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# Intepreting Gender

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# Interpreting *Gender*

Linda Nicholson

**G**ENDER IS A strange word within feminism. While many of us assume it has a clear and commonly understood meaning, it is actually used in at least two very different and, indeed, somewhat contradictory ways. On the one hand, *gender* was developed and is still often used as a contrasting term to *sex*, to depict that which is socially constructed as opposed to that which is biologically given. On this usage, *gender* is typically thought to refer to personality traits and behavior in distinction from the body. Here, *gender* and *sex* are understood as distinct. On the other hand, *gender* has increasingly become used to refer to any social construction having to do with the male/female distinction, including those constructions that separate “female” bodies from “male” bodies. This latter usage emerged when many came to realize that society not only shapes personality and behavior, it also shapes the ways in which the body appears. But if the body is itself always seen through social interpretation, then sex is not something that is separate from gender but is, rather, that which is subsumable under it. Joan Scott provides an eloquent description of this second understanding of *gender* in which the subsumption of sex under gender is made clear: “It follows then that gender is the social organization of sexual difference. But this does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men; rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences. . . . We cannot see sexual differences except as a function of our knowledge about the body and that knowledge is not ‘pure,’ cannot be isolated from

This article is a summary statement of a book in progress titled “The Genealogy of Gender.” As the book has been in the making for several years, this particular article has its own long and complex genealogy. For this reason I cannot begin to thank all of the people who have read or heard some part of it and contributed to the birth of the present version. Many, many people will find much of this familiar. A few special thanks, however, are necessary. I would like to thank the Duke–University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Center for Research on Women for providing me with a Rockefeller Foundation Humanist in Residence Fellowship for 1991–92. That fellowship, combined with a University at Albany, State University of New York sabbatical gave me a year to think about many of the ideas in this article. I also want to thank Steve Seidman for reading every draft and for intervening in the development of this article at several crucial points.

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its implication in a broad range of discursive contexts" (1988, 2). I want to argue that while this second understanding of gender has become more dominant within feminist discourse, the legacy of the first survives, in certain subtle but important respects, even within the thinking of many of those who would endorse the second. This legacy not only casts the relation between these two senses of *gender* as more complex than the above either-or portrayal, but also generates obstacles in our abilities to theorize about differences among women.

The first of these two senses of gender has its roots in the coming together of two ideas important within modern Western thought: the material basis of self-identity and the social constitution of human character. By the time of the emergence of the "second wave" of feminism in the late 1960s, one legacy of the first idea was the notion, dominant in most industrialized societies, that the male/female distinction was caused by and expressed, in most essential respects, "the facts of biology." This conception was reflected in the fact that the word most commonly used to depict this distinction, *sex*, was a word with strong biological associations. Early second-wave feminists correctly saw this concept as conceptually underpinning sexism in general. Because of its implicit claim that differences between women and men are rooted in biology, the concept of sex suggested the immutability of such differences and the hopelessness of change. To undermine the power of this concept, feminists of the late 1960s drew on the idea of the social constitution of human character. Within English-speaking countries, this was done by extending the meaning of the term *gender*. Prior to the late 1960s, *gender* was a term that primarily had been used to refer to the difference between feminine and masculine forms within language. As such, it conveyed strong associations about the role of society in distinguishing that which is coded *male* from that which is coded *female*. Feminists extended the meaning of the term to refer also to differences between women and men in general.

But most interesting is that *gender* at that time was generally not seen as a replacement for *sex* but was viewed, rather, as a means to undermine the encompassing pretensions of *sex*. Most feminists during the late 1960s and early 1970s accepted the premise that there existed real biological phenomena differentiating women and men that are used in all societies in similar ways to generate a male/female distinction. What was new in the idea they advanced was only that many of the differences associated with women and men were neither of this type nor the direct effects of such. Thus *gender* was introduced as a concept to supplement *sex*, not to replace it. Moreover, not only was *gender* viewed as not replacing *sex* but *sex* seemed essential in elaborating the very meaning of *gender*. In her important article, "The Traffic in Women," for instance, Gayle Rubin introduced the phrase "the sex/gender system" and defined

it as "the set of arrangements upon which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (1975, 159). Here, the biological is being assumed as the basis upon which cultural meanings are constructed. Thus, at the very moment the influence of the biological is being undermined, it is also being invoked.

Rubin's position in this essay is not idiosyncratic. Rather, it reflects an important feature of much twentieth-century thinking about "socialization." Many of those who accept the idea that character is socially formed and thus reject the idea that it emanates from biology do not necessarily reject the idea that biology is the site of character formation. In other words, they still view the physiological self as the "given" upon which specific characteristics are "superimposed"; it provides the location for establishing where specific social influences are to go. The feminist acceptance of such views meant that sex still retained an important role: it provided the site upon which gender was thought to be constructed.

Such a conception of the relationship between biology and socialization makes possible what can be described as a "coatrack" view of self-identity. Here the body is viewed as a type of rack upon which differing cultural artifacts, specifically those of personality and behavior, are thrown or superimposed. One crucial advantage of such a position for feminists was that it enabled them to postulate both commonalities and differences among women. If one thought of the body as the common rack upon which different societies impose different norms of personality and behavior, then one could explain both how some of those norms might be the same in different societies and how some others might be different. The shape of the rack itself could make certain demands as to what got tossed upon it without being determinative, in a sense reminiscent of biological determinism. As such a position would construe cross-cultural commonalities in personality and behavior as the result of a social reaction to the givens of biology, biology here does not "determine" such commonalities in any strict sense of that term. One could still envision a future in which a particular society could react to such demands in very different ways than in the past. Thus, such a coatrack view of the relationship between biology and society enabled many feminists to maintain the claim often associated with biological determinism—that the constancies of nature are responsible for certain social constancies—without having to accept one of the crucial disadvantages of such a position from a feminist perspective—that such social constancies cannot be transformed. Moreover, such a view also enabled feminists to assert differences as well as similarities among women. The claim that some of what is thrown upon the rack is similar across cultures—as a response to certain features of the rack itself—is compatible with the claim that some other things thrown upon it are also different.

