

# CURRENT CONTROVERSIES IN FEMINIST THEORY

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Mary G. Dietz

*Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota, 267 19th Avenue S.,  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; email: dietz@polisci.umn.edu*

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■ **Abstract** Over the past two decades, academic feminism has differentiated and fragmented substantially in light of a wide range of new approaches in theory. This overview and assessment of the wide, diverse, and changing field of feminist theory gives particular attention to contestations surrounding the political theorizing of gender, identity, and subjectivity. Three divergent and oppositional perspectives—difference feminism, diversity feminism, and deconstruction feminism—frame current discussions regarding the “construction” of the female subject; the nature of sexual difference; the relation between sex and gender; the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.; and the significance of “women” as a political category in feminism. The problem of epistemic identification (locating or dislocating the female subject, analyzing gender difference, politicizing identity) is also a central element in the theorizing of feminist politics, multicultural citizenship, justice, power, and the democratic public sphere. Within this domain, we find equally intense debates among feminist theorists concerning **the meaning of feminist citizenship and the politics of recognition**, as well as the relations between gender equality and cultural rights, feminism and multiculturalism, democracy and difference. Although the field is far from convergence even on the meaning of feminism itself, we might take its current state as a sign of its vitality and significance within the discourses of contemporary social and political theory.

## INTRODUCTION

Before assessing current controversies in the domain of academic feminist theorizing, it is important to recognize that feminism is a historically constituted, local and global, social and political movement with an emancipatory purpose and a normative content. It posits a subject (women), identifies a problem (the subjection and objectification of women through gendered relations), and expresses various aims (e.g., overturning relations of domination; ending sex discrimination; securing female sexual liberation; fighting for women’s rights and interests, raising “consciousness,” transforming institutional and legal structures; engendering democracy) in the name of specific principles (e.g., equality, rights, liberty, autonomy, dignity, self-realization, recognition, respect, justice, freedom). As a historical movement, feminism is geared toward action-coordination and social

transformation, interrogating existing conditions and relations of power with a view toward not only interpreting but also changing the world. Consequently, the philosophical and analytical debates that arise from feminist theorizing are unavoidably political (not purely philosophical), insofar as every emancipation project that aims toward freedom must undertake the historical and theoretical analysis of power, and every theoretical project that arises out of real, material contexts of action must speak to the political and ethical dimensions of transformation and change. In the face of the world diversification of the feminist movement over the past 20 years, Western feminist theory (a problematic category in itself) has been forced or encouraged to think through the limitations of previous North Atlantic, Anglo-American, second-wave formulations that were largely untouched by the histories of women not of the West, and the work of African, South Asian, and Middle Eastern scholars. Consequently, and in its most salutary manifestations, contemporary feminist theory is becoming less unthinkingly Western and more thoughtfully Western, more global, more comparative, and more democratic in its efforts to grasp the complexities of human cultures, social orders, and practices as it addresses women in the world. Yet, at the same time, the conflict of interpretations that appears to be a permanent feature of current feminist theory has not produced anything like a smooth alignment with the social and political movement called feminism, wherever it is practiced in the world.

Over the past two decades within the academy, feminist theory has transformed substantially in light of a wide range of intellectual and philosophical discourses and new approaches in theory. Feminist theoretical contestations have moved well beyond the ideological terms “liberal,” “socialist,” and “radical” that used to frame them (Jaggar 1983, Tong 1989). Of course, feminist theory and gender studies are themselves part of this range of new theoretical approaches; but one notable trait of feminist theory has been its tactical capacity to appropriate and deploy various, often irreconcilable, methods and theories in the course of engaging with its own subject matter. These theories emanate from numerous forms of contemporary critique and include critical theory, discourse ethics, political liberalism, analytic philosophy, hermeneutics, structuralism, existentialism, phenomenology, deconstruction, genealogy, poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, cultural studies, language analysis, pragmatism, neo-Marxism, and post-Marxism. Many feminist theorists deploy inventive combinations of these discourses and methods, creating their own hybridized critical-interpretive positions; but it would be a mistake to assume (and inadvisable to wish) that their various positions ultimately or coherently conjoin under “feminist” as a unitary category. There is today, for example, no agreement in feminist theory about the meaning and status of the concept “women” or “gender identity,” nor even consensus about how to appropriate gender as a useful category of analysis (Scott 1988a, Nicholson 1994, Carver 1996). Thus, what really exists under the standard rubric of feminist theory is a multifaceted, discursively contentious field of inquiry that does not promise to resolve itself into any programmatic consensus or converge onto any shared conceptual ground. Whether or not this is a welcome situation in the long

term, it is certainly a sign of the dynamism and vitality that mark feminist theory today.

## CONSTRUCTING THE STATUS OF “GENDER”

Despite the multifarious divergences within academic feminism, one general conceptual strategy seems to have informed its theorizing since the mid-1970s: the articulation of gender as a phenomenon separate from but related to biological claims of natural sex difference between men and women. The latter view is itself a by-product of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science of reproductive physiology, which located sex difference in the male and female anatomies (Schiebinger 1989, Laquer 1990). The disentanglement of the concept of gender from the dichotomous variable of biological sex, with which it had previously been considered synonymous, was an emergent property of second-wave feminist philosophy and social science research ever since Beauvoir's (1949) celebrated formulation, “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” Within social science research, the first systematic articulation of gender as a formal category of critical feminist analysis appeared in Rubin's (1975) structuralist anthropological account of a “sex/gender system.” Drawing on Freud, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan, Rubin specified certain cultural and institutional mechanisms that transform biological males and females into a gender hierarchy (and a corollary heterosexual disposition) that subordinates women. What is important here is the operating premise behind this particular moment in the development of analytic feminism. As Lovenduski distills it (1998, p. 337), “sex and gender are analytically distinct, gender is relational, and the concept of sex is meaningless except when understood in the context of gender relations.”

The political significance of the conceptual innovation regarding gender can hardly be overestimated. Under this argument the supposedly natural relation of “male and female” could be theorized as the product of specific social, cultural, historical, and discursive processes, a move that throws into question the very concept of naturalness as well as the meaning of social construction (Butler 1987, 1990; Nicholson 1990). Furthermore, the sex/gender system that this hitherto “natural” relation represented could now be theorized as a social condition constituted through relations of power, thus open to critique and the possibility of change. Although not all modes of feminist theorizing abandoned biological foundational or essentialist arguments, the “social constructivist” framework for understanding gender became integral to contemporary feminist discourses and research programs across the social sciences (e.g., Chodorow 1978, Gilligan 1982, Ferguson 1984, Keller 1984, Fausto-Sterling 1985, Klein 1986, Scott 1988a, MacKinnon 1989), and in the interpretation of Western political theory and philosophy (e.g., Okin 1978, Elshtain 1981, Pitkin 1984, Brown 1988, Di Stefano 1991, Coole 1993, Lloyd 1993). However, despite refinements in the notion of gender as a social construction constituted by and constituting a culture, a system, or a specific structure

of relations, in feminist theory the concept remains, as Butler writes (1990, p. 16), “a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time.” Indeed, notwithstanding the constructivist turn and the proliferation of “gender studies,” feminist theorists today regularly, and often radically, disagree over the practical-normative significance of maintaining a conception of gender as, on the one hand, a binary configuration of masculine/feminine or male/female rooted in the idea of gender or sexual difference or, on the other hand, as a process or an effect of discourse that is constantly in production and therefore changeable and fluid. As various formulations of gender and sex and their relation to difference began to emerge in the 1980s, they moved feminist theory toward what was widely understood as a “crisis of identity” within the field (Alcoff 1988).

### **From Gender to Subjectivity: the Controversy over “Women”**

Within a philosophically diversified and politically volatile context, perhaps the most pressing issue in feminist theory during the 1980s and 1990s was how (and whether) to construct a subject of feminism under the category of woman or women. Indeed, of all the concerns that have accompanied the conceptualization of gender over the past two decades, none have produced more theoretical divisiveness than the effort to rethink the meaning of gender difference, or the idea of the feminine within sexual difference, as a social, cultural historical, and psychosymbolic phenomenon. The controversy can be framed in the form of two questions: Is there a coherent concept of woman that stands prior to the elaboration of women’s interests or point of view, or a concept of the feminine that functions as a symbolic unconscious? If so, what epistemic identity or meaning adheres to such concepts of subjectivity?

