speak the specificity of female desire, which has completely different values than those of phallic thinking. Women's eroticism is neither one nor two but plural, as women's bodies themselves experience arousal and pleasure in a multiplicity of places that cannot all be identified. Touch, not sight, predominate. the auto-eroticism of vaginal lips touching clitoris, of intimate bodies touching. A genuinely feminine language moves and twists, starts over again from different perspectives, does not go straight to the point. Such a language can displace the sterility and oppressiveness of phallocentric categorization (on Irigaray, see Gallop, 1981: Berg, 1982: Kuykendall, 1983.)

Kristeva. (1980, 1981a, b) also focuses on language, and the repression of specifically female experience. Language has two moments, the symbolic, the capacity of language to represent and define, to be literal, and the semiotic, those elements of language that slip and play in ambiguities and nuance. Certain linguistic practices, such as poetry, make most explicit use of the semiotic but for the most part the playful, musical, in language is repressed in Western culture and the symbolic, rational, legalistic discourse rules. For Kristeva this repression concerns the repression of the body and the installation of order, hierarchy and authority. Repression of the body and the semiotic entails repression of the pre-oedipal experience of the maternal body before the subject emerges with a self-identical ego, as well as denial by the culture of the specificity and difference that the female body exhibits. Challenge to the dominant oppressions, to capitalism, racism, sexism, must come not only from specific demands within the political arena, but from changing the speaking subject.

Kristeva finds in the repressed feminine the potential for such change, where feminine means at least two things. First, women's specific experience as female bodies, the daughters of mothers, and often mothers themselves, an experience of a decentered subject. Second, the aspects of language and behavior Western culture has devalued and
repressed: the poetic, rhythmic, musical, nurturant and soothing, but also contradictory and shifting ways of being, that fickleness the women have been accused of. This revolution of the feminine Kristeva finds in a number of male avant garde writers. The women's movement, however, also carries the possibility of displacing the rigidity of a subject that loves authority, provided that women do not fall into that humanist feminism by which they simply demand getting in on the masculinist power game.

To summarize, humanist feminism defines femininity as the source of women's oppression, and calls upon male dominated institutions to allow women the opportunity to participate fully in public, world-making activities of industry, politics, art and science. In contrast, gynocentric feminism questions the values of these traditional public activities that have been dominated by men. Women's oppression consists not in being prevented from participating in full humanity, but in the denial and devaluation of specifically feminine virtues and activities by an overly instrumentalized and authoritarian masculinist culture. Femininity is not the problem. For gynocentric feminism, and indeed is the source of a conception of society and the subject that can not only liberate women, but all persons.

III

The polarity between humanist and gynocentric feminism might be considered part of the logic of feminism itself. Feminism consists in calling attention to and eradicating gender-based oppression. Humanism and gynocentrism are the two most obvious positions to take in that struggle. Either feminism means that we seek for women the same opportunities and privileges the society gives to men, or feminism means that we assert the distinctive value of womanhood against patriarchal denigration. While these positions need not be mutually exclusive, there is a strong tendency for both feminists and non-feminists to make them so: Either we want to be like men or we don't.

I think that contemporary gynocentric feminism has a number of aspects that make it a better analysis than humanism feminism. At the same time, I think the swing toward gynocentrism has left behind some important elements of feminist politics that humanist feminism has emphasized. We need to rethink our analysis, not to form a synthesis of the two, but to cook up a better mixture out of some of the old ingredients.

Since it was first uttered in the eighteenth century, humanism feminism has assumed the liberation of women as an extension of the values of liberalism. The ideal of universal humanity, that all persons have equal rights whatever their station or class, should be extended to women. To be sure, many humanist feminists, such as Beauvoir, have been socialists, and have called for radical transformation of economic and political institutions. The argument for such socialism, however, is that only publicly controlled and democratic economic and political institutions will make it possible to realize the ideal of equality and self-development promised by liberalism. Even socialist versions of humanist feminism, then, stand in continuity with the modern humanist tradition insofar as it seeks to realize the values articulated by that tradition for all persons, including and especially women (Eisenstein, 1980).

Gynocentric feminism confronts humanist feminism on one of its core assumptions, namely, that the ideal for feminists is a universal humanity in which all persons equally realize their potential for self-development. Nearly every term in this sentence can be put to gynocentric feminist critique, but I will restrict myself to the notion of universal humanity. On the humanist feminist view uttered by Beauvoir, differences between men and women are socially enforced oppressions. In their humanity there is no essential difference between men and women. and we look forward to a society in which sex difference will make no difference.