But what is interesting is that many who would endorse the understanding of sex identity as socially constructed still think of it as a cross-cultural phenomenon. They do so, I would claim, because they think of it as the cross-culturally similar social response to some "deeper" level of biological commonality, represented in the material givens of the body, that is, that women have vaginas and men have penises. Thus many feminists increasingly have thought of sex identity both as a social construction and as common across cultures. Linking this position and thinking of sex as independent of gender is the idea that distinctions of nature, at some basic level, ground or manifest themselves in human identity. I label this common idea *biological foundationalism*. In relation to the male/female distinction, it expresses itself in the claim that distinctions of nature, at some basic level, manifest themselves in or ground sex identity, a cross-culturally common set of criteria for distinguishing women and men.

Biological foundationalism and the coatrack view of identity in general stand in the way of our truly understanding differences among women, differences among men, and differences regarding who gets counted as either. Through the belief that sex identity represents that which is common across cultures, we frequently have falsely generalized matters specific to modern Western culture or to certain groups within it. It has been difficult to identify such faulty generalizations as such because of the alliance of biological foundationalism with some form or other of social constructionism. Feminists have long come to see how claims about the biological causes of personality and behavior falsely generalize socially specific features of human personality and behavior onto all human societies. But biological foundationalism is not equivalent to biological determinism; all of its forms, though some more extensively so than others, include some element of social constructionism. Thus, even the earliest feminist position that construes sex as independent of gender, in using the term *gender* at all, allows for some social input into the construction of character. Moreover, any position that recognizes at least some of what is associated with the male/female distinction as a social response tends to theorize some difference in how societies interpret this distinction. Such difference is sometimes allowed through the assumption of a past or future society that has responded or will respond to the givens of biology in different kinds of ways than has been true for most human societies. For example, sometimes the argument that the generalization being expressed is only true for "patriarchal societies" is given as a disclaimer against overgeneralization. But typically, no precise criteria are offered to let us know where the boundaries of "patriarchal" societies fall. Thus, what looks like a historical claim functions primarily to jettison the demand for historical reference. Moreover, even if one

accepts the reference to patriarchy as entailing reference to any society in which some form of sexism exists, such a disclaimer precludes investigation into the different ways the body might be interpreted differently even among such societies. Other problems attend the postulation of differences coexisting with similarities. Such theories are dualistic regarding differences, both allowing for differences and presuming commonalities. But the problem with such a dualistic type of approach is that it generates what Elizabeth Spelman describes as an additive type of analysis. "In sum," she elaborates, "according to an additive analysis of sexism and racism, all women are oppressed by sexism; some women are further oppressed by racism. Such an analysis distorts Black women's experiences of oppression by failing to note important differences between the contexts in which Black women and white women experience sexism. The additive analysis also suggests that a woman's racial identity can be 'subtracted' from her combined sexual and racial identity" (1988, 128). In other words, a dualistic approach obscures the possibility that what we are describing as commonalities may also be interlaced with differences.

In short, it is not enough to claim that the body always comes to us through social interpretation, that is, that sex is subsumable under gender. We must also come to explicitly accept one of the implications of this idea, that we cannot look to the body to ground cross-cultural claims about the male/female distinction. The human population differs within itself not only in social expectations regarding how we think, feel, and act but also in the ways in which the body is viewed and the relationship between such views and expectations concerning how we think, feel, and act. In short, we need to understand social variations in the male/female distinction as related to differences that go "all the way down," that is, as tied not just to the limited phenomena many of us associate with gender (i.e., to cultural stereotypes of personality and behavior) but also to culturally various understandings of the body and to what it means to be a woman or a man. In this alternative view the body does not disappear from feminist theory. Rather, it becomes a variable rather than a constant, no longer able to ground claims about the male/female distinction across large sweeps of human history, but still there as always a potentially important element in how the male/female distinction gets played out in any specific society.

### **Historical context**

The tendency to think of sex identity as given, as basic and common cross-culturally, is a very powerful one. If we can see it as historically rooted, as the product of a belief system specific to modern Western

societies, we can appreciate the deep diversity in the forms through which the male/female distinction has been and can come to be understood.

European-based societies from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries increasingly came to think about people as matter in motion, as physical beings ultimately distinguishable from others by reference to the spatial and temporal coordinates we occupy. This meant a tendency to think about human beings in increasingly "thing-like" terms, that is, as both similar to the objects around us—because composed of the same substance, "matter"—and as separate from such objects and from each other—because of the distinctive spatial and temporal coordinates that each self occupies.<sup>1</sup>

But it is not only that the language of space and time became increasingly central as a means for providing identity to the self. The growing dominance of a materialist metaphysics also meant an increasing tendency to understand the "nature" of things in terms of the specific configurations of matter they embodied. The import of this for emerging views of self-identity was a growing tendency to understand the nature of human selves in terms of the specific configurations of matter that they embodied. Thus the material or physical features of the body increasingly took on the role of providing testimony to the nature of the self it housed.

In the late twentieth century, we associate the body's increasing role in providing testimony to the nature of the self it houses with an increasing belief in biological determinism. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, a growing sense of the self as natural or material conjoined two emphases that only in later centuries will be viewed as antithetical: a heightened consciousness of the body as a source of knowledge about the self, and a sense of the self as shaped by the external world. A heightened consciousness of the self as bodily can be illustrated by the kinds of issues seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theorists increasingly thought relevant to attend to. Thus, for example, while an early seventeenth-century patriarchalist such as Sir Robert Filmer might use the Bible to justify women's subordination to men, the later natural law theorist John Locke would cite differences in male and female bodies to accomplish a related goal ([1690] 1965, 364). But *nature* for natural

<sup>1</sup> While the growth of a materialist metaphysics may have contributed to the growth of that strong sense of individualism that many writers have linked to modern Western conceptions of the self, it would be a mistake to see such individualism merely as a result of the growth of such a metaphysics. Some writers, such as Charles Taylor, have pointed to an emerging sense of "inwardness," one aspect of such an individualism, as early as in the writings of Augustine. See Taylor 1989, 127–42. And, according to Colin Morris, such a turn to a language of inwardness represents a widespread twelfth-century phenomenon followed by a decline of this tendency in the mid-twelfth century and a gradual resurfacing, culminating in the late fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance (Morris 1972). Moreover, even in the period after the emergence of a materialist metaphysics, other social transformations have contributed to the development of such a sense of individualism differently among different social groups.

law theorists such as Locke did not mean just the body in distinction from other kinds of phenomena. It could also refer to the external influences provided by vision or education. Thus, while Locke might point to differences in women's and men's bodies to make a point, he could also in his writings on education view the minds of girls and boys as malleable in relation to the specific external influences they were subject to. In short, *materialism* at this point in history combines the seeds of what were later to become two very different and opposing traditions. As Ludmilla Jordanova notes,

It had become clear by the end of the eighteenth century that living things and their environment were continually interacting and changing each other in the process. . . . The customs and habits of day-to-day life such as diet, exercise and occupation, as well as more general social forces such as mode of government, were taken to have profound effects on all aspects of people's lives. . . . The foundation to this was a naturalistic conceptual framework for understanding the physiological, mental and social aspects of human beings in a coordinated way. This framework underlay the relationship between nature, culture and gender in the period. [1989, 25–26]

As Jordanova points out, this tendency to view the bodily and the cultural as interrelated is expressed in the use of such eighteenth-century "bridging" concepts as temperament, habit, constitution, and sensibility (1989, 27).