To put matters schematically, we might cast the current controversy over woman (or “the subject”) in terms of three dominant perspectives that have developed over the past two decades of feminist theorizing: difference feminism, which is itself divided into “social” and “symbolic”; diversity feminism; and deconstruction feminism. Difference feminism, whether social or symbolic, is preoccupied with revaluing “women” or the feminine in order to affirm a positive account of the female side of the gender binary or the female aspect of sexual difference. Both forms of difference feminism theorize the tenacity of gender identity as male/female difference and locate women’s subordination or the repression of women’s agency within a social or symbolic system of gender bifurcation rooted in psychological relations or psychic structures. Both also appeal, though with different emphases, to the female body, the maternal, or women’s universal oppression as unique means of access to ways of knowing in the world or speaking/being within the patriarchal system.

Primarily in opposition to social difference feminism, diversity feminism challenges, both philosophically and politically, the notion of a female subject and the very coherence of the concept of “woman.” Diversity feminism complicates and multiplies the concept by considering race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other

ascriptive identity categories. In effect, diversity feminism questions the primacy of sexual or gender difference and its elision of other collective forms of difference and identity.

Deconstruction feminism argues for dismantling gender's inhibiting polarities of male and female altogether. This perspective rejects any notion of an a priori female subject grounded in a presexed body, any concept of "woman" as the foundation of a feminist politics, or any conception of sexual difference that instantiates the feminine or a presumptive heterosexuality as the privileged locus of ethics or existence. From the deconstructive perspective, neither sex nor the body are brute, passive, or given; they constitute systems of meaning, signification, performance, reiteration, and representation. Thus, instead of inscribing sex as an essential, biological, or psychically foundational category and gender as a social construction, deconstructive feminism rejects the opposition between sex and gender, essentialism and constructivism, altogether.

Of course, given the academic multiplicity of feminist theory, there are important theoretical variations not only within difference feminism but also within diversity and deconstruction feminisms. Indeed, the effort simply to name, categorize, and review the alternatives has become a small industry in the literature (e.g., Echols 1983; Harding 1987a; Moi 1987; Alcoff 1988; Hawkesworth 1989; Snitow 1989; Braidotti 1991, 1994; Ferguson 1991; Grant 1993; Grosz 1994; Coole 1994; Nicholson 1994; Fraser 1997; Arneil 1999; Kruks 2001). (Feminist theory is extremely self-conscious.) The stakes in these debates are, however, every bit as practical and political as they are categorical, analytical, and philosophical. As Butler puts it (1990, p. 5), "In the course of this effort to question 'women' as the subject of feminism, the unproblematic invocation of that category may prove to *preclude* the possibility of feminism as a representational politics." Or, as Nicholson asks rhetorically (1994, p. 100), "Does not feminist politics require that the category *woman* have some determinate meaning?" Hence, the controversies over sexual difference, gender identity, and the concept of woman in feminist theory, as well as the politics of the difference, diversity, and deconstruction perspectives, require closer examination.

## THE SUBJECTIVITY PROBLEM IN FEMINISM: THEORIES OF DIFFERENCE

Not the least of the controversies within feminist theory involves the confusion that attends the theorization of gender or sexual "difference." Any effort to make sense of this term must begin with recognition of two separate, though distantly related, approaches within the field. The first approach is the social difference feminism of primarily Anglo-American theorists who understand gender in terms of its social or psychological construction and often rely on empirical descriptions regarding gender development and the internalization of norms. The second approach is the symbolic difference feminism of primarily French theorists whose projects begin psychoanalytically, exploring the effects of sexual difference within

the unconscious, the symbolic, and the imaginary domains. As Zakin points out (2000, p. 22), these two logics of difference feminism need not be incommensurable, but they do tend to operate in different fields of reality (historical-material and symbolic-psychical) that rarely overlap at the level of critical commentary within feminist theory (but see Eisenstein & Jardine 1980, Meyers 1992, Butler 1994, Zakin 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that the controversy over “difference” bifurcates into two separate literatures, with diversity feminists responding primarily to social difference feminism and deconstruction feminists responding primarily to symbolic difference feminism.

## **Difference Feminism I: Gender as Social Reality and Feminist Standpoint**

The dominant discursive context of Anglo-American feminist theorizing in the late 1970s through the early 1980s was forged out of second-wave feminism, including the existential feminism of Beauvoir (1949), the liberal feminism of Friedan (1963), the radical feminism of Millet (1970), the socialist-Marxist feminism of Rowbotham (1972), the psychoanalytic feminism of Mitchell (1973), and other “women’s liberation” writers of the 1960s and early 1970s. In response to the dominant concepts and categories of these diverse literatures (e.g., patriarchy, androgyny, misogyny, consciousness raising, sisterhood), socialist-feminist critiques of capitalist patriarchy and “dual-systems” theory (Young 1981), and radical Beauvoiresque proclamations about child bearing, family life, and the role of wife and mother as the site of woman’s oppression, a new perspective on “the woman question” emerged. We now have a series of terms to identify it: feminist standpoint theory, standpoint epistemology, cultural feminism, social feminism, gynocentric feminism, woman-centered theory, and difference theory. Social difference feminism advances insights variously drawn from (or combining) dialectical and Marxist historical materialism (O’Brien 1981, Hartsock 1983, MacKinnon 1983); the object-relations school of psychoanalytic theory (Chodorow 1978, Flax 1980, Hartsock 1983); cognitive development analysis and moral psychology (Gilligan 1982); social psychology and situational sociology (Miller 1976, Smith 1987); interpretive social science (Rose 1983, Harding 1986); and the literatures on female spirituality and bodily essence (Rich 1976, Daly 1978). The collective aim of these theorists is to thematize a feminism rooted in the realities of women’s lives and in ways of knowing or being that flow from women’s experiences (Harding 1987b) or from the female body (Rich 1976).

The most systematic account of social difference feminism’s epistemology is that of Hartsock (1983, 1987), with whom the term feminist standpoint is most closely associated. The idea of a feminist standpoint (or standpoint feminism) became something of a flagship or, to paraphrase MacKinnon (1987, p. 151), an epistemic term of art for a sector of academic feminist theory. In developing the feminist standpoint, Hartsock (1983, 1987) posits (*a*) a historical-materialist thesis indebted to Marx but attuned to gender rather than class analysis; and (*b*) an

object-relations psychology influenced by Chodorow (1978) and Flax (1980) that asserts a distinctively female self attuned to connection rather than separation, continuity rather than dissociation, and relational knowledge rather than abstract reason. Accordingly, Hartsock notes a profound structural difference between the “lived realities” of women and of men in a society structured by compulsory heterosexuality and masculine domination. Within this materialist framework, Hartsock (1987, p. 164) finds an epistemological consequence: The “double aspect” of women’s lives is the basis for a particular “understanding of social relations” and a “privileged vantage point on male supremacy,” which can ground a powerful critique of the phallographic institutions and ideology that constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy. The task of feminism is to revalue female experience, search “for common threads which connect the diverse experiences of women,” and articulate a standpoint that offers “the possibility of a fully human community” grounded in an analysis of women’s claims to knowledge (Hartsock 1987, pp. 174–75; also Harding 1987b, 1991).

Despite the divergences between biological accounts on the one hand and psychological, social, or cultural explanations of women’s commonalities on the other, social difference feminists do share three theoretical strategies worth noting. First, at the level of social theory, difference perspectives all bring to the feminist project an implicit epistemology substantively geared toward accessing the true (if non-biological) nature and social reality of women. Second, at the level of conceptual analysis, social difference theorists all assume the coherence of an account of gender identity rooted in the difference between two sexes. Regardless of how they get there, in other words, persons are preeminently male or female in social difference feminism. The point is not to challenge the reality of this dyadic formulation or deny its logic as an analytical framework but rather to explore its social, moral, and political meanings and how it structures power. Within this theoretical perspective, to paraphrase Adams & Minson (1990), male/female simply “mark[s] the always already given gender in the category of humanity.” Third, social difference feminism does not merely register women’s difference from men; it mobilizes gender difference in order to shed a “distinct light” (MacKinnon 1987, p. 57) on epistemological issues, to espouse the superiority of women’s ways of knowing, or to reclaim their moral voice.

