RECONSTRUCTING FEMINIST THEORETICAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

Struggles to carve out places in the academy for feminist studies have been long and hard-fought. Now, it seems, those places have been secured. However, just when academic feminist studies seem to be coming into their own, some feminists perceive a widening schism between feminist theories and feminist practices. These feminists maintain that much of what preoccupies academic feminists is remote from any feminist political practices beyond that sphere.

Academic feminists, I believe, must take these criticisms seriously. Therefore, in this thesis, I suggest a way of bridging that divergence. Measuring the merit of theories on the basis of their usefulness to feminist practices, I assert, would repair the disconnection between feminist theories and practices. Reconstructing feminist theoretical practices in that way assumes a pragmatic view of truth. Appropriating pragmatism, I argue, would allow feminists to acknowledge valuable lessons realized in feminist political practices while remaining on the cutting edge in the academy.

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for my mom and dad

To reaffirm the primacy of feminist struggle, feminist scholars must renew our collective commitment to a radical theoretical agenda, to a feminist education that is the practice of freedom. We begin this task by acknowledging that feminist theory is losing its vital connection to feminist struggle and that connection must be firmly reestablished and understood if our work is to have significant political impact.

-bell hooks

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INTRODUCTION

The Category of "Women"

The production of feminist theories constitutes one of the most vital dimensions of twentieth-century critical discourses. Feminist theorists have elucidated the ways in which women have been "written out of" philosophy and every other established academic discipline. As well as introducing "recovered" content into academic curricula, many feminists have asserted that the division of subject matter into disciplines stifles the production of feminist theories; hence, these feminist academics have opted for interdisciplinary approaches to women's, or feminist, studies. An interdisciplinary method is required, Judith Butler asserts, "in order to resist the domestication of gender studies or women's studies within the academy and to radicalize the notion of feminist critique."[1]

To "be" a woman is to be culturally-situated as one. The signs 'woman' and 'women' signify positionings: those signifiers are political significations constituted in language. Insofar as I claim that those signs

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[1]Judith Butler, Preface to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. xiii. Further references to this text parenthetically embedded as *GT*.

signify political positions generated in language, I am endorsing a poststructuralist feminism. Following the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault,[2] I take 'language' to signify "systems of meaning." Within these systems, signs circulate between and through a multiplicity of sociocultural nexes: meanings are created through differentiation.[3] Language, for poststructuralists, is constitutive of social practices, epistemologies, and ontologies; in other words, for poststructuralists, "language" constructs

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[2]While in this thesis I shall make a constructive use of Foucault's work, I should also draw attention to feminist criticism of Foucault's androcentrism. For example, in their introduction to the collection *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, [(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp.ix-xx], the editors, Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, write: "Foucault might have given new status to discourse, but he fails to take into account the relations between masculinist authority and language, discourse, and reason. Language, feminists claim, is never gender-free". Though they too draw upon his texts, Diamond and Quinby indicate "gaps in [Foucault's] genealogies" (p. xv). More pointedly, Sandra Bartky asserts that Foucault fails to see "those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine. To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body," Bartky argues, "is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been posed" (p.64). Sandra Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in Diamond and Quinby, eds., pp.61-86.

It is worth noting that Foucault refuses to be labelled as 'poststructuralist,' 'structuralist,' 'Marxist,' or anything as for that matter. Explaining his resistance to labels, Foucault states: 'I do not understand what kind of problem is common to the people we call post-modern or post-structuralist.' Foucault and Gerard Raulet, "Structuralism and poststructuralism: an interview with Michel Foucault," *Telos* 55, pp.195-211, p.205; in Susan J. Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), p.18.

[3]Joan Wallach Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 53-65, p. 55.

"reality". For example, arguing that "class" is a notion which should be reconceptualized, Gareth Stedman Jones claims that "class" does not preexist, predetermine, or become reflected in class consciousness. Rather "class," states Jones, is "constructed and inscribed within a complex rhetoric of metaphorical associations, causal inferences and imaginative construction."[4] Feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott observes that the "origins of class must be sought then not in objective material conditions, nor in the consciousness said to reflect those conditions, but in the language of political struggle."[5]

The claim that the signs 'woman,' 'women,' and what they signify, are contingent upon discursive practices implies, then, that language is constitutive of the category of "women." Assignment to the category of women is not a natural fact of existence which some embody; assignment to the group "women" is a discursive production. To claim that the sign 'women' does not signify, or mirror, something which is extant in "nature" is not to imply that real material women (the subjects of feminism) do not exist. Rather, the claim that the category of "women" is constituted in **discursive practices** which themselves are contingent, is the assertion

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[4]Gareth Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism," *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.102; in Scott, p.56.

[5]Scott, pp.56-57.

that the sign 'women' does not signify an historically or culturally continuous unity; furthermore, neither is 'woman' the signifier of an historically or culturally coherent identity.

The sign 'woman' signifies a "fluctuating identity," claims Denise Riley.[6] Riley states that, "to speak about the individual temporality of being a woman is really to speak about movements between the many temporalities of a designation" (*AN*?, 98). Meanwhile, the category of "women," Riley writes, is "historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change" (Ibid., 1-2). Riley further argues that, "'women' is a volatile collectivity" of very different positionings. So different are these positionings within 'women,' asserts Riley, that "the apparent continuity of the subject of 'women' isn't to be relied on; 'women' is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity" (Ibid., 2).

For Riley, "the modern collectivity of women was established in the midst of other formations" (Ibid., 8). Therefore, that signification cannot be decontextualized and subsequently analyzed without reference to its participation in networks of relational meanings. Riley offers as an example the "increasing sexualization" of women. By the eighteenth century, the

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[6]Denise Riley, *"Am I that Name?" Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 1. Further references to this text parenthetically embedded as *AN*?.

prevailing notion was that women were "saturated with their sex" and that this had implications for their bodies and souls alike (Ibid., 8).[7] A feminist analysis of the category of women in that historical context, then, should consider its situatedness in discursive formations which include the histories of other concepts such as "the body" and "the social" (Ibid., 7). In that historical context, especially generated in gynæcology and psychiatry, a discourse of sexuality in medicine was made to pass for the "truth" of "women." Truth-discourses which purport to describe "women" contribute to the construction of their object.

Power produces the subjects of the category of "women". Power, Foucault maintains, produces rather than merely repressing subjects. For Foucault, 'subject' does not signify modern philosophy's *cogito*, autonomous self, or rational moral agent. To be a subject, Foucault writes, is to be, on

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[7]In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, [Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Random House, 1980)], Foucault identifies "four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex" (p. 103). One of these is "the hysterization of women's bodies": "a threefold process whereby the feminine body is analyzed -qualified and disqualified- as being thoroughly **saturated with sexuality**; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children's education): the Mother, with her negative image of 'nervous woman,' constituted the most visible form of this hysterization" (p.104; emphasis added). Further references to this text parenthetically embedded as *HS*.

one hand, "subject to someone else by control and dependence," and, on the other, tied to one's "own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to."[8] Power, Foucault argues, produces subjects "gradually, progressively, really and materially through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, [and] thoughts".[9] The "essence" of power, according to Foucault, consists in "acting upon an acting subject by virtue of their acting or being capable of action." "The exercise of power," Foucault writes, "consists in guiding the possibilities of conduct and putting in order the possible outcomes" (*SP*, 220-221). Further, the production of these practices, these limits of possible conduct, Foucault claims, is also a concealing. Concealment of these practices allows the naturalization and legitimation of the discursive formation in which they circulate (*GT*, 2).

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[8]Foucault, "The Subject and Power" appended to H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 212. Further references to this essay parenthetically embedded as *SP*.

[9]Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon, ed., Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 97.

This Distinction Which is Not One[10]

The practices that produce women subjects establish the criteria for assignment to the category; subsequent assignment to that category is contingent upon fulfilling those criteria (*GT*, 2). The criteria for the category of "women" are the physical features perceived to belong to the female "sex". Though taken as a biological given, "sex," writes Monique Wittig, is a "sophisticated and mythic construction."[11] For Foucault, "sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures" (*HS*, 155). Echoing Wittig and Foucault, Butler thinks that a supposedly "raw," or natural, "sex," is in fact the "cooked," or conventional, product of a particular socio-political discourse (*GT*, 37). "Sex," Butler asserts, "has been gender all along."[12] In other words, "sex" too is a discursive production.

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[10]The heading of this section is a pun on the title of one of Luce Irigaray's texts: *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[11]Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," in *Feminist Issues*, (Winter 1981), p.48.

[12]Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault, in *Feminism as Critique*, Drucilla Cornell and Seyla Benhabib eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.134.

Butler's claim that "sex" is discursively produced raises a problem for the "sex/gender distinction." In a paper which appeared in 1975,[13] Gayle Rubin defines a "sex/gender system" as: "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity."[14] "Every society," writes Rubin, "has a sex/gender system -a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner".[15] Rubin's sex/gender distinction draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss's nature/culture distinction: "sex is to nature ... as gender is to culture" (*GT*, 37). In Rubin's terms, "gender," is the culturally-encoded production of natural, i.e., prediscursive, "sex". In other words, according to Rubin, female and male sexes are plastic matter molded by, and subjected to, signification within culture. I maintain, however, that these "sexes" are coordinates of a complex network of power relations which has already limited the possible interpretations of those productions.

Power relations are productive of discursive practices that **constitute**, rather than reflect, the "realities" of nature, biology, sex. All of

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[13]Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women* Rayna R. Reiter, ed. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp.157-210.

[14]Ibid, p.159.

[15]Ibid., p.165.

these concepts are contestable. As feminist epistemologist and philosopher of science Sandra Harding argues: "the way contemporary Western society draws the borders between culture and nature [is] both modern and culture bound."[16] The nature/culture dichotomy, Harding asserts, is reflected in a series of binary oppositions that structure most western modes of thought. Some of these are: reason versus emotions, mind versus matter, self opposed to other, objectivity/subjectivity, and male/female. The terms of these dichotomies are related asymmetrically. In all cases, the former term is elevated while the latter is denigrated and conceived as partial or flawed. This sort of dichotomous thinking, Harding suggests, resurfaces in feminist theorizing in the form of the "sex/gender" distinction (Ibid., 31). Constructed to facilitate anthropological analyses, the distinction is, however, already circumscribed in a culturally-specific epistemological framework. Butler asserts that, "the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive

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[16]Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl, and Mary Wyer, eds. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.31. Further references to this essay parenthetically embedded as *IAC*.

interests."[17] Butler explains that the apparent self-evidence of these categories is discursively produced: practices which produce "females" and "males" are concealed subsequent to that production "in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise" (*GT*, 2). Elsewhere, Butler states:

> [to ensure] the reproduction of a given culture, various requirements, well-established in the anthropological literature of kinship, have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which requires the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes which, in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system.[18]

Disciplining Women

Multifarious modalities of power produce subjects. One mode of subject-constitution Foucault calls "discipline".[19] Not to be identified with a

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[17]Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case, ed. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 275. In *HS* Foucault writes: "the notion of 'sex' made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle ..." (p. 154).

[18]Butler, in Case, ed., p.275.

[19]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Alan Sheridan trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 134, and passim. Further references to this text parenthetically embedded as *DP*. Consider Butler's cited (p.1) remarks in light of the following description of "discipline." In *SP* Foucault writes: "In a given society there is no

structure or institution, "discipline," Foucault explains, "is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology" (*DP*, 215).

Discipline is a modern form of power. In the late 18th- and early 19th-centuries, Foucault writes, "discipline," began to replace public spectacles, such as executions, as an effective mechanism of power. In pre-modern times, the tortured, dismembered, and executed bodies were signs of the sovereign's power. Public spectacles have been replaced by modern disciplinary operations of power: control, compliance, and obedience. Modern forms of discipline control the imprisoned by compelling them to signify the prohibitive law as their essence, soul, and conscience. The law is inscribed

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general type of equilibrium between finalized activities, systems of communication, and power relations. Rather there are diverse forms, diverse places, diverse circumstances ... But there are also 'blocks' in which the adjustment of abilities, the resources of communication, and power relations constitute regulated and concerted systems. Take for example an educational institution: the disposal of its space, the meticulous regulations which govern its internal life, the different activities which are organized there, the diverse persons who live there or meet with one another, each with his [*sic*] own function, his [*sic*] well-defined character-all these things constitute a block of capacity-communication-power. The activity which ensures apprenticeship and the acquisition of aptitudes or types of behavior is developed there by means of a whole ensemble of regulated communications (lessons, questions and answers, orders, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, differentiation marks of the 'value' of each person and of the levels of knowledge) and by the means of a whole series of power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidial hierarchy).