Yet to say that a growing focus on the materiality of the self during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not translate simply into biological determinism does not negate the point that the body was increasingly emerging as a source of knowledge about the self in contrast to older theological views. And one way in which this focus on the body began to shift understandings of self-identity is that the body increasingly began to be employed as a resource for attesting to the differentiated nature of human beings, such as on the basis of race. As many commentators have pointed out, race was first employed as a means of categorizing human bodies in the late seventeenth century, and it was only in the eighteenth century, with such publications as the influential *Natural System* by Carolus Linnaeus (1735) and Friedrich Blumenbach's *Generis humani varietate nativa liber* (On the natural variety of mankind; 1776), that there began to be made what were taken to be authoritative racial divisions of human beings.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that physical differences

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of this point, see Jordan 1968; Banton and Harwood 1975; West 1988; and Outlaw 1990.

between, for example, Africans and Europeans were not noted by Europeans prior to the eighteenth century. They certainly were noted and used to justify slavery. But, as Winthrop Jordan points out, physical differences were only one of such differences; that Africans engaged in "strange" social practices and were "heathens" (i.e., not Christians) also provided justification in the European mind for the practice of taking Africans as slaves (1968, 3-98). Moreover, to note a physical difference, or even to attribute moral and political significance to it, is not the same as using it to "explain" basic divisions among the human population as the concept of race increasingly did from the late eighteenth century on.

### **The sexed body**

The above example of race illustrates how the growing dominance of a materialist metaphysics did not mean the construction of new social distinctions *ex nihilo* but rather the elaboration and "explanation" of previously existing ones. To be sure, such new explanations also entailed transformations in the very meaning of the distinctions themselves. Such is the case in the modern Western understanding of the male/female distinction. Although the growth of a materialist metaphysics obviously did not create this distinction, it did entail changes in the importance of physical characteristics and in their role: from signaling this distinction to explaining it. At the time such a metaphysics was increasingly taking hold, other social changes were also occurring, such as a growing separation of a domestic and public sphere, that increasingly gave support to the biological explanation of the male/female distinction as a binary one.

Thomas Laqueur, in his study of medical literature on the body from the Greeks through the eighteenth century, identifies a significant shift in the eighteenth century from a "one-sex" view of the body to a "two-sex" view. In the earlier view, the female body was seen as a lesser version of the male body "along a vertical axis of infinite gradations," whereas in the later view the female body becomes "an altogether different creature along a horizontal axis whose middle ground was largely empty" (Laqueur 1990, 148).

That in the earlier view physical differences between the sexes are viewed as differences of degree rather than of kind manifests itself in a variety of ways. Whereas we, for example, view female sexual organs as different organs from those of men, and by their difference signifying the distinction of women from men, in the earlier view these organs were viewed as less developed versions of male organs. Thus, in the old view, the female vagina and cervix did not constitute something distinct from the male penis; rather, together, they constituted a less developed version of it. Similarly, in the old view, the process of menstruation did not describe a process distinctive to women's lives but was seen as just one

more instance of the tendency of human bodies to bleed, the orifice from which the blood emerged being perceived as not very significant. Bleeding itself was viewed as one way bodies in general got rid of an excess of nutriment. Since men were thought to be cooler beings than women, they were thought to be less likely to possess such a surplus and hence less likely to possess a need to bleed (Laqueur 1990, 36–37). Similarly, Laqueur points to Galen's argument that women must produce semen, since otherwise Galen asks, there would be no reason for them to possess testicles, which they clearly do (1990, 35–36). In short, the organs, processes, and fluids we think of as distinctive to male and female bodies were rather thought of as convertible within a "generic corporeal economy of fluids and organs" (1990, 40). As Laqueur demonstrates, this "generic corporeal economy of fluids and organs" began to give way to a new two-sex view: "Organs that had shared a name—ovaries and testicles—were now linguistically distinguished. Organs that had not been distinguished by a name of their own—the vagina, for example—were given one. Structures that had been thought common to man and woman—the skeleton and the nervous system—were differentiated so as to correspond to the cultural male and female" (1990, 35).

Another manifestation of this new two-sex view was the delegitimation of the concept of hermaphroditism. As Michel Foucault points out, in the eighteenth century hermaphroditism became a shrinking concept. Foucault notes that during this century the hermaphrodite of previous centuries became the "pseudo-hermaphrodite" whose "true" sexual identity only required sufficiently expert diagnosis:

Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals. Henceforth, everybody was to have one and only one sex. Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory. From the medical point of view, this meant that when confronted with a hermaphrodite, the doctor was no longer concerned with recognizing the presence of the two sexes, juxtaposed or intermingled, or with knowing which of the two prevailed over the other, but rather with deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances. [1980, vii]

These new ways of thinking about the relation between female and male bodies are related to a variety of cultural changes. As many commentators

on the history of the family and of gender have pointed out, one important consequence of emerging industrialization and growing urbanization was an increasing differentiation of domestic and nondomestic life, associated, respectively, with women and men.<sup>3</sup> But these new ways of thinking about the male and female body also can be related to the increased tendency, discussed above, for the body to serve as the source of information about the self and thus to serve as the source of information about one's identity as male or female. As Laqueur points out, it is not as though, in the older view, physical differences between women and men were not assumed; they were. Such differences, however, were seen as being the logical expression of a certain cosmological order governed by difference, hierarchy, interrelation—as “markers” of the male/female distinction rather than as its basis or “cause” (1990, 151–52).

When the Bible or Aristotle is the source of authority about how the relationship between women and men is to be understood, any asserted differences between women and men are to be justified primarily through reference to these texts. When, however, the texts of Aristotle and the Bible lose their authority, nature and the body become the means for grounding any perceived distinction between women and men. This means that to the extent there is a perceived need for the male/female distinction to be constituted as a deep and significant one, the body must “speak” this distinction loudly, that is, in every aspect of its being. The consequence is a two-sex view of the body.

