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'DIVIDED WE STAND': Sex, Gender and Sexual Difference

Henrietta Moore

This article was originally presented as a paper, and since much of what it discusses turns on problems of position, location, self-representation and representativity, I have decided to leave it, as far as is possible, in its original form. Extensive use of the first person pronoun is frowned on in the contexts in which I am used to working, but I have deliberately retained it in this text to try and convey a sense of particularity, of myself speaking in a specific context(s). The use of 'we' is a highly politicized act both in anthropology and in feminist contexts. Its use here is intended to convey a sense of audience, that is of myself speaking to others. But, and much more importantly, it also operates as a mark of interrogation, a fictive unity that reveals the lines of fragmentation at the very moment when it claims affinity.¹

The original impetus for this paper was a question concerning the way in which feminism had influenced or affected my own work. This perfectly reasonable request engendered in me a feeling of intense panic. My first thought was 'Oh God, how *has* feminism influenced my work?' The root of the anxiety, of course, is one about being found out, being exposed as 'not the real thing', 'not a proper feminist'. The anxiety of failure and lack is not entirely confined to feminists. In fact, it is probably rather a common paranoia among academics. However, what this anxiety raises for me as a feminist is the question of positionality. Feminist politics and feminist practice have always required a clear sense of position and of the politics of location. For one thing, there has been the necessity of speaking out, declaring one's feminist politics within the workplace or the home or the political party or wherever. In addition, the powerful, sometimes acrimonious, debates within the feminist community itself have demanded that one own up as to where one locates oneself in terms of a variety of carefully drawn and demarcated internal divisions: radical feminist or socialist feminist, for

Feminist Review No. 47, Summer 1994

example? These divisions are important because they have guided the political programmes proposed by different groups of feminists, and because they bring already politicized identities into play. They raise, therefore, what I am going to call, after Nancy Miller, the problem of representativity (1991: 20). Who and what do we represent when we speak out, and how do we negotiate the inevitable problem in the social sciences of having to speak about people while trying not to speak for them? The question of who speaks for whom and on what basis has given rise in feminist debate to a number of very significant divisions; one of which is the split between theory and practice. The main issue here is one about how to link theoretical work with political activism. Those who have not seen themselves as theorists have demanded to know what purpose theory serves for them and how readily, if at all, theory takes account of their experiences, concerns and struggles. Feminist theory has seemed to many not only arcane, but élitist, racist and/or patriarchal.

Thus, the politics of location make two things abundantly clear. Firstly that there is no single, homogeneous body of feminist theory; and secondly, that the divisions between different groups of women, as well as between practising feminists, make it impossible to assert a commonality based on shared membership in a universal category 'woman'. Such divisions have a particular resonance for me because I work as a social anthropologist. As it happens, I work with and across divisions of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity and religion. I question the purpose of my work, especially my theoretical writing, for the people I work with because I do not find it easy to know of what immediate use it could be to them. I frequently try to deal with this problem, at least in part, by grounding my theoretical thinking in the details of daily life and in the realities of postcolonial political economies. I do not succeed in this as often as I should like, and I tenaciously hold on to what I try to convince myself is an acceptable political position by giving as much space and time to working on issues of agricultural change, women's labour and nutrition, as I do to writing on theoretical questions. The gross imbalances of power involved in my research situation mean that, at every turn, the very fact of writing and talking about other people's lives can never be clearly separated from the question of whether or not one is speaking for them. This is a perennial problem for all feminist social scientists, in spite of a commitment to feminist methodologies and participatory research. Many of my feminist colleagues are very critical of my involvement in anthropology; often projecting on to me their own anxieties about how to deal with issues of race and class, and about how to manage the increasing gap between feminist activism and the academy. I inevitably do the same to them. The most significant impact that feminism has had on my work has been to create a space in which I must continuously engage with these issues of positionality and representativity. In this paper, I want to take up a very small part of this theme and discuss the way in which theoretical treatments of sex, gender and sexual difference are connected to what it is that unites and what it is that divides us as women and as feminists.



The assertion of the non-universal status of the category 'woman' is by now almost a commonplace. However, anthropology has had a particular historical role in the development of feminist theory because of its contribution to the critical reworking of the category 'woman'. In the 1970s, feminists outside anthropology drew readily on the cross-cultural data provided by anthropological research to establish variability in gender and gender roles, and thus provide substantive content for the feminist position that gender was socially constructed and not biologically determined. However, cross-cultural variability in the social construction of gender could not and did not account for women's universal subordination, and in order to remedy this, anthropology developed two very important comparative theories to try and address this issue.