These blocks ... constitute what one might call, enlarging a little the sense of the word, "**discipline**" (pp.218-219; emphasis added).

on and through bodies, not with force and violence, but by the disciplining of norms and codes of behaviour (*GT*, 134-135). Foucault writes: "Thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the 'physics' of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics" (*DP*, 177). Contemporary techniques of surveillance, Foucault suggests, are exemplified in Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" (Ibid., 200).[20]

Bentham's Panopticon was a bastion for incarceration. Architecturally innovative. Efficiently punitive. Insidiously normative. Foucault describes the "Panopticon" in this way:

> at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other ... By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cell of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and recognize immediately ... Visibility is a trap (Ibid., p.200).

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[20]Foucault discusses Bentham's Panopticon at pp. 200-207; this discussion is situated in the more comprehensive explication of "Panopticism," pp. 195-228.

A 19th-century innovation in penology, "panoptic logic" has become an ubiquitous 20th-century operation of power. Bentham's invidious genius lay in recognizing that the **possibility** of being seen, the **threat** of constant surveillance, is an effective disciplinary mechanism. Foucault writes, "he[21] who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; ... he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles" (*DP*, 202). The "panoptic schema," Foucault claims, infuses our entire social body (Ibid., 207) In short, ours is a "disciplinary society" (Ibid., 216).

"Disciplines" are among the practices that institute the signification of gender. Signifying practices of power confine "intelligible" genders within a binary matrix: women subjects/men subjects.[22] Disciplinary practices produced on the everyday level of the subject make possible hegemonic gender power structures. There, on the micro-level, gendered subjects are formed, defined, and "normalized," through mundane

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[21]Foucault's use of so-called "generic" masculine pronouns is symptomatic of his androcentrism. See n2 above.

[22]In the notes to *GT*, Butler writes: "I use the term *heterosexual matrix* ... to designate that grid of **cultural intelligibility** through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized ... [and] ... to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality"(p. 151n6; second emphasis added).

social practices. Gender power relations, furthermore, are asymmetrical. The logic of panopticism is pertinent to analyses of asymmetrical gender power relations.

"Panoptic logic" is relevant to women's subordination because subjects gendered women are produced as objects of desire on the basis of "visual impact."[23] Women's outward appearances are believed to express "truths" of our being, our essence, morals, sexual desires, and self-respect. In the media, classrooms, or pornography, on the streets, production line, or golf-course, "men assess, judge and make advances on the basis of ... visual impressions. The ability to scrutinize is premised on power. Indeed the look confers power. Women's inability to return such a critical and aggressive look is a sign of subordination, of being the recipients of another's assessment."[24] It is no wonder that, for most women, visibility is a trap: the ever-present **threat** of being scrutinized is as disciplining as actually being under a scrutinizing gaze. Women, in other words, are constituted as objects for public (read: male) voyeurism. Carole Spitzack argues, "women must [not only] understand how they are viewed by others, but they must present their bodies in a manner that is consistent with the elaborate images of

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[23]Carole Spitzack, *Confessing Excess: Women and the Politics of Body Reduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p.44.

[24]Rosalind Coward, "The Look," in *Female Desires* (London: Paladin Books, 1985), p.75.

images of invisible tower guards ... a woman must [play] the roles of tower guard and prisoner simultaneously."[25] Advancing a similar argument, Sandra Bartky asserts: "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other."[26] In patriarchal cultures, women, John Berger writes, "do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity." Discussing the historical "ways of seeing" constitutive of "the nude" as an art-form, Berger states: "the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men ... because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him."[27]

Women are disciplined through an array of practices. One form of disciplining produces what Foucault calls "docile bodies" (*DP*, 136). "A body," states Foucault, "is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Ibid., 136). Seeming acts of choice, disciplinary practices that

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[25]Spitzack, pp.44-45.

[26]Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in Diamond and Quinby, eds., p.72.

[27]John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972) pp.63-64.

produce women as docile bodies may take the form of personal "hygiene" performed with ritualistic regularity, or practices of "self-control" and "self-improvement" such as strict diet and exercise regimens. Constructed as harboring insatiable desires, hungers, and forces, women's bodies are believed to require constant monitoring, evaluating, and regulating. A woman may even seek out instruction in, for instance, the application of facial and body cosmetics, identification of colours that "highlight" her "complexion," or coaching in charm and social graces. Some invest much time and money for training in the communication of body postures, gestures, and movements; and, further, some mutilate their bodies and faces with surgical procedures euphemistically called "cosmetic surgery," "face-lifts," "eye-lid lifts," "tummy-tucks," and "breast implants." All of these practices are aimed at improving bodies that would otherwise look drab, pale, flabby, fleshy, saggy, skinny, too black, too old, too wrinkled, or too tired. Indeed, the "political anatomy" of the anorectic can be read as a text of cultural and historical prescriptions of "femininity". Susan Bordo,[28] for instance, has compellingly argued that contrary to prevailing notions of the

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[28]Susan Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo, eds. (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 13-31; Bordo, "Reading the Slender Body," in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, Mary Shuttleworth, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 83-112.

anorectic as compulsive, masochistic and psychologically-ill, in fact, the anorectic occupies a subject-position at the extreme of the continuum of normative femininity: all women are potentially subjected and disciplined by these conventional prescriptions. The anorectic, Bordo explains, is symbolic of the disciplining which governs the physical, social, and conceptual space that women are permitted to occupy in patriarchal societies.

Performing these acts and acquiring these skills is, of course, inherently paradoxical. Cultivating these techniques is aimed at attaining the image of the "ideal woman;" yet, this persona is an elusive construct which no woman can ever embody. These disciplinary practices constitute an endless cycle in which while some are being performed, even mastered, increasingly others are produced. The continuous proliferation of these practices increasingly defines women subjects. Many women perceive that failure to cultivate these practices jeopardizes their "natural" femininity. As western cultural standards of "womanliness" become more strictly defined, extravagant, time-consuming, and demand greater effort and precision, engaging in these practices is a sign of social stature. Considering the rapid obsolescence of these fads, fashions, and skills, the financial resources required to construct women subjects' bodies can be enormous. Rosalind Coward writes,

> Advertising in this society builds precisely on the creation of an anxiety to the effect that, unless we measure up, we will not be loved. We are set to work on an ever-increasing number of areas of the body, labouring to perfect and eroticize an ever-increasing number of erotogenic zones. Every minute region of the body is now exposed to this scrutiny by the ideal. Mouth, hair, eyes, eyelashes, nails, fingers, hands, skin, teeth, lips, cheeks, shoulders, arms, legs, feet-all these and many more have become areas requiring work. Each requires potions, moisturizers, conditioners, night creams, creams to cover up blemishes ... This is not only the strict grip of the cultural ideal; it is also the multiplication of areas of the body accessible to marketing.[29]

So, in a consumer society, practices that construct "feminine" bodies are costly constructions, valuable assets, and secure speculations. In capitalist patriarchal societies, women's bodies are commodified surfaces: constituted as displays of accessories, mannequins of the season's fashions, billboards of the latest swimwear. "This is the absolute rule with respect to the face and the body, the generalization of sign exchange value to facial and bodily effects." "This," Baudrillard ominously pronounces, "is the final disqualification of the body".[30]

The category of "women" is produced through, and in accordance with, these historically and culturally contingent practices; the radical

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[29]Coward, pp.80-81.

[30]Jean Baudrillard, "Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Charles Levin, trans. and intro. (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press Ltd., 1981), p. 94.

contingency of "being" a woman, and of "being" women, then, is implied. In order to take full account of the contingency of "woman" and "women," I suggest, feminists should not presuppose an identity of a feminist subject. Assuming a coherent and continuous feminist subject marks out in advance what qualifies as that subject. The colonializing presumptions of a feminine substratum, "Woman," are now widely-recognized; 'woman,' however, is thought to be unproblematic. Though conceived as less presumptuous, that lower-case sign too obscures the diversity and discontinuity of the significations of "women": asserting that "woman" expresses a transcultural, ahistorical, i.e., natural, "femaleness," precludes identifying gender signification as a regulatory assignation and "sex" as its naturalized foundation.

As dispositions, desires, capacities, and reading practices, claimed characteristic of women one by one are deconstructed, pursuing a "women's," or, "woman's," identity becomes increasingly suspect (*GT*, 1). Does maintaining an identity of the feminist subject result in producing feminist methods and epistemologies that fit with that subject's characterization? Consider Butler's assertion that "the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from 'women' whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics" (*GT*, 4). Do feminists require a feminist subject in order to mobilize

and resist? Riley, for one, thinks not. Riley states: "feminism must negotiate the quicksands of 'women' which will not allow it to settle on either identities or counter-identities, but which condemn it to an incessant striving for a brief foothold" (*AN?*, 5) Riley refers to the multiple and shifting significations of "women" as the fluctuating, or "peculiar temporalities" of the sign. The "shakiness of the designation 'women,'" maintains Riley, "is the lot of feminism" (Ibid., 98).

The title of Black feminist bell hooks' text *Ain't I a Woman*[31] is a response to an embarrassing theoretical practice: analyses of "women" which do not acknowledge the "multiple significations" of that signifier. Butler writes: "If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term

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[31]Bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981). In her 1851 speech to an Akron, Ohio women's rights convention, Black feminist activist Sojourner Truth "point[ed] to the contradictions inherent in blanket use of the term *woman*." Truth said:

> That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, Bert J. Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p.235; in Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p.14.

fails to be exhaustive" (*GT*, 3). A feminist analysis of "women" must examine the ways in which the constitution of race, ethnicity, dis/ability,[32] class, sexuality, and other axes of power relations intersect the axis of gender. To argue as I have that the category of "women" cannot be analyzed apart from the systems of relational meanings in which it circulates, implies that "gender" cannot be separated "from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (Ibid., 3). Axes of power relations which intersect the axis of gender too are historically and discursively constituted. The "truths" of these significations are "produced, evaluated and set into circulation as multiple, overlapping and crisscrossing."[33]

The instability of these significations implies that the signification of gender is context-dependent. In the context of, say, a women's dance, a subject "is" her gender, i.e., "is" a woman, to a great degree; however, in the context of a wheelchair-fitness class, the subject's

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[32]My use of a clumsy neologism is a political act. The disjunctive form of that sign indicates my resistance to that signification while drawing attention to ongoing debates over which of these terms is most preferable: "crippled," "handicapped," "disabled," "challenged," or "differently-abled." For one argument in the debate see Susan Wendell, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability," in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (Special Issue: Feminist Ethics & Medicine), vol.4, no.2, (Summer 1989), pp.104-124.

[33]Barry Allen, "Truth in Politics: Foucault on Truth and Power," p. 12. Unpublished paper presented at meeting of Canadian Philosophical Association, Victoria Canada, May 1990.

gender signification may be eclipsed by the signification of dis/ability, i.e., the subject "is" dis/abled more than the subject "is" gendered. Riley argues that "any attention to the life of a woman, if traced out carefully, must admit the degree to which the effects of lived gender are at least sometimes unpredictable, and fleeting." How far can one take on the identity of a gender?, asks Riley. "How could someone 'be a woman' through and through, make a final home in that classification without suffering claustrophobia?" (*AN?*, 6).

"Theory" in Feminism

Since the Enlightenment, philosophical and political theories have taken humanism's purportedly universal "Man" as their subject and object. Initially, feminist critiques of philosophical and political theories attempted to repair this androcentrism. It was thought that by "extending" the universality and reinterpreting the categories of various traditional theoretical discourses, women's activities and social relations could become visible: these "partial" theories could be salvaged (*IAC*, 15). Liberal, socialist, and Marxist political theories, functionalism, and structuralism, to name a few, have been resources for feminist analyses. "We have stretched the intended domains of these theories," writes Harding, "reinterpreted their central claims, or borrowed their concepts and categories to make

visible women's lives and feminist views of gender relations" (Ibid., 16). Feminist theorists began to recognize, however, that not only the contents of these theories are androcentric: the paradigms in which they are constructed presuppose and articulate masculinist biases. As Harding observes, women's experiences have neither "provided the grounding for" these theoretical discourses nor "served as the[ir] test of adequacy" (Ibid., 16). Thus, invariably, the usefulness of these mainstream theoretical frameworks for feminists has been limited. Indeed, if one follows the genealogy of the emerging canon of feminist theory, one traces a series of convergences with, but also divergences from, other theoretical discourses.

Alerted to the masculinism of these discourses, some feminists claim that theories *tout court* have little relevance to women's lives. Others assert that the production of "theory" further entrenches class differences between women which result from unequal access to the canons of knowledge and hence knowledge-production.[34] Moreover, some believe that **feminist** theory replicates what is perceived as a "patriarchal association between knowledge and power" (*IAC*, 17). Harding writes,

> we sometimes claim that theorizing itself is suspiciously patriarchal, for it assumes separations between the knower and the known, subject and object, and the possibility of some powerful Archimedean standpoint

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[34]Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 6-7.

