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Conjectures of a Confused Feminist: Destabilizing the Binary Construction of the Sex/Gender System

Sex refers to the biological material of our bodies. Hegemonies define our bodily material using the binary of either male or female sexed bodies. The construction of a dualistic sexed body simplifies, denies, and restricts the natural continuum of the human body's sexed variance by demanding a socially constructed identity of male or female. The sexed body, as historical and cultured, is already inscribed with a gender *and* a sex. By inscribing and limiting the definition for accepted/expected sexed body identities, hegemony establishes the biological justification to naturalize the hierarchal stratification of gendered bodies, as women or men. This dualistic construction of gender requires the binary construction of sex to reinforce the subordination of women on the basis of their historically essentialized nature as a physically weaker body defined through reproductive potentiality. Women (do we dare say feminists?), individually and collectively, challenge the patriarchal construction of their bodies as female (passive, weak, capable of reproduction) and of their inscribed identity as women (politically and economically marginalized/subordinated, socially restrained, submissive as wives, and dedicated as selfless mothers and wives).

I asked my mother, "What does being a woman mean to you?" She responded, "Being a mother." My mother explained that after giving birth, her identity as a wife, as a worker, as an individual each subsided to her identity as a mother. She became selfless. My mother sells her labor as a secretary. A client came into the office and she introduced herself as "Julie, Angie and

Hallie's mother." She is no longer Peggy Roberts, let alone Peggy Theurich (her maiden name). She is our mother. She is defined by her motherhood. Woman here means mother.

The gendered construction of the female body creates the gender woman vis-à-vis her positioning as potential mother and wife. Why? Patriarchal conceptions of women define gender in relation to the sexed body. We have a gender because of our sex. I am female. Therefore I am a woman, meaning the potential to be a mother, and within the heterosexism of institutional marriage meaning my potential to be a wife. Do I have a choice of recognizing my femaleness? Before I was born, the doctor (who was male) looked at my body, did not see a penis, and I became a female, while simultaneously named a potential woman. No one consulted me. I was just born with a body. And a man with a medical degree declared my body female because I didn't have a penis and I did have a uterus, ovaries, and a vagina – meaning reproductive organs. Doctors assign a gendered sex identity according to a preconceived socially defined sexed body:

They focus primarily on reproductive abilities (in the case of a potential girl) or penis size (in the case of a prospective boy). If a child is born with two X chromosomes, oviducts, ovaries, and a uterus on the inside, but a penis and scrotum on the outside, for instance, is the child a boy or a girl? Most doctors declare the child a girl, despite the penis, because of her potential to give birth, and intervene using surgery and hormones to carry out the decision.¹

This sexed body already came with a gender and my gender already came with a sex; call it a buy one get one free deal (or a rip off). My body became female because of its gendered genitalia and organs. The body's *genderitalia* establishes a sex. Genitalia become signifiers for sex, and sex a signifier for gender. The sexed material realities of my body render my gender woman and my sex female. None of this is natural. The development of technology and medical science as declaimers of truth provides doctors the social justification to perpetuate myths of binary sexed bodies by mutilating intersex children to fit within the normalized conception of the male or female body. The restructuring of the intersex body is required to maintain gender and

¹ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 5.

sex divisions, “Infant genital surgery is cosmetic surgery performed to achieve a social result – reshaping a sexually ambiguous body so that it conforms to our two-sex system.”² Doctors construct intersex bodies to fit within cultured and historical definitions of a dual sex reaffirming and protecting the binary of genders.

During the 1870s, new scientific technology provided doctors the necessary tools to decipher/define the bodily material of sexed/intersexed individuals. In 1896, British physicians “cleansed past medical records of accounts of hermaphroditism, claiming they did not meet modern scientific *standards*.”³ As medical practitioners defined intersexed bodies as the “other,” the doctors established the dualist construction of the normalized sexed body as male or female; “People of mixed sex all but disappeared, not because they had become rarer, but because scientific methods classified them out of existence.”⁴ Why did doctors at this particular historical and cultural moment define sex within a binary social construction?