The first asserted that women were everywhere associated with nature, partly as a result of their reproductive functions, while men were associated with culture. It was suggested that the devaluing of nature in relation to culture accounted for the hierarchical relations between women and men (see Ortner, 1974). The second theory emphasized that women were inferior to men because they were linked to the domestic sphere, once again in consequence of their role in reproduction and child care, while men were associated with the public sphere of social life (see Rosaldo, 1974). These comparative theories of women's subordination were not long-lived. The categories of nature, culture, public and private were themselves found to be historically and culturally variable, and the homologues posited between these categories and the categories of gender difference were revealed to be far from universal.² What is important about these two comparative theories of women's subordination is that they attempted to provide socially, as opposed to biologically, based accounts of women's position in society and of the origins of gender difference. The preconditions for this project were, of course, that the biological and the social had already been separated from each other as explanations for the origins of gender difference. Whatever role biology was playing, it was not determining gender.

The very fact that these comparative theories were social rather than biological in their determinations opened them to critical reinterpretation by feminists of colour, feminists from the developing world and lesbian feminists. They challenged the notion of the universal category 'woman', and the assumption of underlying commonalities of existence for all women. Trans-cultural and trans-historical patterns of female subordination were rejected, and theoretical concepts were reformulated.³ In the social sciences, at least, this produced a crisis both about the political purpose and organization of a feminist politics which did not appear to have a coherent constituency, and about the status of analytical models of gender. In general, it would probably be fair to say that many responded to the latter crisis by asserting the necessity for culturally and historically specific analyses. We could look for commonalities between well-specified situations, but we would never be able to

state in advance what would be the consequences of the intersections of race, class and gender, for example. What is interesting about this crisis is that it generated a simultaneous move towards pluralism and specificity. The very fact of having to reduce the scope of any model or analytical statement to a particular situation produced an enormous range of empirical outcomes and theoretical positions. We now recognize this development as part of a general critique of universalizing theories, meta-narratives and totalizing typologies. The current debate is, of course, one about whether we locate the origins of this movement in poststructuralism and deconstructionism or in feminism.

However, as regards feminist theory in the social sciences, the shift in methods of gender analysis towards a specificity which would account for a plurality of experiences and contexts was not as radical as it seemed. One fixed position remained and that was the division between sex and gender. Gender was seen as socially constructed, but underlying that idea was a notion that although gender was not determined by biology, it *was* the social elaboration in specific contexts of the obvious facts of biological sex difference. It did not matter that almost everyone recognized that both biology and culture were historically and culturally variable concepts, as were the relations between them. The problem was that the elaboration of the social determinations and entailments of gender in all their specificity had effectively left the relationship between sex and gender very under-theorized.

Recent work in anthropology has returned to this question of the relationship between sex and gender. Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier (1987) have suggested that the radical separation of sex and gender characteristic of feminist anthropology is a specific and rather pervasive ethnocentrism. They argue that it is part of a Western folk model which dominates anthropological theorizing, and, like so many of the other binary categorizations in anthropology – nature/culture, public/private – it does not stand up to cross-cultural examination. In many ways, this simply marks the impact of neo-Foucauldian thinking in anthropology. It is worth recalling here Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality Vol I* that 'sex' is an effect rather than an origin, and that far from being a given and essential unity, it is, as a category, the product of specific discursive practices.

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, an omnipresent meaning; sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (Foucault, 1984: 154)

Foucault's basic argument is that the notion of 'sex' does not exist prior to its determination within a discourse in which its constellations of meanings are specified, and that therefore bodies have no 'sex' outside discourses in which they are designated as sexed. Consequently, the construction of fixed binary sexes, with fixed categorical differences is

the effect of a specific discourse. What is more, if binary sex is an effect of discourse, then it cannot be considered as a unitary essentialism, and, more importantly, it cannot be recognized as invariant or natural. This is, in essence, the argument Thomas Lacqueur makes so elegantly in his recent book (Lacqueur, 1990). However, two quite radical positions follow from this point.

First, in terms of anthropological discourse, the distinction between sex and gender on which feminist anthropology has rested its case falls away. As Judith Butler (1990) points out, in her reading of the above passage from Foucault, perhaps there is no distinction to be made between sex and gender after all. The second point, which follows from the first, is that, as Yanagisako and Collier (1987) assert, we cannot necessarily assume that binary biological sex everywhere provides the universal basis for the cultural categories 'male' and 'female'. **If gender constructs are culturally variable, then so are the categories of sexual difference.** This is not the first time in anthropology or anywhere else that the fixed binary categories of sex have been interrogated; one only needs to point to the extensive literature that exists on the 'third sex', hermaphroditism and androgeny.⁴ However, the recent work in anthropology has a rather different purpose.