> from which nature and social life fall into what we think is their proper perspective ... Our ability to detect androcentrism in traditional analyses has escalated from finding it in the content of knowledge claims to locating it in the forms and goals of traditional knowledge seeking (Ibid., p.17).

Feminists of the second wave began producing feminist theoretical discourse in "consciousness-raising groups". 'Consciousness-raising' signifies the process in which women tell each other their experiences of, for example, sexual abuse, childbirth, and mastectomies, as well as feelings of, for instance, low self-esteem, fear, and rage. Recognizing striking similarities in the stories shared, feminists began theorizing direct correlations between women's personal experiences and practices and the positions of women in society. "The personal is political" -a feminist slogan originating in these groups- articulates the relation between the micro-level of women subjects and hegemonic patriarchal structures: experiences and practices on the micro-level of the subject are produced **in accordance with** hegemonic structures; but also, practices performed at the level of the subject make **possible, produce, and reinforce** these structures. "CR" groups provided feminist theorizing with invaluable intimations and insights. The non-hierarchical structures of collectives and their methods of consensual, negotiated decision-making were alternatives to the impersonal transactions of mainstream culture. Further, "processes" that reflected the

expressed experiences of those women were developed; one such example is the process of "doing rounds". "Rounds" provide every woman in the collective with the opportunity to speak uninterrupted. "Rounds" are conducted at the beginning, end, and often throughout a meeting. This procedure was developed to prevent feminists from replicating the "silencing of women" that many felt was an implicit feature of their interactions with men. "Doing rounds" and other feminist processes produced in CR have been adopted by unions, peace activists, support-groups, and others.

During the 80's, most theories produced in those early years have been identified by women of colour, lesbians, poor, and working-class women as "false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women who dominated the beginnings of [that] wave."[35] Constructed to expose the situatedness of mainstream discourses, those feminist theories too reflect the perspective of a particular location. In 1984, speaking at a conference on "Women and the Struggle Against Racism," Angela Davis makes these remarks:

> white leaders of the women's movement presume that when Black women raise our voices about the triple oppression we suffer, our message is at best of marginal relevance to their experiences ... Their theories and practice have frequently implied that the purest and

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[35]Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism, in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda J. Nicholson, ed. and intro. (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.

> most direct challenge to sexism is one exorcised of the elements related to racial and economic oppression-as if there were such a phenomenon as abstract womanhood abstractly suffering sexism and fighting back in an abstract historical context. In the final analysis, that state of abstraction turns out to be a very specific set of conditions: white middle-class women suffering and responding to the sexist attitudes and conduct of white middle-class men and calling for equality with those particular men. This approach leaves the existing socioeconomic system with its fundamental reliance on racism and class bias unchallenged.[36]

Crisscrossing power axes subject women in varying degrees. Some women are multiply-oppressed by relations of power; others, such as white, heterosexual, middle-class and upper-class women, while subjected to gender oppression, accrue benefits from some of its forms, and further, are privileged in relation to other axes of power. To prevent replicating the racism, classism, heterosexism and other "isms" of "malestream" theories and redress marginalizing in feminist movements, feminists should generate theories that take full account of the multiple variation within "women" and the differing modes of women's oppression. Feminists should plainly see that theorizing "women" as a seamless unity and women's oppression as monolithic, "hamper[s] rather than promote[s] sisterhood."[37]

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[36]Angela Y. Davis, "Facing Our Common Foe: Women and the Struggle Against Racism." Address to a conference sponsored by the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, November 15, 1984; printed in Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Culture, & Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp.17-18.

[37]Fraser and Nicholson, p.28.

To be sure, increasing awareness of feminist movements and recognition of "problems of exclusion in feminist thought"[38] have altered the faces of feminist theories. Recognizing the diverse modalities of women's oppression and the spectrum of power axes that infuse the axis of gender, however, is not sufficient to resist and subvert power. Resisting and subverting asymmetrical gender power relations requires conceiving of these not as "differences" extant in, and mirroring, "nature". Apparent natural differences such as these are all, every one of them, significations constituted in language. They are political productions, yet, by representing asymmetrical relations of power as if they were grounded in nature, they conceal the political -and contingent- quality of those relations.

Practical Feminist Theories

Feminist theories should inform feminist practices, but, should also be informed by those practices; the relation should not be unidirectional. Conceiving of theories and practices as distinct, each with its own functions, struggles, and agendas, is not conducive to proliferating "voices" within feminisms. Conceiving of feminist theories and practices as dichotomous threatens to impoverish both. On one hand, non-theoretical

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[38]Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

feminist practices are ill-equipped to resist a number of interventions that require "state of the art" theoretical perspicuity (e.g., mandatory HIV screening); on the other, some feminist theories (for the most part, some academic feminist theories) do not attend to, and are not applicable to, feminist politics. Such theories do not draw upon insights produced in feminist practices, and offer no practical information, methods, or strategies for resisting the power relations that subordinate women. Indeed, I am at times baffled by the description of these as **feminist** theories. In the following chapter, I argue that Lacanian "feminist" theories are paradigmatic of such unavailing theories.

Feminists, however, must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Feminists need theoretical discourses that can effectively struggle against technologically sophisticated forms of surveillance and intervention. Recent reproductive technologies and prevention from the AIDS "epidemic" are cases in point. An "epidemic," Linda Singer states, emerges as a construct of power "in light of which bodies will be mobilized, resources dispensed," and increased surveillance and regulatory tactics legitimated.[39] "Most of the innovations in reproductive ideology and

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[39]Linda Singer, "Bodies-Pleasures-Powers," in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol.1, no.1, (Winter 1989), p. 49. See also Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, A.M Sheridan Smith, trans. (New York and London: Pantheon Books, 1973).

technology," asserts Singer, "have sought to render women's bodies more easily mobilizable in response to shifting utilities, most notably the production and coordination of populations."[40] These regulatory practices and interventions demand critical assessment by feminists. Feminists must examine how reproductive technologies target and manage women's bodies and how the constitution of the AIDS virus as an "epidemic" exacerbates homophobia and racism.[41] Both the developing reproductive technologies and the determination of the AIDS virus as an "epidemic" multiply the points of intervention in the populace generally while targeting certain populations specifically.[42] These are two examples of the escalating complexity of productive power relations to which feminist practices at the end of the 20th-century must attend.

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[40]Singer, p. 58.

[41]See Simon Watney, "Missionary Positions: AIDS, "Africa," and Race," in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol.1, no.1 (Winter 1989), pp. 83-100. Watney elucidates the ways that the uncritical acceptance of "Africa" as the origin of HIV infection has produced the "cultural and psychic construction" of "African AIDS". This spurious notion of a unified "Africa" obscures the specificities of the AIDS virus in the diverse countries as well as denying any and all social, cultural, ethnic, and economic diversity within these. Watney also asserts that identification of "African AIDS" "reads the modes of HIV transmission as signs of a generalized and homogeneous African primitiveness, ... [and] the alleged '"mis-reporting' of African HIV and AIDS statistics as further evidence of 'backwardness' and 'unreliability'" (p. 90). Also see Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[42]Singer, p. 49.

Rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, feminists need to continue producing theoretical discourses. The production of theoretical and analytical tools in academe can help us clarify our positions on the problematics of our situations; further, developing our theoretical stances might strengthen the motivation for achieving our goals. Feminists need theories which examine how social practices on the micro-level produce gendered subjectivities that make possible hegemonic power structures. Feminist practices and political questions on the level of women subjects and feminist practices, though, should remain "the motivating force behind feminist theory."[43] Contemporary feminist practice "is increasingly a matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest or identity." "Postmodern" feminist theories and critiques must "be explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different groups and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods." The primary benefit "of this sort of theory," Fraser and Nicholson claim, "would be its usefulness for contemporary feminist political practice." "In a sense," they comment, "this practice is in advance of much contemporary feminist theory."[44]

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[43]Weedon, pp.1-2.

[44]Fraser and Nicholson, pp.34-35.

Feminists, I assert, should assess theoretical discourses on the basis of their utility for feminist practices. When producing or appropriating a theoretical discourse, feminists must ask ourselves: 'would this theory be useful for feminist practices in concrete cultural contexts?' In asserting this, I am advocating that feminist theorists should take up a "pragmatic view of truth." As William James describes the pragmatic view, the "truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it." "Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events."[45] "The possession of truth so far from being an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions."[46] For the pragmatist, the good of theory and the test of truth lie in the practical differences which result from a theory's being taken up, put to the test in practice. James maintains that the "serious meaning" of any postulation "lies in the concrete difference to some one which its being true will make". He writes that "if it can make no practical difference whether a given statement be true or false then the statement has no real meaning."[47] In the contexts of feminist theories, then,

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[45]William James, *Pragmatism and four essays from* <u>*The Meaning of Truth*</u> (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p.133; emphasis James's.

[46]Ibid., p.135.

[47]Ibid., p.229.

presupposing a pragmatic view of truth implies that the *verification* of any claim is dependent on its utility for feminist practices.

In this thesis, I appropriate pragmatism for feminisms. In chapter two, I illustrate the critical use of pragmatism by considering the usefulness to feminists of Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse. Some feminists argue that it is a valuable theory of the "psychic" construction of gender and social gender asymmetry in patriarchal societies. That assessment, I argue, is wrong-headed. Adhering to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory commits feminists to a reductionistic theory of women's subordination that does not account for the multiple significations of "women;" further, it remains unclear to me how, or even whether, a Lacanian feminism would incite social change. Because a Lacanian feminism would not differentiate "women" and differing modalities of women's oppression, nor would it stimulate feminist activism, a Lacanian feminism is useless for feminist practices. For my pragmatic feminism this means, it is not true.

In the third chapter, I develop the positive content of my envisioned feminist appropriation of pragmatism: I sketch out what an antifoundational, pragmatic feminism might look like. To do this, I implement Butler's antifoundational, "non-identitarian" feminism. Butler argues that feminist theories which presuppose a common or existing identity of "women," threaten the radicalism of feminist politics. While this

poses an exciting challenge to feminist thinking, Butler's discourse is also problematic. Like many postmodern theoretical discourses, Butler's feminism is articulated in jargon-laden language. Her use of inaccessible language suggests that Butler's theoretical discourse is distanced from feminist practices beyond the academic sphere. This feature of Butler's work is unacceptable for pragmatic feminism. Pragmatic feminism is tied to concrete political practices. Here, then, I look to the work of bell hooks. Unlike Butler's discourse, the clarity and straightforward manner of hooks' discourse indicates that it is connected to contextualized political practices. When the politically progressive elements of Butler's discourse are presented in the style that characterizes hooks' cultural criticism, a more pragmatic feminist theoretical discourse is produced.

Chapter 2

LACANIAN FEMININE-ISM: A LACANIAN 'FEMINISM'?

Introduction

In 1970, Kate Millett[1] wrote a scathing critique of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, in which she exposed its androcentrism, masculinism, and misogyny. Subsequently, however, feminists have begun to reconsider these charges. For example, in 1974, Juliet Mitchell[2] argued that feminist dismissals of Freud were reactionary and uncritical. There, Mitchell, a reputed feminist, endorsed Freudian psychoanalysis and advocated a **feminist** Freudianism. Jane Gallop explains Mitchell's recuperation of Freud in this way:

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[1]Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1970).

[2]Mitchell's most renowned discussion of Freud is in her *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Random House, 1974). However, as early as *Woman's Estate* [(New York: Random House, 1971), pp.159-172], Mitchell advocates a reconsideration of Freudian psychoanalysis by feminists. Mitchell writes: "Radical Feminism postulates a primary psychological demand for power by men as the original source of the oppression of women. In doing this, it confirms what is, to me, a serious error in our movement-it simplifies psychology and is content with a rejection of psychoanalysis for its dislikeable ideology. The American Movement's rejection of Freud, in particular, is a further manifestation of the moral response to the negative feminine attributes I have detailed" (p. 163).

> Mitchell's feminist Freudianism was made possible by the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Because Lacan's way of reading Freud located sexuality itself in language, that is, in culture, the Lacanian Freud no longer prescribed normality but described the conflicts and discontents of a bisexual animal who must, in order to function in the social world, become a man or a woman-assume an alienated sexual identity. Lacan's work produced a Freud that might be of use to feminism.[3]

Mitchell and other "Lacanian feminists" assert that Lacan's "return to Freud" has radicalized Freudian psychoanalysis. They argue that Lacan's distinction between the "phallus" of the symbolic realm and the "penis" of the material realm, as well as his claim that "sex" is a phantasmatic linguistic construct, eradicate the disturbing biologism of Freudian psychoanalysis. These feminists further assert that the Lacanian notion of the "excluded feminine" aptly describes women's subordination to cultural patriarchal structures.