## **Difference Feminism II: Sexual Difference and Psychosymbolic Structure**

The dominant discursive context of Continental feminist theorizing of the 1980s was constituted by structuralist (Lévi-Strauss), psychoanalytic (Lacan), poststructuralist (Foucault, Deleuze), and deconstructive (Lyotard, Derrida) influences within the academy, and radical forms of practice in the European political sphere (Fraser & Bartky 1992). Together, these forces produced within feminist theory a unique complex of positions called French feminism, associated primarily with the philosophical and literary writings of Cixous (1976), Irigaray (1985a,b, 1993), Le

Doeuff (1989), and Kristeva (1980, 1982, 1984), although other significant feminist thinkers influenced by post-Marxist approaches emerged as well (e.g., Wittig 1976, 1980; Plaza 1978; Delphy 1984). Over the past two decades, French feminism has received wide attention within Anglophone feminist philosophy and literary, cultural, and film studies; numerous volumes are devoted to critical commentaries on and interpretive applications of French feminist psychoanalytic writings (e.g., Marks & de Courtivron 1980; Gallop 1982; de Lauretis 1987; Moi 1987; Spivak 1988; Brennan 1989; Butler 1990; Whitford 1991; Braidotti 1991, 1994; Cornell 1991, 1995; Fraser & Bartky 1992; Grosz 1989, 1994; Burke et al. 1994; Zerilli 1994; Deutscher 1997). French feminism has much in common with deconstruction feminism (particularly in its view of sexual identity as a linguistically or discursively mediated phenomenon); but its commitment to the concept of irreducible sexual difference warrants its inclusion under the category of difference feminism, its various strategies of displacement notwithstanding.

A distinctive aspect of French feminism, especially in the writings of Kristeva and, even more influentially, Irigaray, is the tenacity with which it holds to sexual difference as a primary critical-analytical concept and a fundamental ontology of human existence. Simultaneously appropriating and subverting Lacan's categories of "symbolic order" (or the "Law of the Father"), the "imaginary," and *jouissance*, Kristeva (1980) locates sexual difference in the semiotic (feminine) zone of the preverbal, pre-Oedipal maternal body, the time of mother/child bonding and maternal rhythms that precedes the (masculine) zone of the symbolic order, in which the child's desire of the mother is fully repressed. Kristeva (1984, 1986) deploys the symbolic and the semiotic to mark sexually differentiated forms of language; the latter retains logical connections and linearity, but the former "marks a point of resistance to paternally coded cultural authority," unbounded by linguistic rules and keyed to the expression of libidinal drives (Fraser 1992, p. 187). Thus, within the unconscious psychic roots of patriarchal power, Kristeva (1986, p. 294) identifies a transgressive "dissident" embodied in Woman as the sign of the feminine, if not in real, historically situated women as social beings. In this respect, Kristeva's conception of female subjectivity remains "firmly on the interface between the psychic and the political" (Braidotti 1991, p. 231), engaged in a perpetual poetic subversion of the logicosymbolic, phallogocentric code.

If Kristeva's thought exhibits the power of the French feminist psychoanalytic account of the tenacity of gender, then Irigaray's writing exemplifies French feminism's continuing insistence on "the fundamental nature and, indeed, the infrastructural status of sexual difference to human existence as a whole" (Cheah & Grosz 1998, pp. 3–4). It is within this position that Irigaray (1985b, p. 136) explores the specificity of woman symbolically as a "being-two" ("not One"). She invokes the metonymic figure of the half-open sex whose two lips displace the phallic signifier to become the basis for imagining "speaking (as) woman should" (*parler femme*), against the symbolic order. At the crux of this psycholinguistic maneuver lies the sexual difference between woman and man, or what Irigaray calls the different modes of articulation "between masculine and feminine desire



and language” (1985b, p. 136). Like Kristeva, Irigaray (1985b, pp. 110, 134) wants to model a new kind of linguistic exchange, a “feminine syntax” that would no longer privilege “oneness” or “any distinction of identities” but rather articulate itself within the unconscious as the play of metonymy. Irigaray’s earlier work was, therefore, directed toward theorizing the feminine and speaking the female body not as already given “essences” but as utopian categories that point toward or inaugurate a future within language and intelligibility. Her more recent work (Irigaray 1993, 1996) has shifted from the feminine within sexual difference to sexual difference itself, or the “figure of being-two,” in an effort to rethink rights and ethics. For Irigaray (1993, pp. 13–14; 1994, 1996), “the fecund couple” of sexual difference, as a “generative interval,” is an analytical category that serves to critique gender oppression and neocolonial globalization (e.g., Berger 1998, Fermon 1998), and to provide for the dissemination of new values and the transfiguration of cultural and sociopolitical life (e.g., Schwab 1998).

### **“The Issue Which Simply Refuses to Die”: Essentialism and Difference**

No philosophical matter is more tenacious within feminist theory’s subjectivity problem than essentialism, “the issue which simply refuses to die,” partly because its status within feminism cannot be readily resolved (Fuss 1992, p. 95, 1989; Heyes 2000). Both social and symbolic difference feminisms have had to face the problem of essentialism in the form of questions about whether it is possible or desirable to forward a collective concept of “women,” valorize a symbolic appeal to “the feminine,” or posit irreducible “sexual difference” without asserting some invidiously exclusive or normalizing metaphysical substance, natural life form, or deep structure with regard to these entities. This matter is particularly complicated because, with few exceptions (e.g., Rich 1976, Daly 1978), neither social nor symbolic difference feminists have sought recourse to a foundational concept of the essential female, or declared a natural or innate difference between women and men. Social difference feminism, whatever one makes of its efforts to articulate an identity for women, remains committed to a concept of gender as a social and psychological construction and condition (Alcoff 1988); and symbolic difference feminism, whatever one makes of its efforts to secure a place for the feminine, remains committed to the deployment of irony, tropes, literary devices, and a “strategic” essentialism that refuses to submit to the dualisms of Western “phallogorphism,” including the binary category of essence/accident (Fuss 1992, p. 108). Nevertheless, these commitments have not secured social difference feminism from diversity theorists’ charges of (latent) essentialism and universalism (see below). Nor have they rescued French feminism from attacks concerning its alleged metaphysical idealism (Burke 1981, Moi 1985); its psychologistic reductionism (Plaza 1978); its reliance on an inadequate political psychology and an inhibiting (Freudian) gender bifurcation (Leland 1992, Meyers 1992); its structuralist ahistoricism (Spivak 1988, Fraser 1992); and, on the matter of irreducible

sexual difference, its presumptive heterosexuality (Butler in Cheah & Grosz 1998). Thus, intense debates about “risking essence” proliferate within feminist theory, especially at the intersection of symbolic difference and deconstruction feminisms.