During the last three decades of nineteenth century Western Europe, capitalist industrialization, urbanization, and modernization redefined the daily lifestyles of society. The resulting sexual division of labor through the designation of factory labor for able bodied males (physically stronger) and the maintenance of the home by females (reproductive bodied women) required strict dualistic constructions of sex and gender to justify the subordination of women in the public sphere as non-wage earners and economically dependent on men as well as women’s relegation to the private sphere as wives and mothers reproducing the next generation of wage laborers. Racialized patriarchal capitalism in the form of imperialized/imperializing hegemonies requires my sexed gender/gendered sex identity to reinforce social hierarchies of male superiority. But why?

² Fausto-Sterling, 80.

³ Fausto-Sterling, 39.

⁴ Fausto-Sterling, 39.

The Sex/Gender Dichotomy/Matrix and Polyversal Feminists' Critiques of Cultural Essentialism and the Racialized Sexed Gendering of the Nation

We are bodies. We attempt to define our bodies within a world which simultaneously constructs our bodily identity for us. We are racialized bodies inscribed with a sexed gender and a gendered sex historically fluid in meaning and constantly responding to particular socio-economic and political contexts. The racialized sexed body with a fluid gendered meaning is placed within a geopolitical border of the nation, defined through and by religious, ideological, and ethnic boundaries. Feminists, constructed within, across, and through geopolitical nationalized boundaries (*terroritories*), incorporate and centralize their personal and collective experiences as socially, culturally, and historically defined gendered female bodies in the resistance within and against racialized patriarchal capitalist imperialized/imperializing hegemonic forces.

The absence of discourse regarding colonialism, class, race, and color by white western feminists excluded poor women and women of color from the dialogue of feminism by silencing the alternative modes of subordination by mainly white supremacist, western forms of racialized patriarchal capitalism. The development of the liberal feminist movement in the United States constructed through white economic privilege reinforced the west's cultural essentialism by denying the plurality of women's experience across the world. This cultural essentialism produced a western liberal feminism applying white middle class women's particular experience as non-wage earning mothers and wives to *all* female bodies. By homogenizing all women as struggling against a single form of patriarchy (relegation of women into the private sphere as mothers and wives), white petite-bourgeois women marginalized and silenced the plurality of struggles faced by women of color and economically subordinated women across the globe.

As white liberal feminists attempt to deconstruct essentialized notions of gender within the west, these feminists simultaneously reinscribe cultural essentialism by silencing the experiences of women of color within racialized capitalist exploitation, occupation, colonization, and imperialism. Postcolonial feminisms respond to the cultural essentialism asserted by liberal western feminism and western militarized imperialism:

A postcolonial feminist perspective that strives to be attentive to differences among women without replicating such essentialist notions of cultural differences needs to acknowledge the degree to which the colonial encounter depended on an ‘insistence of Difference; on sharp, virtually absolute, contrasts between ‘Western culture’ and ‘Other cultures.’”⁵

The construction of difference based on the creation of the “other” as socially and culturally inferior justified colonial and imperial expansion as well as the assertion of western liberal feminism as “the” feminism. This essentialized focus on difference not only silenced the similarities existing in feminisms across the globe, but also homogenized national and cultural conceptions of both “the west” and “the non-west.”

As colonial imperialism curtails indigenous cultural practices, anti-colonial nationalist movements redefine conceptions of culture through the essentialized differences originally asserted by the imperial power. Anti-colonial nationalists have utilized the rhetoric of difference to redefine and reassert their “indigenous” cultures within the confines of cultural essentialism, producing “anti-colonial nationalist movements embracing and trying to revalue the imputed facets of their own ‘culture’ in these stereotypes.”⁶ As women within these imperialized/anti-colonial borders resist the gender and cultural essentialism of their bodies, the nationalized redefinitions of “indigenous” cultural identity in opposition to the imperial power “often depict culturally dominant norms of femininity” and “equate women’s conformity to the status quo with

⁵ Uma Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: a Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism,” Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Post-Colonial, and Feminist World, ed. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000), 83.

⁶ Narayan, 84.

‘the preservation of culture’ and cast feminist challenges to norms and practices affecting women as ‘cultural betrayals.’”⁷ Nationalist anti-colonial struggles usurp the gender presentation of the female body and use women’s gendered sexed bodies as declarations of cultural preservation.