My discussion of Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse is designed to illustrate the pragmatic mode of feminist analysis that I advocate. I shall consider the ostensible radicalism of Lacan's claim that gender identity is a position in language, occupied and reproduced. In Lacan's terms, women's position of exclusion from culture is homogeneous; a Lacanian feminism, therefore, would not take account of the multiple significations of "women"

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[3]Jane Gallop, "Phallus/Penis: Same Difference," in *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp.124-125.

and the varying modes of women's oppression. A feminism grounded in such an abstract, decontextual conception of women's oppression, I argue, would not be useful for feminist practices. Also, those phantastic identifications rely on a prior "recognition" of a postulated sexual binarism. Postulating binary "sex," I maintain, undercuts the subversive potential of the claim that those "sexes" are, in fact, historically contingent constructs. Further, Lacanian discourse makes asymmetrical gender power relations appear inevitable. Theoretical discourses that constitute women's subordination as necessary rather than contingent are anathema to feminist emancipatory aims, and on this pragmatic ground should not be endorsed.

Freud's Theory of (Hetero)Sexuality

For Freud, sexuality and gender identity are formed in a series of developmental stages. According to Freud, "sexual drive" is originally propped up on vital needs or functions. These needs and functions require the activity of an other (usually the mother); the paradigm example of this satisfying activity is breast-feeding. "Sucking at the mother's breast," he writes, "is the starting-point of the whole of sexual life".[4] The act of sucking excites areas of the mouth and lips. The stimulation derived from this

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[4]Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 1, James Strachey, trans., James Strachey and Angela Richards, eds. (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 356. Further references to this text parenthetically embedded as *ILP*.

sucking, Freud says, is "sexual" pleasure. Envelopes of the mucous membrane, such as the mouth, at which "sexuality" is produced, Freud identifies as "erotogenic zones". Other erotogenic zones include the "genitals" which are excited by urinating and defecating.[5] Beginning with the mouth, stimulation of the erotogenic zones becomes independent of any somatic function. The infant's entire body becomes a source of autoerotic pleasure. Freud asserts that the (m)other who, in a sense, institutes this pleasure becomes associated with it; this association is manifested in a desire for her.

According to Freud, then, infantile sexuality is polymorphous and incestuous. Infantile polymorphous and endogamous sexuality must be repressed in favour of exogamous genital heterosexuality.[6] The father's prohibition against incest institutes the laborious construction of exogamous heterosexuality from primordial polymorphous and endogamous sexuality.

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[5]Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay, ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), pp. 256-257.

[6]"Endogamous sexuality" signifies a sexuality that circulates within a family, clan, or tribe. "Exogamous sexuality" on the other hand signifies a sexuality (usually culturally-enforced) wherein a member of a family, clan, or tribe, engages in sexual relations only with those external to that group. Freud describes differing cultural forms of exogamous arrangements and their relation to "totemism" in *Totem and Taboo* (especially the first essay, "The Horror of Incest"). He writes: "In almost every place where we find totems we also find a law against persons of the same totems having sexual relations with one another and consequently against their marrying. This, then, is 'exogamy,' an institution related to totemism". Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, James Strachey, trans. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950), pp. 3-4.

heterosexuality from primordial polymorphous and endogamous sexuality. The proscribed endogamous (incestuous) desires for the maternal body must, therefore, be abandoned. Paternal prohibition, states Freud, has generated the transcultural and transhistorical "incest taboo."[7] By generating exogamic heterosexuality, Freud asserts, the incest taboo ensures the reproduction of cultures.

With the onset of the "phallic stage," the genitals become the focus of the child's sexuality. This developmental moment, Freud claims, is characterized by the "Oedipus complex." Resolution of the Oedipal conflict structures the child's gender identity. 'Oedipus complex' signifies the set of relations wherein the child cathects one parent as the object of desire and feels ambivalent toward the other. Freud states that "masculine" identification for the boy requires retaining the heterosexual aim of his desire for the mother. The boy, however, upon discovering his sister's or girl playmate's lack of a penis, "comes under the sway of the castration complex": he fears his father will punish him for desiring his mother by destroying his "precious portion" (his penis) (*ILP*, 359). Because he fears castration by his father, the boy abandons desire for his mother. The heterosexual aim of the boy's desire therefore must be directed to an acceptable object-choice.

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[7]Ibid., p.9.

In contrast to what the boy's masculine identification demands, the founding of the girl's femininity, Freud claims, requires a "double wave" of repression (*GT*, 46). First, the girl must shift the aim of her libidinal cathexis from her same-sex object-choice (her mother) to an opposite-sex object-choice (her father). Furthermore, the girl, having noticed her lack of the "big, visible penis," (*ILP*, 360) envies boys for possessing one and wishes that her father would provide her with a penis by giving her a son. Identifying with her mother, however, enables the girl to develop her "femininity"; this identification requires that the girl's desire for her father be displaced onto some more acceptable heterosexual object-choice (*GT*, 45-46, 59-64, 159n15).

Freud appropriates active sexual drive ("libido") for the "masculine". He states, "[s]o far as the masturbatory manifestations of sexuality are concerned, we might lay it down that the sexuality of little girls is of a wholly **masculine** character".[8] Since the girl's identification with her mother induces femininity, not masculinity, she must repress her masculine libido. Indeed, Freud states matter-of-factly that "[in little girls] the tendency to sexual repression seems in general to be greater; and, where the component instincts of sexuality appear, they prefer the passive form" (*ILP*, 287). For Freud, repression of her sexual drive is a requisite

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[8]Freud, "Three Essays", p. 85; emphasis added.

accomplishment for the little girl: necessary for her acquisition of a "feminine" identity.

Lacan's Theory of Gender Identity (or, the Phallus Looks Like a Penis from This Side of the Couch)

For Lacan, "sexuality" is produced and regulated by linguistic structures of culture. In Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse, the father's prohibition of the incestuous mother/son dyad is a function of the paternal law. Paternal prohibition, Lacan claims, institutes a series of libidinal displacements onto language in a chain of metonymic associations.[9] These linguistic associations Lacan calls the "Symbolic". For Lacan, this Symbolic order of linguistic significations structures any kinship system. Lacan's notion of the paternal order of language is based upon Lévi-Strauss' understanding of the incest taboo. For Lévi-Strauss, exchange of women (as "gifts") through the heterosexual institution of exogamous marriage circulates the "name" and is an universal expedient for consolidating the homosocial bonds of men.[10]

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[9]Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 188.

[10]Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp.480, 496, and passim.

An infant enters the Symbolic and intersubjectivity, according to Lacan, when it recognizes itself as an entity separate from its mother's.[11] The infant recognizes itself as a "totality" rather than a body-in-pieces and "anticipates" the power of its maturity (Ibid., 4). With this "*Gestalt*," the infant acquires an *imago* with which to identify (Ibid., 2). Although in this moment the child achieves an identity, it experiences **loss**: loss of the original *jouissance*, of "being one with the mother."[12] The desire to retrieve the primordial *jouissance* propels the subject into language: "the subject speaks only to displace desire onto the metonymic substitutions for that irretrievable pleasure. Language is the residue and alternative accomplishment of dissatisfied desire, variegated cultural production of a sublimation that never really satisfies" (*GT*, 43).

The loss results in a "primary repression" (*Urverdrängung*).[13] The primary repression conceals the loss of the primordial union in the

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[11]Lacan refers to this as the "mirror stage". See Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," *Écrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), pp. 1-8. Further references to this essay parenthetically embedded as *MS*.

[12]Drucilla Cornell and Adam Thurschwell, "Feminism, Negativity, Intersubjectivity," in *Feminism as Critique*, Drucilla Cornell and Seyla Benhabib, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 146.

[13]Lacan, "The Meaning of the Phallus," in *Feminine Sexuality*, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., Jacqueline Rose, trans. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), p. 80. Further references to this essay parenthetically embedded as *MP*.

subject's unconscious. The frustrated desire to reunite with the Other is displaced onto language, but can never be satisfied: the discourse of the speaking "I" is always lacking. This "split at the core"[14] Lacan calls "castration". Distinct from Freud's notion of castration, for Lacan, 'castration' signifies the subject's relation to the "phallus," signifier of the order of language. For Lacan, unlike Freud, "castration" is indiscriminate: all infants are propelled into the Symbolic realm. By claiming that all subjects are castrated, Lacan, it seems, remedies the biologism of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. "Sexual difference" is a product of the Symbolic realm: "the Symbolic [is] a set of differentiating linguistic rules that effectively create sexual difference" (*GT*, 27). The fundamental split of the subject establishes sexual difference. For Lacan, "sex" signifies "phantasmatic" identification rather than anatomical distinction: the masculine subject signifies "having" the phallus while the feminine "signifies nothing," is "empty."[15] The feminine, for Lacan, is "the signifier of the **lack** of the signifier" (*JW*, 144; emphasis added). Lacan puts it this way: "when any speaking being whatever lines up under the banner of women it is by being constituted as *not all* that they are placed within the

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[14]Cornell and Thurschwell, p.146.

[15]Lacan, "God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman," in Mitchell and Rose, eds., Rose, trans., pp.144, 145. Further references to this essay parenthetically embedded as *JW*.

phallic function" (*JW*, 144; emphasis Lacan's). For Lacan, masculine subjects signify desire. By contrast, women signify the lack (*manque*) of desire, i.e., the lacking which (supposedly) constitutes the essence of desire. As for Freud, so again for Lacan, desire is appropriated for the male: "the term of reference" (*TLG*, 23), the signifier of desire (the phallus), is a "male" one. Women, Lacan claims, desire to signify **that** desire, to "be" what is lacking, what is desired. Women, in other words, signify both the **lack of**, and the **desire to signify masculine desire**. These, then, constitute the identifications in the Lacanian binary framework: on one hand, the identification of the masculine subject-position, the subject that signifies desire and attempts to conceal its "loss;" on the other, the feminine identification, which, signifying the "lack" of desire, desires to signify masculine desire.

The autonomy of the masculine subject who is described as "having" the phallus is relative to its ability to exclude the feminine "Other." Through "being" its Other, women signify the phallus (*MP*, 83). In a gesture of abnegation, women **appear** as the signifier (Ibid., 83-84). Excluded from subjectivity, women's relations to the signifier, the phallus, are relations of *non*-identity: women **reflect** masculine power by **being** its absence, its alterity, "the dialectical confirmation of **its** identity" (*GT*, 44; emphasis added). Like the unwitting dependence of the master on the slave

in the Hegelian dialectic, the masculine subject who has the signifier is dependent on the recognition of the excluded Other for **its** power; but the Lacanian subject's dependence on women as Other is yet more self-serving. Butler writes that, for Lacan,

> the woman as reassuring sign *is* the displaced maternal body, the vain but persistent promise of the recovery of pre-individuated *jouissance*. The conflict of masculinity appears, then, to be precisely the demand for a full recognition of autonomy that will also and nevertheless promise a return to those full pleasures prior to repression and individuation (Ibid., 45; emphasis Butler's).

Constitution of sexual identification, according to Lacan, is a function of the Symbolic. Masculine identification requires repression of the desired feminine. These repressed desires, Lacan claims, pose a threat to the coherence of the subject's gender. In other words, the excluded feminine is site of potential ungrounding of the (masculine) subject. "The excluded term is an excluded sexuality that contests the self-grounding pretensions of the subject as well as its claims to know the source and object of its desire" (Ibid., 66). Coherence of the subject's identity "is called into question by [that which it excludes] in the process of identity formation" (Ibid., 44-45). Lacan emphasizes the difficulty, indeed virtual impossibility, of restricted sexual identification.[16] Rose explains that Lacan's account of tenuous

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[16]Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction-II" to Mitchell and Rose, eds., Rose trans., p.29. Further references to this essay parenthetically embedded as *RI*.

sexual identification rests upon what he considered Freud's "most fundamental discovery," namely, that "the unconscious never ceases to challenge our apparent identity as subjects" (Ibid., 30). For Lacan, "the unconscious undermines the subject from any position of certainty, from any relation of knowledge to his or her psychic powers and history, and *simultaneously* reveals the fictional nature of the sexual category to which every human subject is none the less assigned" (Ibid., 29). Lacan argues that sexual identification, confined as it is within the compulsory binary matrix of "having" or "lacking" the phallus, operates as a cultural sanction on subjects. "Sexual difference" for Lacan, Rose writes, "[is] assigned according to whether individual subjects do or do not possess the phallus, which means not that anatomical difference *is* sexual difference ... but that anatomical difference comes to *figure* sexual difference" (Ibid., 42). Rose explains that, for Lacan, something is seen (or, as it were, **not** seen) within an already-constituted value-system: "having" or "lacking" the phallus is ascribed value in an already-instituted "phallocentric" signifying order. Signification, i.e., relation to the phallus, is logically and temporally prior to "being" masculine or "being" feminine.