## MULTIPLYING THE SUBJECT: DIVERSITY FEMINISM

Social difference feminism’s tendency to appropriate the concept of “women” as an unproblematic universal invites charges of essentialism, raises the question of exclusion, and ignites the identity crisis within feminist theory (Lugones & Spelman 1983, Alcoff 1988, Fraser & Nicholson 1990, Grant 1993). Surveying the contemporary classics of feminist theory, Spelman (1989) argues that, beginning with Beauvoir, feminism was insufficiently attentive to ethnicity, class, and race and was captured by unexamined heterosexist assumptions. By presupposing the lives of white, middle-class, heterosexual women as paradigmatic for the situation of all women, Spelman contends, the dominant strains of feminist theorizing fail to appreciate how the social constructions of race, class, and sexuality profoundly alter the status of gender, complicate identity, and fundamentally pluralize and particularize the meaning of “women.” Difference feminism, it seems, could not adequately theorize differences among women (Hekman 1999) or incorporate cultural and historical diversity into the notion of standpoint that relies philosophically on a “speaking subject who is an autonomous, self-conscious individual woman” (Alarcón 1990, p. 363). Thus, at the level of practical politics and strategic organization, social difference feminism’s articulation of women’s experience and the quasi-prescriptive character of its generalizations appear limited and reductive, not only privileging whiteness and “consciousness” but also excluding axes of domination and oppression other than gender (Alarcón 1990, Fraser & Nicholson 1990). Cott (1986, p. 49) effectively summarizes the conceptual dilemmas of social difference feminism: “It acknowledges diversity among women while positing that women recognize their unity. It requires gender consciousness for its basis, yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles.”

In response to these Anglo-American inadequacies, redefinitions of female subjectivity begin to take form in what Rich (1976) terms a “politics of location” and Kruks (2001, p. 86) later calls “a politics of identity affirmation.” (The generic term is “identity politics.”) On both counts, feminist thinkers begin to press demands against the existing women’s movement and the “class biased ethnocentrism” (Alarcón 1990, p. 364) of mainstream feminist theory, calling for recognition, power, respect, and voice for women of color (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983, Lorde 1984, Trinh 1989, Anzaldúa & Keating 2002). Collins’ (1991) articulation of an “Afrocentric feminist epistemology” or a “Black women’s standpoint” is a systematic attempt to counter the whiteness of feminist theory in the name of a “politics of empowerment” rooted in a recognition of the marginality and outsider status of black women (see also Hull et al. 1982; Smith 1983; hooks 1981, 1984, 1989, 1990; Carby 1987; Christian 1988). Critiques of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1983) and, later, the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1990) further

challenge the hegemonic status of mainstream (difference) feminism's concepts of gender and sexuality (see also Wittig 1976, 1980; Fuss 1989; Phelan 1989; Card 1995). The whiteness and ethnocentrism of Western feminist theories of gender, sexual difference, and subjectivity are also scrutinized by postcolonial and Third World critiques that engage the "subaltern" (Spivak 1988), interrogate colonizing practices (Alexander & Mohanty 1997), and analyze the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local and historical contexts, with a view toward asserting the material and discursive processes of identity formation (Lazreg 1988, Mohanty et al. 1991). Finally, Haraway (1990, p. 201; 1991) subjects feminist standpoint theories to epistemological and technological interrogation, rejecting the notion of a single feminist standpoint and criticizing the "unintended erasure of polyvocal, unassimilable, radical difference[s]" within the approach first formulated in Hartsock's work.

Given the array of views within the diversity feminisms (which are themselves as theoretically and methodologically varied as the diversity they champion), it is difficult to identify a set of philosophical or political features that allow them to coalesce into a unified whole. Collins' (1991) approach, for example, has far more in common with Hartsock's (1983) standpoint theory than with Haraway's construct of social identity as fragmentary, contradictory, and ungrounded in color, which is closer to deconstruction feminism. Anzaldúa's (1987) cultural/group identity politics is considerably distant from Mohanty's (1991, p. 51) historical-materialist critique, which vehemently eschews the production of "a singular monolithic subject" out of putatively shared experiences of subordination, dependence, oppression, or victimization, or a preconstituted group identity.

Nevertheless, the diversity perspective, at least as I construe it here, exhibits four key features: First, it brings to the feminist project an emphasis on differences, pluralities, heterogeneity, and multiplicity in the theorizing of women, thereby rejecting the notion of a unitary group or singular gendered category (much less an experientially or morally superior gendered category). Second, it emphasizes the situated, specific, historically embodied condition of the female subject primarily with attention to so-called sociocultural identities based on ethnicity, religion, sexuality, class, color, and so on. Third, as part of a political project of empowerment, diversity feminism repeatedly invokes those subjugated and silenced "others" who are displaced, marginalized, exploited, or oppressed under structures of domination that privilege the white, male, heterosexual, Eurocentric, or Western subject. Fourth, in the diversity perspective, the articulation, negotiation, and recognition of previously submerged, negated, or dismissed identities or subjectivities (along a range of politicized differences not simply focused on women) are a central task of a feminist politics of resistance.

## Theorizing Subjectivities from an Epistemological Point of View

In the wake of these diversity feminisms, an "ensemble of epistemological and political conundrums" (Brown 1995, p. 43) enters onto the stage of academic feminist

theory in the form of encounters between social difference and diversity feminists. To paraphrase Haraway (1988) and Hartsock (1997, 1998), the problem is how simultaneously to hold to a radical and contingent account of knowledge claims and knowing subjects, thereby dissolving the false “we” of the feminist standpoint, while maintaining solidarity, across differences, among women in the name of a long-term or wide-ranging feminist movement. Is it possible to incorporate a concept of differences and diversity without ceding the privileged (truth) ground of a “women’s standpoint,” or the concept of sexual difference? As hooks contends (1989, pp. 22–23), “recognition of the inter-connectedness of sex, race, and class highlights the diversity of experience, compelling redefinition of the terms for unity”; but the challenge remains to determine exactly what the redefinition requires.

Confronted with this problem, feminist theory took a philosophical turn toward questions about the meaning of the self, the subject, and gendered subjectivity, as well as the content of a feminist epistemology (e.g., Jaggar & Bordo 1989, Code 1991, Gunew 1991, Harding 1991, Alcoff & Potter 1993, Scheman 1993, Campbell 1998). In response to Hekman’s (1997, 1999) challenge that standpoint theory address the question of differences, for example, Hartsock (1997; 1998, pp. 240–41) begins to reformulate her initial views in terms of the “real multiplicity and variety” in the epistemologies contained in the experience of dominated groups; and Collins (1997) appeals to “group-based experiences.” Haraway’s (1988) effort to achieve a rapprochement with standpoint theory replaces a unitary and privileged epistemological position with a concept of diverse and publicly communicable (but not necessarily privileged) “situated knowledges” and “partial perspectives.” Benhabib (1992, pp. 10–11) envisions an ethical continuum that moves from the “standpoint” of the generalized to the “concrete,” particularized, and distinct other(s); Weeks (1998, pp. 8,10) appeals to the feminist standpoint as an “inspiring example” for a collective feminist subjectivity, constructing “antagonistic subjects” and rooted in a sense of commonality with other women. Hirschmann (1992, pp. 338–39) develops a feminist theory of the variety and multiplicity of standpoints that recognizes “the interdependence of different kinds of oppression” and underscores the articulation of identity as a “collaborative enterprise” involving conversation and mutual recognition. Kruks (2001, p. 176), invoking Beauvoir, recommends an intersubjectivity “that can acknowledge and accept otherness” and respect difference as part of “the project of feminist world-travelling.”

These multiplications take place not only at the level of interaction among subject positions and subjectivities but also within the individual, theorized as self and subject. Alcoff (1988, pp. 432–33) forwards “a conception of the subject as positionality,” where identity is a matter of “choices” made “relative to a constantly shifting context” that is mutable, fluid, and persistently enacted. Anzaldúa (1987, p. 98; Anzaldúa & Keating 2002) introduces the concept of *mestiza* consciousness to capture identity not as a set of compartmentalized components (race, sexuality, class, etc.) but as a complex of border crossings and admixtures; similarly, Clough (1994, pp. 115–16) and Sandoval (1991) valorize identity as a hybrid “rather

than the unified subject-identity.” Alarcón (1990, p. 366) cites a “plurality of self” and “multiple antagonisms” in grasping the subjectivity of women of color; Haraway (1991) pursues the concept of feminist subjectivity and hybridity through the dislocated image of the “cyborg”; de Lauretis (1990) theorizes the subject as a process of embodied, material, interconnected relations, a multiplicity of positionalities and entanglements. Despite considerable differences in substance, all of these projects seek to describe the constituents of the subject(s) for whom feminism speaks and to assign a normative value to these descriptions, even as they acknowledge that privileging the subject, albeit a “multiple-voiced” subject, is not enough (Alarcón 1990).