We know that the recognition of anatomical differences between women and men does not necessarily produce a discrete, fixed, binary categorization of sex in the manner of Western discourse. Ethnographic material suggests that the differences between women and men which people in other cultures naturalize and locate in the human body and in features of the physical and cosmological environment are not necessarily those which correspond to the constellation of features on which Western discourse bases its categorizations. For example, the social differences between women and men may be located in the body as natural differences, as in situations described by anthropologists working in Nepal, where the differences between the female and the male are conceived of as the difference between flesh and bone.⁵ However, these differences of gender are said to be located in all bodies, thus collapsing the distinction between sexed bodies and socially constructed genders usually maintained in anthropological discourse. The female and the male, as flesh and bone, are, of course, necessary features of bodily identity. This produces a discursive space where theories of social (gender) difference are grounded in the physiology of the body, and thus function as part of the biological facts of sex difference.

This is, of course, very close to Foucault's own project which is concerned with how it is that sexual differences and the category of sex are constructed within discourse as necessary features of bodily identity. In Western discourse, it appears, it is not just that we need to have a body in order to have a sex, but that we need a sex so as to have a body. This rather strange way of thinking, of modelling the relationship between bodies and the categories of sexual difference, is precisely that which is most readily undermined by ethnographic material. Many of

the differences which concern people around the world are internal to bodies, that is within them rather than between them. The question is, are we to speak of these differences as differences of sex or of gender? This point is difficult to grasp for many of us because we have the gravest difficulty in understanding categories of sex and notions of sexual difference which do not correspond neatly to discrete physical bodies already designated as sexually differentiated. Sex then, as far as we understand it within the terms of Western discourse, is something which differentiates between bodies, while gender is the set of variable social constructions placed upon those differentiated bodies. It is precisely this formula which obscures rather than illuminates when it comes to the analysis of sex, sexual difference and gender cross-culturally. In many instances, as I have already suggested, gender differences are internal to all bodies and are part of the process through which bodies are sexed. In such situations, it is far from apparent how we should distinguish sex from gender, and, even more problematic, it is unclear as to exactly what gender as a concept or a category refers to. This argument is, of course, quite different from those which have been made about the 'third sex', hermaphroditism and androgeny.

The instability, or potential instability, of the category gender in cross-cultural analysis is an alarming prospect. However, when we talk in general terms about discourses on gender and on the relationship between sex and gender, even if by this we only really mean to say different ideas about sex and gender, we still have to ask ourselves the question, 'Whose discourses are we referring to?' At one time, anthropology subscribed to the view that each culture had its own model of gender, its own definitions of the categories female and male. This view, which was much reinforced by a predominantly Durkheimian view of culture and by the kind of liberal cultural relativism still prevalent in the discipline, has changed in recent years as anthropologists have moved towards working with models of culture which stress conflict and indeterminacy, and as they concentrate more on the differences within cultures as opposed to simply between them.⁶ However, it does not solve the problem of how to link what we might call dominant cultural models of gender to the specific experiences and situations of particular groups or individuals within that social context. This is not, of course, a problem which is confined to anthropology, but it raises once again the problems of positionality and representativity.

One set of problems here is about how the experiences of race, sexuality and class, as well as other forms of salient difference, transform the experience of gender. But, there are additional problems about how we are to conceptualize and analyse the over-determined relationships between dominant and sub-dominant discourses on gender, the body, sexuality and sexual difference. These questions become particularly acute when we acknowledge that they are crucial not only in and for our work, but in and for our lives. What relationship do feminist understandings of gender have to dominant gender models and ideologies?; can the former ever be entirely free of the latter? is this

what we are striving for? This is not only a matter of politics, but it is also a matter of subjectivity and self-identity. When we are busy discussing other people's discourses on gender, their views about the body, their gender identities and subjectivities, how easy do we find it to produce the kind of analysis which we would like to see applied to ourselves? As Adrienne Rich remarked:

Perhaps we need a moratorium on saying 'the body'. For it's also possible to abstract 'the body'. When I write 'the body', I see nothing in particular. To write 'my body' plunges me into lived experience, particularity . . . To say 'the body' lifts me away from what has given me primary perspective. To say 'my body' reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions. (Rich, 1986: 215)

By 'grandiose assertions' Rich means presumably universalizing, comparative theories. As a lesbian feminist, Rich is only too well aware that the dominant discourses on gender, the body and sexuality prevalent in her own cultural setting do not fit her personal understanding of these categories and/or processes very closely. Lesbians, like many other groups, have evolved their own discourses, what some have termed sub-dominant or alternative discourses, on these issues. It is on this basis that writers talk of different kinds of experience – 'the lesbian experience' or 'the Black experience', for example – and seek in terms of feminist theory to establish the grounds for theoretical approaches based on positionality and representativity. However, the problem is not just how to recognize the existence of specific groups who may have alternative perspectives and may not subscribe to dominant discourses within any particular setting. The more pressing problem with regard to gender, the body and sexual difference is to work out what bearing social and/or cultural discourses have on individual experience.