Wilfried Ver Eecke locates a fascination with the visual in Lacan's thought as early as the latter's doctoral thesis. Lacan, according to Ver Eecke, was attempting to establish "seeing [as] the faculty which bridges

the psychological and the physiological."[17] To support his thesis, Lacan cited examples from zoological studies. In one such example, Lacan referred to the instinctual visual and tactile "recognition" which transforms desert locusts from "solitary to gregarious".[18] Later Lacan implemented this notion of biological causation in his theory of the mirror-stage. Maturation of the female pigeon's gonads, Lacan reports, require visual contact with another of its species (*MS*, 3). The human infant's *Gestalt*, he claims, is likewise "capable of formative effects" in the organism. "Psychological concepts," asserts Lacan, "hardly seem less appropriate for shedding light on these matters than ridiculous attempts to reduce them to the supposedly supreme law of adaptation." Lacan further argues that,

> [one sees in the] social dialectic ... why human knowledge has greater autonomy than animal knowledge in relation to the field of force of desire, but also why human knowledge is determined in that 'little reality' ... I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality (Ibid., 3-4).

For Lacan, "the function of the mirror-stage [is] a particular function of the *imago*." The "recognition" (the *Gestalt*) which is a condition

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[17]Wilfried Ver Eecke, "Hegel as Lacan's Source for Necessity in Psychoanalytic Theory," in *Interpreting Lacan*, J.H. Smith and W. Kerrigan, eds. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 116.

[18]Ibid, p.116.

of acquiring of an *imago* establishes the human's relation with its reality. The "little reality" of the *Gestalt* determines human knowledge. Hegelian ontological/epistemological concepts, presupposed in the notion of the subject's dependence on the Other's recognition, are also implicit in the Lacanian notion of the infant's *Gestalt*: the infant's self-recognition (*Gestalt*) in the Lacanian mirror-stage, like the recognition in the Hegelian dialectic, is required for "self-consciousness." Hegel writes: "A self-consciousness has before it a self-consciousness. Only so and only then *is* it self-consciousness in actual fact; for here first of all it comes to have the unity of itself in its otherness."[19] Self-consciousness, in the Hegelian dialectic of lordship and bondage **achieves** self-consciousness. Hegel's self-consciousness (which seems to anticipate Lacan's infant in the mirror-stage) sublates its otherness in attempts to become a coherent self. In Hegel, self-recognition is self-consciousness's projection of itself into the external world. Rose explains Lacan's similar notion of self-recognition in this way: "For Lacan the subject is constituted through language - the mirror image represents the moment when the subject is located in an order outside itself to which it will henceforth refer" (*RI*, p.31).

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[19]Friedrich Hegel, Hegel: *The Essential Writings*, Frederick G. Weiss, ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974), p.70.

The subject's perception and cognition are structured by its *Gestalt*. This fundamental split of the subject establishes the contrasting thinking necessary for intersubjectivity. Lacan's privileging of conceptual binary contrasts is characteristic of "structuralist" thinking. "Structuralists," Carole MacCormack writes, "proceed upon the basis of belief that there is a single basic structure of binary thinking underlying all human mental functioning and behaviour".[20] For Lacan, the *Gestalt* is **structurally necessary** for the human organism. And note: the infant's *Gestalt* requires the primary repression of the maternal Other. Recall that in the moment of the *Gestalt* the infant acquires an identity but experiences loss of the primordial *jouissance*. Further, bear in mind that it is attempts to retrieve the lost *jouissance* that propel the infant into the necessary realm of intersubjectivity. So, for Lacan, then, the primary repression or exclusion of the (m)Other is a structurally necessary moment in the maturation of the human organism. The repression of the (m)Other, of the "feminine," castrates the subject. Castration throws the subject into language and intersubjectivity. Castration of the subject, the subject's repression or exclusion of the "feminine," when generalized, results in exclusion of women

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[20]Carol P. MacCormack, "Nature, culture and gender: a critique," in *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.2.

in patriarchal cultures. In effect, culture overcomes nature; objectivity and intersubjectivity surpass subjectivity; and "masculine" represses "feminine".

According to Lacan, the primordial (m)Other of the mirror-stage, "the structural base of the ego," must be excluded. Women's exclusion in patriarchal societies, one "Lacanian feminist" remarks, results from confusing the structural base of the ego, with "woman".[21] "The mother in both sexes therefore implies an unseen dominance." As a consequence of this confusion, "women," writes Ragland-Sullivan, are "seen as secretly powerful." Displacement of the primordial (m)Other onto "woman," Ragland-Sullivan explains, makes woman "someone to be feared, denied, ignored, denigrated, fought, and conquered - or conversely worshipped and enshrined." Whether "feared or extolled," the subject's "attitude toward women implies a position toward its own unconscious."[22]

Limitations of Lacanian "Feminine-ism"

Sexual identification, for Lacan, is a phantasmatic position in language. As with every dimension of the subject's identity, "sexual identification," Lacan claims, is endangered by the disruptive character of

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[21]Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p.297.

[22]Ibid., p.297.

the unconscious. The unconscious is a phantasmagoria, in part, of sexual desires, yearnings, and fantasies which have been suppressed, excluded, and denied. For Lacan, sexual identity (indeed all identity) is fragile. Neither conscious identity nor unconscious otherness are static entities: the subject's unconscious perpetually threatens to disrupt conscious control. Because he asserts that sexual identity is a phantastic linguistic construct, some claim that Lacan's discourse would be considerably useful for feminist subversion of patriarchal power structures and gender oppression. This observation, however, is far from uncontested. Butler, for example, is skeptical: "By instituting the Symbolic as invariably phantasmatic, the 'invariably' wanders into an 'inevitably,' generating a description of sexuality in terms that promote cultural stasis as its result" (*GT*, 55). And further, "why this exclusive focus on the fall into twoness?" Why just one Other rather than two or several? The answer is not difficult to discern. Lacan claims that "sexual difference" is constituted by the linguistic associations of the Symbolic; in fact though, in Lacanian discourse, the recognition of a postulated binary "sex" is **prior** to, indeed structures, **any** signification. Binary sexual difference is presupposed in Lacan's theory of the Symbolic.

Lacan distinguishes the "phallus" of the Symbolic realm from the "penis" of the material realm; but, that "distinction" suggests Gallop, "seems

to resist clarification."[23] Lacanians agree with feminists that our culture is phallocentric. For Lacanians though, the phallus is not a penis; thus, for Lacanians, phallocentrism is not androcentrism. Lacanians "consider this a structural fact of language that need have no relation to oppression of women by men."[24] "Lacanians," Gallop states, "would simply separate the symbolic phallus from the penis." "But," Gallop rhetorically asks, "is this separation possible?"[25] Elsewhere, responding to that question, Gallop argues:

> The question of whether one can separate 'phallus' from 'penis' rejoins the question of whether one can separate psychoanalysis from politics. The penis is what men have and women do not; the phallus is the attribute of power which neither men nor women have. But as long as the attribute of power is a phallus which refers to and can be confused (in the imaginary register?) with a penis, this confusion will support a structure in which it seems reasonable that men have power and women do not. And as long as psychoanalysts maintain the [ideal] separability of 'phallus' from 'penis', they can hold on to their 'phallus' in the belief that their [phallocentric] discourse [need have] no relation to sexual inequality, no relation to politics.[26]

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[23]Gallop, p.125.

[24]Ibid., p.126.

[25]Ibid., p.126.

[26]Gallop, "Writing Erratic Desire," in *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) pp.92-112, p.97

De Lauretis agrees with Gallop and others that Lacan's penis/phallus distinction is a contrivance. "Castration," Lacan claims, is the fragmentation of the subject instituted by the paternal order of language; but, de Lauretis observes, the signifier of "castration" -the phallus- "can only be conceived as an extrapolation from the real body."[27] de Lauretis further argues that "when Lacan writes ... 'the interdiction against autoeroticism, bearing on a *particular organ,* which for that reason *acquires the value of an ultimate (or first) symbol of lack (manque)* ... '[28] there is no doubt as to which particular organ is meant: the penis/phallus, symbol of lack and signifier of desire."[29] If the signifier of desire is a male one, then "desire and signification are defined ultimately as a process inscribed in the male body"; "dependent on the initial -and *pivotal*- experiencing of one's penis, on having a penis."[30] Indeed, the male's penis, asserts Stephen Heath, "is the

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[27]Teresa de Lauretis, "Through the Looking-Glass," in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.23.

[28]Jacques Lacan, "Pour une logique du fantasme," *Scilicet*, no.2/3 (1970), p.259; in de Lauretis, p.23; emphasis de Lauretis's.

[29]De Lauretis, p.23.

[30]Ibid., p.23; emphasis de Lauretis's.

condition of the [symbolic phallus]."[31] "Lacan," argues Heath, "is often no further than the limits of pure analogical rationalisation in this respect."[32]

Rose disputes these readings of Lacan. "Lacan," she argues, "constantly refused any crude identification of the phallus with the order of the visible or real ... and he referred it instead to that function of 'veiling' in which he locates the fundamental duplicity of the linguistic sign" (*RI*, 42). Rose is adamant that the "phallus" is ascribed value in an already-instituted signifying order, yet she apparently overlooks the fact that the phallocentric signifying order itself presupposes a prior recognition of a postulated sexual binarism. As Butler explains, Lacan claims that "[t]he ontological specification of being, negation, and their relations is understood to be determined by a language structured by the paternal law and its mechanisms of differentiation" (*GT*, 43). In fact, though, the binary positions of "being" or "having" the phallus in the Lacanian account of signification require prior recognition of "sexual difference." Lacan describes the "phallus" in this way: "**something the symbolic use of which is possible because it can be seen**, because it is erect, of what **cannot be seen**, of what is hidden, there is **no possible symbolic use.**"[33] Freudian,

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[31]Stephen Heath, "Difference," in *Screen*, 19:3, (Autumn 1978), pp. 53-54.

[32]Ibid, p.54.

[33]Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre* ll (Paris 1978), p.315, in Heath, p.54; emphasis added.

Lacanian, feminist, or other, theoretical discourses which assume that the binary opposition male/female is the "truth of sex" are precluded from identifying that binarism as a historically contingent disciplinary mechanism which is reinforced by other dichotomies that structure western modes of thought. Western metaphysical/epistemological dualisms, such as, nature as opposed to culture, masculine opposite feminine, self versus other, subject/object, and knower/known, have been integral to projects of gender oppression, racist domination, and cultural colonialization.[34]

Rose's defense of Lacan, however, accords with others. These vindicators of Lacan dispute the claim that his discourse is implicitly androcentric. MacCannell and Ragland-Sullivan, for instance, insist that Lacan is not *pre*scribing phallocentrism; rather, he is *de*scribing the effects of phallocentrism.[35] Derrida, for one, scoffs at this kind of defense and

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[34]Feminist analyses of the various forms of "mastery over" that these oppositions are implicated in have been extensive; see, for instance, Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," pp.190-233, and, Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," pp.300-323; both in Nicholson, ed.

[35]Juliet Flower MacCannell, *Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), esp. chpt.1; Ragland-Sullivan, p.298, and passim.

'Phallocentrism' signifies an epistemic stance that some claim is characteristically "masculine". In a phallocentric epistemological economy the "visual" is valorized. Conceptions of knowledge-acquisition that privilege "seeing" (the gaze) are said to "[derive] from men's need to valorize their own visible genitals against the threat of castration posed by women's genitalia, which exist as 'nothing to be seen,'" (as Irigaray puts it). Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Gillian Gill, trans.

reminds us: "description is a 'participant' when it induces a practice, an ethics, and an institution, and therefore a politics that insure the truth of the tradition."[36] Truth-discourses that purport to "describe" "gender construction" contribute to that construction. In short, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory reproduces phallocentrism.

If, however, MacCannell and Ragland-Sullivan were correct in claiming that Lacan is merely describing phallocentrism, then asymmetrical gender power relations are not foundational to the Lacanian framework. If they are not integral to Lacanian discourse, then transformation of those power relations could be adequately incorporated into that discourse. Yet transforming asymmetrical gender relations would destroy the Lacanian framework. Understanding why this deconstruction would result requires exposing a conceptual flaw that these defenses presuppose. Conceiving of asymmetrical gender power relations as revisable within the frame of Lacan's theory blurs the distinction between the **content** of the Symbolic and the **process** of entering into that intersubjective realm. For Lacan, the content of the Symbolic may change: signification is contingent. The process

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(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.48; in Mary E. Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth," in *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1989, vol.14, no.3, p.540.