The rapprochement between at least some social difference and diversity feminists means that gender is absorbed into a mixture of identifications and that feminist subjectivity is now a pluralized phenomenon woven of many different strands. Yet, despite its view of “women” as an identity complex of color, class, ethnicity, culture, sexual identity, sexuality, etc., this sector of feminist theory by no means abandons the “subject”; it merely complicates and situates it, so that the prevailing political question is how these variously situated knowledges, partial perspectives, or complex subjects connect or translate across “multiple intersecting differences” (Fraser 1997, p. 180) that are by no means limited to gender. As we shall see, “diversity theory” or “pluralist multiculturalism” (Fraser 1997, p. 185) and the attendant epistemological problem of “recognition” generate a great deal of controversy about the meaning, processes, and procedures of a (feminist) politics of identity.

Before turning there, however, we need to examine deconstruction feminism, the third perspective in contemporary feminist theory, wherein the feminist politics of identity theorizes its own negation by designating “women” as a field of differences that cannot be summarized through any descriptive identity content or category. Deconstruction feminism disrupts and dismantles all the multivocal, preconstituted categories (race, color, class, gender) and the “et cetera” (Butler 1990, p. 143) that diversity theories promote as culturally and politically paramount.

## **DISMANTLING THE SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTION FEMINISM**

The challenge to theorizing the “subject” in the category of women is perhaps most famously and controversially exemplified in the early writings of Butler (1986, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1993), especially *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). “Through [the] horizontal trajectory of adjectives,” Butler writes of diversity feminism (1990, p. 143), “these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete . . . This is a sign of exhaustion as well as of the illimitable process of signification itself.” Butler’s (1995a) denial of the presituated “voluntaristic” subject has produced intense and varied responses in current feminist (and queer) theory. More generally, the project

of undermining any notion of a prediscursive subjectivity or a free agent has been addressed under the label of feminism's relation to (and anxieties concerning) postmodernism (Lovibond 1989, Bordo 1990, Fraser & Nicholson 1990, Nicholson 1990, Flax 1990, Hekman 1990, Singer 1992, Walby 1992, Benhabib et al. 1995, Nicholson 1999, MacKinnon 2000), poststructuralism (Alcoff 1988, Fraser 1995), and postmodernity (Brown 1995). Although the sometimes pejorative designation "postmodernism" became a staple of theoretical negotiations in the 1980s and 1990s between feminism and post-Enlightenment deconstructive critiques, it is too vague and covers too many divergent thinkers to provide adequate purchase on the specific theoretical issues in these debates (see Butler 1995a).

Nevertheless, Benhabib (1995a, pp. 18–21), for example, draws on the work of Flax (1990), for example, to locate in the "postmodern position" the three theses of "the death of Man, the death of History, and the death of Metaphysics" and finds affinities between postmodern and feminist claims. Benhabib recommends a feminist "skepticism" in relation to postmodern orientations, lest "female emancipation" founder within post-Enlightenment paradigms that embrace uncertainty, flux, instability, and indeterminateness and forego a "regulative principle" on agency, autonomy, and selfhood. Benhabib's (1995a) conclusion, that feminism and postmodernism are not conceptual political allies, is emphatically shared by MacKinnon (2000) (who problematically allies postmodernism with multiculturalism); but these views have earned responses from theorists who see complementarities between feminism and various deconstructive or poststructural critiques (e.g., Butler 1995a,b; Brown 1995; Carver 1996; Fraser 1997; Scott 1988b; Webster 2000). This controversy remains one of the most vitriolic of current theoretical feminist debates.

What really seems to be at stake in the feminism/postmodernism confrontation is (a) the deconstruction of the subject in the category of women in feminist theory and (b) the formulation of a post-foundational feminist politics that shifts from the concept of an autonomous agent to the theorization of discursive relations of power, language games, significations, subversions, and performances. On these matters, the work of Butler is central, if not absolutely definitive (see also Riley 1988; Spivak 1988; Cornell 1991, 1992; Scott 1992; Grosz 1994; Brown 1995, 1997; Deutscher 1997; Zerilli 1998a).

The political focus of Butler's theoretical project is to submit notions of the subject, the body, sex, gender, sexuality, and materiality to "a deconstructive critique" geared toward displacing them "from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power." The unavoidable accompaniment to this project is the "loss of epistemological certainty" or of a strongly secured ontological identity as the source of agency, matters especially pertinent, as we have seen, to difference and diversity feminisms and to feminist politics (Butler 1995a, p. 51). Butler starts with certain key elements of Foucault's writings and moves beyond them to explore how the sexed-gendered subject is produced and concealed in feminism within a "heterosexual matrix" that perpetuates exclusionary practices, paradoxically undermining feminist goals (1990, pp. 5–6). This exploration,

which Butler calls a “*feminist genealogy* of the category of women,” involves a complex set of text interpretations ranging across the writings of Freud, Beauvoir, Rubin, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Wittig, and Irigaray. From it we can distill at least three critical points that decisively position Butler’s variant of deconstruction feminism (1990, p. 5).

The first point holds that there are no prediscursive, prior, or “natural” sites or foundations for either sex or gender on which to rest identity. In effect, “‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender” and hence is itself a “gendered category” (Butler 1990, p. 7; 1993). Second, gender is inflected with power and regulated through the institution of “a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality,” under the hierarchical and oppressive binary relation of masculine:feminine (1990, pp. 22–23). Yet, third, the political regulations and disciplinary practices that produce gender (as heterosexual difference) can be “displaced from view” through the “play of signifying absences” that are sustained through “corporeal signs and other discursive means” (1990, p. 136). This latter claim initiates Butler’s most original insight: Gender is “performative,” an intentional act or “strategy” that suggests a “dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (1990, p. 139). Performativity, as Butler articulates it, “is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed” (1996, p. 112) through subversive speech acts of parody, repetition, and recitation, as for example in the cultural practices of “drag,” cross-dressing, and the “sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” (1990, p. 137). These practices took on more paradigmatic significance in subsequent literatures than Butler initially intended (1996).

What counts here, for purposes of feminist theory, is the deconstruction that Butler’s concept of the discursive “performativity of gender” (1990, p. 139) effects on the subject, the body, and the category of sex, all of which, under these terms, are no longer construed (as they are among social difference and some diversity feminists) as entities prior to practices of signification. Rather, body, sex, desire, and the subject are effects of signification and discursive ordering, “under context, up for grabs,” circumscribed as political issues and productions of power (1995a, p. 54). Butler insists, however, that this radical reconceptualization of identity as an effect actually opens up possibilities of agency that are foreclosed by positions that underwrite the heterosexual matrix and “take identity categories as foundational and fixed” (1990, p. 147; 1995b, 1997a). And in her more recent writings, in a psychoanalytic turn, Butler (1997a, 2000a) endeavors to theorize identity as a complex disposition, figured through loss and ambivalence, melancholy and finitude. These moves have not, however, inoculated her critical genealogy against a wide range of friendly and unfriendly criticisms from feminist theorists who view the deconstructive project, and some (if not all) aspects of postmodernism more generally, as undermining the feminist commitment to women’s agency (e.g., Benhabib 1995a, Weeks 1998), identity and sense of selfhood (e.g., Di Stefano 1990, Hartsock 1990, Moya 1997, Kruks 2001), liberation (e.g., Fraser 1995), social reality (MacKinnon 2000), and social justice (Nussbaum 1999b). At this level, Butlerian deconstructive feminism, even once inflected with an affirmative gesture toward

subjectivity and agency (Butler 1997, 2000a), remains a terrain of contestation, and the “subject” in feminism—whether under the gaze of difference, diversity, or deconstruction—persists as a seemingly ineradicable, perpetually problematic specter haunting feminist thought.