### Sex and gender

This concept of sex identity as a sharply differentiated male and female self rooted in a deeply differentiated body was dominant in most industrialized countries at the time of the emergence of second-wave feminism. But there were also ideas around at the time that feminists could draw upon to begin to challenge it. The growth of a materialist metaphysics in early modern Western societies was never uncontested; many cultural and intellectual movements throughout Western modernity have striven to prove the distinctiveness of human existence in relation to the rest of the physical world.<sup>4</sup> Some of these movements,

<sup>3</sup> Laqueur also claims that the binarism of the new view was a consequence of these social structural transformations in the lives of women and men. See Laqueur 1990, 193–243.

<sup>4</sup> Any elaboration of this opposition requires a book-length discussion. That a full-scale materialism was not easily endorsed in the very early period is most obviously indicated in the dualism of one of the most outspoken advocates of such a materialism, René Descartes. But even Descartes's position was considered much too radical by “The Cambridge Platonists,” those who were sympathetic to some version of materialism but thought Descartes's position carried it too far. For an informative discussion of religious

particularly those grounded in religion, have continued to stress a religious, rather than physiological, grounding of the male/female distinction. Moreover, even from within this metaphysics there emerged perspectives that challenged a biologically grounded concept of sex identity. In the nineteenth century, one theorist who maintained a strong materialism while also elaborating with great theoretical sophistication the idea of the social constitution of human character was Karl Marx. He, along with many other nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, contributed to a way of thinking about human character that acknowledged the deep importance of society in constituting such character that second-wave feminists could draw on. Although the challenge to this concept of sex identity has been extensive in second-wave writings, it has also been incomplete. Still maintained is the idea that there exist some physiological givens that are used similarly in all cultures to distinguish women and men and that at least partially account for certain commonalities in the norms of male and female personality and behavior. This position, which I have labeled *biological foundationalism*, has enabled many feminists to explicitly reject biological determinism while holding onto one of its features: the presumption of commonalities across cultures.

What I am calling biological foundationalism is best understood as representing a continuum of positions bounded on one side by a strict biological determinism and on the other side by the position I would like feminists to endorse: that biology cannot be used to ground claims about "women" or "men" transculturally. One advantage of depicting biological foundationalism as representative of a range of positions is that it counters a common contemporary tendency to think of social constructionist positions as all alike in the role that biology plays within them. Thus, feminists have frequently assumed that as long as one acknowledged any distance at all from biological determinism, one thereby avoided all of the problems associated with this position. But I want to claim that the issue is more relative: that feminist positions have exhibited more or less distance from biological determinism and, to the degree that they have done so, have exhibited more or fewer of the problems associated with that position, specifically its tendency to generate faulty generalizations that represent projections from the theorist's own cultural context.

Let me elaborate this point by using my earlier coarctate metaphor. All those positions I am labeling biological foundationalist assume that there

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tensions around the adoption of materialism through the modern period, see Brooke 1991. In the late nineteenth century, other, nonreligious arguments emerged against the utility of scientific modes of explanation in accounting for human behavior and social laws. This movement was most pronounced in Germany and received a full elaboration in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey.

exists a common biological rack that all societies must respond to in some way or other in elaborating the distinction between male and female. If one were a strict biological determinist, the rack alone would constitute this distinction. But given that all biological foundationalists are social constructionists in some form or another, all assume some social reaction to the rack as partly constitutive of the male/female distinction. But there are various ways of conceptualizing such reactions or conceptualizing "what gets thrown upon the rack." One could think of what is thrown upon the rack as significantly similar across most societies as a direct response to the givens of the rack. Alternatively, one could think of what is thrown upon the rack as mostly different in different cultures, with what is shared representing only a minimal common response to the givens of the rack. Finally, of course, one could give up the idea of the rack altogether. Here biology, rather than being construed as that which all societies share in common, would be viewed as a culturally specific set of ideas that might or might not be translatable into somewhat related ideas in other societies, but even when translatable could not be assumed to shape in cross-culturally similar ways each society's understanding of the male/female distinction.

To show how various forms of biological foundationalism have surfaced in second-wave theory, let me begin with the writings of two thinkers who represent a position close to one end of this continuum. Both of the following theorists are explicitly social constructionist. Yet both use the body to generate or justify generalizations about women across cultural contexts in a way that is not significantly different from biological determinism.

The first writer I would like to turn to is Robin Morgan in her introduction to *Sisterhood is Global*, "Planetary Feminism: The Politics of the 21st Century."<sup>5</sup> In this essay, Morgan is explicit about the many ways women's lives vary across culture, race, nationality, and so forth. She also believes, however, that certain commonalities exist among women. As she makes clear, such commonalities are for her not determined by biology but are, rather, "the result of a common condition which, despite variations in degree, is experienced by all human beings who are born female" (1984, 4). While she never explicitly defines this common condition, she comes closest to doing so in the following passage: "To many feminist theorists, the patriarchal control of women's bodies as the means of reproduction is the crux of the dilemma. . . . The tragedy within the

<sup>5</sup> It was as a consequence of reading Chandra Talpade Mohanty's very insightful discussion of Robin Morgan's introduction to *Sisterhood Is Powerful* that I thought of looking to Morgan's essay as a useful exemplar of biological foundationalism. See Mohanty 1992. I see the intent of Mohanty's analysis as very much overlapping with mine, though there are differences in the specific form of each.

tragedy is that because we are regarded primarily as reproductive beings rather than full human beings, we are viewed in a (male-defined) sexual context, with the consequent epidemic of rape, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, and sexual traffick in women, with transacted marriage, institutionalized family structures, and the denial of individual women's own sexual expression" (1984, 6, 8).

Passages such as these suggest that there is something about women's bodies, specifically our reproductive capacities, that, while not necessarily resulting in a particular social outcome, nevertheless sets the stage for a certain range of male reactions across cultures that are common enough in nature to establish a certain commonality in women's experience as victims of such reactions. Again, this commonality in female bodies does not determine this range of reactions, in the sense that in all cultural contexts such a commonality would generate a reaction that was of this type, but this commonality nevertheless does lead to this kind of reaction across many contexts. The difference between this type of a position and biological determinism is very slight. As I noted, biological determinism is commonly thought to apply only to contexts where a phenomenon is not affected by any variations in cultural context. Because Morgan is allowing that some variations in cultural context could affect the reaction, she is not here being a strict biological determinist. But because she believes that this commonality in female bodies does lead to a common type of reaction across a wide range of diverse cultural contexts, there is, in reality, only a small space that separates her position from that of a strict biological determinist. When we see that within a theory biology can have more or less of a determining influence, so can we also see that one can be more or less of a social constructionist.