[36]Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, Alan Bass, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.481; in Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p.9.

of entering the Symbolic, including the requisite primary repression, however, is not likewise alterable. Lacan's decontextualized account of the subject's acquisition of an *imago* and "loss" displaced onto language precludes a structural modification of the Symbolic. The exclusion of Woman, of the Other, the "feminine," is **necessary** in Lacan's scheme regardless of social, historical, or cultural context. Lacanian theory reifies the present state of western sociocultural affairs in a manner that suggests a necessary connection between linguistic structures and patriarchal power relations. Put another way, Lacan's account of sexual identification rationalizes "existing systems of domination by making them appear as the natural and inevitable extensions of the constraints imposed by linguistic structures."[37]

Lacan (and Julia Kristeva) espouse conceptions of the "feminine" "as that which cannot be spoken in language."[38] Similarly, Hélène Cixous conceives of "writing said to be feminine" as a "textuality" associated with a "female libidinal economy". "Writing in the feminine," according to Cixous, "is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother,

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[37]Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 41.

[38]Ibid., p.35.

passing on what is most archaic."[39] Toril Moi explains that, for Cixous, "[t]he voice in each woman ... is not only her own ... [H]er own speech becomes the echo of the primeval *song* she once heard ... It is, in short, the Voice of the Mother, that omnipotent figure that dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal baby".[40] Ann Jones wryly remarks that, from behind Cixous' transhistorical maternal voice can be heard the "coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries."[41]

As pragmatist Richard Rorty writes, "there is nothing deep down inside us except what **we** have put there ourselves".[42] Constructions of the "feminine" as "hysterical" and "frenetic" reify patriarchal stereotypes of "Woman" while perpetuating normative definitions of "feminine women" as irrational and self-abnegating souls. Defining the feminine as "perpetual negativity" and "dissidence," Rita Felski argues, "simplifies the complex

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[39]Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" Annette Kuhn, trans., in *Signs*, vol.7, no.1 (1981), pp.53-54.

[40]Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), p.114; emphasis Moi's.

[41]Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine," *Feminist Studies*, vol.7, no.2, (1981); in Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.67.

[42]Richard Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p.xlii; emphasis added (I consider Rorty's "we" in the following chapter). Further references to this text parenthetically embedded as *CP*.

relationship between feminism and existing ideological and cultural traditions." To be sure, women's contributions to western cultural discourses have been trivialized and marginalized. Recognizing androcentric bias in systems of meaning, though, does not justify the assumption that "social and symbolic discourse is inherently phallocentric."[43] Dismissing all forms of discursive activity as **inherently** patriarchal, Felski asserts, amounts to a failure to acknowledge that "any form of critique ... depends upon intersubjective norms and values."[44] Indeed, Deborah Cameron writes that much of the project of "*écriture féminine*" is "completely utopian". Cameron observes that the projects of articulating the purportedly "excluded feminine" stir the imagination but "[have] little concrete pay off".[45] Hypothetical decontextualized gendered modes of discursive activity such as these "excluded feminines," rather, are a sure "route to political quietism - a sense that nothing can really be changed."[46] Unlike these utopian "feminine-isms," pragmatic feminism "acknowledge[s] that modes of

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[43]Felski, p.42.

[44]Ibid., p.46; emphasis Felski's.

[45]Ibid. p,11.

[46]Deborah Cameron, "Why is language a feminist issue?" Introduction to *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.1-28, p.11.

representation have been historically constructed".[47] For the pragmatic feminist, there is no "primordial desire" or "excluded feminine" that stands apart from culture and language.

Such monologous notions of the "Other," furthermore, do not acknowledge the heterogeneous forms and degrees of oppression to which women are subjected. For Lacan, the signification of "sex" is prior to other cultural significations, such as, race or class. In Lacanian discourse, the binary "sexual" identifications are conceived as isolatable from and lying "behind the structuration of the subject": "the symbol or signifier" of sexual difference is, according to Lacan, the "one structural universal."[48] When gender is conceptualized as prior to, and isolatable from, other categories of signification with which it circulates (e.g., sexuality, dis/ability, and ethnicity) it is decontextualized. Decontextual conceptions of gendered "women" do not account for the shifting terms of that discursive production. Recall Riley's assertion that the signification of gender must be analyzed in the discrete cultural contexts of relational meanings in which it is constructed. There is no gender-in-itself uncontaminated by race, ethnicity,

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[47]Ibid., p.19.

[48]Ragland-Sullivan, "Seeking the Third Term: Desire, the Phallus, and the Materiality of Language," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis,* Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof, eds. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.41.

historical contingency or sexuality. The constitution of gender informs, and is informed by, the constitution of other significations.

Failure to attend to the multiple significations in "women" results in theoretical distortions; specifically, the multiplicity of forms that women's subordination takes in concrete cultural contexts is obscured. Any theory like Lacanian psychoanalytic, which theorizes the discontinuities **within** gendered subjects at the expense of attending to the diversity of cultural and historical situations **among** gendered subjects is unsatisfactory. As Felski asserts, the notion of the "feminine" as synonymous with any marginality or negative stance blurs "crucial distinctions between different forms of oppression and exclusion within society, whether on grounds of gender, race, or class". Generalization of this kind, continues Felski, "collapses fundamental distinctions in the ideology, social position, and cultural politics of a range of oppressed groups through an appeal to an undifferentiated notion of negativity."[49] Feminists should endorse and produce theories which account for the ways that the constitution of race, sexuality, dis/ability, ethnicity, and other effects of power relations, intersect the production of gender. When the category of "women" is theorized as a seamless unity, and women's oppression represented homogeneously, the varying forms and degrees of women's subjection to

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[49]Felski, p.46.

power relations are papered over. Theoretical practices which obfuscate the multiplicity of women's subordination produce marginalizations within feminist movements; such exclusionary theoretical practices undercut feminist struggles of resistance.

Obfuscation of distinctions among modalities of subjection and subjugation is the result of a theoretical stance distanced from the concrete, everyday contexts in which power most effectively operates. Indeed, hooks draws attention to the privileged locations from which these **elisions** of "differences" are articulated: "what does it mean," asks hooks, "when primarily white men and women are producing the discourse around Otherness?"[50] Elsewhere, hooks remarks, "let's acknowledge that few nonwhite scholars are being awarded grants to investigate and study all aspects of white culture from a standpoint of 'difference'; doesn't this indicate just how tightly the colonizer/colonized paradigm continues to frame the discourse on race and the 'Other'?"[51] For hooks, these "discourses of the Other" "are often exclusionary even as they call attention

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[50]Bell hooks, "Critical Interrogation," in *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), p.53.

[51]Ibid., p. 55.

to, appropriate even, the experience of 'difference' and 'Otherness' to provide oppositional political meaning".[52]

To reiterate, in this thesis, I am advocating that feminists take a pragmatic approach to the production and appropriation of theories. Theoretical discourses are "instrumental to an active [sociocultural] reorganization, [the] removal of some specific problem and perplexity; the test of their validity and value lies in accomplishing this work."[53] Theoretical discourses, John Dewey argues, "are tools. As in the case of all tools, their value resides not in themselves but in their capacity to work shown in the consequences of their use."[54] The validity or invalidity of a theory, for pragmatists, is determined by the degree to which it is able to organize practices.[55] For pragmatic feminists, then, a theory is verified precisely to the extent that it works to reorganize practices, that it contributes to the practices that feminisms are. Consider, then, the usefulness to feminist practices of Lacanian discourse: What beneficial consequences will result if Lacanian discourse were taken up as "true"?

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[52]Hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning*, p.23.

[53]John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1920;1948), p.156.

[54]Ibid., p.145.

[55]James,p.142.

Would Lacan's discourse provide feminists with methods to, say, mobilize for access to abortion on demand; or, is it suggestive of strategies for combatting homophobia; would it be useful in developing strategies for resisting police harassment of prostitutes? Suppose a student were being sexually harassed by one of her professors. Would the notion of the "excluded feminine" provide a feminist analysis of the harassment that locates it on the continuum of sociocultural violence against women? I think that it is obvious that Lacanian psychoanalytic theory would make no practical difference **here or anywhere else**.

Lacanian "feminists" maintain that Lacan's discourse locates sexual difference and women's subordination in language and culture. For this reason, they argue, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is intrinsically political. Lacan's followers further claim that his notion of the excluded "Other" is potentially subversive: the self-identical posturing of the subject is always tenuous. Yet, monologically produced as structurally necessary for the subject, that construct is devoid of subversive possibilities: the relation between the masculine subject of identity and the exclusion of the feminine Other simply reproduces already-extant asymmetrical gender power relations anew. Lacan's notion of subversion is a **chimerical abstraction**. Rather than conceptualizing asymmetrical gender power relations as

contingent and mutable, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory represents them as inevitable.

My argument in this thesis is that feminists should only endorse theories that are concretely useful for feminist practices. A condition on this kind of usefulness is that the theory take into consideration the plurality of sociocultural significations in the category of "women" and the ways in which the axes of power relations that constitute these intersect with the axis of gender. In this chapter, I have exemplified the negative, critical potential of this pragmatic methodology by criticizing the psychoanalytic discourse of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's theoretical discourse fulfills none of the above criteria: Lacanian psychoanalytic theory both requires and reinforces the asymmetrical gender relations of the status quo.

Chapter 3

TOWARD PRAGMATIC FEMINIST THEORIES

Introduction

In my introductory chapter I refer to poststructuralist accounts of the materiality of language which claim that assignment to the category of "women," i.e., gender assignment, is a linguistic construction. As an example of such a theory, Butler argues that "sex," the purportedly prediscursive foundation of culturally-encoded gender, is a culturally-enforced signification of bodies. Corporeal significations such as sex, dis/ability, and race are produced by power. Myriad axes of subjection, therefore, make subjects gendered women variously oppressed by power. Feminist theories should acknowledge these varying modalities of subjection. In order to account for the disparate modes of women's oppression, feminist theories must be historically-sensitive, contextual, and fallibilistic.

In the preceding chapter I elucidate these claims through a critique of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Lacan's discourse, I argue, represents women's oppression as monolithic. As one critic puts it, the "Lacanian subject is a sexed subject first and last". In Lacan's ahistorical,

idealist account of identity formation "few allowances are made" for the ways that other axes of signification overlap and interlock with the axis of "sex."[1] Lacanian discourse, therefore, cannot address the differing forms and degrees of women's concrete subjection to power. As well, Lacan's theory is grounded in a postulated binary sex. Because Lacanian discourse presupposes binary sex, advocates of that theory are precluded from regarding sexual difference as an effect of power. In my second chapter, then, I illustrate a critical use to which feminist theorists can put philosophical pragmatism. In this chapter I suggest constructive feminist use of pragmatism by providing a blue-print for a "pragmatic feminism." Appropriating pragmatism, I argue, would enable feminists to retain the antiessentialism and antifoundationalism of poststructuralism while eschewing the obscurantism and anti-democratic exclusivity of that discourse.

Feminism and Pragmatism

Feminists, I maintain, should assess theoretical discourses on the basis of their usefulness to feminist practices. Such an assertion presupposes a pragmatic view of truth. For pragmatists, the test of a claim's validity lies in its consequences in concrete situations. Pragmatic feminists,

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[1]Fuss, p.10.

then, would argue that what has beneficial practical consequences for feminist practices has a better claim to truth than any alternative. Constructing and endorsing theoretical discourses that "work" in the service of feminist practices, i.e., theories that contribute usefully to feminist struggles in concrete contexts, is the strategy of a pragmatic feminism.

To many feminists the term "pragmatic feminism" will be an oxymoron. To many feminists, pragmatism seems antithetical to radical social movement: the pragmatic view of truth seems to entail acquiescence in the status quo. For instance, James writes: "Truth grafts itself on previous truth, modifying it in the process, just as idiom grafts itself on previous idiom, and law on previous law."[2] To be sure, epistemological conservatism like that cannot be assumed by feminist movements striving for thoroughgoing sociopolitical changes. In my first chapter, though, I indicate the ways in which feminists borrow, reinterpret, and utilize claims, categories, and methods of mainstream, or rather, *male*stream, discourses. These discourses, feminists believe, are expedient to theorizing our hitherto obscured and excluded subject matter. Feminists should similarly reconstruct and implement those aspects of philosophical pragmatism that are useful in feminist struggles. This, after all, is the lesson of the "pragmatic view of truth." Theories, discourses, and methods have utility for

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[2]William James, p.158.

feminists if they are applicable to and capable of radically transforming oppressions. Pragmatic feminists would interpret James' claim as: whatever method, technique, or theory looks as if it might be of use should be tried. What has worked in past feminist struggles may, of course, need to be revised later. Indeed, Dewey clears a theoretical space for radical revision of discourses. Discourses, Dewey argues, are "hypotheses" contingent upon their effectiveness when put into action. Theories and systems, he states, "are always open to development through use. It is to enforce the lesson that we must be on the lookout quite as much for indications to alter them as for opportunities to assert them. They are tools."[3] Particular discourses and theoretical practices are useful for some tasks, not all. Like other devices, theoretical practices and discourses are often in need of upgrading or replacement: theories and discourses too are practicable, mutable, fallibilistic, and prone to obsolescence.