## THEORIZING FEMINIST POLITICS

The essential problem and the *idée fixe* of feminist theory remains, to date, the problem of epistemic identification—locating or dislocating the subject, fixing or deconstructing the category “women,” discerning or dismantling the meaning of the feminist “we,” and theorizing or displacing “identities.” Thus, it is not surprising that feminist theories of politics, action, and the public sphere, their considerable variations notwithstanding, tend to map the epistemological/identification controversies concerning the self, the subject, and subjectivity that frame feminist theory writ large. Young (1997b, p. 18) implicitly captures this situation when she states, “Feminist politics evaporates . . . without some conception of women as a social collective.” It is a short step from there to Hekman’s (1997, p. 142) claim that “feminist politics are necessarily epistemological,” an understanding that is shared by many feminist political theorists but not endorsed by those who do not understand theory as geared toward the articulation of philosophical certainties or an epistemological a priori, including philosophically verifiable claims that assert a prior identity of the female subject (Mouffe 1992; Brown 1995; Fraser 1997; Zerilli 1998b, 2000; Heyes 2000; Dietz 2002). Political theorists of the latter type tend to understand identity not formally or philosophically, as prior, for example, to history, economy, culture, or society, but rather as interpretable only through this complex of elements and in relation to human practices and the effects of power. Nevertheless, within current feminist theories of politics, we can indeed see the epistemic problem defining the boundaries and circumscribing the contours of some of the issues at hand. The epistemological debate over “difference” and “diversity” has translated into an extensive literature concerning feminist conceptions of citizenship and ethics, the politics of group difference, representation, and multiculturalism, and the norms of democratic discourse.

One of the most salient features of contemporary feminist theories of politics is their shared commitment, in principle, to the concept of democracy, despite the historical and political reality of women’s subjection, subordination, underrepresentation, and disenfranchisement as citizens within modern democratic polities (Pateman 1989; Mendus 1992; Phillips 1991, 1993, 1995). Insofar as feminist theorizing understands itself not only as an interpretive project but also as a project of emancipation, it has sought to articulate problems of democracy with a view toward strategies of representation and participation, collective agency and freedom, that are cognizant of feminist principles and goals. As Pateman argues (1989, p. 223), “a ‘democratic’ theory and practice that is not at the same time feminist merely serves to maintain a fundamental form of domination and so makes a mockery of the ideals and values that democracy is held to embody.” As we have seen, however, the crucial conceptual coordinate “feminist” that Pateman advances is contentious,



and so are the theoretical projects that appropriate and deploy it within the current context of feminist democratic political theory. The contestations roughly follow the epistemic terms of difference, diversity, and deconstruction, only now they are translated into the theorizing of citizenship, representation, multiculturalism, democratic discourse, and political action.

## Citizenship as Gender(ed) Difference: Women in the Public Sphere

Insofar as social difference feminism is a politics as well as an epistemology, it challenges conventional liberal-egalitarian feminist theories, predominant in the 1970s, that locate women's political emancipation in gender "equity," or in the elimination of invidious gender distinctions between men and women and hence in the minimizing of gender difference itself (e.g., Okin 1989a). On the other side of what came to be known as the debate over "equality versus difference" (e.g., Okin 1989a, Young 1990, Phillips 1991, Bock & James 1992, Mendus 1992, Lister 1997), social difference feminists thematize women's identity and female relationality as the sources of a truly civil society and genuinely democratic citizenship. Like many liberal-egalitarian theorists, social difference feminists assume that persons are preeminently male or female, but instead of underwriting a concept of gender neutrality (a liberal "abstract" universal that they unmask as, in reality, a particular norm from the point of view of masculine domination), they challenge the "patriarchal conception of civil society" (Pateman 1989, p. 52). The alternative to masculinist citizenship is a sexually differentiated but equality-based conception of citizenship that would recognize women as women, valorize the female body, and privilege certain presumptively female social capacities (e.g., intimacy, attentiveness, connectedness, relational self-definition, reciprocity) and social practices (e.g., mothering, care taking, peace making). Jones (1990, p. 18; 1988) calls for a polity "that is friendly to women and the multiplicity of their interests," a polity that contests the allegedly masculine liberal concepts of justice and the male terms of citizenship, as already uncovered in feminist critical theory (e.g., Pateman 1988, 1989; Shanley & Pateman 1990; Okin 1989b; Lister 1997).

In its most programmatic political theoretical form, social difference feminism (like symbolic difference feminism) confronts the "repression of female sexual difference" (Cavarero 1992, p. 40) in an effort to assert the ethical and political value of the feminine against the masculine, the private against the public, and the ethos of care against the ethos of justice. However, social difference feminism emphasizes women's (socially constructed) practices, experiences, and ways of being and knowing, particularly in the realm of mothering, motherhood, and maternal thinking. Accordingly, women's roles in the private realm of the family and intimate relationships, especially that of the mother and child, are advanced as the source for a new public, political morality (Elshtain 1981, 1982; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1989; Held 1990), a revitalized public sphere (Elshtain 1981, Hartsock 1987), or feminist democratic discourse and action (Elshtain 1982, Jones 1990, Boling 1996). By claiming the "private woman" for the purpose of reinventing

the public realm, difference feminism attempts to reverse the normative relation that it identifies in patriarchal Western thought, where the private domain of the feminine is subordinate to the public domain of the masculine. In social difference feminism, then, the “male public” is “womanized” by way of importing putative female virtues into the political realm. Within this project, however, the original conceptual duality of public/private is not itself displaced but remains relatively stable, spatial, and fixed. Thus, social feminism may privilege female virtue, connectedness, and peace in order to challenge the hegemony of the autonomous and violent male warrior in the state-as-public-sphere (Elshtain 1987, Tickner 1992); but at the conceptual level, it dismantles neither the gender binary of male/female nor the spatial binary of public/private. **In many respects, the social difference approach to gendered citizenship, with its indebtedness to Gilligan (1982, Gilligan et al. 1988) and its emphasis on women’s unitary identity and values, the priority of the family, the private realm as the source of female political values, the care for children, the uniqueness of women’s voice and relational connections, and the concern for community, remains the dominant element in much Anglo-American academic feminism as well as in everyday feminist political discourse, including the discourse of electoral and institutional politics in the United States (E. Goodman 2002, unpublished speech).**

Within the context of academic feminist political theory, however, social difference feminism has met with a variety of criticisms, perhaps most importantly from Tronto (1987, 1989, 1993). Tronto complicates the ethic of care sociologically, along the lines of race and class, and politically situates care in relation (not opposition) to justice and democratic citizenship, thereby dismantling the social feminist gendering of justice as male and care as female (see also Bubeck 1995, Sevenhuijsen 1998). Difference feminism is also vulnerable to criticism from feminists who theorize more complex accounts of practices of responsibility (Smiley 1992) and women’s self-understandings and social lives (Walker 1998), contest social feminism’s reliance on the public/private distinction to conceptualize politics (Dietz 1987), and reject maternal thinking and the mother/child dyad as adequate models for **democratic, non-hierarchical, citizen politics and action (Dietz 1985, 1987, 2002; Phillips 1991; Mouffe 1992)**. Of course, social difference feminism’s homogenizing, generalizing, and sometimes communitarian impulses are also subject to critique from diversity feminists, who are “suspicious of the univocal concepts of power” (Acklesberg 1997, p. 170) that reside within any unitary or gender-specific concepts of citizenship, community, and politics that do not recognize social and cultural differences among women or formulate axes of identity beyond gender.

## **Citizenship in Contestation: Universal Feminism and the Clash of Cultures**

The tension between equality and difference, and the attendant issue of gender neutrality versus gender specificity, remain fundamental features of feminist

theorizing, perhaps most notably in Anglo-American law and legal studies (e.g., Rohde 1989, Minow 1990), theories of justice (Okin 1986, 1989a, Young 1990), and welfare (Fraser 1997; also Young 1997b). However, at the level of theorizing a politics of citizenship, the equality/difference debates reached an impasse in the 1980s, as new theoretical issues altered feminist theories of citizenship. Foremost among these problems is **the thematizing of diversity, or how political society, broadly construed, constructs persons and groups along multiple lines of identity, including gender, race, color, sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity, and nationality.** The recognition of group differences and cultural diversity poses both local and global dilemmas for feminism that harken back to the movement's opposition to hierarchical forms of domination and its abiding concern for sex equality: how to theorize a conception of justice (or equality of rights) that applies to all persons while still maintaining the integrity of and respect for particular, diverse groups and cultural collectives? The problem, in other words, is how to acknowledge pluralism as group rights or cultural identities without allowing the well-being or interests of any one group or subgroup to be secured unjustly at the expense of another's. Can universality be reconciled with differences? Can truth, rights, and moral equality be defined or theorized in a way to produce a universally, cross-culturally accepted point of view?