Another writer who explicitly rejects biological determinism but whose position also ends up being functionally very close to it is Janice Raymond. In her book, *A Passion for Friends*, Raymond explicitly rejects the view that biology is the cause of women's uniqueness. "Women have no biological edge on the more humane qualities of human existence," she claims, "nor does women's uniqueness proceed from any biological differences from men. Rather, just as any cultural context distinguishes one group from another, women's 'otherness' proceeds from women's culture" (1986, 21). This position is also present in Raymond's earlier book, *The Transsexual Empire* (1979). What is very interesting about *The Transsexual Empire*, however, is that much of the argument here, as was the case with Morgan's argument, rests on the assumption of an extremely invariant relationship between biology and character, though an invariance that is not of the usual biological determinist kind. In this work, Raymond is extremely critical of transsexuality in general, of what she labels "the male-to-constructed-female" in particular, and most

especially of those “male-to-constructed-females” who call themselves “lesbian feminists.” While many of Raymond’s criticisms stem from the convincing position that modern medicine is not the most appropriate arena for challenging existing gender norms, other parts of her criticism emerge from certain assumptions about an invariant relationship between biology and character. Specifically, Raymond doubts the veracity of claims on the part of any biological male to have “a female within him”: “The androgynous man and the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist deceive women in much the same way, for they lead women into believing that they are truly one of us—this time not only one in behavior but one in spirit and conviction” (1979, 100).

For Raymond *all* women differ in certain important respects from *all* men. This is not because the biologies of either directly determine a certain character. Rather, she believes that the possession of a particular kind of genitals, that is, those labeled *female*, generates certain kinds of reactions from others that are different in kind from the reactions generated by the possession of those kinds of genitals labeled *male*. The commonalities among these reactions and their differences from those experienced by those with male genitals are sufficient to ensure that no one born with male genitals can claim enough in common with those born with female genitals to warrant the label *female*. Thus she claims, “We know that we are women who are born with female chromosomes and anatomy, and that whether or not we were socialized to be so-called normal women, patriarchy has treated and will treat us like women. Transsexuals have not had this same history. No man can have the history of being born and located in this culture as a woman. He can have the history of *wishing* to be a woman and of *acting* like a woman, but this gender experience is that of a transsexual, not of a woman” (1979, 114).

Raymond qualifies her claims in this passage to those living within patriarchal societies. But across such societies Raymond is assuming enough of a homogeneity of reaction that biology, for all intents and purposes, becomes a “determinant” of character. To be sure, biology does not here directly generate character. But because it here invariably leads to certain common reactions, which also invariably have a specific effect on character, it becomes in effect a cause of character. Like Morgan, Raymond is not claiming that biology generates specific consequences independent of culture. For both, however, variability within and among societies becomes so muted in relation to a certain class of issues that culture becomes, in relation to these issues, a vanishing variable. The invocation of culture does, of course, allow these theorists to postulate differences existing side by side with the commonalities and also leaves open the possibility of a distant society where biology might not have such effects. But in neither case does it interfere with the power of bio-

logical givens to generate important commonalities among women across a wide span of human history.

I have focused on the writings of Robin Morgan and Janice Raymond for the purpose of illustration. The type of biological foundationalism exemplified in their writings is not at all unique to these two writers but represents, I believe, a major tendency within second-wave theory, particularly in that tendency known as radical feminism. This, of course, is not surprising. Since the early 1970s, radical feminists have tended to be in the vanguard of those who have stressed the similarities among women and their differences from men. But it is difficult justifying such claims without invoking biology in some way or other. During the 1970s, many radical feminists explicitly endorsed biological determinism.<sup>6</sup> Biological determinism became, however, increasingly distasteful among feminists for a variety of reasons. Not only did it possess an unpleasant association with antifeminism, but it also seemed to disallow differences among women and—in the absence of feminist biological warfare—seemed to negate any hopes for change. The task became that of creating theory that allowed for differences among women, made at least theoretically possible the idea of a future without sexism, and yet also justified cross-cultural claims about women. Some version of a strong form of biological foundationalism became the answer for many radical feminists.

While radical feminist writings are a rich source of strong forms of biological foundationalism, they are not the only source of biological foundationalism in general. Even theories that pay more attention to cultural history and diversity than do those of many radical feminists often rely on some use of biological foundationalism to make critical moves. Beginning in the 1970s and early 1980s, much of second-wave feminism in general began to move in the direction of stressing similarities among women and their differences from men, changing from what Iris Young has called a humanistic stance to a more gynocentric one (1985, 173–83). The enormous attention given at this time to books such as Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1983) and Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) can be said to follow from the usefulness of the former in elaborating difference between women and men and of the latter in accounting for it. While both of these works strikingly exemplify a difference perspective, neither fits easily into the category of radical feminism. Yet in both of these works, as well as in

<sup>6</sup> One radical feminist theorist who explicitly endorsed biological determinism in the late 1970s is Mary Daly. In an interview in the feminist journal *off our backs*, Daly responded to the question whether men's problems are rooted in biology with the response that she was inclined to think they were (1979). This interview was brought to my attention by Douglas 1990. For other instances of this tendency within radical feminist theory during the 1970s see Jaggar 1983.

others of this period that emphasize difference (those of such French feminists as Luce Irigaray, for instance), there is an interesting overlap with perspectives embodied in much radical feminist analysis. Specifically, these works claim a strong correlation between people with certain biological characteristics and people with certain character traits. To be sure, in a work such as Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, such claims are built upon a rich and complex story about culture: about how the possession of certain kinds of genitals places one in a particular psychosocial dynamic only in specific types of circumstances and only insofar as those genitals possess certain kinds of meanings. Nevertheless, I would still describe a work such as *The Reproduction of Mothering* as biologically foundationalist. I do so because its complex and sophisticated story of child development, as a story supposedly applicable to a wide range of cultures, rests on the assumption that the possession of certain kinds of genitals conveys a common enough meaning across this range of cultures to make possible the postulation of a fundamentally homogeneous set of stories about child development. To assume that the cultural construction of the body serves as an unchanging variable across sweeps of human history and combines with other relatively static aspects of culture to create certain commonalities in personality formation across such history suffices, in my account, to indicate some version of biological foundationalism.