During the 1979 Iranian revolution, “many women, even nonreligious, nontraditional, and highly educated women, took up the veil as a symbol of solidarity and opposition to the Shah.”⁸

Women’s solidarity with the revolution integrated the gender presentation of the female body as veiled (meaning culturally traditional) in order to visibly reflect opposition to the Shah’s imperial western influences. During the revolution, however, Khomeini began to implement restrictions against women and “the veil was once again becoming compulsory.”⁹

Despite the initial voluntary wearing of the veil as a form of protest against the “west,” “those with social power conveniently designate certain changes in values and practices as consonant with ‘cultural preservation’ while designating other changes as ‘cultural loss’ or ‘cultural betrayal.’”¹⁰ The veil became a material requirement for women’s lives and represented a gendered cultural presentation of the Islamic state in opposition to the culturally essentialized notions of the secular “west.” The gendered presentation of cultural preservation restricted and curtailed Iranian women’s life choices as a patriarchal theocracy redefined their “non-western” culture on the bodies of women. Today, the United States re-employs cultural and gender essentialism by redefining the gender presentation of Muslim women’s veiled bodies as a signifier for Islamic fundamentalists and the “haters of freedom.” This reciprocal cultural and gender essentialism uses the bodies of women to validate masculinized militarization in the form

⁷ Narayan, 85.

⁸ Nayereh Tohidi, “Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran,” *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991), 252.

⁹ Tohidi, 252.

¹⁰ Narayan, 89.

of economic imperialism, occupation and neocolonialism. George W. Bush, paternal protector of “democracy,” liberates the women of Afghanistan and Iraq, but throughout this whole process, the voices of these women are silenced. Muslim women’s gendered politicized bodies, usurped in rhetoric of their own cultural politics as well as the west’s cultural essentialism, contribute to the homogenization of Middle Eastern governments as patriarchal militarized Islamist states form the justification for the west’s masculinized imperial battles for “freedom.” But who, exactly, is this freedom for?

Women challenging the reintroduction of cultural norms by critiquing the patriarchal tendencies of the asserted national and indigenous cultural traditions are positioned as “‘cultural traitors’ and ‘stooges of Western imperialism.’”¹¹ The enforcement of difference through cultural essentialism establishes a restrictive dichotomy demonizing the culture and ideologies of the “other” with no acceptable boundary crossings. Imperializing forms of western pop feminism reinforce and reinscribe this cultural essentialism both at home and abroad. Pop feminism as a blend of liberal and deradicalized radical feminisms “advertises women in the u.s. as sexy – ‘free and equal’ – to third-world-southern and –eastern countries. The media moguls just forget to mention domestic battery and the glass ceiling and poverty rates among women here.”¹² Pop feminisms designed for export displace radical feminist critiques of male privilege by presenting a false construction of the gendered sexes through affirming western women as part of a professional class, completely free and independent of patriarchal institutions. Western patriarchal governments, reinforced by corporate media, construct the gender presentation of the female body as sexual and professional (visualize Britney Spears and Hillary Clinton) each

¹¹ Narayan, 85.

¹² Zillah Eisenstein, Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century (New York: Routledge, 1996), 116.

perceived as representing an independence to reaffirm the cultural superiority of the west's "liberation" of women. This liberation is not for every American woman, however.

Within the nation, "women become a metaphor for what they represent, rather than what they are."¹³ The racialized gendered body presented by Condoleezza Rice represents the achievements of racial and gender equality within the highest institution of our government - even though these "achievements" fail to be materialized in the everyday existence of women, women of color, and single women throughout the United States. Western women, and our female bodies, exported as propaganda, perpetuate the mythological truths asserted by our government while our everyday lives continue to be curtailed by racialized patriarchal capitalism; "More women enter government, and they still must find day care. There is a family leave act, and women still can't afford to take leave without pay. The gag rule was repealed, and federal clinics are being defunded and closed."¹⁴ The denial of the actualities of western women's plural and subordinated existences homogenizes perceptions of "the western woman" while concurrently promoting the internalization of a false radical feminist achievement within the United States. This construction of pop feminism exported as truth perpetuates cultural essentialist conceptions of the "west" while simultaneously alienating third world feminists whose feminisms become contorted within their own cultures as spawns of western pop feminism.

As feminisms across the globe pluralize the sex/gender dichotomy/matrix by articulating multiple sexes, genders, and patriarchies, feminists must also eradicate the homogenized cultural essentialist notions prevailing within, across, and through our multiple bodies, sexes, genders, cultures, religions, nations, and identities. By maintaining liberal western feminism as "the"

¹³ Eisenstein, 53.