Within this context, some feminist theorists have begun to charge cultural rights theorists, or "multiculturalism" in general, with ignoring the rights of women and "inequalities between the sexes" (Okin 1999, p. 23), even as they forward the rights of groups or cultures, thus reinscribing the very structures of masculine domination that feminism resolutely opposes (Okin 1995, 1998; Nussbaum 1995, 1999a; MacKinnon 2000). Among the "perils of multicultural accommodation" (Shachar 1998, p. 287; see also Spinner-Halev 2001), these scholars argue, is acquiescence to the continuing subordination, exploitation, and oppression of women within all spheres of culture and society. Thus a recent book title asks, "Is multiculturalism bad for women?" (Okin 1999). At issue is not only the analysis of cultural or religious practices that the critics of multicultural accommodation deem oppressive of women's and girls' individual rights, dignity, and freedom (e.g., head scarves, veiling, clitoridectomy, polygamy), but also the position of women within cultures and groups. **Also at stake is the larger, political philosophical matter of whether (and, if so, how) a modern feminist universalism, attentive to cultures but also committed to abstract principles of justice and rights, can be articulated in the name of women** (Benhabib 1995b). Feminist theorists who answer in the affirmative (e.g., Chen 1995; Okin 1995, 1998, 1999; Nussbaum 1995, 1999a, 2000; Benhabib 1995b, 2002; Jaggar 1998; Ackerly & Okin 1999; MacKinnon 2000) do not necessarily agree on the foundations or suppositions that might inform such a project. (Nussbaum, for example, formulates a modified Aristotelian humanism, Okin defends a modified Rawlsian liberalism, and Benhabib offers a modified Habermasian discourse ethics of interaction.) But they all seem to share an orientation that envisions the possibility of a "global dialogical moral community" (Benhabib 1995b, p. 237; 2002) that addresses questions of justice and injustice in

the cultural and political conditions of women's lives, especially the lives of poor women in local Second and Third World cultures. Thus, the universal feminist claims about the conditions and rights of women rest on substantive conceptions of the social and public good that are binding insofar as they are subject to rational justification and are practiced concretely.

Yet it is precisely the notion of a "qualified defence of essentialism" (Okin 1995, p. 275), and a global ethical discourse grounded in principles of justice and rights for women *qua* women, that other feminist theorists of local and global cultures wish to counter (e.g., Lazreg 1988, Spivak 1988, Moghadam 1989, Trinh 1990, Mohanty 1991, al-Hibri 1999, Honig 1999, Euben 2001, Butler 2000b). At the very least, these "culture" scholars raise interpretive, methodological, and political concerns about what constitutes an adequate representation of women *qua* women, or a justifiable understanding of cultural practices different from one's own, or an appreciation of context, especially with regard to women of the Second and Third Worlds. The very terms that create an opposition between "women" and "multiculturalism," or reduce multitudes of cultures to a single "-ism," are also matters of concern (Norton 2001). Putnam (1995, p. 311), for example, argues that some feminist universalist projects are vulnerable to charges of "substitutionalism," or, in Alarcón's words (1990, p. 356), a "logic of identification," whereby First World (Anglo-American, middle-class, female) feminist scholars perpetuate the bias of Western theories of justice in the name of all women, especially those not of the West. Correspondingly, other critics charge that universal feminism does not confront "the parochial character of its own norms" or "consider the way in which feminism works in full complicity with U.S. colonial aims in imposing norms of civility" on Second and Third World cultures (Butler 2000b, p. 35; see also Ahmed 1992, Smolin 1995–1996, Sassen 1998, al-Hibri 1999).

These responses vividly replay some aspects of the difference/diversity feminism debates over the subject, now transferred into the politics of culture and post-colonial theory. In an extension of philosophical discussions of the relation between universalism and particularism, cultural feminists emphasize the importance of differentiating, along historical and cultural lines, social practices within and across cultures, including oppressive cultural efforts that cut across gender difference (e.g., efforts to control male sexuality) (Honig 1995). A critical feminist theory geared toward emancipation must, these feminists argue, be willing to get its hands dirty by creating concrete historical genealogies. For the universalists who wish to defend the gender binary as a category of analysis and identify inequality between the sexes as the principal aim of "most cultures" (Okin 1999, p. 13), however, these directives toward contextual specificity and respect for cultural differences threaten to slide into relativisms that claim "all cultures are equally valid" (MacKinnon 2000, p. 699) or to converge "with the positions of reaction, oppression, and sexism" (Nussbaum 1995, p. 66; 2000).

In sum, despite efforts to the contrary (Okin 1999), the universalist tendency to interpret the cultural feminist suspicion of regulative normative ideals as the

equivalent of a nihilistic, radical relativism, and the culturalist tendency to interpret the universalist appeal to abstract moral principles as the replay of Western hegemonic imperialism, have not eased the tension between feminism and multiculturalism in theory or in practice. Although this controversy between universalist and cultural feminists may appear to be headed toward a version of the equality/difference impasse, newly emerging projects within feminist theory seek to restage the concept of the universal (e.g., Zerilli 1998a, Butler 2000b) and explore the paradoxical aspects of the discourse of rights (Scott 1996, Brown 2000) in poststructuralist terms that neither simply reinscribe nor completely abandon Western discourses of modernity. Some of these projects recognize the complexity and discursive ambiguity that constitute the political struggles occurring within the gap between ideal consensus and nihilism, or between “recalcitrant cultural practices and abstract moral principles” (Euben 2001, p. 891). Hence, the aim of this dimension of critical feminist theory is to investigate how concrete, historical struggles employ both universal and cultural discursive strategies with a view toward social justice and freedom.

## DEBATING DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSES

In recent years, political theorists have been engaged in debates about what it might mean to conceptualize a feminist political praxis that is aligned with democracy but does not begin from the binary of gender. Along these lines, Mouffe (1992, pp. 376, 378; 1993), for example, proposes a feminist conception of democratic citizenship that would render sexual difference “effectively nonpertinent.” Perhaps the most salient feature of such conceptions is the turn toward plurality, which posits democratic society as a field of interaction where multiple axes of difference, identity, and subordination politicize and intersect (e.g., Phelan 1994; Young 1990, 1997b, 2000; Benhabib 1992; Honig 1992; Ferguson 1993; Phillips 1993, 1995; Mouffe 1993; Yeatman 1994, 1998; Bickford 1996; Dean 1996; Fraser 1997; Nash 1998; Heyes 2000; McAfee 2000). Although these theorists tend to share a conception of democratic politics that begins with the reality of adversarial interaction and conflict, they nevertheless exhibit considerable divergences in outlook when it comes to theorizing democratic politics. At issue in each of these outlooks, however, is not so much the legal-judicial question of how to safeguard differences or the institutional question of how to represent them (but see Phillips 1995, Young 2000), but rather the question of what it means to actualize public spaces and enact democratic politics.

Feminist theorists of democratic plurality roughly differentiate along two lines of concern. The associational approaches (see Dietz 2002, pp. 136–37) are closer to the epistemological project of diversity feminism, since they tend to begin from “politicized identity” (Brown 1995, p. 69) and then theorize (democratic) politics in terms of the proliferation, negotiation, and coordination of multiple, intersecting identities, selves, or groups. Associational projects are especially interested in the “politics of recognition” (Fraser 1997) and the conditions necessary

to achieve truly democratic discourse, communicative interaction, and solidarity (Fraser 1986; Young 1990, 1997b; Phillips 1995; Benhabib 1996; Bickford 1996; McAfee 2000). From this position, they contribute importantly to the expanding literatures concerning democratic deliberation.