A problem running throughout the above theories, a problem that many commentators have pointed out, is that "a feminism of difference" tends to be "a feminism of uniformity." To say that "women are different from men in such and such ways" is to say that women *are* "such and such." But inevitably characterizations of women's "nature" or "essence"—even if this is described as a socially constructed nature or essence—tend to reflect the perspective of those making the characterizations. And as those who have the power to make such characterizations in contemporary European-based societies tend to be white, heterosexual, and from the professional class, such characterizations tend to reflect the biases of those from these groups. It was thus not surprising that the gynocentric move of the seventies soon gave way to outcries from women of color, lesbians, and those of working-class backgrounds that the stories being told did not reflect their experiences. Thus, Chodorow was soon critiqued for elaborating a basically heterosexual story and she, Gilligan, and radical feminists such as Mary Daly have been accused of speaking primarily from a white, Western, middle-class perspective.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Judith Lorber, in faulting Chodorow's work for not paying enough attention to social structural issues, explicitly raised questions about the class biases of *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Her more general points, however, would apply to issues of race as well. See her contribution to the critical symposium on *The Reproduction of Mothering*

My argument is that in all those cases where feminist theory makes generalizations across large sweeps of history, what is being assumed are common perspectives throughout such history about the meaning and import of female and male bodies. Many writers have pointed out how in these types of theories the specific content of the claim tends to reflect the culture of the theorist making the generalization. But also being borrowed from the theorist's cultural context is a specific understanding of bodies. This understanding is then assumed to underlie a story of character development or societal reaction applicable across an indefinitely vague span of time. The methodological move here is not different from that employed by biological determinists: the assumed "givenness" and commonality of nature across cultures is being drawn on to give credibility to the generality of the specific claim. In short, it is not only that certain specific ideas about women and men—that women are relational, nurturing, and caring while men are aggressive and combative—are being falsely generalized, but that also being falsely generalized, and indeed making these further generalizations about character possible, are certain specific assumptions about the body and its relation to character—that there are commonalities in the distinctive givens of the body that generate commonalities in the classification of human beings across cultures and in the reactions by others to those so classified. The problems associated with a feminism of difference are both reflected in and made possible by biological foundationalism.

But the rejoinder might be made that what my argument is failing to allow for is that in many historical contexts people have interpreted the body in relatively similar ways and this common interpretation has led to certain cross-cultural commonalities in the treatment of women. True, it might be the case that some feminist scholarship falsely assumed the generalizability of some specific character traits found in contemporary middle-class Western life, that is, that women are more nurturant than men. But it has not generally been problematic to assume, for contemporary Western societies as well as for most others, that the possession of

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in *Signs* (Lorber 1981). Elizabeth Spelman focuses on the ways in which Chodorow's account insufficiently addresses issues of race and class in *Inessential Woman* (1988). Adrienne Rich has noted the lacuna in Chodorow's analysis regarding lesbianism in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980). Audre Lorde has raised issues of racism in relation to Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" (1981). Spelman also looks at the ways in which Mary Daly's analysis tends to separate sexism and racism and make the latter secondary to the former in *Inessential Woman*. Radical lesbian feminist separatism has been criticized as ignoring issues of race. See, e.g., the Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981). The class and race biases of Gilligan's work have been pointed to by Broughton 1983. I also develop this issue in my article in that same volume, "Women, Morality and History" (Nicholson 1983).

one of two possible kinds of bodies does lead to the labeling of some people as women and others as men and this labeling bears *some* common characteristics with *some* common effects.

This is a powerful response, but, I would claim, one that derives its power from a subtle misreading about how gender operates cross-culturally. Most societies known to Western scholarship do appear to have some kind of a male/female distinction. Moreover, most appear to relate this distinction to some kind of bodily distinction between women and men. From such observations it is very tempting to move to the above claims. I would argue, however, that such a move is faulty. And the reason is that "some kind of male/female distinction" and "some kind of bodily distinction" include a wide range of possible subtle differences in the meaning of the male/female distinction and of how the bodily distinction works in relationship to it. Because these differences may be subtle, they are not necessarily the kinds of things that contemporary Western feminists will first see when they look at premodern European cultures or cultures not dominated by the influence of modern Europe. But subtle differences around such issues may contain important consequences in the very deep sense of what it means to be a man or woman. For example, certain Native American societies that have understood identity more in relation to spiritual forces than has been true of modern European-based societies have also allowed for some of those with male genitals to understand themselves and be understood by others as half man/half woman in ways that have not been possible within those European-based societies. Within these latter societies, the body has been interpreted as such an important signifier of identity that someone with female genitals has also not been thought to ever legitimately occupy the role of "husband," whereas in many African societies this is not the case. In short, while all of these societies certainly possess some kind of a male/female distinction and also relate this distinction in some important way or another to the body, subtle differences in how the body itself is viewed may contain some very basic implications for what it means to be male or female and, consequently, produce important differences in the degree to which and ways in which sexism operates. In short, such subtle differences in the ways in which the body itself is read may relate to differences in what it means to be a man or woman that "go all the way down."<sup>8</sup>

But this point may be established not only by looking at the relation between contemporary Western societies and certain "exotic" others. Even within contemporary European-based societies we can detect im-

<sup>8</sup> On the ways in which the Native American *berdache* undermines European notions of gender, see Whitehead 1981 and Williams 1986. For a very useful discussion of the phenomenon of female husbands, see Amadiume 1987. Kopytoff 1990 provides an extremely provocative discussion of the relation between the phenomena of female husbands and broader issues concerning the nature of self-identity.

portant tensions and conflicts in the meaning of the body and in how the body relates to male and female identity. While certainly these are societies that, over the last several centuries, have operated with a strongly binary male/female distinction and have based this distinction on an attributed binary biology, they have also been societies that, in varying degrees, have articulated notions of the self that deny differences among women and men, and not just as a consequence of 1960s feminism. In part, this denial of differences is manifest in the degree to which the belief that women and men are fundamentally the same is also a part of the hegemonic belief system of the societies in which many of us operate and has been available for feminists to draw on as an attack upon differences. Indeed, it is at least partly as a consequence of a general cultural tendency in some European-based societies to somewhat disassociate biology and character that feminism itself was made possible. One of the weaknesses of a difference-based feminism is that it cannot account for the phenomenon of such societies having produced feminists—that is, beings whose genitals, by virtue of the account, should have made us completely feminine but whose actual political skills and/or presence in such previously male-dominated institutions as the academy must indicate some masculine socialization. Moreover, it seems inadequate to conceptualize such socialization as merely an “add-on” to certain “basic” commonalities. In short, it is because of a certain prior disassociation of biology and socialization that, at a very basic level, many of us are who we are.