Gynocentric feminism can reveal this ideal of universal humanity as both unrealistic and oppressive. This ideal proposes to measure all persons according to the formal standards of rationality and rights. But the material differences among persons determined by history, region or bodies continue to operate, so some will measure differently. Only an explicit affirmation of difference and social plurality, gynocentric feminism suggests, offers the hope of overcoming sexism, racism, ethnic oppression. Such affirmation of difference is difficult and threatening, however, because it challenges modes of individual and community self-identification.

As I already pointed out in discussing Beauvoir, humanist feminism focuses its investigation primarily on women's situation and criticizes patriarchy because of its specifically destructive effect on women's lives, without questioning the dominant culture's basic assumptions about the good human life. Gynocentric feminism, on the other hand, takes a much broader look at our society. It seeks to uncover and throw into question some of the most basic assumptions of the Western tradition of thought of which modern humanism is a part—the distinction between nature and culture, spirit and body, the universal and particular. Gynocentric feminism links masculinist culture's equation of humanity with rationality, on the one hand, to the repression of life spontaneity and the development of an oppressive web of social controls and organizational hierarchy, on the other. In these ways it is similar to and stands in the same category with critiques of Western culture uttered by Nietzsche, Adorno and Horkheimer, Foucault and
As a result of its greater comprehensiveness, gynocentric feminism broadens its critique of our society beyond focus on specifically sexist institutions and practices and specific damage to women. Because it brings feminist critique to basic assumptions of the society as a whole, gynocentric feminism offers for the first time distinctively feminist analyses of social structures and forms of symbolization not tied to women in particular—such as racism, classism, the military or the state. This has produced a broadened polities in which feminists participate as feminists in ecological, anti-militarist, anti-racist struggles. Unlike humanist feminism, that is, gynocentric feminism has developed a perspective from which to criticize any institution or practice in our society, even if it does not distinguish women’s specific oppression.

While gynocentric feminism is deeply radical in these ways, it also harbors some dangers to radical politics. Turning to femininity as the source of values by which to criticize patriarchal culture and form the image of a better society seems to lead to a disturbing essentialism. By ‘essentialism’ I mean an account that theorizes women as a category with a set of essential attributes. O’Brien states that she describes the structure of womanhood in her articulation of the female mode of reproductive consciousness. Hartsock acknowledges historical and situational differences among women, but claims feminist theory requires identifying common attributes of women’s experience. Gynocentric feminists find these attributes in the same place as has patriarchy—in women’s reproductive biology and the activity of mothering. Feminist anti-militarist and ecological analysis finds women more in touch with nature than men because of the cycles and changes of our bodies, and more peaceloving because our nurturing impulses foster in us a love of life.

French theorists explicitly criticize feminist tendencies toward essentialism. On this account many of them reject the label ‘feminist’. They fear replacing humanism, where universal humanity is projected as an ideal, with universal womanhood. ‘Woman’ is a fiction, a metaphysical attempt to bring multiplicity into unity. The French theorists I have referred to nevertheless share some of the essentialist tendencies of gynocentric feminism in the U.S. They rely on an opposition between the masculine and the feminine, even where, as in Kristeva, they do not necessarily associate these with men and women. Though these theories explicitly question Western dichotomous thinking, their use of the opposition of masculinity and femininity retains its traditional dichotomous terms, in revaluated form: the masculine is power, discursive rationality, calculation, abstraction, while the feminine is desire, sensuality, poetic language, the immediacy of contact with nature. Like their counterparts across the ocean, these French theorists tend to reduce women’s specificity to reproductive biology and the function of mothering (Stanton, 1983). Though in some of her writing Irigaray reaches toward a woman-to-woman relation beyond the mother/daughter cycle.

Gynocentrism’s most important contribution is its affirmation of difference against humanism’s claim of a universal humanity. Gynocentric feminism, however, still tends to see gender difference as a relation of inside and outside. We need a conception of difference that is less like the icing bordering the layers of cake, however, and more like a marble cake: where the flavors remain recognizable different, but thoroughly in-situated in one another.

Gynocentric feminism has rightly restored dignity to the character of women, shown how within our confined roles and despite often severe domination by men, we have made new things, contributed to historical events, struggled actively against our oppression, and formed networks of solidarity. It has been especially necessary to topple the stance of women as victims, weak, passive and only partial human beings.