This is, of course, simply a modern version of an old problem in sociology and anthropology about the relationship between the individual and society. In anthropology, this problem has often been run in terms of the relationship between dominant cultural symbols and the individual's understanding and interpretation of them. This is a key issue in feminist theory, of course, where feminist standpoint theory invites us to take women's experiences as a starting point for analysis.⁷ Standpoint theory assumes that women have a different perspective from men, and that different groups of women will also differ in their standpoints. In this sense, it privileges groups over individuals, but a more radical reading of its premises would suggest that we all have different experiences and understandings of cultural discourses, symbols and institutions. The question here is one about how much any of us share with each other.

The specific and the universal, the particular and the comparative, how are these two polarities to be brought into conjunction with each other? I have always been a supporter of the specific and the particular over the universal and the comparative, and I have always assumed

that this is the result of my experience of research in Africa. However, in her Amnesty Lecture on 'Women and Human Rights' (Oxford, 5.2.93), Catherine MacKinnon argued for both the universal and the particular. MacKinnon holds to a radical feminist version of standpoint theory. In her work she consistently emphasizes what it is that women, in the global sense, share, and her work has been extensively criticized on precisely this point. She was talking about the mass rape and enforced impregnation of women in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. She argued simply that these crimes have been and continue to be practised on women in many different times and places, and without erasing or ignoring the specifics of what is going on in the former Yugoslavia, it is important to recognize that women suffer these crimes at the hands of men and they do so because they are women. Women are in fact universal in their particularity. It was very hard at that moment to deny the force of her argument, or even to think of any compelling reason why I should ever have disagreed with it. Women do fear sexual violence. If we want some empirical justification for such a universalizing assertion it is only a matter of looking at the various women's grass-roots organizations around the world and at what they are campaigning against.

Rosi Braidotti, starting from very different assumptions, makes an argument which has strong parallels with MacKinnon's. She speaks of a vision of women as a *collective singularity*, where this notion is intended to provide a provisional platform for the support of 'women's real and multiple struggles' (Braidotti, 1991: 132). However, when we examine her argument and consider what she finds her collective singularity on we find the connexions with MacKinnon's argument quite evident. For example, at one point, she says: 'It is on the basis of their shared experience as bio-culturally female beings that women have started to speak in their own voice, distancing it from masculine experience' (Braidotti, 1991: 139). Bodies. It all has something to do with bodies.

Is it really the case that our similarities are grounded in our bodies? This is an example of a moment when the personal comes into lived relation with the theoretical. I find that my antipathy even to simply posing this question is so great that I have to remind myself not to grind my teeth. And yet, I know that the recent return to the body in feminist theory and the efforts on the part of many researchers to reclaim the female body and the feminine – partly as a protest against the disembodied nature of the social constructionist discourse on the body – seems to many to offer real hope and potential. This return to the body is not, however, a straightforward one because some researchers want to distinguish between different types of female body. Some do not want to reduce the female body to its sexual and reproductive functions, and, as such they want to be able to mark a female body which is not the maternal body. For others, the primary connexion is between mothers and daughters, or mothers and children, and they would like to be able to celebrate the maternal in the female body.⁸

French feminists associated with the school of *l'écriture féminine*

have been accused of biological essentialism; although their work has recently been re-evaluated on this point.⁹ Rosi Braidotti, in particular, argues that this charge of essentialism is false and that the feminine libidinal economy discussed in this work has taken on board the fundamental epistemological insight of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis which is that the body is a 'cultural artifact' (Braidotti, 1991: 219; 243). Braidotti suggests that what is hopeful about a return to the female body is that it signals a recognition of the embodied nature of subjectivity. However, there is a distinction to be made here between her argument and a straightforward neo-Foucauldian or social constructionist one, because she eschews any attempt to sever the body from the biological and claim that it is just a social construction or a social field, nothing other than an effect of discourse (Braidotti, 1991: 131; 243). This point is worth making because it is the case that a radical social constructionist position, such as that espoused by Judith Butler (1990) in her recent book, does risk positing the body as a blank surface on which the social becomes inscribed, thus suggesting in some sense that the body is pre-social.¹⁰