In short, a feminism of difference and the biological foundationalism on which it rests contain, in contemporary European-based societies, elements of both truth and falsity. Because these are societies that to a significant degree perceive female and male genitals as binary and also link character to such genitals, people born with “male” genitals are likely to be different in many important respects from people born with “female” genitals as a consequence of “possessing” such genitals. A feminism of difference and the biological foundationalism on which it rests, however, are also false not only because of the failure of both positions to recognize the historicity of their own insights but also because neither allows for the ways in which even within contemporary European-based societies the belief system their insights reflect possesses a multitude of cracks and fissures. Thus, a feminism of difference can provide no insight into those of us whose psyches are the manifestation of such cracks. Take, for example, those who are born with “male” genitals yet think of themselves as female. Raymond in *The Transsexual Empire* claims that “male-to-constructed-females” are motivated by the desire to seize control, at least symbolically, of women’s power to reproduce (1979, 28–29). She also claims that “female-to-constructed-males” are motivated by the desire to seize the general power given to men, that is,

are "male-identified" to the extreme (1979, xxiii-xxv). Assuming for the sake of discussion that such accounts are valid, they still leave unanswered such questions as why particular women are so male-identified, or why only some men wish to seize symbolic control of women's power to reproduce or do it in this particular way. Any appeals to "false consciousness," like their earlier Marxist counterparts, merely place the lack of an answer at a deeper level, as again no account is made why some and not others succumb to false consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Thus, even to the extent that the culture itself links gender to biology, a feminist analysis that follows this approach is unable to account for those who deviate.

Because a feminism of difference is both true and false within the societies in which many of us operate, the process of endorsing or rejecting it is similar to looking at those pictures in psychology textbooks where one moment the picture looks like the head of a rabbit and the next moment it looks like the head of a duck. Within each "view," features stand out that had previously been hidden, and the momentary interpretation feels like the only possible one. Much of the power of books such as Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* lay in the fact that they generated radically new ways of viewing social relations. The problem, however, is that these new ways of configuring reality, while truly powerful, also missed so much. Like a lens that only illuminates certain aspects of what we see by shadowing others, these visions kept from sight the many contexts in which we as women and men deviate from the generalizations these analyses generated, either because the cultural contexts of our childhoods were not ones where these generalizations were encompassing or because the specific psychic dynamics of our individual childhoods undermined any simple internalization of these generalizations. Thus, from within the perspective of a feminism of difference it became impossible for women to acknowledge both the ways in which the generalizations generated from the analyses poorly captured their own notions of masculinity and femininity and also, even when they did, how their own psyches might embody masculine traits. Any acknowledgment of this latter deviation seemed to make one's membership in the feminist community particularly suspect.

This last point illuminates what is often forgotten in debates about the truth of such generalizations: since evidence can be accumulated both for their truth and their falsity, their endorsement or rejection is not a consequence of a dispassionate weighing of the "evidence." Rather, it is our disparate needs, both individual and collective, that push those of us who

<sup>9</sup> This general weakness in arguments that employ the concept of "false consciousness" was suggested to me in another context by Marcia Lind.

are women to see ourselves more or less like other women and different from men. At a collective level, the need to see ourselves as very much like each other and different from men made a lot of things possible at a certain moment in history. Most important, it enabled us to uncover sexism in its depth and pervasiveness and to build communities of women organized around its eradication. It also contained some major weaknesses, however, most notably its tendency to eradicate differences among women. The question facing feminism today is whether we can generate new visions of gender that retain what has been positive in a feminism of difference while eliminating what has been negative.

### **How then do we interpret woman?**

Within contemporary European-based societies there is a strong tendency to think in either-or ways regarding generalities: either there are commonalities that tie us all together or we are all just individuals. A large part of the appeal of theories that supported a feminism of difference was that they generated strong ammunition against the common societal tendency to dismiss the import of gender, to claim that feminism is not necessary since "we are all just individuals." A feminism of difference uncovered many important social patterns of gender, patterns that enabled many women to understand their circumstances in social rather than idiosyncratic terms.

My argument against a feminism of difference does not mean that we should stop searching for such patterns. It is, rather, that we should understand them in different and more complex terms than we have tended to do, particularly that we should become more attentive to the historicity of any patterns we uncover. As we search for that which is socially shared, we need to be simultaneously searching for the places where such patterns break down. My argument thus points to the replacement of claims about women as such or even women in patriarchal societies with claims about women in particular contexts.<sup>10</sup>

The idea that we can make claims about women that span large historical stretches has been facilitated by the idea that there is something common to the category of *woman* across such historical stretches: that all share, at some basic level, certain features of biology. Thus what I have called biological foundationalism gives content to the claim that there exist some common criteria defining what it means to be a woman. For political purposes such criteria are thought to enable us to differentiate enemy from ally and to provide the basis for feminism's political

<sup>10</sup> Of course, the demand for particularity is always relative. As such, any demand for particularity cannot be interpreted in absolutist terms but only as an indication that we move more in such a direction.

program. Thus, there will be many who view my attack on biological foundationalism as an attack on feminism itself: if we do not possess some common criteria providing meaning to the word *woman*, how can we generate a politics around this term? Does not feminist politics require that the category *woman* have some determinate meaning?