James writes that one who "follow[s] the pragmatic method asks: 'What is truth *known-as*?'"[4] For pragmatic feminists, analyzing what truth is "known-as" would mean clarifying what counts as truth and who produces that truth. These would be feminist analyses of the present patriarchal "regime of truth" and also analyses of various feminist "regimes of truth"

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[3]John Dewey, p.145.

[4]James, p.242.

(since there is no such single entity as an unitary, unified, or single feminism). Every society, according to Foucault, has a regime of truth: "the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true," mechanisms of verification, procedures valued in acquiring truth, and authoritative status ascribed to those who pronounce what qualifies as true.[5] Critically assessing what passes as truth -how it is **made** to pass, and to what effect- would assist feminists in analyzing how normative definitions of truth (about, e.g., the body or family relations) marginalize and subjugate some knowledges as "falling below" prevailing scientific standards, as "unscientific," or as "folklore." With Foucault, pragmatic feminism views truth as "a thing of this world" that is "produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint."[6] Presupposing the pragmatic definition of truth as that which works, feminists would analyze how what passes, here and there, for the truth **works** to sustain hegemonic patriarchal power structures.

Pragmatic feminism, then, would combine the Foucauldian stance on truth with that of pragmatism. Both stances are necessary. Pragmatic feminists would recognize as true that which is useful for feminist

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[5]Foucault, "Truth and Power," in Gordon, ed., Gordon, Marshall, Mepham, and Soper, trans., p.131.

[6]Ibid., p. 131.

movements, but, also would take a critical look at how what passes for the "truth" subjects, normalizes, and "polices". Feminists must indeed resist the power relations that constitute the 'general politics' of truth in patriarchal societies. Yet there is no remote site outside of these power relations from which to survey and subvert them. Strategies of resistance are always already embedded in the power relations that they are constructed to subvert. Power relations that subjugate, and the "regime of truth" that they produce, can only be resisted from within that matrix of power, that is, from a site of "internal exclusion."[7] Producing discourses that work to undermine the truth that reproduces patriarchal power relations is one strategy of resisting that power. By producing, searching for, documenting, and articulating subjugated knowledges, "criticism performs its work." For Foucault, subjugated knowledges are "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (*TL*, 82). Working to restore these subjugated knowledges to circulation challenges and resists the authoritative status conferred upon what passes for the truth. Women's self-help health clinics, lesbian networks, midwifery-training centres, and

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[7]Biddy Martin, "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault," in Diamond and Quinby, eds., p.10.

feminist studies in the academy, for example, produce knowledges that struggle against and resist hegemonic meanings.

Against "Feminist Standpoint" Theories

Pragmatic feminism does not rely on the idea of a "feminist standpoint." Feminist standpoint theories borrow arguments from historical materialism to assert that "women" (viz. as homogeneous subject) have privileged access to knowledge. On Hegel's account, the slave gains an understanding of the workings of the universe through labouring for its master. Similarly, through class struggle, the Marxian proletariat become ideal knowers (*IAC*, 24). "The argument here," writes Harding, "is that human activity, or 'material life,' not only structures but also sets limits on human understanding: what we do shapes and constrains what we know."[8] By virtue of activity relegated to certain social locations, it is argued, subjects in those situations (e.g., the proletariat) obtain fuller, less distorted, knowledge than that of other groups (e.g., the bourgeoisie).

Feminist standpoint epistemologies substitute "women" for Marx's workers or Hegel's slave. Men are substituted for the bourgeoisie/master. For standpoint theorists, women as a class (like the Marxist proletariat) are

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[8]Harding, "Epistemological Questions," in Sandra Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.185.

subjected to "false consciousnesses" (which here signifies acceptance of male dominance as natural). Subjected to false consciousnesses, women are nevertheless the potentially ideal agents of knowledge for feminist standpoint epistemologies. Such theories must, however, posit a homogeneous group of "women" and a common "women's standpoint," analogous to that of the proletariat in Marxism.[9] Various accounts of women's common experiences have been advanced in efforts to ground a women's privileged standpoint; for instance: "the [unity] of manual, mental, and emotional capacities in women's traditional activities;" the "relational character of women's labor in the production of use-values and in reproduction;" and "the multiple oppressions experienced by women that generate collective struggles against the prevailing social order".[10] Feminist standpoint epistemologies claim that "[m]en's (sexists') perceptions of themselves, others, nature, and the relations between all three are

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[9]Mary E. Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth," in *Signs* vol.14, no.3, (Spring 1989), p.544.

[10]Ibid., p.544. On the unity of women's capacities, see Hilary Rose, "Hand, Brain and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences," in *Signs*, vol.9, no.1 (Autumn 1983), pp.73-90; on the character of women's labour, see Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing a Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in Sandra Harding and Merrill J. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Co., 1983), pp.283-310; on the multiple oppressions of women, see Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983).

characteristically [partial]." For standpoint epistemologists, Harding writes, "men's characteristic social experience, like that of the bourgeoisie, hides from them the politically imposed nature of the social relations they see as natural" (*IAC*, 25). Through feminist political struggle and analysis, these feminists argue, women can achieve a more complete, less distorted, understanding of human social relations and interactions with nature.

Feminist standpoint theories claim to articulate a transcultural, transhistorical "reality." Certainly these theories draw new attention to, and dignify, heretofore denigrated activities, such as caring for the young, sick, and old, preparing food, and other domestic tasks that traditionally have been "women's work." These epistemologies, moreover, articulate the emotional and contextual relations between subjects that, with few exceptions, have been obfuscated in modernist philosophies of "Man." Self-made, self-seeking, and devoid of emotional and familial ties, that androcentric rational animal emerges from the "state of nature" to enter social existence. Meanwhile, the social interactions on such modernist accounts are reduced to an assortment of duties, contracts, and rights.[11]

In ways not unlike the "excluded feminine" that Lacan and others imagine, however, feminist standpoint epistemologies "serve culturally

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[11]Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other," in Benhabib and Cornell, eds., p. 85, and passim.

conservative aims" (*GT*, 36). Standpoint theories reproduce stereotypes of women as, for instance, intuitive, emotional, and closer to "nature." Moreover, like belief in "feminine libidinal economies," belief in a unique feminist standpoint constitutes an exclusionary practice within feminism. By grounding claims in purportedly foundational commonalities or activities, feminist standpoint theories unwittingly replicate the universalizing presumptions of modernism. Presupposing "a 'natural' subject/self capable of grasping intuitively the totality of being, and a homogeneous women's experience, that generates a privileged view of morality, fail[s] to do justice ... to the multiplicity and diversity of women's experiences."[12]

Feminists have become aware of the ways in which racism, ageism, and other "isms" interlock with sexism. Often painfully realized when, say, racism, splits a feminist collective, this awareness has made feminists sensitive to the arrogance of presupposing **the** true feminist story or standpoint. Discourses that presuppose some residing commonality, disposition, or capacity of the feminist subject invariably marginalize or entirely exclude whole groups of women. This marginalizing, in fact, produces the sort of fragmentation that purported commonalities are meant to overcome. If the feminist subject is no longer posited as a ground for feminist claims, feminist theories would not perpetrate this sort of

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[12]Hawkesworth, p.546

feminist claims, feminist theories would not perpetrate this sort of marginalizing; thus, if the feminist subject is relinquished as the point of departure for feminist activity, then feminist theories would become more inclusive. "Antifoundationalist" feminism would enlarge the numbers of women included in feminist struggles.

Not all feminists express the standpoint theorists' confidence in "the power of 'the' human mind to reflect perfectly a readymade world that is out there for the reflecting" (*IAC*, 25). Many feminists reject the possibility of the unmediated objectivity that was to be the legacy of the Enlightenment. Feminists critiques of the modernist pursuit of "the" true story have affinities with, and may draw upon, the arguments of other critics of modernism such as, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Rorty. Antifoundational **feminist** critiques of modernism, unlike the others, are explicitly political. These feminist critiques argue that **the** "reality" mirrored in that ostensibly objective stance is in fact a situated one: that so-called objectivity articulates the interests and experiences of white, western, propertied men.

Postmodern Feminisms, Relativism, and the Complacent Pragmatism of Rorty

Cognizant that the universalizing gestures of foundationalist feminist theories should be eschewed, some feminists are nevertheless

critical of antifoundational feminisms. "Postmodern" feminisms, they argue, are politically counterproductive. Adopting antifoundationalism, these feminists maintain, entails relativism. Harding, for instance, asserts that the "feminist postmodernist tendency appears to support an inappropriate relativist stance." A relativist stance, Harding argues, "conflicts with feminism's perception that the realities of sexual politics in our world demand engaged political struggle." A relativist stance for subjugated groups "expresses a false consciousness." For subjugated groups, Harding asserts, such a stance amounts to "[accepting] the dominant group's insistence that their right to hold distorted views ... is intellectually legitimate" (Ibid., 27).

But pragmatism should not be mistaken for relativism. As Richard Rorty states, pragmatism is "simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like 'truth,' 'knowledge,' 'language,' 'morality,' and similar objects of philosophical theorizing."[13] Directing the charge of "relativism" at pragmatism "depends on a misrepresentation of the pragmatist's stand on truth." Relativism presupposes the very conception of truth that pragmatism rejects. Relativists hold a **theory** about truth.[14] Pragmatists,

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[13]Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism," in *CP*, p.167.

[14]C.G. Prado, *The Limits of Pragmatism* (Atlanta Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1987), pp.19-20.

on the other hand, say that truth is not "the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about" (*CP*, xiv). Rorty explains that "the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. Not having any epistemology, *a fortiori* [the pragmatist] does not have a relativist one."[15]

Rorty remarks that associating pragmatism with relativism results from confusing "the pragmatist's attitude toward *philosophical* theories with his [*sic*] attitude toward *real* theories" (*CP*, 167). Rorty allows that both James and Dewey are "metaphilosophical relativists." But this merely means that they see no point in choosing between philosophical theories "of the typical Platonic or Kantian type." Such theories, states Rorty, attempt to ground practices in something external to those practices. For pragmatists, any philosophical grounding is only as good or as bad "as the practice it purports to ground." Relativism is a real problem "if it concerns *real* theories, not just philosophical theories." Real theories, for Rorty, are those whose alternative candidates for belief "we" care about: "alternative, concrete, detailed cosmologies, or alternative, concrete, detailed proposals for political change." When a new alternative is proposed, Rorty

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[15]Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson, eds., *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.170.

says, "**we** debate it ... in terms of the various concrete advantages and disadvantages it has." (Ibid., p.167; second emphasis added).

Rorty's relentless antifoundationalism, as well as his "insistence on the priority of practice [and] the contingent, historically conditioned character of subjectivities and rationalities,"[16] are well-suited for a feminism that is not grounded in a transhistorical woman's, or women's, identity. "Non-identitarian" (antifoundational) feminist theories would be sensitive to historical and contextual differences between the **seemingly** homogeneous category of "women." Giving primacy to the ways that contingent practices **constitute** identity and knowledge, then, would give feminist theories the flexibility they need if feminists are to address the "endless variety and monotonous similarity"[17] of women's oppression. However, like the texts of his predecessors in the western malestream philosophical tradition, the usefulness for feminists of Rorty's pragmatism is limited: it should not be appropriated uncritically. Consider, for example, Rorty's distinction of "real" theories from "philosophical" theories. Here, Rorty's historicist approach to philosophical discourses takes a remarkably ahistorical turn, ignoring the functions and roles that philosophical theories

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[16]Nancy Fraser, "Introduction: Apologia for Academic Radicals," in *Unruly Practices* (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), p.5.

[17]Rubin, p.160.

have in historical periods (*AEP*, 207). It is one thing to repudiate the search for **epistemological foundations**; it is quite another to neglect considering the **historical effects** of those that have been expounded. Rorty's uninterest in making this distinction can be inferred from his suggestion that "philosophical" theories are not ones that "we" care about. By neglecting to consider the embeddedness of philosophical discourses in more encompassing cultural formations, Rorty papers over the ways in which western philosophical theories have colluded with, and legitimated, sexism, racism, religious persecution, and technological domination of the environment. West puts it this way:

> To undermine the privileged philosophical notions of necessity, universality, rationality, objectivity, and transcendentality without acknowledging and accenting the oppressive deeds done under the ideological aegis of these notions is to write an intellectual and homogeneous history, a history which fervently attacks epistemological privilege but remains relatively silent about forms of political, economic, racial, and sexual privilege (AEP, 208).