Braidotti argues that what is truly revolutionary about a return to the female body is the notion of speaking from the body, with all that this implies both about the specificity of positionality and the embodied, material nature of one's relation with the world. Much of her inspiration seems to come here from a reading of Adrienne Rich against the writings of the *l'écriture féminine* school, and it is from the former that she derives her term 'feminine corpor(e)ality'. Rich writes:

In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies . . . ; we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence (Rich, 1976: 39–40)

Rich takes the woman-to-woman bond as the grounds for subjectivity and for social relations. Braidotti tries to take the argument about feminine corpor(e)ality a stage further, and she stresses a notion of the body as an interface, a threshold between the material and the symbolic. The body is, therefore, not an essence nor indeed a form of anatomical destiny, but rather it is 'one's primary location in the world, one's primary situation in reality' (Braidotti, 1991: 219).

Thus speaking from the body would be a way of acknowledging women's position in the world, their difference from men, their particularity. It would also be a way of stressing simultaneously women's material and symbolic relation to their world. Such a view of the body could in principle, although Braidotti does not elaborate on this point, deal both with the politics of reproduction and sexual violence and with the symbolic construction of sexual difference, including the discursive over-determination of the category 'woman'. Braidotti is sensitive to the charges of exclusion and unwarranted universalism that could be levelled at this theory, but by stressing the materiality and

specificity of the body as a location for subjectivity, she hopes to take account of the differences between women, while allowing for what MacKinnon would term their *universal particularity*.

There are some interesting parallels here with more recent work in biology. The radical separation of biology and culture is something many biologists would no longer hold to. A more contemporary view of human biology would stress that biology enables culture, while culture brings about biological change. In what now sound like rather old-fashioned terms, we could say that biology and culture are in a dialectical relationship. In this version of biology, the body is indeed an interface, a threshold, a mediator. Perhaps we are arriving at a situation where the metaphors of the biological and the social sciences are going to come into some kind of conjunction or relation with each other.

Overall, we might argue that the view of the body espoused by Rosi Braidotti has considerable potential. In particular, its welding of French and North American feminist theory allows it to occupy a rather creative discursive space. However, this notion of the body does still provide difficulties and these arise predominantly, I suggest, because of the influence of psychoanalytic thought on the scholars on whom Braidotti draws. The crux of the issue is, what is the ontological status of the body, and beyond that what is the ontological status of sexual difference? In order to proceed much further with this discussion, we have to recognize the degree to which we as feminists have a tendency to talk past each other once we begin to speak of sex, gender and sexual difference. One starting point is to note that sexual difference for French feminist scholars is not sex and not gender. It is, I think, a rather intermediate term. This is because much of their work draws on psychoanalytic thought and starts with the premise that one must acquire a sexed identity. But however one might theorize the stages involved in that acquisition, it is not the same thing, of course, as anatomical sex nor is it the same thing as acquiring a gender. Braidotti (1991: 264) refuses to confront this issue, and effectively claims that gender and sexual difference are the same thing and/or that the difference between them is not significant.

Braidotti's return to the female body reinscribes binary sexual difference, and makes the inevitability of a mutually exclusive categorization the basis for women's engagement with the world. In this sense, it does not matter that she can deal with the charge of universalism by providing the space for an embodied subjectivity that can be historically and culturally specific, because what she cannot do is to abandon the originary nature of the sexual difference which grounds her theory of the body. The question is, does this matter? Perhaps there is a case for asserting the primacy of sexual difference if we want to describe women in their *particularity*, and especially if we want to treat issues of domination and power.

However, as many others have pointed out, there are very serious difficulties with asserting a primary, ontological status for sexual





difference: principally, the exclusion of other forms of difference, notably race and class; and the reinscription of the binary categorization of sexual difference which makes the feminine the male 'other' and institutes a relation of hierarchy. Theories which posit the primacy of sexual difference are in fact vulnerable to criticism because in order for the assertion of primacy to be convincing they have to be abstract and decontextualized. At the first moment that the question is asked 'whose sexed identity?', it becomes apparent that the reality of such a lived identity is that it cannot be experienced in a pure form.