¹⁴ Eisenstein, 119.

feminism, political movements by women across the world become marginalized and their valuable contributions to feminisms' inclusivity silenced. For example, liberal western feminism largely focuses on women's reproductive rights by demanding access to abortions, Chicana feminists, however, also recognize reproductive rights as integral to their struggle but "equal concern has been the forced sterilization and forced birth control that some Chicanas have suffered through state intervention."¹⁵ While reproductive rights remain central to both liberal western feminisms and Chicana feminisms, the absence of dialogue regarding forced sterilization within liberal white feminism reflects the need to incorporate a feminist movement of inclusion in order to acknowledge and address the particular experiences of women and the various needs of gendered female bodies within different and multiple national, religious, and ethnic constructs.

Rather than positioning feminist liberation within the rhetoric of liberal individualism and autonomy utilized by white petite-bourgeoisie liberal feminists, many Third World and Chicana feminist theories embrace the collective liberation of their communities as integral to their feminist struggle. Chicana feminisms incorporate not only a critique of the enforcement of gender, but also the subordination of their communities within racialized capitalism and neoimperialism, "Chicana feminisms proclaim the primacy of material conditions and advocate strongly the 'basics' required for human existence, such as adequate jobs, decent wages, good working conditions, child care, health care, and public safety."¹⁶ Despite the plurality of issues Chicana feminists advocate, gender remains a primary source of analysis; "Chicana feminisms

¹⁵ Aida Hurtado, "*Sitos y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms*," Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World ed. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000), 132.

¹⁶ Hurtado, 133.

struggle to incorporate diverse issues without losing the centrality of gender in all their battles.”¹⁷ Chicana feminisms represent a microcosm of the potentiality of inclusive polyversal feminisms across the globe, centralizing the critique of the enforcement of the sex/gender dichotomy/matrix while incorporating multiple socio-economic and political realities particular to the feminisms’ national, racial, class context. The basis of Chicana feminisms’ theorization involves “contentious confrontation,” however, not ideological unity. Differences do not form a basis of divergence and exclusion but rather discussion and debate, strengthening the Chicana feminists’ movement through dialogue and the incorporation of women’s pluralities. The theories of contentious confrontation, collective liberation, and constant self-scrutiny articulated within Chicana feminisms provide vital analytical foundations for polyversal feminisms across the globe.

The oppositional consciousness of Chicana feminists not only reflects their ideological positions, but also their physical and psychological locations, “By standing on the U.S. side of the river they see Mexico and they see home; by standing on the Mexican side, they see the United States and they see home. Yet they are not really accepted on either side. The U.S.-Mexico border becomes the metaphor for all the ‘border crossings.’”¹⁸ The dialectical nationality of Chicanas defies the geopolitical *terroritories* constructed through imperial military battles and annexations in which imaginary yet very real borders require a national identity subscription to one country. Chicana feminists ideologically and physically (meaning both their border crossing locations and their border crossing bodily’ blood/racial lines) challenge the construction of finite borders and identities within an increasingly nationalized militarized globe. The construction of *terroritorial* boundaries defined by essentialized notions of pure racial blood lines are protected

¹⁷ Hurtado, 142.

¹⁸ Hurtado, 144.

and sustained through the nationalized female's biological capability to reproduce, "just as women's bodies produce children who are part of a socially constructed family grounded in notions of biological kinship, women's bodies produce the population for the 'national' family or nation-state, conceptualized as having some sort of biological oneness."¹⁹ Nationalist governments require the gendered sexing of the female body, asserted biologically as a potential mother, to perpetuate racial purity within strictly constructed national borders. The gendered sex/sexed gender of women defined by the female body's reproductive potential to produce both social and national families curtails female sexuality by positioning women as mothers within the heterosexist institution of marriage. The essentializing of the womb as the center of female sexual acts and sexuality not only reinforces heterosexism through the reproduction of the family/nation, but also reflects the need for nationalist protection of heterosexist institutions of marriage to ensure the continuation of the racialized bloodline population (as well as reproducing wage laborers) within the boundaries of the national *terroritory*.