To counter this idea that feminist politics requires that *woman* possess some determinate meaning, I would like to borrow some ideas about language from Ludwig Wittgenstein. In arguing against a philosophy of language that claimed that meaning in general entailed such determinacy, Wittgenstein pointed to the word *game*. He argued that it is impossible to come up with any one feature that is common to everything called a *game*:

For if you look at them [the proceedings that we call "games"] you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. . . . Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. . . . And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. [1953, 31e–32e]

Thus, the meaning of *game* is revealed not through the determination of some specific characteristic, or set of such, but through the elaboration of a complex network of characteristics, with different elements of this network being present in different cases. Wittgenstein used the phrase "family relationships" to describe such a network, since members of a family may resemble one another without necessarily sharing any one specific feature in common. Another metaphor that suggests the same point is that of a tapestry unified by overlapping threads of color but where no one particular color is found throughout the whole.<sup>11</sup>

I want to suggest that we think of the meaning of *woman* in the same way that Wittgenstein suggested we think about the meaning of *game*, as a word whose meaning is not found through the elucidation of some specific characteristic but is found through the elaboration of a complex network of characteristics. This suggestion certainly allows for the fact that there might be some characteristics—such as possessing a vagina and being over a certain age—that play a dominant role within such a net-

<sup>11</sup> The tapestry metaphor was first used in an article I coauthored with Nancy Fraser to provide a model for how we think about feminist theory in general. See Fraser and Nicholson 1990.

work over long periods of time. It also allows for the fact that the word may be used in contexts where such characteristics are not present, for example, in English-speaking countries prior to the adoption of the concept of *vagina*, or in contemporary English-speaking societies to refer to those who do not have vaginas but who still feel themselves to be women, that is, to transsexuals before a medical operation. Moreover, if our frame of reference is not only the English term *woman* but also all those words into which *woman* is translatable, then such a mode of thinking about the meaning of *woman* becomes even more helpful.

Conceptualizing *woman* in this way is helpful mostly because of its nonarrogant stance toward meaning. As I mentioned, such a way of thinking about the meaning of *woman* and of its non-English cognates does not reject the idea that over stretches of history there will be patterns. To give up on the idea that *woman* has one clearly specifiable meaning does not entail that it has no meaning. Rather, this way of thinking about meaning works on the assumption that such patterns are found within history and must be documented as such. We cannot presuppose that the meaning that is dominant in contemporary, industrialized Western societies must be true everywhere or across stretches with indeterminate boundaries. Thus, such a stance does not reject the idea that the two-sex body has played an important role in structuring the male/female distinction and thus the meaning of *woman* over a certain portion of human history. But it does demand that we be clear about what exact portion that is and even within it, what the contexts are in which it does not apply. Moreover, because such a stance recognizes that the meaning of *woman* has changed over time, it also recognizes that those presently advocating nontraditional understandings of it, such as transsexuals, cannot be dismissed merely on the grounds that their interpretations contradict standard patterns. Janice Raymond claims that no one born without a vagina can claim to have had comparable experiences to those born with one. My question is, How can she know this? How can she know, for example, that some people's parents were not operating with a greater slippage between biology and character than is true for many in contemporary industrialized societies and thus really did provide to their children with male genitals experiences comparable to those born with vaginas? Historical change is made possible by some people having experiences that really are different from those that have predominated in the past.

Thus I am advocating that we think about the meaning of *woman* as illustrating a map of intersecting similarities and differences. Within such a map, the body does not disappear but rather becomes a historically specific variable whose meaning and import are recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts. Such a suggestion, in assuming

that meaning is found rather than presupposed, also suggests that the search itself is not a research/political project that an individual scholar will be able to accomplish alone in her study. Rather, it implies an understanding of such a project as necessarily a collective effort undertaken by many in dialogue.

Moreover, as both the above references to transsexuals and my earlier discussion of commonality among women and difference with men should indicate, it is a mistake to think of such a search as an "objective" task undertaken by scholars motivated only by the disinterested pursuit of truth. What we see and feel as commonalities and differences will at least partially depend on our diverse psychic needs and political goals. To clarify the meaning of a word where ambiguity exists and where diverse consequences follow from diverse clarifications is itself a political act. Thus, the clarification of the meaning of many concepts in our language, such as *mother*, *education*, *science*, *democracy*, while often portrayed as a merely descriptive act, is, in actuality, stipulative. With a word as emotionally charged as *woman*, where so much hangs on how its meaning is elaborated, any claim about such must be viewed as a political intervention.

But if elaborating the meaning of *woman* represents an ongoing task and an ongoing political struggle, does this not undermine the project of feminist politics? If those who call themselves feminists cannot even decide upon who women are, how can political demands be enacted in the name of women? Does not feminism require the very presupposition of unity around meaning that I am saying we cannot possess?

To respond to these concerns, let me suggest a slightly different way of understanding feminist politics than has often been taken for granted. Normally when we think of "coalition politics," we think of groups with clearly defined interests coming together on a temporary basis for purposes of mutual enhancement. In such a view, coalition politics is something that feminists enter into with "others." But we could think about coalition politics as not something merely external to feminist politics but as that which is also internal to it. This means that we think about feminist politics as the coming together of those who want to work around the needs of women where such a concept is not understood as necessarily singular in meaning or commonly agreed upon. The coalition politics of such a movement would be formulated in the same way coalition politics in general are formulated, as consisting of lists of demands that take care of the diverse needs of the groups constituting the coalition, as consisting of demands articulated at a certain abstract level to include diversity, or as consisting of specific demands that diverse groups temporarily unite around. Indeed, I would claim that such strategies are those that feminists have increasingly adopted over the past twenty-five-

year period. Thus white feminists started talking about reproductive rights instead of abortion on demand when it became clear that many women of color saw access to prenatal care or freedom from involuntary sterilization as at least as relevant to their lives as access to abortion, if not more so. In other words, feminist politics of the past twenty-five years has already increasingly been exhibiting internal coalitional strategies. Why cannot our theorization of *woman* reflect such a politics?

This type of politics does not demand that *woman* possess a singular meaning. Moreover, even when feminist politics does claim to speak on behalf of some one understanding of *woman*, can it not explicitly acknowledge such an understanding as political and thus provisional, as open to whatever challenges others might want to put forth? In other words, can we not be clear that any claims we make on behalf of women or women's interests are stipulative rather than descriptive, based as much on an understanding of what we want women to be as on any collective survey as to how those who call themselves women perceive themselves? Acknowledging the political character of such claims means, of course, abandoning the hope that it is easy determining whose definition of women or women's interests one might want to include in one's own claims. But, I would argue, that determination has never been easy. Feminists speaking in the name of women have often ignored the claims of right-wing women as they have also taken on certain ideals about women's interests from the male left. That white feminists in the United States have increasingly felt it necessary to take seriously the demands of women of color and not the demands of white, conservative women is not because the former possess vaginas that the latter do not but because the ideals expressed by many of the former conform more closely to many of their own than do those of the conservative women. Maybe it is time that we explicitly acknowledge that our claims about women are not based on some given reality but emerge from our own places within history and culture; they are political acts that reflect the contexts we emerge out of and the futures we would like to see.

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