When has gender ever been pure, untainted by other forms of difference, other relations of inequality? Lives are shaped by a multiplicity of differences; differences which may be perceived categorically, but are lived relationally. The concepts of sexual difference and gender difference collide at this moment and cannot usefully be separated again, although they never become and cannot become identical. And, as for gender discourse, there is no discourse on gender outside the discourses of race and class and ethnicity and sexuality and so on. The point then is that although, in theory, we could all live the categorizations of our bodies and our identities in different ways – as Braidotti implies – we would still have to acknowledge that, in terms of the theory as posited, our bodies would be primarily differentiated in relation to a binary sexual economy which would be prior to all other forms of difference.

Perhaps the problem is not really one about bodies at all, but about identities, or rather about how we conceive of the relationship between the two. This is, of course, a problem which has been formulated for, at least, some of us in a very specific way by psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic theory is, as has been remarked, an historically and culturally specific theory, just like any other. However, the processes of identity acquisition which it proposes are intended to have universal application, and the relationships between anatomy, sexuality and identity which it validates are presented as marking the path of non-pathological development. The rigidity of the sexed categories that psychoanalysis provides is open to question. Jacqueline Rose for one has argued that psychoanalytic theory does not work with a notion of fixed and immutable identities, and that it has been one of the few places in Western culture where it has been possible to realize that women 'do not slip painlessly into their roles as women, if indeed they do at all' (Rose, 1983: 9). However, in spite of these more liberal interpretations, which argue that psychoanalysis takes sexual difference as something to be explained rather than assumed, it is still the case that psychoanalytic theory insists that in order to become a member of a social order we must make an identification with either the category 'woman' or the category 'man'. This is the nub of the matter. What does psychoanalytic theory intend when it says that we must identify with one or other of these categories? Is it really proposed that we should take these categories to be discursively produced and therefore variable across space and time? There is, of course, much talk about how it should be possible to imagine

a signifying economy which does not take the phallus as the primary signifier, but this is seen as a potentiality rather than an actuality. From the point of view of cross-cultural analysis, it can be argued that Lacan's *law of the father* is ethnocentric, and that, since it is an abstract and decontextualized theory of signification and takes no account of any form of difference except that of sex, it is exclusionary in a number of ways.

Lacan has always been credited with cleansing Freud of biologisms, and some of his own ideas about the body and its relation to subjectivity are suggestive. Lacan moves away from Freud's idea of sexual drives as given in biological development to an analysis of such drives through the functioning of language and linguistic processes. For Lacan, drives are not biologically determined, but rather are constituted in processes of signification. Lacan treats the body in an analogous fashion, suggesting that the body as it is experienced and perceived by the child is fragmentary, a body-in-bits-and-pieces. Out of this biological chaos of sensation and physiological activity will be constructed a lived anatomy, a psychic map of the body which is given not by biology, but by significations and fantasies (both personal and collective) of the body (Grosz, 1990: 43–4). Elizabeth Grosz describes 'this body' in the following way:

Bound up within parental fantasies long before the child is ever born, the child's body is divided along lines of special meaning or significance, independent of biology. The body is lived in accordance with an individual's and a culture's *concepts* of biology. (Grosz, 1990: 44)

This sounds a little like Foucault with the psychic and the cultural added. However, Lacan's lived anatomy is an imaginary one, a unity created out of the internalizations of self-other relations. This body-image is an effect of the highly particular meanings that the body has been endowed with by individuals, by cultures, and – according to Lacan – by the nuclear family. One cannot accept this proposition about the nuclear family uncritically, but what seems to be implied here is that the body-image or corporeal schema is the result of the internalization of the body-image of others, particularly the primary carer. Overall, however, what is significant about this body-image is that it is neither natural nor cultural, neither individual nor social; rather it is a threshold term occupying both positions (Grosz, 1990: 46). There are some resonances here with Braidotti's 'feminine corpor(e)ality', although in order to provide a workable theory of embodied subjectivity we would need to combine Braidotti's emphasis on materiality with Lacan's insistence on the symbolic. This might prove extremely difficult, not to say risky, since there is nothing that links Braidotti's female body to Lacan's feminine, except some residual and unresolved problem about anatomy. The problem is that the female and the feminine are not the same thing. Here the concepts of sex, gender and sexual difference all collide together. The meanings of these terms begin to escape us, and



they do so largely because they are decontextualized. It is only in the context of racial discrimination, religious intolerance, neo-imperial politics, and other concrete socio-economic determinations that we know what distinguishes sex from gender, that we understand the economy of sexual difference, that we come to grips with the material referents of the symbolic. The potential for developing a feminist theory of embodied subjectivity which could and would take account of race, class, sexuality and other forms of difference certainly exists. However, it is likely to remain permanently out of reach while we insist that sex, gender and sexual difference are foundational in some sense, either as categories or as sets of relations. In so far as the theories of the body I have been discussing rest on poststructuralist assumptions, they are clearly anti-foundationalist; although my point is that they are not really so because they work on the assumption that bodies are already divided into two mutually exclusive categories. Binary biological sex provides the basis for the cultural categories 'male' and 'female'. The shifting and unstable nature of the sexed identity proposed by Lacan is always mapped on to and mapped out in terms of a pre-existing categorization of sex. This may not matter, of course, if what we really want to do is to work out some kind of critical practice, that is a space for critical reflection on and political action around these issues, rather than a new metatheory.