The construction of females, biologically asserted as women, sexually gendered to become mothers, protect and maintain heterosexist and nationalist bordered identities. By essentializing Serbian identity in opposition to Bosnian Muslims, the nationalized construct of a bordered *terroritory* confined solely to a pure Serbian bloodline resulted in territorial conquest, ethnic cleansing, and mass rape within Yugoslavia. The attempt to create a pure Serbian national *terroritory* positioned the gendered cultured female body as a source of national conquest. The sexualization of ethnic hatred and nationalism constructed on women's bodies positioned women (meaning bodies capable of reproduction) as "prime targets because of their cultural position and

¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation," Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World ed. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000), 169.

their importance in family structure.”²⁰ Fatima, a Muslim women raped during the war, recounted Serbian soldiers proclaiming that “Muslim women would give birth to Serbian children.”²¹ By carving imaginary national borders defined by and within racial bloodlines, gendered borders confine the female body to her sexed *genderitalia* as a potential reproductive mother of the family and nation.

War rape redefines and reconstructs gender at the site of the sexed and gendered body. By raping the female body, men enforce the gendered woman as passive and reconfirm the gender of the female sexed body as a potential mother of the nation. Simultaneously, rape reaffirms the masculinity of the body doing the raping while de-legitimizing the masculinity of the raped victim’s male family members for their failure to protect “their women.” In return, however, women often responded to the rapes by redefining and challenging the female body’s expected/accepted gendering. Following the mass rape in Bosnia, many women impregnated by Serbian soldiers rejected the child in their womb; one woman stated, ““If I’d ever had any chance to kill the kid inside me, I’d have done it.””²² As women, raped as potential mothers of the nation, deny their children, the females redefine preconceived notions of femininity as nurturing, loving, selfless mothers and regender their bodies as non-mothering women. Some Bosnian women raped during the war deconstruct normalized gender roles by joining the army, ““the main reason I put on a uniform is to get revenge.””²³ The incorporation of female bodies within masculinized military action regenders the female sexed body as aggressive and assertive (meaning gendered as man). These women, raped because of their female sexed body and the

²⁰ Ruth Seifert, “War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis,” Mass Rape: The War against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina ed. Alexandra Stiglmyer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 62.

²¹ Alexandra Stiglmyer, “The Rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” Mass Rape: The War against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina ed. Alexandra Stiglmyer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 104.

²² Stiglmyer, 133.

²³ Stiglmyer, 99.

culturally gendered meaning of the bodies' reproductive *genderitalia* reclaim their bodies and genders as a form of resistance. By rejecting the forced motherhood or responding aggressively by masculinizing their gender through military combat, these women redefine their female sexed body and the body's cultural and historical gender by refusing the inscribed gendering of their bodies through the rape.

Society in the twenty-first century attempts to reinforce the binary of sexed bodies, and the dual gendering of these sexed bodies within the public and private spheres. Gender has become destabilized, however. Gender no longer means a woman as mother and wife within the heterosexualized institution of marriage or the capitalist system of wage-labor or the racialized hierarchies of society. Woman is a single mother, an Iraqi or Palestinian refugee, a third world worker in a transnational factory, an American soldier, a black secretary of state, a lesbian fiancé, the judicial nominee for the Supreme Court. The neo-imperial racialized capitalist militarized globe redefines/reconstructs gender into a plurality. The gendered and sexed binary is bending. Women's lives are changing, and with us, we change our sexes and genders.

While the gendered sexes and sexed genders and regendered genders and resexed sexes are articulated and manifested in multiple ways throughout the world, the feminist critique requires a fundamental centering of this sex/gender dichotomy/matrix within the personal and collective experiences and struggles of people across the globe. From this center, feminisms embrace multiple forms of resistance against the subjective subordinations of racism, capitalism, colonization, imperialization, nationalism, etc. As these patriarchal structures, simultaneously plural yet similar, attempt to construct the gendered and sexed meanings of the female body, women from across the globe deconstruct, reconstruct, redefine, and reclaim the politicized meaning of their gendered and sexed bodies. Feminisms require the inclusion of these polyversal

self-gendered reconstructions of the female body to combat the racialized, nationalized, militarized patriarchal capitalism dictating our human bodies around the globe. Our racialized, nationalized, and cultured differences as gendered sexes and sexed genders do not prevent, restrict or curtail feminism as a solidified movement, but rather reinforce, strengthen, and embolden a pluralized inclusive feminism.

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