In its effort to recover self-respect, agency and authentic subjectivity of women by finding greater value in traditional women’s culture than the dominant masculinist culture, however, gynocentric feminism tends to swing too far away from understanding women as confined or enslaved. It rejects too completely the Beauvorian claim that femininity inhibits, distorts and mutilates women’s lives. Gilligan’s accent on women’s traditional sovereignty in the private realm where she cares for each person in her particularity, for example, fails to note how this ethic of care often leads women to a sacrificing stance that can make us easily hurt.

The gynocentric revaluation of traditional femininity can weaken the claim that women are oppressed. If women’s labor has been as creative or moreso than men’s labor, if women’s networks and relations with children have been the source of values more life giving than the public activities of men, if female desire is more playful, less rigid than male desire, then what warrants the claim that women need liberating? To be sure, all gynocentric feminists find that men rule society and in so doing devalue and repress this feminine sphere. Such a way of conceptualizing male domination, however, mutes the outrage against injustice that humanist feminism exhibits because it claims that women are not simply devalued, but damaged, by male domination.

Gynocentric feminism, moreover, tends to reject too categorically the value of the activities and ambitions associated traditionally with masculinity. Men have traditionally reserved for themselves the public activities of political position, recognized
artists. inventor or scientist. and have recognized only other men worthy to compete for the accolades that reward excellence. If the activities which men have dominated really are less valuable than those in which women have traditionally engaged, as gynocentric feminism suggests. then in what does male privilege consist? The other side of gynocentricism's denial of the damaging consequences of femininity is its denial of the growth promoting aspects of traditional masculinity. If we claim that masculinity distorts men more than it contributes to their self-development and capacities, then again the claim that women are the victims of injustice loses considerable force.

Within the context of anti-feminist backlash. the effect of gynocentric feminism may be accommodating to the existing structure. Gynocentric feminism relies on and reinforces gender stereotypes at just the time when the dominant culture has put new emphasis on marks of gender difference. It does so, moreover, by relying on many of those aspects of women's traditional sphere that traditional patriarchal ideology has most exploited and that humanist feminists such as Beauvoir found most oppressive—reproductive biology. motherhood. domestic concerns. Even though its intentions are subversive, such renewed attention to traditional femininity can have a reactionary effect on both ourselves and our listeners because it may echo the dominant claim that women belong in a separate sphere.

Humanist feminism calls upon patriarchal society to open places for women within those spheres of human activity that have been considered the most creative. powerful and prestigious. Gynocentric feminism replies that wanting such things for women implies a recognition that such activities are the most humanly valuable. It argues that in fact. militarism. bureaucratic hierarchy. competition for recognition. and the instrumentalization of nature and people entailed by these activities are basic disvalues (Ferguson, 1983).

Yet in contemporary society, men still have most institutionalized power. and gynocentric feminism shows why they do not use it well. If feminism turns its back on the centers of power. privilege and individual achievement that men have monopolized. those men will continue to monopolize them. and nothing significant will change. Feminists cannot undermine masculinist values without entering some of the centers of power that foster them. but the attainment of such power itself requires at least appearing to foster those values. Still. without being willing to risk such cooptation feminism can only be a moral position of critique rather than a force for institutional change.

Despite its intention. I fear that gynocentric feminism may have the same consequence as the stance of moral motherhood that grew out of nineteenth century feminism: a resegregation of women to a specifically women's sphere. outside the sites of power. privilege and recognition. For me the symptom here is what the dominant culture finds more frightening. Within the dominant culture a middle-aged, assertive woman's claim to co-anchor the news alongside a man appears considerably more frightening than women's claim to have a different voice that exposes masculinist values as body-denying and selfish. The claim of women to have a right to the positions and benefits that have hitherto been reserved for men. and that male-dominated institutions should serve women's needs. is a direct threat to male privilege. While the claim that these positions of power themselves should be eliminated and the institutions eliminated or restructured is indeed more radical. when asserted from the gynocentric feminist position it can be an objective retreat.

Gynocentrism's focus on values and language as the primary target of its critique contributes to this blunting of its political force. Without doubt, social change requires changing the subject. which in turn means developing new ways of speaking. writing and imagining. Equally indubitable is the gynocentric feminist claim that masculinist values in Western culture deny the body. sensuality and rootedness in nature. and that such denial nurtures fascism. pollution and nuclear games. Given these facts. however. what shall we do? To this gynocentrism has little concrete answer. Because its criticism of existing society is so global and abstract. gynocentric critique of the values. language and culture of masculinism can remove feminist theory from analysis of specific institutions and practices and how concretely they might be structurally changed in directions more consonant with our visions.

REFERENCES