However, as an anthropologist, it is the pre-existing categorization of sex – that somehow, in the hands of theorists, transmutes itself first into sexual difference and thence into gender – which is the stumbling block. Much new work on the gendering of body parts, bodily substances and social acts makes it clear that there is no one-to-one correspondence between sex, gender and sexual difference understood in the terms of Western discourse. As I suggested earlier, individual persons while having recognizable biological features, might not have discrete and singular genders in the sense that feminist discourse has conventionally understood that term. Anna Meigs has argued on the basis of her research with the Hua people of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, that individuals are classified by external anatomical features, but that they are also classified according to the amount of certain male and female substances they have in their bodies. These substances are thought to be transferable between the genital classes through eating, heterosexual sex and everyday casual contact (Meigs, 1990: 108–9). The binary categories 'female' and 'male' are thus not discrete ones and nor are they premised on the discrete binary categorization of biological sex differences evidenced by external genitalia.

The Hua insist that the gender of a person changes over their lifetime as their body takes on more of the substances and fluids transferred by the other sex. On the basis of what Meigs says, the Hua would appear to have a pre-existing categorization of sex, since they classify substances as sexed according to the kinds of bodies they originate in. Semen, for example, is a male substance. However, the question is how well are their theories of sex, gender and sexual



difference represented by theoretical models premised on European and North American folk models? Perhaps it does not matter that in order to make alternative gender models intelligible to our students, colleagues and readers, we have to rework them in terms which thoroughly misrepresent them. Thereby, I may add, making them appear even more exotic. But, there is an additional point because one of the things revealed by alternative models for thinking and living the connexions of sex, gender, and sexual difference is that European and North American models are probably not well served by the prevailing theories either. Many people find that their theories of sexual difference and their experience of gendered identities do not correspond well to discrete binary categories. There has been some recognition of this in recent theoretical work on gender where writers have begun to emphasize the performative aspects of gender identity and the possibilities that exist for the subversion of categorical identities.¹¹



This emphasis on performance is welcome, but it does not seem very revolutionary from an anthropological point of view. This is because ethnographic material suggests that gender categorizations are often based on roles – that is, on what women and men do – rather than on anatomy. The North American *berdache* is now a rather well-known example of a third gender categorization which counters the one-to-one equivalence of the binary categories of sex and gender; and a man most usually becomes a *berdache* by assuming the tasks and roles of a woman.¹² There is considerable emphasis in the anthropological literature on gender as performed and its relation to the symbolic construction of gender. More recent work stresses that these different aspects of gender are perhaps best seen as mutually co-existent, but sometimes conflicting, models of or discourses on gender. Where discourses exist that focus on the absolute and irreducible nature of sexual difference, there is no particular reason necessarily to privilege them over other discourses or to accord them some kind of foundational status. What is essential is to examine those contexts in which certain discourses become appropriate and powerful. Marriage ceremonies, for example, are sometimes situations in which sexual difference is stressed. Philosophical discussion may produce a very different account, underplaying the role of women and men in biological reproduction, and emphasizing their essential similarities, especially as through the course of biographical time. Ethnographic accounts often give a very vivid sense of people's perceptions of their 'lived anatomies' and of how understandings of bodies, gender identities and sexual difference are given substance through involvement in repetitive daily tasks and through the concrete nature of social relationships. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that age, class, race, sexuality and religion completely alter the experience of a 'lived anatomy', of what it is that sex, gender and sexual difference signify. What performance is all about, of course, is gender relations.

'Gender relations' is not, however, a term widely used by theorists who derive their inspiration from poststructuralism and/or from the

writings of Lacan. Conversely, we should note that anthropologists rarely use the term 'sexual difference' unless they mean biological sex, and they never use the phrase 'sexual relations' unless they mean sexual intercourse. We can see once again how easy it is for us all to talk past one another. This is particularly the case when we think about performance and gender relations, and the connexion of both to a notion of embodied subjectivity.