In contrast, **agonistic approaches** reject identity-based formulations and are more closely related to projects of deconstruction. They theorize politics as a persistently constitutive antagonism that is disruptive and potentially subversive; thus, singular identities such as “women,” or even multiple identities such as “*la mestiza*,” are never pre-articulated but rather are the productions of speech and articulation, constantly vulnerable to contestation, transformation, and destabilizing maneuvers as performativity (Honig 1992; Mouffe 1992, 1993; Brown 1995; Butler 1997b,c; Zerilli 1998b). Thus, the category of women “is the empty signifier”—not the subject that precedes its claim, but the “articulation of a political identity” (Zerilli 1998a, p. 19). Although they theorize speech, discourse, and language as sites of signification, power, and performance, agonistic approaches do not thematize conditions for political deliberation or coalition politics, nor do they advance theoretical arguments concerning agreement, consensus, or even communicative competence within the field of democratic politics. Instead, they emphasize the dynamics of “democratic equivalence” (Mouffe 1992, p. 381) and “**performative freedom**” (Honig 1992, p. 226; 1993) that, through action, agonistically generate new and unpredictable identities. [Indicative of the interpretive elasticity of some political theory texts is the fact that both associational and agonistic theorists draw inspiration from Arendt (see Honig 1995, Dietz 2002), even as the former also exhibit affinities with Habermas whereas the latter acknowledge debts to Foucault, and sometimes to Wittgenstein (Mouffe 1992, Zerilli 1998b, Heyes 2000).]

Among the associational theorists, Young (1990, pp. 10, 167, 184) is best known for formulating “the politics of group assertion,” and the concepts of “group differentiated citizenship” and the “heterogeneous public,” all of which she mobilizes to call for political mechanisms that will provide effective recognition and representation within the public sphere of constituent groups that are disadvantaged, marginalized, or oppressed. Young’s political thought is perhaps the paradigmatic example of the effort to theorize (and stabilize) group difference and representation. However, it has been criticized by feminist democratic theorists of plurality who question the very effort to totalize, unify, or essentialize a “social group” (Phillips 1993, Mouffe 1993, Bickford 1996, Narayan 1997, Yuval-Davis 1997), particularly in ways that suppress differences within groups (Lister 1997) or do not adequately distinguish between identity and social position (Bickford 1999) or between **cultural and economic concerns** (Fraser 1997), or ways that threaten simply to recapitulate interest-group pluralism rather than political solidarity (Mouffe 1992, also Dean 1996). (For a social difference feminist critique of identity group politics, see Elshtain 1995.) At issue in these critiques of group identity or differentiation and the claims that emerge from them is a question of central importance to any theory that, in the wake of late twentieth-century social movements, considers

itself committed to a democratic project: Exactly what distinguishes a truly emancipatory struggle for identity or recognition and distinguishes it from a useless distraction, a bourgeois mystification, a solipsistic celebration, or a “wounded attachment” (Brown 1995, p. 52)? This question (and even the legitimacy of asking it) presses particularly hard both among and between associational and agonistic feminist theorists, who often disagree vehemently not only about what constitutes an adequate formulation of identitarian claims to justice or freedom but also about the very priority, centrality, and connectedness of some struggles of resistance in relation to others. How systematically to theorize this matter is also subject to dispute. Fraser (1997), for example, argues that the cultural politics of “recognition” has eclipsed the economic politics of “redistribution,” and she seeks to realign the balance between them. Both Young (1997a) and Butler (1997c) criticize Fraser’s distinction as overly schematized and inadequately attentive to the political potentiality of identity-based struggles as well as to culture as a key site of resistance.

Whatever the efficacy of a concept of group difference or the priority of a politics of recognition, a turn to models of a heterogeneous public, subaltern counter-publics, or a dispersed network of many publics (Benhabib 1996, p. 83; Fraser 1997) has moved feminist associational projects of democracy directly onto the broad “publicist” terrain of deliberative democracy and discourse ethics. Here, debates about what constitutes emancipatory, communicative interaction, democratic “talk,” and, more specifically, adequate processes and procedures for adjudicating rights, needs, and beliefs have galvanized the attention of theorists of democracy, multiculturalism, nationalism, and postcolonialism. Always alert to the ways in which seemingly egalitarian structures and practices can mask or legitimate domination and exclusion, feminist democratic theory brings a critical eye to the deliberative and discursive public sphere (Mansbridge 1990, Lara 1998, Lugones 2000). The contributions of Benhabib (1992) and Fraser (1989, 1992) are noteworthy because both, despite important theoretical differences (see Benhabib et al. 1995), have advanced critiques of liberal models of the bourgeois public in favor of discourse or dialogic models that envision democratic and feminist possibilities. Other associational theorists seek to counter the domination embedded within certain modes of (theorizing) communication by augmenting discursive intersubjectivity with complementary forms of dialogic interaction, including greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling (Young 1997b, Lara 1998), testimony (Sanders 1997), and listening (Bickford 1996). In this mode, some associational democratic feminists incline to theorize political discourse in an interpretive frame that recalls diversity feminism’s attention to relational subjectivity (McAfee 2000), as well as personal life narratives, experiential storytelling, and the partial critical perspectives of minority or Third World women (Lara 1998, Ackerly 2000). Others advance models of discourse that forward deliberative reasoning, argumentation, critical scrutiny, and the exercise of political judgment (Benhabib 1996, McAfee 2000). Hence, the necessary discursive and procedural elements within the democratic public sphere, if not the normative priority of communicative over strategic



action, remain matters of discussion and disagreement among associational democratic feminists.

The issues that perhaps loom largest between associational and agonistic theories of politics, however, involve **the emancipatory quality of language or discourse as politics** (nearly all of the associational and agonistic theorists eschew the psychosymbolic structural models of language that inform French feminism; see Fraser 1992). Butler (1997b), whose deconstruction feminism surfaces in other texts as agonistic democratic political theory, distances her own speech-act approach from the procedural and modified Habermasian conception of public sphere deliberative politics favored by Benhabib (1996; also see Kohn 2000, Webster 2000) and amended by Young (2000). As “agonists,” Butler (1997b) and Mouffe (2000) believe that the formation of subject positions necessarily takes place within complex webs of power relations that also mark permanent diversity within the semantic field. In this **agonistic view (which does not begin by aligning politics with a public communicative space of interaction)**, politics is essentially a practice of creation, reproduction, transformation, and **articulation (not coalition)**, wherein the rules of the game, as well as the players, are never fully explicit, stable, or fixed; and they are always constituted through acts of power (Mouffe 2000). The agonistic position asserts that the main question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power or aspire to undistorted communication, but rather **“how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values”** (Mouffe 2000, p. 100). Thus, agonists eschew projects that analyze the conditions surrounding and the procedures embodied in participatory communicative contexts, on the grounds that these projects misconstrue language and evade rather than confront the constitutive nature of power. Finally, within this account of power, the agonist locates the subject “neither as a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process” (Butler 1995a, p. 47). Simply put, associational feminists scrutinize the conditions of exclusion in order to theorize the emancipation of the subject in the public sphere of communicative interaction; **agonistic feminists deconstruct emancipatory procedures to disclose how the subject is both produced through political exclusions and positioned against them.**

This contrast in democratic theorizing brings us back to the central issue of contemporary feminist political theory: the status of the subject as a point of departure for feminist political theorizing. We return, that is, to the question of whether it is possible or desirable to determine a ground of the subject in feminism. And although one political theorist has suggested that it is time “to break the spell” that this epistemic picture holds over feminist theory and feminist politics (Zerilli 1998b, p. 455), this release is unlikely to occur anytime soon. Can feminist theory abandon its fixation on settling (and unsettling) the subject without giving up on feminism as an emancipatory political movement? Can feminism live without an ideal theory that provides regulative criteria for interpretation and political action? For now, responses to these questions exist only within the contestations that are the reality, and the vitality, of contemporary theories of feminism.



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