The "debates" of which Rorty speaks occur within particular and quite often exclusionary contexts. Who has voices in these debates? Certainly not the marginalized, subordinated, and silenced. Relative to whose social location is any alternative for belief to be assessed as an "advantage" or "disadvantage"? Relative to which social station are these alternatives adjudicated? Further, whose criteria determine which theories

"we" care about? Feminist theorists should not pass over these questions in silence. Candidates for belief that are considered viable ("legitimate" or "reasonable") alternatives to be "debated" within these contexts are part of this culture's regime of truth. Candidates for belief that challenge this dominant regime of truth (such as those produced by feminists, herbalists, and environmentalists) are subjugated, disqualified, and marginalized.

Rorty's presumptuous "we" "homogenizes social space [and assumes] tendentiously that there are no deep social cleavages capable of generating conflicting solidarities".[18] Disagreement over what "we" find "good to believe," according to Rorty, is resolvable with intellectual dialogue. Contra Rorty, however, competing definitions of what is "good to believe" (i.e., "is true") are precisely what is at stake in cultural, political, and social struggles. These are struggles over "cultural meanings and social identities;" struggles "for the power to construct authoritative definitions of social situations".[19] Differing social locations have disparate histories, access to material resources, and perceptions of social relations. This cultural "polyglot" generates often conflicting interpretations of experiences, needs, social policies, and concrete alternatives. Concrete realities and perspectives

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[18]Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy," in Fraser, p.104.

[19]Fraser, "Apologia," p.6.

that diverge from that of the socially dominant group (white, western, propertied, heterosexual males) are, as a rule, not taken into account.[20] Rorty's assumption that there are no fundamental cultural rifts indicates this kind of failure to acknowledge the heterogeneity of western history and culture.

Rorty supposes that resistance to his antifoundational postmodern "bourgeois liberalism" derives solely from reluctance to give up "metaphysical comforts" like the idea of human nature or truth as correspondence. As Nancy Fraser comments, he seems to think that "we can ... go straight from objectivity to solidarity, from the metaphysical comfort of traditional philosophy to the communitarian comfort of a single 'we.'"[21] His assumption of the homogeneity of western, late-capitalist cultures seems to lead Rorty to conclude that "politics is a matter of everyone pulling together to solve a common set of problems."[22] Puzzled, Fraser wonders: "How can such critical metaphilosophical views sit so comfortably with such complacent political attitudes?" What exactly is the "deep connection

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[20]For recent feminist discussions of such cultural struggles, see Fraser, "Struggle over Needs," in Fraser, pp.161-187. Also see, Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public," pp.92-113, and, "Polity and Group Difference," pp.114-137; both in Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[21]Ibid., p.104.

[22]Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity?" p.104.

between pragmatism and 'bourgeois liberalism'"? Must political movements that resist or seek to subvert the hegemony of 'rich North Atlantic bourgeois democracies'[23] be under the sway of realist correspondence theories of truth? Does the liberal intellectual "community" hold the copyright on antifoundationalist discourses?

Feminisms and other progressive movements can accept Rorty's critical metaphilosophy but reject his liberalism.[24] Pragmatism is not wedded to bourgeois liberalism and, furthermore, neither must emancipatory and oppositional movements be committed to metaphysical realism. West's "neopragmatism" is a case in point. Noting the apolitical character of most traditional pragmatists (Dewey and C.W. Mills being outstanding exceptions), West remarks that the pragmatic tradition "is in need of an explicit political mode of cultural criticism" (*AEP*, 212). Neopragmatists, states West, have reached the limits of their historicist antirealism and antifoundationalism. The task now is to conjoin these insights "to the best of recent refinements in social theory, cultural criticism, and historiography *and* [root] them in possible social movements or social motion, those with efficacious strategies and tactics for fundamental social change" (Ibid., 210; emphasis West's). Neopragmatists,

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[23]Rorty, in Fraser, p.5.

[24]Fraser, p.5.

writes West, should evaluate, criticize, and think genealogically about concrete practices "in light of the best available social theories, cultural critiques, and historiographical insights and ... act politically" to achieve certain beneficial ends (Ibid., 209). West's pragmatism (and the pragmatic feminism that I envision) "gives prominence to the plight of those peoples who embody and enact the 'postmodern' themes of degraded otherness, subjected alienness, and subaltern marginality, that is, the wretched of the earth (poor peoples of colour, women, workers)" (Ibid., 237).

Radically Politicizing Pragmatism

In this last section of my discussion I shall look in more detail at the work of Judith Butler. I shall argue that although Butler's poststructuralist feminism is compatible with the antifoundationalism of pragmatism, to become useful for feminist practices it has to be revised in the direction of pragmatism.

For Butler, "gender identity" is not an essence or foundation: "gender" is a political signification. According to Butler, feminist efforts to articulate a "women's identity" hypostatize a discursively-constituted signification that subjects: subjects gendered women are produced in an asymmetrical, subjugated power relationship to men. Actions done in the name of "women," therefore, perpetuate these power relations. Feminist

theories that claim to articulate an account of the essential feminist subject obscure all other oppressions in order to claim that gender inequality is the most fundamental relation of power. Asymmetrical gender power relations, however, cannot be isolated from other relations of power. Thus, feminist theories should not preclude significant differences within the apparently homogeneous category of "women." Predictably, feminist theories that attempt to articulate the identity of the feminist subject by "[elaborating] predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and ablebodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc.' at the end of the list." The embarrassed 'etc.,' though, is instructive for feminist theoretical practices: "It is the *supplément*, the excess that necessarily accompanies any effort to posit identity once and for all" (*GT*, 143). The "exhausted etc.," Butler maintains, should be an impetus to a new feminist analytic. Feminists should "shift from an *epistemological* account of identity to one which locates the problematic within practices of *signification*" (Ibid., 144; emphasis Butler's). If the identity of the feminist subject were understood to be a discursive construction of signifying practices, Butler states, feminist movements would be more inclusive. Understanding the identity of the feminist subject as the product of multiple and interlocking axes of power would enable feminist theorists to take account of the increasing number of constituencies in "women" that call out for recognition. By maintaining that gender

identity is discursively-constituted, then, Butler seems to rectify the exclusionary dimensions of feminist discourses.

Butler's de-essentializes notions such as "sex," "women," and "women's identity" that have been central to feminist thought. These theoretical innovations pose exciting challenges to feminisms. When these contested concepts (these ostensible "foundations") are deconstructed, they are exposed as politically-motivated fictions. To be sure, Butler's account of gender identity well-suits the impulse of pragmatic feminism. Butler asserts that when an antifoundational, non-identitarian approach to feminist political actions is taken, "identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them. Certain political practices," she remarks, "institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view" (*GT*, 15-16). Butler's theoretical discourse is not, however, without shortcomings. In particular, her work exemplifies the exclusionary character of "avant-garde" poststructuralist feminist discourses.

On the point of exclusionary feminist theoretical discourses, bell hooks is especially vocal. Hooks denounces avant-garde feminisms. Avant-garde feminist theories, she asserts, engender "an academic elitism which

embraces traditional structures of domination."[25] Increasingly, what counts as "acceptable" theory in the academy are "Euro-centric [and] linguistically convoluted" discourses (*TRA*, 36). Many postmodern feminist theories produced in academia fit this description. Commenting on Butler's *Gender Trouble*, for instance, Hudson writes, "[it] is a book ... which makes the reader feel slow-witted".[26] Feminist theories that are arduous to comprehend (like Butler's) or which incorporate the jargon of "postmodernism" are implicitly viewed as superior, as more "intellectually sophisticated" than feminist writing that is not cast in this presently fashionable jargon. Hooks argues that, in this case, "the radical, subversive potential of feminist scholarship and feminist theory in particular is undermined" (*TRA*, 36). These postmodern feminisms direct their "critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a language rooted in the very master narratives [they claim] to challenge."[27] That audience is, for the most part, white, western, and professional. In effect, then, these feminist discourses reproduce many of the exclusionary discursive

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[25]Bell hooks, "feminist theory: toward a radical agenda," in *Talking Back* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p.36. Further references to this essay parenthetically embedded as *TRA*.

[26]Liam Hudson, "The Same but Different," Review in *Times Literary Supplement* (*TLS*), No. 4,548, June 1-7, 1990, p.588.

[27]Hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," p.25.

mechanisms, structures, and contexts of sexist, racist, and classist cultures that feminisms aim to transform.

For hooks, changing "the exclusionary practice of postmodern critical discourse is to enact a postmodernism of resistance."[28] Hooks argues that in order to resist exclusionary structures of the academy, (academic) feminists must produce theories that are inclusive. Inclusive feminist theories account for the variation in "women." One way that feminist theories can acknowledge the variety in "women" is by using accessible language. As hooks writes: "There is a place for theory that uses convoluted language, metalanguage, yet such theory cannot become the groundwork for feminist movement unless it is more accessible." Accessible language is not "less complex or rigourous" (*TRA*, 39). Language is accessible that is connected to concrete existence, not obscurantist, nor muddled with theoretical abstraction. "Cultural critics who are committed to a radical cultural politics must offer theoretical paradigms in a manner that connects them to contextualized political strategies."[29] Pragmatic feminist theories would be articulated in accessible language. The pragmatic feminism that I envision is inclusive and accessible; it is non-hierarchical, not elitist.

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[28]Ibid., p.30.

[29]Bell hooks, "Liberation Scenes," in *Yearning*, p.8.

Pragmatism offers feminisms a way to retain the useful insights of recent poststructuralist theories (antiessentialism and antifoundationalism) without succumbing to their exclusionary aspects. Feminists need antiessentialism and antifoundationalism in order to correct marginalizing already present within feminist discourses and to avoid perpetrating new exclusionary practices. Pragmatic feminism combines the antifoundationalism and antiessentialism of traditional pragmatism with contemporary (academic) feminist analyses. But it does not remain cloistered within the academy. With an ear to the street, pragmatic feminists aim for seamless continuity between theories and practices inside and beyond the university.

For pragmatic feminists, a theory is only as good as the practices to which it is tied. Pragmatic feminists acknowledge that diverse groups of women have differing access to resources, varying needs, and are variously oppressed; hence, pragmatic feminists aim to produce theories that are situation-specific, flexible, and fallibilistic. These practices are strategies for problems as varied as, say, forced sterilization of dis/abled women, custody battles of lesbian mothers, and sexual discrimination against women academics. In order to produce strategies for diverse circumstances, pragmatic feminists avoid searching for the single solution guaranteed to bring about a fine new day. Any prescription touted as the ultimate remedy

for the multiple wounds inflicted upon women subjects will be recognized, at the end of the day, as a simulacrum. Uniform solutions to the spectrum of women's subjection conceal, or disguise, the complexity of the cultural matrix of power relations. Further, pragmatic feminists establish various alliances and solidarities with other groups working to subvert oppressive hegemonies and radically transform white supremacist, homophobic, and militaristic cultures. By joining in solidarity with other groups, pragmatic feminists explicitly acknowledge that subjects in "women" have commonalities with those men who are similarly subjected along racist, heterosexist, and ableist lines.

Conclusion

Participation in the academic milieu need not replicate its exclusionary practices. The academy too can be a site for feminist struggles: feminist pedagogy has radical potential. But mandatory course-curricula, conservative disciplinary constraints, censorship of publishable subject matter, as well as pressures to achieve status, tenure, and notoriety, all threaten to undermine the radical possibilities of academic feminisms.

Philosophical pragmatism, I believe, offers feminists ways of safeguarding this radicalism. Feminists should evaluate theories and discourses on the basis of their usefulness for concrete feminist practices.

Pragmatic feminists recognize that what passes as "true" in the dominant culture commonly "works" to subjugate. At the same time, for pragmatic feminists, what is true, becomes true as it proves itself in feminist practices. In order to be useful for feminist practices, theories and discourses must account for the myriad differences of the subjects historically-situated as women. Theories grounded in an essential notion of the feminist subject's identity cover up the endless variety in "women." For this reason, I have suggested that Judith Butler's "non-identitarian" account of gender would be useful to feminists. Butler argues that, rather than a substrate on which to ground feminist claims, "being" a woman is in fact a political signification. When gender identity is conceived as a discursive construction, the radical contingency of women's oppression is thrown into relief. Thus Butler offers feminists hope for our (often wearisome) struggles. I have noted, however, that Butler's feminism is in need of democratization. Unless it is to remain confined to an elite of feminist intellectuals, Butler's work must be infused with clarity and elaborated in a forthright manner. Academic feminists must aim for inclusive, accessible, jargon-free, theoretical discourses. Here (academic) feminist theorists have something to learn from the exemplary work of feminist cultural critic bell hooks.

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