Lacan explicitly states that the subject divided in language is a subject constituted in language, but by language he does not mean social discourse, he means instead a system of signification, a system of signs. More problematic yet, is the fact that the Lacanian subject should not be confused either with the person or with the self. The assumption of a sexed subject position is a prerequisite for agency and for self-identity, and as such subjectivity is an attribute of the self, but subjects are not individuals. It is for this reason that Lacanian ideas about the constitution of subjectivity – in spite of the liberating release they provide from Cartesian views of the subject and its role in the production of knowledges – are likely to give us very little insight into the experience of being a gendered individual. To do that, we would need to link Lacanian ideas about the constitution of subjectivity to social discourses and discursive practices. This is precisely what a number of feminists have tried to do, most notably perhaps Teresa De Lauretis (1986). The issue here, of course, is that the sexed subject and the gendered individual are not one and the same. There is a gap and it is this gap which the notions of *embodied subjectivity* and *corpor(e)al femininity* are designed to fill.

De Lauretis tries to bridge the same gap by stressing notions of intersubjectivity and relationality. She makes use of the insights of Lacanian theory, but her concern is with an 'I' understood as a complicated field of competing subjectivities and competing identities. This 'I' is most certainly a concrete individual and one who is engaged in relations with others. This view of subjectivity does not privilege gender over all other forms of difference, but because of its stress on intersubjectivity and on social relations, it is perfectly compatible with a notion of embodied subjectivity, as well as with ideas about performance. De Lauretis argues convincingly that differences between women may be better understood as differences within women. In other words, that the differences of race, class, sexuality and so on are constitutive of gender identity. As De Lauretis says:

The female subject is a site of differences; differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these together and often enough at odds with one another . . . once it is understood . . . that these differences not only constitute each woman's consciousness and subjective limits but all together define the female subject of feminism in its very specificity . . . these differences . . . cannot be again collapsed into a fixed identity, a sameness of all women as Woman, or a representation of Feminism as a coherent and available image. (1986: 14–15)

Difference is, of course, a relational concept, and it is always experienced relationally in terms of political discrimination, inequalities of power and forms of domination. There is, therefore, nothing useful to be said about gender outside of the concrete specificity of gender relations. This very specificity guarantees that gender itself does not exist outside of its material and symbolic intersections with other forms of difference. In fact, I would suggest for the time being that we might be better off working back towards sex, gender, sexual difference and the body, rather than taking them as a set of starting points. If our *universal particularity* is to be significant, and if we are to achieve anything as a *collective singularity*, then we might best strive towards an understanding of embodied subjectivity which does not privilege gender and sexual difference unduly just because we are so uncertain about what else it is, if anything, that we share.



Notes

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- 1 This paper was originally presented at a conference on feminist theory at the University of Essex in February 1993. My inspiration for publishing the piece in this form comes from my reading of Nancy Miller's attempt to explicate the politics and contingencies of identity and location (1991). I am also grateful for Marianna Torgovnick's discussion of the use of the pronoun 'we' (1990: 4).
- 2 See Moore (1988: 13–30), MacCormack and Strathern (1980), Strathern (1984), Rosaldo (1980).
- 3 One such concept was the family; Amos and Parmar (1984), Bhavnani and Coulson (1986), Collins (1989; 1990).
- 4 The literature is very extensive, but see Epstein and Straub (1991), Williams (1986), Garber (1992) for examples from literature, anthropology and history.
- 5 Levi-Strauss (1969) first identified the flesh/bone complex. See, for example, Diemberger (1993) and for further discussion Moore (1993).
- 6 Again, the literature is large, but see Sanday and Goodenough (1990), and Atkinson and Errington (1990) for examples.
- 7 See, for example, Harding (1987).
- 8 Most notable in this regard is the work of French feminists, particularly Kristeva (1980) and Cixous (1980; 1986). Anglo-American scholars are also involved in this move, but they proceed from different premises, and criticisms of the French school abound. See, for example, Suleiman (1986), Gallop (1988), Burke (1980), Rich (1976), Conley (1984), Stanton (1986), Spivak (1992), Silverman (1988), Delphy (1975), Grosz (1989).
- 9 Brennan (1989), Schor (1989).
- 10 Butler (1990: chap 3) argues that Foucault's position provides for a critique of Lacanian and neo-Lacanian theories. On this basis, she criticizes Kristeva's view of the maternal body as pre-symbolic, but without apparently recognizing the perils of her own neo-Foucauldian position.
- 11 See, for example, Butler (1990) and Garber (1992).
- 12 Williams (1986); Whitehead (1981); Roscoe (1988).

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